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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Jessica Thern Smith entitled "Always and Never the Same: Women's Long-Distance Friendships during Life Course Transitions." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Communication & Information.

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ALWAYS AND NEVER THE SAME: WOMEN'S LONG-DISTANCE FRIENDSHIPS DURING LIFE COURSE TRANSITIONS

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jessica Thern Smith
May 2010

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Linda, and my father, Ralph, for their many sacrifices and steadfast support. All the moments we shared that once seemed ordinary, now add up to so many memories I wouldn't trade for anything. I am grateful to be your daughter, your "snug."

I also dedicate this dissertation to my two Sarah's. No matter the distance, our friendships have never faltered. I eagerly look forward to our futures together.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the amazing women who were willing to share their stories. You allowed me intimate access to both the joyful and sorrowful moments in your friendships, for which I am forever grateful.

I am also profoundly indebted to Dr. Michelle Violanti. Words cannot possibly express how thankful I am for your unwavering commitment to my success. Whether providing thoughtful advice, honest feedback, fierce loyalty, or encouraging support, you have always gone above and beyond your duties as advisor and dissertation chair. I truly appreciate your time, energy, and dedication.

My deep appreciation also goes to my other exceptional committee members. To Dr. John Haas, thank you for believing in my abilities and always "having my back." To Dr. Margie Morrison, thank you for teaching me what it *really* means to be a qualitative scholar. And to Dr. Michael Olson, thank you for taking a chance on this communication scholar! Through your teaching and mentoring, I have learned how to be a successful member of the academic community and I will always be grateful for your guidance.

To Amy and Nikki, I am so thankful we were brought together almost five years ago and that our friendships have remained strong despite each of us venturing down diverging paths. Like the big sisters I never had, you have provided so much comfort, encouragement, affection, and hilarity that I honestly don't know how I survived without you!

Thank you to Allyson Beutke DeVito for your unfaltering support. Without you (and our lunch dates), I sincerely doubt I would have made it through the ups and downs of these past four years. I hope I have been half as good of a friend to you as you have been to me.

Thank you to Dr. Bill Stuart, Dr. Pam Tracy, Dr. Naomi Johnson Tsigaridas, and Dr. Trevor Potts. You each mentored me in your own unique way and much of my success is due to your support. Your encouragement motivated me to pursue graduate education and I hope one day I am able to inspire students like you inspired me.

I am also thankful for my colleagues and professors, particularly Laura Arnett Smith, Sandy Cabbage, Dr. Ken Levine, and Dr. Laura Miller, who each sacrificed time and energy to assist me along the way.

Thank you as well to my fellow graduate students, who provided empathy, advice, and distractions from stress.

Finally, thank you to my loving family who have always supported my pursuits and never hesitate to say "we're proud of you."

ABSTRACT

Various challenges can threaten the security of personal relationships, but one of the most difficult problems to manage is geographic distance. As more people live apart from someone about whom they care, the prevalence of long-distance relationships will increase. However, research on how long-distance friendships are characterized and accomplished lags behind.

Therefore, the present study was designed to uncover how women define and maintain their long-distance friendships. A total of 34 interviews were conducted with first-year undergraduate students, first-year graduate students, and recently-hired faculty members at a large university. The interview transcripts were analyzed inductively, which resulted in the creation of nine categories. These were eventually reduced to six maintenance behaviors: openness, assurances, positivity, joint activities, personal networks, and mediated communication. Participants also challenged definitions of long-distance friendship based upon geography and replaced them with definitions based upon communication (access to interaction, use of mediated communication, level of closeness, and a commitment to expend the necessary time and energy to make it work).

Although long-distance friendships may require more effort and involve more mediated communication, this study demonstrates that long-distance friends rely on similar maintenance behaviors as geographically-close friends. This indicates that long-distance friendships may not be as dramatically different or as perplexing as commonly thought. Overall, the present study reveals that long-distance friendships can be satisfying and maintained successfully, which challenges both cultural assumptions and traditional social science research. Many long-distance friendships are well-equipped to weather both changes and challenges, making them flexible, not fragile.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

It has been well-documented that having friends is perceived as a significant aspect of leading a fulfilling life (Barbour, 1996; Bell, 1981; Davidson & Packard, 1981; Demïr, Özdemir, & Weitekamp, 2007; Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Hays, 1984; Reisman & Yamokoski, 1974; Schofield, 1964). A friend is frequently the first person individuals turn to when celebrating a success or mourning a loss. Friends offer support, intimacy, acceptance, and trust, all of which are considered by many to be vital components of a healthy and satisfying life. Supportive friendships have a therapeutic value and those who enjoy them often have higher self-esteem and suffer depression and other emotional disorders less frequently (Barbour, 1996; Beraman & Moody, 2004; Berndt, Miller, & Park, 1989; Collins, Laursen, & Hartup, 1999; Davidson & Packard, 1981; Griffiths, 1995; Hartup & Stevens, 1997). Especially for women, friendship is restorative and contributes to personal growth and change (Davidson & Packard, 1981). Thus, although people differ in the types of friendships they have and how they are sustained, many, if not most, would agree that friendships are important.

Despite their importance, however, friendships have been described as the most fragile relationship (Wiseman, 1986). Due to their voluntary nature, friendships lack much of the external structure of other personal relationships and because of this they can often deteriorate more easily (Allan & Adams, 1989; Suttles, 1970; Wiseman, 1986). In a study of adult friendships, for example, Rawlins (1992) observed: "The interviews were riddled with accounts of how vulnerable friendships were to altered circumstances. It felt like valued friendships were continually slipping away" (p. 287). Despite their fragility, however, friendships are expected to

last. "When we invest our time and emotions with a friend, we anticipate that [they] will be there for us in the future" (Sheehy, 2000, p. 31).

However, in our increasingly mobile society, it is becoming more and more difficult to live up to that expectation of longevity. Long-distance moves have become quite common and many Americans are less likely to live in close proximity to their families of origin. Indeed, according to the U.S. Census, over 120 million people changed their residence between 1995 and 2000 (Schachter, Franklin, & Perry, 2003). Long-distance moves increased further between 2002 and 2003 with 20 percent made across state lines (Schachter, 2004). It seems likely that as more individuals find they cannot live and work, or live and study, in the same location as those they care about, the trend toward long-distance relationships (LDRs) will continue to grow.

Numerous statistics show that a high proportion of Americans have had, or currently do have, a variety of LDRs. For example, according to Rohlfing (1995), as many as 90 percent of North Americans have at least one long-distance friendship. In addition, Pistole (2005) estimates that at least one-third of college students are currently involved in a relationship with someone who lives in another city or state. Long-distance dating relationships are also fairly common, particularly among college students, constituting 25 to 50 percent of dating relationships on residential campuses (Aylor, 2003; Guldner, 1996; Knox, 1992; Stafford, 2005; Stafford, Daly, & Reske, 1987). Commuter marriages have also become increasingly common in the past three decades with the U.S. Census Bureau reporting about 3.6 million Americans living apart from their spouses for reasons other than divorce or marital discord (Conlin, 2009). It's apparent that LDRs are quite common in the United States.

Rationale

Although the prevalence of LDRs alone makes them a valuable topic of study, even more important are the challenges they pose on various assumptions held by Western society about close relationships. Stafford (2005) writes:

> It is not the ubiquitous nature and vacuous knowledge of LDRs alone that make the topic worthy of study. When these factors are considered in conjunction with U.S. cultural assumptions about the nature of close personal relationships and the communication considered necessary to maintain them, LDRs merit notice (p. 5).

According to Stafford (2005), the "master narrative" (Nelson, 2001) of personal relationships in the United States requires (1) frequent face-to-face communication, (2) geographic proximity, and (3) a shared residence (in the case of families). Since LDRs do not conform to these standards for normative behavior, they are frequently perceived as less viable (Bergen, 2010; Stafford, 2005). In the case of friendships, many studies have demonstrated that proximity to one's friends is often essential to maintaining those relationships and a loss of proximity is associated with friendship termination (Allan, 1989; Matthews, 1986; Rawlins, 1992; Rose, 1984; Rose & Serafica, 1986). Despite cultural assumptions and empirical research, a multitude of Americans currently maintain a variety of LDRs, friendships included. Thus, it becomes important to ask: What are these individuals doing to successfully sustain their LDRs?

Although a growing number of scholars are attempting to answer that question, we still know much more about the development, maintenance, and termination of proximal relationships; there are significantly fewer examinations into the day-to-day maintenance of LDRs and even less research on long-distance friendships. As Chayko (2002) so poignantly states: "In effect we treat the tip of the iceberg—the visible, physical, face-to-face relationships

among us—as the part most worthy of attention. We ignore and relegate to the realm of the insignificant that which is hidden from view" (p. 5). More research on *how* LDRs are accomplished is needed to broaden our knowledge of these under-studied relationships. Thus, the phenomenon of long-distance friendship is one "ripe with research potential" (Rohlfing, 1995, p. 192).

In addition to needing further research about long-distance friendships in general, exploring the use of communication technologies to maintain these relationships is also needed. Historically, various technologies have been associated with residential mobility through advances in information access, transportation, and communication (Shklovski, 2006). For many, the Internet and other communication technologies have provided a faster and more cost-effective way to bridge the distance created by residential mobility. In fact, interpersonal communication remains the dominant use of the Internet (Hampton & Wellman, 2001; Howard, Raine, & Jones, 2001; Kraut, Mukhopadhyay, Szczypula, Kiesler, & Scherlis, 1998; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Stafford, Kline, & Dimmick, 1999). However, relatively little research has examined how already existing personal relationships are maintained online (Boneva, Kraut, & Frohlich, 2001; Wright, 2004). The current study, therefore, sought to advance our understanding by exploring the phenomenon of long-distance friendship and how this type of relationship is maintained. Thus, the overarching question of this study is: What does it mean to have a long-distance friend?

Sensitization

Qualitative researchers use existing literature in various ways depending on the research tradition that has been adopted. The present study adopts a grounded theory approach, and thus, some literature review is conducted first to "sensitize" the researcher by placing the study in

context and revealing a partial framework of "local" concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). However, the main literature review is conducted during data analysis because the literature informs concept development and the grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thus, what follows is a brief overview of literature relevant to the study of long-distance friendships, which should provide the reader with a basic framework to enhance understanding.

The following literature review is divided into thematic sections. The first section explores life course transitions, such as leaving for college, getting married, having children, and moving residences. Second, the limited research on long-distance relationships is examined, including both challenges and possibilities. Next, the relationship maintenance literature is highlighted. Lastly, the impact of communication technologies on interpersonal relationships is addressed, including a brief overview of media richness theory and uses and gratifications theory.

Transitions and turning points

Scholars from numerous disciplines have offered a variety of explanations for the changes that occur throughout life, with some theories (e.g., Erikson, 1985) proposing the existence of stages that each individual passes through, and others (e.g., Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005) emphasizing the importance of social contexts and social roles. The latter approach uses the concept of the "life course" to describe the path people take over time within social and historical contexts (Leonard & Burns, 2006). Throughout a person's life, significant transitions occur. A transition can be defined as "(1) an event of some significance that is (2) part of the experiences of a significant portion of a population, (3) often anticipated in advance of the actual event, and (4) often occurring within a relatively narrow span of time" (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005, p. 21). These transitions, or "turning points," are labeled as important because they

contribute to an individual's life story. According to Leonard and Burns (2006), self-perceived turning points are the means by which individuals incorporate important changes—for better or worse—into their life story or "self-narrative." For example, leaving the parental home is considered to be a life course transition because it typically occurs at a certain age or stage in life; it is seen as an important right-of-passage; it is an expected event; and it is often perceived as part of the narrative of "becoming an adult." Other life-course transitions typically involve education, employment, marriage, family, retirement, and tragedy. During these transitional periods, an individual's personal relationships are likely to change (Blieszner & Adams, 1992; Rawlins, 1992). One relationship type that changes frequently during the life course is friendship.

Friendships are developed and maintained within the contexts of life-course transitions. These contexts may provide opportunities for friendships to grow and deepen, but may also be a source of pressure and conflict that cause friendships to be neglected (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). For children and adolescents, school is frequently the context of most of their friendships. But maintaining these friendships once they have left school is not always easy and requires friends to make an effort to remain in one another's lives. At such a young age, many children and teenagers do not recognize the need to work on relationships, and thus "old" friends are quickly replaced by "new" friends (Rawlins, 1992; Spencer & Pahl, 2006).

A noticeable change in friendship patterns typically occurs when adolescents transition into young adults, and more specifically, into college students. Rawlins (1992) and other scholars call this time period the Early Adult Transition period. Despite the many positive challenges that college provides young adults, the transition to a completely new environment can often be an emotionally stressful time characterized by increased amounts of anxiety,

loneliness, homesickness, depression, and feelings of loss and disappointment (Compas, Wagner, Slavin, & Vannatta, 1986; Felner, Faber, & Primavera, 1983; Paul & Brier, 2001; Schlossberg, 1981; Weiss, 1990). As Shaver, Furman, and Buhrmester (1985) note, "the college freshman [*sic*] is forced not only to build a new social support system but also to renegotiate relations with family and friends back home" (p. 194). Rawlins (1992) continues to say that, "handling new living conditions and educational settings, while developing new relationships and reconciling them with 'abandoned' family, friends, and romantic partners, comprise sweeping practical and emotional challenges, often disrupting previous social arrangements" (p. 105).

Therefore, first-year students tend to report psychological dependencies, poorer social skills, and emotional adjustment problems more frequently than do upper-level students (Lapsley, Rice, & Shadid, 1989). Many first-year students report feeling lonely because they are physically separated from their "old" friends and have yet to form any deep relationships with peers on campus. Pre-college friends "mutually anchor and affirm each other's identity during unstable and threatening times like the move to college" (Rawlins, 1992, p. 104). Although most conceptualizations of homesickness include a longing for home and family, many self-reported definitions of homesickness also include missing one's friends (Fisher, 1989; Fisher, Murray, & Frazer, 1985). Grieving the loss of friends has recently become so central to studies of the transition between high school and college, that Paul and Brier (2001) termed this phenomenon "friendsickness." They argue: "The loss of frequent socialization and intimacy with a familiar group of friends, compounded by the uncertainty about the unfamiliar environment at college, can bring about painful feelings of loss that trigger grief and mourning" (p. 78).

The existence of a supportive network is imperative to college students' adjustment because when events separate a person from those with whom he/she is familiar, it threatens a

person's sense of self (Oatley, 1990). Therefore, maintaining relationships with those "back home" is very important to many college students, particularly first-year students, because those are the people that know them the best and can offer them support during this chaotic and emotionally trying time. In interviews with young men and women, Benenson and Christakos (2003) found that women especially reported that they would feel very distressed over the potential termination of their current, closest same-sex friendship. Therefore, despite the difficulties, perhaps the need to maintain connection with home and the apparent concern of women about the potential loss of their friends will lead them to make more concerted efforts to maintain their personal relationships once they have left for college.

In spite of making a commitment to maintaining high school and college friendships, many of these relationships fade after graduation (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Adults live different lives than most college students. They have a greater number and a wider variety of demands for their time (Blieszner & Adams, 1992). Multiple transitions are experienced during middle adulthood, such as starting a career, getting married, establishing a home, and having children. Experiencing these turning points often means less time is available to spend with friends.

Settling down with a romantic partner or getting married can have an immense impact on friendships. Being part of a couple provides an opportunity to make new friends, whether by adopting each other's friends or making "couple friends." Predictably, developing new friendships can take time away from maintaining ties with "old" friends. One's romantic partner may also act as a "gatekeeper," limiting or discouraging contact with one's separate set of friends (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). In other instances, one may not approve of his or her friend's romantic partner causing competing commitments and loyalties to strain the friendship.

Becoming a parent is another life-changing transition that can greatly alter one's friendships. Parents often have little time or energy to spare and may find it difficult to pay much attention to their friends, especially if they are simultaneously trying to build a career. "While well-established relationships may remain intact, friends who are high maintenance, who do not live locally, or who do not have children may be neglected or lost" (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, p. 95). It is during this time that people often make new friends who are local, such as neighbors and work colleagues, or who are experiencing similar circumstances, such as church congregants, members of parent-teacher associations, and playgroups. "Local friends are a boon when people are tied to their neighborhood" such as when they have young children (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, p. 99).

Geographic mobility is clearly a major life-course transition and can pose numerous challenges to the maintenance of friendship. It is much easier to keep friends if they remain local and accessible. If friends fall victim to the cliché "out of sight, out of mind," it is likely the friendship will dissolve. However, distance may actually strengthen some friendships as they realize the value of their relationship and intensify their commitment. After all, distance may also "make the heart grow fonder." What follows, therefore, is a discussion of the long-distance relationship literature, examining both their difficulties and their ability to be lasting and satisfying.

The difficulties of long-distance relationships

For a friendship to develop and last, multiple factors must converge. One such factor, as asserted by a significant amount of research, is frequent contact between friends (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Davis, 1973). Many studies have demonstrated that proximity to one's friends is often essential to maintaining those relationships and a loss of proximity is associated

with friendship termination (Allan, 1989; Matthews, 1986; Rawlins, 1992; Rose, 1984; Rose & Serafica, 1986). For example, in his longitudinal research with first-year college students, Hays (1984) found that residential proximity was correlated positively with friendship development. Time spent together makes companionship and communication possible, thus increasing the likelihood of relationship development (Reissman, Aron, & Bergen, 1993). "People who do not see each other frequently—for whatever reason, even involuntary 'good' reasons—simply cannot be as close, other things being equal, as people who *do* spend a lot of time together" (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989, p. 794, emphasis in original). Since frequent face-to-face contact is deemed necessary for a friendship to develop and last, LDRs are perceived as challenging, if not impossible, to maintain (Sahlstein, 2004).

To "make up" for the lack of face-to-face interaction, LDFs must consciously and explicitly enact particular behaviors that help to maintain their relationships across geographic distance. However, many recognized maintenance behaviors are not easy or possible to enact due to the distance. Thus, LDFs are faced with a paradox: they need to enact multiple maintenance behaviors to compensate for the distance; but because of the distance, many maintenance behaviors are impossible to enact. Thus, long-distance friendships may be characterized by fewer maintenance activities that could lead these relationships to be less close and less satisfying (Johnson, 2001).

In her study on the friendships of college students, Rose (1984) found that 57 percent of her participants had recently lost at least one close friend and nearly half of those attributed geographic separation to the ending of the friendship. She concludes that "continuing friendships without the environmentally imposed contact of high school requires a cognitive shift to a concept of 'friend' in which the physical presence of the friend is not necessary for the

continuation of emotional bonds" (p. 276). Being able to make this cognitive shift may be difficult for many individuals, and may take a considerable amount of adjustment time and effort.

In Rohlfing's (1995) study of women's long-distance friendships, the maintenance of these relationships was perceived to be challenging. The primary channel of communication used by participants was the telephone with the frequency of calls ranging from once a month to once a year. All the women interviewed said they wished they could call more frequently. They also expressed frustration over the low level of intimacy that could be reached during these phone calls. Most of the time was spent "catching up" on more superficial topics instead of delving deeper into emotional sharing. Letter-writing between the women was infrequent due to time constraints and visiting also seldom occurred. When the women were able to travel to see a friend, the trip frequently overlapped with other reasons to be in the area. When asked why they did not travel just to visit with one another, the women expressed that they didn't have enough money or time (Rohlfing, 1995).

For many, the maintenance of long-distance friendships is undermined when they discover that they lack the resources to maintain their "old" friendships (Fehr, 2000). Friendships that survive geographic distance often involve phone calls, letters, e-mails, care packages, and traveling. Therefore, people with greater socioeconomic status may find it easier to maintain their friendships than those without the necessary resources. Perhaps due to the United States' struggling economy and the continuous rise in air travel and gas prices, many individuals simply cannot afford to travel to their LDFs. This may be a particularly difficult challenge for undergraduate and graduate students. Due to rising tuition costs across the country, many college students work while taking classes, limiting their free time. Thus, maintaining a

long-distance friendship is difficult for many college students because they lack the resources to visit or call their friend(s) frequently (Rohlfing, 1995; Rose, 1984).

Pre-tenure, female faculty members may also face many special challenges. Female faculty still earn less, on average, than their male peers and are less likely than men to have tenure (AAUW, 2004). Thus, female faculty may have limited funds to devote to traveling. In addition, it takes women longer than men, on average, to be granted tenure regardless of their marital or parental status (Modern Language Association, 2009). To achieve tenure, female faculty must devote a considerable amount of time and energy to publishing and teaching. For many women, this is in addition to care-taking responsibilities. Similarly to undergraduate and graduate students, it is likely that many female faculty members are also lacking the time and money to devote much attention to their long-distance friendships.

The literature discussed above demonstrates that LDRs pose many challenges to those involved. Dealing with the physical separation, keeping in contact with one another, and finding the time and money to maintain the relationship are just a few of the problems distal partners face. However, some research does suggest that just because long-distance relationships are difficult does not mean that they can't be successful and satisfying.

The possibility of long-distance relationships to last

Although a majority of both lay people and researchers believe that LDRs typically fail, there is a significant amount of data to contradict that conclusion (Guldner & Swenson, 1995; Johnson, 2001). For example, research has found no change in relationship commitment following a geographical separation in a sample of 40 college students (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). In another study, couples who reported spending *more* time together showed no greater increase in relationship satisfaction than the control group (Reissman, Aron, & Bergen, 1993). In

addition, individuals in LDRs report levels of relationship satisfaction, intimacy, trust, and commitment that are almost identical to those reported by individuals in proximal relationships (Guldner & Swenson, 1995). These studies suggest that the quantity of time spent with a partner is not central to relationship satisfaction. "In fact, some individuals can apparently maintain perfectly satisfying relationships with very little face-to-face contact" (Guldner & Swenson, 1995, p. 319). It is therefore possible for relationships to continue despite discontinuous periods of physical and interactional co-presence (Sigman, 1991). Thus, "despite the miles that separate them, each [friend] seems to provide the other with a sense of history and relational continuity that is not endangered by the infrequency of day-to-day communication" (Rohlfing, 1995, p. 189).

Although some of the above-mentioned research was conducted using long-distance *romantic* partners, the results are still applicable to long-distance friends (LDFs). Many researchers have noted that long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs) tend to be more difficult to maintain than long-distance friendships because romantic relationships include behaviors that require proximity (kissing, holding hands, caressing, making love, etc.) whereas friendships do not. "Although friends may successfully sustain a distal relationship with visits occurring as infrequently as once every 3 to 5 years, with mediated communication occurring as seldom as once annually, it is unlikely that such limited contact will sustain long-distance lovers" (Rohlfing, 1995, p. 177). Hence, if researchers (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Guldner & Swenson, 1995; Reissman, et al., 1993) have determined that those involved in LDRRs report just as much relational satisfaction as participants in proximal relationships, it can be imagined that those involved in long-distance friendships have an even better chance of reporting relational

satisfaction since intimate, physical contact is not required for friendships. However, more research needs to be conducted on this topic in the future.

Despite the limited number of studies specifically concerning long-distance friendship, there are several that demonstrate these are equally close and satisfying relationships. For example, Oswald and Clark (2003), using a social exchange approach, hypothesized that long-distance friendships would be most costly in terms of investments and thus would be more susceptible to deterioration. However, they found that proximity was not related to how much friends invested in the relationships. Therefore, they concluded that the frequency of face-to-face interaction is almost irrelevant to maintaining close friendships. Instead, they found that friends who communicated frequently, such as through telephone calls, were more likely to remain best friends and did not report a decrease in satisfaction, commitment, and rewards. In another study, Chayko (2002) found all but four of her fifty interviewees reported they had formed at least one strong social bond with a person they saw face-to-face just once or twice a year or less. The interviews caused Chayko (2002) to conclude that "it is through symbols, rituals, talk and thinking about others to the extent that we can feel we are 'carrying' them with us that we mentally 'dust' off and maintain our connections" (p. 80).

As a third example, Rose and Serafica (1986) conducted interviews with men and women about the nature of casual, close, and best friendships. They found that casual and close friendships were more negatively affected by a lack of face-to-face interaction than best friendships. According to their interviewees, best friendships require less proximity, but considerable interaction to be successful. Interaction in the form of letters, phone calls, occasional visits, and the exchange of gifts were all cited as necessary for best friendships to continue being fulfilling, but frequent face-to-face interaction was not. Furthermore, when asked

how friendships end, many of the participants expressed skepticism that a best friendship *could* end. One participant commented on this: "Best friendships are self-maintaining. [They] can tolerate distance, time, and pressure. The commitment maintains itself. The emotional intensity doesn't change" (p. 280). Therefore, best friendships were regarded as more self-maintaining and less vulnerable to a decrease in proximity than other friendship types.

The traditional assumptions that long-distance friendships are less close, less satisfying, or inherently at risk often stem from the limited ways they have been studied. Blieszner and Adams (1992) note that in a significant amount of research, one of the most widely-used measures of friendship is rate of contact. It is an underlying assumption in these studies that a larger quantity of contact is better than less. Adams (1998) adds that long-distance friendships are often not even treated separately from local ones, and most questions are designed to measure face-to-face contact. In addition, some scholars have even defined friendship as a local phenomenon and thus eliminated all non-local contact from their research (Adams, 1998). Furthermore, conclusions about the closeness of long-distance friendships are tied to how "close" is defined. For example, part of the definition Berscheid et al. (1989) used included "engaging in joint activities." So, if closeness is defined in ways that require face-to-face interaction, then long-distance friendships cannot be close by definition. However, definitions do not have to be so narrow. Instead, "closeness in friendships could be considered in numerous ways including support, shared interests, and expressions of the importance of the relationship" (Stafford, 2005, p. 85). How frequently partners interact face-to-face "does not convey much about the impact of friendship on a person's well-being" (Blieszner & Adams, 1992, p. 37). Only focusing on such an indirect indicator of friendship is limiting and does not highlight the *quality* of friendship dynamics. Thus, the lack of face-to-face contact does not guarantee a

relationship will dissolve. If both partners are committed to maintaining the relationship, it is likely to be lasting and rewarding.

Relationship maintenance

In the last 30 years of communication research, scholars have increasingly focused on the strategies and techniques individuals use to maintain their relationships with others (Dindia, 2003). Therefore, due to the vast number of studies devoted to relationship maintenance, one specific definition of the term does not exist. For example, Dindia and Canary (1993) explain relational maintenance with four accomplishments: to keep a relationship in existence; to keep a relationship in a specified state or condition; to keep a relationship in a satisfactory condition; and to keep a relationship in repair. Each of these classifications reflects how various scholars define relationship maintenance in accordance with their specific theoretical frameworks and research goals. Thus, relationship maintenance is a multifaceted concept. But no matter how it is defined, relationship maintenance is vital to the continuance of all relationships and is often the longest lasting period of a relationship (Duck, 1988).

The present study utilizes the definition created by Canary and Stafford (1992, p. 243): "Relational maintenance behaviors [are] actions and activities used to sustain desired relational definitions." Using this definition, Canary and Stafford (1994) argue that individuals maintain their relationships through both strategic and routine behaviors. Routine behaviors are less conscious and more habituated while strategic behaviors help the individuals achieve particular relationship goals. Their definition also indicates relational maintenance behaviors not only keep the dyad together, but also uphold the desired quality of the relationship. This means strategic and routine behaviors serve to sustain the nature of the relationship to the dyad's satisfaction.

To determine what types of routine and strategic maintenance behaviors individuals use, Canary, Stafford, Hause, and Wallace (1993) surveyed college students about their various relationships, both platonic and romantic. Based on this study, Canary et al. (1993) created a general typology of maintenance strategies used in familial relationships, friendships, and romantic relationships. This line of research has become the most frequently used operational definition of relational maintenance behaviors in the literature and has inspired research by others beyond the original typology (Dindia, 2003). Their taxonomy includes ten categories: positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, sharing tasks, joint activities, cards/letters/calls, avoidance, antisocial, and humor.

Positivity consists of such behaviors as acting cheerful and avoiding criticism of the partner. It also involves doing favors for one's partner and the display of affection. *Openness* refers to having direct conversations about the relationship including self-disclosure, advice-seeking, advice-giving, and meta-relational communication. *Assurances* are composed of expressing feelings of love, commitment, and supportiveness as well as implying a relational future. *Social networks* involve surrounding the relationship with friends and family who approve of and support the relationship. *Sharing tasks* involve fairly dividing the household chores or sharing routine relationship tasks. *Joint activities* reflects how the dyad spends time together, including routine events/places, rituals, talk time, and visits/road trips. *Cards/letters/calls* involve the use of multiple channels to keep in contact with their partner. *Avoidance* reflects both the evasion of the partner in certain contexts and the evasion of particular issues. *Antisocial* behaviors are composed of direct and indirect unfriendly actions while *humor* reflects the use of jokes and sarcasm in the relationship. In their study, Canary et al. (1993) found that openness, joint activities, and assurances were indicated the most frequently

by the sample and humor, antisocial behavior, social networks, and sharing tasks were the least frequently mentioned.

Johnson (2001) utilized the taxonomy created by Canary, et al. (1993) in her examination of the differences between the maintenance behaviors of geographically close and long-distance friends (LDFs). Johnson notes that previous relationship research has focused on the quantity of maintenance behaviors and has suggested that the more behaviors used, the better the relationship. However, many maintenance behaviors are not available to those in long-distance friendships because of a limited amount of face-to-face interaction (such as the above-mentioned sharing tasks and joint activities). Utilizing diary entries written by undergraduate college students, Johnson found that when reporting on geographically-close friends, participants listed significantly more maintenance behaviors than when reporting on LDFs. Respondents also reported using a few different maintenance behaviors in geographically-close friendships versus long-distance friendships. For example, social networks and joint activities were used in geographically-close friendships a larger percentage of the time whereas cards/letters/calls were reported a higher percentage of the time in long-distance friendships. No significant differences were found between geographically close and long-distance friends' use of positivity, assurances, and openness. Perhaps most importantly, Johnson did not find any significant differences in levels of satisfaction and closeness between the two types of relationships.

