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## Technology and Making-Meaning in College Relationships: Understanding Hyper-Connection

**Abstract** This article explores how the use of communication technology has transformed social interactions and the sense of self that is derived from such interactions by considering the role of presence and absence in relationships among college students. Analyzing interviews with 38 participants, I explore how they construct understandings of presence, absence, connection, and disconnection within peer social groups and intimate relationships, indicating the emergence of a culture of hyper-connection. I suggest that technological developments have enabled forms of interaction that encourage frequent connection and the idealization of constant communication among participants. These findings further indicate that the normalization of hyper-connection may have impacts on relationship practices and constructions of identity among participants.

**Keywords** Communication Technology; Social Interaction; Presence; Absence; Relationships; College Students; Connection; Disconnection; Intimacy

Developments in information and communication technologies in the last 20 years have given rise to questions about their impact on interpersonal relationships, social networks, and identities (Birkets 1994). This work provides an examination

of the experiences and interpretations of technological innovation among college students in one Northeastern university. I focus on the practices, experiences, and interpretations of participants as they engage in a technologically-mediated and emergent means of human connection and social life. In this article, I consider the role of meaning and values of connection, disconnection, and *hyper-connection* among contemporary college students. I pay particular attention to how students derive meaning from connection and disconnection as it relates to presence and absence within social groups or networks. The focus of this work is on the relationship between social interactions and the development of individual values, behavior, and a sense of self related to technological communication.

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The goal of this paper is to explore the way(s) in which techno-social practices are experienced and understood by participants. I am particularly interested in identifying patterns of behavior, social expectations, and self-reported interpretations of such behavior. First, I discuss how the idea of connection is constructed in social networks, through the establishment of online presence. Next, I express the self-reported interpretations and meanings participants attached to disconnection and lack of technologically-mediated interactions. I go on to consider the perceived consequences of disconnection among participants. Finally, I examine how these constructions of connection, disconnection, and presence as normal result in social pressure towards compliance in a social network.

### Theoretical Context

An important debate about the consequences and impacts of technological development has emerged in recent decades. Some thinkers posit a construction of the Internet as an isolating technology that disrupts relationships and damages social skills (Sanders et al. 2000; Reid and Reid 2004). As a result, concerns about the degradation of social skills, and overall quality of life, have emerged in both academic and popular publications (Kraut et al. 1998; Engelberg and Sjöberg 2004; Booth 2013). Additionally, research in the area of Internet addiction disorder (IAD) has highlighted concerns about the role of technology and Internet in mental health (Young 1998). While most researchers view IAD as a condition related to other compulsive behaviors, there is still a great deal of debate about the symptomology and diagnosis of the illness (Bai, Lin, and Chen

2001; Hur 2006; Siomos and Angelopoulos 2008). Yet, these perceptions of dangerous technological innovation are often countered by imaginaries of utopian relationships. The imaginary of a relationship free of social stigma in which participants can be more real with one another (McKenna, Green, Gleason 2002) is central to this thinking.

Meanwhile, other scholars have suggested that communication technologies are more a danger to the self than to the social and can lead to a fragmentation of the self (Gergen 2000). While others theorize the emergence of a much more complex and nuanced self (Gubruim and Holstein 2000) within a technological world. Despite their differences, many researchers agree that the construction of the self exists in a reflexive relationship with social practices and meanings, many of which are tied to social interaction (Giddens 1991). Therefore, foundational to understanding the social consequences of technological innovation is having a clear picture of what practices and norms are central to the contemporary social environment and how they are understood by those engaged in such practices.

In order to contribute to this goal, I work to better understand the ways in which technology use and relationships are given meaning and how that meaning-making shapes the experiences and identity of a specific population, those in early adulthood. College students aged 18-24, sometimes called digital natives (Palfrey and Gasser 2008), are on the forefront of the integration of technological communication into intimate interpersonal relationships. Having grown up with technology in their lives, many in this age group have experienced the technological

integration that scholars have debated as a central aspect of their social world and their construction of self. Further, their status as college students allows for comprehensive access to modern communication technology and an emergent set of social norms that shape interaction and self.

