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# Social Networking and Interpersonal Communication and Conflict Resolution Skills among College Freshmen

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Social Networking and Interpersonal Communication and Conflict Resolution Skills  
among College Freshmen

Submitted by John J. Drussell  
May 2012

MSW Clinical Research Paper

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, MN and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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## **Abstract**

Social networking is a current phenomenon that consists of both web-based communication with Internet users through websites and interaction with others via cellular phones. A survey conducted on 2,277 American adults found that 18-24 year olds sent or received an average of 109.5 text messages per day, which works out to be more than 3,200 text messages per month. Further, it was estimated that 713 million people ages 15 or older, which was 14% of the global population, used the Internet in June 2006, with 153 million being in the United States. The purpose of this study at social networking, specifically the activities of texting and use of the social network site (SNS) Facebook, and its impact on communication and conflict resolution skills. Twenty two college freshmen responded to an anonymous survey addressing their daily activities in social networking as well as general attitudes regarding communication and conflict resolution. The findings of this research suggest that individuals consider face-to-face interaction the most effective and preferred means to communicate and resolve conflict with others. However, the results also indicate that individuals participate in daily social networking activities at a higher rate than what has been found in previous studies. Further, participants reported using texting and Facebook to communicate and resolve conflicts in their in everyday life. Future research is necessary and encouraged to examine how social networking relates to the skills of communication and conflict resolution and its impact on interpersonal functioning.

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“As one person I cannot change the world. But, I can change the world for one person.”

--Anonymous

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## Introduction

Growing concern exists among researchers regarding the effects of the Internet on youth regarding potential risks to safety, well-being, and skill development (Selfhout, Branje, Delsing, Bogt & Meeus, 2009; Caplan, 2003; Gross, 2004). Social networking is a current phenomenon that consists of both web-based communication with Internet users through websites (Facebook, MySpace, YouTube) and interaction with others via cellular phones. According to Facebook statistics, there were 526 million daily active users on average in March 2012. Further, the 2010 Media Industry Fact Sheet reported that two-thirds of the population over the age of 13 are connected by cell phones. Social networking has become common in today's society, especially among adolescents and young adults, and continues to grow in popularity. These activities occur among people who already know each other personally as well as those who have never met in person. Increased utilization of computers and cell phones to communicate, tasks that have historically required interpersonal skills and face-to face interaction, may be altering the means in which young people attain and practice skills that are necessary to function in their daily lives.

Over the past decade, technological advances have reached all segments of the population across the globe. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was epitomized by youth staying connected through face-to-face interaction or the use of the landline telephones (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). Social networks, thought of as a set of people in which support is exchanged (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Wellman, 1981) or relationships that are important to an individual (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kahn & Antonucci, 1981) were typically managed through interpersonal or conventional telephone contact. However, the growth in Internet access and software availability as well as advancements of cell phones, combined with a population of youth who have grown up exposed



to this technology, has resulted in social networks being replaced online (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008) and through telecommunications.

The youth of today use technology such as the Internet more than any other method through which to communicate and socialize (Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009; Kaynay & Yelsma, 2000; Nie & Hillygus, 2002). Recent studies have shown that communication technology is increasing exponentially with each generation and is becoming a mainstay within our society (Mishna et al., 2009). According to statistics gathered by ComScore Networks, 713 million people ages 15 or older, which was 14% of the global population, used the Internet in June 2006, with 153 million being in the United States (Lipsan, 2006). Further, adolescents use the Internet much more often than children, but the age of first Internet use is rapidly descending (Greenfield & Yan, 2006; Wartella, Vandewater, & Rideout, 2005). In fact, even young children are online and there are numerous social networking sites that cater to this population (Giffords, 2009). As technological advancements are made, the residual impact of social networking on society's young generation is of valuable importance to researchers in the social work field. Left unattended, the lack of skills to effectively communicate and resolve conflicts in person may negatively affect behavior and impair the ability to develop and maintain relationships.

Once envisioned as an efficient tool for researchers to share files and access data by remote login, commercialization of the Internet has resulted in the creation of email and the World Wide Web (Giffords, 2009). The enormous technical complexity of the Internet has expanded to include thousands of networks, millions of computers, and billions of users across the world (Greenfield & Yan, 2006). The Web 1.0 experience, which was exemplified by connectivity, Internet entrepreneurs, and the potential of substantial monetary profits has been replaced by Web 2.0, which is detailed by user-generated content, group formation, and social

networking (Giffords, 2007; Boutin, 2006; Bradbury, 2007; Israel, 2006; Levy & Stone, 2006; O'Reilly, 2005; Rivlin, 2004). Combining the tremendous expansion of the Internet and the advances in communication technology has resulted in new capabilities not foreseen by the original developers.

Modern conveniences such as using cell phones and the creation of social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter) for interaction have shown a variety of influences in the research. Within the social networking spectrum exists the activities of instant messaging (IMing), texting, blogging, bulletin boards, and posting (comments, status updates, and videos). Greenfield and Yan (2006) use the "Effects Model" to explain the shift from seeing the Internet as doing something to adolescents to an outlook that consists of adolescents taking an active role in co-constructing their own environments. As with any object, the responsibility falls upon the Internet user or social networker as to the purpose of engaging in the activity and what is hoped to be accomplished. However, technological side effects may not always be apparent to the individual user and, combined with millions of other users, may have large-scale implications. Therefore, each participant has a dual role—as an individual who may be affected by the social environment and as a participant who is interacting with others and co-constructing the same environment (Greenfield & Yan, 2006).

Given that communication plays a central role in personal relationships and that relationships are assessed by the communication skills of others (Burlison, 2003), impairment in the ability to effectively communicate may hinder successful relational development in young adults. This can potentially impact an array of life areas such as family relationships, socialization, school performance, and employment. Further, the failure of young people to effectively resolve conflicts in person can jeopardize safety and may lead to chronic acts of

violence that include verbal threats, pushing, grabbing, punching, and fighting (Woody, 2001; Bastian & Taylor, 1991; Opotow, 1989). Thus, the lack of conflict resolution skills may lead to the use of human services and involvement in the legal system, requiring the need to access limited financial resources, and also the risk of out-of-home placement.

Despite the potential benefits for adolescents who engage in the various types of social networking, such as the sense of being understood and supported by peers (Selfhout et al., 2009) the research is showing that the excess use of this technology may underhandedly inhibit proper interpersonal skill development (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003). Due to the nature of the social work profession and its efforts to enhance the lives of youth and plan for their successful transition into adulthood, further examination of the impact of social networking on adolescents is justified. Therefore, it is the purpose of this study to examine the impact of social networking on the skills of communication and conflict resolution within the young adult population.

## **Literature Review**

### **Social Networking Activities**

Advancements in technology have resulted in people being able to access a wealth of information and participate in virtual opportunities not previously available. Through the tools of computers and cell phones, society has moved from engaging in face-to-face interaction while performing these activities to endeavors that do not require in-person interaction with others. The devices have therefore become the actual mediators between people and knowledge or entertainment. Within recent years, technology has also made available different avenues for communicating. The capabilities of computers and cell phones have allowed users to develop means to participate in the world of social networking, now making the device the mediator of communication between individuals.

**Internet surfing.** The term “Internet surfing” appeared after the creation of the personal computer and the Internet and is seen as an extension of “channel surfing”, where viewers randomly change channels on a television using a remote control with no real physical effort. Internet surfing is activity described as spending time visiting either random or targeted websites on the Internet for non-communication purposes. Users can view websites to gather information, play interactive games, shop, and view photos and movies. Surfing the Internet can be addictive in nature because individuals receive short-term gratification every time they go online, making it very desirable to continue to go online to receive this gratification (Selfout, Branje, Delsing, Bogt & Meeus, 2009; Hall & Parsons, 2001). Studies have demonstrated that excessive Internet surfing may increase depression and social anxiety (Selfout et al., 2009; Morgan & Cotton, 2003). Therefore, individuals who struggle with Internet surfing and also participate in social networking as a means of meeting their social needs may be at risk for a significant decline in communication and conflict resolution skills due to their isolative behaviors. Moreover, Selfout et al., (2009) found that adolescents with low perceived friendship quality reported significantly higher depression and social anxiety. Since excessive computer use can inhibit exploring one’s actual environment and impact the growth of friendships, this is of major concern.

**Instant messaging.** In contrast to surfing, instant messaging (IM-ing) consists of sending real-time online computer messages to another user in a mutually established conversation. Researchers found that IM-ing is the most popular method of communication among teens who go online, with 75% using this medium and 48% doing so at least once a day (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Lenhart et al., 2005). This format is typically private and can be an opportunity for adolescents to practice and develop social skills (Selfout et al., 2009; Morgan & Cotton, 2003; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). However, a recent longitudinal study showed that IM-ing

predicted more depression among adolescents over a six month period (Selfout et al., 2009; Van den Eijnden, Meerkerk, Vermulst, Spijkerman & Engels, 2008). The effects of Internet surfing and IM-ing on internalizing problems may be closely related due to the finding that adolescents who spend more time IM-ing also spend more time surfing (Selfout et al., 2008; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut, & Gross, 2001).

**Texting.** The short messaging service (SMS), more commonly known as “texting”, is the cellular phone version of IM-ing and also results in virtually instant messages between the sender and receiver. Cell phones have been engineered over the past years to accommodate the demand of texting, such as offering a full QWERTY keyboard, and many cell phone carriers offer plans that contain unlimited texting. In fact, Crabtree et al. (2003) expected SMS to dominate mobile messaging in regards to both traffic volume and revenue well into the last quarter of the decade (Reid & Reid, 2007). In a Norwegian study of 19-21 year olds, participants sent an average of six texts per day in 2001. When the same age group was measured again in 2007, this number tripled to an average of 18 text messages sent per day (Ling, 2010). A survey conducted on 2,277 American adults by the Pew Research Center found that 18-24 year olds sent or received an average of 109.5 text messages per day, which works out to be more than 3,200 text messages per month (Smith, 2011).