This research clearly demonstrates that geographically-close friends may utilize more maintenance behaviors than LDFs, but their relationships aren't necessarily any closer or more satisfying. Therefore, even though a long-distance friendship may lack some of the day-to-day behaviors common in geographically-close friendships, these maintenance behaviors may not be essential to having a rewarding relationship. Thus, rather than concentrating on the frequency or

quantity of maintenance behaviors, particular types of behaviors and the perceived effectiveness of those behaviors should be examined.

Canary and colleagues' (1993) typology is a useful starting point, but because it was based on multiple types of relationships (romantic, familial, and friendship), all the strategies may not be applicable to friendships. Thus, Oswald, Clark, and Kelly (2001) identified four types of *friendship* maintenance behaviors: interaction, positivity, supportiveness, and self-disclosure. Interaction refers to activities that friends do together, such as going to social gatherings. Positivity encompasses behaviors that make the friendship upbeat and enjoyable. Supportiveness includes communication that offers consolation, comfort, and encouragement. Lastly, self-disclosure refers to meaningful communication, such as sharing private thoughts (Oswald, et al. 2001; Oswald & Clark, 2003). These four maintenance behaviors predict friendship satisfaction and commitment and differentiate between casual, close, and best friendships (Oswald, et al., 2001). The use of each of the maintenance behaviors also predicts the successful maintenance of best friendships over a one-year period (Oswald & Clark, 2003).

A weakness of both typologies is that they do not explicitly account for computer-mediated maintenance behaviors. Most research has not specifically examined how people use computer-mediated communication (CMC) to maintain relationships, especially not existing relationships that were initially formed face-to-face (Wright, 2004). It is possible that online maintenance differs from face-to-face maintenance. Thus, additional research is needed to create a typology of the strategies people use to maintain both exclusively Internet-based and primarily Internet-based relationships.

In summary, despite their many difficulties, research indicates that LDRs are capable of being lasting and satisfying. These relationships are sustained through the use of various

communicative maintenance strategies because, as Dindia (2003) argues, "the quality of a relationship is primarily determined by the *quality* of the communication in the relationship" (p. 1, emphasis added). It is thus possible that the frequency and quantity of maintenance strategies does not determine whether a LDR lasts and remains satisfying. Rather, particular types of maintenance behaviors may be more important in sustaining a relationship.

The increasing availability of sophisticated communication technologies could alleviate the difficulties of maintaining relationships across geographic distance, allowing long-distance partners to enact maintenance strategies that they otherwise could not, possibly resulting in positive outcomes such as increased commitment (Stafford, Kline, & Dimmick, 1999; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Hampton & Wellman, 2001; Howard et al., 2001; Shklovski, 2006). Thus, research on the impact of technology on interpersonal relationships is highlighted next.

The impact of communication technology on interpersonal relationships

Advancements in communication technologies have dramatically changed how people interact with one another. These technologies have provided users with easier, faster, and cheaper ways to keep in contact with loved ones and colleagues across time and distance. Many communication technology users are involved in "mixed-media relationships," meaning that they are maintained using multiple communication media such as cellular phones, email, and online chat in addition to face-to-face communication (Walther & Parks, 2002). According to Chayko (2002), individuals use a variety of technologies to complement each other and to fulfill different needs: "Technologies can even 'boost' one another and 'boost' face-to-face interactions" (p. 137). Often, users choose a particular medium based upon the type of message they need to communicate. This idea forms the basis of Daft and Lengel's (1986) media richness theory.

Although this theory was developed to examine information processing in organizations, it has also been applied to the use of communication channels to maintain interpersonal relationships. The theory initially evolved before widespread adoption of new media, but scholars have retroactively fit these newer media forms into the theory's original framework (Dennis, Kinney, & Hung, 1999). The core argument of media richness theory is that media differ in "richness," based on their capacities to facilitate shared meaning between communicators within a given time interval (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Performance improves when people use richer media for equivocal tasks (when there are multiple interpretations of available information) and leaner media for nonequivocal tasks (Dennis, Kinney, & Hung, 1999; Walther & Parks, 2002).

According to the theory, face-to-face communication is the richest communication channel because it enables participants to use various modes of communication, both verbal and nonverbal (Dennis, Kinney, & Hung, 1999). Other media are considered to be "leaner" because they are capable of sending fewer cues (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987). Thus, the following channels can be ordered hierarchically, ranging from richest to leanest: face-to-face, video conferencing (webcam, Skype), telephone, social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace), instant messaging, text messaging, message boards/blogs, email, letters/memos/notes, spam/bulk email, flyers/bulletins.

Some research has suggested that women have a greater ability to send and receive certain forms of nonverbal communication (c.f. Briton & Hall, 1995; Burgoon & Dillman, 1995). Therefore, women may be more strongly affected by the lack of nonverbal cues in CMC than men, leading them to choose richer communication channels to maintain their interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, since women may benefit from using richer channels, they may

prefer face-to-face communication and be less comfortable with technologically-mediated communication.

Even though media richness theory has not been empirically supported in its entirety, the concept of choosing media based on message intention is still a useful premise. The adoption of multiple communication technologies forces individual users to choose the appropriate medium according to the circumstances. This idea is particularly interesting when considering the nature of LDFs. Due to geographic distance, long-distance partners are not frequently able to utilize face-to-face communication, which is considered to be the "richest" medium. Rather, they must "make do" with technologically-mediated communication.

Similar to media richness theory is the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory. A U&G perspective assumes that media use is often goal-directed to satisfy needs and is performed by an active audience able to articulate their needs and motives (Rubin & Rubin, 1985). Individuals choose media forms based on the gratifications they expect to receive from these media. In other words, certain communication channels might better meet particular needs than others (Dainton & Aylor, 2002).

Dainton and Aylor's (2002) study is grounded in a uses and gratifications perspective on communication channel selection in LDDRs and its effect on relationship maintenance. They found telephone use was perceived as a functional alternative to face-to-face communication, while Internet use was not. It is possible that the immediacy of the telephone provides an interactive way to bridge geographic distance in ways that text-based CMC cannot. Telephone use was also significantly related to the performance of assurances and openness. The communication behaviors necessary to demonstrate openness and reassurance are interactive in nature and require sensitivity to social context cues; therefore, the synchronicity of the telephone

makes it better suited for enacting these particular maintenance behaviors. Thus, respondents considered their needs and chose particular media based on the gratifications they expected to receive.

For some, relying on technologically-mediated communication could reduce relationship satisfaction. But for others, the advancements in technology have created a multitude of options that serve a variety of communicative purposes. Based on media richness theory and uses and gratifications theory, it seems likely that those involved in LDRs adapt their maintenance behaviors to these mediated channels, making selections based on their needs. The variety of channels available to choose from could also help long-distance partners communicate more frequently, which could, in turn, uphold levels of relationship satisfaction.

Existing literature on the topics of LDRs, relationship maintenance, and communication technology raises some intriguing questions. First, if difficult relationships are frequently terminated, what is it about these particular relationships that keep friends satisfied despite geographic distance? Second, if those in LDRs have fewer maintenance behaviors available to them, what strategies *are* they using that allow their relationships to survive and flourish? Lastly, since geographic distance prevents frequent face-to-face interaction, how do communication technologies help or hinder the maintenance of long-distance friendships? Therefore, the present study considered these questions and uncovered the ways women define and maintain their long-distance friendships during specific life-course transitions.

CHAPTER II
METHODOLOGY

The Interpretive Paradigm

For the current project, I sought to elicit women's friendship stories using face-to-face interviews. During these interviews, I hoped to momentarily enter what Edmund Husserl calls the "life worlds" of my participants to gain a better understanding of the meanings they construct when they interact with friends. This is possible because, "qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their stories" (Patton, 2002, p. 341).

Furthermore, within the interpretive paradigm, it is acknowledged "that what we can know of reality is socially constructed through our intersubjective experiences within the lived world, which results in a form of truth *that is negotiated through dialog*" (Angen, 2000, p. 386; emphasis added). Therefore, it is vital I used methods that not only allowed dialog between my participants and myself, but also gave participants a chance to dialog with themselves. Using face-to-face interviews inherently involves dialog and ensures that the data emerge emically from the voices of the participants. In other words, categories and themes must be participant-based since they are the experts I am seeking to understand. A secondary reason for using interviews stems from the concept that humans are storytellers and our lives are simply a series of stories (Bochner, 1994; 2002). Therefore, if humans are story*tellers*, then having them *tell* their stories in person may provide a "natural" way to communicate their thoughts and memories.

Specifically, an interviewing style based on McCracken's (1988) "long interview" was utilized for the current study. The long interview is a qualitative interview style where the interviewer uses a structured, yet open-ended, questionnaire (discussion guide) to elicit responses from participants. According to McCracken (1988), "the long interview is one of the most powerful methods in the qualitative armory" (p. 9). The power of the long interview lies in its ability to give the researcher intimate access to the thoughts and feelings of the individuals being interviewed:

> The method can take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world. It can also take us into the lifeworld of the individual, to see the content and pattern of daily experience. The long interview gives us the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves. (McCracken, 1988, p. 9)

As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) point out, "its ability to travel deeply and broadly into subjective realities has made the interview a preeminent method in communication and the other social sciences" (p. 170). These qualities are vitally important to interpretive researchers in their search for the everyday meanings and lived experiences of individuals as they negotiate the social world.

When exploring the meaning of friendship to participants, it is absolutely necessary to utilize such an interpretive methodology, especially since the numbers generated from quantitative research can only tell us so much:

> It is difficult to imagine a study of "friendship," for instance, that does not inquire into how people define a friend, how they experience a friendship, and the silent assumptions that operate in every social situation to dictate how friends and nonfriends act. The long

> interview lets us map out the organizing ideas of friendship and determine how these ideas enter into the individual's view of the world. It also lets us see how friendship works as a constituent of the individual's daily experience. (McCracken, 1988, p. 10)

According to Blieszner and Adams (1992), friendship researchers acknowledge the need for qualitative methods, alone or in conjunction with quantitative methods, to examine interactions and people's interpretations of them. Therefore, the long interview offers a paradigmatically-appropriate method for accessing women's insight into the meaning of friendship in their lives.

Participants

In the present study, theoretical construct sampling was used; participants were selected according to the criteria of key constructs that have originated from the researcher's own theorizing (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Three groups of participants were interviewed: first-year undergraduate students, first-year graduate students, and recently-hired faculty. Undergraduate participants were interviewed during their second semester at the university. Graduate student participants were interviewed in the late spring and early summer of their first year at the university. For faculty participants, "recently-hired" was defined as working at the university for four semesters or less. I chose these three groups because they allowed me to compare friendships during different types of transition. Each of these circumstances could pose different challenges to maintaining friendships with those "left behind." Exploring the meaning of friendship during these turning points could greatly contribute to the literature.

I chose to concentrate specifically on women's experiences because women may be more successful in maintaining LDFs. Women's same-sex friendships tend to be characterized by mutual interests, emotional involvement, and personal talk, all of which are easier to share at a distance than the joint activities that characterize many men's friendships (Bell, 1981; Rose,

1984; Rubin, 1985; Swain, 1989). However, these studies were conducted in the 1980s so this area needs updating. Therefore, I focused on the long-distance friendships of women to determine if they are truly characterized by "feminine" values and if these values ease the difficulties created by distance.

Initially, the exact number of participants could not be specified because qualitative scholars continue collecting data until "redundancy" or "saturation" has been reached (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Thus, I continued to interview participants until no new themes emerged. This saturation was reached after interviewing 12 undergraduate students, 7 graduate students, and 8 faculty members. Six additional interviews with undergraduate students and one additional interview with a graduate student were conducted because they had already been scheduled. Thus, 34 interviews were conducted in total (18 undergraduate students, 8 graduate students, 8 faculty members).

In the discussion of findings, participants' names have been changed to protect their privacy. The names of other people, cities, and schools mentioned by participants have also been removed. For the sake of brevity and flow, only the participants' pseudonyms are utilized. If the reader would like to know which participants are undergraduate college students, graduate students, or faculty, please refer to Table A below.

Table A: Participant Groups and Pseudonyms

Group	Participant Number	Pseudonym
Undergraduate Students	UG 1	Aaliyah
	UG 2	Bailey
	UG 3	Caitlyn
	UG 4	Daniella
	UG 5	Eileen
	UG 6	Felicity
	UG 7	Gaby
	UG 8	Haley
	UG 9	Isabella
	UG 10	Jacqueline
	UG 11	Kara
	UG 12	Leila
	UG 13	Madeline
	UG 14	Nadine
	UG 15	Ophelia
	UG 16	Patricia
	UG 17	Rene
	UG 18	Sophia
Graduate Students	G 1	Abby
	G 2	Becca
	G 3	Caroline
	G 4	Dessa
	G 5	Erika
	G 6	Francesca
	G 7	Grace
	G 8	Hannah
Faculty Members	F 1	Addison
	F 2	Berkley
	F 3	Cindy
	F 4	Dorothy
	F 5	Eva
	F 6	Fay
	F 7	Gail
	F 8	Heather

Recruitment of participants

Participants were recruited through a variety of techniques. First-year students were recruited from introductory public speaking courses required for all majors on campus. First-year graduate students and recently-hired faculty were initially located by emailing administrative staff who were asked if their department had any new, female graduate students or faculty. This method provided me with numerous graduate students, but only a handful of faculty members. Thus, I located records from new faculty orientations held the previous two years. In return for participating in the study, undergraduate students received research participation credit, which is a requirement of their public speaking class, while graduate students and faculty acted out of kindness and empathy.

Procedures

A discussion guide was developed through two means. First, previous interviews that I conducted on the topic of women's long-distance friendships were examined for weaknesses, such as leading questions and a lack of probing. Second, pilot interviews with one participant from each of the three groups were conducted. Consulting previously-conducted interviews and analyzing the pilot interviews helped me create more narrowly-focused and relevant questions as well as more clearly worded instructions and probes. The pilot interviews also familiarized me with the interviewing process, especially the interviewer/interviewee relationship. This is important because qualitative research demands a much more complex relationship between interviewer and interviewee, especially in terms of the presentation of self, avoiding premature judgments, and asking leading questions (McCracken, 1988).

The pilot interviews also served as a way for me to review my "cultural categories," as suggested by McCracken (1988). During this step of the research process, the researcher

examines his or her own experiences with the topic of study to better understand how the self is used as an instrument of inquiry. Using the "self as instrument" means that the researcher relies on his or her own experiences, imagination, and logic to sort through the oftentimes "messy" data that qualitative inquiry produces. Due to the central role of the researcher, a qualitative research report should include information about the researcher(s) (Patton, 2002). Therefore, what follows is a brief description of my journey to the topic of long-distance friendships.

I was first attracted to the field of interpersonal communication because of a desire to study the dynamic and intense experiences of living. Specifically, I became interested in studying women's friendships because of the valued friendships I have had in my own life. I realized that in the chaos of early adulthood, many friendships are lost as other people and other experiences become prioritized. After graduating high school and college, I quickly realized how many of my friendships had dissolved. I assumed other women must share similar experiences and emotions as they navigate life-course transitions. So I decided to see what the interpersonal communication literature could offer me. Surprisingly and disappointingly, the friendship literature I encountered did not inspire or enlighten me. It did not invite me into the lives of women who are coping with the loss of their girlhood friendships or struggling to keep these relationships "alive." Thus, as a Masters student, I decided my academic contribution would be to study the phenomenon of women's long-distance friendships from an interpretive perspective, using qualitative interviewing to elicit their stories. My research program has evolved since then, but those early explorations have led me to this dissertation.

Although my experiences and values inevitably impacted the interviews, I practiced continuous self-reflexivity and bracketing (Fischer, 2009). I also relied on a discussion guide to direct the interviews and ensure that all researcher-determined questions were addressed.

However, the discussion guide I created was open-ended, meaning that it could change depending on the responses of the interviewees. Whereas I set probes in advance, many follow-up questions were created spontaneously during the actual interviews. This flexible structure is closely aligned with Lindlof and Taylor's (2002) description of interviewing as conversation with a purpose and Haley's (1996) observation that discussion guides are designed to be a conversation *starter*. Although some structure is useful during the interviews, it is paradigmatically important that the interviewees' responses guide as much of the interview as possible. The discussion guide is reproduced in Appendix A.

With participant permission, all interviews were digitally recorded to ensure that none of the participants' words were overlooked or misconstrued. Recording also allowed for precise transcription, which, in turn, allowed for much thicker description and deeper analysis. This is significant because relying on short-hand notes, rather than complete transcriptions, negatively affects a researcher's interaction with the data. If the researcher does not have access to the interviewee's actual words, then the researcher is not truly exploring the interviewee's life world. The 34 interviews ranged in length from 25 minutes to 120 minutes, resulting in 440 single-spaced, transcribed pages.

Analysis

An effort was made to transcribe the audio recordings immediately following each interview. This allowed me to constantly re-work my discussion guide to explore concepts that I had not anticipated. While the core of the discussion guide remained the same across all interviews, additional questions were often added. This process also allowed for "constant comparison" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). As I analyzed each interview, each incident in the data was compared with other incidents for similarities and differences.

Through this process, I identified properties that differentiated one category from another. This resulted in a more refined coding scheme.

Using grounded theory as a basis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), examining data inductively allowed categories to emerge from the actual words of the participants rather than imposing categories taken from previous research. The coding process involves three steps. Through open, axial, and selective coding, the researcher "becomes familiar with the data at the micro level and begins to build a structure that interrelates the key parts of the data set" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 232).

The coding process first involved reading the transcripts several times, scanning each line for themes and categories. This was done with an open mind and without any restrictions or purpose other than identifying potentially meaningful "incidents" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This "open coding" basically involved (1) identifying chunks of text that suggested a coherent category, (2) labeling that category, and (3) comparing other incidents to the category (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). These categories were continuously reexamined and reworked with each close reading of the transcripts. This process resulted in the emergence of 35 open codes.

The next step involved "axial coding," which refers to making connections between categories. Whereas open coding involves identification and naming, axial coding is concerned with links and relationships. This process can lead to the creation of new codes or collapsing open codes into broader categories. During this stage, I considered similarities and differences between open codes, as well as contexts, causes, consequences, and conditions, which allowed me to create precise parameters for applying each code. Through this process, the 35 open codes were collapsed into nine axial codes. Thus, axial coding integrates previously separate

categories and pushes data analysis from simply generating collections of categories to creating theoretical constructs (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Selective coding was the last and most abstract step, which consisted of identifying the overarching themes of the data. This involved relating the axial codes to these comprehensive themes, the "selective codes." Thus, the nine axial codes were integrated into six selective codes, which represent the maintenance behaviors utilized by participants. Simply put, the process of selective coding answers the macro-level question "What is going on here?" The essential idea is to develop a single storyline around which everything else revolves. Through this process, my grounded theory was developed.

This grounded approach means that data analysis was not a single step in the research process. Rather, it continued throughout the entire period of data collection and it is through this constant analysis that themes emerged. These emergent themes were amended, extended, and even abandoned as I grappled with the data. Eventually, a substantive theory, grounded in real-world situations, was formulated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Evaluative Criteria

It must be understood that interpretive research cannot be judged using the same criteria as quantitative studies within a post-positivistic paradigm. No matter how methodologically rigorous or systematic an interpretive researcher is, she/he will not produce the objectivity and reliability desired by post-positivistic researchers (Angen, 2000). Smith (1984) suggests that interpretive researchers must "dispense with the traditionalist ideas of objectivity and truth" and recognize the unique strengths and contributions of qualitative inquiry (p. 390). Therefore, the result of interpretive research is not so much conclusive as it is believable. Similarly to art and literature, qualitative research can be judged by how well it allows readers or listeners to

understand and feel the experiences being shared (Bochner & Ellis, 2003). The text is not meant to be received as much as it is to be used and engaged with (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillman-Healy, 1997). From an interpretive perspective, the quality of research becomes "a moral question that must be addressed from the inception of the research endeavor to its completion" (Angen, 2000, p. 387). Trustworthiness, rather than reliability and validity, is the primary measure of appropriate research procedure for interpretive studies (Haley, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Five particular techniques were utilized in the current study to ensure the trustworthiness of data collection and analysis: pilot interviews, reflexivity, the redundancy criterion, thick description, and member checks (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As previously mentioned, the pilot interviews helped me to develop a relevant and clear discussion guide as well as familiarize myself with the interviewing process and the interviewer/interviewee relationship. Being able to practice made the formal interviews flow smoothly and lessened the occurrence of interruptions and leading questions. During the pilot interviews and throughout the entire research process, I also practiced self-reflexivity (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This refers to acknowledging and appreciating the value of my own contribution to the study. Because we cannot separate ourselves from what we know, the researcher's experiences and values are inherent to all phases of the research process (Angen, 2000). Consequently, the researcher's position in interpretive inquiry requires constant self-critical reflection and evaluation. The third technique, the redundancy criterion, refers to a point at which the data become "saturated." At the point of saturation, no new information is revealed by participants. This concept informs an interpretive sample size because the number of interviews conducted is expanded until clear patterns of similarity emerge from the participants' comments (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Haley, 1996).

The fourth technique, "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), involves using the exact words of the participants as the core of the discussion. To put it differently, it refers to letting the participants' insights and comments "speak" for themselves. This is significant because interpretive research is a "chain of interpretations" that must be thoroughly documented so readers can judge the plausibility of those interpretations (Angen, 2000). That is why the verbatim responses of the participants are included in the findings section of this paper. Finally, member checks were used to assess the adequacy of data analysis from the participants' points of view (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Providing participants with summaries of the major findings gives them the opportunity to correct errors and challenge what are perceived as wrong interpretations. Member checks also provide participants with the opportunity to volunteer additional information, which may be stimulated from recollecting the interview. Ten participants, representing all three groups, responded to the member check and confirmed the accuracy of my interpretations. These five techniques enhanced the quality of the final research report by strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of data analysis, interpretation, and presentation.

Although the process of managing qualitative data is systematic and rigorous, it also requires creativity, flexibility, and an appreciation of the unexpected. Informed by McCracken (1988), the present study utilized qualitative interviewing to elicit women's experiences maintaining their long-distance friendships. The transcriptions of 34 interviews were analyzed inductively, allowing the categories and themes to emerge from the words of the participants. The trustworthiness of data analysis was strengthened through the use of pilot interviews, reflexivity, the redundancy criterion, thick description, and member checks. The following

chapter provides a thorough description of the findings and discussion of the major themes that arose from the extensive data set.

CHAPTER III
FINDINGS

This study sought to examine women's long-distance friendships during specific life course transitions. Traditional research suggests that long-distance relationships are problematic and often not long-lasting due to limited, or non-existent, face-to-face contact (Allan, 1989; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Kelley, Herzog-Simmer, & Harris, 1994). However, in the past fifteen years, a substantial amount of research has demonstrated that the lack of face-to-face interaction is not a guaranteed relationship "killer," and that long-distance relationships can be just as lasting and satisfying as proximal relationships (Guldner & Swenson, 1995; Johnson, 2001; Rohlfing, 1995). Uncovering how people maintain these relationships successfully not only helps us to understand friendship, relationship maintenance, and closeness better, but also challenges many traditional assumptions about what constitutes a personal relationship (Johnson, 2001; Stafford, 2005). Thus, the subsequent findings answer the overarching question of this study: What does it mean to have a long-distance friend?

What follows is a detailed report of the interview data, which illuminates how women perceive and maintain their long-distance friendships with other women. While this dissertation set out to examine transitional stages in these women's lives, the transitions themselves did not appear to have an impact on their relationship maintenance so all the data were grouped together. The transitions were downplayed in favor of focusing on the communication strategies these women use to maintain their long-distance friendships. The maintenance behaviors are presented based on the prevalence of each theme in the overall data. But first, I explore how participants characterize their long-distance friendships.

Defining Long-Distance Friendship

Put simply, friendship is a special type of relationship. It is one of the only personal relationships in Western culture that is not governed by law, celebrated formally, or institutionally structured. Although cultural norms exist regarding friendship, we are still free to define friendship as we prefer and to be friends with whomever we choose (Blieszner & Adams, 1992). This freedom is one of the great attractions of friendship (Fehr, 1996), but it is also a double-edged sword: "It slices us free of restrictions but it also cuts us off from the comfort and security of knowing exactly what is expected of us and how we should behave with our friends" (Brenton, 1974, p. 23). The absence of clear expectations can make defining friendship challenging.

No single definition exists for "friend" or "friendship" even though it is considered to be one of the most important types of relationships that an individual can have. "Everyone knows what friendship is – until asked to define it. Then, it seems, no one knows" (Fehr, 1996, p. 5). Friends are often described as someone you can trust, you can depend on, who accepts you as you are, you can have fun with, and with whom you share things (Sapadin, 1988). In a phenomenological study of college women, friendship was described as: a loving relationship; a world of shared meanings and understandings; ongoing growth and change; the interrelated attributes of concern, sharing, commitment, freedom, respect, trust, and equality; and promotion of personal development (Becker, 1987). This variety of characteristics indicates that friendship is multifaceted and difficult to encapsulate in a single defining phrase. As anthropologist Raymond Firth concludes:

> Friendship is of a very diverse and complex, even ambiguous nature [. . .] The concept can vary greatly in intensity, from simple well-wishers to familiar, close, dear, intimate,

bosom, boon-companion friends, each with its own subtle quality. (as cited in Spencer & Pahl, 2006, p. 57).

Thus, the word "friend" covers a huge array of relationships and is defined by a variety of characteristics. But no matter its definition or its scope, most agree that friendship is, as my participants put it, "a meaningful relationship" and "an important part of your life."

Participants overwhelmingly indicated that without friendship, they would be depressed, bored, and "on edge." As Erika put it, "friends prevent me from going within," suggesting that friends pull you out into the surrounding world and experience life with you, side by side. Friends are there through everything, from the mundane, such as tagging along during errands, to the life-changing, such as dealing with the death of a loved one. Friends are there to have fun with, to pass the time with, and to share your secrets with. But not all friendships are created equal. We have numerous types of "friends" in our lives, ranging from acquaintances to best friends. We also have friendships that are active, dormant, and no longer (Rawlins, 1992).

One particular type of friendship that is becoming increasingly prevalent is the long-distance friendship. Due to the mobility of the American population, long-distance moves have become quite common, which often forces friends to go their separate ways. Although both traditional assumptions and empirical research have suggested that long-distance friendships are impossible to maintain (Stafford, 2005), the current study's participants tell a different story. This study demonstrates that relationships are not solely based on proximity and frequent face-to-face interaction; instead, relationships are based in mutual interactions *and* go beyond those interactions (Stafford, 2005). Friendships can exist across telephone lines, in cyberspace, and even within our minds (Chayko, 2002; Stafford, 2005). Sometimes it's enough to be

psychologically present, what Spencer and Pahl (2006) describe as the extent to which friends are "just there, frequently, in the back of your mind" (p. 74).

Simply put, long-distance friendships are unique – they fly in the face of cultural assumptions and perplex scholars. Thus, the first step in understanding these puzzling relationships is figuring out exactly what characterizes them. This is no easy task since long-distance relationships "defy precise definitions" (Stafford, 2005, p. 7). However, most participants did not struggle over their definitions. They know exactly what characterizes these special relationships; more often than not, it's more than mileage.

Based on my interviews, I suggest Stafford (2005) should refine her assertion that long-distance relationships "defy precise definitions" (p. 7). Instead, it seems that these relationships defy *simplistic* definitions. When one considers the phrase "long-distance relationship," one can't help but hear "long" and "distance." Thus, these relationships are frequently defined by how far apart partners are in mileage or travel time. However, in more empirically-oriented studies, "miles separated" standards vary considerably across studies. Apparently, perceptions of "distance" vary from person to person. This is not surprising to an interpretive scholar and participants confirmed that long-distance friendships are characterized by more than the distance that separates them.

Participants, of course, acknowledged that geographic distance is part of the definition, but what "distance" means varied from participant to participant. To some, long-distance means they cannot see their LDF in person every day, as is possible with work colleagues, classmates, and other proximal friends. These participants suggested long-distance means a lack of "easy access." To them, "access" means that if they were unexpectedly and immediately needed, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for them to get to their LDF quickly, and vice versa. Thus,

LDFs are not often as "available" as proximal friends and therefore, cannot always be relied on for instrumental or day-to-day assistance. Other participants commented that *how* they communicate with their LDFs is what distinguishes them from proximal relationships. These participants observed that they must rely on mediated channels with their LDFs, whereas face-to-face communication dominates their proximal relationships.

Beyond these possibly obvious characteristics, most participants also observed that their long-distance friendships are defined by effort, commitment, and closeness. Participants expressed that these types of friendships require more effort to maintain. They are friends, as Berkley explains, "that I can't see on a whim, one of those that I have to plan ahead to see."

> *Cindy:* You can't just meet up for dinner, or you couldn't just go over to comfort someone if they needed it, you couldn't just meet up, you know, over the weekend. You [have] to actually make some sort of effort, you [have] to plan it, it couldn't just be "okay, let's meet up for dinner after work."

Thus, due to geographic distance, these friends must make advanced plans to see one another face-to-face. They cannot easily participate in everyday routines or be around for spontaneous events such as meeting for drinks after work or offering a shoulder to cry on during tough times.

But more importantly than simply requiring extra effort, participants expressed that these are friendships they are *willing* to exert effort to maintain. They are "someone you want to stay close to" and thus, "someone you regularly talk to." As Eileen comments: "[They are] someone that obviously you cannot see on a regular basis but you maintain the closeness by talking, continuing communication." Since LDFs aren't going to "run into" each other at the supermarket or coffee shop, and they aren't able to have spur-of-the-moment lunch dates, they

have to consciously enact most maintenance behaviors. Thus, they must make time to communicate with their friend.

