

# **Friendship Through the Ages: A Technological Perspective**

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## **Friendship Through the Ages: A Technological Perspective**

### **Abstract:**

Friendship is a socially constructed phenomenon that is part of the everyday lives of human beings. Its practices have been researched for many years by sociologists and social anthropologists. The use of digital communication technology has come to play an important role in the way that we interact with family and friends. This qualitative study explores different dimensions of friendship that are practiced across three generations of Canadian, middle class, educated women. Furthermore, it looks at how these dimensions of friendship are made manifest, diluted or challenged by the use of communication technologies. The main findings show that the ideals of friendship are expressed through intimacy, closeness and reciprocity for all generations, however the way that these are expressed through digital communication technology varies across the generations.

**Keywords:** Friendship, digital communication technology, attachment theory, self-disclosure, intimacy, reciprocity

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## **1. Introduction: Communication Technology as an Integral tool for Practicing Friendship**

Friendship has been a widely studied topic in the fields of sociology and social anthropology. In the Western context, we have begun to depend more on our friends than ever before by expecting them to fulfil more duties and social roles (Pahl, 2000). For example, as people move around more, local friends can take on helpful roles in cases of emergency because they are geographically close in comparison to family members who may be geographically far (Pahl, 2000). As new digital information and communication technologies have become an increasing part of our lives, we use them more to practice our friendships (Miller, 2011; Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014). This paper focuses on how middle class women in different generations practice friendship through various means of communication technology. I look at both analog communication technology (CTs) such as letter writing, telegrams, and speaking on the telephone, including mobile phones; and new digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as emailing, instant messaging, skypeing, and using social media in order to understand how people incorporate these tools in their practice of friendship.

Broadly speaking, friendship is a co-constructed phenomenon characterized by reciprocity, intimacy and closeness (Rawlins, 2009; Allan & Adams, 1998; Buote, Wood, & Pratt, 2009). In the contemporary North American context, there are no rigid rules of who one must be friends with and how long a friendship will last, and therefore I explore whether and how CTs and ICTs contribute to helping sustain and maintain friendships, and whether they add or alleviate pressure to communicate with friends. The anthropology of friendship is a relatively widely explored topic, but there are few studies about how CT and ICTs are used to practice friendship across multiple age groups. Most research in this area focuses on young peoples' use of ICTs in general or seniors' introduction to ICTs to keep in touch with family, so my research

addresses the lack of studies of both how people from various generations use technology and the role of analog CT tools in practices of friendship (Van Cleemput, 2011; Green & Singleton, 2009; Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, & Schneider, 2013). I explore the possible differences and similarities between how different generations of middle class Canadian women use communication technology to practice friendship as ICTs become ubiquitous. In order to do this, I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews with women in three different age categories: 18-25, 30-40 and 65+. My research question is as follows: *how does technology affect dimensions of friendship through the generations?* Through analyzing the semi-structured interviews, my qualitative study helps fill the gaps in the literature, and shows how it is important to look at practices of friendship through communication.

The first section will touch on current literatures pertaining to friendship. Specifically, it will explore how friendship is defined and practiced through the use of ICTs and what kind of concerns that have arisen from this. The second section will describe the methodology used to conduct this research. The third section will discuss my findings and will show how values and ideals of friendship are similar across the generations, but the way that people practice these aspects vary generationally. Finally, I look at the limitations of the scope of this study and suggestions for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Contextualizing Friendship through Intimacy, Reciprocity and Closeness*

Friendship is difficult to define as its practices, rituals and values vary cross-culturally and across history (Pahl, 2000; Miller, 2011). Historically, people became friends with people who looked similar to them, who were in the same social class and, likely, in the same neighbourhood (Fehr, 1996; Allan & Adams, 1998). As mentioned above, friendships are defined by levels of intimacy, reciprocity and closeness (Allan & Adams, 1998; Buote, Wood,

& Pratt, 2009; Rawlins , 2009). Friendships are intimate because friends are a part of people's private lives; they know more about their friends than the general public ever would (Pahl, 2000). They are reciprocal because friendship itself is co-constructed and friendships typically need to have reciprocal exchange of effort, time and social exchanges in order for them to be sustained (Fehr , 1996; Adams , 1998; Rawlins , 2009). Furthermore, there is a mutual dependency that bonds the dyad (two friends) together (Pahl, 2000; Rawlins , 2009). Closeness is a level of intimacy but also a characteristic that people use to define levels of friendship, be it as friend, good friend, close friend or best friend (Pahl, 2000; Buote , Wood, & Pratt, 2009; Ozad & Uygurer , 2014). These characteristics are broad and expressed in a variety of ways. Therefore, I use them when coding and analyzing my data as they are good indications of how people view friendship. I did, however, remain open to finding other characteristics while coding my interviews. These characteristics were also taken into consideration in my interview guide. Moreover, these characteristics are important to explore while looking at different generations in order to see if they are similar or if their definitions vary across time.

As technology continues to develop, so do the ICTs that we incorporate into our lives. There have been extensive studies of how teens incorporate ICTs into their friendship practices (Van Cleemput, 2011; Green & Singleton, 2009; Hollenbaugh & Ferris , 2014). Some studies have shown that there has been a surge in the values of quality versus quantity of friendships. For example, Green and Singleton (2009) conducted a study on adolescents and young adults in order to show how people meet others online and are able to sustain friendships with people who may not be in the same social class, or be in the same geographical area. Although we may become friends with people in different groups, the characteristics of intimacy, reciprocity and closeness are still fundamental to sustaining a friendship. Furthermore, despite their findings,

they did note that friendships that had an element of time spent face to face were deemed as stronger (Green & Singleton, 2009). There have been many studies that have been conducted on youth as there have been concerns raised about their ability to sustain social relationships with the surge in ICTs (Turkle, 2015). Sherry Turkle (2015) conducted a study on how the desires that people have to 'reclaim conversation' can play a pivotal role in reshaping technological habits of individuals.