In a European study of 635 participants ages 16-55 years old who visited a website and completed an online questionnaire, 48.9% reported preferring to use their cell phones for texting over voice calls and 26.1% reported texting too much. This study also measured levels of loneliness, expressive control, interaction anxiousness, and conversational involvement. Two significant findings were that 61% of the participants stated they say things in text that they would not feel comfortable saying face-to-face and 64% stated they feel they are able to express

their true feelings best in text messages rather than in face-to-face interactions or voice calls (Reid & Reid, 2007).

### **Quality of Social Networking Relationships**

Personal interaction is and has always been an important function of the human experience. Prior to the technological revolution and creation of personal computers and cell phones, relationships were typically developed and maintained by means of face-to-face interaction and verbal or written communication. With the development of the Information Age, characterized by the ability for people to freely and conveniently access and exchange information through technology, the way in which our society interacts with one another has continued to transform. Technological Determinism Theory attempts to help explain how changes in methods of communication through advancements in technology impacts general society. According to this theory, media technology shapes how individuals in a society feel, act, and think as well as influences how society functions as they move from one technological age to another. In other words, people learn how to think and feel the way they do based upon the messages they receive through the current technology. This theory supports the belief that “the medium is the message” and that people adapt accordingly and will utilize the means in which society as a whole is using to communicate. As the medium changes, so does society’s way of communicating. If the medium is impersonal, then the message itself is also impersonal (Mcluhan, 1962).

With the creation of the virtual world, individuals have the opportunity to interact with others, both known and unknown, in a variety of ways. With the change in nature of these relationships, it has been of interest to gauge the perceived quality of online relationships. Because Internet sites, such as America Online (AOL) and Facebook, allow groups of users to

connect with other groups, users engage in group forming activities that are comparable to face-to-face groups (Giffords, 2009). According to Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007), social networking sites on the Internet may be used to strengthen relationships that already exist, therefore acting as a bridge between the online and offline worlds (Perez-Latte, Portilla, & Blanco, 2011).

A study by the USC-Annenberg Digital Future Project (2006) on Internet usage found that 43% of Internet users who are part of online communities feel as strongly about their online communities as they do about their real-life communities (Giffords, 2009). In another research study among adolescents, a prominent finding was that participants who had developed friendships and relationships online consider them to be as real as relationships in their actual lives. Further, these online friendships were described as being long-term, trusting, and very meaningful (Mishna et al., 2009). Because of potential attached meaning to these virtual relationships and the possibilities that human interaction may become volatile and unpredictable, it is of explicit interest to investigate how users, specifically adolescents and young adults, manage to communicate and resolve conflicts within these communities. Therefore, more research is needed in this area.

### **Benefits and Concerns of Social Networking**

Different theories have surfaced regarding the impact of social networking. It has been found that participation in social network sites provides a number of potential benefits for adolescents. Cited by Hinduja and Patchin (2008), it was found that benefits of online interaction include that it provides a means in which to learn the ability to relate to others, tolerate differing viewpoints, express thoughts and feelings in a healthy way, and practice critical thinking skills (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Berson, Berson, & Ferron, 2002). In addition, Clavert (2002) states

that communicating with others on the Internet is an opportunity to explore self-identity and enhance self-discovery.

Another perceived benefit is that the Internet increases the possibility to contact peers, thus enhancing self-esteem and feelings of well-being (Selfhout et al., 2008; Morgan & Cotton, 2003; Valkenberg & Peter, 2007). Further in regards to social networking, the Internet provides a virtual place to spend time and share thoughts and objects with personal meaning, such as pictures and stories, and remain closely connected with friends regardless of geographic distance (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Boyd, 2006). Also, it is believed that individuals may feel empowered when using social networking to establish relationships that provide information, mutual assistance, and support (Giffords, 2006). Finally, it was found that teens with difficulties may use online relationships as temporary bridges that bring them into safe and comfortable face-to-face relationships (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003). All of these mentioned benefits to participants, especially adolescents who are attempting to practice social skills and explore who they are as individuals, add to the justification of including social networking into the current developmental perspective.

Despite the potential advantages of social networking, there are a number of concerns. A well-known study conducted by Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukophadhyay and Scherlis (1998) was one of the first to examine the relationship between Internet use and the aspects of social involvement and psychological well-being. The HomeNet field trial followed 93 families in their first 12-18 months of being online. A total of 256 people took part in the study. It was hypothesized that the users would increase their sense of social support and feel less lonely, be less affected by stress, and have improved mental health. However, the results of the study showed the opposite. Associations were found between increased Internet use and



decreased social involvement, feeling more lonely, and an increase in depressive symptoms. Another result was that higher Internet use was related to a decrease in communication among family members. The results of the original study were criticized and caused much controversy, prompting a second study. The follow-up study found varying results that contradicted the results of the first study in all areas except life stress.

Another consequence of social networking that has been addressed in the research is the issue of cyber bullying. Much data exists regarding the negative aspects of social networking and the incidence of cyber bullying and victimization among users. Traditionally, bullying has taken place during face-to-face interaction. However, advances in technology have opened up new ways for this to occur over electronics, from texting on cell phones to the posting of comments or videos on websites (Marsh, McGee, Nada-Raja, & Williams, 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Regarding text bullying, the prevalence of its occurrence ranges from 15-32% (Marsh et al., 2010; Beran & Li, 2005). In nationally representative surveys of 10-17 year-olds, it was found that twice as many youth reported they were victims of online harassment in 2005 as compared to data from 2000 (Giffords, 2009; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006).

The issue of cyber abuse (bullying, unwanted sexual advances, and stalking) should be taken very seriously due to the detrimental effects on victims, which include feelings of depression, guilt, shame, as well as self-harm and withdrawing from family and friends (Mishna et al., 2009). Using a phenomenological approach, an analysis of anonymous posts by adolescents revealed a high incidence of cyber bullying from both real-life acquaintances and those who were met online (Mishna et al., 2009). In another study, it was found that students who were text bullied were significantly more likely to feel unsafe at school than those students who had not been text bullied (Marsh et al., 2010). Whether due to low self-esteem or poor social

skills, adolescents who turn to online relationships because of feelings of isolation by peers may find that online relationships are filled with complications (Wolak et al., 2003; Egan, 2000). It is within these relationships that adolescents may be victimized by cyber bullying, unwanted sexual advances, and even cyber stalking.

### **Communication and Conflict Resolution Skills**

Successfully maneuvering through life requires attaining a set of skills, for example the ability to communicate with others and work through conflicts, that are acquired through different avenues during a person's developmental journey. From the early days of mainframe computers to the present, computers have been mostly used for interpersonal communication (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). In fact in terms of meaning, communication is the most important use of the Internet for adolescents (Greenfield & Yan, 2006; Gross, 2004). Regarding conflict resolution, Chung and Asher (1996) and Rose and Asher (1999) have argued that responses to hypothetical situations involving conflict are similar to responses observed during real-life conflict (Johnson, LaVoie, Eggenburg, Mahoney, & Pounds, 2001). This highlights the value in presenting opportunities to practice these skills to prepare for real life situations. However, these hypothetical situations were presented face-to-face to a group by a facilitator and did not include a technological or social networking component.

With an overwhelming trend among adolescents and young adults toward the reliance on technology for communication, it is speculated that the decline of face-to-face interaction will result in decreased ability to handle real-life conflicts. In analyzing data from a study of adolescents with close online relationships, it showed that a disproportionate number reported high amounts of conflict with their parents as well as low levels of communication with their parents (Wolak et al., 2003). In another study, adolescents who engaged in online

communication and felt frightened or that they were in significant trouble did not reach out and communicate with their parents (Mishna et al., 2009). Empirical data in social work literature, as well as other professional journals, on the effects of school-based conflict resolution programs have been positive, suggesting that teaching conflict resolution skills to students increase their knowledge of how to resolve conflict using non-violent means (Woody, 2001; Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, Mitchell, & Fredrickson, 1997).

Although some research exists that examines the activities of social networking and the potential effects, both positive and negative, on its users, there is a gap in the empirical literature. Social networking relies on technology and is conducted over specific devices with no presence of face-to-face interaction, which results in an inability to access interpersonal behavior and signals to facilitate communication. Adding the possibility that relationships can become volatile and unpredictable, no current research addresses how social networking affects the ability for users to resolve conflicts in their daily lives. A concerted effort to focus on how social networking impacts the ability to perform the functions of communication and conflict resolution in real-life relationships would be highly beneficial. The available research did not speak to these particular issues, hence the impetus for this quantitative study. Therefore, this researcher proposes the following research question: What is the impact of social networking on interpersonal communication and conflict resolution skills?

### **Conceptual Framework**

#### **Social Exchange Theory**

Social exchange theory is derived from basic principles of economics and compares human behavior to that of transactions in a market place environment. The theory begins with the principle that human social behavior is based upon the drive to maximize benefits while

minimizing costs. In other words, during social exchange, one must give in order to receive. However, to allow for maximum satisfaction, the level of perceived rewards need to be greater than the amount of the perceived costs expended during the interaction process. In social exchange theory, the six main rewards that exist, consisting of both the tangible and intangible, are love, money, status, goods, information, and services. The identified costs in social exchange theory are time and energy (Ripa & Carrasco, 2007).