> *Rene:* [A LDF is] somebody you are friends with and then move away from and you try to stay in contact with them as much as you can and still be friends and still be part of their lives. You just don't live by them anymore.

Rene's use of the word "try" reflects the effort that is often necessary to maintain LDFs and that word was repeatedly used by other participants: "we try to call once a week," "we try to see each other during school breaks," "I try to keep her up-to-date." Participants argue that this effort to communicate regularly is important.

> *Nadine:* I just think if you do not have contact then you sort of lose knowing the person; you lose who they are becoming. You move away and your life changes. If you don't keep contact you do not really know who that person is anymore.

Since LDFs cannot be there to witness changes, frequent communication is necessary to remain "up-to-date" and involved. However, maintaining a consistent communication routine can be challenging. As Patricia observes: "When you can't go next door to visit them, you also lose the communication and it is harder to stay in contact." Thus, the lack of face-to-face contact can cause a reduction in communication, which can continue to decrease, if partners aren't willing or able to put forth the necessary effort.

Despite fluctuating moments of dormancy, many participants declared that their LDFs are "always there" and can always be counted on:

> *Dessa:* I don't think it's someone you see every day obviously, or that you even speak to every day. But they are people you know are there for you when you need them. You

> know that you can call them at four o'clock in the morning and they will answer the phone if you need to talk to them.

So despite not being able to see one another often and possibly not communicating frequently, these friends remain important fixtures in one another's lives. For many participants, they have an understanding with their LDF that when life gets in the way and communication decreases, they are still "there" for one another. Infrequent communication does not mean the friendship ceases to exist.

One repeatedly mentioned quality of long-distance friendships, that helps alleviate the periodic lulls in communication, is friends' ability to "pick up where they left off." When describing qualities of close friendship that her LDF possesses, Ophelia had this to say: "A friendship is lasting. It is not something that just comes and goes when it wants to. I think even though you may grow apart a little, you can always pick up where you left off." Heather agrees:

> I think you can always pick up the phone and call that person and, you know, start from wherever you left off. And you know that person, even though they're not close in proximity to you, that they will still provide you with support, in terms of talking about your career [. . .] we support each other through marriage, having children, celebrations, and not so happy events in your life. You can rely on those people to be there for you.

Although distance may make friends grow apart because they aren't there to experience day-to-day life together, the underlying bond remains, allowing friends to reconnect quickly and easily. These are also friends we can count on for support no matter the distance and no matter how long it has been since our last conversation. Spencer and Pahl (2006) describe "pick up where you left off" friendships as those where there is no need to re-establish the relationship and the bond

is secure enough to withstand long periods of separation. Similarly, some participants mentioned being able to reestablish communication as if "no time has passed."

> *Eva:* Even though we don't see each other, we still support each other and talk to each other, and you can feel like time really hasn't passed when you e-mail or pick up a phone and talk to them.

Eva's comment suggests that LDFs can resume communication as if they were continuing a conversation from yesterday when maybe it occurred weeks or months earlier. Perhaps because of their level of closeness or their shared history, LDFs can fall back into sync after periods of disconnection. With newer friendships, or those that are less intimate, if friends do not communicate for a length of time, it is as if the relationship is put on hold—you no longer know what they're doing, what they're thinking, or how they're feeling. So if communication resumes, it is like starting from the beginning. But due to a depth of knowledge and shared understanding, participants' LDFs have a continued awareness of one another's emotions and points of view, which makes their relationship independent of time.

Participants' definitions indicate that long-distance friendships may be challenging because they lack frequent face-to-face interaction and require advanced planning. However, the necessary effort and lack of co-presence does not deter participants from devoting themselves to the continuous maintenance work. As Grace so aptly put it, "when I go home, these are the people I want to see; these are the people I will see; these are the people I will keep up with." So there's a desire to remain close and a confidence that their relationship will last for years to come. Thus, these interviews confirm long-distance relationships defy simplistic definitions.

Maintaining Long-Distance Friendships

The core of the interviews concerned how participants have maintained their long-distance friendships across time and space. The relationship maintenance behaviors that participants reported are used both intentionally with a goal in mind as well as out of habit, just because "that's what friends do." Two parts define relationship maintenance: "One is strategic planning for the continuation of the relationship; the other is the breezy allowance of the relationship to continue by means of the routine, everyday interactions and conversations that make the relationship what it is" (Duck, 1994, p. 46). But, as discussed above, the maintenance of long-distance friendships is often intentional and conscious because geographic distance makes both spontaneity and routine almost impossible. It's much easier to bring a friend a mug of coffee, make dinner together while watching *American Idol*, or go for a long walk when she wants to chat, if you live in the same community. LDFs don't have the same opportunities to sustain those "breezy" day-to-day rituals or to be impulsive. Although LDFs may be limited in the maintenance behaviors they can enact, their relationships are not necessarily weaker, less intimate, or less satisfying than proximal friendships. LDFs are likely to adapt to the circumstance and adjust the ways they maintain their relationship.

Due to the emergent nature of interpretive data analysis, I allowed categories and themes to materialize from the words of the participants. This resulted in nine "axial codes" grounded in the data: together-time, memories, support system, communication, unconditional loyalty, similarity, social networks, deep trust, and intimate knowledge. It was during axial coding that my data surprised me. Axial coding involves making connections between categories, which can lead to the creation of broader categories that span multiple codes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). As I re-read the interview transcripts and solidified codes, I discovered that the emic categories I had

created during "axial coding" would fit into the typology designed by Canary, Stafford, Hause, and Wallace (1993). At the onset of this project, I turned up my nose at the idea of testing existing theory, instead desiring to generate a "grounded theory" that specifically applied to the maintenance of long-distance friendships. Alas, my data did not seem to share that desire! This should come as no surprise since the unpredictability of qualitative research is predictable. It is much like a journey during which the researcher's skills grow and perceptions change, causing many claims to come into focus only after a long period of wrestling with the data. Oftentimes, the best findings are uncovered serendipitously. Indeed, one of the primary strengths of qualitative research "remains its blend of strategy and unexpected discovery" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 210).

After a significant amount of contemplation, I ultimately decided that the categories created by Canary et al. (1993) could serve as my "selective codes." My axial codes related easily to these selective codes and this discovery helped me to formulate my grounded theory. Thus, *memories* and aspects of *support system* and *unconditional loyalty* became *positivity*. *Deep trust*, *intimate knowledge*, *similarity*, and aspects of *communication* were merged into the single category of *openness*. The categories of *support system* and *unconditional loyalty* became *assurances*. *Together-time* became *joint activities*. My code of *social networks* mimics Canary, Stafford, Hause, and Wallace's category, and thus remains the same, except I re-named it *personal* networks. "In contrast to social network researchers who define the boundaries of a particular group and then focus on its interconnected relationships, those who study personal networks focus on the ties that are defined as significant by a particular individual" (Boase, 2008, p. 493). Since my focus is on understanding the relationships deemed important by participants, I have chosen to use this terminology. Canary and his colleagues (1993) devised

the category of *cards/letters/calls* to reflect the use of multiple channels to keep in contact with LDFs. However, the name of this category is dated; therefore, I updated it to *mediated communication*. This category includes the use of phone calls, text messaging, instant messaging, email, social networking sites, letters, greeting cards, and video chat. Since LDFs cannot frequently see each other face-to-face, they must rely on technologically-mediated communication to enact many of the identified maintenance behaviors. Thus, *mediated communication* overlaps with the other categories.

The categories of *sharing tasks*, *avoidance* and *antisocial*, that are in Canary and colleagues' (1993) typology, were not found in the current study's data. In the present study, instances of *humor* reflected inside jokes and being cheerful, so they were categorized as either *openness* or *positivity*, depending on the context. Therefore, a separate category for humor was not deemed necessary. In their study, Canary et al. (1993) found that humor, antisocial behavior, social networks, and sharing tasks were the least frequently mentioned maintenance behaviors, which reflects the current study's findings. Participants reported the use of mediated communication, assurances, and openness the most often. Please refer to Tables B and C, below, for a summary of the coding scheme.

In addition to reflecting Canary and colleagues' (1993) relationship maintenance typology, the present study's six categories (positivity, openness, assurances, joint activities, social networks, and mediated communication), are similar to those in Sapadin's (1988) study of 156 professionals living in New York, Boston, and Los Angeles who were asked to complete the sentence "A friend is someone…" The most frequent responses were: with whom you are intimate, you can trust, you can depend on, with whom you share things, who accepts you, with whom you have a caring relationship, with whom you are close, and you enjoy. Numerous other

studies (e.g., Bell, 1981, Crawford, 1977; Fischer, 1982; Hays, 1988; La Gaipa, 1977) found similar qualities and characteristics were mentioned by respondents when asked to define friendship or describe what makes a good friend.

What follows is a detailed discussion of these maintenance strategies and behaviors. Included in this discussion are extensive samples of quotations from participants. This "thick description" (Denzin, 1989/2001; Geertz, 1973) gives readers an intimate glimpse into the life worlds of the participants—reading their words provides insights into their perceptions and experiences. Intertwined with these excerpts is a "chain of interpretations" that demonstrates how the reality of the participants was understood by the researcher and allows readers to judge the plausibility of those interpretations (Angen, 2000).

Table B: Coding Scheme of Relationship Maintenance Behaviors

Category	Subcategory	Example
Positivity		
	Remaining cheerful and optimistic	"Like you write on their Facebook wall, "I miss you and this is what we are going to do when we get back." I just try to be like upbeat about it. I think it keeps the relationship positive and not like bogged down."
	Avoiding criticism and judgment	"[They] won't look at me differently for what I may have experienced or what I may be going through or my struggles. They'll be like 'That's you, and you're still my friend.'"
	Doing favors and giving gifts	"I have this thing that I bake and it's like her favorite thing in the world. It's like the one special thing I do for her. I know that she loves it, so just because I love her so much, I'm gonna do it."
	Keeping and displaying artifacts	"She wrote me a letter on Valentine's Day that says like 'don't worry, the boys will come.' I mean it's ridiculous, but I still keep it, I usually look at it on Valentine's Day. I'm very nostalgic that way."
Openness		
	Self-disclosure	"With my [LDFs], usually I don't censor. Like if I want to tell them how I feel or what happened, I will tell them anything and everything."
	Honesty	"I can be completely honest with both of them and not be afraid of how they will react to what I say, whether it will make them angry or offend them or hurt them. I think that when you have a true friend, those lines of communication are open."
	Trust	"It is just that trust that has been built up over almost five years, like telling secrets and them not getting out into rumors and things like that."
	Intimate understanding	"Someone who is close enough and known you long enough to know what you need because I am not very good at asking for what I need. So, someone who has lived enough life with me to be able to know [. . .] what I need."
Assurances		
	Supportiveness	"There was a major fight [fiancé] and I had. [. . .] So I called both of them back to back. I think I talked to them for two and a half to three hours, to each of them, and that kind of diffused the situation on my part. [. . .] They talked me down."

Category	Subcategory	Example
Assurances, cont.		
	Loyalty	"She [her LDF] was always in my corner. Like when everyone else in your family has given up and the situation is hopeless, she didn't do that."
	Future	"We always talk about traveling and where we want to go. Like, we have planned our spring break already next year together [chuckling] and we planned on going to our old school's graduation and everything. We are always talking about the future."
Joint Activities		
	Girls' Night	"We'll meet for dinner, and we'll spend probably three hours in the restaurant. [. . .] Then we usually end up finding a coffee shop after that, [. . .] and we usually end up going to someone's house or apartment, crack open a bottle of wine, and pass out on the couch. It's fun stuff."
	Rituals	"The first thing we do is go get a sno cone. We found a sno cone place like 20 minutes from our house so we go up there every Friday and just grab one of those."
	Hanging Out	"We'll go to bookstores, the beach, go out to eat, just sort of what, I think, most normal women, or people, do."
	Talk Time	"We would probably just sit and talk and talk and talk [. . .] She always has a million things she wants to tell me and show me."
Mediated Communication*		"If I did not have [technology] she would not know I missed her all the time. If we did not have that, I don't think we would have lasted because it would just be so hard to communicate with each other and keep up with our lives."
Personal Networks		
	Family	"My [LDFs] are the kind of friends that know my parents, they know my family. I've lived in the same neighborhood my whole life, so everyone knows me, they know my parents, they know everything."
	Friends	"We actually talk to our other friends from high school and we communicate through them too. Like they will talk to me and then go talk to her. Like whenever I talk to someone, I mention her to them. It is pretty much how we keep our other friends because we make sure everyone keeps in touch."

* Mediated Communication is addressed in Table C.

Table C: Coding Scheme for Mediated Communication

Subcategory	Dimension	Example
Strengths and Benefits		
	Convenience	"It is just convenient. You don't have to go home to call her; you can call her [. . .] when you are walking to class. If you are in the library studying, you can't really use your cell phone to call, so you just Facebook her. It is just convenient."
	Asynchronicity	"I can write on her [Facebook] wall and two days later, she can write on mine. We don't have to coordinate our schedules."
	Instant Access	"I think it would just be disheartening to know a letter is going to take so long to get to the person, and so long to get back to you. I just think it's a whole lot easier for things to be instantaneous."
	Suitable for "Little" Messages	"I will post on Facebook or send a text message saying 'I have a really busy week but just thought I would say hey.' It is something where I don't have a lot of time to chat right now but I am still thinking about you."
Weaknesses and Disadvantages		
	Less Personal	"Text messages are a lot less personal than to just call and ask them about their day. I think it is a lot more personal to call because you hear the voice, you hear how they react, and I think you can understand a lot better."
	Lack of Nonverbal Cues	"You don't get the nuances. You don't have the intonation, you don't have the body language, you just can't whisper, you can't get loud and be animated. It just dulls your communication."
	Misinterpretation	"I have had misunderstandings. Like you read the text in the wrong voice. You take their tease as them saying something mean to you."
	Provides Excuse	"I think that it is an excuse to not have to make a personal investment. Technology takes the effort out of it."

Subcategory	Dimension	Example
Mediated Channels		
	Facebook:	
	Wall Posts	"Wall posts are usually for 'Hey, hope you are having a good day, miss you' or 'Hey you should call me later, I have something to talk to you about.' Just things I don't care if people know."
	Private Messages	"Facebook messaging I reserve for more serious topics, like 'Hey, this is what's going on, I can't really talk right now, but what do you think?' Things I don't necessarily want everyone on Facebook to read.
	Applications	"Bumper stickers are these little squares and they have something written on them or pictures and they are really funny. A bumper sticker is how I send her silly stuff."
	Photo Albums	"I feel like it lets me know a little bit more about her life because when she tells me things I can only picture it so well in my mind without knowing for sure how it was, so it's nice to see [photographs] to reinforce like mind pictures."
	Phone	"When we do call, it means more, I think, it's not just 'hey, checking in, how's the weather?' it's more like 'hey what's going on in your life? What are you thinking these days?'"
	Texting	"I think it is just a quick way to say something that you need to say without having to make a phone call."
	E-Mail	"I'm doing whatever, but I can slip an e-mail in there. [. . .] It's on your own time, you can write in the middle of the night, you can write in the morning, and it's not an agreed-upon moment between two people."
	Video Chat*	"It was awesome 'cause you can hear and see, you don't have problems with intonation and typing, and it was awesome. [. . .] The conversation we had was more meaningful than two or three hours of chatting online because you can get more out [of it]."
	Other*	Live Journal, letter-writing, electronic greeting cards, instant messaging.

* Participants rarely reported using these media.

Assurances

The first relationship maintenance behavior is *assurances*, which includes the dimensions of supportiveness, loyalty, and future planning. To "assure" means to pledge, to swear, to guarantee. Thus, this category involves directly and indirectly promising one another of the importance of the relationship, including actions that demonstrate commitment, sacrifice, reliability, and devotion.

The first subcategory, supportiveness, involves all the ways friends help, counsel, and "boost you up." Examples of support were varied, but most of them were treated as simple acts of kindness, not spectacular displays of devotion. Support is a central feature of friendships because helping a friend deal with a problem is one way of strengthening the relationship (Richey & Richey, 1980). Sharing troubles and seeking assistance puts oneself in a vulnerable position. The willingness to become vulnerable communicates to one's friends that they are trusted and their help is valued, which could make one's friends feel appreciated, thus strengthening the friendship. If friends share a particular problem, that similarity could enhance their bond further, making them feel even more connected. Cindy recounts how she has tried to offer her LDF support during the stressful job-hunting process, something that her LDF did for her:

> I call her to ask her how things are going with her school [. . .] because she's in a tough position with finishing a dissertation and trying to find a job. [. . .] So I always call, because I vividly remember that whole time, and so I try to call and give her encouragement and support, you know, "you're going to make it. You're going to make it through. You're going to find the right job." She did that for me last year, and she was

really supportive [. . .] so I try to do the same thing for her now. You know, now that the tables are sort of turned.

Since Cindy and her LDF have experienced the same challenges, they are able to empathize. Frequently, graduate student participants commented that friends who did not attend graduate school cannot comprehend their current experiences, which may make their attempts at support less helpful. Cindy's comment also reflects the importance of reciprocity. Personal relationships are characterized by the "give and take" of resources. In the early stages of a developing relationship, symmetrical reciprocity is important, meaning that friends give and receive equivalent amounts of whatever they exchange (Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987; Hays, 1989; Youniss, 1980). However, as a friendship reaches a certain level of closeness and begins to stabilize into the maintenance stage, reciprocity is not closely monitored (Blieszner & Adams, 1992). Since established relationships involve the partners in ongoing commitments and responsibilities, there is not typically pressure to return assistance comparable to what they just received. Instead, friends often are satisfied if the relationship is balanced in the long run (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Thus, Cindy received support from her LDF when she was searching for a job, but it is not likely that Cindy felt pressure to immediately offer something in exchange. But now that her LDF has reached the same job-hunting stage, Cindy can "return the favor."

During stressful or troubling times, friends are likely to seek support from their friends. Buhrke and Fuqua (1987) found that this is especially true for women: female respondents reported more contact with close friends when under stress than male respondents. Often, for both undergraduate and graduate student participants, stories of seeking and receiving support revolved around "break-ups" and "boy troubles." During these times, according to Kara, LDFs serve as "your own personal psychologist," offering reassurance that "everything will be okay":

> *Dessa:* There was a major fight [my fiancé] and I had, shortly after we had moved up here together and it was a question of whether or not he was even going to stay. And he left and I had no one. [So] I called [both of them] back to back. I think I talked to them for two and a half to three hours to each of them and that kind of diffused the situation on my part. [. . .] They talked me down.

Dessa's comment illustrates that LDFs can still be relied upon to provide emotional support during difficult times. Effective emotional support is characterized by expressing genuine care and concern, emphasizing availability and willingness to listen, and supporting the expression of feelings (Burleson, 2008, p. 225). Although perhaps not an ideal conversational environment, these messages can be communicated via mediated channels, like the telephone. Thus, LDFs can still "be there" without being physically present. However, sometimes LDFs are able to comfort one another in person. Undergraduate participants were more frequently able to travel to their LDF when needed because many of their LDFs lived in the same state. Rene describes how her LDF supported her after a break-up:

> [After I had] broken up with my boyfriend, she like came over to my house without me even asking and like brought me my favorite food. She brought me pickles and she brought me cookie dough ice cream. And then, we just like laid on my bed and she like cried with me [. . .] I think she brought me a coloring book too because we love coloring.

During these difficult moments, LDFs are there, in some form, to ease the heartache. However, while some LDFs were able to be together during these times, most weren't and had to rely on mediated communication to give or receive support. Although providing support via mediated channels is *possible*, for many participants, being comforted over the phone is simply not the same as it is face-to-face. Gaby explains: "She [her LDF] could say the things she wanted to

say, but she couldn't just, it sounds kinda dorky, but she couldn't just sit there and let me cry on her." Heather also notices the difference: "When you communicate with someone in person, there's just a different energy, versus over the telephone. It's just a better connection that you make with somebody when you're face-to-face." Feeling a close connection to another person when receiving emotional support is likely to be very important and missed when it's not there. Likewise, not being able to give emotional support to their LDFs in person troubled many participants, including Erika and Cindy:

> When [LDFs] dog died, I cried on the phone with her! It was just her damn dog, you know, but we both sat on the phone and cried and I *really* wished I could have been there for her.

Although Erika was able to comfort her LDF over the phone, she felt like it wasn't sufficient and would have preferred interacting in person. Similarly, Cindy was saddened by her long-distance friend's admission that her support was helpful, but "not the same" as what she would receive in person:

> She actually said something interesting to me the other day, which kind of made me sad. I was telling you how we were both really supportive of each other and I try to be now for her in terms of the dissertation process and finding a job. [. . .] She said to me, "well, you know, it's hard, you are still really supportive, but I don't have that face-to-face." [. . .] So it really made me sad, there's nothing I can do. We can all try to call her and encourage her and tell her that it's all going to work out, but over the phone, you know, probably isn't as effective.

Cindy and Erika both expressed feeling helpless, as if their efforts weren't enough and they weren't sure what else to do. When I asked Cindy why offering support and encouragement over

the phone isn't always effective, she suggested it is the lack of presence—not being able to touch someone, or see their expressions, or offer to distract them from their troubles. She also suggests that this lack of presence could make support messages less persuasive:

> That's like the age-old question: What *is* it about having someone right there? I don't know if it's just like the cliché of having a shoulder to cry on or if it's more believable face-to-face. Um, you feel more of an emotional connection face-to-face, maybe, and so you truly believe someone's persuasion that you are going to be okay, maybe you believe it more if it's face-to-face. I also think there's something about being face-to-face, and I know they say diversion [chuckles] isn't all that effective in terms of support, but you know, when you can say, "let's just go to the mall and forget about it," and we can't do that now.

Although the social support literature may suggest that distracting a friend from her problems isn't always an effective strategy (Burleson, 2008) sometimes those diversions really are helpful. Since LDFs aren't frequently able to comfort one another in person, they aren't able to say, "let's go to a movie" or "let's go for a jog." Thus, LDFs may not be able to use every strategy in their "social support arsenal," possibly making the support seem less helpful.

The challenge of geographic distance means that individuals often have to adjust how they offer support to their friends. Many of the participants mentioned the "little things" that they do for their long-distance friends or that their long-distance friends do for them. By referring to these instances of support as "little," the participants seemed to be indicating that they did not consider these acts to be anything significant or notable. But due to the frequency that they referred to the "little things," it also seems like these acts make an impact on their friendships. Eileen, Kara, and Dessa provide examples of these "little" support messages:

Eileen: It was not anything big but she was having a hard time adjusting to like living with a bunch of people at first because she was an only child. So I just sent her like a little e-card and let her know she was going to work it out. Nothing big though.

Kara: I was having a really bad day where I had gotten a bad grade on my biology test and she sent me a little joke that [. . .] just kind of brightened up my day a little bit.

Dessa: If we know someone is having a bad time, we send these stupid, little funny greeting cards. Just the corniest jokes. It's just funny. [My LDF] got me into that. I was never a greeting card person until I met [her]. She sent a greeting card for everything. We would go to Walgreens and she would buy like fifty greeting cards. What do you need them for? You never know. So now I do the same thing.

Despite the geographic distance, these women indicate that LDFs still are able to demonstrate emotional support by sending messages through mediated channels. Although "little," these messages of support are still capable of alleviating or lessening emotional distress. Supportive communication research indicates that sometimes the mere presence of others who are believed to have a caring intent can be helpful during troubling times (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). As Caitlyn explains, even when separated by distance, "[My LDF] sympathizes with whatever I am feeling and is there when I need somebody to cry to and she listens. It's just her presence. It's comforting." These messages could be a way LDFs establish psychological presence when physical presence is impossible.

Frequently intertwined with support is loyalty, which refers to the idea that friends can be relied upon—that they "are there for each other *no matter what*." According to Davis and Todd (1982), "the ability to count on the other, no matter what, is for many people the definition of a

best friendship" (p. 103). Participants emphasized that friends often put themselves second to take care of each other in a way that some compared to the unconditional love and loyalty of family.

> *Cindy:* In comparison to some of my other girlfriends, [. . .] she is really, really one of those people who would drop anything, um, to be there. And, I have some really, really good friends, who, um, I don't know if I'd actually say that about them. I think it takes a very special kind of friend to really, really say that, "no matter what is going on with you, I will drop anything and go to you if you need me to" and she is one of those people. She is very, very loyal.

These friends are, according to Erika, "not in it just for themselves." Gaby concurs:

> [They're] someone who loves you unconditionally, and who is going to be there for you and even put you before themselves a little bit, not always, but that is what I try to do. [They're] somebody who cares about your best interests and is not selfish about it.

The unconditional nature of loyalty was also described by numerous undergraduate participants in, interestingly enough, boxing or street-fighting terms. These participants believed their LDFs were always "in their corner" and would never "talk behind their back" or "stab them in the back." Aaliyah, who dealt with family conflict after her parents' divorce, provides an example of this:

> She [her LDF] was always in my corner. Like when everyone else in your family has given up and the situation is hopeless, she didn't do that. [. . .] Because of everything that's been going on, I've noticed how essential it is to have someone in your corner, for when you are fighting well and when you are fighting poorly.

Not surprisingly, loyalty is often cited as a factor that makes a good friendship, particularly amongst teenagers and young adults (Bell, 1981; Rawlins, 1992; Yager, 1999). For example, Yager (1999) found that 32 out of the 46 university students she interviewed stated loyalty was a significant factor in a close friendship.

For many participants, loyalty is characterized by letting nothing get in the way of "being there" for one's friends, as indicated by frequent use of the phrase "no matter what." As Francesca concisely explains: "No matter what I'm going through or what they're going through, we support each other." When discussing loyalty, participants' stories often involved personal sacrifice, putting the needs of their friends above their own: spending days by her long-distance friend's hospital bed, refusing to be kicked out by nurses; driving for ten hours to reach her LDF during a crisis; spending hours on the phone and skipping classes to support her friend through an emotional rough patch. Often, these stories demonstrated quite remarkable examples of devotion and reliability, what Becca refers to as "fierce loyalty."

> *Dessa:* There was a point, [LDF] was in New York, she went up there with her boyfriend, moved up there with him because he was going to grad school. So that's why she moved back to Manhattan and started working at [restaurant name]. They were on again, off again all through college and she was absolutely miserable and at one point, I was [. . .] back in [Southern city], I literally was like I'm about to buy a plane ticket. I'm going to New York, I have to, I have to go, she can't afford to come home, I have to go. But, you know, it's just those kinds of things that ultimately we would do. [So] I went, I stayed, it was a day and a half, but I was there. It was all the time I had off work and, you know, it made her so much happier.

Isabella: I was in the middle of studying for my first or second chemistry test and I was like a nervous wreck because I did not know how hard it was going to be. She called me just wanting to talk about her little brother who is [hesitates] all types of interesting. Um, he had just been having a really hard time and stuff and he was upsetting her so she called me and wanted to talk about it. I am thinking, "It is 11:30 and this is the last thing I have time for." But, I probably talked to her for like a good two hours.

Thus, these women put aside their own needs in order to "be there" for their LDFs. Many participants explained that this willingness to make sacrifices is what often distinguishes casual friends from close friends. Becca explains:

For me, the definition of a friend is like it's 2 o'clock in the morning and my car is broken down, can I call you and will you pick up the phone and not make up some lame excuse about why you can't come get me? And I feel like some of my social friends at [name of university], if I called them they'd be like "oh, I don't think I have any gas in my car" or like "no, it's really late," you know, that kind of thing. Those friends you don't talk to for three months, you know, I called a lot of them after my break-up and they were on the phone with me for an hour, and gave me whatever I needed. And I think for me that is so important.

So for Becca, and many other participants, friends like their LDFs are those who show up when you need them even if it isn't convenient and who talk to you even if it's been a while since your last conversation. Simply put, they are always willing to help.

The last dimension of assurances involves talking about the future. As the category of assurances represents commitment, this subcategory reflects the ways participants convince themselves and their LDFs that the friendship will last for many years to come. These

conversations often involved discussions of future visits to one another's homes or vacations they plan on taking together. When I asked Haley if she and her LDF discuss future plans, she responded enthusiastically:

> Yeah, all the time. We always talk about traveling and where we want to go. Like, we have planned our spring break already next year together [chuckling] and we planned on going to our old school's graduation and everything. We are always talking about the future.

When I inquired about the purpose of these types of conversations, participants stressed that even if the plans don't come to fruition, the simple act of *making* plans confirms that the friendship will last into the future.

> *Ophelia:* I guess, like, knowing that our friendship is going to last. That kind of just like, solidifies it almost. Like, being able to talk about where we are going to be as friends down the road, not just as individuals.

For Ophelia, future plans frame the friends as a cohesive unit, rather than two separate individuals. After all, future plans involve how the friends will spend time *together*. Francesca insightfully observes that planning makes the future concrete:

> Well I love to make plans and I think it's because it's a control thing, I know what the future is going to bring, it almost, being an English major, language is important, the act of speaking is important, and it almost seems to make real the idea that we will be together. It causes it to happen in a way. And it also just gets exciting because even if those plans fall through, it's the idea that we have thought about the time that we're going to spend together and we value it and want to make it special. They're special enough that I'm willing maybe to sacrifice time with my family to be with them.

Plans make anticipated reunions real. They could help some friends maintain a hopeful attitude and manage uncertainty while they are separated (Sahlstein, 2006). This type of future planning serves as a type of promise—"we *will* be together in the future." Hannah suggests that talking about what they would like to do together is a surrogate for joint activities:

> I think it's almost as a substitute for that person being there, that we can still make plans to do something, and maybe it is just talking to them, but maybe it's a lower-level substitute for going out to grab a beer or watching a movie with that person.

For participants, talking about the near and distant future is both comforting and exciting. It assures them that, despite the difficulties that distance creates, both friends intend for the relationship to continue. It's also simply exciting to look forward to the next time they can see one another face to face.

