Women and Friendship: The Role of Communication Technologies in Sustaining Critical Connections

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Abstract

In contrast to traditional theories of psychological development which stressed separation and individuation as representing optimum stages in a continuum of development, feminist theories emerging out of the Women’s Movement drew attention to the female sense of self occurring within the context of ongoing relationships. In particular, female friendships were acknowledged as vital to women’s personal growth and development (West, 2005), and as increasingly important sources of mutual support and companionship for women (Moyal, 1992). Paralleling this renewed interest in women’s lives, several landmark studies noted the role the landline telephone playing in supporting these critical female connections (Moyal, 1989; Rakow, 1992). This paper builds on this theoretical and empirical background by examining the role information and communication technologies play in enabling contemporary midlife women to sustain female friendships across time and space. In contrast to previous generations, women’s networks today are often very geographically dispersed. In this context, ICTs play a critical role in not only sustaining women’s existing friendships, but in some cases also enabling women to expand their social networks and sources of support. While teenagers and young people’s use of communication technologies such as mobile telephones and social networking sites is well documented, this paper aims to fill a gap in the literature by documenting how an often overlooked group of users - midlife women - are using these same technologies. In doing so, this research reinforces not only the importance of women’s friendships as pivotal to women’s psychological wellbeing, but also demonstrates the degree to which new technologies support the ongoing maintenance of these critical connections in women’s lives.

Keywords
Midlife women, Women’s psychological development, Friendship, Information and communication technologies (ICTs), Interpersonal communication
Introduction

This paper considers the ways in which communication technologies are being co-opted to sustain friendships in women’s lives. Drawing on a current research project which considers midlife women’s communication practices, the paper draws on feminist perspectives on women’s psychological development to position friendships as emblematic of the key themes of connection and relationships, which are woven like a thread through many women’s lives¹ (Gilligan, 1982; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Rakow, 1992). The paper begins by outlining the evolution of theories relating to women’s psychological development, and considers how feminist theory has positioned relationships and connections as being “at the heart” of female psychosocial development (West, 2005). Against this backdrop, the paper examines the role of women’s friendships as an empathic and empowering resource in many women’s lives (Goodman, cited in West, 2005). This is followed by an analysis of research documenting the part that information and communication technologies (ICTs) have come to play in sustaining, and in some cases enriching, women’s friendships. Finally, the paper considers the opportunities new media channels offer to women, not only in terms of managing existing relationships, but also potentially as a conduit through which lapsed friendships can be revitalised.

Women’s Psychological Development: the Centrality of Relationships

A review of the literature relating to women’s psychological development reveals the contested nature of ‘knowledge’ within this field. As Williams notes, early efforts to explain the “behavioural differences between males and females” inevitably reflected, and in turn reinforced, prevailing social beliefs on the appropriate role and nature of women in comparison to men (1983, p. 14). This pattern is most clearly evident in Sigmund Freud’s theories on the formation of the female personality. Freud’s new theories of psychoanalysis were heavily influenced by the notion that anatomical differences between the sexes were ultimately responsible for gendered patterns of psychological development. From Freud’s perspective, differences between men and women’s moral and psychological development could be explained by “women’s developmental failure to meet the male standard” (Kolander, Ballard, & Chandler, 1999, p. 32).

¹ This phrase has been borrowed from Lana Rakow’s discussion on the role of the telephone in women’s lives (Rakow, 1992, p. 149).
Insofar as traditional psychoanalysis focused on the obstacles in the way of ‘normal’ female [heterosexual] development, it overlooked the relational dynamics within which that development takes place (Chodorow, 1978, p. 114). In contrast, post-Freudian psychoanalytic thinking shifted the focus to a study of the “psychical relations between human beings rather than the inner world of the individual subject alone” (Elliott, 1994, p. 18). One of the major post-Freudian psychoanalytic strands, object-relations theory, posited an individual’s psychological development as occurring in relation to other objects (Elliott, 1994, p. 22; Kahane, 1992, p. 286). As Elliott suggests, “[i]n the object-relations perspective, the emergence of selfhood is tied to the development of interpersonal relations” (1994, p. 27). Object-relations theorists such as Fairbairn and Mahler constructed psychological development as a continuum from the undifferentiated infant, whose identity is merged with the maternal ‘object’, through “symbiosis to separation and individuation” (Mahler, cited in Kahane, 1992, p. 286).