## Methodology

This project focuses on how college students integrate technological communication use into their social lives, and considers new possibilities for social interactions that occur due to the use of such technology. I developed a project that focuses on the experiences of college students in a private university in the Northeast of the United States. Using qualitative data collection techniques, including interview and observation, I gathered data about everyday activities, opinions, experiences, and expectations of participants. Specifically, I used traditional, face-to-face interviews as the primary source of my data, then supplemented the work with online ethnographic data collection methods. This process allowed me to most effectively examine the attitudes, feelings, behaviors, and experiences of participants. In this modest study, I collected interview data on 38 participants between the ages of 18 and 24. The interviews themselves were between 45 and 90 minutes long and tended to be around one hour on average. In addition, I followed participants online via social media over the course of 4 months, generating several hundred pages of postings and field notes.

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 agreed to participate, set up an interview time and date. Students who volunteered and participated in interviews provided additional contacts and introduced me to individuals that they felt would be interested in participating. At this point, I made an effort to seek out participants from those groups underrepresented in my research. Ultimately, my participants are from a diverse set of race, gender, sexuality, and religious backgrounds recruited from among interviewees.

Each of the 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 are from the field notes, which do 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.

I began my data analysis with the intention of using predefined codes gleaned from the literature. I quickly discovered that the use of a pre-existing “codebook” was too limiting, so I switched to a more general analytic approach (Taylor and Bogdan 1998). I revisited the handful of interviews that I had coded and utilized an open coding process. I conducted a close read and added brief tags or descriptors to ideas and concepts that I found interesting or important, using the “comment” function in my word processor. I then identified and grouped analytic categories that form the basis of my discussion.

Like all research, this project faces limitations. This qualitative paper focuses on the identification of patterns of experience, self reported behaviors, and interpretations among participants. The design of this project does not seek to provide a comparison between groups, but rather identify the subjective experiences of participants. Future work in this area might include a comparison between groups in order to better understand the differences and similarities in experience.

## Hyper-Connection

In general, the college students who participated in this study rely on complex communicative processes to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, which may include a variety of face-to-face and technologically-mediated forms of communication. For example, common forms of communica-

tion 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 a discursive environment that is separate from the content of a given message and rooted in the form and the logic of that techno-social environment. Within this environment, many of the participants share a set of interactional norms about when, where, and how communication technologies are integrated into social behavior and an individual sense of self.

One of the most important shared norms is the experience of *hyper-connectivity*. The concept of hyper-connectivity was originally identified by cybertheorists Barry Wellman and Anabel Quan-Haase. Hyper-connectivity is the “availability of people for communication anywhere and anytime” (Quan-Haase and Wellman 2005:285). Effectively, the concept expresses the idea that technological infrastructures have allowed for an expansion of communication patterns and social networks (Wellman 2001). This study works to better understand the social norms and experiences of hyper-connectivity among technologically savvy college students.

For the purposes of this article, I will use the term hyper-connection to refer to the experience and social expectations related to hyper-connectivity. Thus, hyper-connection is the set of social expectations and behavioral norms in which being available for communication “anytime and anywhere” (Quan-Haase and Wellman 2005) is essential to social relationships. For participants in this study, hyper-connection was

achieved by establishing a sense of potential availability within a peer group. Participants below share the logistics of achieving this hyper-connection, as well as the social and emotional consequences of deviance and compliance with regard to these expectations.

### Understanding Hyper-Connection

Hyper-connection among participants is not only the result of emerging technology, but is the goal of emerging social actions and individual behavior. The notion of being connected is to be present and available to friends and family, and thus strengthens interpersonal relationships and social ties. Achieving this is tied to *techno-interactional* behaviors in which social interaction occurs through the use of communication technologies. The importance of availability for intimacy and collective social experience is an idea that is shared by many participants. William is deeply involved in Greek culture on campus. He claims that the technological bonds that tie him to peers shape his social status.

If I were to put my phone down and turn my phone off for a little bit...like...I could be missing out on so much. That's one of the reasons why I got the BlackBerry, is because emails would go rapid fire from the listserv at the fraternity...let's say I'd come over to a guy and say, "Did you see the stuff going on the listserv," and he'd say, like, "No, dude, I'm not by my computer, so I hadn't seen it." But, you know, already there would be this whole argument that would pan out over the email listserv that I would just completely miss. So, now, I'm connected into that. I can see it.