In her interviews with long-distance romantic couples, Sahlstein (2006) reached the same conclusion. She found that "making plans" was used as a strategy to manage the dialectical tension of certainty-uncertainty. Participants reported feeling uncertain during their time apart, so making plans helped them to produce certainty about their future together. This is further supported by Maguire's (2007) study of long-distance dating partners: participants who felt certain about being with their partner in the same location in the future reported more satisfaction and less distress than those who felt some degree of uncertainty about a future reunion. Research has also demonstrated future planning is a key form of relational investment that can sustain partners' relational commitment over time (Brashers, 2001; Sahlstein, 2006). Thus, talking about the future and making plans could be a strategy to affirm a future face-to-face reunion, lessen distress, and enhance commitment.

Through *assurances*, friends are able to promise one another that they will always "be there" no matter where they are or what they're doing. Friends commit to always being available and willing to provide practical help and emotional support, sharing each other's highs and lows (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Supportive communication is significant because it is a primary way social connections are sustained (Gottlieb & Wagner, 1991; Reis, 2001). However, providing emotional support and practical assistance can be emotionally demanding and time consuming; therefore, this willingness seems to be reserved for close friends, such as the participants' LDFs.

Openness

The second maintenance behavior, *openness*, entails references to disclosure and candidness, including the subcategories of self-disclosure, trust, honesty, and intimate understanding. In any interpersonal interaction, norms exist regarding what individuals "should" and "should not" say; and within many of our personal relationships, there is a conscious awareness of self-presentation (Giles & Street, 1994). We frequently ask ourselves, "Would it be appropriate to reveal this information to this person, in this situation?" But, according to participants, that type of monitoring doesn't typically occur within their long-distance friendships. Instead, they describe a feeling of freedom to act in any way they desire, even if it means becoming vulnerable or making a fool of themselves.

Participants frequently commented that they have sincere, authentic, and deep relationships with their LDFs, a result of their unrestricted communication. They feel free to discuss any topic and reveal any piece of information no matter how trivial, intimate, or embarrassing.

Gail: We talk about everything and I feel like she and I have one of the most authentic relationships. She was saying to me the other day that she's having trouble

> communicating with some of her friends in terms of, you know, just interpersonal dynamics, and I was like "well do you feel like there is anything that you need to put on the table with me?" and she's like "No, I feel that we have the most open and honest relationship" and I'm like, "that's great because that's how I feel."

Gail's conversation with her LDF suggests they have a level of openness that may not be present in their other relationships. They not only can talk about "everything," but they also engage in metacommunication "checking in" on the status of their relationship. This willingness and desire to engage in honest, candid communication reflects the sincerity and forthrightness of *openness*.

The first dimension of openness is self-disclosure. Traditionally speaking, self-disclosure involves revealing private information about oneself to others (Tardy & Dindia, 1997; Wheeless, 1978). Self-disclosure is thought to boost intimacy in relationships, and self-disclosure in the form of everyday talk was considered the primary form of friendship maintenance (Rose, 1985). Research has also demonstrated that women tend to self-disclosure more in their same-sex friendships than men do in theirs, perhaps due to rigid gender roles that suggest men should not be vulnerable (Agrawal, Jacobson, Prescott, & Kendler, 2002; Dindia & Allen, 1992; Johnson, Brady, McNair, Congdon, Niznik, & Anderson, 2007; Rawlins, 1992; Rose & Asher, 2004; Swain, 1989; Sy, DeMeis, & Scheinfield, 2003; Warden & MacKinnon, 2003); so it's not surprising that self-disclosure was perceived as an integral part of these women's friendships.

Many participants explained that their LDFs are so special because they feel comfortable telling them "anything." Participants described this quality using phrases like "nothing is off-limits," "there are no boundaries," and "I don't censor." Information sharing with LDFs can exceed what they reveal to others, even to other people they are close to such as family members and romantic partners.

Dorothy: I guess sharing information that we don't share with other people, you know, talking through things that maybe I wouldn't tell others. She really is, besides my husband, a confidant, [she] is somebody that I will take issues or problems to, you know, this is happening or that's happening and I don't know how to deal with it and I need that thoroughly logical, pragmatic mind of yours to give me this kind of objective opinion.

Dorothy's comment illustrates not only these long-distance friends' willingness to divulge intimate information, but also their ability to provide "objective" advice by providing an alternative perspective. With openness comes an understanding that friends will listen and will be receptive. Although they may want to critique or advise or fix, they are able to restrain themselves and offer what is needed.

Being able to freely share personal information is quite an important part of these friendships, as indicated by the frequency participants used the exact phrase, "we can talk about anything." These women feel comfortable and at ease around their LDF, encountering no barriers or restrictions. "Friends are people who can relax with each other, who feel comfortable in each other's presence" (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, p. 59). For some participants, this level of openness makes their long-distance friendships unique, unlike some of their other close personal relationships.

Dessa: It's so weird to say it, but I share more with them than I do with [my fiancé]. I think with relationships, especially intimate relationships between people, it's hard to really share everything about yourself partly because maybe you're afraid of how they will react to certain things in your past, in your history, but they [friends] know everything. Every dirty, intimate detail and they never judge me for it. I think fear and judgment is part of it. I just think there are ways they understand me that he never will.

Dessa's insightful comments illustrate that these long-distance friendships are characterized by complete, unconditional openness and acceptance. In other personal relationships, there may be a fear that revealing too much will damage the impressions that their partner has formed. The perceived certainty that their LDFs will be receptive and accepting is likely the result of trust.

The second subcategory, trust, involves the belief that friends can be confided in. Research suggests that one of the most damaging events in personal relationships is self-disclosing information that the recipient finds offensive or upsetting (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). Thus, trust becomes very important in friendships because the chance of offending or shocking a friend decreases once trust has been established. As Francesca observes: "Even if we do something that might offend, there's always forgiveness." Trust is also significant because many believe once they confide in a trusted friend, they are confident their secrets won't be revealed to others. As Yager (1999) argues:

> Trust is one of the most meaningful traits you can find in a best or close, and even a casual, friend. It means your friend is there for you. It also means if you reveal private thoughts or information or share something confidential, it is not revealed. (p. 108)

Participants, like Sophia, tended to agree: "I know I could tell them anything and I would not be judged and it would not go anywhere and they feel the same way about me, too." For Kara, the closeness she feels with her LDF comes from the trust they have established: "It is just that trust that has been built up over almost like five years, like telling secrets and them not getting out into rumors and things like that."

Sometimes, LDFs were trusted not just with information, but with tasks, both real and hypothetical. Isabella explains:

> She is pretty much the only person in the world that I would trust to do something for me to the standards that I would want it done and know, hands down, that it is going to be perfectly fine. Like, I would let her plan my wedding and not even look at what she was doing. Not even think twice about it, which is a pretty big thing for me because I am a little bit of a control freak.

Being able to trust a friend with secrets, feelings, and tasks is paramount in close friendships (Yager, 1999). According to Bell (1981), this is because "close friendships are possible only if certain barriers are eliminated and the two people can come to an understanding. This further means that what they do and get from each other is based on trust. There is no questioning – no wondering about the other, it is just right" (p. 16).

Related to trust is honesty, the third subcategory. Honesty is typically defined as the revealing of all information that is relevant to share in a particular situation (McCornack, 1997). In many interactions, we possess information that's relevant to share, but we may hesitate because we know that revealing that information could damage our face, our partner's face, and our relationship (McCornack, 1997; Petronio, 2000). When placed into this type of situation, many of us choose to protect the relationship and keep quiet. But according to most participants, this doesn't apply to their LDFs. The interviews were saturated with instances of "brutal honesty" and "telling it like it is," such as Fay's comment: "I think that she's very honest with me [. . .] She's an intelligent woman, so I really respect her opinion and she's gonna tell it like it is even when it's not nicest to hear." Aaliyah also appreciates her long-distance friend's honesty: "The other thing I love her the most for is that she is really honest with me. If she sees me making a decision that is not right, she will stop me in my tracks."

When asked about the qualities of a "true friend" that her LDFs possess, Dessa provided a humorous yet revealing explanation of the role of honesty:

> I think it's the way that you can talk to each other; I think that has a lot to do with it. I think, I don't know how to phrase it exactly, it's the fact that I can be completely honest with the both of them and not be afraid of how they will react to what I say, whether it will make them angry or offend them or hurt them, I think that when you have a true friend, those lines of communication are so open that, you know, for example, if I make jokes about [my LDF], she's put on a little weight since college and she always asks me "does this make me look fat?" Well, kind of, it kind of does, you should probably wear something darker [laughs]. It's not meant to be hurtful, it's just funny and true [laughs]. But I think it's the brutal honesty. I think if I asked one of them the same thing, it wouldn't make me angry but if [my fiancé] said something like that to me, I'd be like "What?! Excuse me? Did you say that to me?" You take the criticism a lot easier when it's from a true friend; it's easier to swallow than if it were from someone that you just casually know or an intimate romantic relationship.

Although she may attempt to "soften the blow" of her feedback by using words such as "kind of" and "probably," Dessa is still telling her friend something she may not want to hear. From many of the participants' perspectives, this degree of honesty is rare and really limited to very close friendships. Even romantic partners, as Dessa suggests, cannot reach this level of honesty in many situations. We may be hurt by our partner's frankness, but we appreciate this same quality in our close friends.

For a few participants, honesty was perceived as a lack of "BS" and "crud." It's apparent from their colorful language that dishonesty, in the form of "sugar-coating" or placating is not appreciated.

Researcher: If you had to identify something that you just love, you just adore about these women, what would it be?

Hannah: Their straight-forwardness. Their lay-it-on-the-line.

Researcher: And what's so appealing, so attractive about that quality?

Hannah: I'm trying not to use the word BS, but I hate, I hate BS, I don't like it, I don't, you know, if my hair looks like shit, I want you to tell me it looks like shit, 'cause it does today, so I know it does. I don't want people to beat around the bush, and so, I don't want a relationship built on lies.

So Hannah prefers friends who are willing to provide that "brutal honesty." Like Dessa argues, we're apt to appreciate this candidness when it comes from friends, realizing they have our best interests in mind. Caitlyn is also grateful for her long-distance friend's honesty, which she doesn't find in many other relationships:

Researcher: What do like about her bluntness, her getting to the point?

Caitlyn: I guess because my parents or other friends are like "Oh, it's going to be okay," but they don't mean it, but she is like, "Okay, here is how it is, yeah it really sucks, here is what I think you should do about it." She cuts out the crud that everyone says so I can feel better and it's sometimes what I need.

Participants, like Caitlyn, often suggested that other friends, and even family members, might be hesitant to suggest they are doing something wrong, inappropriate, or sabotaging. According to Spencer and Pahl (2002), some friends feel they can be more honest with each other than with

other personal relationships for a variety of reasons. First, friends do not feel obligated to protect each other in the same way as family and romantic partners often do. They also are seen as less likely than family to be upset by problems, dwell on them, and lecture or judge. So for participants, their LDFs are unique because they provide them with their frank observations and honest opinions, regardless of the potential to hurt or offend, without lecturing or nagging.

Finally, the subcategory of intimate understanding suggests that close friendships are distinguished from casual friendships by knowledge about the unique individuality of the other, rather than a role-reliant or stereotypical conception (Weiss & Lowenthal, 1975). Intimate understanding refers to the belief that friends know each other's true selves, like Haley explains: "I feel like college has actually changed me a lot. But I feel like whenever I go back to her [her LDF], I just know my old self, the way I used to be." No matter how we change or what type of front we put up, these friends know who we *really* are. This results in a deeper understanding of one another's needs, fears, and desires. As Erika succinctly observed: "She knows me and she knows how I am." Many participants' comments suggest an intense emotional bond, such as Aaliyah describing her LDF as "an extension of me" and Becca considering her LDF to be her "friend soulmate." During our interview, Becca provides this example of intimate understanding:

> When I was writing my thesis, I would come home, walk right to my room, shut my door, I would maybe say "hey, how are you?" but then shut my door. And she would give me my space and then, you know, there would be nights when we'd sit up until 4 in the morning talking. She was really good at knowing what I needed in a friend and a roommate, and I think that that's a real quality. [. . .] We just had a really good understanding of each other.

Sophia also believes her LDF has a special understanding of her needs. When asked what constitutes a true friend, like her LDF, she explains:

> Someone who is close enough and known you long enough to know what you need because I am not very good at asking for what I need. So, someone who has lived enough life with me to be able to know that when I am talking, they know what I need and [. . .] when they are talking, I know what they need.

Perhaps due to their emotional bond and their mutual understanding, Becca's and Sophia's LDFs are able to anticipate and fulfill their needs. Dessa agrees: "They are people who know the intimate details of your life. They really just get you. They understand you without you having to explain yourself."

This dimension of openness also reflects the importance of a shared history, whether in the form of sharing an extensive past, sharing new experiences, or enduring challenging events together. As Aaliyah observes: "As much as it can be really important to get new experiences, it can be just so tremendously helpful to be with people who have shared experiences, or at least sympathy about your experiences." Similarly, Hannah refers to a "mutual commiseration" while Becca stresses the importance of experiencing "firsts" together:

> It was both our first year in grad school, and I was more from the South, but Alabama is a whole different place, and she was from Chicago, so we kind of bonded over this, "we're in [name of city]. What does that even mean?" type of situation. I think that helped our relationship a lot, that shared experience. We both taught for the first time, um, and that was huge, I mean, we chose the same textbooks, [. . .] we would sit down and lesson plan together, we would write our essay prompts together, I mean that was *hugely*, I mean, so crucial, so I think that we had a lot of "firsts" together.

Sharing "firsts" together may strengthen the bond between friends. Experiencing something new, exciting, or scary for the first time allows friends to offer one another support and feel like they have achieved something together. Later in their friendship, friends can reflect back on that shared experience, thus invigorating the friendship and strengthening their bond further.

For many participants, intimate understanding results not just from sharing experiences, but sharing a past. Most of the participants mentioned "growing up together" with their now long-distance friends. For some participants, this was meant literally, because they have known their LDFs since childhood. For others, particularly those who met their LDFs during college, the phrase "growing up together" reflects maturing and sharing experiences together. For most of the participants, growing up together meant feeling a closer connection to their LDFs that they do not have with many of their proximal friends, typically because they have not known them as long. Similarly, in her research on the proximal and long-distance friends of older women, Adams (1998) found that the respondents' LDFs were emotionally closer and longer-term friends than the ones who lived near them. When asked what sustains their relationships with their LDFs despite the challenges of geographic distance, Erika and Dessa reflect on the importance of shared pasts:

> *Erika:* I would say it's because we have all had important roles at important times in our lives. [My LDF] and I in our more formative years, [. . .] during very important times of our lives, so now it's like because we have been through these things, we have these solid foundations with each other [. . .] With everything her and I have been through since we were thirteen, it's not going to stop now.

> *Dessa:* I think it's the history. We meet so many new people, you know, [LDF #1] is starting a new job as a teacher and [LDF #2] is doing the same thing and me being back in grad school, we know we're going to meet tons of new people, but the three of us have the history that isn't going to be instantly formed with others. I mean, of course, as time goes on, we may fall off with each other and new relationships develop, but at this point in my life, it's the history between the three of us and we understand each other. We know every bad thing. We've been through hard stuff together.

For most participants, their LDFs are in a class all their own due to this intimate understanding that comes from knowing one another's life stories. In contrast, newer friendships lack that shared understanding and knowledge of one another's pasts. As Addison comments, "I've met some really great people but none have that context. [My LDF] has nine years worth of context that no one else has."

> *Aaliyah:* You know with my friends here, I have that interaction, or they may know little things [. . .] or they may be there for those little moments, but they are very different in that a lot of people that know my story know because I told them, not because they were there. Whereas with her [her LDF], she was there when a lot of what's happened kind of came out, and when a lot of things were going on, she was there for that, and through that it's easier to be closer than in most other relationships, or friendships I should say.

Transitioning to a new place and a new stage of life involves meeting new people. When we are able to form satisfying, proximal friendships, we may neglect our "old," absent friendships. Although many participants mentioned the excitement of meeting new people, all believed their long-distance friendships could never be replaced due to their years of shared history.

Having a shared history and shared experience are important because, according to Elder and Clipp (1988), remembering a particular period of life maintains a connection with people who were important at that time, perpetuating their social bond. In fact, sharing a history is "one of the best reasons for maintaining a friendship over time" (Yager, 1999, p. 118). For many participants, their adolescent and young adult friendships are still maintained despite separations because, according to Rawlins (1992), "they remain both historically and currently salient to each other. [. . .] Since these friendships were developed while dealing with fundamental decisions and life issues for the first time, the partners persist as important conversational recreators of and symbolic links with such unrepeatable moments" (p. 104). This is supported by many participants' statements that they feel closer to their LDFs because they have known them for a longer period of time, and thus have shared many important moments together. They are links to one another's pasts.

This shared history also makes maintenance easier because participants don't have to fill each other in on superficial details. LDFs already know those details; they are already familiar with the background, so they can cut right to more meaningful conversation. As Eva suggests: "We have all that history together so we don't have to fill somebody in on the past forty years; you can just pick up where you left off." Dorothy agrees: "I appreciate the fact that she understands how insane my family is, and knows enough about them so I don't have to *explain*, I can just update."

> *Addison:* A conversation with [my LDF] doesn't involve a lot of explanation. You can sort of send her random bullet points about your life and she understands how to place that into the bigger picture and that's not true with someone you don't know well, where you have to tell the whole story. So with her, it's just the update.

The importance of this level of familiarity is particularly noticed when it isn't available, as noted by Sophia who was experiencing "boy troubles" no one but her LDF was aware of:

> I [didn't] know who to talk to about it that knew everything about what has been going on, so I would not have to sit there and catch [them] up on all this other stuff. I just wanted somebody to talk to that knew what was going on.

For Sophia and many other participants, having someone who knows the history and the many layers of evolving stories is invaluable. It not only makes conversation more meaningful or helpful, it also provides us with a sense that someone "gets" us. Thus, although LDFs may miss out on the everyday details of one another's lives, they do possess comprehensive knowledge about each other's pasts as well as a deeper understanding of the "big" issues.

Intimate understanding also includes having inside jokes that are only meaningful to the friends involved. Whereas artifacts often represent inside jokes, this category refers to the actual joke. According to Bell (1981):

> There is sometimes a strength that can be gained by individuals based on having shared with others in the past. When they encounter those who shared with them, there may be a strong sense of identification and frequently a sense of exclusiveness – exclusive because it was their private, shared experience." (p. 15)

Inside jokes often serve this purpose – to remind friends of past events and to create a sense of exclusivity because the memory only has meaning for them. Participants animatedly told me about jokes they have with their LDFs and the stories behind them, including obsessions with *Lifetime* made-for-television movies, an appreciation of infomercials, a toy dinosaur that has its own Facebook page, and creating a nickname by combining the words "cankles" and "antlers" (for reasons the participant no longer remembers). Becca and her LDF share numerous inside

jokes that have been retold over the phone and on Facebook and are reflected in several gifts, including a wedding present.

> Oh we loved on Wednesdays, god we really are kind of lame, the grocery circulars come out and so we would sit in our opposite rooms and look and be like "oh strawberries are on special!!" and we would get very excited. So sometimes she'll call me on Wednesdays and be like "check your grocery circular" even though they don't come out on Wednesdays here, it's still like Wednesday is grocery circular day. Or on Facebook, she writes "check your grocery circular, check to see if avocados are on sale." [laughs] God I feel so lame now!

Becca's comment is interesting because it suggests LDFs have to adapt how they communicate about "old times" and funny memories. Becca and her LDF now rely on mediated channels to share these private jokes: "[Through Facebook] sometimes, even if it's not like talking, we still try to maintain contact with each other through things that we have in common, silly things like that." Although these jokes are indeed silly and meaningless to outsiders, they are immensely important and missed when friends don't have the same opportunities to be goofy and playful. When asked what makes long-distance difficult, Aaliyah responded:

> Being able to make those little day-to-day jokes that I can't really make with her anymore, that's hard. Having to recognize that those day-to-day jokes are made now with someone else, and it's like on both ends, so just recognizing that and having to deal with that is what's hardest for me.

Whereas many participants discussed using mediated channels to carry on the tradition of retelling inside jokes, some participants believe these channels do not "do the jokes justice."

Thus, new inside jokes are created with proximal friends, and the old jokes created with LDFs either fade or are reserved for face-to-face interactions.

Thus, the feelings of exclusivity and connection from sharing jokes create a deeper bond that is preserved through the retelling and reliving of the jokes. For some, being able to use mediated channels to continue those jokes maintains a sense of normalcy and encourages the belief that they can "carry on" like old times. However, not being able to tell these jokes in person is something that is noticeably missed.

The interviews indicate the *openness* that exists in these friendships involves high levels of understanding, trust, and receptiveness. We open ourselves to our friends in order to enhance intimacy, strengthen our bond, and encourage another to share her private self (Weiss & Lowenthal, 1975). This openness creates authentic relationships characterized by free-flowing communication and a lack of inhibition.

Positivity

The third relationship maintenance category is *positivity*, which involves being cheerful, avoiding criticism, doing favors, expressing affection, and displaying artifacts. For many participants, the ability of their LDF to make them laugh was perceived as an important quality that lifted their spirits or made them look at the bright side of an upsetting situation.

Researcher: What is she like as a person, as a friend?

Ophelia: She just always makes me laugh and she can make a horrible day better just by talking to her on the phone.

Researcher: If you had to identify something about her that you just love, you adore about her, what would it be?

Rene: How she can make any bad situation funny. Like, anything that goes wrong in my life, I call her like bawling and she can like make me laugh within like five minutes. She can always just make me laugh.

Making one another laugh could be a very powerful maintenance strategy for long-distance friendships, which can be characterized by many challenges, frustrations, and disappointments: Cancelled visits, incompatible schedules, infrequent communication, missing major events, conflicting time zones, having to "make do" with technologically-mediated communication, and many more. Being able to remain positive could help LDFs get through the rough patches, focus on the strength of their relationship, and look forward to future get-togethers.

Madeline: Um, you know, like you write on their Facebook wall, like "I miss you and this is what we are going to do when we get back." I just try to be like upbeat about it. I don't know how you would express that, like sad, like "I miss you dot, dot, dot." Instead of "I miss you exclamation point." I think there is a difference. Like an excited thing as opposed to a depressed thing.

Researcher: Why do you think that is important?

Madeline: Um, I think it just keeps the relationship positive and not like bogged down. Because if you don't see somebody for a long time, you will think of all the times you *did* talk to them so [that makes you] all like ughhh, then you will be like ughhh when you see them. I am always excited to talk to her so I think it is important to be positive.

Madeline's comments suggest that allowing oneself to focus on the negative can damage the relationship. She illustrates this vividly through her use of language. Using an exclamation point in a message is a way to indicate certainty and cheerfulness, while "dot dot dot" may be a way to demonstrate uncertainty or gloominess. Madeline argues that negativity can even affect

friends when they see one another in person, because if they are feeling negative while apart, that negativity could seep into their together-time. Hence, it's important for communication to remain upbeat and positive, like Rene tries to do: "I always let her know I love her and how good of a friend she is to me and that I can always trust her and want to hang out with her."

Participants also reported being cheerful and optimistic about other situations and relationships in their long-distance friends' lives, whether it be career problems, marriage troubles, or family drama.

> *Addison:* I always try to be positive about [her husband's] job situation. They're so frustrated and annoyed so I try to tread lightly on that and be supportive and not harp on that. And then [my LDF] has a very strange relationship with one of her sisters, and I try to do the appropriate level of asking about [her]. So even though she's had a hard time with her, I try to ask what's been going on with her and try to be nice. Just trying to make sure I'm checking in on all parts of her life but not making her talk about things she doesn't want to.

Addison's comments illustrate the importance of not only being positive about the friendship, but being positive about the other relationships and events in her long-distance friend's life. Being encouraging and constructive about issues outside the friendship can be a way to show that we care about our friend in her entirety, which includes being concerned about significant others in our friend's life. Addison's quote also suggests she knows her LDF doesn't want or need her to be critical. Instead, she knows when to "tread lightly," when to listen, and when to ask innocuous questions. Rather than make her friend feel worse by criticizing and "harping" on the negative, she demonstrates warmth, kindness, and sympathy.

Another component of positivity is refraining from criticizing or judging one's friend. Participants often commented that their LDFs would never pass judgment, despite changes, faults, and "stupid" decisions:

> *Fay:* [They] stick by you, I think, when you do make poor decisions, you know, because you're going to make those decisions, and you need someone to say, "Yep, that was a dumb decision, but I'm still your friend."

> *Abby:* [She] can tolerate me being human and having faults. Like with any relationship, you do stupid, critical stuff. Um, and, [pause] sometimes it is not about being an idiot yourself. Sometimes just your circumstances change and being willing to weather that. Um, whether that is like a move across the country or you know, other changes in your relationships.

> *Erika:* [My LDF] is understanding of me not always answering the phone [laughs]. Um, maybe understanding of my personality flaws. Maybe understanding of my situation in life. Um, my understanding of theirs, you know, and being able to be courteous and there for each other when it's important.

So despite making "dumb" decisions, acting like an "idiot," and not answering the phone, friends still love us. Acceptance and affirmation are key elements of friendship (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Participants immensely value being accepted for who they are and not being judged or disapproved of. However, refraining from judgment and critique is not always a simple task. According to Rawlins (1992), the dialectic of judgment versus acceptance is one of the pivotal dilemmas managed among friends. The reader will notice that the maintenance behaviors of positivity (absence of judgment) and openness (being honest) can conflict with one another and

participants' comments are sometimes contradictory. They desire to be completely open without the fear of judgment, while simultaneously appreciating "brutal honesty." Thus, acceptance functions in a dialectical relationship with judgment and friends must develop rules, criteria, and practices to communicate in such a way to balance these competing needs.

Part of "being positive" also involves doing favors and giving gifts. This form of affectionate communication includes sending care packages, baking favorite desserts, picking up restaurant tabs, and mailing funny greeting cards. When Kara returns to their shared hometown, she bakes brownies for her LDF, while Aaliyah wakes up at 7:00 a.m. to make her long-distance friend's favorite chocolate chip coffee cake:

> She knows that it's something that I rarely make and it's something special for her. It's like the one special thing I do for her. It's like I know that she loves it, so just because I love her so much, I'm gonna do it.

Favors were often considered "small" ways they express affection for their LDF, rather than grand gestures. However, favors could also be quite dramatic, making the word "favor" seem inadequate.

> *Fay:* Um, gosh, I thought it was pretty nice of her. I knew that her and her husband were planning to have a second child, and when I told her we were getting married and asked her to be in the wedding, she planned her pregnancy, like "we cannot have sex after this day so I can be there at the wedding" and she cut it close and she said "oh my gosh, I thought I made the biggest mistake because I realized timing wise…" I mean her child was literally six weeks old and they rushed the passport to come down here. And [her husband's] parents came down to babysit the children so that she could be at my wedding and she squeezed into her dress. So at my wedding, she had like baby in one arm, eating

a sandwich in her hand, and her husband was feeding her a drink, and I was like "that's like the perfect picture."

So although most favors were described by participants as "small gestures" of affection, there were also instances like Fay's LDF planning her pregnancy around her friend's wedding date. These favors demonstrate warmth and care, reflecting the loving nature of these friendships.

Participants also mentioned giving gifts, such as baskets of goodies, edible fruit arrangements, stuffed animals, and Christmas/birthday presents. Often, these gifts are very personal or reflect a specific aspect of the friendship:

Erika: With both of them, I wouldn't do this with a lot of people, I just give them art, both of them have tons. Maybe they don't want it, but they've got it [laughs]. I give stuff to family, and I consider her close to family. Other people can buy it.

Becca: For my birthday this summer, she sent me a Freud and his couch sock puppets, and the note was like, "this is for next year when you need someone to talk to." And they're magnets too, so they're on my refrigerator. That was a good one. I thought it was really cute, really sweet, 'cause we'd sit on our couch a lot and talk.

Similarly to their discussion of favors, when participants described their gift-giving or expressions of affection, they often used phrases like "little" or "random" as if these tokens were insignificant or not well-planned. However, due to the sheer number of times such positivity was mentioned, these acts are obviously quite significant. "Exchanging gifts with friends […] can be one of the joys of friendship. […] It is the symbol of your friendship through the gift, not the gift itself, that counts" (Yager, 1999, p. 114). So even if these displays of affection are "little," the thought behind them is what makes them meaningful:

Jacqueline: A lot of times I will just send her a message that says 'I miss you' or it'll be little things like that…like "I miss you, can't wait to see you." So just little things like, you know, they are not huge gestures, or it's not like I am calling her everyday to tell her I miss her, but it's like little things every once in a while that kind of send the message.

Jacqueline's comment suggests that these gestures are not about predictability or cost. Thus, although day-to-day maintenance often is not grand or even explicit, it is still quite important.

Researcher: What do you do to maintain the friendships with these women? To kind of keep the friendships alive?

Abby: What I would *like* to do, my goal for myself, is to do thoughtful things when I can. Um, and that is a good thing that [my LDF] started. But because she is just so over the top, I kind of feel like I can't be like that. [. . .] I will never have that kind of energy, [. . .] but I would like to do it. It just makes me feel so wonderful, I would like to do that, spontaneously do something nice. You know? Whether it is sending a handwritten letter out of the blue or doing something special when they come to visit.

When Abby told me this, you could see the concern on her face. It bothered her that she did not have the energy or the forethought to do "spontaneous, thoughtful things" for her LDFs like they often do for her. This concern, or desire to do more, indicates just how important these "little things" are to a friendship. They make one feel loved and cared for; they make one feel "wonderful."