This focus on separation and individuation as representing optimum psychological development was a common theme in developmental theory throughout much of the twentieth century. Both Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget developed theories of psychological development that, in common with Freud, established the male experience as the standard for normal psychosocial development; one in which the “masculine ideal of separation, autonomy, self-reliance and individualism” were seen as characterising the higher stages of psychological and moral development (Benjamin, cited in Cranny-Francis, Waring, Stavropoulos, & Kirkby, 2003, p. 61).

In the mid 1970s, amidst the second wave of the Women’s Movement, Nancy Chodorow refocused attention on theories of female subjectivity. Drawing on object-relations theory, Chodorow considered how the practice of exclusive mothering in early childhood generates different “psychological capacities” in males and females, which account for continuing gender role distinctions (1978, p. 7). According to Chodorow, the centrality of relationships and the interdependence that characterise young girls’ lives means they develop with “a basis for ‘empathy’ built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not” (1978, p. 167). As such, while both genders can be said to have equal relational potential, current

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2 Chodorow qualifies the use of the term ‘mother’ within the context of a ‘nuclear family’. She notes research which indicates that primary love need not be exclusively associated with the infant’s mother; an infant may develop primary love with anyone who can provide the same “constancy and quality of care”. Moreover, primary love may develop with more than one “attachment figure”, as may be the case with child care or societies not based on the nuclear family, such as the Israeli kibbutzim (Chodorow, 1978pp. 74-75). For ease of writing in this paper, ‘mother’ has been used as a generic term for the primary care-giver for whom the infant develops a primary love relationship.
parenting practices dictate that, in general, it is in females that the qualities necessary to
develop a relational orientation are more highly developed (1978, p. 169).

More recently, feminist theorists have repositioned research into woman’s psychological
development, moving the focus from the analysis of her differences compared with man, to
the study of her as a unique being in her own right (Williams, 1983, p. 18). In contrast to
traditional theories of development which emphasise separation and independence, rationality
and objectivity, as central to psychological maturity and morality, feminist theories privilege
the importance of relationships and connections, caring and empathy, as integral to women’s
sense of self (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1986). Indeed, according to Miller, “an inner sense of
connection to others is the central organizing feature of ... [women’s] development” (Miller &

This paper uses this feminist approach to women’s psychological development as a
conceptual framework through which to examine how women’s communication practices
reflect a sense of self-in-relation. While the research this paper is drawn from considers how
women are using multiple information and communication technologies (ICTs) to help them
maintain a range of family and social relationships, the focus of this paper is much narrower;
it documents the degree to which ICTs have become critical tools in maintaining female
friendships during women’s midlife years.

**Women’s Social Networks – Past and Present**

Historically, women’s social networks have been largely defined through webs of kinship
(McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006; Young & Willmott, 1962). Past research into
network composition consistently indicated that while both men and women had similar sized
social networks, women’s networks comprised significantly “fewer ties to nonkin and more
ties to kin” than their male peers (McPherson et al., 2006; Moore, 1990). However, research
over the last twenty years indicates that the balance in women’s social networks is changing.
Some researchers have suggested that the changes wrought in part by the women’s movement
over the past 30 years have altered the social environment for both men and women, with
women increasingly turning to their female friends for emotional support and companionship,
even where family members may live close by (Gouldner & Strong, 1987, pp. 3-4; Moyal,
1992, p. 57). Indeed according to Ellen Goodman, for many women the most empathic and
empowering relationships are to be found in their friendships with other women (cited in
West, 2005). Such a dynamic is evident in interviews undertaken for this current research
project, as the following comments by a 48 year old participant reveals:
So I think we all have somebody, but another female, yer. And you share stuff with that female that you probably, even though you’ve got your spouse, ... they listen, but they don’t have that feminine connection, you know? (Gillian)