## 2.2. *Loss of Empathy Through the Use of ICTs*

Sherry Turkle has conducted extensive research on the usage of ICTs and the growing role that communication technology has begun to play in all aspects of our lives, such as work, romance, friendship and even raising children. Her dominant fear and the fear that was expressed in some of her interviews is that the use of ICTs is inescapable and hinders the ability of people to have face-to-face conversations anymore, yet there is a desire to reclaim those skills (Turkle, 2015). Although a psychologist, she does have a background in sociology, and her book *Reclaiming Conversation* touches on many themes that are useful for this study and can be applied through an anthropological lens. Her study sheds light on the struggles that the individual has in grappling with the power of communication technology that people feel is exerted over them. In other words, they feel as though technology has the power over them as opposed to them having control over their communication habits. For example, one of her participants discussed how it was now the norm to no longer talk to one another, but to post and share things online instead, "the focus of friendship became what you found online and how you would share that with your friends. These days, you do it with Instagram or Snapchat. People are less into their profiles, but the idea is the same. Don't talk it. Post it. Share it." (Turkle, 2015, p. 138). I will touch on this idea more in my findings section as this practice was very common with my



participants 18-25. The idea of being connected and always communicating with friends over the use of ICTs can be seen as a new form of attachment. Attachment theory has been used as a tool to analyze adolescents' friendship practices over ICTs.

### *2.3. Attachment Theory as an Intergenerational Tool*

Attachment theory has been an effective tool in outlining the emerging social pressures and anxieties people have to remain in constant communication with friends (Buote, Wood, & Pratt, 2009). Attachment theory assumes that all individuals are born with behavioural control systems that help with survival (Buote, Wood, & Pratt, 2009). An example of this theory at work is when people reach out to their friends or loved ones when under stress or needing to feel a sense of belonging and assistance (Buote, Wood, & Pratt, 2009). Although this theory is based in psychology, it has been useful to many sociologists and social anthropologists when analyzing their data and explaining their findings of how friendships are practiced, and sustained with younger adults (Van Cleemput, 2011; Ozad & Uygurer, 2014). Attachment theory was used to analyze the intergenerational uses of friendship as I looked at different individuals who have different social histories and means of communication. It was used as analytical tool of comparison to show how reliant, or not, people are on their friends based on how often they communicate with them both in person and over ICTs. Another way to analyze my data was through degrees of intimacy found through communication technology and the way in which people disclosed information about themselves to their friends online.

### *2.4. Self-Disclosure: Beyond Face-to-face Intimacy*

Intimacy is a dimension of friendship that allows the relationship to grow. This form of intimacy historically was not reached as quickly as it now can be online or via texting (Buote, Wood, & Pratt, 2009; Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, & Schneider, 2013). Scholars have studied the phenomenon of self-disclosure online, which can have both positive and negative

implications (Buote , Wood, & Pratt, 2009). Self-disclosure is a way to reveal things about the personal self, or ‘true self’ to others (Hollenbaugh & Ferris , 2014). However, this can get challenged through mediums such as Facebook as people choose to post about the ‘self’ that they would like to portray, giving an illusion of intimacy (Turkle, 2015). Self-disclosure can develop by forming the self and how we see our friendships in many ways. For example, if someone updates their status on Facebook, the more “likes” they get, the more likely they are to post another status containing the same degree of information. This means, if someone posts something intimate about their lives and they receive a lot of positive attention from their friends, the more likely they are to continue to project that aspect of themselves online (Hollenbaugh & Ferris , 2014). The construction of friendship and the self through communication technology only began to be truly studied in the last decade (Miller, 2011). Through the increased accessibility to social media websites such as Facebook and the expansion of data plans, people have been able to self-disclose through status updates whenever and wherever they want to.

Hollenbaugh and Ferris (2014) compared people who showed different degrees of self-disclosure on status updates; for instance, some disclosed intimate information many times a day on Twitter and Facebook. Others self-disclosed even more intimate information more times than what was average for others. Finally, they looked at the wide variety of topics people would discuss over social media. With the tools of communication technology, there have been concerns about people excessively self-disclosing to some, which has caused problems with other relationships, for example cheating on spouses, jealousy, and divorce (Miller, 2011). In his book, *Tales from Facebook* (2011), Daniel Miller explores peoples’ Facebook practices and illustrated the everyday uses, tensions and developments in their friendships and relationships. He discussed things such as people disclosing intimate information about themselves to friends

over their partners, and how that lead a couple to file for divorce (Miller, 2011). He demonstrates other aspects of Facebook as well and how it can be used as a vehicle of sociality for those who are generally isolated (Miller, 2011). This ethnography is an effective example of the way in which people in Trinidad practice friendship over Facebook, however, other modes of ICTs were not analyzed, for instance texting. Texting can be more private, between two people, but it is also a form of technology and needs to be considered through looking at self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is also important when looking at the reciprocal dimension of friendship. Is the self-disclosure between friends mutual?