Within social exchange theory, relationships are evaluated using a cost-benefit analysis with an expectation that social relations will be established and continued based on being mutually gainful (Zafirovski, 2003). Homans (1958), a leader in social exchange theory, denied that cultural and social environments impacted behavior and that only psychological factors were relevant. He argued that history is only important because a history of rewards tells an individual what is in his or her best interest. However, many theorists have since added their perspectives to social exchange theory and emphasized the role that social, economic, political, and historical contexts play in social exchanges (Hutchinson, 2008).

A major premise within social exchange theory is regarding the issue of power. Whether acknowledged or not, persons with greater resources often hold more power over others during social exchanges (Hutchinson, 2008). This power can relate to not only control of potential rewards and punishments, but also the ability to influence the thoughts and behaviors of others within social exchanges. The basis for this control exists when one person is dependent on another for his or her own sense of rewards (Ripa & Carrasco, 2007).

When applying social exchange theory to the phenomenon of social networking, it can be said that the technological exchanges between individuals capture a mutual cost-benefit structure. The amount of time and energy one designates to texting or posting comments and

status updates on Facebook relates directly to perceived rewards, such as number of “likes” or responses. In other words, given the ability to disperse information efficiently to a mass audience with little time and effort, the potential for rewards in social networking are unrestricted. This drastically differs from conventional face-to-face interaction where more effort and calculated thought is needed for mutually beneficial social exchanges.

Further, it may be that the greater the number of people within one’s social network, including cell phone contacts, viewers of videos, and online friends, the greater the amount of perceived status and power the person has by self and others. This power can be exerted over those who are dependent on acceptance and the desire that their cyber social exchanges produce rewards, resulting in potential atypical thoughts and behaviors from the person seeking affirmation (Ripa & Carrasco, 2007). Fear of rejection can be a powerful influence on altering one’s actions and the perceived costs of such rejection intolerable. Another display of power exists in social networking when an individual makes a conscious decision to ignore or deny attempts from others seeking social exchanges. The receiver of such exchanges may perceive limited or no cost to not responding. However, the initiator may perceive a high level of costs and even make multiple attempts to conduct social exchanges, continuing to receive zero rewards.

### **Object Relations Theory**

With contributions from multiple writers in the psychodynamic field, object relations theory is not necessarily a single theory, but is called so in order to differentiate itself from other theories with common characteristics. With an emphasis on their inner world, object relations theory examines the dual process of people experiencing themselves as separate and independent from others, while also feeling an intense attachment to others (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz,

2008). Within this theory, it is believed that all people have an internal and often unconscious world of relationships that differs from, and in many ways are more significant and powerful, than what exists in their external world of social relationships. The focus then is placed on interactions individuals have with others, the way in which these interactions are internalized, and the central role these internalized object relations play in psychological life (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 2008). Thus, the term “object relations” encompasses actual relationships with others, as well as internalized representations of others and self.

As just stated, object relations include not only the intricacies of external relationships, but also an internal world of relations between self and others. Further, object relations extend to how others have been internalized and ways in which they become part of the self. This is represented in people’s fears, fantasies, wants, and desires (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 2008). Interestingly, a characteristic that differentiates object relations theory from similar theories such as drive theory and ego psychology is its attention on how needs are met or not met in relationships, which contrasts to the idea of drives and impulses. Since a person’s external needs are to be met by other people, the relationship is placed at the center of the experience. These needs include being viewed and valued by others as an individual, to be accepted for both positive and negative qualities, and to be given love, care, and protection (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 2008).

One important aspect of object relations theory proposed by Donald Winnicott is the importance placed on how a developing person transitions from requiring attachment to others to a position of separateness. Winnicott developed the term “transitional object” to aid in this transition and to help settle the internal conflicts of attachment and individualism. An object that is in one’s possession to bridge the gap between separateness and internal representations of

others is viewed as a transitional object (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 2008). Basically, anything that assists a person in successfully maintaining a mental representation of valued others in their absence can be considered a transitional object. For children, these objects may include a favorite book read at bedtime, a piece of jewelry from a parent, or even a favorite song that is usually sung together.

When considering object relations theory, it may be reasonable to view items such as cell phones, computers, the Internet, and even ringtones as transitional objects. For example, the acts of carrying a cell phone or hearing a ringtone designated to a valued other may create a sense of comfort for someone struggling with independence in that it creates internal images of social networking relationships. Even entering an establishment with the Internet, and therefore perceived access to social networks, may itself ease someone who is experiencing discomfort due to feeling disconnected. Without proper coping skills, individuals who engage in social networking to meet their psychological needs may feel distress that impairs their daily functioning when having limited or no access to these technological transitional objects.

In the social networking context, object relations theory highlights the notion that people both desire to establish themselves as separate individuals with status as well as have their need for attachment be met by those in their social network. The significance of these relationships may not be fully understood in reality, but once internalized take on a powerful and meaningful existence and adds to one's sense of self. Interpretations of the meaning and value of these relationships rely on virtual communication, which can be subjective in nature. Along with the need for attachment, the desire to feel accepted and valued in the social networking environment can create insurmountable pressure. Not only is a person attempting to develop relationships with individuals, but also with their larger social networking group. As object relations theory states,

this includes both the good and the bad that individuals bring to relationships, resulting in potential conflict between users. For example, an individual would set aside undesirable characteristics of another in order to maintain the level at which he or she feels valued and accepted. As part of the social networking experience, users may incorporate and digest qualities of communication experiences within their online realm into their own individual identity.

The activities of texting and Internet-based communication facilitate a virtual world of relationships and allow users to internalize mental representations of others within their social network. Since no face-to-face interaction exists, people are left to rely on their creative imagination and constructions to incorporate meaning into these relationships. Therefore, each user's internal world may be vastly different from what the evident facts might suggest in their actual social networking environment. When issues with communication and conflict arise, users are left to reconcile what is presented in reality with their internal definitions and meanings of social networking relationships. Poor communication and the inability to resolve these conflicts may impair both the real status and internal representation of these relationships.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The research design that was used for this study was a cross sectional survey that gathered quantitative data. The survey was a questionnaire consisting of closed ended questions that measured respondent attitudes and behaviors about social networking, such as texting and using the social network site Facebook. The survey was created by the researcher and conducted using Qualtrics, a computer program supported at the University of St. Thomas. The survey, along with a brief description (Appendix A) was announced in The Bulletin, which is the online



newsletter at The University of St. Thomas. Students who chose to participate in this research accessed the survey by clicking on the link provided in the newsletter.

### **Sample**

College freshman ages 18-19 who were enrolled at the University of St. Thomas were the target population for this research. Using a purposive convenience sampling method, college freshmen at this university were chosen due to their practical access and their likely experience of the research topic. Further, as adults this population can participate by their own choosing without requiring parental permission and signed consent forms.

It was a goal of this study to accurately represent social networking involvement and experiences in young adults. Therefore, to be eligible for this study, an age limit of 18-19 was set by the researcher. However, to address an interest in social networking among the high school population, a strategy of asking respondents to answer survey questions based upon their high school experiences was initially considered for a variety of reasons. First, it may be common practice for students who move away to college to remain in contact with friends and family through the convenience of technology. Therefore, their participation in social networking may be suddenly heightened and not true to typical use. To more genuinely capture the potential impact of social networking, the researcher felt it would be more representative to measure attitudes and practices of social networking during the time participants lived in their stable and accessible familial and social environments in high school.

Second, entering college can potentially expand an individual's social network to great lengths, both in true life and in the virtual world. This dramatic increase in social networking opportunities may not be accurate of the high school experience, as not everyone pursues post-secondary education and is introduced to such an immediate expansion of their social networks.

Relationships among high school students are believed to be more stable and predictable. Finally, the purpose of this research was to investigate the impact of social networking practices on the areas of communication and conflict resolution skills. Therefore, since high school students are still in a developmental stage and in the process of learning and attaining these skills, focusing on high school students allows examination of the effects of social media during this formative stage.

However, the strategy of having respondents reflect on their senior year of high school while answering survey questions was not used due to the potential inaccuracy of estimations. The researcher desired current data that more precisely illustrated social networking among the young people in the study. To balance the goal of assessing social networking among young people and the necessity for accurate data, the researcher decided to focus on college freshmen ages 18-19 years who attended the University of St. Thomas. Further, the ease of access to this population was the most feasible option.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

The criterion for participation in this research was that respondents be college freshman ages 18-19 attending the University of St. Thomas. There were no other qualifying characteristics in order to take part in the survey, such as certain life experiences or membership in a specific group. Therefore, this was not considered a vulnerable population. All participants in this research remained completely anonymous and no identifying information was gathered. Since the survey was online and anonymity parameters were already in place, there was no possibility of tracing a completed survey back to a particular respondent. The researcher had no way to know who agreed to participate in the study.

The questions that were used in this survey posed little risk to the respondents. The questions gathered information on attitudes toward social networking and actual practices within this context. This topic is overall neutral in nature and unlikely caused discomfort. However, some respondents may have never been asked to report on their attitudes and behaviors regarding social networking and how they use this medium to communicate and resolve conflict. Therefore, this may have resulted in some sensitivity to the questions. Further, information on the topics of friendships and relationships were gathered, which may have resulted in self-reflection and unanticipated feelings. Given that fact that the survey is online, participants had the choice of quitting at any time or skipping questions without consequences in case they became uncomfortable.

The act of participating in the study was completely voluntary. There were few risks and no actual benefits for taking part in this research. Once notified about the study through reading the university's online *Bulletin*, each participant had the choice of clicking on the link to the survey. If an individual proceeded, a letter of informed consent first appeared (Appendix A). Clicking on the "Yes" button indicated that a respondent agreed to the provisions outlined in the letter of informed consent. At that time, the survey items appeared and the process began. A respondent was able to discontinue participation at any time by either clicking on "Exit" or by exiting their browser window.