As well as the enjoyment and support that female friendships can offer, the value of friendships for women is also underpinned by the voluntary nature of these social ties. While kinship ties can be immensely rewarding, friendships offer a vehicle for sharing and supporting that is not embedded with intrinsic obligations or expectations:

Because friendship rests on mutual choice and mutual need and involves a voluntary exchange of sociability between equals, it sustains a person’s sense of usefulness and self-esteem far more effectively than filial relationships. (Blau, cited in Gouldner & Strong, 1987, p. 4)

**Methodology**

Qualitative in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with forty Western Australian women, recruited through a process of ‘snowball sampling’. As one of the key aims of this research was to investigate the role of communication technologies in helping women manage transitions during their midlife years, the women were required to be between forty five and fifty five years of age. Interviews, lasting on average one to two hours, were recorded digitally and then transcribed. The interview transcripts were coded thematically using NVivo qualitative research software. As well as mapping women’s use of ICTs to manage family and social relationships, other key themes that emerged from data analysis included the factors that influence women’s ICT choices, such as perceived levels of social presence attributed to different communication tools; women’s networks of social support; computer-mediated social support sourced from non-traditional sources, such as discussion forums and health support sites; and women’s experiences of midlife transitions, such as menopause, the ‘empty nest’, and loss of parents.

The participants represented a broad cross-section of socio-economic backgrounds, and expressed varying degrees of competencies and experience using a range of ICTs. Fourteen (35%) of the women employed multiple communication technologies and channels, such as email, social networking sites, instant messaging, webcam, VOIP, mobile and landline telephones and text messaging to help them maintain contact with friends and family, while at the other end of the spectrum two women (5%) made very limited use of online communication technologies, including email, and instead relied heavily upon the landline
and mobile telephone, as well as text messaging. While the small sample size prohibits the project findings being considered representative of women in general, the in-depth nature of the qualitative interviews nevertheless provides a very rich source of detailed information on a section of the population which has often been overlooked in communication research. To protect participants’ privacy and anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout this paper, and all identifying information has been removed. Italics are used to indicate questions or comments made by the interviewer during the interviews.

**Women, Friendships and the Role of Communication Technologies**

One of the dominant themes in the interviews with women in this research project was the degree to which the women value the opportunity to ‘catch up’ with their friends in person. Indeed, many of the women interviewed expressed the sentiment that face-to-face communication is the ‘gold-standard’ of communication channels. However, hectic lifestyles, competing family and work responsibilities and increasingly mobile populations mean that many women’s social networks must by necessity also be sustained through mediated communication technologies. In particular, research documenting the role of the landline telephone during the latter part of the last century revealed the telephone had become a critical tool in maintaining women’s friendships (Frissen, 1995, p. 87; Moyal, 1992, p. 57; Rakow, 1992). Indeed, Ann Moyal’s landmark Australian study in the late 1980s found that after family communication, “the second most important site of telephone networking was between close women friends” (Moyal, 1992, p. 57). As this current research project reveals, the landline telephone is still considered one of the most valued communication technologies for enabling women to connect with family and friends.

As well as their use of the landline telephone, the women interviewed have also integrated a range of newer ICTs, such as email, mobile telephones, text messaging (SMS), social network sites and instant messaging (IM), into their everyday communication practices. These findings echo to a large extent the significant body of research built up over the last ten years which reveals that new communication technologies are playing an increasingly important role in helping women sustain both local and distant social ties (Baldassar, Baldock, & Wilding, 2007; Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006; Matzko, 2002). Women’s media choices reflect the social context in which the communication event occurs, and indicate a degree of both conscious and unconscious awareness of the different affordances offered by different channels. For many of the participants, mediated communication tools such as email and SMS are generally used more for instrumental purposes (Noble, 1987), organising activities and arranging to meet in person. In this context, text messages are used as a ‘quick and dirty’ way
of setting up opportunities for more satisfying face-to-face meetings. Similarly, email can provide a convenient and time-saving means of keeping in touch, in contrast to telephone calls which can be more difficult to manage. As the following comments suggest, 51 year old Ellie appreciates the succinctness of text-based modes such as email, SMS and IM:

