ABSTRACT

GRIER, AMANDA PHOEBE. Technology Use as a Relational Management Tool for First Year College Students. (Under the direction of Dr. Joann Keyton).

First year college students (FYC) rely heavily on communication technologies to maintain parental ties. However, little is known about how FYC students use technology as a tool to avoid topics with their parents. The research study was designed as a two-part, multi-method study. Part one was an online survey given to FYC students, and results indicate that students choose to text or call their parents over other technologies. Results also show that topic avoidance and reasons for topic avoidance are significantly slightly correlated, but the regression model showed no significant results. Part two expanded on the survey results during focus group discussions. Technology was described as a tool to for students to engage in topic avoidance strategies, maintain the parent-student relationship, and gain independence and privacy while staying in touch with parents.
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Technology Use as a Relational Management Tool for First Year College Students

by
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BIOGRAPHY

I grew up in Fayetteville, NC with my mother, father, and younger brother. My parents have always supported my educational goals which has helped me achieve academic success. I graduated from North Carolina State University with a B.A. in Communication with a concentration in media and minor in journalism in May 2014. I started the M.S. in Communication program at North Carolina State University in August 2015. My research interests are interpersonal communication and media studies. After graduation, I plan on continuing my education with a Ph.D. program.
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Technology Use as a Relational Management Tool for First Year College Students

Advances in technology have increased communication between college students and parents resulting in closer parent-student relationships (Sax & Wartman, 2010; Smith, Nguyen, Lai, Leshed, & Baumer, 2012). Yet, the saying “what you don’t know doesn’t hurt you,” is used to highlight how people often avoid topics in close relationships to avoid conflict. Research supports that avoiding sensitive topics in close relationships can benefit the relationship (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). Topic avoidance has been studied in family and friendship contexts focusing on gender, age, and parenting style differences (Rubin, R. B. Rubin, Graham, Perse, & Seibold, 2010). While technology is used as a tool for college students and parents to communicate, more research is needed to understand if technology can be used as an effective tool for students to avoid topics with their parents and what strategies they use.

The purpose of this study is to understand how first year college (FYC) students use communication technologies as a tool to maintain parental ties while also using technology as a tool to avoid discussing sensitive topics with their parents. It is also worth mentioning that FYC students are in the stage of emerging adulthood, marked by ages 18 to 25, which is a life period of exploration and continuous change (Arnett, 2000; Hall & Feister, 2015). Today’s FYC students are also known as millennial students who have grown up in a digital world (Howe & Strauss, 2007). With more access to technology than past generations, this study looks at what technologies students choose to use when communicating with their parents and why. This study can help students and parents understand how technology can be used as a relationship maintenance tool. This research also gives more insight into how
communication technologies can be used as a tool to engage in effective topic avoidance strategies.

**Review of Literature**

**College Students’ Use of Communication Technologies**

Communication technologies are digital applications such as texting, email, phone calls, video chat, and social networking used to process and communicate information (Sarigiani, Trumbell, & Camarena, 2013). A recent study (Golonka, 2013) asked 180 college students at a mid-sized private institution in the southeastern United States to self-report their technology use with their parents. The study found that college students on average receive and initiate 10.92 cell phone calls, 49.88 text messages, and 6.04 email exchanges in a week with parents (Golonka, 2013). College students use a wide range of communication technologies and consider convenience, depth, purpose of conversation, and overall situation when choosing which communication technology to use when speaking to their parents (Connell & Dworkin, 2012; Smith et al., 2012). College students often use communication technologies to speak to their parents to catch up, ask for money, get family updates, say hello, and discuss problems or decisions they need to make (Levine & Dean, 2012). These conversations are most often through phone calls and text messaging (Sax & Weintraub, 2014). This study will focus on what communication technologies students choose to use when communicating with their parents.