### **Data Collection**

The survey (Appendix B) consisted of various items including 5-point and 7-point Likert scales asking participants to rate their attitudes on numerous statements involving aspects of social networking. Other items on the survey consisted of listing estimated time spent in social networking activities, relationships ending using social networking, and two questions asked

participants to rank their preferences in the areas of communication and conflict resolution. The only demographic information that was gathered was the gender of the respondents. The majority of the questions concerned the social networking activity of texting and the social network site Facebook. Estimated time for completing the survey was 10 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

The data from this research was analyzed using both Qualtrix and *Minitab 15* data-analysis software. The researcher used descriptive statistics to explain the results from the survey. Frequency distributions and measures of central tendency were used to report on nominal variables such as gender of respondents, the amount of time spent texting and on Facebook, numbers of texts and Facebook posts sent and received, and status of intimate relationships.

The 5-point Likert scales were developed using two formats. One scale ranged from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” and the other scale ranged from “Never” to “Always” for answer options regarding communication and conflict resolution. There were also two ranking questions on the survey. The first ranking question from the survey “I prefer to keep in touch with others by:” contained five options and the second ranking question “I prefer to let someone know I’m mad at them by:” contained six options. These ordinal level variables are displayed in figures. The final 7-point Likert scale ranged from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” and its six items inquired about general attitudes towards social networking.

### **Results**

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the impact of the social networking activities of texting and using Facebook on communication and conflict resolution skills.

## Demographics

A total of 22 students attending the University of St. Thomas who met research criteria responded to the survey. The initial announcement of the survey link in the Bulletin yielded 12 respondents. With approval from the university's IRB and hoping for a snowball effect, the researcher posted the survey link in the Bulletin a second time with a supplementary statement encouraging participants to share the link with fellow 18-19 year-old freshmen. This effort resulted in an additional 10 respondents. Of the students who responded, 17 (77%) were female and 5 (23%) were male.

## Social Networking Accessibility

Respondents were asked three closed ended questions regarding access to cell phones, computers, and profiles on the social networking site Facebook. Table 1 shows that all 22 participants in the survey reported they either own or have access to a cell phone with texting capability and a computer with the ability to connect to the Internet. This results in easy access and the convenient option to participate in social networking. Further, all 22 respondents also indicated they have a profile on Facebook.

**Table 1. Access to Social Networking Mediums**

Cell Phone	Count	Percent	Computer	Count	Percent	Facebook Profile	Count	Percent
1	22	100.00	1	22	100.00	1	22	100.00
N=	22		N=	22		N=	22	

## Time Spent in Activities

Respondents were asked to report on minutes spent each day in different social networking activities that were the focus of this study. Table 2 shows respondents' estimates of the amount of time in minutes they participated in texting, using Facebook, as well as face-to-face interaction with others. As a point of clarification, the survey specified face-to-face

interaction as being leisure/social time with others. This distinction was important to include because the target population consisted of college freshmen and time spent in other activities, such as attending classes or doing homework, was not considered as interpersonal interaction.

When comparing the ranges of the three activities reported by the participants, the results show wide spans in the amount of daily time spent in each activity. Texting has a range from 20 minutes to three hours with a mean of 77.5 minutes; time spent on Facebook has a range from zero minutes to four hours with a mean of 108.4 minutes; and face-to-face interaction has the largest range from zero minutes to 10 hours with a mean of 249.09 minutes.

**Table 2. Average Daily Minutes in Social Networking Activities**

Texting	Count	Percent	Facebook	Count	Percent	Face-to-Face	Count	Percent
0-29	1	4.55	0-29	2	9.09	0-29	1	4.55
30-50	7	31.82	30-50	3	13.64	30-50	1	4.55
51-60	4	18.18	51-60	5	22.73	51-60	0	0.00
61-90	3	13.64	61-90	2	9.09	61-90	0	0.00
91-120	5	22.73	91-120	2	9.09	91-120	5	22.73
121-180	2	9.09	121-180	5	22.73	121-180	5	22.73
181+	0	0.00	181+	3	13.64	181+	10	45.45
N=	22		N=	22		N=	22	

For texting, the results show that 55% (n=12) reported spending an hour or less in the activity, 36% (n=8) reported spending over an hour up to two hours, and 9% (n=2) reported spending more than two hours texting each day. These results show that as the amount of time spent texting increases, the participation in the activity decreases. An interesting finding is that one respondent reported spending 1.5 hours per day texting, but zero time on Facebook and zero time face-to-face with others in leisure/social activities. The researcher also asked participants to list the average number of daily texts. This number ranged from 0-200, with a mean of 59.91 texts sent per day.

When looking at the respondents' time spent on the social networking website Facebook, the results show that 45% (n=10) spent an hour or less in the activity, 18 % (n=4) reported

spending over an hour up to two hours, and 36% (n=8) reported spending over two hours each day on Facebook. The results show that there are more users in the lowest and highest amounts of time, with the middle amount being the least common. As demonstrated in this data, more participants spent longer daily time on Facebook than in the activity of texting. However, it is interesting to note that two participants reported spending zero minutes on the social networking site Facebook. The researcher also asked participants to list the average number of daily posts or comments on Facebook. This number ranged from 0-20, with a mean of 4.91 messages or posts per day.

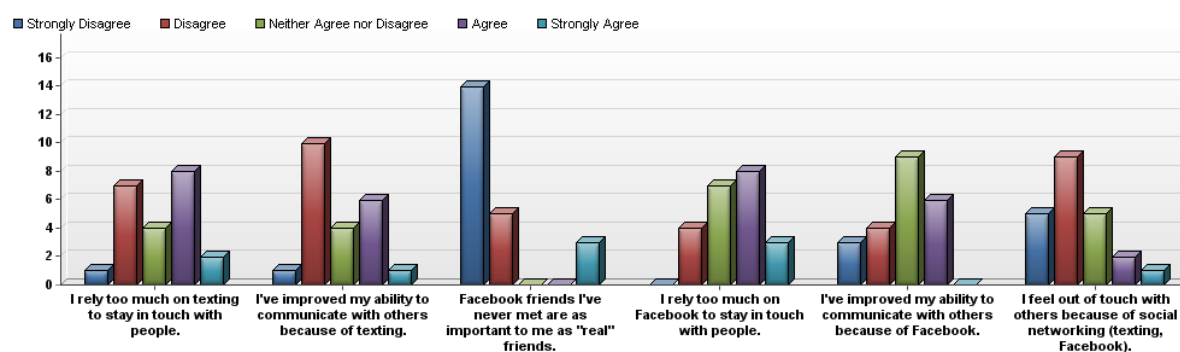
As previously stated, the amount of face-to-face social/leisure time had the largest range among all of the three activities. The results show that 9% (n=2) spent an hour or less in the activity, 23 % (n=5) reported spending over an hour up to two hours, and 68% (n=15) reported spending over two hours each day in social interaction with others. As seen in the results, the highest amount of time with others was the most common among respondents, with the lowest being second, and the middle range having no participation. More respondents spent the most time face-to-face with others than any other activity.

## **Communication**

**Texting and communication.** Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement to various statements regarding their use of texting to communicate with others (See Figure 1). In response to the statement “I rely on texting too much to stay in touch with people,” 36% (n=8) of the respondents reported they agreed. The next most common choice was disagree, with 32% (n=7) choosing this option. In response to the statement “I’ve improved my ability to communicate with others because of texting,” 45% (n=10) of the respondents disagreed. This was the most common choice for the statement. The results demonstrate that while more

respondents felt they rely too much on texting than not, some felt their ability to communicate has improved because of this activity.

Respondents were asked to answer various statements that reflected the prevalence of specific texting behaviors to communicate with others (See Figure 2). In response to the statement “I text people who are in the same place as me rather than talking,” 50% (n=11) of the respondents reported doing this sometimes and 45% (n=10) stated they never engage in this mode of communication. In response to the statement “I carry on conversations over text rather than talking to people,” 64% (n=14) of the respondents reported they sometimes communicate with others in this manner. This was by far the most popular response, followed by an even split between the remaining eight participants with 18% (n=4) each choosing between never and often. An interesting consideration is if the convenience of texting over in-person contact is more appealing, even when two people are in the same place.



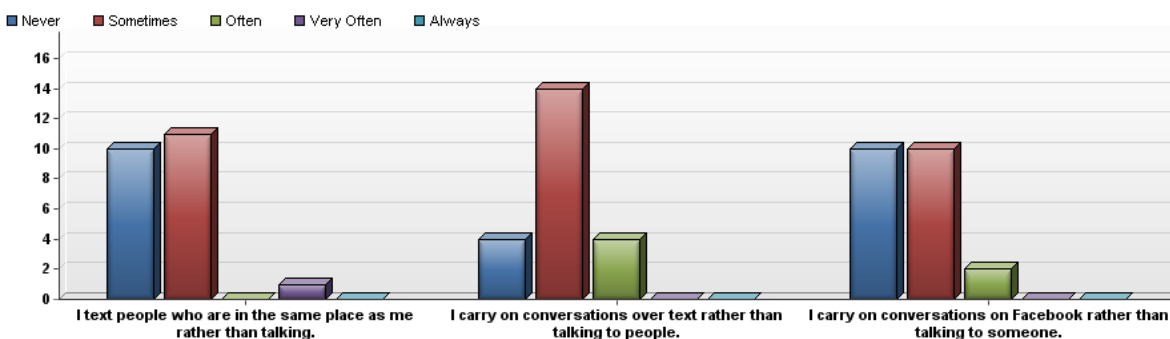
**Figure 1. Perceived Impact of Social Networking on Communication Skills**

**Facebook and communication.** Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement to various statements regarding their use of Facebook to communicate with others (See Figure 1). The most common response to “I rely too much on Facebook to stay in touch with people” was agree with 36% (n=8) making this choice, while 32% (n=7) neither agreed or disagreed. For



the statement “Facebook friends I’ve never met are as important to me as ‘real’ friends,” 67% (n=14) strongly disagreed and 23% (n=5) disagreed. In response to the statement “I’ve improved my ability to communicate with others because of Facebook,” 41% (n=9) of the respondents neither agreed or disagreed. This was the most common response, followed by 27% (n=6) of the respondents reporting they agreed with the statement. As seen in the results, more respondents felt they rely too much on Facebook than not, while the majority felt that their ability to communicate has not improved due to this activity. Also, the far majority of respondents strongly felt their Facebook friends were not as important as their “real” friends.