The fear of being left out is a concern for individuals who are connected to friendship groups and social networks. Interconnected social relationships are shaped by, and connected by, near instant communication. As Olivia explains,

since I commute, like, people I'm taking classes with, I'll add them, especially the group projects—it's the easier way to communicate 'cause some people will check their Facebook more than they actually email. So, that's one of the good things about it.

Presence, or what we might call "potential presence," is a foundational idea here. The social expectation that someone is available if needed functions as a kind of glue that holds groups of friends, and even extended social networks, together (Zhao 2003). Arthur explains that Facebook allows for the maintenance of relationships in his life that otherwise might not continue.

I think almost everyone is on it. Just...at least, for kids my age, because it started out as just the, like, college community and stuff. People were all about it because it was a great resource to keep in touch with...Sometimes the best way to keep in touch is through...was through Facebook.

The accessibility of the individual also works as a social imperative that is necessary to demonstrate belonging within peer groups and friendship networks. The above respondent goes on to explain the consequences of being without a technological device, of being literally disconnected from technology, and how that results in disconnection from social interaction. William explains,

I can't call somebody and be like, "Hey, you know, I'm gonna be there in a little bit," or, "Where are you?" Or, let's say I'm going someplace to meet and I don't see them...Like the old days, you just wait around and hope and then maybe go somewhere, and like, go to a phone and leave a message for them and say, "Hey, I missed you blah, blah, blah." Like, no, expectations like that are completely different. You can't do that.

While on the surface such problems may seem to be merely logistical, a deeper meaning emerges quickly. This is about availability, and perhaps more importantly, about the potential availability in a social situation, even if this takes the form of technological interactions. This collectivity and hyper-connection draws a sharp contrast not only to the stereotypes about technological use, but also the preceding generation, which, according to some authors, is deeply isolated with regard to social interactions (Putnam 2000). That notion of disconnection is tied to the vision of the technologically dependent loner, but the social reality of the digital natives may be very different. For example, Ruth discusses the social risks that she runs by having a policy of delaying responses to texts in certain circumstances.

I'm horrible...they texted me and I don't text back right away. Like, I don't like texting in class. Like, a lot of people you see texting in class, I hate that 'cause I know a lot of teachers, they find that simply disrespectful. So I'm late on text back right away, so a lot of people say that I'm rude...because, you know, people want a quick response.

Ruth's internalization of herself as "horrible" is important to understand just how necessary the

technologies of availability are to her social group. While not a fully internalized self-evaluation, the normative expectations of Ruth's social environment encourage her to allow her sense of identity, and even her internally directed sense of self, to be challenged by non-compliance with this social norm and shaped by the demands of interaction. Her interactions with peers, and just as importantly, her lack of interaction create a social reality in which she is deviant. Ruth has violated social expectations and that violation sends a message about her self-identity, she is "horrible" because she does not text back. The meaning Ruth derives from these interactions suggests the construction of a clear sense of shared meaning among her peers.

### Meaning-Making in Techno-Interaction

The idea that being absent from the flow of communication within a peer group has real social consequences is a theme many respondents agree with. For many participants, not following the rules about how quickly they should respond to text messages, how often they post on Facebook, and how available they are via Internet, enabled by mobile devices such as iPhones, is understood to be matters of respect. As one respondent, Tyler, suggests, such delays are "being just, you know...cold and...disrespectful to your friends." He goes on to explain that lack of response or lack of availability sends a very clear message to others, a message of rejection. Jessie outlines the consequences of not responding to text messages or not responding to Facebook messages.

It means that you're ignoring them. I have...one of my roommates, he's been having this little conflict with



one of his friends because he doesn't always answer her phone calls and he doesn't always answer texts because he's busy. He's in class. He's in lab. He's doing things. He's running around all day. He does not have time for that, but she...she'll post messages to his Facebook wall, later, saying, "Hey, how come you don't respond to my text? Hey, how come you don't respond to my phone calls? Hey, how come...you have a cell phone, like, use it." Respond to me—all the time, now, now, now, now, now, now, now, now.

Ze<sup>1</sup> goes on to explain that messages being sent between his roommate and his friend are clear and understood by all parties. It is about commitment to the relationship, and about the friendship as a priority. The medium of technology sends a message beyond just the words present in the communication.