The last subcategory, artifacts, includes tangible objects that represent the friendship or remind the participant of her LDF. The way participants described these items made them seem like vessels of memories. Participants only had to glance at them and be flooded with stories and

images from the past. Dessa and Grace mention some of the keepsakes they have in their homes that remind them of their LDFs:

> *Grace:* I do have one magnet [picture] frame, um, that's been on my refrigerator, every refrigerator I've ever had, since I went to college. I have one picture when we were freshmen in high school that I still have and it's in my room, I've had it forever. Um, she wrote me a letter on Valentine's Day my sophomore year that says "don't worry, the boys will come." I mean it's ridiculous, but I still keep it, I usually look at it on Valentine's Day. I'm very nostalgic that way.

Similar to Grace's predilection towards nostalgia, Dessa admits to being a "packrat" and surrounding herself with artifacts:

> *Dessa:* There's pictures of all three of us all over the place. I have more pictures of the three of us than I do of me and [my fiancé]. It's everywhere. All the little cards, I still have notes [LDF #1] and I passed back and forth during class. Um, I still have, I'm a pack rat, I never throw anything away. I still have little trinkets and souvenirs from [LDF #2] wedding.

The variety of these artifacts ranged widely from common items, such as framed photographs and birthday cards, to unique gifts, such as an engraved jewelry box. While many participants instantly had lists of items that remind them of their LDF, other participants struggled to identify specific artifacts. Frequently, they commented that "everything" reminds them of their LDF so it was difficult to think of something in particular. Isabella compares this to the aftermath of breaking up with a romantic partner: "We have been friends for so long, I guess it would be kind of like if you broke up with somebody after like six years of dating – everything is going to remind you of them somehow or another."

Often, artifacts reflect inside jokes the two share, so looking at them brings back those happy and funny memories. Hannah provides an example of how artifacts represent inside jokes and co-created stories:

> We went to a tournament a few years ago and I stole a field sign and I still have that sign, it's above my door. [. . .] It makes me laugh, and it brightens up my desk space. And, um, it just reminds me of good times. And there's like stories connected to all those. Like the rugby field sign, there's a story connected to it that I don't want to repeat [laughs]. Like she can give me that look and I know she's thinking about it.

Hannah's comment illustrates that, to outsiders, these objects may seem like ordinary or even strange items to have in one's house; but to friends, they are saturated with meaning. When I asked Becca about keepsakes, her face lit up and she animatedly told me about several items she has that remind her of her LDF and the silly stories that are connected to them:

> When we first moved in, you know, we had no furniture, 'cause she was moving all the way from Chicago and I've lived in a dorm so I didn't have any furniture, so we went to this thrift store and we found this coffee table and we're like "oh this is really cute" so she picks it up and the leg falls off, so the guy just gave it to us for free and we tried to glue it, we got like the gorilla glue and did everything we could to glue it on and, in the end, it never did, so before I left, she said, "here, take the coffee table leg." So I have that.

Immediately following that story, she enthusiastically launched into a second one:

> I was studying for [the GRE subject test] my second year and she drew this picture for me of like the GRE monster, who has no arms, so we sometimes do impressions of him and he has his own voice that goes with it. And I'm like this stick figure standing behind

it, kicking it in its rear and I had that on my wall all year and now I have it on my refrigerator.

When I asked why they hold onto these items, many participants initially laughed and said either they're not sure or they really don't serve a particular purpose. But as they continued to talk, it became apparent how purposeful these objects are. They described these objects as tangible representations of their absent friend. They keep them and display them to "honor" their friend, and it reassures them that they will never forget the person or the stories. As Rene observes: "I need a part of her around me still. I have to have her around me, even if it's not her, just like things that remind me of her."

Becca: They remind me of our relationship, just, I mean, like grad school is such a serious time but we laugh so much when we are together [. . .] she used to come in and do like that walk when I was studying and be like "AAARRRGGHH!!!" [the GRE monster sound] That's the noise that the GRE monster makes. So when I see that, it just, you know, it brings back the memories. It's like [my LDF] personified in a picture.

For Becca, these artifacts represent her long-distance friend's personality and their friendship, bringing back memories of goofy moments spent together. For Francesca, who moved frequently as a minister's daughter, these artifacts help her hold onto those she had to leave behind.

Francesca: Um, I think for *me*, since I've moved so much, I really do value the friendships that last and, um, I, I miss them and I miss seeing them, so to have that visual there, is sort of a reminder that they're there. I hang on, I'm definitely a pack rat, I cling to things a little bit more because I moved, and especially with them, it makes me feel like they are present in a way even though they're not.

For Francesca, these artifacts affirm that the friendship still exists and her friends are still "there" even if they aren't physically present. Fay believes these objects serve as connections to the past, allowing her to relive special moments. They also keep her friends fresh in her mind.

> *Fay:* Well it's definitely a reminder. I think when you see them, you reflect back on those times in your lives with that person, and the fond memories that you had. [. . .] It's a way to keep that person in your life, you know, even though we can't see each other often enough, we can still, you know, keep them close, keep them in the forefront.

Artifacts, such as photographs and knick-knacks, are more than simple home decoration. They are symbols that stimulate sociomental connections: "photographs generate memories, they bring 'the other' back into one's mind and help the connector sense, visualize, and thus renew the connection" (Chayko, 2002, p. 81). People use symbols to make mental connections to the past more tangible and memories more concrete and easily accessed. As Abby commented: "I think, when time goes by, I think sometimes it is hard to even get a sense of the person in your head if you don't hear their voice or see them. So it's nice to have things that are current." These artifacts remind participants of the longevity of their friendships and keep that absent friend fresh in their minds. Perhaps most importantly, they remind participants of having fun, like Dessa suggests: "I think it's just memories. Memories of fun, fun times. Of course, it's the difficult stuff that makes you close, but it's the fun stuff that lasts." Therefore, having these keepsakes around them makes the participants feel closer to their LDFs by keeping them "mentally alive" (Chayko, 2002, p. 100). So these are items that maintain a sense of normalcy and connection, as if to say "this friendship is still important to me and I have the artifacts to prove it!"

In sum, the maintenance category of *positivity* reflects the importance of being cheerful, expressing affection (through both talk and artifacts), and avoiding criticism. These behaviors communicate love and warmth, which help to sustain the health of the relationship. Since friendships lack the external structures of other personal relationships, having a friendship characterized by positivity may be the most basic requirement for continuing the relationship. After all, two of the core qualities of friendship are liking one another and enjoying one another (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). So, to put it simply, if one is not happy in the relationship, why remain friends? Thus, positivity helps friends to remain satisfied with each other and the relationship.

Joint activities

The fourth relationship maintenance category is *joint activities* and involves spending time together face-to-face, whether simply "hanging out," going on vacation together, or revisiting former rituals. Proximal friends obviously spend considerably more time together, but face-to-face visits with LDFs were also frequently mentioned. This is significant because "regular get-togethers are the best way for a friendship to stay current and not stuck in the past" (Yager, 1999, p. 120). Admittedly, finding or making opportunities to interact face-to-face is challenging for many LDFs. But even inconsistent or brief periods of face-to-face contact can positively impact the relationship: "It is not the amount of time per se that supports the relationship, but rather some factor associated with even small amounts of time spent together" (Guldner & Swenson, 1995, p. 319).

For participants, the frequency of face-to-face visits ranged from once a week to once a year. For most, these reunions typically coincided with university breaks, such as the winter holiday, spring break, and summer vacation, and were perceived as being very important to the participants. These "girls' nights" or "catch-up sessions" sometimes involved just the participant

and her friend and other times included a large group of "old" mutual friends, sometimes even spouses or partners. Many of these reunions were described with enthusiasm and much laughing. It was obvious that spending time together was something the participants enjoyed and looked forward to.

For many participants, there was a desire to recreate past routines that were formed when the pair was proximal. Thus, when visiting one another, LDFs often engaged in the same types of activities they used to enjoy. Hannah explains: "We like to go out to dinner, meet up with other friends [. . .] We go to the dog park, we watch movies, pretty much the same things we would do if she was in town." When asked why she prefers to incorporate her LDF into mundane activities, rather than special pursuits, Hannah suggests:

> Well, because people are coming into town, and as much as you planned out for them to be there, it's still an interruption of your regular schedule, so like going to the grocery store, we've done that. We still get to share that experience, but still get your errands done [laughs]. We always went to the movies, we'd go to bars and stare at people, so you want to recreate those memories.

Hannah's comment suggests that these are the types of friends you can do "anything" with and have a good time, whether it is something exciting and unusual or something commonplace. There also seems to be a lack of pressure to "entertain." With newer or more casual friendships, there may be a greater desire to keep everyone engaged and amused to avoid any awkwardness. As Addison explains, with closer friends, like her LDF, "there's enough to fill the time." But with new friends, "there's a certain nervousness that saying 'hey, come over' is not enough; you have to make sure that everyone is entertained." Participants' LDFs are the type of friend with whom they feel comfortable running errands, taking walks, or even being silent, like Eva and her

LDF: "Often we just sit around and read a book, even in the same room." Addison and her LDF even have a special name for "doing nothing":

> *Addison*: We call it "tooting." It just means that you don't do anything. You wander around and if someone calls, you say "I'm tooting." So, in New York, it's easy. You just walk out her front door and toot.
>
> *Researcher*: Now is tooting a cultural idiom or is it something the two of you created?
>
> *Addison*: You know, I actually think I grew up with that word. I'm pretty sure my mom used it. And then I think [my LDF] just adopted it and thought it was *hilarious*. I don't toot with anyone but her.

Although Addison's terminology is unique, almost all participants described various ways of "doing nothing" with their LDFs. Francesca describes the activities she engages in with her LDF as quite "normal," not out of the ordinary: "We'll go to bookstores, the beach, go out to eat, just sort of what, I think, most normal women, or people, do." When I interviewed Caroline, her LDFs were planning to visit the following week. When I asked what her plans were, Caroline said they may take a trip to the mountains, but "beyond that we're just going to sit and hang out, watch TV." So for many participants, simply "hanging out" like they used to is a perfectly satisfying way to spend time together.

Perhaps one reason why "hanging out" is often preferred over planned-out activities is because it allows for uninterrupted conversation. For Erika, this "talk time" is central to their visits: "[She and I] don't really have much tradition, but we would probably just sit and talk and talk and talk. [. . .] She always has a million things she wants to tell me and show me and lots of things about the house and things about her husband." Abby shares the same experience: "That is mostly what we would do. Sit and talk. We would not usually go out anywhere." Kara

agrees: "[We] just probably end up talking most of the time because we have a lot of catching up to do." Fay also enjoys activities that allow her to chat with her LDF:

> We'll go to each others' homes, cook a meal, drinks will be had, [. . .] and after that, usually just really good conversation. We can usually just catch up and talk; we don't need to do anything elaborate.

When I inquired why they didn't feel the need to do something special, or "elaborate," Fay suggested their focus is on "catching up" so they don't want to be distracted from that:

> I guess there's so much to catch up on. There's so much to inform each other about what we've been up to since we last saw one another that almost if we did something, like if we went to get a manicure or a massage or a movie, that's going to detract from the time that we can talk about things. It's just a nice bonding, 'cause even at a restaurant, you're distracted by, you know, the servers coming in, like they have the habit of coming at the wrong moment.

For many participants, it's not simply a desire to talk with their LDF, it's a need. This need is best met when the friends can focus just on themselves without the distractions of other people, their surroundings, or feeling like they have to be "doing" something. Some of the undergraduate participants fulfill this need to talk by having sleepovers with their LDF:

> *Patricia:* Um, we just sit and talk. It is always nice to spend the night; we always end up spending the night together and just talking.

> *Ophelia:* We still have sleepovers and stuff. She stays with me. [. . .] We will rent movies and just talk mostly.

Engaging in activities that provide opportunities to talk is reiterated in many other participants' narratives. It is also reflected in literature describing women's friendships. For example, in interviews with men and women, Caldwell and Peplau (1982) found that women describe best friendships as involving "emotional sharing and talking" while men emphasized "activities and doing things together" (p. 721). Further, when given a choice between "doing some activity" or "just talking" with their best friend, over three times as many women as men chose just to talk. Such research led Davidson and Packard (1981) to conclude that, "in general, for women, conclusions point to the greater importance of verbal exchange, which includes emotional expression" (p. 498).

Data from the present study both confirms and challenges this research. Whereas most participants stressed the importance of simply talking with their friends, they also engaged in activities together. Seeing a movie, getting pedicures, and going shopping may be stereotypical activities for female friends. However, participants also mentioned kayaking, hiking, playing basketball, attending college sporting events, going to concerts, and road trips. Thus, my data seem to support the research of Johnson and Aries (1983) who found that when women were asked about the most important benefit of their friendships, they highlighted the value of conversation, either by itself or along with other shared activities. So it is apparent that women value *both* shared activities and personal talk, what Dorothy describes as "talking and doing."

Beyond "talk time," when asked about spending time together, most participants mentioned eating meals. Dessa describes a typical "girls' night" with her LDFs:

> If we can get together, we'll start out, we'll meet for dinner, and we'll spend probably three hours in the restaurant. We're the most annoying girls in the world; we constantly have to apologize 'cause we're so loud and um then we usually end up finding a coffee

shop after that, [. . .] and we usually end up going to someone's house or apartment, crack open a bottle of wine, and pass out on the couch [laughs]. But it's fun stuff.

It was apparent from the interviews that when LDFs reunite, food is typically involved, whether in the form of a mutually favorite dish or a favorite restaurant. For Abby, it's sushi because her LDF spent time in Japan and got her "hooked." For Gail, she and her LDF typically visit the Olive Garden for Italian food, while Erika and her LDF enjoy Indian cuisine together. Food truly permeated the interviews, including frozen grapes, Mt. Dew slushies, milkshakes, uncooked cookie dough, and for Nadine, who is able to see her LDF weekly, snow cones:

Nadine: The first thing we do is go get a snow cone. We found a snow cone place like 20 minutes from our house so we go up there every Friday and just grab one of those.

Researcher: So, has that become kind of like a routine, like a tradition?

Nadine: Yeah, for this whole semester really.

Researcher: Why do you think you guys keep doing that over and over and over again? What is it about that tradition that you like so much?

Nadine: I think it is being able to talk because it is like 20 minutes to get there and 20 minutes back so basically by the time you get there it is about one hour together. You can just say stuff that you don't have time to say over the phone. You don't have time every day to talk about everything. Like she texted me today during class and said she needed to talk about stuff so it is just a time to let everything go.

Nadine's comment brings the focus of these visits back to "talk time." She and her LDF enjoy the ritual of eating snow cones together, but it seems like the real enjoyment comes from their uninterrupted conversations while driving. Other rituals were mentioned by participants, most often involving favorite restaurants:

Leila: Every time when we go into town we always eat at that one Mexican restaurant.

Researcher: What do you think it is about that Mexican restaurant? How did that start?

Leila: Ummm, well, it first opened when we were, I think, juniors, so I think a bunch of us went and we were like, "we will try it" and then we all loved it so every time we would have like a girls night, we would go there. And, um, we all get the same thing every time we go. So everyone is like, "well, you are going to get the taco salad, I know you are going to." It is just where we always congregate.

Madeline: There is this restaurant called [name] and so we always go there. Like everyone in my high school and everyone in the surrounding area like goes there. It is open 24-hours in the summer so that is fun to do. Um, what else do we do? We always go out to lunch at this restaurant called [name]. It is a Japanese restaurant. We have always gone out to lunch there. [. . .] We have done that since tenth grade, eleventh grade, a long time. We have done that a million times.

The centrality of sharing a meal while visiting one another could be related to the meaning of the food, being both substance and symbol (Furst, 1997; Lupton, 1996). Those who eat together share not only the food, but also their experiences and thoughts (Fieldhouse, 1995). This is conceptualized as the idea of "commensality," meaning literally "sharing a table with someone" (Visser, 1991), a way to bond and reconnect with family and friends. Interestingly, in studies of young people, women wanted to sit at the table a long time and talk to family members or friends, whereas men reported simply wanting to be nutritionally satisfied (Jansson, 1993, as translated to English in Sidenvall, Nydahl, & Fjellström, 2000). So perhaps cooking a meal together or visiting a favorite restaurant is a particularly important joint activity for women.

From participants' comments, it is apparent that spending time together, face-to-face, is a vital part of their friendships. Having fun and "catching up" seems to reaffirm their connection. But it doesn't seem to matter what the friends engage in, just as long as they are together. As Eileen suggests, "we can either be having a lot of fun together or we can jut be sitting, not even talking, and we are just really close either way."

Personal networks

Personal networks, the fifth category, reflects the involvement of friends and family, including reliance on their acceptance and support. As Jacqueline explains: "My [LDFs] are the kind of friends that know my parents; they know my family." Like Jacqueline, because many participants have known their LDFs since childhood or young adulthood, they know and have spent time with one another's families. Some participants talked about spending time at one another's homes when they were younger and how, when they return to their hometown, visiting each other's families is still common.

> *Madeline:* My parents love her. Yep, yep. She is really good friends with my dad. She always talks to my dad when she comes over, and my mom. She comes over, like in the summer she comes over for dinner a lot.

> *Jacqueline:* I don't go home very often. I mean, obviously, it's quite far away. But when I do see her, we go home on breaks. We usually go out to lunch with our moms, because they're friends, and they love that.

Several undergraduate and graduate student participants mentioned that their LDFs were such a constant fixture in their lives growing up that their parents now treat their LDFs like another one of their children.

Isabella: My parents treat her like another child. They will say, [LDF—by name], give her the whole name kind of thing. [Laughing] She calls my mom, "Mom" and "Sunshine" and all sorts of weird stuff. She practically lived at our house for like a year or two.

Erika: Still, to this day, it's like that. She considers my mom as sort of her surrogate mother, as a lot of the kids around our house did. My mom is like supermom. She's always "Mom."

Participants also mentioned spending time with their long-distance friends' siblings during visits.

Madeline: She is good friends with my brother, too. He is twelve now and he really likes her. Um, it is kind of funny to hang out with him [chuckles]. So we hang out with him and hang out with my sister.

Some participants also commented that they see their long-distance friend's children when they visit, ask about them during phone conversations, and request photographs to see how they've grown.

Fay: A lot of it still circles around the children, um, [the] last time we went, and they were going to bed, we got there and I think they [her LDF and her husband] kept them up a little bit later so we could see how they're growing, you know, just get a chance to see them.

Fay later commented that one of the biggest challenges of being so far away from her LDF is not being able to watch her children grow up. She lamented that, "they barely know who I am." As mentioned earlier, caring about the personal networks of our friends demonstrates that we care for our friends in their entirety. We don't simply limit our concern to our friend as an isolated

individual. Rather, we're frustrated when our friend's husband is laid off; we're scared when our friend's father has to undergo surgery; and we're excited when our friend's child scores her first goal in soccer. The lives of parents, siblings, and children matter to us because they matter to our friend.

Graduate student and faculty participants also discussed the importance of liking one another's romantic partners, typically fiancés and husbands. This is significant because a friend's marriage instigates one of the most sweeping changes to friendship practices (Brown, 1981). Typically, following marriage, each spouse's contact with friends diminishes, the level of intimacy in their friendships declines, and partners encounter problems blending each other's individual networks of friends (Dickson-Markman & Markman, 1988; Milardo, Johnson, & Huston, 1983; Rose, 1984). The outside demands of a romantic partner are one of the primary reasons women's friendships deteriorate during adulthood (Rose, 1984). Thus, to prevent deterioration and maintain a close connection with their LDFs, participants perceive the importance of liking their friends' spouses and spending time with them:

> *Fay:* I think getting along with her husband, uh, I think the other thing with my other girlfriend who I lost touch [with], I *don't* feel connected to her husband. In fact, I'm not 100 percent sure he likes me. Um, whereas with [my LDF], I adore [her husband]; he's perfect for her, we get along really well, and he and my husband, get along really well.

It's also important that their friends approve of their partnerships, which would likely reduce feelings of discomfort, competition, or abandonment. Francesca and Dorothy explain:

> *Francesca:* I've measured a lot of my relationships, like with him, to what I have with [my LDF]. [Her] approval of him was incredibly important. [She] was my first friend from my old life who's met him and she gave him like the flat-out seal of approval and

that validated the engagement. He would have gotten the ring back [laughs] if she had said otherwise.

Dorothy: I guess my worst-case scenario would have been if my husband and she didn't get along. That would have been interesting if, you know, right at the point where we met each other, if my friend had been like [facial expression reflecting dislike], that would have been a problem. But they get along really well.

As important as getting along with one another's romantic partner seems to be, the geographic distance sometimes makes it difficult to have enough time to get to know these individuals, or even to meet them in the first place. Eva reflects on this challenge:

She's getting married this coming summer and I have never met her fiancé, which I feel, you know, she and I both feel bad about [says this quietly]. So that's a long-distance friend I guess—someone who you don't meet their fiancé before the wedding [chuckles].

Since LDFs are not around to experience everyday life together, they often miss out on events, both big and small. This can cause LDFs to feel detached from one another's lives. Missing these events and turning points could provoke a sense of disconnection that cannot be assuaged no matter how frequently friends talk. Not meeting a friend's fiancé until their wedding day or not seeing their new child until he/she is two years old are moments that could make LDFs really feel the emotional distance that can result from geographic separation.

Despite it being important to feel connected to one another's families, sometimes friends desire time alone. Thus, friends must negotiate the dialectical tension of inclusion/seclusion, which reflects the desire to include others in the relationship and also desire to keep it private. (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Caitlyn provides an example of this negotiation:

> She has multiple siblings, so usually we are with one of the other's siblings, so we usually stay in and watch a movie or cook dinner. [. . .] Before I leave, like I said she has multiple siblings; she has eight brothers and sisters. So, before I leave, we'll go somewhere, sit down and talk just one on one and have some time together.

In Caitlyn's case, she and her LDF strike a balance between inclusion and seclusion by utilizing the strategy of "alternation" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), which involves satisfying both needs at different times. Dorothy provides another example of alternation:

> [My husband] doesn't mind coming along with us when we do things and she doesn't mind if he's there. But it's also important for us, it's important for *me*, I guess, that we also do things on our own. I don't want her to feel like she's a third wheel; I'm sensitive to that I guess.

Dorothy's comment illustrates the simultaneous desire to involve others in the friendship and spend time alone. She also addresses a potential challenge of merging personal networks—someone will feel awkward and out-of-place. Thus, one reason spending time alone with her LDF is important is because she does not want her friend to feel like a "third wheel." When discussing personal networks, many participants seem to utilize the strategy of "segmentation," which involves compartmentalizing different areas of their relationship: when they are separated geographically, LDFs only communicate with one another, not each others' families; but when LDFs visit one another, they involve each others' families in many of their interactions.

Thus, the interviews indicate LDFs know one another's families and are comfortable spending time with them. Typically, they are treated like another member of the family. As Eileen observes: "My friends, they really are like family. Even to my real family." Many participants mirror Eileen's comment, suggesting that friends are "a chosen family." Dorothy's

LDF often jokes that "I'm your family and you're my husband" because she isn't married and Dorothy's family is "crazy." Thus, they have taken over other roles for each other. Calling friends "family" recognizes the strength of commitment within a friendship and seems to imply a strengthening of the bond, "as though the relationship has taken on extra or special qualities" (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, p. 119).

Participants also discussed involving other friends in their relationship with their LDF. Sometimes these are mutual friends that the dyad hangs out with during visits.

> *Gaby:* We usually get the whole group together, we have a group of about 8 of us from high school, and we get together and eat or go see a movie or whatever, and we usually take 10 million pictures.

Although some graduate student and faculty participants mentioned reuniting with larger groups of "old" friends, not surprisingly, undergraduate participants mentioned these get-togethers the most. These participants have not been separated from their high school friends long enough for these relationships to wane due to different life paths. Many undergraduate participants also discussed not wanting to "let go" of high school friendships, so it is likely they make more of an effort to visit one another when they return to their hometowns.

A few participants also mentioned using their networks of mutual friends to "check up" on one another.

> *Francesca:* I think each one of them [her two LDFs] is closer to me than they are to each other. A lot of their connection to each other is through me. So, um, I'm the one who maybe informs [LDF #1] about something going on with [LDF #2] and vice versa, so I don't think they talk to each other as much, but we'll all get together.

Francesca describes a long-distance friend triad, in which she serves as the link between them. Similarly, Haley and her LDF serve as connections between members of their high school group of friends, attempting to keep everyone up-to-date. She also reports finding out information about each other from other friends in their shared network. Haley seemed to find this helpful, but a couple participants mentioned being offended or hurt when they found out something about their LDF from a third party, rather than from the friend herself. This demonstrates that personal networks can be both a blessing and a curse—they can help keep friends connected, but can also remind us that we are indeed separated from our closest friends, and thus not always aware of the goings-on in their lives.

A few participants also discussed the challenges that arise when merging "old" friendship networks with "new" friendship networks. Sometimes, these attempts are successful:

> *Gaby:* I live with two girls I met here, and we're really close, but I don't think they have replaced my high school group, but they've met. We've all gone bowling together, because I wanted my [LDF] to meet my current friends, so we can all be friends. It went really well because they are all easy to get along with people, like I try to be.

Other times, introducing LDFs to newer, proximal friends doesn't work out:

> *Grace:* This past weekend two of my friends came, my friends from [name of university], and I introduced them to my friends here and it was kind of difficult. Part of it, I think, is their personalities are very different [. . .] but part of it is because when I have these two separate groups of friends, I can talk about them to each group and I can kind of mediate what I say. I can kind of say "oh this is my friend, this is what we did, don't I have a cool friend?" But then they actually meet and they have to make their own

judgment. They're very different people, so the social situation of bringing them together didn't really work out so well.

As Grace discovered, the desire to have one's friends be friends with each other is not always easy to fulfill. Sometimes it is simply contrasting personalities. But often, it is the result of the past and present bumping heads. When we make life-course transitions, we often change, and new friends are part of that change. Pre-transition friends may be surprised by those changes and may feel "left out." Problems can also arise from feeling jealous that these people are able to be with our friend on a day-to-day basis. As Dorothy commented: "I think the hardest part is when you start meeting other people and being jealous that she had a roommate in [another state] and I was like 'Ugh! It's not fair! I would love to still be there!'" Conflict can also be caused by competing loyalties. Time and energy are limited commodities; thus, there may be a question of who gets more attention. Despite these difficulties, however, most participants discussed the importance of involving personal networks in their friendships.

Recently, Sahlstein (2006) suggested that scholars broaden their perspectives on LDRs to include the influence of social networks on those involved in these relationships. She argues that much of the research on LDRs solely focuses on the "primary relationship" and does not consider the relational forces outside of the dyad. This is problematic because social networks often play an influential role, providing support to those involved in LDRs or posing various challenges. As Parks (2006) suggests, one cannot address interpersonal relationship development, maintenance, and deterioration without considering how such involvements are intricately nested within surrounding networks or a larger system.

Although participants did not mention personal networks as frequently as other maintenance behaviors, friends and family were often integrated into their long-distance

friendships. One possible reason including personal networks isn't a commonly used maintenance behavior among long-distance friendships is because of the distance. Other than receiving photographs of their long-distance friends' children and sending mass e-mails to groups of LDFs, the inclusion of personal networks tended to occur during face-to-face visits. Since most participants cannot visit their LDF frequently, the opportunities to interact with family and mutual friends are also limited.

The sixth maintenance category is *mediated communication*. Because the interviews were dominated by discussions of communication technologies, a separate section will be devoted to participants' use and perception of them.

The impact of technology on keeping in touch

During the interviews, a considerable amount of time was spent talking about the types of technology participants use to keep in contact with their LDFs and how much of an impact such technologies have made on their relationships. Although a few participants see their LDF frequently, most do not. This lack of face-to-face contact means that friends must rely on communication technologies to enact the previously-discussed maintenance behaviors. As Isabella succinctly observed: "Technology. That is probably about the best that we can get."

All participants adamantly expressed that technology has helped them keep in touch with their LDFs, and that without it, they probably wouldn't be as close to them as they are now. When asked how technology has helped their long-distance friendships, participants had this to say:

> *Rene:* Well, if I did not have my cell phone, I would not be able to talk to her because we do not have a phone in our dorm so, that would not be good. And, Internet, that is just easy to put pictures of us up and talk about it on there and just randomly in class one day

> just write on her wall, like, "I miss you. Call me later." If I did not have that she would not know I missed her all the time. If we did not have that, I don't think we would have lasted because it would just be so hard to communicate with each other and keep up with our lives. By the time I got back for summer I would be like, "what's been going on?" Like, "I missed a whole year of your life."

Sophia mimics Rene's belief that without technology, she would feel totally "out of the loop" in regards to her LDF:

> If we did not have those modes of communication, I would just be surprised when I went home and I saw her at church. Like, "hey, you are home! That is great! Let's go do something after church for lunch or something." You know, it would be this whole long, well, how has your semester been, kind of thing.

Most participants heralded the convenience of communication technologies. Caroline, like other participants, suggests this convenience makes it easier to communicate with their LDF on a more consistent basis. This consistent contact could be a "saving grace" for many long-distance friendships—keeping one another consistently updated could maintain their closeness. For some faculty participants, one reason modern technology has made it easier to consistently communicate is because they no longer have to think about time of day or paying per minute for phone calls.

> *Gail:* I was thinking about how in the 90s when I was in college, in the late nineties, when you would have to think about what time of day to call. 'Cause it was like 25 cents a minute during the day. And now, you know, you have a flat rate regardless if you have a home line or a cell phone, and so I can call her whenever I want.

Eva also appreciates not having to budget her money for long-distance phone calls like she used to:

> There was a time when it was a long-distance phone call, and I really had to think about whether I was going to spend that money when I was in college. [. . .] But now, I don't even think about it; if I want to talk to her, I just talk to her. And I think that's true for a lot of my friends, you know, that you probably wouldn't have stayed in touch with but now it's so easy to stay in touch.

For many people, modern calling plans have eliminated the forethought and budgeting that once characterized long-distance phone calls. The removal of those restrictions makes it easier to call a friend spur-of-the-moment, whenever there's an opportunity. This convenience could increase the frequency with which LDFs communicate with one another.