### *2.5. Friendship: A CT and ICT Perspective*

Friendship is incredibly complex and, as technology develops, it is used as a tool that creates or develops the dimensions of friendship (Fehr, 1996; Allan & Adams, 1998; Pahl, 2000). There is a certain amount published on how technology impacts adolescents and young adults, but not how it has affected people over time or how people's perceptions change with more communication technology. Furthermore, there is a lack of comparative studies between long lasting friends and friends made more recently. As mentioned above, I define the main characteristics of friendship as reciprocity, intimacy and closeness. I will further be contextualizing that in the idea based on the values of people's quality of friendship and how they practice their intimate conversations—through CT, ICTs or face-to-face—which is something that has not been thoroughly researched. I will analyze my findings based on self-disclosure to explore if participants' portrayal of their 'self' and their friendship practices have changed over time based on their access to CTs and ICTs and their history with that friend. I will be able to explore these fine details through the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. *A Qualitative Approach: The Benefits of the Semi-Structured Interview*

Like that of other anthropologists who have had success in studying friendship and friendship practices, my approach is qualitative (Pahl, 2000; Miller, 2011). As mentioned in the literature review, Miller (2011) showed the varying tensions and practices of Facebook. He did this through qualitative interviews and observations. This proved as an effective method as friendship values and practices can be highly subjective. Therefore, I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews as well as this kept the interviews within the scope of an honours project, while allowing for some open elaboration from the participants. Furthermore, this method is an effective one as friendship has changed over time and can be a very unique experience hence semi-structured interviews is useful in terms of using probes when speaking with my participants. Ray Pahl (2000) emphasized that people's ideas of what a 'best friend' is are interpreted in different ways in various communities. For example, someone who lives far from their family may rely on their friends more heavily than someone who lives close to theirs. Thus, it is important to use semi-structured interviews to possibly uncover other dimensions of friendship that people may value.

#### 3.2. *Population and Study Sample: Why Middle Class Women*

Since friendship is culturally constructed, I only interviewed a very specific demographic. My study population is middle class Canadian adult women. Previous studies have shown that friendship is practiced differently across genders and therefore, given the scope of this research, I decided to focus solely on women rather than other genders (Allan & Adams, 1998; Miller, 2011). For this study, when I use the term middle class I mean it in a cultural sense more than an economic one. More specifically, I am referring to women who have or are working toward a university degree and have professional or highly skilled jobs, as they are

likely to have commonalities relevant to the topic of friendship in their life experiences, such as making close friends at university or being in professional networks beyond the workplace. I separated my age ranges into different age groups with fifteen-year age gaps in order to effectively capture an intergenerational comparative perspective. I recruited participants from the following age groups in my sample: 18-25, 40-50, and 65+. I interviewed four people in each age group, twelve women in total, for a duration of one hour each.

### *3.3. Recruitment Strategies*

As I interviewed people in different generations, I used a variety of recruitment strategies. My aim in recruitment was to go beyond my own social networks when recruiting participants. I made posts on Facebook, posted flyers throughout Halifax and recruited participants using word of mouth. The majority of my participants were recruited through social media and word of mouth. Snowball sampling proved to be useful particularly in regards to getting in contact with people in different generations. A copy of my recruitment materials can be found in Appendix A. As my study focuses on women in Canada, I looked to recruit women both from Halifax, and Ontario as that is where I am from and was there for part of the time that I conducted my research. The majority of women I interviewed were from small towns throughout Ontario and Nova Scotia. The fact that they were from small towns could have had an impact on my findings, and was not an intentional aspect of my recruitment.

### *3.4. Risk Management*

Once contacted by potential participants, I let them know the full extent of my study and that their commitment would be a one-hour interview at a place of their choice, wherever both I and the participant felt comfortable. I had many participants reach out who were not geographically close to me, therefore I conducted nine of the twelve interviews over the telephone. I went over the risks and discomforts both upon first contact and before the interview

began. Risks or discomforts associated with my research were unlikely to supersede those incurred in daily life or in a typical conversation about friendship. Strong feelings could have arisen if individuals had particularly negative experiences in the context of certain friendships. I mitigated this risk by making sure that participants knew that they could choose to not answer any question I asked and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. A copy of the consent form can be found in Appendix B.

### *3.5. Semi-Structured Interview: Older vs. Newer Friends and Forms of Analysis*

Semi-structured interviews allowed me to gain in-depth insight on people's perspectives of friendship. As I am interested in exploring the characteristics of friendship (intimacy, reciprocity and closeness) further, I looked at the quality perspective as opposed to the quantity perspective of friends. Therefore, I interviewed participants in-depth about two close friends of theirs and analyzed how they practice friendship through the uses of CTs and ICTs as well as face-to-face. Self-disclosure and identity of one's self through ICTs and CTs was analyzed by discussing how the participants communicate with their friends, how they solved problems with their friends—using CT or ICTs or not—and how and why they became close friends to begin with. This gave me a better grasp of how people value or socially construct intimacy in their friendships across generations.

There were three different sections of the interview. The first was questions about friendship and use of CTs and ICTs in order to ease the participant into the interview with some general questions and for me to get an idea of what they most valued in a friend. The second section was a series of questions regarding a friend the participant has had for a long time. These questions were oriented around how they communicate, how they met and what kind of role CT and ICTs play in their everyday practices of friendship. The third part consisted of a friend that

has been made more recently. The questions in this part were similar to the last section in order to make effective comparisons in my analysis. My full interview guide can be found in Appendix C. I also asked the participants if I could record the interview for purposes of accuracy and all agreed to this.

Once I completed my interviews, I transcribed them and coded them right away. I coded them according to the characteristics of friendship—intimacy, reciprocity and closeness, but I also took other patterns that emerged from the data into account. I advanced my analysis through the application of self-disclosure and attachment theory in mind, but had many other patterns emerge beyond these concepts. I compared the interviews with one another to look at the generational similarities and differences in friendship practices and evaluated the attachment that each participant has in their friendships. Moreover, I was able to do this with each participant with their newer and older friends and continued to look for patterns that emerged from that context as well.