That’s the other thing about communicating via phone, when you phone up a friend, you’ve got to go through all the niceties, and all the ‘how’re you going?’, and you can’t make it too quick often, whereas email, or ... MSN [IM], you’re just straight to the point, no fluffy bits. And that’s really a time-waster ... and it goes on forever [saying hello/goodbye] and you haven’t got time for that. (Ellie)

However, at least one of the women lamented the fact that some degree of personal contact is making way for mediated communication:

I’ve got a couple of really close friends, and one of them tends to, we used to meet quite a bit for coffee, but now she’s relying more on email, and I miss the close connection we used to have over the cup of coffee, so I’m, yer, I think sometimes people get too busy and think that email is an ok substitute, and it’s not. (Beth)

Moreover, while mediated channels such as email and SMS might be considered suitable for fulfilling instrumental goals, they are less likely to be considered an appropriate medium when a more tangible form of emotional support is needed. In her reflections on communication with a close friend, Beth observed:

If it’s something, if it’s just a quick update of news that’s fine, but if there’s some indication she [friend] needs a bit of emotional support, which you can’t do, I really don’t think it’s [email] adequate. (Beth)

While women such as Beth and Ellie prefer to use emails and text messages predominantly as supplementary channels of communication, there is also evidence that such phatic communication can serve a more intrinsic purpose (Noble, 1987) in the context of the broader relationship. While the convenient nature of these new media fit well with women’s busy lives, at the same time the opportunity to interact on a frequent and regular basis can facilitate a deeper engagement in each others’ everyday lives, and help to establish the perception of a ‘continuous connection’ (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2006). This sense of a continuous connection manifested across multiple communication technologies has implications for the quality of relationships. As research has consistently highlighted, there is
a positive association between “increased interaction and increased liking” (Adams & Stevenson, 2004). It is highly likely, therefore, that the introduction of new communication channels which foster increased contact will impact positively on the quality of personal relationships (Adams & Stevenson, 2004). Moreover, the introduction of a new communication channel doesn’t necessarily substitute for the use of an existing communication technology, but rather tends to encourage more frequent communication using both channels (Wilding, 2006). Both Wilding (2006) and Licoppe and Smoreda (2006) note that the content of the interaction is not necessarily as significant as simply the fact that communication is taking place.

While both Ellie and Beth use multiple communication technologies to sustain a continuous connection with local friends, similar patterns are also evident in the maintenance of distant ties. As the following excerpt from Licoppe and Smoreda’s research indicates, the introduction of low cost forms of communication provides a platform through which the ‘tyranny of distance’ can be at least partly overcome:

Before I had an Internet connection, it was usually she who called me, I didn’t call because financially it’s very expensive, so I didn’t call, and I’m very lazy about writing letters....Whereas an e-mail is different: I connect up, I write her a little note and that’s that. (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2006, pp 309-310)

Likewise, this current research project reveals that email can be a particularly valuable tool in facilitating ongoing interaction in situations where relationships have either lapsed, or communication has been infrequent, due to the difficulties of sustaining communication across time and distance. Such is the case for 46 year old Chris, who in the past has had very infrequent communication with friends who live some four hours drive away in a rural area. As Chris explained, communication had been largely limited to “the yearly Christmas newsletter” and information exchanged through both women’s parents, who were also friends. Difficulties in finding convenient and affordable communication channels meant that:

Because of the communication thing [difficulties] ... we’d go for, well really probably without seeing each other and speaking to each other for quite a few years. (Chris)

The introduction of email has ‘changed the ball game’ for both Chris and her friends. When asked who she emails the most, Chris replied:
Probably a couple of friends in the country....It’s easier to just sit and type and just send it off than ring them, because being on farms and that, it’s quite difficult time wise to catch them ‘cause they’re always out. [Also] because I don’t have cheap STD rates on my phone ... I try not to phone, that’s a deterrent, whereas because I’ve got full broadband, it’s no effort to email, and it doesn’t cost any extra, and I know they will get it. (Chris)