Convenience was the most frequently-mentioned benefit of modern communication technologies. When asked if technology has made it easier to keep in touch with their LDFs, participants had the following to say:

> *Ophelia:* It is just convenient. You don't have to go home to call her; you can call her in between. Like when you are walking to class, you can call her and tell her something. And if you are in the library studying, you can't really use your cell phone to call, so you just Facebook her. It is just convenient.

For participants like Ophelia, convenience is perceived as being able to call "whenever, wherever." For Kara, the asynchronicity of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is convenient:

> Yeah, because you might have three papers due and a test that week and you cannot really spend the time to talk on the phone for like three hours or something so it kind of

> keeps you able to have that contact with them but not have to deal with the time issue. It shows that you still care.

Thus, when we're too busy to devote time to a lengthy phone conversation, text-based CMC allows us to quickly and easily send a message to demonstrate that we still care about our friends. Gaby also appreciates asynchronicity:

> You don't have to be there at the same time. Like Facebook, you can leave somebody a wall comment and they don't have to be there to get it. It can be there a month [. . .] and you can still communicate with them. The same goes for texting; if you're in class you can wait two hours and text them back.

Gaby's comment also suggests that it is not necessary to have back-and-forth interaction with one's friend to still communicate. Sending a message that could remain unread for days or weeks is still perceived as communication. Thus, it is the actual sending of a message, not the immediate response, that characterizes text-based mediated communication.

Thus, participants perceive communication technologies as "easy" and "convenient" tools for remaining connected to their LDF. Text-based media were seen as especially convenient because of their asynchronicity. Since LDFs often have conflicting schedules and may even be in different time zones, asynchronicity can be a blessing—friends can still communicate without both partners being simultaneously present.

Almost in direct contrast to their appreciation of asynchronicity, participants also praised communication technologies for their "immediacy" and providing "instant access" to their LDFs. As Jacqueline observes: "she may be five hundred miles away, but she's only a second, a phone call away. It's so easy to just call her and, all of a sudden, it's like she's right here next to me." Often, speedy technologies were compared to time-consuming letter-writing.

> *Felicity:* I think it would just be disheartening to know the letter is going to take so long to get to the person, and so long to get back to you, and I just think there's so much happening in life, like every day, you would just stop writing unless you're really, really motivated to. And so, I just think it's a whole lot easier for things to be instantaneous to keep you remembering what's important.

For Felicity, in the time it takes to send a letter and receive a response, you keep living life. Thus, in between letters, you may forget to tell your friend something that happened because it is no longer in the forefront of your mind. So technology helps to provide friends with up-to-the-minute information, which is particularly appreciated when "big" events happen. Haley also feels letters take too long, and prefers to have back and forth conversations with her LDF via text messaging:

> Whenever I need her, I will text her and she will text me right back. Like whenever I have something funny to tell her I will text her and it always goes back and forth. I don't see myself writing letters ever. [chuckling] I used to go to camp over the summer and it was really hard writing letters. My friends at home would write me letters back but it took forever just to get back to each other. That is why whenever I send her [her LDF] packages, I overnight them because it makes it so much easier.

The possibility for friends to respond immediately to texts could comfort users, giving them the feeling that their friend is "right there," ready to listen. Haley desires immediacy so much that she and her LDF pay the extra money to ship care packages overnight!

Participants' appreciation for both asynchronicity and instant access presents an interesting contradiction. On one hand, participants like knowing they don't have to coordinate schedules with their LDFs and can "put off" communicating if they're too busy. Simultaneously,

they also desire immediate access to their LDF, being able to connect in that moment. Research has demonstrated that individuals find both synchronicity and asynchronicity attractive (Utz, 2007). Synchronous media are closer to face-to-face communication and allow for the giving and receiving of immediate feedback. Asynchronous media are independent of time and space; thus, individuals can compose, send, and receive messages whenever is convenient. A strength of asynchronous communication is that it is unobtrusive, eliminating concern about interrupting a friend's schedule. Apparently, participants value both of these characteristics.

Perhaps this reflects Boase's (2008) concept of the "personal communication system." Similar to uses and gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974), Boase (2008) suggests that individuals draw on various media to fit their social needs and lifestyles. According to this perspective, users select media based on their intrinsic properties: "individuals will choose to use particular kinds of communication media when there is a congruency between opportunities that they provide and the characteristics of the ties with whom they are used to communicate" (Boase, 2008, pp. 492-493). In other words, when participants desire feedback and pseudo face-to-face interaction, they may be more likely to choose a synchronous channel such as telephone, video chat, or instant messaging. When they want to communicate with their LDF while they are working on other tasks or when they are not sure if their LDF is available, they may be more likely to choose an asynchronous channel such as email, Facebook, or texting. Basically, the variety of communication technologies available allows users to "pick and choose" depending on their needs, their lifestyle, and the nature of their relationships.

Participants also perceived communication technologies, particularly text-based media, to be useful maintenance tools because they make it easy to let their friend know they are thinking about them. When schedules are hectic and friends haven't had the opportunity to talk, sending

these "random" and "little" messages lets one another know that they still care. It is during busy times like these that asynchronicity is appreciated. Not surprisingly, participants frequently mentioned sending these messages via texting and Facebook:

> *Aaliyah:* Random text messages. Sometimes during the day I'll just text her and be like "Hey! Good morning beautiful!" and send a bunch of "I love you and you're amazing and I can't wait to see you!" Just something that lets her know that even though I may be all the way over here, and she's caught up on her crazy, busy life, I still love her, still [am] here for her.

> *Sophia:* I will randomly, when I think about somebody, I will either send a card or post on Facebook or send a text message saying "Hey, I am thinking about you. I have a really busy week but just thought I would say hey." It is something where I don't have a lot of time to chat right now but I am still thinking about you.

Aaliyah and Sophia's comments illustrate that even when they're busy or their LDFs are busy, asynchronous channels allow them to still communicate that they are being thought about and that they are still interested in one another. Often, these "thinking of you" messages are inspired by moments when LDFs would "pop" into participants' minds. They frequently mentioned experiencing "out of the blue" moments when something in their environment would instantly remind them of their LDF.

> *Isabella:* It [usually] has to do with something stupid we have done and it will be like, "Oh, ha ha, I remember that time." Or, if we are watching one of our shows that we used to watch together we will call each other and be like, "Oh my gosh, can you believe that?" Or, send each other a text while we are watching and be like, "Are you watching?

You need to be watching. This is a good one." Just kind of little, short, sporadic things. She will be like, "Hey, I just thought about you. Have a good day. Bye bye."

Isabella and her LDF use communication technologies to remind one another of former rituals or inside jokes. These are short, spontaneous messages that they can send one another quickly to let the person know that they are still thought about. Caroline also uses communication technologies to let her LDF know that no matter the distance between them, she is still psychologically present:

Caroline: If I find something online that I think may interest them, I'll forward them the link. Sending an email saying "hey, I was thinking of you today" or "I saw this and thought of you" something like that. Just to remind them that I still think about them.

Participants mentioned being frequently reminded of their LDF during the course of their day-to-day lives whether due to the personality of a proximal friend, the way someone laughs, a song on the radio, an outrageous dream, or even a black and white bedspread that reminds a participant of her LDFs obsession with zebras. As Jacqueline explains: "[It's] just little things that sometimes [don't] mean anything at all to anybody else, but to us it's like 'Aw! She's thinking about me!'"

Participants overwhelmingly indicated that modern communication technologies have made it easier to remain involved in their long-distance friends' lives. Besides the overall speed and convenience of these technologies, perhaps maintaining their friendships via mediated channels is perceived as "easy" because participants have numerous communication media available to them. Particular communication strategies may be better suited to particular media, and participants use them to fulfill particular needs (Boase, 2008). Thus, what follows is a discussion of popular media used to communicate with LDFs, including Facebook, cell phones for calling and texting, email, and video chat.

Facebook

Facebook, a social networking website, was founded in 2004 to serve as an online community for college and university students. According to the Facebook Press Page (2010), the site boasts approximately 400 million active users all over the world (70% of users are outside the United States). Users create online profiles, accumulate "friends" who can post messages on each other's pages, join virtual groups based on common interests, and learn about their "friends" through information and photographs posted on their profiles. Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, and Espinoza (2008, p. 428) found that "keeping in touch with friends they do not see often" was the most frequently-reported reason participants use Facebook. Many participants, mostly undergraduate and graduate students, mentioned using Facebook to communicate with both proximal and long-distance friends, and find it to be a useful maintenance tool, as Madeline declares:

> It [maintaining her friendship] probably has a lot to do with Facebook, which is, I think, a great tool. Um, I mean it is a huge media thing now but, like, I think what it boils down to is it really is good for keeping relationships, even causal ones, with people you knew in high school. Like you still know their name if they have Facebook.

Thus, Facebook has become an incredibly popular method to remain connected to one's social network, including proximal and long-distance friends, casual and close friends, old and new friends.

Previous research (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007) found that individuals, college students especially, most often use Facebook for social purposes, specifically to maintain or bolster existing offline relationships. Females are also more likely than males to use social networking sites to reinforce pre-existing friendships and keep in

touch with friends they rarely see. In contrast, males use the Internet for playing games, conducting research, making new friends, and flirting (Cooper & Weaver, 2003; Jackson, Ervin, Gardner, & Schmitt, 2001; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Morgan & Cotton, 2003). This could be the result of females playing the roles of "kin keepers" and relationship "maintainers" more frequently than males (di Leonardo, 1992). Indeed, intimate, dyadic friendships among girls and women are associated with more interpersonal maintenance behaviors (Oswald, et al., 2004). So what makes Facebook such a useful tool to sustain existing relationships, particularly among females? For Erika, Facebook allows her to feel connected to her LDF, as if she is still a part of her day-to-day life:

> The thing about Facebook that I like is that I can just sort of go and look at her! [voice raises] It's silly but I can go and look at her page and I can take it all in and she'll say "I'm going to work tonight" and I'll say "Oh, that's what she's doing, she's going to work" and there's something warm and fuzzy about that.

For Sophia, Facebook provides a way to keep up-to-date so phone and face-to-face conversations can go into more depth rather than spending time "catching up" on a breadth of more superficial topics:

> As sad as this is to say, I think Facebook is a really big help because I can look at her pictures and she can look at mine and we can do statuses [status updates] and kind of know what is going on in each others' lives so that when we do talk it is not like we say "catch me up on everything;" it is like, oh yeah, I saw that, you know, tell me a little bit more about that. But you don't have to start from the very beginning. So, it makes it easier because you have [that] mode of communication.

Many participants also commented that Facebook has become an all-purpose tool, like "one stop shopping." As Daniella explains "*everyone* is on Facebook." Beyond that, everything a person needs to maintain a sense of connection to LDFs is located in one place:

> *Felicity:* I think it's the fact that you can sit there and it's all in one page. You can sit there and go through other people's pages while still having conversations. It's extremely convenient to have everything at your fingertips in one page.

Facebook allows LDFs to remain up-to-date and involved in each others' lives by providing users with a variety of features, including options for text, audio, and visual.

Two options for keeping in touch are wall postings (which is similar to posting comments on a discussion board) and private messages, also called inbox messages (like an email). The participants repeatedly distinguished between private messages and wall postings:

> *Rene:* [Wall posts] are just things I don't care if people know: "I love you, I miss you. You are my best friend. I cannot wait to see you this weekend." Like that all goes on her wall. And also, if it is like something funny that happened to me that I don't care about people knowing. But then, like in the messages, I will [write] like, "ah that was so sad about blah, blah." Just something I don't want other people to know I guess.

> *Caitlyn:* Wall posts for me are usually for "Hey, hope you are having a good day, miss you" or "Hey you should call me later, I have something to talk to you about." And then, Facebook messaging I reserve for more serious topics, like "Hey, this is what's going on, I can't really talk right now, but what do you think?" Things I don't necessarily want everyone on Facebook to read.

Rene's and Caitlyn's comments indicate that anyone who has access to your Facebook page can read your wall postings, but that messages are private and cannot be seen by anyone other than the recipient. Thus, participants indicated private messages are suited for personal messages, longer messages, and as a substitute for email or phone calls. In contrast, wall postings are for those "little, random, spur-of-the-moment" messages, including thinking of you messages and inside jokes. Participants provided these examples of wall posts: "I love you," "Call me," "You're awesome," "Hope you're having a great day," "The funniest thing just happened," "I forgot to tell you this," and "I miss you."

Facebook also provides users with a variety of applications, such as "Girlfriend Gifts" (virtual gifts, such as candy and jewelry that can be posted on a friend's page), "Birthday Cards" (get reminders of upcoming birthdays and send virtual greeting cards), and "Honesty Box" (users can ask questions about themselves and friends can post anonymous answers). Primarily undergraduate student participants reported using the bulletin board feature, bumper stickers, and flair. The bulletin board feature is like a virtual corkboard that friends can "tack" things to, such as Christmas trees, birthday gifts, and buttons (flair):

> *Gaby:* [There are] these sticky buttons that say things, so you search for whatever, like if you want to [send] one about *Twilight* [a movie], you type in *Twilight*, and it comes up with all these *Twilight* buttons. And then you pick one to send to your friend.

Leila explains that bumper stickers are virtual stickers users can search for based on themes or create themselves: "Bumper stickers are these little squares and they have something written on them or pictures and they are really funny. A bumper sticker is how I send her silly stuff." When I asked what purpose these virtual gifts serve, participants responded that they reflect inside jokes, are meant to brighten their friends' day, or even to momentarily relieve boredom:

Leila: They just get a laugh. And, they remind me of things like from occasions when we watched this or saw that or if we did something.

Isabella: If it made me laugh, it is probably going to make her laugh and if it made her laugh, it is probably going to make me laugh. So, just like, "Oh, that looks funny to me I am going to send it to her so she will laugh." Kind of a brighten your day type thing. "Here, I am bored, laugh some."

Due to their frequently humorous nature and purpose of making friends laugh, bulletin boards and bumper stickers seem to serve as a form of *positivity* (being cheerful). Since they are sometimes used to represent inside jokes, these applications could also be a form of *openness* (intimate understanding). Thus, this provides an example of how LDFs use mediated channels to enact maintenance behaviors.

Despite all the times participants mentioned using Facebook to keep in touch with LDFs, many of them commented that they only use it for silly, unimportant messages, like wall postings, flair, and bumper stickers. However, it does seem, simply from the frequency they mentioned using it, that this is still an important way to feel connected with their friends. Perhaps this is because simply sending a computer-mediated message if often enough to let friends know that the relationship exists and that the person is being thought about (Rabby & Walther, 2003). As Grace observes:

It lets me see what's going on in her life. Even just the little things like that status updates, I can comment on that and say "Hey, I'm still part of your life. I'm still here." Not just to remind her, but to be involved in her life, even in the mundane things like I had a fly in my burger at Burger King, whatever it happens to be [laughs].

Since LDFs cannot frequently experience mundane events as they occur, Facebook allows them to virtually experience what's occurring in their friends' day-to-day lives.

Participants also mentioned using Facebook to look at photographs of LDFs as a way to see what's going on in their lives, as well as posting their own. According to the Facebook Press Room (2010), over 3 billion photographs are uploaded each month, so it is obviously a popular feature of the website. Photographs serve as a way to witness events, big and small, in one another's lives: new home, new friends, dorm life, children, pets, vacations, and parties. As Jacqueline comments: "It definitely helps keep it so that you feel like you are right there." Sophia and Felicity also believe browsing their long-distance friends' photo albums helps them to feel better connected:

> *Sophia:* Just seeing how she is changing, if she is changing, you know, that kind of stuff. It helps me to put visuals with the stories.

> *Felicity:* I feel like it lets me know a little bit more of her life because when she tells me things I can only picture it so well in my mind without knowing for sure how it was, so it's nice to see it, to reinforce like mind pictures.

So photographs provide evidence of changes and new experiences that LDFs aren't there to witness. Undergraduate and graduate student participants also mentioned that looking at photographs allowed them to see who their LDFs are hanging out with. This helps their conversations because they can talk about new friends the other has not met without as much confusion.

> *Haley:* We just check up on each other's lives to see who they are friends with and stuff like that. Then, like whenever I call her and we talk about someone that she has not met

or she does not know, I am like, "oh that is this person or that person." She will go look them up. We always do that.

Using Facebook photo albums in this way reflects the maintenance behavior of *personal networks*. Being able to see one another's new friends removes some of the mystery or uncertainty surrounding these recent additions to each other's networks. This could help lessen the feeling of being "out-of-the-loop." It could also allow friends to demonstrate interest in these new acquaintances, thus coming across as cheerful and positive rather than jealous, which could be considered a form of *positivity*. Viewing photographs could also deepen one's understanding of their friends' lives, thus serving as a way to enact *openness*.

Faculty participants mentioned browsing Facebook photo albums as well. Often, having access to their long-distance friends' photographs was the reason they initially joined Facebook. Encouraged by her LDF, Fay said: "She is the reason why I'm on Facebook. I'm not a big Facebook person, but it was [my LDF] who said, 'You've gotta get a Facebook account because I'm going to post some pictures of my kids.'" Faculty participants also mentioned receiving photographs as e-mail attachments and looking through online galleries offered by companies like Kodak and WalMart. Regardless of how photographs are accessed, they serve meaningful purposes for participants. When one is not able to witness changes and new experiences in person, photographs help to ease the distance by allowing LDFs to still feel involved in one another's lives. As Francesca suggests: "There is something about *seeing* somebody, even if it is electronically."

A few graduate students and most faculty members reported not using Facebook frequently, if at all. Eva observes that the merging of separate groups of friends isn't an attractive idea to her:

> I just don't think there is a, there is no natural place when you are my age where you should have your colleagues, your high school friends, your college friends, like those groups don't mix. I don't want the people that I work with to see the same things that my high school friends would be interested in.

For Eva, there is a perception that each group of friends represents a different part of her life, and thus anything she would post for one group may not be interesting to, or even appropriate for, the other groups.

Dorothy even labeled herself a "horrible Facebooker." When I asked what makes someone a "good" or "bad" Facebook user, she explained that she often leaves her status unchanged for weeks at a time and she rarely checks her page even when she knows she has messages waiting for her. Interestingly, this seems to suggest that for Facebook to serve as an effective relationship maintenance tool, it must be maintained itself. Dorothy also finds Facebook "overwhelming," which deters her from using it often:

> It's like overwhelming now, it's like I have all of those people all at one time. [My LDF], she actually clicks on other people's like webpages and like checks them out and stuff and I just want to go and like look at my wall, update my status, you know, put a new funny picture up, and just be done.

The existence of numerous features, a variety of applications, and huge lists of "friends" can certainly be overpowering for some people. Abby agrees that Facebook now has "too much going on":

> It used to be a lot easier to keep in touch with people but now you just have this, you have the [news] feed, which has so much more information than I ever wanted to know

about anybody. So I always miss something important because I can't be bothered to go through and keep up with that.

These same qualities can also make Facebook a "time waster," distracting us from other tasks that need to be completed. That's why Addison avoids the website:

> If I were on Facebook, I would spend all my time looking at people's pictures and reading their updates. I think in the long-run I wouldn't do that, but [during] the first set-up period, I would. So I have to stay away. I'm resisting it! A major form of self-control! [laughs]

Addison's comment suggests that even though she feels she shouldn't join Facebook, there's still a desire to participate. She and Dorothy commented that they sometimes feel "out of the loop" because they don't use Facebook frequently or at all.

> *Addison:* All my friends are like "well, you would know that if you were on Facebook." Yep, but I'm not so…I mean, especially for my friends who update their daily mood, some of that I don't need, but some of it is useful information.

Addison, and other participants, sometimes feel that by not using Facebook, they miss out on certain aspects of their friends' day-to-day lives.

> *Dorothy:* The primary reason for me [feeling] guilty for not going to Facebook is that she's [her LDF] a Facebook user so she's updating a lot and saying things that are going on, and I'm missing that daily update that I could be plugging into.

Missing out on these frequent updates even makes Dorothy feel guilty, as if she's not being a "good friend."

Some participants observed that Facebook really isn't a valuable tool for remaining connected with their close friends, such as their LDFs. However, they do report using it to reconnect with "old" friends and maintaining more casual relationships.

> *Cindy:* I don't get on Facebook all that often. I really use Facebook as a means of communicating with people who I never really talk to on the phone. Um, so people that I wouldn't necessarily call up but I'm just randomly thinking about, like "Hey girl! How you doing?" [. . .] People that I wouldn't necessarily send an email to or call, it's a nice way to still feel like you're superficially part of their life, I guess.

Cindy's comment suggests that Facebook is particularly suited for maintaining casual friendships. There may still be a desire to know what is going on in one another's life, but there isn't a need for more intimate conversation. Dorothy also observes that Facebook may allow us to re-connect with former friends, but the contact tends to be fleeting:

> I like being able to catch up with people that I have lost contact with that I was really sad I had lost contact with, but the reality is, we might exchange one or two back and forths and that's really it.

Although Facebook may provide a way to find "old" friends, since the bond between them has long been dissolved, it's often difficult to sustain meaningful interaction. In other words, Facebook may bring people from our pasts back into our lives, but it can't make us friends again. Berkley notices that Facebook actually reunites us with people we were never even friends with:

> I certainly think it's a quantity versus quality tradeoff. Like I might now be friends with 60 of the people I went to high school with even though I didn't like 58 of them. The reality is the degree to which I stay in touch with them, or the quality of the conversations, I imagine in most cases it is not as useful as it was before we has some of

> these modern technologies. Because you had to work at it differently before all these technologies, so it was someone you *wanted* to stay in touch with whereas now, I'm literally in touch with people I went to high school with who I barely talked to when I was *in* high school.

Berkley's comment suggests that due to technologies like Facebook, we may be connected with more people than ever before, but those connections are superficial. She argues that before we had access to many modern technologies, we had to put forth effort to remain connected with friends once lives diverged. Therefore, we communicated with individuals with whom we truly wanted to stay in touch. Whereas now, we tend to establish what Heather calls a "false sense of connection."

Facebook has certainly made an impact on individuals' social lives and, according to some, changed the way we maintain our personal relationships. For some participants, Facebook is an incredibly useful tool that allows users to maintain a sense of connection to their long-distance friends' lives even without exchanging messages. Voyeuristically observing a friend's photo albums, status updates, and other postings allows us to feel like we still know who our friend is and what she is doing. Using Facebook as a way to exchange messages asynchronously is also perceived as convenient because friends can still communicate despite conflicting schedules. However, other participants feel Facebook simply allows us to reestablish superficial connections, thus providing quantity over quality. Some participants even avoid Facebook altogether, viewing it as overwhelming, inappropriate, or a "time waster." Despite participants' opinions, Facebook's popularity is constantly growing. Recently, Facebook was the most frequently-visited website worldwide, overtaking Google (Pepitone, 2010). More interestingly, Facebook was also the most visited website on Christmas Day (Richmond, 2009), perhaps due to

more people wanting to send well wishes to friends and family. Thus, it's apparent that millions of people perceive Facebook to be a relationship maintenance tool and the site's popularity is likely to continue growing, at least until the next great technological advancement is developed.

Cellular phones

Using their cell phones for talking and for text messaging was mentioned frequently by all participants, with undergraduate students reporting slightly more text messaging than graduate students and faculty members. For many participants, phone conversations do not occur frequently because it requires them to coordinate their schedules. When asked how they communicate with their LDFs, several participants cheekily responded: "phone tag." The demands of school, work, proximal friends, children, and romantic partners often make finding time to chat on the phone very challenging. Some participants attempt to overcome these challenges by setting up "phone dates." Often, these appointments occurred on Sundays, perhaps because it provides a week's worth of information to discuss, but it's before the chaos of a new week begins. Or perhaps it is simply because of the "free nights/weekends" available with many cell phone carriers.

> *Eileen:* We call every Sunday. We set aside time and if we miss that Sunday we try to do it like within a couple of days of Sunday.

> *Haley:* Whenever we don't talk for a week or something, we will text each other, "Hey, we need to schedule a phone date. I have not heard from you in a while.

Phone dates require LDFs to "make time" for one another, exemplifying the effort that is often required to maintain these relationships.

When LDFs are able to call their friends (most often using a cell phone; only a handful of participants mentioned using land-line phones), they did so to engage in longer, deeper conversations often because the phone is perceived as a richer medium more suited for intimate communication (Whitty & Gavin, 2001). Participants commented that phone calls were often reserved for telling detailed stories and discussing important information.

> *Grace:* When we do call, it means more, I think, it's not just "hey, checking in, how's the weather?" it's more like "hey what's going on in your life? How's this move thing? What are you thinking these days?"

Grace's comment illustrates that she frequently exchanges shorter, less intimate messages with her LDF, so that when they do call one another, it is more meaningful. So they reserve deeper, more personal communication for the phone; therefore, phone calls are one way LDFs seem to enact *openness*. Hannah also designates the phone for intimate, "serious" conversations, setting aside special occasions to talk without distractions or time limitations:

> We do kind of say, "when are you free?" 'cause when we do call each other, it may be like a two second phone call and say "are you free?" because we're gonna get down and dirty and talk, you know, and then I'll be like "okay, I'll call you in two hours." Turn off your TV, and we can get down to serious business.

Although many participants reported engaging in brief phone conversations with their LDFs, phone calls tend to be saved for lengthier interactions. Research suggests that phone calls are often perceived as deeper and more meaningful than e-mail, and that individuals prefer using the phone with closer friends and to discuss more intimate topics (Utz, 2007). Participants tended to agree that lengthy telephone calls are reserved for their closer friends. Dorothy explains that she prefers the phone because she knows her LDF so well, she can visualize her while talking: "I

know her voice well enough to know, I can imagine her saying those things and I can imagine seeing her say those things more than I can with other people." In contrast, casual friends or "old" high school/college friends tend to be relegated to text-based communication, such as Facebook. Ophelia explains one reason why:

> It is kind of hard to carry on a phone conversation with someone that you are not necessarily that close with. I mean, sort of like the awkward talks [chuckles]. You can only say so much before you have caught up with one another.

Since casual friends may not know as much about the personal details of one another's lives, they may not have as much to discuss. Therefore, phone conversations could feel forced and awkward. But with text-based, asynchronous media, users have more control. Similar to Facebook, they can plan out what to say and once the message is sent, they are done communicating. This makes it ideal for friends who may still be interested in one another's lives, but have no desire to develop or maintain a close connection.

In contrast to lengthy phone calls, text messaging is typically reserved for quick, short messages, including expressions of affection ("telling her how much I love her"), brief updates ("I'm only about an hour away from your house"), inside jokes ("oh my gosh, you'll never guess what just happened"), or checking if a friend is available to talk ("are you busy?"). Gail considers texting a "substitute for the banter" that she and her LDF used to engage in when living near one another while Cindy uses it for more "poignant questions, like 'did you know this was going on?' or 'did you hear about so-and-so.'" Nadine uses texting as an alternative to brief phone calls:

> I think it is just a quick way to say something that you need to say without having to make a phone call. It sounds kind of, that is what like my parents would say, "why don't

you just call them" [chuckles] but it is like, I don't need to call them, I just need to tell them one little thing.

For many participants, when they need to communicate brief messages, texting is seen as an appropriate medium. As Nadine asserts, these short messages don't *require* a phone call. Friends may not have time to engage in a lengthy phone conversation or may not want to interrupt a friend's day, so a text message is seen as a convenient and unobtrusive way to communicate a succinct message.

Participants, mostly undergraduate students, reported texting is convenient when they can't actually talk, such as while in class, in meetings, or running errands.

Isabella: If you are in the chemistry lecture hall, why not sit there and text because it is not like you are paying attention anyway. If she is out of class, then she can still talk to me and I can still write down the notes I need to get.

Isabella's comment suggests that she not only can text in situations when she can't talk, but she can also text while completing other tasks. Being able to multi-task was a frequently-mentioned benefit of texting. Friends can complete homework, clean house, or run after children and still be able to send a quick text. Similarly, participants also mentioned liking that texting can be asynchronous, so a message can wait to be read until it's convenient:

Francesca: They can respond when it's convenient to them. It can just sit there rather than sort of when the phone rings, I feel like I have to answer it even if I can't, while a text can sit there.

Since most participants reported not knowing their LDFs day-to-day schedules, texting allows them to send a message without worrying about interrupting something important or intruding on their friends' time. This desire to be unobtrusive leads many participants to use texting as a

precursor to calling. Texting first to ask "are you available?" was one of the most frequently-mentioned reasons to text.

> *Hannah:* Like if it's the middle of the day and I know [LDF #1] is teaching or [LDF #2] is at work, and I never know when [LDF #2] is at work [laughs] so I'll text first and ask "Are you at work? Can I call you?" And they always text me first because they never know if I'm in class or at work or whatever else I may be doing, so it usually starts with a text message and then we end up calling. Like one night, [LDF #1] texted me about one of our old friends. It said [name of friend] is getting married. It was one of those, I just called, even though it was two o'clock in the morning, like "What?! Again?" [laughs]. So I guess texting in the middle of the night to see if the other one's awake [laughs].

Thus, many participants perceived texting as a way to determine if their LDF is free to talk. Since messages can sit unread, a text is perceived as less intrusive than a ringing phone. So if the receiver is busy, she can ignore the text, and the sender knows her friend isn't available.

Although many participants reported texting their LDFs, many also reported not liking it. Reasons included: the small size of keyboard makes it too difficult; it costs extra money; and it takes too long to type out messages. Eva argues that she's too "old" to text: "I'm almost 40 and texting is just not what I do. I'm old, I've finally come to terms with that." Thus, a couple of participants perceive texting as an activity "young people" engage in. Other participants feel that texting is impersonal and leads to more misinterpretation:

> *Caitlyn:* Text messaging, I feel it is super impersonal, and I am not crazy about text lingo either, that just bothers me. I just feel like texting is really impersonal, a lot of times you can't tell what a person is implying, or what their tone is when they are texting you, whereas if you are talking on the phone, it is a lot easier to understand or interpret.