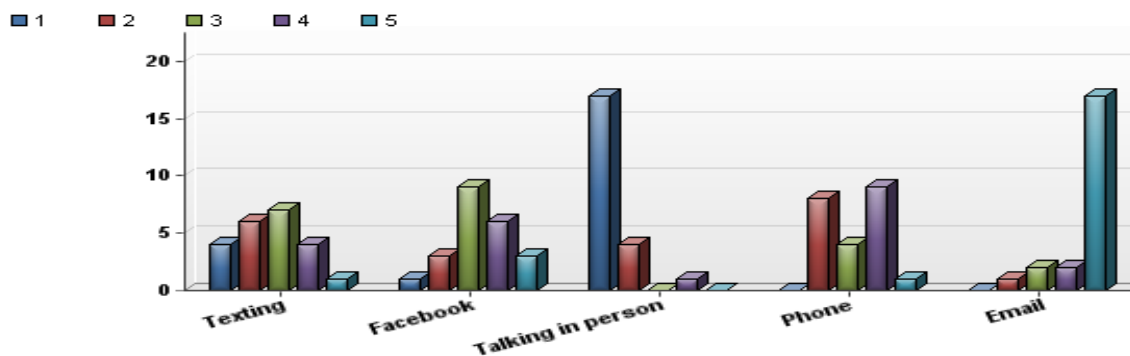
Respondents were then asked to respond to a statement that reflected a specific behavior of communication (See Figure 3). In response to the statement “I carry on conversations on Facebook rather than talking to someone,” the most popular responses were never and sometimes, each resulting in 45% (n=10) of the respondents choosing these categories. As seen in the data, it appears that respondents use texting more often than Facebook to have conversations with others. It may be that the quick turnaround time and easier access to cell phones may be attractive features of texting.



**Figure 2. Frequency of Using Social Networking for Communication**

**Social networking and communication.** Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement to a statement regarding their perspective on how social networking has affected their interpersonal relationships (See Figure 1). In response to the statement “I feel out of touch with others because of social networking,” 41% (n=9) of the respondents disagreed, while 23% (n=5) were each in the categories of strongly disagree and neither agree nor disagree. Even though a fair number of respondents reported an overreliance on social networking to communicate, the results show this has minimally affected their sense of feeling out of touch with others. One factor to consider is if respondents felt their social networking enhanced their relationships with others.

Respondents were then asked to read the statement “I prefer to keep in touch with others by” and rank their preference of mediums of communication, with “1” being the highest preferred method to “5” being the lowest. The five different mediums as well as the results are shown in Figure 4. For texting, the most common rank was third, with 32% (n=7) choosing this medium. For Facebook, the most common rank was also third, with 41% (n=9) choosing this medium. For talking in person, the most common rank was first, with 77% (n=17) of the respondents choosing this medium. For phone, the most common rank was fourth, with 41% (n=9) choosing this medium. And finally for email, the most common rank was fifth, with 77% (n=17) choosing this medium. As seen in the results, talking in person was by far the most preferred among respondents and email the least. Talking on the phone to stay in touch was the second most preferred means to stay connected with others. Texting and using Facebook, and showed a mix of rankings.

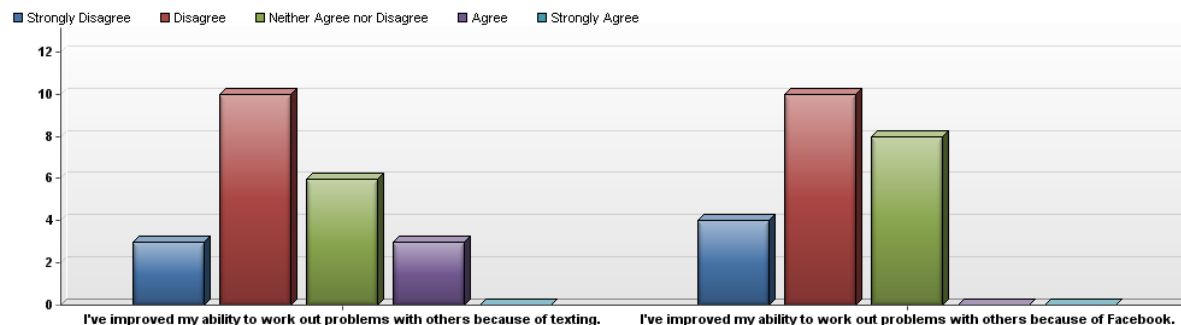


**Figure 3. Rank of Preference in Communication Mediums**

### Conflict Resolution

**Texting and conflict resolution.** Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement a statement regarding their use of texting to resolve conflicts (See Figure 4). In response to the statement “I’ve improved my ability to work out problems with others because of texting,” the two most popular responses were 45% (n=10) of the respondents reported disagreeing and 27% (n=6) neither agreed or disagreed. As the results show, the far majority of respondents felt that texting did not improve or had no affect on their conflict resolution skills.

Respondents were then asked to respond to various statements that reflected the prevalence of using texting to resolve conflict with others (See Figure 5). In response to the statement “I send texts to someone I’m mad at instead of talking,” 59% (n=13) of the respondents answered sometimes, while 36% (n=7) stated they never engage in this activity. Additionally, one respondent reported often sending texts for this purpose. In response to the statement “I solve problems with friends by texting,” the results were split with 50% (n=11) of the respondents choosing never and the other 50% choosing sometimes. As the results show, it appears that respondents more commonly than not use texting to express conflict, with a number of them also using texting to resolve these conflicts.

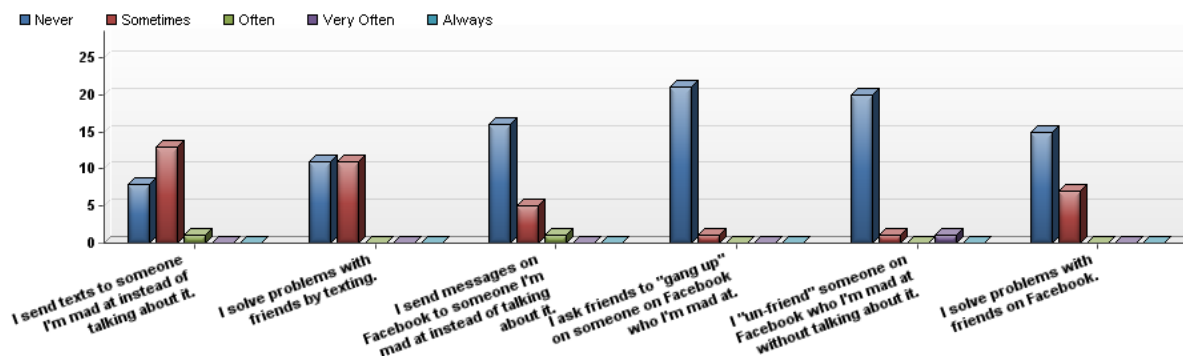


**Figure 4. Perceived Impact of Social Networking on Conflict Resolution Skills**

**Facebook and conflict resolution.** Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement to a statement regarding their use of Facebook to resolve conflicts with others (See Figure 4). In response to the statement “I’ve improved my ability to work out problems with others because of Facebook,” 45% (n=10) of the respondents disagreed, while 36% (n=8) of the respondents neither agreed or disagreed. As seen in the results, these two responses were the most common for each statement. Therefore, it can be said that respondents felt their conflict resolution skills were not improved due to Facebook.

Respondents were then asked to respond to various statements that reflected the prevalence of using Facebook to resolve conflict with others (See Figure 5). In response to the statement “I send messages on Facebook to someone I’m mad at instead of talking about it,” 73% (n=16) stated they never engage in this activity, while 23% (n=5) reported sometimes. Additionally, one respondent reported often using Facebook in this manner. For the next statement, the far majority of respondents (95%, n=21) stated they never ask others to “gang up” on someone they are mad at on Facebook, while one respondent reported sometimes using Facebook for this purpose.