The secondary message being sent by a speedy response is that the friendship is valuable and important to both parties. A delayed response is an indication that the friendship is not valued by the "slower" respondent. This may be because speedy communication is a means of "being there" or establishing presence despite physical distance. As Kate notes, it makes communication possible.

All over the world, at least all over the United States, you can text your friends all day long. I have friends that go to school in Connecticut. I have friends that go to school in Florida and California, and so it's nice to be able to text them, it's like they're there without being there.

<sup>1</sup> Jessie is genderqueer and does not identify as a man or a woman and prefers to use gender-neutral pronouns. Jessie uses "ze" in place of "he" or "she" and "hir" in place of "him" or "her." I follow this convention in this project as requested by the participant.

This notion of "being there without being there" is key in understanding the discourse of technological use created independently of the words themselves. By establishing presence in a social situation from which you are physically absent, technological communication allows a message about the value of the relationship to be sent. Hallie explains the importance of technology in her relationships.

I use Skype a lot because my boyfriend lives on Long Island. So we're pretty far apart. And he just graduated, so, I feel like technology...if we didn't have technology, we probably wouldn't stay together. So it would be...and me and my dad, pretty much, only communicate via email. So we don't see each other very often, or anything.

The degree to which an individual is perceived to value a relationship with others is an indicator of how invested he or she is in the relationship. By establishing one's presence online, and making oneself hyper-connected or "always" present, a social environment is formed. This environment has the effect of encouraging further investment in the idea of hyper-connection. This creates a relationship between social interactions, such as availability via text, and group expectations, such as those about appropriate availability, based on the meanings attached to techno-interactive processes. Mia notes that her relationship with text messaging is rooted in acknowledging the importance of other people, through communication and "being there."

I can keep a conversation going, for, like, two days straight, with, like, one person, and so that'll be back and forth, constantly, all day. And we don't really

talk about anything important, it just kind of...I don't know...being there.

The relevance of simply being present and having access to the presence of others is reinforced not only by peers, but also her own perception about what is "normal" in the techno-social world. This socially constructed need for co-presence is at the root of the hyper-connection of the social world. One must not only be technologically present in order to provide social connection to others, but there is also an expectation of reciprocity. This reciprocity is based on the idea that techno-interaction is made possible because technology extends to human senses, allowing us to experience interaction virtually. Thus, through technology, the individual is never really alone.

### Getting Out and Feeling Loss

However, it is not in discussing presence and connection where participants most clearly articulate the meanings attached to techno-interaction, but in the discussion of loss and disconnection. The medium of technology, as theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) notes, is about the extension of human senses. McLuhan and Fiore (2001) argue technological mediums of communication carry inherent messages about their use, which are interpreted along with the message itself. The technologies of communication that are employed by participants extend the senses across geographic space to encounter others, friends, family, et cetera. In acknowledging or rejecting the importance of utilizing these virtual senses to render an individual self as present or, conversely, to acknowledge the

presence of another, a message about the value of the other is being sent. The presumption of some kind of ability to extend the senses, to connect with the other demonstrates a sense of interconnection. Among many participants in this study the extension of the virtual senses becomes most relevant when the extension is truncated. To be cut off from technologically-mediated social interaction via the loss of a phone or Internet access results in emotional distress.

Essentially, for many of the participants in this study, to lose the instrument of technological communication is to lose the intimate connection to one's community and to the self that is deeply rooted in that community. Allen explains that for him, he would be unable to access friends and his social network.

I don't think that I would have as much friends as I do now. Because of the Internet I can stay connected with my former classmates and my close friends. I think my life would also be more boring.

William also links disconnection with a sense of loss, but articulates a much more intense experience. He suggests that his relationship with technology is so important that he has complex feelings about even contemplating a lack of technologically-mediated connections. When I asked him to tell me what it would be like if he lost his phone, he explained in terms of disconnection and fear.

I've lost it, I've...you almost feel like...naked...I can't really be without my cell phone. Like when...if my phone dies...my phone just died and shuts off. I do feel off, you can't contact people right away if I need

to or anything. I can't get in contact with them. I'm like, disconnected. Nobody can reach me, and people...I can't reach them, I mean, just think about this. It's the craziest thing for me, is like, OK, so my phone dies, right. I don't know what time it is. That's one of the things right there. I don't carry a watch. Nobody carries a watch...I don't know what time it is. No access to emails, unless I go onto a computer, but I'm not always around a computer, so I can't get my emails right away. Nobody can reach me. I can't reach them...What am I supposed to do?