Like Caitlyn, other participants complained that the abbreviated language and the lack of nonverbal cues removes the intimacy and also causes misunderstandings. Some participants dislike texting because they find it difficult to reduce what they want to say to approximately 160 characters, while others find this length restriction makes texting a useless way to communicate. Berkley describes her perception of text messaging:

> It can certainly, in a Twitter-esque sort of way, boil relationships down to 160 characters. Like this is how many characters I have, "here's my day," "how was your day?" Here you go, in 160. Whereas [phone] conversations or even letters, gasp, can you imagine, I guess, [do] not require, but encourage more in-depth discussion.

Although many participants find text messaging to be a medium perfectly suited for sending brief messages and providing a way to communicate when talking is not possible, other participants perceive it as limited.

In sum, many participants reported using their mobile phones to keep in touch with their LDFs. Since phone conversations were seen as more personal and also required participants to coordinate their busy schedules, phone calls were frequently reserved for longer, more intimate conversations. Although brief or spur-of-the-moment calls do occur, participants reported setting aside special times to have these lengthy chats, even setting up "phone dates." In contrast, texting was often used for shorter messages. Few participants, almost all undergraduate students, reported having long texting "conversations" with their LDF. Overall, participants either praised the convenience and unobtrusiveness of texting or lamented its brevity and lack of intimacy.

With the development of smartphones, the mobile phone has become an integrated device, providing users with multiple communication tools. Users can call, text message, check

their Facebook page, maintain a day planner, take and send photographs, surf the Internet, and e-mail. Having all these possibilities in one device is likely to make communication faster, easier, more convenient, and more cost-effective. This could help LDFs maintain their relationship, eliminating the confines of space and time.

E-mail

E-mail is another tool mentioned by participants. Due to its asynchronous nature, e-mails have many benefits that may make it attractive to LDFs. First, e-mails can be read immediately after they are received, but also hours or days later. For friends in different time zones or with dramatically different schedules, this quality may be particularly important. Individuals can also take their time carefully composing and editing an e-mail, which could be important when sharing a detailed story or discussing heated emotions (Utz, 2007). Lastly, e-mails "automatically document" interactions, providing users with a record of their conversations. Although this is often very important in business settings, it could also be useful for friends who would like to keep their conversations, much like old letters or diaries.

Interestingly, undergraduate students rarely reported using e-mail to communicate with their LDFs. For them, e-mail is perceived as a formal medium and thus used for school, work, family, and extracurricular organizations. In contrast, graduate student and faculty participants reported using e-mail often. Perhaps this is due to a generational difference. Since e-mail is an "older" medium, many graduate students and faculty members may be more attached to it because it was one of their first forays into the World Wide Web. Abby comments that because she used e-mail so long for work and school, she grew accustomed to it: "Once you get in the habit of checking e-mail all the time, then it is an extra-convenient way to keep in touch with people." It is likely that e-mail is more thoroughly integrated into the everyday work lives of

graduate students and faculty members; therefore, they may be more comfortable with this medium or may find it particularly convenient. A few faculty members even discussed being an "early adopter" of e-mail (Rogers, 1962). Thus, experiencing the excitement and novelty of a new technology could create something similar to "brand loyalty."

Graduate student and faculty participants reported sending e-mails to their LDF for a variety of reasons: getting feedback on professionally-related documents, sending photographs, forwarding links to websites and online news articles, sending electronic greeting cards, forwarding inspirational or funny chain e-mails, and planning events like weddings and vacations.

Similar to Facebook and text messaging, participants reported liking the asynchronicity of e-mail as well as how easy it is to send a quick "thinking of you" message, thus enacting *positivity*:

> *Addison:* I mean it takes me ten seconds to write a two sentence email and send it to her, literally, and so the thought "hey, I should check in with [my LDF] while she's in my head," I can take care of that thought quickly, um, and then she can respond whenever is convenient for her, and I can read it whenever is convenient for me.

In addition to speed and convenience, a couple participants appreciate e-mail because it provides the opportunity to spend time composing a message, editing it to truly communicate what you intend. Still others reported a preference for "the written word" either because they can express themselves better in text or because they find social interactions cumbersome. When asked what she likes about e-mail, Erika reported all these perspectives:

> The editing of it, I'm sure. I think I find conversation, for me, to be odd. I'm a little bit of a social phobe in that way. So I do, I find conversation to sometimes be awkward and

> strange and they go on for too long and an e-mail, I can do, I'm writing a paper, I'm doing a drawing, I'm doing whatever, but I can slip an e-mail in there and I don't have to spend hours on the phone. I think it's more that it just fits in there and it's on your own time, you can write in the middle of the night, you can write in the morning, and it's not an agreed-upon moment between two people.

Erika's comment suggests that conversing with someone isn't always comfortable or convenient, so she appreciates being able to quickly send a message whenever she wants and once it's sent, she's free to return to whatever task she was working on.

Some participants (primarily faculty) mentioned sending out mass e-mails to larger groups of LDFs. These e-mails were perceived as a very valuable way to keep everyone "in the loop":

> *Cindy:* There's like a group, like the four of us girls, we'll do mass e-mails and so there's no way you could have done that without e-mail. Um, you know, you can write letters back and forth, but you can't do a group letter. All my girlfriends from high school, we do mass e-mails between the six of us; otherwise, there's no way we could all keep up with what everyone's doing.

A couple participants mentioned using "group e-mails" in this way. They were perceived as very convenient ways for an entire network of friends to update one another on their lives, send photographs, and make plans for future reunions. As Cindy's comment suggests, without the option of sending group e-mails, contact with these friends may have disappeared since it would require more time-consuming one-on-one communication. Thus, e-mails may help LDFs enact the maintenance behavior *personal networks*.

Thus, while most undergraduate student participants reported not finding e-mail useful for communicating with friends, most graduate student and faculty participants reported using e-mail frequently for social purposes. It appears many graduate students and faculty participants use e-mail like undergraduate participants use Facebook. E-mail users find the asynchronicity, convenience, and documentation to be very useful, making it a helpful maintenance tool. Being able to send an e-mail quickly and in between other tasks was seen as particularly attractive because it allowed participants to let their LDFs know they are being thought about without taking too much time away from other commitments.

Video chat

Video chat, such as iChat and Skype, is another medium that was discussed by participants. Aside from face-to-face communication, video chat is the "richest" channel because it provides users with both verbal and nonverbal cues. During the interviews, participants often complained about the impersonal nature of text-based media because of the lack of nonverbal cues. They also frequently argued that face-to-face communication is far superior to mediated communication and lamented the fact that they could not see their LDFs as often as they would like. Thus, it would make sense that participants would latch onto video chat as the next best thing to face-to-face interaction. However, very few participants reported using video chat with their LDFs. While some simply do not have the technology required (built-in or external webcams), most participants had rather illogical reasons for not adopting this technology, including being "lazy," not being "technologically-advanced," and feeling like they would have to "put on a show" or "look pretty."

Caroline: I think most of us have the ability, but we're just kind of lazy basically. I'm not sure they would know how to set it up. My dad taught computers for many years so I know how to use these things, but we don't really bother.

Becca: I've actually never Skyped. I'd feel like I'd have to be all cute, you know?

Haley: I just don't have time for that. I feel like I am so busy all the time, I don't have time to sit there and talk on there. Like whenever I text her or call her, I am doing something at the same time.

Amongst many non-users, video chat is perceived as requiring extra effort—to understand the technology, to set it up, to coordinate schedules, to sit in front of a screen for a period of time. Interestingly, some participants also feel uncomfortable with their friends "seeing" them, often because of how they would look. Dorothy actually perceives video chat as "unnatural" because it seems like you are staring at one another in ways you wouldn't feel comfortable doing in person. So although most participants find CMC to be impersonal and prefer face-to-face interactions with their LDFs, a majority still do not use video chat. Perhaps video chat is "*too* personal," as suggested by Ophelia, which is an intriguing and perplexing idea to consider. It seems as if many participants do not equate the cues observed during face-to-face interactions with the cues available when using video chat. For example, direct eye contact during face-to-face conversations is likely to be perceived by friends as expressing interest and enhancing intimacy. But eye contact during a video chat is perceived as "unnatural," "forced," or "awkward." Additional research must examine why some individuals perceive face-to-face and video chat to be so different.

But for the few participants that did report using video chat, their opinions were overwhelmingly positive. Despite technical glitches such as slow Internet connections and a time delay with sound, participants were overjoyed with being able to see their LDFs while communicating. Madeline likes being able to use iChat with her LDF because it allows her to see what clothes she is wearing, what her dorm room looks like, and even chat with her roommate. It also feels more intimate: "Her laugh makes me laugh. It is more personal. It is kind of like she is there." A recent adopter of Skype, Hannah sings its praises:

> I had this long, developing story that I really wanted to tell her but I felt like if I sent her a note, there would be written evidence of it and I didn't want it written down, and if I typed it up, I didn't think it would do it justice, so I was like, hold on a second, let me go talk to my neighbors, I'm getting Skype, and so like 30 minutes later, I'm on Skype. It took me an hour to tell her the story and it was totally worth it. It was awesome 'cause you can hear, you don't have problems with intonation and typing, and it was awesome. And it's really clear, which is amazing. It boggles my mind that we can do that. [. . .] The conversation we had was more meaningful than two or three hours of like chatting online because you can get more out [of it].

Hannah's comment supports media richness theory's (Daft & Lengel, 1986) assertion that users select rich channels for equivocal messages, such as long, detailed stories. Uses and gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974) and Boase's (2008) personal communication system perspective, would also suggest that individuals purposefully select media based on their needs. In Hannah's case, the need to tell a personal, complex story without producing written "evidence" led her to Skype, which she perceived as the best media to satisfy her need.

In sum, users perceive video chat to be an amazing tool to connect with their LDFs because it allows for real-time conversation, like a telephone, with the added benefit of observing nonverbal cues, like during face-to-face interaction. This type of interaction could make the enactment of *assurances*, *positivity*, and *openness* more effective or more pleasurable. The enjoyment of such a "rich" channel is not surprising; what *is* surprising is how few participants use video chat and how many reported they simply don't have the desire to use it.

Other media

Participants discussed other mediated forms of communication including letters, electronic greeting cards (e-cards), LiveJournal (a weblog), and instant messaging. However, these channels were rarely used to communicate with LDFs. Letter-writing was seen as a very personal way to communicate because it takes much more effort to compose a letter than to send a text or email, and being able to see a friend's handwriting enhanced its appeal. Those who did report engaging in letter writing perceived it as a nostalgic way to communicate when feeling homesick or sentimental. However, letters were not written by many participants. LiveJournal is one of the original social networking sites. However, unlike Facebook's overwhelming number of features, the focus of LiveJournal is users' diary-like entries. Readers can gain insight into bloggers' thoughts and feelings by reading these entries and can post comments about what they read (like on a discussion board). Only two participants mentioned using LiveJournal regularly; Facebook was the preferred social networking site among participants. Lastly, participants also rarely reported instant messaging through services such as AOL, Yahoo, MSN, and Google. Faculty participants, and many graduate student participants, reported not being able to coordinate time to sit in front of a computer with their LDF. Undergraduate and graduate student participants preferred to use the chatting feature available on Facebook. This is

essentially the same technology as "traditional" instant messaging, but users reported liking it more because everything is located in one place so they could chat while simultaneously using other Facebook features.

Limitations of technology

Despite the many benefits of technology and participants' adamant belief that without such media their LDFs would suffer, participants aptly point out technology is not a panacea. In fact, almost all participants agreed that technology is a "double-edged sword" with many strengths, but almost as many weaknesses. As Gail describes it: "Technology is fantastic and cumbersome at the same time." Graduate student and faculty participants were more likely than undergraduate participants to view technology in this way, although many undergraduates were also very critical. This is not surprising since the undergraduate participants are members of "Generation Net" who have grown up surrounded by technologies that provide instant access to the world. They have woven technology into their daily lives and use the Internet, e-mail, instant messaging, blogs, and social networking sites at higher rates than individuals from any other generation (Fox & Madden, 2005; Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008; Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Rainie & Tancer, 2007). To members of the plugged-in generation, technologically-mediated channels simply extend their ability to communicate with their social networks (Junco, 2005). This could mean that undergraduate students do not perceive technology as possessing weaknesses or interfering with/damaging social relationships because it is all they have known; it's simply their way of life. In contrast, a few of the graduate student participants and all of the faculty members are from earlier generations, so they are able to compare "then" and "now." Many of these participants reflected on "what it used to be like" before many contemporary technologies were widely adopted, or even invented.

One of the more obvious weaknesses of computer-mediated communication is the lack of nonverbal cues, which participants believe leads to less personal interactions.

> *Hannah:* You don't get the nuances. You don't have, um, you don't have the intonation; you don't have the body language, which is a huge thing; you just can't whisper; you can't get loud and be animated. It just dulls your communication.

Hannah's comment that the lack of nonverbal cues "dulls" communication is interesting. It gives the impression that the medium removes the liveliness from the conversation, making it lackluster. This could be problematic for LDFs since they frequently have to rely on mediated channels to communicate. If conversations feel dreary or lifeless, relational satisfaction may decrease. Leila also believes the absence of nonverbal cues lessens the personal connection:

> Text messages, I know they are convenient and they are easy, but at the same time I think they are a lot less personal than to just call and ask them about their day and whatnot. I think it is a lot more personal to call because you hear the voice, you hear how they react and I think you can understand a lot better.

For Leila, not being able to hear her friend's voice not only makes conversation less lively, but also can lead to misunderstandings.

Text-based media were perceived to be the least personal, but even telephone conversations were seen by some participants as less intimate, and not a satisfactory replacement for face-to-face communication:

> *Aaliyah:* She is one of those people that makes good facial features. She'll just do random little things that over the phone or over the Internet, I can imagine her doing it—but it's not there in person. Because I know what would happen if I was there, and she was doing it—she would goof off into another little thing, and we'd end up laughing for

> 45 minutes, really over nothing. But over the phone it's like "Haha, that's funny," but that's the end, so it's not like, carrying over.

Since her LDF is a particularly animated person, Aaliyah really misses being able to see those expressions. When they talk on the phone, there is not the same level of connection, and interactions are simply not as funny or dynamic. Caitlyn also finds the absence of nonverbal cues troubling:

> It's easier to keep in touch, but at the same time it's not as personal as actually having a conversation. Like, we can tell when we are upset over the phone or whatever, but when you are looking at that person in the face it is easier to understand… Like, when I am talking to her and I can see the tears welling up, I can understand better the emotions she is dealing with and how it is really affecting her, as opposed as just being able to hear her voice over the phone.

Like Leila, Caitlyn feels like she can understand her friend better when she can observe nonverbal cues. Being able to have a deeper and more accurate understanding of what a friend is currently feeling could allow for the creation of more person-centered support messages. Without these cues, a friend's efforts to be comforting could be less effective.

Not surprisingly, participants frequently commented that they'd rather be interacting in person and that face-to-face communication is far superior to mediated communication.

> *Grace:* Face-to-face is always better and I feel like we're closer, even when we're not doing anything, just hanging out, or I can understand more about her life because I can see gestures or see who's she's hanging out with.

Grace argues that when she is able to communicate with her friend in person, she feels a closer connection to her. Being able to see her, touch her, and just be in her presence could make

friends feel like communication is more intimate and meaningful. Hannah also prefers to hang out with her LDF in person:

> I just don't like having that medium there. It makes it easier, but I would prefer to just hang out with [my LDF] and walk around campus and laugh at people, and just sit and chat.

Hannah's comment suggests that the actual medium is seen as "getting in the way," as if it obstructs intimate communication.

The lack of nonverbal cues when communicating via text-based media was also criticized as causing misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Computer-mediated communication was also cited as encouraging individuals to send messages that they wouldn't consider sending if communicating face-to-face. However, participants were quick to comment that these drawbacks don't apply to communication with their LDFs. Very few participants admitted to having conflicts with their LDFs, whether due to technology use or otherwise.

> *Patricia:* Not specifically with her but with other friends, I have had misunderstandings. Like you read the text in the wrong voice or instant message, you read it in the wrong voice. You take their tease as them saying something mean to you.

> *Nadine:* I am talking about with other friends, I have had arguments with another friend and we talked about [how] you say harsher things in a text message than you would ever say in person or on the phone. It is easier to say it because you cannot see their reaction or hear their reaction.

According to Junco (2005), college students in particular are more likely to post information and pictures online that they would not divulge to others in person. So perhaps the interpersonal

distance created by text-based media makes users feel "anonymous" or "safe," which leads to communicative behaviors that normally would not occur.

One of the most interesting critiques of technologically-mediated communication, and the most relevant to long-distance friendships, relates to the concept of effort. Long-distance friendships require effort to be maintained satisfactorily. Effort means putting forth the time needed to connect. Isabella explains:

> My grandmother is like 87ish and she is very hard core about manners and making time for people and I think it is just something I have always been taught. You make time for people. [Talking on the phone] is obviously more personal than sending a message.

However, that time is not always there. Due to conflicting schedules, busy lives, and outside demands, sometimes the time or motivation to put forth the effort is lacking. Numerous participants felt like technology made it easier to *not* exert effort—media provide quick, easy ways to send messages, removing the personal investment, as Dessa explains:

> I think that it is an excuse to not have to make a personal investment. I think you could use it as an excuse because technology is so impersonal that it takes the effort out of it.

This idea of a technology providing an "excuse" to not communicate in more personal ways proliferated the interviews. Becca believed she and her LDF would talk on the phone more if they didn't have text messaging, while Eileen thought she would make more of an effort to take trips to see her LDF if she couldn't rely on technology. Fay observed that this lack of effort or investment makes the communication less authentic, meaning you can "be in touch, but feel disconnected":

> I think it makes us kind of complacent in that we don't go out of our way as much to do the little things to show you care because you can zip off a quick email, and I think there

> are definitely other things I could do, like sending a card when I'm thinking about her versus sending her a quick email to say "hey, how are you feeling? I was thinking about you." [. . .] There is something to be said for spending time, even if it's parallel time, just quiet, to be next to that person, um, I think if we didn't have some of these forms of technology to communicate that we might make a more vested interest in other means. Gone are the days of writing a letter or driving to see someone because you can't necessarily talk to them and you want to have a lengthy conversation.

Fay's insightful comments illustrate the contradictory nature of modern technology: we love it and we hate it simultaneously. We grow attached to its convenience, ease, and speed. But we deplore these exact same qualities because it makes us lazy and disconnected. Fay, and other participants, noted that if we weren't so reliant on technology perhaps we would invest greater amounts of time and effort into our communication with friends. However, as many of us *are* dependent on the expediency of technology, we allow it to play the primary role in maintaining our long-distance relationships. Some participants even suggested communicating via technology sometimes replaces the desire or need to see one another in person, becoming the only way friends communicate:

> *Francesca:* At times it seems that it has replaced that face-to-face interaction, 'cause even if I may be in town, I might say "well, Facebook me and we'll see what happens" or "text me and we'll see what happens" and what happens is we text and text and text and nothing will result from that.

> *Ophelia:* It [Facebook] becomes a way, with not just her but other friends that have gone away to school, it becomes like the only way that we talk. Like, I would not call friends

that, like I have a friend that went to Harvard. I would never call her, I just Facebook her because I know she is busy and I am busy and it just becomes like a lot less personal.

Thus, participants observed that because technology frequently removes the effort and the investment, it can negatively affect their communication with their LDFs, making them "lazy" and "cheapening the interaction." But this same outcome, participants argued, can make technologically-mediated communication ideal for keeping in touch with casual friends.

> *Isabella:* I think they make it easier to keep in touch with people that you were not that good of friends with. Like, just people that I went to high school with. I would be like, "Hey, how are you? How is school going?" But, I think for closer friends, it makes it worse because you are more tempted to just sit down and write out an e-mail than take the time to call when you should take the time to call because you know whatever they are doing they would probably drop it and talk to you anyway. So, I think it kind of gives you an easy way out that you should not take. It makes it a little too easy when what you should want to do is spend time with that person and take time for that person and it is just like tempting you to take the shortcut. Because it was easy to find myself, "I should call [my LDF] today" and then, "Ah, I will just shoot her a little e-mail."

Although technology helps to alleviate the challenges that come with maintaining long-distance friendships, participants often found them to be poor substitutes for face-to-face interaction. When asked what they dislike about communication technology, many participants cited the lack of nonverbal cues, the increased likelihood of misinterpretation, and the removal of personal investment. Almost all participants perceived mediated channels to be less personal than face-to-face communication, and thus expressed a preference for conversing in person. As Fay argues:

"Technology affords us a really convenient and inexpensive way to talk, but I don't know if that equals connection."

Despite technology's weaknesses and the negative influence it may have on personal relationships, technologically-mediated communication is still a very important relationship maintenance strategy used to bridge the physical and emotional gaps between friends. As Aaliyah suggests, "when I would send her a message and she would send me a message back, it was like 'Okay, she's still there.'" Thus, these messages assure us that our friendship still exists and our friend is still "there" for us.

For some, relying on technologically-mediated communication could reduce relationship satisfaction due to its lack of immediacy and its impersonal nature. But for others (all of the present study's participants included), the advancements in technology have created a multitude of options that serve a variety of communicative purposes. Some media, like the telephone and video chat, serve as the "next best thing" to face-to-face communication, allowing participants to hear one another's voices or see their expressions. Other media, like text messaging, Facebook, and e-mail, are best suited for quick, unobtrusive messages that don't require friends to coordinate their schedules. This variety seems to help long-distance partners communicate more frequently, which could, in turn, uphold levels of relationship satisfaction (Adams, 1998; Hays, 1984; Hays, 1985). Computer-mediated communication technologies have strengthened many individuals' relationships and have even made their lives better over time (Jones, 2002; Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2000; Walther & Parks, 2002). This research is reflected in participants' enthusiastic belief that technology has made "keeping in touch" easier and without it, their friendships would suffer.

CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to uncover how women, following a life course transition, describe and maintain their long-distance friendships. Informed by McCracken (1988), 34 qualitative interviews were conducted with women in a university setting: first-year undergraduate students, first-year graduate students, and recently-hired faculty members. The interview transcripts were analyzed inductively, using grounded theory as a basis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which allowed the categories and themes to emerge from the words of the participants. This inductive approach resulted in six maintenance behaviors, which confirm the research program of Canary, Stafford, and colleagues (1991, 1992, 1993, 2002). These maintenance behaviors (assurances, openness, positivity, joint activities, personal networks, and mediated communication) are reviewed below. Implications, limitations, and directions for future research are also addressed.

Summary

Traditional research and cultural assumptions suggest that long-distance relationships are problematic and often not long-lasting due to limited, or non-existent, face-to-face contact (Allan, 1989; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Kelley, et al., 1994). However, the present study reveals relationships are not solely based on proximity and frequent face-to-face interaction; instead, friendships can exist across telephone lines, in cyberspace, and even within our minds (Chayko, 2002; Stafford, 2005). Participants' definitions indicate long-distance friendships may be challenging, but the necessary effort and lack of co-presence does not deter them from devoting themselves to the continuous maintenance work. Because they value these

friendships and *want* them to last, participants reported feeling confident their long-distance friendships will persist for years to come.

Participants reported putting considerable day-to-day effort into maintaining their long-distance friendships. These often strategic and sometimes routine maintenance behaviors are what keep their relationships "alive." First, participants discussed the significance of friends "always being there" to provide support, help them through difficult times, and boost them up. Making future plans with their LDFs served to confirm both friends were committed to making the relationship last. Secondly, friendship is a relationship built on trust and participants commented that their friends are completely honest with them and they can confide in one another about anything. Friends also share an intimate understanding, often resulting from being friends since childhood or young adulthood. This shared history and deep understanding allow participants to offer specialized advice and support to each friend.

Third, remaining cheerful and optimistic when facing the challenges and disappointments that accompany long-distance relationships, as well as refraining from criticism, helps LDFs view their relationship positively. Giving gifts, doing favors, and being affectionate also enhances the bond between friends. In addition, surrounding themselves with photographs and keepsakes serves as a way to remain sociomentally connected to their friends no matter how far apart they are from one another. Fourth, visiting LDFs provided participants with opportunities to have fun, relax, and revive their relationship. During visits, participants often reported "doing nothing" with their LDFs, demonstrating their comfort with just being together. Sharing a meal and engaging in lengthy conversations were the most frequently-mentioned joint activities. Fifth, many participants believed the involvement of family and mutual friends plays an important role in sustaining their friendships. Lastly, because face-to-face visits may be

infrequent, LDFs must rely on mediated communication to remain connected and up-to-date. These maintenance strategies worked together to keep participants' relationships strong and satisfying. "The spirit or essence of a connection, then, remains in the absence of face-to-face interaction, in large part *because we work so hard* to keep it alive" (Chayko, 2002, p. 89, emphasis added). These women indeed worked hard to keep their valued friendships from slipping away.

Despite the fact that many, if not most, personal relationships are maintained by both face-to-face and mediated means (Walther & Parks, 2002; Wellman & Gulia, 1999), the majority of research on relationship maintenance has focused on face-to-face strategies (Dainton & Aylor, 2002). Thus, one of the most important contributions of the present study is the insight it provides into how women use technology to maintain their long-distance friendships. Participants reported using a variety of technologies to complement each other and to fulfill different maintenance needs, which supports a variety of theoretical perspectives, such as uses and gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974), personal communication system perspective (Boase, 2008), and media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

The online networking community, Facebook, was mentioned frequently by undergraduate and graduate student participants, while most faculty participants either used it infrequently or not at all. For some participants, Facebook is an incredibly useful tool that allows users to maintain a sense of connection by exchanging messages, browsing photo albums, reading status updates, and using applications. Using Facebook as a way to asynchronously exchange messages is also perceived as convenient because friends can still communicate despite conflicting schedules. Many participants also noted they typically use Facebook to communicate silly, brief, or affectionate messages to their friends, rather than long, important, or personal

messages. Other participants feel Facebook simply allows us to reestablish superficial connections, thus providing quantity over quality. Some participants even avoid Facebook altogether, viewing it as overwhelming, inappropriate, or a "time waster."

Using cell phones for talking and for text messaging was mentioned often as well. Since phone conversations were seen as more personal and also required participants to coordinate their busy schedules, phone calls were frequently reserved for longer, more intimate conversations. Although brief or spur-of-the-moment calls do occur, participants reported setting aside special times to have these lengthy chats. In contrast, texting was often used for shorter messages that don't require a phone call. Overall, participants either praised the convenience and unobtrusiveness of texting or lamented its brevity and lack of intimacy.

While most undergraduate student participants reported not finding e-mail useful for communicating with friends, most graduate student and faculty participants reported using e-mail frequently for social purposes. These participants find the asynchronicity, convenience, and documentation of e-mail to be very useful, making it a helpful maintenance tool. Being able to send an e-mail quickly and in between other tasks was seen as particularly attractive because it allowed participants to let their LDFs know they are being thought about without taking too much time away from other commitments.

Since video chat provides both visual and auditory cues, it is the "richest" channel available to many LDFs. However, a surprisingly small number of participants reported using video chat with their LDFs. While some simply do not have the necessary equipment, most participants had rather illogical reasons for not adopting this technology, including being "lazy," not being "technologically-advanced," and feeling like they would have to "look pretty." However, those who reported using video chat perceive it to be an amazing tool to connect with

their LDFs because it allows for real-time conversation, like a telephone, with the added benefit of observing nonverbal cues, like during face-to-face interaction.

Although participants acknowledged a variety of weaknesses and limitations, every participant stated that these technologies have made keeping in touch with their LDFs easier. Without them, many participants said the relationships wouldn't be as satisfying because it would be much more challenging to communicate. Examining how technology affects our interpersonal relationships is a quickly growing and much-needed area of research because, "in an age in which technology continuously 'brings' absent others into our social spheres, our tendency to connect in this way will only increase" (Chayko, 2002, p. 4). Therefore, the present study is a leap in the right direction, providing us with a deeper understanding of how long-distance friends utilize technologically-mediated channels to maintain their relationships.

Implications

In addition to explicating the role technology plays in the maintenance of women's long-distance friendships, the broader implications for the current study are manifold. The first implication relates to the grounded theory generated through open, axial, and selective coding of the data. Research suggests maintenance behaviors vary according to the type of relationship (Canary & Stafford, 1994) and thus, will vary in form, frequency, and importance between LDRs and geographically-close relationships (Stafford, 2005). Due to limited, or non-existent, face-to-face interaction, LDFs may have fewer opportunities to enact certain maintenance behaviors. Thus, it seems logical that long-distance friendships are not only challenging to maintain, but also may be maintained differently than proximal friendships. The present study demonstrates long-distance friendships *do* require significant effort to maintain, but the strategies used are quite similar to those used by proximal friends. This is most clearly evidenced by the realization

that my "emic" axial codes could easily be merged with an existing typology created by Canary, Stafford, and colleagues (1991, 1992, 1993). Thus, it seems as if long-distance and proximal friendships can be maintained in very similar ways. This suggests that long-distance friendships are not dramatically different from proximal friendships, nor are they quite so perplexing, which contradicts the assumptions of both laypersons and social scientists.

One of the most significant differences between long-distance and proximal friendships is that LDFs must rely on mediated channels to enact most of these maintenance behaviors. Thus, it is possible to enact positivity, openness, assurances, and even personal networks using mediated means of communicating. And while engaging in joint activities may seem like an implausible strategy for LDFs, it is actually a viable maintenance behavior, at least for the current study's participants. As most participants are members of Generation Net, they are spending more time technologically-connected and those connections will inevitably lead to further refinement of how to enact these maintenance strategies through mediated channels.