The next section will discuss my findings that emerged from the interviews that I conducted. My findings section will first explore the different dimensions of friendship as seen through the generations through the characteristics, intimacy, reciprocity and closeness. Moreover, it will address the commonalities of what participants defined as a ‘good friend’ across the generations and then will look at practices between older versus newer friends. The second theme I will discuss on is the moralization of technological practices, such as justifications as to why people use ICTs over face to face communication that common within the middle aged and senior generations. The third theme addresses the anxieties and contradictions that emerge within the middle aged and senior generations of women in a more pronounced way than with young adults.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Dimensions of Friendship Through the Generations

To you, what makes a good friend? Was the first question that I asked my participants in the interview. After a long pause, they would then list characteristics of a good friend. The different generations all echoed similar ideals when it came to determining what a good friend was, indicating that dimensions of friendship remain constant across different generations. This section will explore those dimensions in order to solidify the way that these characteristics manifest themselves in the everyday practices of friendship. The characteristics described can be reflected back to the themes of intimacy, closeness and reciprocity across the generations. These characteristics are not mutually exclusive and when describing a “good friend” my participants’ answers were very formulaic in the sense that these characteristics complemented one another. For example, Ally (19) explained that “A good friend is someone who accepts you for who you are, so like someone who accepts you also makes you feel comfortable around them which then leads to someone who is trustworthy, and they trust you”. Initial aspects of intimacy, such as acceptance of a friend for who they are, was needed to make a friend closer. Furthermore, the intimate exchanges need to be reciprocal because the more those friends confide in one another, and the closer that they become. Therefore, these characteristics can be seen as cyclical and different degrees of this can be seen through the comparison of long lasting friends and newer friends. Before, touching on this however, I will expand on the main ideas of what my participants thought made a good friend.

### 4.2 Common Generational Values of Friendship

When I asked Angela (23) what made a good friend, she paused for a moment and replied “someone who you can be yourself around. You don’t have to put on a certain façade, or act a certain way to be comfortable”. This aspect of “being yourself” and “comfortable” was reflected



in other interviews in other ways, such as “someone who will not judge you” (Annie, 23). These suggest a level of intimacy required to maintain a friendship. Friendships that are “easy”, “comfortable” and “people who will listen” was listed as important parts of friendship when participants were describing what made a good friend. This is further echoed by Cathy (71) who expressed that a good friend is someone you can “talk to and you know it’s not going anywhere. You can share all your thoughts and concerns and you know that it’s never gonna leave them”. Trust and loyalty are facets of intimacy that were dominant within the discourse of what makes a good friend across the generations. The discussion of friendship placed high emphasis on intimacy and how this strengthened between friends through reciprocal exchanges. For example, Carrie (68) mentioned that “a good friend is someone who is there for the good and the bad, and you are there for them too”. Levels of intimacy between friends varied depending their degrees of closeness; this was seen when participants were discussing their relationships with their long-lasting friends and their newer friends.

Closeness was used as an important way to classify how much people confided in their friends. Therefore, it was used as a way to shape people’s levels of intimacy and trust within a friendship. All participants assured me that they would separate their friends in different categories. The most common categories were best friends, close friends, work friends and family. Some of these categories overlapped, for example when Betty (43) mentioned that since one of her good friends from work had a baby, her and that friend have been able to spend more time together outside of the office so that their kids can have play dates. That friend had gone from only being a work friend to being a “mom friend” as well. As there are more overlaps though commonalities of life experiences, especially with middle aged women, their friendships strengthen enabling them to become closer friends. This aspect of closeness was achieved when

young women and their friends both went off to university at the same time. Going through similar experiences creates camaraderie and intimacy between friendships. For example, the senior women made new friends who were also retired near where they lived would tend to send texts to make sure that friend was okay and to check in on each other. The understandings of what makes a good friend and how friendships developed were similar across the generations. The way in which people practiced friendship with the long-lasting friends in comparison to their newer friends, however differed.

#### *4.3 Newer versus Older Friendships*

There was a broad pattern across the generations between newer and older friends. As mentioned before, the second part of the interview discussed a friend who the participant has had for a minimum of five years. No matter what the age, when asked what made their friendship so long-lasting, all the participants came back to the idea of a shared history. Most participants no longer lived geographically close to their long-lasting friends, but they considered themselves closer with this friend than the newer friend who generally lived geographically close and who spent more time with them face to face. Furthermore, long-lasting friends had gained a status of being considered family, a finding that is not uncommon in other studies of friendship (Allan & Adams, 1998; Pahl, 2000). When I asked Beatrice (46) about what made her friendship with Judith so long lasting, she replied with the fact that they have “too much dirt on each other not to be friends...I think given our history and what we’ve shared over the years. I think there’s a lot to be said about long time history...I don’t have a sister and she says a lot of the time “I think of you like a sister””. Despite the fact that Beatrice speaks to Judith about twice a year, she still considers herself closer with her long-lasting friend than her newer friend. This can stem back to the degree of comfort in what participants thought made a good friendship—they know that they are friends and are comfortable with that, therefore they do not need to speak to each other all the

time to reassert this. The value placed on a shared history and of a friend being similar to a family member continued to be common throughout other age groups. For example, when Alex (22) was asked the same question about her long-lasting friend Kendra, she explained that:

Well that shared history certainly with a friendship this long, like there's a shared history. Long term friends become...your chosen family...when someone knows so much about you and your history...I guess that's part of the connection and just being similar. Someone who really gets you. She's like the person that I can call at any time no matter how far away she is; I know that we are there for each other.

The idea of friends being one's chosen family is very common within the North American context. This idea of looking at friendship and remaining close with friends who the participants grew up with could have to do with the fact that the majority of the participants all grew up in rural areas. The senior women especially discussed their friends as if they were family as they spent long periods of time when they were kids at each other's houses. For example, Cathy (68) grew up in a small town in Nova Scotia. She discussed how her friendship was so long lasting with her friend, Gertie:

I think growing up in [small town] I mean there really wasn't much...I mean everybody had big families. She came from a family of seven and I came from a family of eight. We only lived maybe five or six houses apart...I would spend as much time at her house as she'd spend at mine. You know that kind of thing where you were involved with all the family I wasn't just friends with her...I mean it was like my second home.