This question, "What am I supposed to do," lies at the heart of the presence/absence narrative. The techno-social world of participants shapes behavior and individual perceptions of the self through the real and imagined interactional expectations of other people. If the medium of communication "dies," it is no longer available to provide a connection with friends and the imagined other. Ruth agrees, becoming emotional at the thought of being disconnected.

I wouldn't...I would have to communicate with people more personally. Um...like, face-to-face. Because I use texts a lot. I don't text my mom because she doesn't really...she doesn't speak English, so I would have to call her, but I...there's a lot of things I, like, I use text for. There's so many arguments that I've won over text. It's crazy. So, since, I even wish Happy Birthday.

Without this means of accessing peers the notion of feeling naked, disconnected, and detached from the world arises. When an individual becomes absent technologically, he or she is unreachable, untouchable, the expanded senses have failed. Not only can

William not "contact people right away," but also he himself becomes someone who "nobody can reach." Logistically, William is unable to contact his friends easily, to get information and support, or even make plans about meetings and activities. However, socially he is also isolated, separated from his friends and peers in a way that engenders in him a sense of loss. Of particular note is that, for William, this is an *imagined* experience that causes an emotional response.

The lack of a technological means of communication, or even the contemplation of such an event, is imagined to result in both the truncation of the expanded senses, but also a resulting disconnection that occurs when the connection is cut off. Aiden agrees, explaining,

Without a[n Internet enabled] cell phone I would not have a social life because my phone is my outlet and source into my social world! I would not be able to survive without my phone because I wouldn't be able to speak to my mother and I also wouldn't be able to speak to most of my friends plus then I'd have nothing to entertain me during class.

This is a frequent theme when respondents contemplate life without technology. Not only do respondents feel emotional discomfort at the idea, but also often express concern about their compliance to social expectations, and even their ability to conduct day-to-day activities. As William tries to explain, "it's a dependency, and it's like you're locked in. And if you're not in it, you're just out of the loop." Like William, others have conflicted feelings about technology, but even then there is a clear

sense of a social imperative. One respondent notes both conflicted feelings about the medium itself, but also about the way in which it functions as a social imperative. Jessie mentions how ze will sometimes play hooky with hir phone.

I don't like to be tied to my phone. There are days, and if I have a day off, oftentimes I'll chuck my phone, like, underneath, or like, behind my bed, or something. And I'll go sit out on the porch for half the day. I'm gonna enjoy the sunlight and the peace and quiet and the not ringing of my cell phone and the not vibrating of my cell phone, constantly demanding my attention. And my computer will stay off and I'll do... like, I'll read a book.

Yet, ze also notes that there are consequences to such behavior as ze is likely to have dozens of text messages, Facebook messages, and instant message contacts when ze does check hir phone. Furthermore, ze explains the increasingly frantic tones of such messages. Nevertheless, for hir, the momentary disconnection is worth it.

Jessie goes on to explain that the constant need to be immediately present via technology is at once draining and comforting. Anna, too, occasionally attempts to disconnect, but struggles to do so as social pressures to remain connected are intense.

[Sometimes] I turn off my Facebook. And much of [it] is hard 'cause all my friends are messaging me through the Facebook. Like organizing things through it. I mean, so, then I'm forced to use it because that's what they're using. You know, that's how I can keep in contact with them.

Kacy agrees, explaining that she, too, feels a pressure to be present and in contact with her friends despite her own desires. Despite Kacy's dislike of texting, she gives in to pressure,

if you want to text me...I sigh and just slump away, kind of, 'cause I just didn't want to do it. [But] I don't want to lose my friend, it's not that much of a hassle just to learn to do it. I did. And, now, I'm not an advanced user, like, I can't do it under the table without looking at the word, but I still use it sometimes.

The pressure to "be present" for others via technology, for Jessie, Anna, and Kacy at least, is sometimes overwhelming. Kacy remains resistant to the norms of text messaging and struggles to set boundaries around her technology use in social situations.