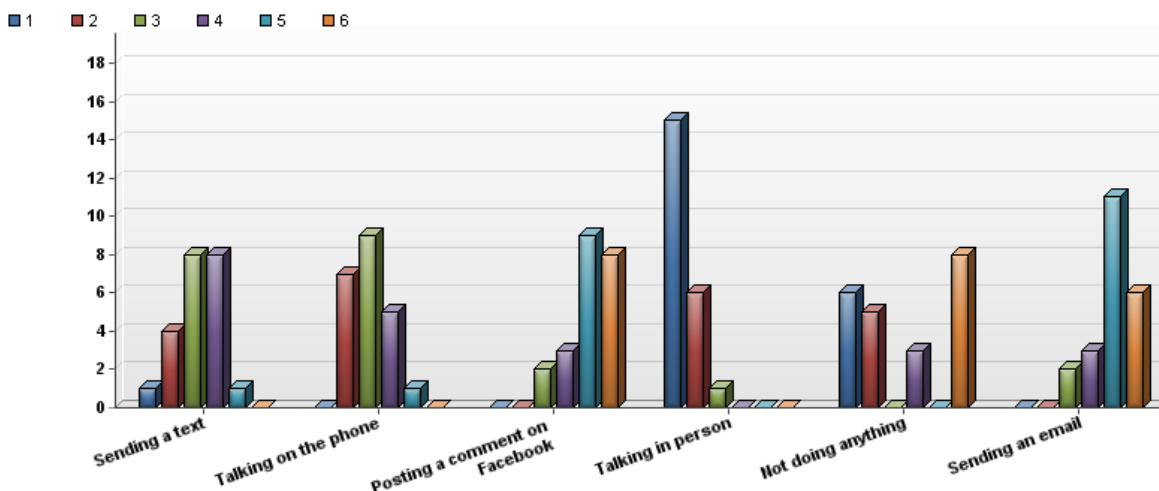
In response to the statement “I ‘un-friend’ someone on Facebook who I’m mad at without talking about it,” 91% (n=20) of the respondents reported never doing this. The remaining two respondents were split between reporting sometimes and very often engaging in this activity on Facebook. For the last statement “I solve problems with friends on Facebook,” 68% (n=15) reported never using Facebook in this manner, while 32% (n=7) replied sometimes. As shown in the results, the far majority of respondents do not express conflict or attempt to resolve conflict using Facebook. However, there was a small percentage of respondents who have used Facebook in this manner, even to the extent of “unfriending” and having friends gang up on someone out of anger. Overall, it appears that respondents viewed texting as being better suited to resolving conflicts with others than Facebook. A text on a cell phone may be more immediately received and read than a message on Facebook.



**Figure 5. Frequency of Using Social Networking for Conflict Resolution**

Respondents were then asked to read the statement “I prefer to let someone know I’m mad at them by” and rank their preference of possible actions. Again, the options were “1” being the highest preference to “5” being the lowest preference. The six different choices as well as the results are shown in Figure 6. For texting, the most common rank was tied between third and fourth, with 36% (n=8) choosing this medium. For talking on the phone, the most common rank

was also third, with 41% (n=9) choosing this medium. For posting a comment on Facebook, the most common rank was fourth, with 36% (n=8) of the respondents choosing this medium. For talking in person, the most common rank was first, with 68% (n=15) choosing this medium. For not doing anything, the most common rank was sixth, with 36% (n=8) choosing this medium. And finally for email, the most common rank was fifth, with 50% (n=11) choosing this medium.



**Figure 6. Rank of Preference in Expression of Conflict**

As seen in the results, talking in person was the most preferred among respondents to express conflict and not taking action was ranked next for the most preferred. In looking at which method ranked second, talking on the phone was ranked the most preferred means to express conflict. Texting showed mixed results, using Facebook appeared less favorable, and sending an email was the least preferred way to express conflict. So, it appears that respondents prefer to show feelings of anger in ways they can receive a more personal interaction by performing this in person or talking in the phone. A point to consider is if respondents find instant and direct individual conversation more favorable during conflict than waiting for a text or typed response.

The next section is in regards to respondents being asked on how social networking has impacted intimate relationships with others. Table 3 displays the frequency distribution of intimate relationships ending over the social networking activities of texting and Facebook. This includes the participants initiating the break-up and also being on the receiving end. As the data shows, one respondent (5%) ended an intimate relationship by sending a text, while six respondents (27%) had an intimate relationship end by their partner informing them by text.

As for Facebook, three respondents (14%) stated they ended an intimate relationship with someone by using this medium, while zero respondents stated an intimate relationship was ended by their partner by receiving a message on Facebook. The results demonstrate that the far majority of respondents have not had intimate relationships end over social networking. When this has occurred, it appears that texting is the more common method of notification. Ending an intimate relationship over social networking may be appealing because of the convenience factor as well as the choice to participate or avoid the resulting conflict with the other person.

**Table 3. The Use of Social Networking to End Intimate Relationships**

Ended By Respondent-Text	Count	Percent
1	1	4.55
2	21	95.45
N=	22	
Ended By Partner-Text	Count	Percent
1	6	27.27
2	16	72.73
N=	22	
Ended By Respondent-Facebook	Count	Percent
1	3	13.64
2	19	86.36
N=	22	
Ended By Partner-Facebook	Count	Percent
2	22	100.00
N=	22	

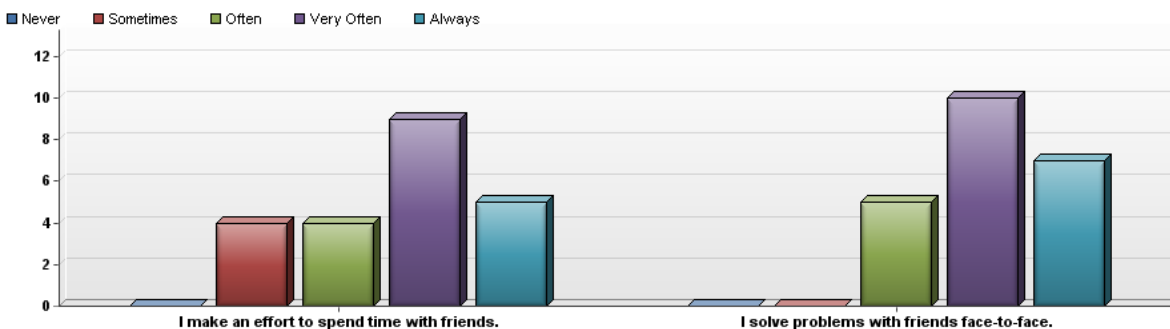
### **Face-to-Face Communication**

Respondents were asked to answer various statements that reflected how often they communicated and resolved conflict with others during face-to-face interactions (See Figure 7).

In response to the statement “I make an effort to spend time with friends”, 41% (n=9) of the respondents reported very often, while 23% (n=5) stated they always do this. The remaining respondents were split equally between sometimes and often, with 18% (n=4) in each category.

In response to the statement “I solve problems with friends face-to-face”, 45% (n=10) stated they very often solve problems in this manner. This was the most popular choice for respondents. The rest of the respondents were divided between choosing always (32%, n=7) and often (23%, n=5).

These results show that all respondents, at differing levels, intentionally have face-to-face interaction with others as well as use this method of contact to resolve conflicts. Further, when compared to the activities of texting and using Facebook, in-person contact is the most common method of communication and conflict resolution. One may wonder if these results reflect the desire of to meet their social needs and feel that conflict is settled on a more personal and immediate basis.



**Figure 7. Frequency of Face-to-Face Interaction**

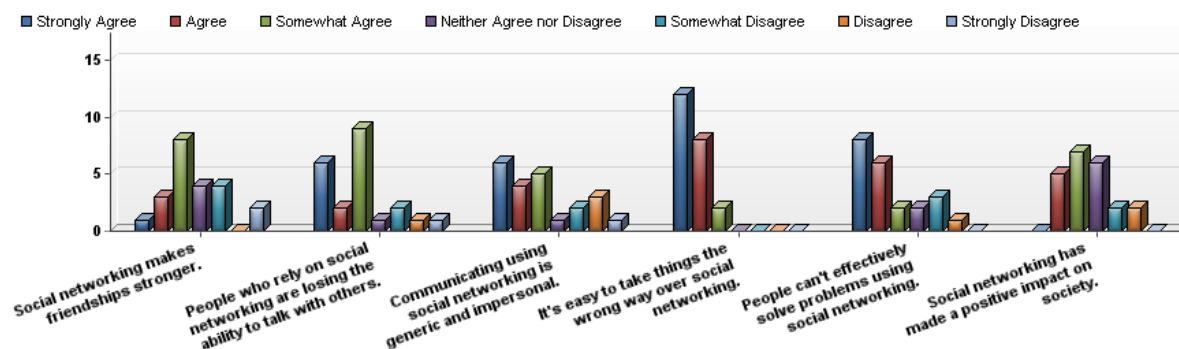
### Attitudes toward Social Networking

Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement to various statements about social networking and its impact on relationships, communication, conflict resolution, and society. These statements as well as the results are displayed in Figure 8. In response to the



statement “Social networking makes friendships stronger,” 36% (n=8) of the respondents somewhat agreed, while 18 % (n=4) of the respondents each neither agreed or disagreed as well as somewhat disagreed. Two participants strongly disagreed with this statement. In response to “People who rely on social networking are losing the ability to talk with others,” 41% (n=9) of the respondents somewhat agreed with this statement and 27% (n=6) strongly agreed. These were the two most common choices among respondents. The statement “Communicating using social networking is generic and impersonal” created a split among respondents. The results show that 27% (n=6) strongly agreed, 23% (n=5) somewhat agreed, and 18% (n=4) agreed.

In response to the statement “It’s easy to take things the wrong way over social networking,” the majority of the respondents (55%, n=12) strongly agreed and 36% (n=8) agreed. In response to the statement “People can’t effectively solve problems using social networking,” 36% (n=8) strongly agreed and 27% (n=6) agreed. These were the two most common categories. As for the last statement “Social networking has made a positive impact on society,” the views were mixed. As seen in the results, 32% (n=7) somewhat agreed, 27% (n=6) neither agreed or disagreed, and 23% (n=5) agreed. Given the small population and the directness of the statements, it was somewhat surprising that participants showed strong attitudes on social networking.



