

Facebook or phone call? Family dynamics might decide

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(Phys.org)—Families are relying on technology more and more to keep in touch, but family dynamics play a role in choosing which technologies they use for communicating.

That's according to new research by doctoral student Emily Cramer and her faculty mentor, Edward Mabry, associate professor of [communication](#).

Their preliminary research on the use of computer-mediated

communication technology showed that families who valued open exchange and communication – a conversation orientation – tended to use Facebook and Skype/. Families who put a high value on avoiding conflict and encouraging [conformity](#) – conformity orientation – tended to use more email, phone calls and texting.

The researchers' definition of communication styles is based on a standard communication scale designed to measure a family's conversation orientation. For example, a family with a high conversation orientation might have long, relaxed conversations and enjoy talking to each other even when family members disagree; a family with a high conformity orientation might stress the importance of unquestioning obedience.



Bill and Kerry Sinksy have four children in college, including UWM senior, Sean, and use multiple new technologies, including social media to stay in touch. Credit: Alan Magayne-Roshak

Those styles drive how the families use new technology to communicate, according to Cramer and Mabry's research findings. "Families with a higher conversational style tend to use richer media like [Facebook](#) or video calling," says Cramer, "while families with a higher conformity style use leaner media like email and telephone calls to communicate."

Findings from Cramer and Mabry's research, "The Impact of Computer-Mediated [Communication Technology](#) on [Family Communication](#) Patterns: An Exploratory Study," were presented this past summer at the International Association for Relationship Research Conference in Chicago.

Cramer's idea for the research grew out of Mabry's graduate seminar on the use of media in communication, she says. In the class, she studied the use of media in different contexts, but discovered that not much work had been done on how [family dynamics](#) affected or were affected by the use of new communication technologies.

The research results were based on a survey of U.S. college students about their preferred forms of communication with their parents and siblings. In general, says Cramer, students from the higher "conformity" families tended to communicate less with their parents than did the students from more "conversational" families. And, not surprisingly, students in general tended to use the technology preferred by their parents.

In a related study, the researchers also found that family size had an

impact on communications. Students from larger families tended to communicate more frequently with their siblings than their parents in a way that seemed to transcend the media used. "We'd like to look at that more," says Cramer, "to see how [family](#) demographics manifest themselves in these new contexts."

One promising finding of the research was that families, even older members, are adopting the new technologies. "More and more, parents are turning to texting to talk with their kids," says Cramer.

Whatever their style, she adds, "families are learning these new technologies, and they want to stay close."

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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