It's like, with this particular friend in mind, she has unlimited minutes and unlimited text messaging, and I understand that she'll text in class 'cause she's not going to sit there on the phone and have a conversation in front of her professor, but maybe she's in class and I'm in class, and I don't want text 'cause I don't want to be rude. And then I'm ignoring her because I haven't answered her text message. So, I don't know. Should I just text her back and say, "I'm in class, can't talk right now." Or should I ignore it 'cause if I text her back, then I'm being rude to my professor. Whereas, if I text her back and she's angry, or she needs me to talk to, for solace or something, then where do I go. Where if you call me, I can always ignore the phone call, but still then, she's not getting that communication that she needs. And I'm not getting the education that I'm in class for, or maybe I just don't want to help you, so what do I do?

Kacy discusses the challenge of finding an “etiquette” of technology use. For many of her peers, the use of text messaging in social situations is accepted, but for Kacy, the demand to be available to provide her friend with “that communication she needs” is frustrating and overwhelming. For her, there is no easy solution to balancing the needs and expectations of her friend with her own desire for distance.

In contrast, Jessie manages her concerns about feeling too connected by taking some time off. Still, prolonged disconnection such as getting rid of her phone or Facebook account is not perceived as desirable. While “disconnecting” for a few hours is OK, the prospect of total disconnection or “going offline” is something that evoked nervous laughter in Jessie. When I pressed for more details, she walked me through the experience of “going offline.” Going offline, in its contemporary usage, is defined as the process of removing one’s profiles, avatars, and contact information from the Internet. Jessie explains what happens if she were to go offline in this sense.

The first thing that would happen is every...like, everyone that knows me personally, in person, will start demanding...like, “What happened to your Facebook?” “What happened to your Facebook?” “What happened...?” “What’s going on?” “Did something terrible happen?” No, I just don’t want to be on Facebook anymore. It’s ruling my life. I want to...I want to become free from it. But then, they become baffled, “But how am I going to send you messages?” “How am I gonna share YouTube videos with you?” “How am I gonna...comment on all of your photos?” I don’t even post photos. “How am I going to do all these things?” “How am I going to keep up with you in my life?”

Immediately social problems arise with friends, family, and other members of social networks. Not only does Jessie imagine an immediate response in her social network, but also discusses the ways in which the very nature of that social network might shift.

My time observing online seems to support Jessie’s assessment of the topic. At one point, Becca, one of the participants I was observing, “dropped out,” meaning she stopped posting regularly to her Facebook account, and her wall was flooded with concerned posts asking if she was OK, and requests like “post something...I miss you.” The depth of connection demonstrates the importance of being connected, not simply with technology, but also with other people, through the use of technology (Castells 2005). That notion that technology connects and ties people together in relationships with other people brings a new conceptualization to the notion of getting and staying “connected.” Thus, the question of how to maintain relationships and connections becomes a central concern, yet apparently the problems do not end there, according to Jessie. While initially mostly logistical problems arise, if disconnection from Facebook is pushed to the next level, Jessie goes on to imagine what it might be like to be entirely disconnected from the Internet.

If I disconnect myself from the Internet as a whole, the majority of my shopping is done online, so I cannot shop for things ‘cause I don’t own a car, so I can’t really go out to stores anymore, unless I am willing to walk a particularly long distance or bum a ride from someone else. I am unable to pursue many of the things that give me momentary entertainment, so I’m sort of left with myself in a house and must pursue more long-

term ways to entertain myself. I’m unable to manage my bank accounts. Because I don’t balance my checkbook anymore because it’s done online; so, everything financial I am incapable of doing, unless I go to the bank and ask for a statement ‘cause I’ve also gone paperless. Since it’s all online, I’ve asked them to stop sending me letters I’m not going to open. So, all my financial stuff is gone. Let’s see, what else do I manage on a daily basis? My access to the news is also gone. I don’t have a subscription to a newspaper service. I don’t have cable television. I don’t have news channels, I don’t have newspapers. The only way I can get information...newsworthy...is by asking other people or purchasing newspapers on a daily basis.

While Jessie and a few others expressed fantasies of being disconnected or out of touch, all of them acknowledged that such behavior would have dramatic social consequences both for the individual and for their friends and family. To be offline is to be disconnected, not only from communication technologies, but also from *other people*, as William notes above when he explains that if he were offline, he “would not have a way to stay in contact with people, or for people to contact me.” If, as McLuhan argues, technology is the extension of senses beyond human capacity, then this disconnection is about being literally out of touch and inaccessible.