For Cathy, being from a small town shapes part of her identity and having created a bond with someone who shares something similar helps that friendship be sustained. Cathy and Gertie only talk once a year on the phone, yet Cathy still considers her one of her best friends. ICT usage with long lasting friends was not as common as it was with newer friends across the generations.

Senior women barely kept in touch with their long-lasting friends and often hear about how they were doing through other family members or people from their towns. Middle aged women discussed not talking to their long-lasting friends as much as their newer. It was more common for young women to talk to their long-lasting friends over ICTs, but engage in wordless conversations. For example, Angela (23) explained that her and her long-lasting friend, Maggie will “talk all through weird pictures on Snapchat, or tag each other in memes on Instagram. It’s like...we won’t even have a conversation”. The idea of sharing through ICTs is quite common within the younger age groups. After asking Ally (19) if she communicates with her long-lasting friend Genny over social media she replied with an example of Instagram: “I will heart Genny’s photo whether I actually like it or not. So, when she gets the notification, she knows that I’m still her friend and that I’m thinking of her”. The idea of the obligatory “like” is common amongst long-lasting friends in the younger generations, and yet similar to the older age groups, there will be minimal conversation, in terms of words, with long lasting friends. This can stem back to people feeling comfortable enough in their friendship to not feel the need to actually speak to each other. This kind of comfort expressed through ICTs has also been seen as a dilution of intimacy, an aspect that I will touch on later. Participants’ friendship practices and usage of ICTs changed with their newer friends.

The second friendship that was analyzed in each interview was about one who the participant had been friends with for a maximum of 2 years<sup>1</sup>. All the newer friends described live geographically close to the participants and therefore, are a part of their everyday lives. Despite being geographically close, participants tend to communicate with these friends over ICTs more

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<sup>1</sup> This was expanded to five with the older generations. If this was the case in the interviews, then the long-lasting friend had to be someone who they had been friends with for a minimum of ten years.

frequently for both conversation and plan-making. I asked my participants if they felt closer to their newer friend as a result of seeing each other more and Angela (23) replied:

I feel really close to him in current life because he knows a lot of the stuff I have going on now, but I think we don't know as much about the past with each other, but every time we spend more time together and hang out, we learn more about that and we trust each other and talk more about that stuff.

She goes on to talk about how they talk everyday over text and snapchat. This pattern is common throughout the generations. Middle aged women tended to keep in touch with their newer friends over ICTs even though they lived close to one another. When discussing their newer friend, most middle aged women discussed a friend from work that they made in the past two years and they often do not spend time together face to face outside of the work environment. There is a physical separation of each other's home lives, but there is still more communication over ICTs. When I asked Beatrice (46) if she spent time with her work friend, Anna outside of work she explained that "you know a work friend is a work friend that you're really happy with at work...like I'll text her on the weekends and ask "how's it goin?" Or I'll see something you know I've been shopping for and I'll send her pictures of different options...but we haven't ever really hung out outside the office except to go for lunch". One can see that the same levels in intimacy and closeness have not been achieved in the same way that it has for long time friends. A possible reason why people reach out to their newer friends is because they are still fostering closeness and ICTs can be used to do this.

A couple of senior women found themselves texting their newer friends more often and would generally call their long-lasting friends. For example, Cathy (68) mentioned that her and her new friend who lives down the road generally just text each other instead of call to make plans. She noted:

The most recent friends that I have, I find that I'm texting with them...this girl I met say 2-3 years ago and we're friends, but we text and say "oh lets go for lunch"... she's younger than me so I think that's why there's so much texting...the older friends we talk on the phone a lot.

Along with other seniors, Cathy tended to explain that her use of ICTs, such as texting, was because of her younger friends. Newer friends of seniors were often retired and only differed in age by a couple of years. Throughout the interviews, participants tended to moralize their ICT usage when discussing their friendship practices.

#### *4.4 Moralization of Technological Practices*

It was explicitly mentioned by all participants that they preferred face to face contact. In spite of long-lasting friends living geographically far, the phone did not seem as a good alternative to most. As a result of this, middle-aged and senior participants had a tendency to justify their use of ICTs with their friends before they discussed how they used it. An example of this is when Bernadette (46) explained that she did not talk on the phone as much for fear that she would be taking up someone else's time.

I don't want to take up someone else time when they have other things to do and I don't want them to be distracted. If we're taking the time to have a phone conversation, then I don't wanna hear them you doing the dishes and talking to their kids...I would just rather send a text.

Beatrice was worried that she was going to be infringing on her friends' time and therefore decided to send them a text as opposed to calling them. Time as a factor was a large cause as to why people decide not to get in touch with their friends over the phone. Others felt satisfied with sending a quick text so to not take up their own time. Another example is from Carrie (68) who explained that she liked texting because "it's just quick and you don't have to drive to their house or call on the phone. You just send a quick "are you okay?" or "where are you?" that kind

of thing.” Although she was not worried about infringing on someone else’s time she was concerned about her own and used that as a means to justify her choice in texting because it was quick.

Another way that people moralize their use in ICTs is through family members. For example Carla (71) said, “The only reason we got new cell phones in the last year or so is because we have grandchildren now and we need to keep up, otherwise we wouldn’t care about it.” After making this justification as to why her and her husband got new phones, she continued to explain that “we only got texting about five or six years ago so that was a whole new thing for us to be able to text and I said “oh my god I love this texting...we gotta keep this up”. People recounted multiple times that they preferred face to face contact with their friends, or talking with them in person. As a result of participants expressing these views, they felt the need to justify, rationalize and moralize their use of ICTs.