**Figure 8. Level of Agreement on Attitudes toward Social Networking**

## Discussion

This study aimed to explore the impact of the social networking activities of texting and the use of Facebook on communication and conflict resolution skills among young adults. For decades, communicating and resolving conflict with others was mostly performed in-person, through written correspondence, or by talking on landline telephones. Now, with a multitude of technological advances, people have an array of options with which to interact with others. This study asked respondents to report on their activities of social networking as well as to respond to various statements created to measure their perspectives on the subject. It was hypothesized that respondents would indicate high participation in social networking activities, as seen in previous studies, as well as report an impact on their communication and conflict resolution skills. This impact has been demonstrated in empirical research as well as the researcher's own professional experiences and has ranged from perceived enhancement of existing relationships and improved sense of self to more detrimental effects, such as higher feelings of loneliness and negative consequences of cyber-bullying. Social networking has become a mainstay in society and the data from this study will add further insight into the phenomenon and its potential impacts on today's young generation.

### **Access to Social Networking**

The findings of this study indicate that social networking is very popular among young adults and that participation in social networking activities is highly common in today's technological society. As seen in the results, all 22 of the respondents reported access to cell phones and computers, as well as had profiles on Facebook. These findings are higher than the average found in the existing literature and, considering the demographics and the limited number of participants in this study, are not descriptive of the general population. As reported in the 2010 Media Industry Fact Sheet, two-thirds of the population over the age of 13 are connected by cell phones. Also, the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) extrapolated the results of a survey and concluded that an average of 68% of households have a computer with Internet access. Finally, according to Facebook's statistics, 1 in every 13 people in the world have an active profile on Facebook. Therefore, the 100% participant accessibility rate for cell phones, computers, and Facebook found in this study does not accurately represent what is found in society. It is speculated that even changing the target population to include all enrolled students at the University of St. Thomas instead of only freshmen would illicit different results. An explanation may be that having a cell phones and computer as well as a Facebook profile is considered the norm in the younger student population.

### **Time Spent in Activities**

As found in other research, this researcher asked that participants state their daily average number of texts. As the results show, the average number of daily texts sent or received by participants in this study was 120, which is higher than the average of 109.5 found by Smith (2011). It is important to remember that this is an estimate, rather than an actual counting. Regardless, it is of interest because Reid & Reid (2007) found that the majority of their study

participants felt they could best express their feelings over text. It could be that the prevalence of texting by these respondents represents a similar sentiment. Considerations include the convenience at which texting is performed as well as not having the person-to-person reaction to comments and opinions, which can be undesired and unpredictable.

In addition to the number of texts, the amount of average daily time spent in texting, on Facebook, and in face-to-face interactions with others was also investigated. Even though no literature was found that measured time spent texting, it was somewhat surprising that one-third of respondents reported spending an average of 2-3 hours each day in this activity. Another interesting finding was that one respondent in the study reported spending 1.5 hours per day texting, but zero time on Facebook and zero time face-to-face with others in social activities. Further, the average time per day of 1 hour and 10 minutes spent on Facebook reported in this study is substantially higher than what the internet usage measuring company Statista found. Data pulled together from three sources found that Americans spend an average of 6 hours and 33 minutes on Facebook per month, which equals to about 13 minutes per day (Van Grove, 2012). However, there was no breakdown of age or other demographics within this data. Therefore, it can be questioned if the higher amount of time spent on Facebook reported in this research is possibly representative of 18-19 year-olds. Finally, an unexpected finding was that one respondent reported spending a daily average of 10 hours in face-to-face social time with others as well as 2 hours on Facebook. Given the time spent in college classes and the demands of academic work, the accuracy of these numbers is questioned.

### **Communication**

It was surprising that the majority of the respondents agreed they relied on texting and Facebook too much, but disagreed about feeling out of touch with others due to social

networking. This may represent the finding by Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007), that social networking may be used to strengthen relationships that already exist and can enhance the feelings of closeness to others. As far as communication skills improving due to texting and Facebook, it seemed the respondents were split in their opinions, but with more feeling that there were no perceived benefits. It is wondered if this is due to participants being submerged in the social networking world of communicating through texting and Facebook and not considering how these activities are impacting their lives.

When compared to the findings of the 2006 USC-Annenberg Project (Giffords, 2006), one major inconsistency in the current study was that a majority of the respondents strongly disagreed that their Facebook friends were as important as “real” friends. Further, the results of the current study also differ from that of Mishna et al. (2009) which found that participants considered online friendships and relationships to be as real as relationships in their actual lives. However, the term “Facebook friends” was used in the current study, while “online friends” and “online communities” were used in the studies just cited. The differences in terminology may account for the varying results.

Finally, it is worthy noting that 50% of participants stated they text others in the same place they are and that the large majority of participants reported sometimes carrying on conversations over text. This was not true for carrying on conversations over Facebook, as participants were equally split between never and sometimes. The prevalence of texting, even to people in the same location, may be an indication of a trend that makes this style of communication style more common than the traditional method of actually speaking to others. As seen in the ranking for communication, the overwhelming first preference was talking in person, followed by texting, Facebook, phone, and then email. These results are consistent with

Reid and Reid (2007) in which participants reported high levels of texting and preferred using texts to communicate over voice calls. One point to consider is if communicating over text is viewed as closer to in person communication than Facebook. This could be explained by social exchange theory in that risk associated with texting is low, but the potential return is low to moderate. However, the nature of communicating over Facebook and its nature of reaching a larger audience makes the risk high, but also the potential reward high. Therefore, texting may be the more appealing form of communication next to face-to-face contact due to its perceived low risk.

### **Conflict Resolution**

Just as in the case of building communication skills, the large majority of the respondents felt that texting and using Facebook has not improved their ability to resolve conflict with others. However, based on the results, there seems to be a definite difference between how often respondents use social networking to communicate versus using this medium to resolve conflicts. Across the board, the majority of respondents reported never using texting or Facebook to resolve conflict with others. The only two exceptions to this were sometimes texting people who they were mad at and sometimes solving problems with friends over text. These findings seem to match those in the ranking of preference of conflict resolution, with talking in person by far being respondents' first choice. However, an interesting result was that the second most popular choice for first rank was not doing anything, which was then followed by sending a text. It is worth noting that talking on the phone, using Facebook, and sending an email did not receive any first preference rankings. Respondents seem ambivalent about resolving conflicts in general, given that "doing nothing" was so highly ranked. However, it is important that talking in person was the most popular way to manage conflict.

This researcher felt it was important to inquire if intimate relationships of respondents have ended using social networking and include the data in the category of conflict resolution. When one thinks of breaking up with an intimate partner, conventional images of giving the news in person or on the phone may come to mind. The infamous “Dear John” letter may also be part of what someone imagines as the traditional procedure. However, again with technological advances, ending intimate relationships can now simply involve sending messages over electronic devices. Because there was no existing literature found that provided statistics on intimate relationships ending using social networking activities, the researcher only has the ability to describe the findings and make tentative inferences.

As noted in the findings section, 45% (n=10) of the respondents reported that texting or Facebook has been used to end intimate relationships they have been involved in. This may indicate a shift away from using human interaction to end relationships between intimate partners. The person who sends a typed message to end a relationship is able to completely avoid the conflict associated with performing this exchange in person, again signaling a lack of effort or ambivalence in resolving conflict. The initiator also holds the power in choosing to respond, or not, to subsequent texts or Facebook messages. Further, an important aspect to consider is the emotional impact and quality of closure one feels when an intimate relationship ends using social networking activities due to the inability for the receiver to question, probe, read facial expressions, or experience the verbal “goodbye.”

### **Attitudes toward Social Networking**

The last section of the survey asked respondents to rate their level of agreement on various statements about social networking and its impact on relationships, communication, conflict resolution, and society in the hopes of uncovering any prominent attitudes among

participants. In viewing the results, all but one statement showed that respondents varied along the continuum, including positive, neutral, and negative attitudes. This one exception was that respondents agreed that it is easy to misinterpret communications during social networking. Due to the high level of agreement to this statement, it is wondered if respondents encountered misunderstandings over text or Facebook, which therefore influenced their answers. In regard to participants feeling that social networking makes friendships stronger, the level of agreement in this study may reflect findings cited in the literature review that online friendships were described as being long-term, trusting, and very meaningful (Mishna et al., 2009). The second positive statement of social networking making a positive impact on society resulted in the majority of respondents agreeing, but did illicit some ambivalence and disagreement. Given the high participation in social networking activities, the researcher had initially expected a more favorable outlook. However, this finding seems consistent with the range of responses to other statements in this section of the survey.

In looking at the remaining statements that proposed negative effects of social networking, it is worth noting some standout results. Surprisingly, the majority of respondents agreed that people who rely on social networking are losing the ability to talk with others. This is interesting and presents an area of further empirical inquiry: what exactly is the impact of social networking on talking face-to-face. The present study did not ask the respondents about his or her own use of social networking and its impact on face-to-face talk, but rather asked about general attitudes. People may tend to evaluate others more harshly than themselves, so this statement can be viewed as a tool for retrospective assessment rather than an empirical time study.