### **Compliance: Getting Connected and Being Normal**

This sense of being “out of touch” and disconnected is traumatic for some participants because they are situated in a social world in which hyper-connection is increasingly understood as not only desirable but more importantly—as normal. Participants exist in

a space that is about techno-interaction and communication of their own presence. Individuals access another, and by establishing their presence, individuals also become accessible to others; an accessibility that results in hyper-connection. Techno-interaction is increasingly regarded as a “normal” part of social network building, and further compliance with this social norm is essential to maintaining social networks. As new means of communication are made possible by technological development, new sets of social expectations also arise, as William explains. “It’s one of those things...like, you’ve got to be on it. People have got to be able to find you these days if you want to be connected.”

Thus, many individuals discuss their introduction to tools such as Facebook and texting as a consequence of social demands for their presence in online spaces, and thus their accessibility to friends, peers, romantic partners, and others. These demands are often to be present and accessible in social situations that are techno-mediated, Jessie explains further. Thus, participants are expected to conform to social norms of techno-interaction because they will be judged on the social meanings attached to their place from the techno-social network.

I’m not a huge fan of Facebook, but I’ll use it. I was actually threatened via physical violence to join Facebook by a friend of mine. She legitimately made the account for me and when I didn’t use it. She punched me every day that I didn’t use it, she would punch me. So now I use it every day.

The pressure to incorporate some form of technological communication into the social relationships



is intense. Other participants also noted that they joined Facebook because of pressure from friends or because they felt like they needed to, as Sara notes,

I didn't join Facebook until my senior year [of high school] when I knew I was going to Syracuse and kind of wanted to start to, like, meet people...it's what you did to get ready for college. I friended my dorm roommate so we weren't like total strangers when we met. We had already gotten to know each other.

The social demands of compliance are intense, just as the rules of text messaging and even emailing require a degree of technological vigilance that sometimes people struggle with. Yet, such vigilance can be worth it for some participants. Abby explains that for her, the keeping in touch aspect of texting and Facebook that allows her to connect is most important.

I think that for certain people, it has...you then have a better relationship with them, or, like, a more of a relationship that you would have had. So I know there's, like, girls on my team, and stuff that, I, like, have nothing in common with. Like we would, like, never really talk or anything. And I would never call them and be, like, "Hey, let's hang out," or whatever. But, with texting, like, you can send a mass text and be, like, "Hey, party at my house," and it, like, goes to them. Whereas, if I didn't have texting, I'd never call them and invite them.

Abby acknowledges that for her, technologically-mediated communication allows her to connect with people whom she otherwise would not interact with outside formal environments of her sports team. It also acts as a quick and efficient way to use those connections to organize social events. For college

students in general, the need for such technological devices is not just a matter of "fitting in" in the way that name brand clothing or accessories can be. This may be because such technologies not only allow people to "fit in," but also provide access to information about what is going on with other people that the student interacts with, such as offline events.

In fact, during the time I spent observing participants on Facebook I noted that making announcements had become such a common event that the site designers added an event planner function that allowed individuals to email event details to their friend lists via the website. Event organization became very common as the following excerpt from my field notes demonstrates.

Today I got 5 event invitations. Two party invites, an announcement of a meeting on LGBT issues, a request to join a Wal-Mart boycott, and an invitation to a baby shower. It looks like these invites were just sent to everyone on the list. I have the option of accepting, declining, or saying maybe to each invite and can also post and read related comments. I can see who else is attending and not attending and in some cases why.

One participant, Jadon, noted that without Facebook and texting it would be impossible for him to mobilize the student organizations he is involved with or "get the word out" about events. Increasingly, even offline interactions such as social events or organization activities relied on technology as a means to facilitate social interaction, even in face-to-face settings. As Jadon notes, "it's what you do...get people together online and get them together offline...texting or announcements...it's what everyone does."

For Lynn, part of the appeal of technology is its relative unobtrusiveness into the social world. She and her peers view this technology as so ever-present that it allows her to be available to her peers, but without the perceived intensity that would be required if she maintained that presence through another method.