College students that are millennials born between 1982 and 2004 (Howe & Strauss, 2007), have been immersed in a digital world. Millennial students are more likely to have what Cline and Fay (1990) coined helicopter moms who constantly communicate with their
children, involve themselves in their children’s lives, and help their children solve their problems and make decisions, known as helicopter parenting (Odenweller, Booth-Butterfield, & Weber, 2014). During the transition to college, millennial students often remain close to their parents (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007). Yet, research suggests that helicopter parenting can delay student’s development of independence (Price, 2010). Research also suggest that parents are more involved in millennial college students’ lives, and in 2009, 41% of college students stayed in touch with their parents by phone, email, texts, or daily visits (Levine & Dean, 2012). When millennial college students move away from their family homes to enter college, they might rely heavily on communication technologies to keep in contact with family members because they have grown up in a digital world.

Technology is a tool that is used for college-aged students and parents to keep in touch, help maintain their bond, and is a positive attachment-seeking behavior (Sarigiani, Trumbell, & Camarena, 2013). A recent study found that college-aged children and parents often contact each other equally through cellphones (Miller-Ott, Kelly, & Duran, 2014). This might suggest that millennial college students encourage communication with parents while at college by contacting their parents through technology at the same frequency which might also encourage helicopter parenting.

Millennial college students have easier access to a wide variety of communication technologies than past generations. While college students are using communication technologies to communicate with their parents more than past generations, research on technology use often focuses on a specific technology. To understand what technologies
FYC students choose to use when communicating with their parents, the following research question is asked:

RQ1: What communication technologies do first year college students choose to use to communicate with parents.

**Topic Avoidance**

Topic avoidance occurs when someone chooses to strategically avoid discussing about a topic to someone through topic avoidance strategies (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2011). “The research on topic avoidance illustrates privacy rule strategy that is used when individuals feel compelled to keep information protected within the privacy boundary” (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2015, p. 343). Petronio (1991) found that adolescents and young adults engage in topic avoidance to regulate privacy boundaries. FYC students are most likely to be living away from their parents’ home for the first time. Therefore, they might use technology as a tool to engage in topic avoidance and use different topic avoidance strategies than when communicating with their parents face to face.

Topic avoidance is used as a strategy to manage one’s privacy by avoiding talking about certain topics to friends, romantic partners, strangers, and family members (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2011). Emerging adults consider their family relational culture, quality of relationship, and relational risk when revealing private information to their parents, and they are most likely to avoid topics with a negative valence (Hammonds, 2015). Topics often avoided in close relationships include: relationship issues, negative experiences or failures, romantic relationship experiences, sexual experiences, friendships, dangerous behavior, everyday activities, other family members, money, deep conversations, drinking or drugs,
and religion (Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a, 1995b). Sex differences in parents also affect topic avoidance, as adolescents and emerging adults both engage in more topic avoidance with fathers than mothers (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). While this study does not focus on gender differences, it will focus on what parent college students communicate with the most through technology.

Topic avoidance can benefit close relationships, and Guerrero and Afifi 1995a found that close parent-child relationships have a high amount of topic avoidance. The main reasons people choose to engage in topic avoidance are relationship (e.g., relationship protection, and relationship destruction), individual (e.g., identity protection and management, and privacy needs), and information based motivations (e.g., quality of expected information, and futility of discussion). People avoid discussing certain topics through different topic avoidance strategies (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). College students use several strategies when engaging in topic avoidance with their parents such as avoiding through deception, showing disinterest in the topic, or anger (Mazur & Hubbard, 2004). Yet, research has not studied differences in strategies when technology is used to engage in topic avoidance with parents.

Topic avoidance can be used as a privacy management tool to protect one from negative information and maintain relationship satisfaction (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004). While research has studied how topic avoidance relates to relationship closeness in family relationships, millennial FYC students is a unique population that has not been studied in this context. Smetana and Metzger (2008) suggest that as adolescents grow older, they feel less obligated to disclose topics to their parents. While research suggests that personal disclosure
creates close relationships (Petronio, 2002), disclosure of personal issues should be
discretionary rather than required (Smetana & Metzger, 2008). Since past research suggests
that topic avoidance benefits close relationships (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000), this study will also
focus on how perceived relationship closeness is related to FYC students’ technology use to
engage in topic avoidance and their reasons for topic avoidance.