Another interesting implication is long-distance friends' use of strategic and routine maintenance behaviors. Strategic behaviors are enacted consciously and purposefully with a particular goal in mind. In contrast, routine behaviors are habitual, mundane, and often enacted unconsciously (Canary & Stafford, 1994). Because LDFs are separated by geography and often have conflicting schedules, whether due to hectic lifestyles or different time zones, maintenance behaviors often have to be enacted consciously and intentionally. However, I noticed an intriguing use of language in over half of the interviews. Participants frequently used the words "small," "little," "random," and "nothing big" to describe many of their maintenance behaviors. This use of language downplays these behaviors making them seem less important, less planned, or less strategic. Therefore, it seems that LDFs may perceive these behaviors as commonplace,

or even obvious, and thus "routine." In fact, some participants struggled to respond when asked how they show their LDF that they care about her. Routine behaviors are not often memorable; they are simply "just something we do." So, although long-distance friendships require conscious effort and advanced planning, friends seem to use routine maintenance behaviors or view their behaviors as part of their everyday lives (requiring little or no extra time or effort).

A third implication of the current study's findings relates to the management of relational dialectics. Relational dialectics theory assumes "social life is a dynamic knot of contradictions" and partners must negotiate these contradictions to achieve balance in their relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 3). It is likely that long-distance relationships involve numerous dialectical tensions because these relationships often involve simultaneous yet competing needs (Sahlstein, 2006). Overall, five dialectics were observed in the present study: ideal/real, novelty/predictability, independence/dependence, judgment/acceptance, and expressiveness/protectiveness. While the last two dialectics seemed to be experienced in much the same way as in proximal friendships, the others pose unique challenges to long-distance friendships.

The ideal/real dialectic (Rawlins, 1992) refers to the discrepancies between what we expect from friendship and what is possible. There are many cultural assumptions about what certain types of relationships should be like. This knowledge shapes our expectations, as well as our subsequent behaviors and perceptions of those behaviors (Stafford, 2005). The absence of proximity and face-to-face interaction in long-distance friendships violates these social norms. Therefore, LDFs have to deal with the reality of their relationships not always living up to their idealized expectations. There is also a cultural notion that personal relationships are "meant to be" and don't require maintenance work. But, given the number of personal relationships that

terminate, the necessity for maintenance is apparent (Stafford, 2005). Therefore, partners must understand that, in comparison to proximal friendships, it may take greater effort, flexibility, and patience to maintain their long-distance friendship. For example, participants often discussed how much they depend on their LDF for support, advice, and comfort. However, due to busy schedules and competing demands, LDFs are often difficult to contact. Thus, participants expressed having to be patient with playing "phone tag," reminding themselves that they would talk with their LDF eventually.

Another example of the ideal/real dialectic relates to the expectation that friends can be relied upon for both affection and instrumental assistance. The present study clearly demonstrates that affection can be communicated via mediated channels. However, geographic distance typically prevents friends from offering one another instrumental support. Not being able to rely on their long-distance friend's practical help may be frustrating or disappointing. Thus, many participants had to be flexible in their attempts to be helpful and resourceful, such as planning a wedding via e-mail and providing instructions for changing a tire over the phone.

Related to the use of routine and strategic maintenance behaviors is the dialectical tension between novelty and predictability, which reflects our simultaneous needs for stability and excitement (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). We tend to appreciate the comfort that comes from consistency, but predictability often spawns boredom. However, limited face-to-face contact frequently prevents LDFs from behaving impulsively. LDFs aren't able to have spur-of-the-moment lunch dates or shopping trips like proximal friends can; and for most participants, LDFs lived too far away for spontaneous road trips. Thus, LDFs may be frustrated by the degree of planning and coordinating that is required to maintain their relationships. Not being able to do things on a whim could leave LDFs dissatisfied with their relationships. Therefore, LDFs must

think of creative ways to enhance the novelty within their relationships. The most typical way participants attempted this was by sending "random," "out-of-the-blue" messages to their LDFs via text, Facebook, and e-mail. Participants suggested these messages are unexpected and therefore serve to brighten their long-distance friend's day and let them know they are being thought about.

A third dialectical tension experienced by long-distance partners is dependence/independence (Rawlins, 1992). The freedom to be independent is the liberty to pursue our own lives without our friend's involvement. In contrast, the freedom to be dependent reflects the privilege of calling on our friend in times of need. Geographic distance obviously provides friends with a considerable amount of autonomy to pursue their interests alone. A lack of interaction can promote positive relational realities (Stafford, 2005) and some participants observed that the distance has been beneficial for them: It has helped them mature, made them value their friendships more, allowed them to experience things on their own, or pushed them to meet new people. Despite enjoying this freedom, participants still desire connection with their LDFs. Using mediated channels to engage in both "chit chat" and intimate communication allows LDFs to renew their bond and feel more involved in each other's lives. Thus, participants want their autonomy *and* they want to know what their long-distance friends' everyday experiences are. Thus, to balance the large amounts of autonomy with connection, it seems important to routinely "check in" with LDFs and emphasize the importance of "being there" for one another.

Other dialectical tensions include judgment versus acceptance and expressiveness versus protectiveness (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Rawlins, 1992). First, friendship is widely celebrated for its ability to enhance our self-esteem by making us feel liked and provide a sense

of belonging. However, friends are simultaneously valued for their honesty and "objective" advice. Thus, friends must negotiate being non-judgmental *and* completely honest. Participants in the present study reported valuing both qualities. How much friends are perceived to care about each other could mediate this dialectical tension (Rawlins, 1992). For example, criticism can be confirming because it communicates that a friend is important enough to be concerned about (Laing, 1971). So, if such judgment is presented in a caring way, it could be perceived as accepting because one's ideas, thoughts, and actions are taken seriously. Also, LDFs may have to balance their needs for expressiveness and protectiveness. Participants overwhelmingly positioned their friendships on the expressive end of the continuum. Honest, intimate, and boundless self-disclosure is vital to their friendships. However, participants also discussed protective practices such as keeping secrets and exercising restraint when commenting on sensitive issues. Trust develops to the extent that this dialectic is appropriately managed (Rawlins, 1992), so it is important that friends balance these needs such as through the establishment of "rules" regarding the conditions for self-disclosure and those for withholding.

Relationships are sustained, and simultaneously grow, through the successful management of these (and other) ever-changing and ever-present dialectical tensions. The present study demonstrates that LDFs experience many of the same dialectical tensions present in proximal relationships, but they may be realized or negotiated in different ways. For example, proximal friends may manage the dialectic of independence/dependence by establishing Friday nights as a time for hanging out with separate groups of friends while reserving Saturday afternoons for one-on-one interaction. In contrast, LDFs may agree to not call one another during the workweek so they can focus on their own needs and interests. But every Sunday, they

set aside time to have lengthy conversations over the phone. Thus, both relationship types experience this dialectic, but negotiate it in different ways.

A fourth implication involves moving us beyond a definition of "long-distance friendship" rooted in distance to one grounded in communication. Previous definitions have created a line in the sand at a specific point as if one mile in either direction makes a significant difference in how individuals view and maintain these types of friendships. Participants in this study focused on defining long-distance friendship with respect to their ability to access them on-demand for an interaction, the use of mediated channels for communication that goes beyond casual or social friends, and a commitment to expend the time and energy necessary to maintain these relationships.

The last major implication relates to the argument that friendships, especially long-distance friendships, are fragile. Traditionally, friendships have been considered particularly vulnerable to dissolution when confronted with change (Allan & Adams, 1989; Rawlins, 1992; Suttles, 1970; Wiseman, 1986). In addition, unlike familial or marital relationships, friendships are voluntary and lack institutional ties, which makes it easier for individuals to terminate the relationship (Wiseman, 1986). However, more current research has demonstrated that friendships are *flexible*, not fragile (Becker, Johnson, Craig, Gilchrist, Haigh, & Lane, 2009).

The present study demonstrates that LDFs may face many challenges and must put forth considerable effort to sustain their friendships. Because these friendships are valued, participants are willing to do whatever it takes to make them last. This means adapting many of their maintenance behaviors to the mediated channels available. For example, LDFs may not be able to provide comfort and support in the same ways as they would face-to-face, so they must adjust their strategies. But this does not mean these communicative behaviors are impossible. Instead,

participants' long-distance friendships are characterized by devotion, resourcefulness, flexibility, adaptation, and patience. Thus, long-distance friendships are well-equipped to weather both changes and challenges, making them flexible, not fragile.

Limitations

As with any research endeavor, this study has its limitations. Despite the value of the findings, the nature of the sample must be recognized as limiting. Although a variety of age groups were represented, all participants were under the age of 45, and most were Caucasian. All participants were also members of a university, either as students or faculty. Scholars must make greater attempts to study more diverse samples to address how long-distance friendships might vary based on race, age, or socioeconomic status. For example, there is an inverse relationship between age and going online, having high-speed internet access at home, using text messaging, reading and creating blogs, and using social networking sites (Fox & Madden, 2005; Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Rainie & Tancer, 2007). Thus, members of older generations may not rely on technology in the same ways as younger generations, which is likely to affect how they maintain long-distance relationships and possibly the extent to which they have them. In addition, members of academic communities are likely to have greater access to computers and the Internet than the general U.S. population. Although mobile phones were a frequently-used channel, having access to other technologies could make maintenance easier because users would have more options to "gratify" their needs. Thus, efforts need to be made to determine how individuals who have limited access to technology maintain long-distance relationships.

A second limitation arises from the friends participants chose to discuss. During the interviews, I asked participants to discuss a female friend they consider to be long-distance and

with whom they still communicate. All participants selected a close friend, and most chose a best friend. Friendships vary considerably in purpose, closeness, interaction, emotional attachment, and commitment. Thus, it is possible that casual, close, and best friendships are maintained in different ways. Although participants sometimes contrasted their close friends with casual friends, more research is needed to determine how (if) less intimate relationships are maintained at a distance.

A third limitation relates to how often participants reported seeing their LDF face-to-face. Visits ranged from once a week to once a year, with an approximate average of four visits per year. No participants reported *never* seeing their LDF in person. Research indicates that periodic face-to-face interaction is associated with higher levels of satisfaction and commitment (Dainton & Aylor, 2002); therefore, the number of opportunities friends have to see one another could impact how they maintain the relationship. LDFs who never see each other face-to-face could have very different relationships than those friends who see one another regularly.

Suggestions for Future Research

Several lines of inquiry for future long-distance relationship research emerged out of the present study. An overarching suggestion is to simply keep examining the phenomenon. First, although the literature on long-distance friendships is growing, it pales in comparison to studies concerning proximal relationships, and even long-distance romantic relationships. Specific areas yet to be explored are men's same-sex, long-distance friendships and cross-sex, long-distance friendships. Second, additional research on the maintenance of friendships is also needed since a majority of the existing literature has focused on maintaining dating or marital relationships (Dainton, Zelley, & Langan, 2003). In addition, more qualitative methods need to be employed in the study of friendship. Traditionally, interpersonal communication research has been

dominated by quantitative methods (Bochner, 2002), which limits what we can know about social relationships and people's perceptions of them.

A fourth, more specific suggestion relates to personal or social networks. Most long-distance relationship research focuses only on the individuals involved in the relationship under study (Sahlstein, 2006). This is troubling because we do not maintain relationships in isolation. Instead, a variety of other network members can support or challenge our relationships. Thus, scholars should examine how relationships, both proximal and long-distance, are managed simultaneously.

Another area ripe for study is an examination of how growing up with access to technology impacts people's views of and enactment of long-distance friendships. For example, today's traditional college students have been exposed to computers for as long as they can remember. How does that impact what they view as public and private messages? A quick perusal of Facebook walls with messages such as "I love you" and "I miss you" calls into question our assumptions that these messages are intended for a close friend and not necessarily everyone with whom she is "friends." Similarly, their consistent exposure to large amounts of stimuli and competing demands have led to a need or desire to multitask. How does this impact maintenance strategies (e.g., sending text messages when I am bored in class or choosing to avoid synchronous, video-based technologies because I will have to focus solely on the interaction)? On a related note, to what extent does technology inhibit meaningful interaction by giving us ready-made conversation topics from a Facebook wall, reducing our uncertainty with little to no interaction? Or, to what extent do Facebook postings and photographs increase our insecurity by leaving open to interpretation how proximal friends are replacing us or how changes following a turning point may push us further apart?

A final suggestion is to compare long-distance relationships that are maintained successfully with those that have faded away. The current study only provides examples of effectively maintained relationships. Due to the many challenges long-distance partners face, it is likely that many more distal relationships are *not* sustained. Making these comparisons could illuminate which strategies are most important to enact when separated geographically. Research could also examine whether there are factors that were apparent when the dyad was proximal that could predict which friendships continue over distance and which dissolve (Johnson, 2001).

Concluding Remarks

In order to remain satisfying, friendships must be constantly renewed, fed by communication that reiterates the importance of the relationship (Lynch, 1977). Simply put, maintenance is necessary to keep these bonds from deteriorating because "after it has started one is still faced with having to make the friendship *work*" (Harré, 1977, p. 341, emphasis in original). Thus, the study of relational maintenance is now regarded as central to communication and personal relationship research (Masuda & Duck, 2002). The current study extends this scholarship by examining how friendships are sustained across geographic distance.

Although long-distance friendships may require more effort and involve more mediated communication, this study demonstrates that LDFs rely on similar maintenance behaviors as geographically-close friends. The strategies employed by participants in the current study (assurances, openness, positivity, joint activities, personal networks, and mediated communication) are also strategies observed in the research program of Laura Stafford and Daniel Canary, which primarily focuses on proximal relationships. This suggests proximal and long-distance friendships may be maintained in very similar ways, which indicates that long-

distance friendships may not be quite as divergent or extraordinary as both cultural assumptions and social science research lead us to believe. Overall, this study demonstrates that long-distance friendships can be satisfying and maintained successfully, which challenges the traditional assumption that relationships exist only when participants are interacting in the same physical space. In the end, despite the difficulties, one thing is for sure: long-distance friendships are possible, prevalent, and purposive.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: DISCUSSION GUIDE

Tell me about a long-distance friend that you are still close to.

How did your friendship begin?

What do you think made you become friends? (i.e. similar characteristics, shared interests, proximity, etc.)

What keeps you friends? (what keeps the relationship strong, important, etc.)

How often do you get to see them face-to-face?

What do you like to do together when you can see each other in person?

When apart, do you do anything to let them know you are thinking about them?

Could you tell me about a time when you did something really nice for them?

What about a time when they did something really nice for you?

Is it difficult not being able to see them face-to-face whenever you want? Why?

Could you tell me about a time when it was really difficult not being able to see your friend in person? How did you handle the situation?

If you had to compare your relationships between your proximal friends and your long-distance friends, how would they be similar and how would they be different?

When you can't see each other face-to-face, how do you communicate with one another?

How have technologies such as [whatever technologies they have mentioned] impacted communication with your long-distance friends?

How do you use [Facebook, cell phone, instant messenger, e-mail, Skype/webcam, letters, greeting cards, etc.] to communicate with your long-distance friend? (i.e. when do they use it, for what types of messages, what features do they like, what do they dislike, etc.)

Are there any other methods you use to communicate with your long-distance friend?

What role does friendship play in your life?

What is the meaning of friendship to you?

APPENDIX B: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION

All applicants are encouraged to read the Form B guidelines. If you have any questions as you develop your Form B, contact your Departmental Review Committee (DRC) or Research Compliance Services at the Office of Research.

FORM B

IRB # _____

Date Received in OR _____

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

Application for Review of Research Involving Human Subjects

I. IDENTIFICATION OF PROJECT

1. **Principal Investigator Co-Principal Investigator:**
   Complete name and address including telephone number and e-mail address

   Jessica T. Smith
   1637 Chenoweth Circle
   Knoxville, TN 37909
   (571) 225-2282 (m)
   (865) 974-8200 (w)
   jsmit198@utk.edu

   Faculty Advisor:
   Complete name and address including telephone number and e-mail address

   Dr. Michelle Violanti
   School of Communication Studies
   University of Tennessee
   293 Communications Building
   Knoxville, TN 37996
   violanti@utk.edu
   (865) 974-7072
   Department: School of Communication Studies

2. Project Classification: *Enter one of the following terms as appropriate:* **Dissertation, Thesis, Class Project, Research Project**, or **Other** (Please specify)

For doctoral dissertation

3. Title of Project: "The Long-distance friendships of college women"

4. Starting Date: *Specify the intended starting date or insert* "**Upon IRB Approval**":

Upon IRB Approval

5. Estimated Completion Date: November 2009

6. External Funding *(if any)**:*** No external funding

- **Grant/Contract Submission Deadline:**
- **Funding Agency:**
- **Sponsor ID Number *(if known)*:**
- **UT Proposal Number *(if known):***

II. PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The proposed study will address the meaning of friendship to college women. I am particularly interested in their long-distance friendships, which can be characterized as a friend who does not live near the participant so seeing that person every day would be impossible. Specific areas of interest are: what qualities female college students look for in a friend, how friendships develop, what role do friendships play in their lives, how their friendships transitioned from proximal to long-distance, how they keep in touch with long-distance friends, and why it is important to maintain their long-distance friendships.

III. DESCRIPTION AND SOURCE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Approximately 10-20 University of Tennessee undergraduate female students enrolled in Communication Studies 210 (Public Speaking) will participate. A required component of CS 210 is participating in graduate student or faculty research (worth 30 points of their grade). All participants used in this study will be at least 18 years of age.

IV. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The principal investigator has received permission from the Basic Course Director to use sections of her CS 210 classes to recruit participants. She will announce the study to her students and will provide my email address so the students can communicate with me. If students do not want to participate in the study, they will be given an alternative project in which to participate in order to receive their research participation credit.

Upon IRB approval, the principal investigator will set up interview appointments with the students who agreed to participate. Email will be used for arranging interview appointments and for "member checking" purposes (discussed below). Each participant will be assigned a

number and that number will be matched with their email address. These email addresses will be kept securely, and separate from the interview data, and destroyed once the study has been completed.

The face-to-face interviews will take place on the University of Tennessee's campus in a classroom or meeting room in the Communications Building. I anticipate the interviews will last approximately one hour. During the interviews, a semi-structured, open-ended discussion guide will be used by the principal investigator (attached to this document). The interviews will be tape recorded if approval has been given by the participant. If the participant does not wish to be tape recorded, she will still be included in the study and she will still receive research participation credit.

Before being interviewed, an informed consent form will be read and signed by all participants. This consent form will tell them about the general purpose of the study and will include the following pieces of information about their rights as a participant: they can cease participating in the study at any time without penalty, they are free to not answer any questions they may be uncomfortable with, and that their indentity will be kept confidential. The consent form will also include an affirmative statement that confirms they are at least 18 years old and will inform them where the digital recordings of the interviews will be kept and when they will be destroyed.

The participants' identities will be kept confidential. Confidentiality will be ensured by limiting knowledge of the participants' names and email addresses to the principal investigator and by asking the participants not to reveal any identifying information during the interviews. If a participant does mention identifying information during the interview, it will be left out of the transcript and not included in the final report. Pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant and those pseudonyms will be used in the transcripts and final paper. The principal investigator will also serve as the transcriber, so no outside person will have access to the interview transcripts. The interview recordings will be digital and will be kept in a password-protected folder on the personal computer of the principal investigator (on campus, 101 Communications Building). The interview transcripts will be kept in a separate password-protected folder on the personal computer of the principal investigator (on campus, 101 Communications Building). The informed consent forms will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the office of the principal investigator (on campus, 101 Communications Building). The interview recordings and transcripts will be destroyed once the study has been completed. The informed consent forms will be kept for three years, according to Federal guidelines, and then they will be destroyed.

After all interviews have been transcribed by the principal investigator, summaries of each participant's interview will be presented to them so they have the opportunity to review the "results" of the study (e.g. the themes of the interviews). This "member check" will give the participants a chance to challenge or correct the interpretations of the principal investigator. These summaries will be emailed to the participants.

V. SPECIFIC RISKS AND PROTECTION MEASURES

There are potential risks involved in this study for two reasons. First, when recording interviews, there is a foreseeable risk of breach of confidentiality because a respondent's comments could be linked directly to them via the recording**.** Secondly, there is also the chance that discussing friendships could trigger emotional responses. These risks will be minimized as much as possible by using the following methods:

1. Participants will be asked to read and sign a consent form that tells them about the general purposes of the study and their rights as a resesarch participant.
2. They will be told that their participation is completely voluntary (they can choose to participate in a different project provided by their instructor).
3. Participants will also be told that they can cease participating at any time and that they do not have to answer any questions that make them uncomfortable.
4. Participants can turn the tape recorder off at any time.
5. The participants' identities will be kept confidential. Confidentiality will be ensured by limiting knowledge of the participants' names and email addresses to the principal investigator and by asking the participants not to reveal any identifying information during the interviews. If a participant does mention identifying information during the interview, it will be left out of the transcript and not included in the final report. Pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant and those pseudonyms will be used in the transcripts and final paper.
6. The principal investigator will also serve as the transcriber, so no outside person will have access to the interview transcripts.
7. The interview recordings will be digital and will be kept in a password-protected folder on the personal computer of the principal investigator (on campus, 101 Communications Building).
8. The interview transcripts will be kept in a separate password-protected folder on the personal computer of the principal investigator (on campus, 101 Communications Building).
9. The informed consent forms will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the office of the principal investigator (on campus, 101 Communications Building).
10. The interview recordings and transcripts will be destroyed once the study has been completed.
11. The informed consent forms will be kept for three years, according to Federal guidelines, and then they will be destroyed.
12. In case a participant gets upset during the interview, they will once again be reassured that they can cease their participation. The principal investigator will also have contact information for the UT Counseling Center that can be given to the participant.
13. After all interviews have been transcribed, summaries of each participant's interview will be presented to them so they have the opportunity to review the "results" of the study (e.g. the themes of the interviews). This "member check" will give the participants a chance to challenge or correct the interpretations of the principal investigator.

VI. BENEFITS

Although there is a significant amount of research on friendships in general, there is little research specifically about long-distance friendships despite their prevalence. Therefore, this research will help to fill a void in the existing literature. The proposed study may also offer participants an opportunity to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their long-distance friendships. Having this time to examine their friendships will possibly allow them to more clearly understand the tensions that distance can place on relationships and help them to

formulate new strategies to improve their friendships despite geographic distance. The findings from the proposed study also have the potential of offering insight to a larger community as well. It is my hope to eventually integrate theory and practice by providing universities with information about the importance of friendships to college students (especially first-year students) making the transition from home to campus. I feel that my research has the potential of assisting various groups on university campuses whose mission is to help students feel more comfortable in their new environments (such as freshmen orientation, residence advisors, counseling, and academic advising).

VII. METHODS FOR OBTAINING "INFORMED CONSENT" FROM PARTICIPANTS

Participants will read and sign a consent form (described above and attached to this document) before interviewing begins. They will also be encouraged to ask any questions they may have regarding the study or their rights as research participant. The informed consent forms will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the office of the principal investigator (on campus, 101 Communications Building). The informed consent forms will be kept for three years, according to Federal guidelines, and then they will be destroyed.

VIII. QUALIFICATIONS OF THE INVESTIGATOR(S) TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

The principal investigator has a M.A. in Communication Studies from Bowling Green State University and is in her third year of the Ph.D. program in the College of Communication & Information at the University of Tennessee. In addition, she has conducted research with the college student population in previous studies and has also gone through Human Subjects/IRB training. Lastly, she will be advised by a faculty member in the College of Communication and Information.

IX. FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT TO BE USED IN THE RESEARCH

A digital recorder will be used to record the interviews. Participants will be asked if they are comfortable being recorded and if they are not, the recorder will be turned off. If the participant does not wish to be tape recorded, she will still be included in the study and she will still receive research participation credit. Participants who do not mind being taped, will indicate this on the informed consent form. The participants will be told that at any time during the interview, they can ask that the tape recorder be turned off. The digital recordings will be kept in a password-protected file on the personal computer of the principal investigator (on campus, 101 Communications Building). The recordings will be kept separate from the transcripts and the consent forms. Both the transcripts and the recordings will be destroyed once the study is complete.

X. RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PRINCIPAL/CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR(S)

The following information must be entered verbatim into this section:
By compliance with the policies established by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Tennessee the principal investigator(s) subscribe to the principles stated in "The Belmont Report" and standards of professional ethics in all research, development, and related activities involving human subjects under the auspices of The University of Tennessee. The principal investigator(s) further agree that:

1. **Approval will be obtained from the Institutional Review Board prior to instituting any change in this research project.**

2. **Development of any unexpected risks will be immediately reported to Research Compliance Services.**

3. **An annual review and progress report (Form R) will be completed and submitted when requested by the Institutional Review Board.**

4. **Signed informed consent documents will be kept for the duration of the project and for at least three years thereafter at a location approved by the Institutional Review Board.**

XI. SIGNATURES

ALL SIGNATURES MUST BE ORIGINAL. The Principal Investigator should keep the original copy of the Form B and submit a copy with original signatures for review. Type the name of each individual above the appropriate signature line. Add signature lines for all Co-Principal Investigators, collaborating and student investigators, faculty advisor(s), department head of the Principal Investigator, and the Chair of the Departmental Review Committee. The following information should be typed verbatim, with added categories where needed:

Principal Investigator: Jessica Thern Smith

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Co-Principal Investigator _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Student Advisor (if any): Michelle Violanti

Signature: _____ Date: _____

XII. DEPARTMENT REVIEW AND APPROVAL

The application described above has been reviewed by the IRB departmental review committee and has been approved. The DRC further recommends that this application be reviewed as:

[ ] Expedited Review -- Category(s): _____

OR

[ ] Full IRB Review

Chair, DRC: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Department Head: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Protocol sent to Research Compliance Services for final approval on (Date): _____

Approved:
Research Compliance Services
Office of Research
1534 White Avenue

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C: VERIFICATION OF INFORMED CONSENT

You are invited to participate in a study about the geographically close and long-distance friendships of women. The results of this research study will be used in the researcher's doctoral dissertation and may be published in an academic journal. In terms of personal benefits, this study may offer you an opportunity to reflect on the qualities of your friendships, possibly helping you to formulate new strategies to improve your friendships despite geographic distance.

Participation in this research involves being interviewed, where I will ask you to talk about your friendships. I estimate that your participation will take approximately one hour. The interview will take place in a classroom in the Communications Building of the University of Tennessee. If you approve, the interview will be tape recorded. You may ask that the tape recorder be turned off at any time during the interview. Only I will have access to the digital recordings. They will be kept in a password-protected folder on the personal computer of the principal investigator. After the study has been completed, these files will be permanently deleted.

There are no foreseeable physical or psychological risks involved in this study that are greater than those normally encountered in daily life. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate in this study, your instructor will provide you with a different research project to participate in so you can receive your research participation credit. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or explanation. If you decide after you are interviewed that you no longer want to participate in the study, you may request that your information not be included in the study's final report.

I will protect the confidentiality of you as a participant and of your responses throughout the study. Only I will have access to the interview recordings and transcripts. Your identity will be altered within any written or published materials. Any details you mention in your interview, such as hometown, school, names of friends, etc., will be replaced or omitted. In the study's final report, I may directly quote you, but your name will not be attached to the quoted statements. Instead, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym that will be used to identify you in the transcripts and final report.

If you have any questions, concerns, or comments about this study, please contact me or the project's advisor, Dr. Michelle Violanti:

Jessica Thern Smith
School of Communication Studies
University of Tennessee
293 Communications Building
Knoxville, TN 37996
jsmit198@utk.edu
(865) 974-8200

Dr. Michelle Violanti
School of Communication Studies
University of Tennessee
293 Communications Building
Knoxville, TN 37996
violanti@utk.edu
(865) 974-7072

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Tennessee Office of Research:

1534 White Ave.
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
Phone: (865) 974-3466
Fax: (865) 974-7400
Email: research@utk.edu

I _____ voluntarily agree to participate in this research effort and affirm that I am at least 18 years old.
(print your name)

I _____ voluntarily agree to have my interview digitally recorded
(print your name)

_____

(signature) (date)

APPENDIX D: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

25 March 2009

Ms. Jessica T. Smith & Dr. Michelle Violanti
School of Communication Studies
293 Communications Bldg
University of Tennessee

Dear Ms. Smith and Professor Violanti;

Thank you for submitting your Form B application for review of your research protocol entitled "The long-distance friendships of college women."

After review, the College Review Committee has approved forwarding your application for expedited review. A copy of your application will be forwarded to the University of Tennessee Research Compliances Service for their review and action. You may not begin data collection until you receive their approval. Applications qualifying for "expedited" review may be acted on within a couple of weeks, while those requiring full IRB review may take as long as 6-7 weeks for action. To enquire about the status of University level review, contact Research Compliance Services in the Office of Research at (865) 974-7697.

I hope that your research goes well. Remember to inform us if there are any significant changes in your protocol, or if you encounter any unanticipated difficulties with research participants.

Sincerely,

Benjamin J. Bates
Chair, College Review Committee
College of Communication and Information

cc: Brenda Lawson, University of Tennessee Research Compliance Services

VITA

Jessica Thern Smith was born in Fairfax, Virginia, the only child of Linda Thern-Smith and Ralph Smith. Jessica began her academic career at Longwood University, graduating summa cum laude, in 2004, with a Bachelors of Arts degree in Communication Studies. She received her Masters of Arts degree in 2006 from Bowling Green State University. Following a year as a special events coordinator, Jessica entered the University of Tennessee to pursue her Doctoral degree in Communication & Information.

At Bowling Green State University, Jessica taught public speaking and interpersonal communication. At the University of Tennessee, she taught both introductory and advanced public speaking, interpersonal communication, and communication theory. Jessica earned the 2007—2008 Outstanding Graduate Teaching Associate Award.

During her graduate career, Jessica participated in numerous regional and national conferences, presenting ten papers. She is an active member of the National Communication Association, Southern States Communication Association, and the American Association for University Women.