Young women did not have quite the same way of justifying their uses of ICTs, but they would discuss how they practiced their friendship over communication technology while reaffirming that it was important to have face to face contact with their friends. For example, after Angela (23) finished talking about her long-lasting friend who she would have wordless conversations with over snapchat and through tagging each other in memes, she drew on an example of another friend to illustrate the importance of being in friends’ presence when they need you. She mentioned that her friend Alice was going through a hard time and she went to visit her. While she was there she noticed that that “when we were hanging out, she was getting texts the whole time from people who she would consider close friends expressing their condolences, but that is not enough”. Although she was not moralizing her use of technology directly, she had a very clear idea of what she thought people should or should not communicate

over ICTs. This is an indication that levels of intimacy may be diluted over ICTs, resulting in concerns over the strength of friendship being maintained. Despite the participants asserting that communication with their long-lasting friends was not always necessary, many of the middle-aged women discussed anxieties that they were out of touch with what was *really* going on in their friends' lives.

#### 4.5 *Anxieties and Contradictions*

When practicing friendship, there were certain anxieties that arose especially among middle aged women about the use of ICTs, yet their anxieties were contradictory as they continue to practice friendship through ICTs. When talking about their long-lasting friends, some of my middle-aged participants reminisced about the days of sending letters. Brittany (48) explained why she used to love letter writing:

In the era, previous to the internet...a letter was something treasured...when it came in the mail it was really wonderful... you have the ability to pause and think about what you're saying when you're writing something... what you sent in a letter was important. It wasn't oh its two o'clock and I'm hungry I think I'll have some chips in a text you know?

Despite romanticising letter writing, when asked why she did not send letters any more, she explained that she just did not have the time to do so any more. One of her concerns though was that communication with her friends over ICTs was not meaningful and was more about mundane things. She was worried that constant communication of these mundane things was diluting intimacy in her friendships. Although she used the justification of time, she was also concerned about her friendship practices more generally. She was worried that she was not taking the time to have a meaningful conversation with her friends over ICTs. This shows that there are certain anxieties about ICTs and friendship, however these worries are contradictory in the sense that they did



not change their practices. Other participants also spoke about sending letters and when they were asked why they didn't anymore, they explained that Facebook was just quicker and easier. Middle aged women further voiced their concerns about technology near the end of the interview.

When I asked my participants if there was anything that I may have missed in terms of communication technology or friendship more generally, many of them voiced anxieties that arise from communication technology, ICTs especially. All participants seemed aware that people post their best self on Facebook. As friendships are intimate, in the sense that friends know more about each other than the general public would, when their friends post to Facebook people do not get the full story of what is going on in their friends' lives. For instance, Betty (43) voiced her concern about Facebook and seeing what her friends post all the time:

You know I'm stuck on this whole notion of technology of being both a blessing and a bit of an impediment because I find it makes us all lazy whereas.... I have another good friend who lives in Calgary... if Facebook didn't exist, I would probably call her more right? Facebook has made me a little bit lazy so...You know I feel connected and updated but...am I really? You know cause I'm seeing them go on a hike or the kids going skiing...Am I really connected in the same way as if I picked up the phone and called, told some stories and laughed you know? Probably not.

This feeling was common for middle aged women. Bernadette (46) echoed a similar sentiment when she mentioned that technology on the one hand, "there's the good and the bad...what you think you look like and how you portray yourself online and how you really are is so different". She expands on this by talking about how she likes to post pictures of herself online, but how she goes through lots of pictures before choosing the right one to post, so that friends know she is doing well. She continues to talk about the negative aspects of Facebook and how she has not felt

the need to go visit her friends in Vancouver and that (like Betty) Facebook has made her a little lazy, yet she still knows that she may not be as up to date through her use of ICTs as she would like to be.

If their concerns were not voiced about their own friendships, their concerns were directed towards the younger generations. Beatrice (46) mentioned that:

I mean the only thing that I can say about technology... I mean I think it can be great if used in the right perspective, but I also find that especially with our younger people that they're relying so heavily on the electronic age that they have lost how to communicate...electronics is gonna be more of a burden on...on friendships and keeping friendships and knowing who are your true friends.

Although Beatrice discussed her habits of practicing friendships through ICTs, and were similar to what she was concerned about, she was worried for the younger generation. Being outwardly worried about the younger generations and their ability to communicate was echoed in what many senior women felt. However, senior women did not seem to be worried about their own uses of ICTs at all, but would explicitly contrast their ICT habits with those of the younger generations.

When asked the same question as the others about anything that I may have missed in regards to technology or friendship, Cassandra (66) stated that:

I think because technology is newer to me than it is to you, your age for instance, you grew up with it. Whereas I acquired it when I was in my 40s like emails and things like that. So I have a different...I think my communication is...I like to see people face to face, while I used to write letters, but now emails, but I think umm...I think talking on the phone is more important to me than it is to young people.

Although the senior participants did not share the same anxieties towards their ICT habits and were very comfortable with their friendship practices, they made evident the digital divide

within the generations. Although Cassandra was not denouncing the use of communication technologies, she was sure to differentiate herself from younger generations with the assumption that younger people do not have an interest in more analogue forms of technology. Furthermore, her friendship practices over ICTs did not differ very much from other generations. She was one of the few participants who still enjoyed talking on the phone, but she nonetheless used ICTs for keeping in touch with friends and family.

The anxieties and contradictions about practicing friendship over ICTs were discussed in ways that gave the illusion that it was technology controlling the individual. Despite the fact that people were worried about their friendships, they made no indication that they were going to change their communication habits, as they have become so integrated in the everyday routine. There was a sense of hopelessness directed at younger generations and a concern that intimacy has been diluted from the use of ICTs.