Further, the majority of the respondents agreed that communicating using social networking is generic and impersonal. This was another unexpected finding given the large amounts of time that participants reported engaging in social networking activities of texting and using Facebook. Also, this finding differs from that of Berson, Berson and Ferron (2002) in which benefits of online interaction included learning relational skills, expressing thoughts and feelings in a healthy way, practicing critical thinking skills. Finally, the agreement to the statement that people can't effectively resolve conflict over social networking seems to coincide with the actual practices respondents reported in the survey. However, there was some minor disagreement to this statement, which may signal that successful resolution of conflict over social networking has occurred at some level among respondents. It is wondered how the overall results would differ, if at all, by polling a more representative sample of the general population.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

This research study offered insight into a possible relationship between how young adults are incorporating social networking into the ways they communicate and resolve conflicts with others. By far, the most common and preferred method of interaction is face-to-face, with respondents stating they engaged in social time with others more than an average of 4 hours per day. The results of the study also show that participants are adding technological communication to this traditional method of contact and spend a fair amount of daily time in social networking activities. The majority of study participants agreed that social networking leaves out the human element and can be generic and impersonal, possibly suggesting limited emotional effort in communications. However, a portion of individuals in this study felt they have improved their skills to communicate because of texting and Facebook. This was not as true for using these mediums to build conflict resolution skills. It should be a point to mention that even though the

majority of respondents disagreed or were neutral that texting and Facebook have improved their communication and conflict resolution skills, the results do not suggest nor imply that these skills were hindered.

Because adolescents and young adults are still maturing and forming the ability to attain and implement communication and conflict resolutions skills on an interpersonal level, it may important that their participation in social networking activities be observed. Communication skills and the ability to resolve conflict may be enhanced by texting or using Facebook, depending on the individual situation. In the case of social networking hindering the ability to effectively communicate and resolve problems with others, an intervention may be appropriate. There may be a strong need for social workers to develop new curriculum and specific treatment modalities that address any negative effects of social networking and skill impairment. These new interventions may be incorporated into existing services and delivered on an individual or group basis. For communication and conflict resolution skills to then be successfully attained, it is critical that social workers work closely with these clients and assist them in incorporating what they learn into areas such as school, family, and peer relationships.

### **Future Research**

As stated, this research study was exploratory because limited research was found that examined the impact of social networking on the specific skills of communication and conflict resolution. This researcher believed, based upon professional experiences and observation, that this topic needed further investigation. Even though studies and articles have been generated within the last few years regarding the impact of social networking in areas such as academic performance, self-esteem, and even physiological changes in the brain, more focus needs to be

placed on examining how social networking relates to the skills of communication and conflict resolution and their impact on interpersonal functioning.

The outcomes of this study demonstrate that future research should further explore the relationship of how social networking, specifically texting and Facebook, potentially affects the ability for individuals to communicate and resolve conflicts within their daily lives. This research could spark future researchers' interest in the subject and to investigate this potential correlation. A larger scale study that included participants more representative of the general population which examined the possible link between social networking and communication and conflict resolution skills would increase generalizability. Including participants more representative of the general population could produce hypotheses related to this variable and add to the ability to conduct inferential statistics. Further, in this study, the activities of texting and use of Facebook between genders and the impact on the identified interpersonal skills was not reported on, therefore is open to be explored in future research. Looking into similarities and differences on how males and females use social networking to communicate and resolve conflicts seems like a worthwhile endeavor. Finally, this research was conducted using a quantitative design and random sampling method. However, it seems highly beneficial for future researchers to conduct qualitative studies in order to get the rich and detailed information about social networking that is typically produced using this design. It may also be better at understanding the differential impact of methods of social networking on communication and conflict resolution.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

A major strength of this study is that participation was both convenient and anonymous. Respondents were able to access the survey online at their own leisure and in their choice of setting. This may have helped facilitate conditions necessary to feel comfortable while

completing the survey. Also, given that the targeted population consisted of college freshman, access to the Internet was not viewed as an obstacle. Further, the anonymous nature of the survey may have increased the possibility that participants were truthful in their responses. In circumstances where participants complete surveys in the presence of a facilitator or in a group setting, there may be pressure to participate and answer questions in a certain manner. This was not a concern due to accessing and completing the survey online.

A limitation of the study is that the research was conducted using only 18-19 year-old freshmen at a faith-based university in a metropolitan area. Although no other attributes were specified for participants to qualify, this group may not be characteristic of the general population of young adults. Further, many schools and universities have their own IRB policies and, for sake of time restraints, conducting the survey using another post-secondary student population was not feasible. As previously stated, the researcher had originally hoped to gather information from high school students regarding the research topic. Again, due to separate IRB requirements and the necessity of obtaining parent permission, time was an issue and therefore the high school population was not a plausible option. Future possibilities of conducting this research include expanding the parameters of the study and making the survey accessible to a broader group.

Another limitation of this research was that there were no existing tools that measure the interaction between social networking and communication and conflict resolution skills. Therefore, the researcher had to develop the survey using professional judgment, personal experiences, and committee input regarding social networking. Not all of the survey questions reflected existing research due to the exploratory nature of the study. Therefore, it is important to note that reliability and validity for this survey has not been established.

A final limitation of the study was the low number of respondents. The researcher had not known the total number of students who met research criteria beforehand. If this had been discovered, the age range may have been expanded to increase the number of potential respondents. The low number of students who took the survey resulted in the inability to conduct inferential statistics to look at any statistically significant relationships between variables.

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## Appendix A: Consent Form

**CONSENT FORM****UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS****GRSW 682 Research Project****Social Networking and Interpersonal Communication and Conflict Resolution Skills  
Among College Freshman**

I am conducting a study about the impact of social networking (texting and Facebook) on interpersonal communication and conflict resolution skills among college freshman. I invite you to participate in this research if you are an 18-19 year-old college freshman at this university. Please read this form before starting the survey.

This study is being conducted by John Drussell, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, University of St. Thomas and supervised by Dr. Jessica Toft.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to see if there is a relationship between social networking (texting and Facebook) and freshman students' skills in communicating and resolving interpersonal conflicts.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to complete the following survey, which should take approximately 10 minutes. There will be no identifying information and all anonymous results will be tabulated using Qualtrics.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

This study has no risks and no direct benefits.

**Confidentiality:**

This is an online survey that asks for no identifying information. There is no possibility of tracing back results to a specific participant. The results of this study will be kept confidential under a password protected user account.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the survey at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at

any time without penalty.

**Contacts and Questions**

My name is John Drussell. You may contact me with any questions you have. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 507-450-3199. If you would like to contact my professor Dr. Jessica Toft for any reason, she may be reached at 651-962-5803. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I give my consent to participate in the study by continuing with the survey.

- Yes
- No

## Appendix B: Survey Questions

Please answer the following questions and select only one response:

1. What is your gender?  Male  Female  Transgender
2. Do you have a cell phone with texting capability or access to one?  Yes  No
3. Do you have a computer or access to one?  Yes  No
4. Do you have a profile on Facebook?  Yes  No

This next set of questions asks about the amount of time you participate in social networking activities. Please answer each question using hours and minutes:

5. What is the average amount of time per day you spend texting? \_\_\_\_\_hours\_\_\_\_\_minutes
6. What is the average amount of time per day you spend on Facebook?\_\_\_\_\_hours\_\_\_\_\_minutes
7. What is the average amount of leisure/social time per day you spend face-to-face with others? \_\_\_\_\_hours\_\_\_\_\_minutes

Please answer the following questions regarding your use of social media:

8. What is the average number of texts you send each day?\_\_\_\_\_
9. What is the average number of texts you receive each day?\_\_\_\_\_
10. What is the average number of posts or comments you put on Facebook each day?\_\_\_\_\_
11. Have you ever ended an intimate relationship with someone by sending a text?  Yes  No
12. Has someone ever ended an intimate relationship with you by sending text?  Yes  No
13. Have you ever ended an intimate relationship with someone by sending a message on Facebook?  Yes  No
14. Has someone ever ended an intimate relationship with you by sending a message on Facebook?  Yes  No

Please read each statement and mark the number that most applies to you using the following scale:

1-Strongly Disagree	2-Disagree	3-Neutral	4-Agree	5-Strongly Agree	
15. I've improved my ability to work out problems by texting	1	2	3	4	5
16. I rely too much on texting to stay in touch with people	1	2	3	4	5
17. I've improved my ability to communicate by texting	1	2	3	4	5
18. Facebook friends I've never met are as important to me as "real" friends	1	2	3	4	5
19. I've improved my ability to work out problems by using Facebook	1	2	3	4	5
20. I rely too much on Facebook to stay in touch with people	1	2	3	4	5
21. I've improved my ability to communicate by using Facebook	1	2	3	4	5
22. I feel out of touch with others because of social networking (texting, Facebook)	1	2	3	4	5

Please read each statement and mark the number that most applies to you using the following scale:

1-Never	2-Sometimes	3-Often	4-Very frequently	5-Always	
23. I make an effort to spend time with friends	1	2	3	4	5
24. I solve problems with friends face-to-face	1	2	3	4	5
25. I send texts to someone I'm mad at instead of talking about it	1	2	3	4	5
26. I text people who are in the same place as me rather than talking	1	2	3	4	5
27. I solve problems with friends by texting	1	2	3	4	5
28. I carry on conversations by texting rather than talking to someone	1	2	3	4	5
29. I send messages on Facebook to someone I'm mad at instead of talking about it	1	2	3	4	5
30. I've asked friends to "gang up" on someone on Facebook who I'm mad at	1	2	3	4	5
31. I've unfriended someone on Facebook instead of talking about it	1	2	3	4	5



Please read each statement and mark the number that most applies to you using the following scale:

Strongly Agree Strongly  
Disagree

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

36. Social networking makes friendships stronger

37. People who rely on social networking are losing the ability to talk with others

38. Communicating using social networking is generic and impersonal

39. It's easy to take things the wrong way during social networking

40. People cannot effectively solve problems using social networking

41. Social networking has made a positive impact on society

**Thank you very much for your time and for participating in this survey!**