Experiences such as Chris’s are not isolated; indeed, research suggests that not only are women more likely than men to use email to sustain local social ties, but they are also more likely to be employing email to re-energise existing relationships, and to re-establish lapsed relationships (Boneva, Kraut, & Frohlich, 2001; Matzko, 2002; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000). In doing so, women are not only enhancing the quality of existing relationships, but are also extending their social networks. Such a dynamic is evident in Gillian’s reflections on her use of email to reconnect with an old school friend:

When you say you reconnected with her...

With email, I mean, we used to write letters. But they would be infrequent. But now with email, it’s probably once a fortnight, we get in touch. So it’s rekindled our relationship, more so, you know? And they’ve been to visit here, and so I keep more in touch with her and what’s going on in the family. (Gillian)

New Opportunities: Women and Social Networking Environments

While email remains the major online conduit through which the women interviewed maintained both family and social relationships, it is worth noting that relationships are also actively sustained, and in some cases re-activated or initiated, in a variety of other online environments. Internet discussion lists and electronic mailing lists, as well as online support sites, instant messaging services (IM), chat rooms, social networking sites (SNS), online dating services and ‘Web 2.0’ applications such as Flickr all provide opportunities for women to connect with existing social networks, or establish new connections. One particular issue that emerged in this current research project was women’s increasing use of social networking sites to reconnect with friends. While social networking sites – and particularly children and young adults’ engagement with these sites - have been the subject of intense interest in both the popular media and the research community (Lenhart, 2009; Ofcom, 2008), there has until very recently been little research documenting other user groups’ experiences in these relatively new online environments. To date, most of the focus in the media and research...
The community has been examining the ways in which young people are using social networking technologies to construct and perform identity, maintain core social networks, and in some cases extend their circle of ‘friends’ beyond their known social network. The large number of academic papers devoted to young people’s appropriation of SNS (boyd, 2008; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Holland & Harpin, 2008; Larsen, 2007; Lenhart & Madden, 2007) has unfortunately served to draw the focus away from other users that may be active in these environments.

However, the recent increase in the number of adults using social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook and MySpace (Lenhart, 2009) suggests that these particular online environments are likely – at least for the next few years - to become a more common platform through which some women will maintain relationships. As Lenhart’s report reveals, adults of all ages are now increasing their presence on a range of social networking sites. Given that there is very little research on adult’s use of SNS, it is difficult to determine how they are using these sites, and what factors are motivating the recent rapid uptake by older people. Some insights are included in Lenhart’s report, which finds that:

> [M]ost adults use online social networks primarily to connect with friends. Nearly nine in ten social network users (89%) say they use the networks to stay in touch with friends, and 57% say they use it to make plans with friends. As with teens, the bulk of these friend connections are with people they already know. (Lenhart, 2009, p. 6)

Certainly, the older demographics featured in sites such as Friends Reunited indicates that connecting (or reconnecting) with friends is a key motivating factor for older people’s engagement with SNS. The extent to which sites such as Friends Reunited are now considered the province of older technological ‘luddites’ is suggested by a post on a consumer technology blog:

> Have you considered creating a service ‘Enemies Re-united’? It might be more fun than the current bunch of old geezers talking about the good old days when you could buy a pint of oysters and still go home with enough change for a prostitute trouser-press etc. (Pelagian, 2008, June 22)

The implicit message here is that older users of these sites do little more than reminisce about the ‘good old days’. While this claim is arguably a generalisation, it could also be suggested that there is little to differentiate the subjective pleasure users of Friends Reunited gain from their interactions, from the enjoyment which younger users derive from their interaction on
Facebook or MySpace. While newer SNS such as Facebook may provide greater functionality and a more stylish interface, the underlying motives for participation may be said to be broadly similar. Regardless of the particular site chosen, both Friends Reunited and MySpace provide a platform through which old friendships can be renewed, and current social networks maintained.