It's the normal form of communication, for the most part. Rather than calling someone to ask them if they want to go do something...it's...you text them to make sure that they can do it. Or...I generally text because I don't know if I'm not interrupting something. I really feel bad if it's like, "Oh, I was just in the middle of a conversation with somebody that I really haven't talked to in a long time. Oh, good, my friend M called, that's awesome. Thanks for interrupting, jerk." So I kind of text and say, "Oh, you can get to it whenever you feel convenient." But it's normal around campus to have your phone.

For Lynn and the majority of other participants, having a cell phone is so unremarkable in face-to-face interactions that communication via text is understood to be almost invisible, and thus unobtrusive. The ability to be "there" without being obtrusive is important for Lynn because she relies heavily on her social circle for support and help with decision-making, as is the case for many of her peers (Bellotti 2008). Lynn goes on to explain that she needs to feel connected, but does not want to come across as too needy because that has the potential to damage relationships.

Ultimately, the normalcy of cell phone or Smartphone use is a result of the social pressures that my participants feel to own and use such devices. Lynn notes that it keeps her connected and is unobtrusive, both important to her, but that these characteristics

come from the technology's status as "normal." The widespread use of cell phones and Smartphones has resulted in perceptions of their universality that have led to the development of social practices that incorporate them, make them even more socially relevant. For Lynn, texting is the "normal" method of communication, and as such has given rise to expectations of courtesy and civility, including not "interrupting something" with a phone call. This perception of normality and the demand for presence within relationships has led to fundamental changes in how interpersonal relationships are conducted.

## Conclusions

Throughout this discussion, I have offered examples of the way individuals grapple with issues of human interaction and hyper-connection. The desire for connection between individuals and between individuals and groups is central to understand the experience of participants. Connection is experienced through meaning-making and the expectations of social interaction that surround presence and absence. The notion of presence and absence, connection and disconnection goes beyond the simple notion of having an "Internet presence" or a profile online. Rather, the idea of presence and absence begs the question to whom are we present or absent? To what people do we have access and to whom are we ourselves accessible?

In order to begin answering this question, we must understand the contemporary nature of social networks. Social networks exist on both the physical and the virtual level. For some, social interaction occurs primarily or exclusively in offline spaces. However, for an increasing number of young people,

techno-interaction is not merely an option, but a requirement for the establishment and maintenance of social network connections. A few participants chose to reject some or all of this pressure to get connected and stay connected. Yet, all acknowledged their existence and the tension that exists between those who live in the techno-social world and those who resist it, those who belong fully to network society and those who inhabit the fringes. For some, like Kacy, it is possible to reject the social pressures for conformity, and to simply accept the social consequences. Which in her case means limited access to events and a small intimate social circle. For others, such as Jessie, a deep ambivalence exists; as she fantasizes about disconnecting for a day to read a book, she also knows that she is unwilling to fully accept what a permanent rejection of the technology would result in. For many, such as Abby, disconnection is not an option, and not desirable, as they consider themselves deeply embedded in the techno-social world and feel that they thrive there.

This embeddedness means embracing a set of social expectations that include consistent “presence” within the techno-social world. This means establishing and maintaining not simply an “online identity,” but a consistent self-presentation of accessibility. The idea is to be plugged in and logged on, not simply regularly, but *all the time*. This level of hyper-connection is impossible in practice and for most participants, not entirely desirable. However, near constant availability

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ty for interaction is the ideal that my participants *perceive* to be the norm among their peers, even as they themselves may be an exception. Many explained that among their peers for relationships to be valid, for intimacy to be achieved it is essential that one’s virtual presence be maintained. Students seek to create a technological self, a digital double that functions as a point of contact with the social world and informs an internal sense of identity. As a result of this perception, behavior is undergoing transformation. A clear demonstration of the Thomas theorem, as young people accept the reality of hyper-connection, the consequences of that reality emerge.

My research suggests that hyper-connection and social integration have emerged as a consequence of technological innovation. While it is true that young adults may be losing traditional social skills, they may be replacing them with an incredibly complex set of interactional tools that are increasingly shaping and reshaping the meaning of relationships and their sense of self. This reflexive process, in which the meaning of technology shapes the interactions between peers, and interactions shape and reshape meaning, has only just begun, and the long-term impacts of technological integration into social behavior are still unclear. Nevertheless, this work has identified some key areas in which technology may require that we rethink our own understanding of the meaning of technology and even the meaning of being connected to another human being.

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