Relationship closeness is conceptualized as the degree of interdependence
experienced cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally between parent and child (Dibble,
Levine, & Park, 2012). This research will focus on what topics FYC students avoid with their
parents, reasons for topic avoidance, and what strategies they use to avoid topics with their
parents when using technology. This research will help close the gap of research on how
communication technologies are used as a tool by FYC students to avoid topics with their
parents. There has also been a lack of focus on the role technology plays in topic avoidance
strategies even though families often use communication technologies. To study how
millennial college students’ close ties with their parents affect how they use technology to
engage in topic avoidance, the following research questions are asked:

RQ2: How does the level of relationship closeness between first year college students
and their parents affect topic avoidance and reasons for topic avoidance when using
communication technologies?

RQ3: How do first year college students use different communication technologies as
a tool to avoid topics with their parents?

Technology’s Role in Relationship Maintenance
Technology continues to become more accessible through various mediums, and multiple communication technologies are used to maintain relationships (Baym, Zhang, & Lin, 2004). As parents and emerging adults use technology more, research has started to focus on how technology can be used as a tool to maintain relationships. Communication with parents during the child’s transition to college can create an easier adjustment to college and is positively associated with attachment (Sarigiani, Trumbell, & Camarena, 2013). In a recent study, participants were asked about technology’s role in their relationship closeness with their parents since they moved away to college (Smith et al., 2012). Relationships with parents most often stayed the same, or participants felt the relationship with their parents strengthened after moving away through their technology use. (Smith et al., 2012). This suggests communication technologies are a tool that can be used by college students to maintain or strengthen family ties during the transition to college.

Cellphone use is positively correlated with relationship-satisfaction (Agliata & Renk, 2008). A study on college students’ use of technology with parents found “college students who report more supportive, satisfying, and emotionally intimate parental relationships talk to their parent on the phone more often” (Gentzler, Oberhauser, Westerman, & Nadorff, 2011, p. 72). This research suggests if college students have a high satisfaction level with their relationship with family members, they will use technology more often to communicate with family members. Another study, (Forward, Sansom-Livolsi, & McGovern, 2008) found that when communication is encouraged by the opposite sex parent, it can create stronger relationships years after the child leaves the home. Yet, both men and women college-aged
children communicate more often with mothers than fathers but report they want more interaction with their fathers (Sax & Weintraub, 2014).

Family communication can have a significant impact on family satisfaction with college-aged children. As technology allows for college students to communicate with their parents more often, parents can have a significant influence on their child’s life at college. Communication reciprocity between parents and college-aged children can help in students’ adjustment to college, lower their distress levels, and increase levels of self-worth (Agliata & Renk, 2008). Past research has focused on college student’s technology use with their parents, but this study focuses on technology use in relation to the parent-student relationship and how it has changed or not.

RQ4: How do FYC students describe how their relationship with their parents has or has not changed since attending college and the role technology plays in these changes?

Methods: Study One

Participants

Part 1 of the study sampled students at North Carolina State University (NCSU), as FYC students are more likely to be moving away from their parents for the first time. Inclusion criteria for the study were (a) FYC students (b) who use communication technology to communicate with their parents regularly (more than once a week), (c) lived at their parent’s home before attending college, and (d) are the ages of 18 to 25. Participants for this study were recruited through flyers posted in freshmen dorms. Access was granted by each FYC dorm’s resident advisor who approved and then distributed the flyers. Snow ball
sampling was used to find participants who were FYC students. From the 140 survey responses received from FYC students, 115 (female = 65.22%, N = 75; male = 34.78%, N = 40) were used for data analysis. Twenty-five participants were omitted from the study as they did not meet the inclusion criteria.

Data Collection

Participants were asked to take an online survey through Qualtrics Survey Software and were emailed a link to the survey. Participants were asked to consent to participate in the study after reading the online informed consent form. If the participant did not consent, they were taken to the end of the survey, and no data were collected. The online survey also asked participants to confirm that they met the inclusion criteria; 18.86% did not.

