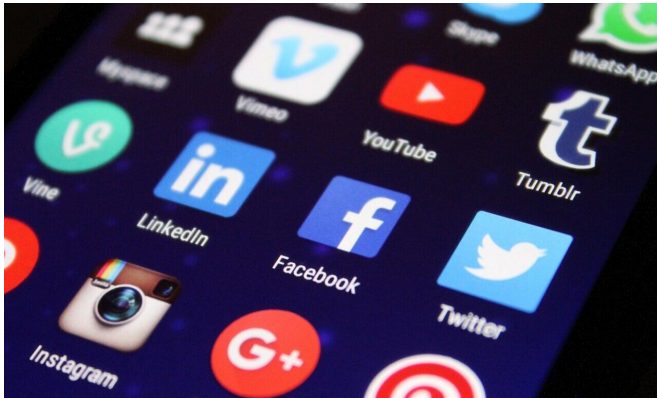


Can relationships flourish through tech alone?

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"Shelter in place" is now the norm in much of the country, thanks to COVID-19. As a result, connections once made face to face are now happening electronically in both work and personal lives. John Caughlin heads the department of communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and specializes in interpersonal communication and the role of technology in close relationships. He spoke with News Bureau social sciences editor Craig Chamberlain.

Do relationships necessarily suffer under these circumstances, when technology is our only means of connection?

People used to think that it was not possible to sustain relationships through technologies, but that idea has largely been debunked. Sometimes it takes longer to convey a sentiment via technology than it would face to face, but people are pretty clever at showing emotions and affection in ways that get around whatever limitations technologies might impose. Even when they use something that seems limited—like text messaging—people make up all kinds of ways to convey things about their

emotions and their relationships, such as using ALL CAPS, purposeful misspellings and emoticons.

And, of course, the tools have become very rich over time. The first people sending text messages probably couldn't imagine using multimedia messages and emoji. But even before these more-recent developments, people were pretty clever about conveying what they needed to with whatever tools they had.

What role does social media play?

People spend a lot of time on [social media](#) doing things that are not particularly well-suited for maintaining close bonds. They can spend a lot of time scanning their feeds or broadcasting information to many people without actually interacting with any particular individuals. Such uses of social media can help someone have a general sense of what is going on with old friends and acquaintances, but they are not likely to help people feel really close to one another.

But social media can also promote closeness. Exchanging private messages or even interacting in a public space online seems to matter. If you want to maintain a close connection with someone, just being on the same social media platform is not going to do it. It requires specific attention to that person, ideally with back-and-forth interaction.

How much should we worry about losing friendships or personal connections?

Even before the rise of social media, friendships were often considered "renewable," meaning that it is not always expected that people maintain focused and consistent contact. Reconnections can occur in friendships in ways we wouldn't expect with other kinds of relationships, such as those with past romantic partners.

Given the current crisis, there are lots of stories

about people reconnecting with friends who they have not really talked to in a while. Communication technologies let us do that even though we can't physically meet.

Conversely, I would also expect that some work- or activities-based friendships will be paused during the current situation, but it would be normal for those friendships to pick up again once more regular in-person contact is reestablished. I suspect most people will be excited to see each other when they get a chance.

Your own research has focused on how people combine technology and face-to-face communication within romantic and other [close relationships](#). Are there keys to good and bad communication in that mix?

There is no doubt that relationships can be strained any time people experience stressors, and the COVID-19 situation certainly counts. But good communication is also one of the most important factors in coping with stressors, and that goes for how we use our digital tools. We can use our smartphones in ways that facilitate good [communication](#), but we can also use them in ways that interfere.

For example, spouses who are quarantined together might be able to talk to each other about things one of them saw on social [media](#), giving them something to potentially bond over. But if one spouse is texting with friends while the other is trying to have a conversation, then it can get in the way. How we use digital tools is usually more important than just having them.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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