The tensions that arise within generations, specifically middle aged women, and their concerns of not truly being in the know with their friends despite access to ICTs and continuously being exposed to their status updates. Moreover, senior women outwardly distanced themselves by contrasting their habits with analog technologies to the youths' ICT usage. Even though ICTs are widely used across the generations in practices of friendship, there is a concern that intimacy is being diluted by them. This echoes the study by Sherry Turkle in her book *Reclaiming Conversation* (2015) that was discussed in the literature review. She was concerned with the fact that people no longer know how to have a face to face conversation or how to interact with one another. She argues that since people have begun to notice this and voice their concerns about it, now is the time to attempt to reclaim face to face intimacy between friends (Turkle, 2015). My participants certainly expressed that they are worried about not

knowing what is really going on in the lives of their friends, however; many have settled for ICT usage as North American life is busy. Time is seen as precious and therefore, some participants may not feel as though they have the time to pick up the phone. Furthermore, there is still a level of comfort in friendship where the participant may not feel the need to contact them. ICTs have become a very integrated and taken for granted part of everyday practices of friendship, but the values of friendship have stayed the same across the generations.

### **5. Conclusion: How does technology affect dimensions of friendship through the generations?**

Based on my findings, the ideals of what makes a good friend is similar across the generations. The characteristics of intimacy, closeness and reciprocity are seen as needed to create a good friendship, however the way that these elements of friendship are made manifest in through ICTs differ depending on the generation and the type of friendship. For long-lasting friends, they are not seen as important tools because these friends have achieved a level of closeness through shared histories and this has led to the classification of these friends being like family. Those who keep in touch regularly with long-lasting friends over ICTs, do so through ways such as sending pictures or tagging each other in memes. These practices can show levels of comfort and intimacy that do not require words. On the contrary to this, as friendships were still coming to fruition with newer friends, ICTs are useful tools in achieving intimacy and reciprocity. The everyday rituals of asking “how’s it goin?” or asking friends’ opinions on clothes through pictures can help foster a sense of closeness in the friendship.

Despite these everyday uses of ICTs, participants moralized their use of them as if to reassure me, or themselves, that they know that face to face communication is “better”. There has been a stigmatization towards people who embrace practicing friendship through ICTs and

yet, this is a very common practice across generations. As a result of this stigmatization, women cited time constraints for their friends or themselves in order to justify their ICT usage. Both middle aged women and seniors used these justifications. Other senior women also cited the younger generation in being the reason why they felt the need to be “up to date” with the newer technologies, before they discussed that they enjoyed using them. The younger generation did not seem to moralize their technological habits in the same way, but were sure to explain that ICTs are only good for certain situations, and should not be used to address friends in serious situations, face to face contact is needed for that. A cause for these moralizations could be due to the anxieties that arise with the increasing reliance on ICTs.

Middle aged women expressed concern that they were unsure what was truly going on in their friends’ lives. Everyone was very aware that you do not get the full story when seeing status updates on Facebook, yet these constant updates has enabled a form of laziness when it comes to friendship. For middle aged women, especially those with children, they are easily deterred away from speaking to friends over the phone or spending time with them face to face and therefore settle for what they see on Facebook. From this aspect, intimacy can be diluted or falsified as there is only the presentation of a specific self-online. The attitudes and practices of friendship over ICTs are riddled with contradictions and that creates these anxieties. There is concern over the younger generation and them not having the skills to communicate with one another.

Friendship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has undergone some significant changes, especially as people tend to move around more (Rawlins , 2009). The roles of friends have changed over time, but ideals of who makes a good friend has remained similar over the years. The emergence of ICTs, and the high rate they are becoming more accessible, have created new ways of staying connected with each other. However, having quick access to friends and online updates has been

accompanied by conflicting feelings towards ICTs depending on the generation. I believe that this fast emergence, and increased dependence, on ICTs shows that different technological means having been available at different times in women's lives affect the way that friendship gets interpreted and practiced across the generations, even though the ideal of what makes a good friend remains the same. Therefore, the dimensions of friendship remain constant while the ICTs are a mere tool where these dimensions are manifest, questioned and sometimes diluted in different ways depending on the generation.

## **Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer and Online Post**

Information on recruitment flyer and online post are as follows:

*Friendship through the Ages: A Technological Perspective*

*Are you a woman in one of the age groups of 18-25, 40-50 or 65+? Do you have a university degree, or are you working toward one? Would you like to be interviewed about your friends and friendships? If so, I'd love to hear from you!*

*Join a social anthropological study exploring women's experiences of friendship and communication technology across different generations, conducted by a Dalhousie honours student. Participation consists of a single interview lasting up to one hour.*

*Please contact Brooke Edwards for more information!*

[brooke.edwards@dal.ca](mailto:brooke.edwards@dal.ca)

705.783.4300

## Appendix B: Consent Form



*Faculty of Arts and*

*Social Sciences*

### CONSENT FORM

#### *Friendship through the Ages: A Technological Perspective*

You are invited to take part in research being conducted by me, Brooke Edwards, an undergraduate student in Social Anthropology, as part of my honours degree at Dalhousie University. The purpose of this research is to interview women of different generations to understand how communication technology impacts the way they practice friendship. I will write up the results of this research in a paper for my class, called the honours thesis.

As a participant in the research, you will be asked to answer a number of interview questions about the different ways that you have used communication technology throughout your life in order to keep in touch with your friends. You will also be asked about other aspects of your friendship practices. The interview should take about an hour and will be conducted in a quiet location of your choice. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. If I quote any part of it in my honours thesis, I will use a pseudonym, not your real name, and I will remove any other details that could identify you or your friends from the quote.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to answer questions that you do not want to answer, and you are welcome to stop the interview at any time if you no longer want to participate. If you decide to stop participating after the interview is over, you can do so until March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. I will not be able to remove the information you provided after that date, because I will have completed my analysis, but the information will not be used in any other research.