The online survey focused on FYC student’s technology use with the parent who they communicate with most often through communication technologies since leaving their home to attend college. Only the participant’s sex was collected for demographic data. The online survey was taken at a place and time that was convenient for the participant. A sample of the online survey can be found in Appendix 1. The quantitative data from the survey responses were evaluated to answer the research questions, RQ1 and RQ2. The online survey data served as the basis for further development of the focus group question schedule.

Measures

RQ1 included an 8 item Likert-type scale with a 5 point Likert-type response set (5 = always, 1 = never) to identify how often participants use various communication technologies. The communication technology items included: email, social networking sites, text messages, multimedia messages, online instant messaging, phone calls, video chat, and
other. The survey item *other* was omitted because participants did not identify other communication technologies.

RQ2 included three Likert-type scales to understand how the level of relationship closeness between FYC students and their parents affect how students manage privacy through topic avoidance when using communication technologies. To measure the independent variable, *relationship closeness* between FYC students and their parents, the 12-item self-report Unidimensional Relationship Closeness Scale (URCS) was used (Dibble, Levine, & Park, 2012). The URCS was created and tested by Dibble, Levine, and Park (2012); high reliability has been reported across relationship types; college dating couples, female friends and strangers, friends, and family members (α = .96). The 12-item scale included scale items such as “My relationship with my mother/father is close,” and “My mother/father and I disclose important personal things to each other.” These items were accompanied by a seven-point, Likert-type response set ranging from agree (7) to disagree (1) (Dibble, Levine, & Park, 2012, p. 557).

To measure the dependent variables, *topic avoidance* and *motives for topic avoidance*, the Topic Avoidance Scale and Reasons for Topic Avoidance Scale were used (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995b). The 8 item Likert-type topic avoidance scale included 5 topics (relationship issues, dating experiences, sexual experiences, negative life experiences, and friendships); its overall reliability has been reported as α = .93 (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a). The scale includes items such as “Discussing past/present romantic relationships and dates,” and “Discussing failures, such as doing poorly in a class or being fired from a job” (Rubin, R.
The items were accompanied by a five-point, Likert-type response set ranging from *always avoid* (5) to *never avoid* (1).

The 12 item Likert-type reasons for topic avoidance scale included 4 reasons (Self-Protection, Relationship Protection, Partner Unresponsiveness, and Social Inappropriateness). Differences in reliability have been reported when mothers and fathers were the target of conversation (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995b). When fathers were the target of conversation, Cronbach’s alphas were reported as: self-protection ($\alpha = .76$), relationship protection ($\alpha = .86$), and partner unresponsiveness ($\alpha = .78$). Cronbach’s alphas were lower when mothers were the target of the conversation: self-protection ($\alpha = .73$), relationship protection ($\alpha = .80$), partner unresponsiveness ($\alpha = .77$; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995b; Rubin, R. B., Rubin, A. M., Graham, Perse, & Seibold, 2010). Reliabilities could not be computed for social inappropriateness because it is comprised of a single item. Items for the scale include items such as self-protection: “I would be embarrassed to disclose,” relationship protection: “Disclosure could lead to conflict,” partner unresponsiveness: “This person lacks knowledge relevant to my problem,” and social inappropriateness: “It would be socially inappropriate to discuss this topic” (Rubin, R. B., Rubin, A. M., Graham, Perse, & Seibold, 2010). The response scale was a seven-point, Likert-type response set ranging from *strongly agree* (7) to *strongly disagree* (1). These scales have been used reliably to study topic avoidance in families and friendships. For this study and its focus on the relationship level of topic avoidance, only 7 scale items were used focusing on the the two topic avoidance reasons: self-protection (4 items) and relationship protection (3) items.

**Data Analysis**
The quantitative data from the online survey was organized and analyzed through SPSS statistical analysis software. To address RQ1, descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation were used to understand what technologies FYC students were managing in their conversations with parents. To address RQ2, regression was performed to test how the IV, level of relationship closeness, affects the DV, topic avoidance and reasons for topics avoidance.

