

---

# College Students' Online and Offline Communication Practices

**Madeline E. Smith**

Technology & Social Behavior  
Northwestern University  
Evanston, IL 60208  
madsesmith@u.northwestern.edu

**Abstract**

Many studies focus on college students' online communication (often limited to one particular platform) and fail to consider students' many daily offline interactions (in classes, clubs, residence halls, etc.). This position paper draws on data from interviews with college students to argue that students' communication, both online and off, have important benefits and consequences that cannot be fully understood by studying only online or offline behaviors.

**Author Keywords**

College students; communication; computer-mediated communication; online—offline; interviews

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous; H.4.3. Information Systems Applications: Communications Applications

**Background and Questions**

College students are some of the most active users of cell phones and social media [3]. Communication and technology researchers have identified a wide range of ways in which students' use of communication technology can have consequential effects on their lives, such as social capital [4], social support [7], depression [10], life satisfaction [5], and academic

Submission for the "Between the Lines: Reevaluating the Online/Offline Binary" Workshop organized by Sarah Vieweg, Oliver L. Haimson, Michael Massimi, Kenton O'Hara, and Elizabeth F. Churchill at CHI 2015.

performance [6]. Many such studies focus narrowly on one specific online communication platform, what might we miss out on by failing to account for the varied ways that students communicate, both online and off?

Developmentally, college students are “emerging adults”—a life phase between adolescence and adulthood [1]. A key component of this time is exploring and trying out different life possibilities as students determine their own enduring identities. One way college students explore their own identities is through communication with others. What can we learn about students’ identity formation by studying their communication behaviors?

### **Interview Findings**

Over the past four years, I have interviewed approximately 100 U.S. college students about their communication practices as part of research studies focused on deception in text messaging [2], communication with parents [9], adjustment to college [8], and group messaging. Although all of these interviews were primarily about computer-mediated communication, participants regularly discussed face-to-face communication as well.

All of the students I interviewed were frequent Internet users and regularly communicated through text messaging, instant messaging, phone calls, video calls, and other online platforms. Yet, many interviewees revealed preferences for offline communication. Offline conversations were viewed as particularly valuable when discussing personal topics or seeking out social support, for example:

***I don’t really like having conversations like that over text. You know you’re not going to convey your thoughts as***

*well, or even worse, you have to think about what you are about to say. And **you won’t get that genuine of a conversation** as a result. –Tyler, 20*

Many college students live in residence halls on campus where they are constantly surrounded by other students and have ample opportunities for face-to-face conversations. My interviewees frequently told stories of running down the hall to quickly ask a peer a question or talking with friends while hanging out in their dormitory rooms. They also described using online communication tools in analogous ways, such as asking a classmate a question via Facebook Message and catching up with a high school friend via FaceTime. While they regularly communicated both face-to-face and online, many participants felt that offline conversations provided more depth.

*I feel like in person conversations are the most valuable. There are times when I’ve talked to people on my floor for 2 or 3 hours, just sitting the in the hallway late at night. And those deep conversations are where you really learn about each other, and you realize that not everyone has the perfect life. **Phone conversations are great, and video chats are great, but having a conversation in person—there’s just so much more of a connection that’s formed with that.** And I love social media with a passion; it’s like my life. But at the same time, I can’t value anything more than an interpersonal conversation. –Anna, 19*

These deeply personal conversations are times when students express themselves to others and explore their own identities. In conversations with friends and family members from home, students often seek to present themselves as they were known previously. Because of the frequently large geographic distances between college students and their hometowns, this type of communication tends to be online. In contrast,

the relationships they form at college are regularly built through both online and offline communication.

### **Workshop Discussions & Ongoing Work**

These findings suggest the need to consider both mediated and face-to-face interactions to fully understand college students' communication and identity explorations. Although the traces left behind by online communication are appealing data sources for such studies, crucial offline communication is not captured. At the workshop I would like to discuss mixed method research approaches to study online and offline communication. I am currently working on a study combining log data, surveys, and interviews to explore relationships between college students' communication behavior and their adjustment to college. One challenge in this study will be incorporating in my analysis both qualitative descriptions of offline communication quantitative log data.

### **Acknowledgement**

This work was partially supported by a NSF Graduate Research Fellowship (DGE-1324585).

### **References**

- [1] Arnett, J. J. Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), (2000), 469–480.
- [2] Birnholtz, J.P., Reynolds, L., Smith, M.E., and Hancock, J.T. "Everyone Has to Do It:" A Joint Action Approach to Managing Social Inattention. *Computers in Human Behavior* 29, (2013), 2230–2238.
- [3] Duggan, M., Ellison, N.B., Lampe, C., Lenhart, A., and Madden, M. *Social Media Site Usage 2014*. Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, (2015).

[4] Ellison, N.B., Steinfield, C., and Lampe, C. The Benefits of Facebook "Friends:" Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12(4), (2007), 1143–1168.

[5] Lepp, A., Barkley, J.E., and Karpinski, A.C. The relationship between cell phone use, academic performance, anxiety, and Satisfaction with Life in college students. *Computers in Human Behavior* 31, (2014), 343–350.

[6] Michikyan, M., Subrahmanyam, K., and Dennis, J. Facebook use and academic performance among college students: A mixed-methods study with a multi-ethnic sample. *Computers in Human Behavior* 45, (2015), 265–272.

[7] Rozzell, B., Piercy, C.W., Carr, C.T., King, S., Lane, B.L., Tornes, M., Johnson, A.J., Wright, K.B. Notification pending: Online social support from close and nonclose relational ties via Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior* 38, (2014), 272–280.

[8] Smith, M.E. Staying Connected: Supportive Communication During the College Transition. In C.J. Bruess, ed., *Family Communication in an Age of Digital and Social Media*. Peter Lang Publishing, New York, NY, (2015).

[9] Smith, M.E., Nguyen, D.T., Lai, C., Leshed, G., and Baumer, E.P.S. Going to College and Staying Connected: Communication Between College Freshmen and Their Parents. *Proceedings of the ACM 2012 conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work* (2012), 789–798.

[10] Tandoc, E.C., Jr., Ferrucci, P., and Duffy, M. Facebook use, envy, and depression among college students: Is facebooking depressing? *Computers in Human Behavior* 43, (2015), 139–146.