

Expanded study will track adolescent behavior on Facebook

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A large-scale, long-term UT Dallas study focusing on adolescent friendships and electronic communication is expanding to include Facebook posts.

A research team led by Dr. Marion Underwood of The University of Texas at Dallas will capture and code the content of [adolescent](#) activity on Facebook, the most popular social [networking website](#). The new research is supported by a more than \$408,000, two-year grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The NIH earlier funded Underwood's study of teen texts, e-mails and [instant messages](#) with a \$3.4 million grant.

According to national surveys conducted by the [Pew Internet and American Life Project](#), 73 percent of teens and preteens (12 – 17 years of age) use social networking sites. About 51 percent of the young people check [social networking](#) sites daily, and 22 percent check more than 10 times per day.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recently reported that social media may offer adolescents benefits such as increased opportunities for social connection and [communication](#), academic opportunities and access to health information, but also warned that use of social media may increase risks of cyber bullying and "sexting." Despite the serious concerns, little research has examined the content of adolescent Facebook communication, said Underwood, Ashbel Smith Professor in UT Dallas' School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences.

"Although systematic studies of Facebook communication are lacking, the structure of Facebook has the potential to provide great social satisfaction but also painful social rejection," she said. "Facebook allows users to customize an online profile with information about relationships, activities, likes and dislikes, and numerous photographs, all of which are visible and available for comments posted by others for all to see. Comments can be positive but also negative."

Facebook communication will be analyzed from a sample of 200 adolescents participating in the ongoing study of friendships and social adjustment. The study began when participants were 9 years old and since then has involved yearly assessments of relationships and adjustment.

Four years ago, the summer before the participants started high school, the children were given BlackBerry devices with service plans paid for by the researchers, including unlimited text messaging, internet access for email and a limited number of voice minutes. The researchers have been capturing the content of all text messaging and email sent and received on these BlackBerry devices.

Starting this summer, and for each year of the two-year study, the adolescents and their parents will be asked to grant permission for the investigators to access the young people's Facebook communication by installing a Facebook application developed by Arkovi, an Ohio-based company.

The Facebook application will record wall posts, status updates, in-boxes and photo albums. All Facebook communication will be captured from all devices used. Facebook content will be stored by Arkovi and maintained in a searchable online archive maintained by another firm, Global Relay, for later coding and analysis.

Studying the content of Facebook communication is vitally important because adolescents and young adults are heavily engaged in Facebook in ways that likely affect their relationships and adjustment, Underwood said.

She added that Facebook has the potential to be powerfully reinforcing because every posting can be "liked" (by pressing a thumbs-up icon) or commented on by others. But it also has great potential to make some people feel lonely because of constant social comparisons among acquaintances.

"Facebook can also be used for intentional, public bullying," she said. "Facebook users can post negative remarks on others' walls or make hurtful comments about others' pictures that can be viewed by all of that person's friends."

By coding the content of Facebook activity in the context of an ongoing longitudinal study measuring [friendships](#) and adjustment, the study will examine how social development and adjustment from third grade onward - as assessed by observations, parents, peers, teachers and self-reports - relates to the content of Facebook communication by a typical group of adolescents.

"Studying the content of Facebook communication could reveal much about adolescents' developing social relationships, the extent to which youth communicate with strangers, and if they are harassed, by whom," Underwood said.

She said the findings could have implications for policy and parenting.

"This study will also illuminate whether some features of Facebook communication are related to psychological health for youth," Underwood said. "Nothing about Facebook has to be inherently negative."

Teenagers may use Facebook in positive ways: to express their identities, share information with friends, plan social events and service projects and school activities, and as a means of seeking social support in times of stress."

Provided by University of Texas at Dallas

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