Seven out of the forty women (just under 18%) in this research project have made use of sites such as Friends Reunited to reconnect with old school friends. For some, such as 55 year old Janette, who migrated to Australia as a young woman in the 1970s, social networking sites not only enable her to locate old friends, but also to re-establish connections regardless of physical location. In the following excerpt, Janette reflects on her use of Friends Reunited:

Friends Reunited was a wonderful thing that I got on to 5 or 6 years ago and discovered all my old school friends, who I’d lost contact with for years...Girls saying we’re they’d been, and what they were doing now, and it was wonderful, and so I’ve got that contact - without Friends Reunited I would never have done that. (Janette)

While Janette’s renewed contacts haven’t as yet developed into deeper connections, the interviews provide evidence that sites such as Friends Reunited can provide a platform through which more satisfying relationships do emerge. For 53 year old Zoe, participation in Friends Reunited offered more than an opportunity to reminisce; conversations with an old school friend have proven to be an ongoing source of pleasure:

It’s [Friends Reunited] been great, and a couple of them, the boy that I knew when I was four, and the girl that I knew in the same street, have become regular correspondents now, we’re really enjoying writing backwards and forwards.... you know, really chatty, fulsome ones [emails] backwards and forwards. (Zoe)

It should be noted, however, that while women’s use of social networking sites does in some ways parallel younger people’s use, there appears to be distinct differences in the way these two groups experience sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Friends Reunited. While both groups use SNS to connect with friends, younger users – in particular teenagers – tend to engage with these sites as more than simply communication channels. As danah boyd notes, while teenagers are more likely to use such ‘spaces’ to “hang out” and socialise with their friends, adults tend to use the sites more strategically as a channel through which to ‘network’ (boyd, 2008, p. 117). Certainly this research supports boyd’s observations on adults’ use of
SNS; sites such as Friends Reunited or Facebook were more likely to be used as [simply] another channel through which to communicate. Such differences in patterns of use do not, according to boyd, “stem from the technology but are most likely driven by how these tools fit into different groups’ everyday practices” (boyd, 2008, p. 117). For the women interviewed in this research project, the value of social networking sites is not the technology’s potential to provide an immersive experience, a platform for identity play, or a sense of place, but rather in the networks’ ability to provide additional channels through which these women can continue to nurture and in some cases extend the networks of relationships and connections in their lives.

Conclusion

For most of the last century, the importance of relationships in women’s lives was considered a sign of inadequate or inferior moral and psychological development. Compared with the masculine standard of autonomy and independence, women’s relational orientation was seen as evidence of emotional weakness (Kolander et al., 1999). It was not until the 1980s that new ways of viewing women’s psychological development emerged; ways that drew attention to the importance of relationships and connections, caring and empathy, as integral to women’s sense of self. This new perspective highlighted how female psychological development occurs within the context of ongoing relationships (West, 2005).

Up until relatively recently, relationships in women’s lives predominantly occurred within kin networks, with women drawing their greatest support from other female relatives who lived in close physical proximity (McPherson et al., 2006; Young & Willmott, 1962). However, social changes in the last quarter of the twentieth century have impacted on women’s personal networks; increasingly women are drawing companionship, comfort and support from their close female friends. Paralleling these changes in the structure of women’s social networks have been rapid developments in information and communication technologies, such that the means by which women maintain these relationships has also fundamentally altered.

As this current research project reveals, contemporary midlife women are proactively appropriating multiple communication technologies to maintain both local and distant friendships. While teenagers and young people’s use of communication technologies such as mobile telephones and social networking sites is well documented, this paper has aimed to fill a gap in the literature by documenting how an often overlooked group of users - midlife women - are using these same technologies to sustain existing or rekindle lapsed friendships. In doing so, this research reinforces not only the importance of women’s friendships as key...
sources of enjoyment and social support to women, but also demonstrates the degree to which new technologies support the ongoing maintenance of these critical connections.

References