Information that you provide to me will be kept private and will be anonymized, which means any identifying details such as your name or your friends' names will be removed from it. Only the honours class supervisor and I will have access to the unprocessed information you offer. I will describe and share general findings in a presentation to the Sociology and Social Anthropology Department and in my honours thesis. Nothing that could identify you will be included in the presentation or the thesis. I will keep anonymized information so that I can learn more from it as I continue with my studies.

The risks associated with this study are no greater than those you would encounter if you talked about this topic in your everyday life. There will be no direct benefit to you in participating in this research and you will not receive compensation. The research, however, will contribute to new knowledge on how technology is used to support different dimensions of women's friendships, and whether women's practices of friendship vary by generation. If you would like to see how your information is used, please feel free to contact me and I will send you a copy of my honours thesis after April 30. I will also be



uploading it to the SOSA Honours Thesis Collection, which you can access by following this link:  
<https://dalspace.library.dal.ca/handle/10222/56276>.

If you have questions or concerns about the research please feel free to contact me or the honours class supervisor. My contact information is 705.783.4300 or [brooke.edwards@dal.ca](mailto:brooke.edwards@dal.ca). You can contact the honours class supervisor, Dr. Martha Radice, at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Dalhousie University on (902) 494-6747, or email [martha.radice@dal.ca](mailto:martha.radice@dal.ca).

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may contact Catherine Connors, Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email [ethics@dal.ca](mailto:ethics@dal.ca).

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**Participant's consent:**

I have read the above information and I agree to participate in this study.

I consent to the audio recording of my interview.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Interview Guide

### *Section 1: General Questions about Friendship*

1. What makes a “good friend”? (Probe: an example would be what makes you feel close to them? Or what are some things they do that help you when you are feeling down?)
2. How many friends would you say you have? How would you group them into different categories? (probe: suggest close friends, friends, and acquaintances, if they are not sure)
3. Starting from most recently to least recently, what are the different forms of communication that you have used to communicate with your friends? (Probe: I am interested in both new ‘digital’ forms of communication, like email, texting or social media, and older ‘analog’ forms like telephone calls or letter-writing.) Roughly when did you start using each type of technology? Are there any types you no longer use, or use less than before?
4. Do you find you can achieve the same amount of closeness or intimacy using other forms of communication beyond speaking face-to-face? If so, how?

### *Section 2: Long-time friends*

I would like you to answer the following questions with a friend who you have had for a long time (at least 5 years).

1. How long have you been friends for?
2. How did you meet one another?
3. Do you live geographically close to one another? Or have you in the past? Probe: what forms of technology do you use to keep in touch? Do you find your friendship strengthened or weakened as a result of the move and way you communicate?
4. How would you describe your relationship with them? What about them makes your friendship long-lasting?
5. What are some forms of communication that you use to keep in touch with one another? Have you changed the way you communicate with each other over the years?
6. How often do you communicate with this friend using any form of communication technology, and face-to-face interactions?
7. How does communication technology affect your friendship? Probe: Do you feel closer to them when you speak to them face-to-face? Or do you find it easier to speak about certain subjects over communication technology?
8. Have you and your friend ever had a falling out? How did it affect your friendship? If so, how did you resolve this issue? Probe: did this falling out take place over a form of communication technology? In what form of communication did you resolve or worsen the issue?
9. How long will you go without speaking to this friend over communication technology? Does this affect the strength of your friendship? Probe: What about face-to-face? How often do you spend time in the same physical space together?

### *Section 3: Recent Friendships*

I would like you to answer the following questions with a friend in mind who you have more recently become friends with (known for a maximum of 2 years)

1. How long have you been friends for?
2. How did you meet one another?
3. Do you live geographically close to one another?
4. How does this friendship differ from the longer lasting friend we just spoke about in terms of the quality of it? For example do you feel closer or more distant to this friend?
5. How often do you keep in touch with one another over communication technology? How does this affect the quality of your friendship? Probe: What about face-to-face? How often do you spend time in the same physical space together?
6. Do you feel that this friendship will create this long-lasting element it over time? Probe: what about it makes it more or less special besides the length of time you have been friends? How do your communication habits differ with this friend or remain similar?
7. Do you feel more comfortable speaking with your friend face-to-face than over communication technologies? Why or why not?
8. Do you feel that you both give and receive emotionally in this friendship?
9. Is there anything that I may have missed that you would like to discuss about your friends either your long-lasting ones, newer friends or both?

*Section 4: Wrap-up*

1. What do you do for a living?
2. How much time in on average are you communicating with friends in a week both with communication technology and without?
3. Have you always lived in the area? Or have you moved around a lot?
4. Again, is there anything else that you would like me to include in this interview?

## Appendix D: REB Final Report Confirmation



April 06, 2017

Brooke Edwards  
Arts & Social Sciences\Sociology & Anthropology  
Dalhousie University

Dear Brooke,

**REB** #: 2016-4041  
Project Title: Friendship Through the Ages: A technological Perspective

I am writing to acknowledge receipt of the final report for this research project. The research ethics file for this project is now closed. Dalhousie University stores this file for 5 years, after which all records associated with the file may be destroyed.

I would like to remind you of your continuing responsibility to ensure that you maintain any records and data associated with this research consistent with your approved research plan.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Catherine Connors".

**Catherine Connors** | **Director Research Ethics** | Dalhousie University | Room 231, 6299 South Street, PO Box 15000, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H 4R2 | phone: 902.494.1462

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