**Results: Study One**

Most participants (80.5%), both male and female, reported using technology to speak with their mothers more frequently than their fathers; 53.6% females spoke with mothers, 10.9% females spoke with fathers, 28.2% males spoke with mothers, and 7.3% of males spoke with fathers. RQ1 addressed what communication technologies FYC students used to communicate with the parent they spoke with most often. Student’s reported using several types of communication technologies with their parents. The results, in descending order, were: text messages ($M = 4.01, SD = 1.04$); phone calls ($M = 3.65, SD = 1.08$); multimedia messages ($M = 2.75, SD = 1.31$); video chat ($M = 1.86, SD = 1.19$); email ($M = 1.68, SD = .70$); online instant messaging ($M = 1.51, SD = .85$); and social networking sites ($M = 1.49, SD = .68$). These results indicate that FYC students use text messages the most and social networking sites the least to communicate with their parents.

RQ2 asked about participants’ perceived relationship closeness with the parent they communicated through technology most often, topic avoidance, and reasons for topic avoidance with their parents when using communication technologies. All scales reported
high reliability: Unidimensional Relationship Closeness Scale ($\alpha = .94$), Topic Avoidance Scale ($\alpha = .84$), and Reasons for Topic Avoidance Scale ($\alpha = .85$).

### TABLE 1 Correlation Matrix for Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>$\alpha$</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Relationship Closeness</td>
<td>66.78</td>
<td>11.63</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Topic Avoidance</td>
<td>22.07</td>
<td>22.07</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>-.42*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Reasons for Topic Avoidance</td>
<td>31.16</td>
<td>8.53</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *$p < .01$

Results showed positive correlation between topic avoidance and reasons for topic avoidance ($r = .29$, $p < .01$). A multiple regression was performed to test RQ2, which asked how the level of relationship closeness between FYC students and their parents affect topic avoidance and reasons for topic avoidance when using communication technologies. The regression was non-significant, $F (1, 86) = 1.06$, $p = .42$.

**Methods: Study Two**

**Participants**

Part 2 of the study included 6 participants with an equal representation of gender (female = 50%, N = 3; male = 50% = 3). All participants were FYC students at NCSU who met the same inclusion requirements as the survey participants. There were three participants in each focus group. All participants reported that their parents lived in North Carolina. Participants were recruited through flyers posted in the same freshmen dorms and granted
access the same way as the online survey flyers. Snow ball sampling was also used to find participants who met the inclusion criteria.

**Data Collection**

Two focus groups were conducted to further explore results of the survey study and answer RQ3 and RQ4. The focus group questions were created based on the survey responses and focused on (a) how certain technologies are used to reveal and disclose certain topics and (b) how technology affects the emerging adult and parent relationship. The focus group questions are provided in Appendix A.

The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher for research purposes only. A trained graduate communication student served as the focus group moderator. Each focus group lasted approximately 45 minutes and was held in a reserved room at the NCSU D. H. Hill Library. The time and location of the focus groups was based on participants’ schedules and preferences. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form before participating in the focus group, and to verify that they meet inclusion criteria. Participants in the focus group portion of the study were from the same general population of FYC students, but had not participated in the survey portion of the study.

**Data Analysis**

The audio recordings from the focus groups were transcribed, and a constant comparative method was used to analyze the qualitative data. Participants were given pseudonyms for analysis of the data. First, after reading through all of the focus group transcripts, each focus group transcript was coded to answer each question as a positive or negative answer. For example, the participant’s response, “Yeah, so I feel like the
relationship with my parents has changed a little bit,” was coded as a positive response for the question, “Has the relationship with your parents changed since you started college?” Then constant comparative method was used to analyze the data to answer the research questions and to look for emerging common themes. Themes were identified from the data by the criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Tracy, 2013). Summaries of the themes across both focus groups were organized through matrixes.

**Results: Study Two**

Part 2 of the study consisted of qualitative data gathered from two focus groups that were used to expand on the survey results and answer RQ3 and RQ4. This section is structured in two parts related to RQ3 and RQ4. The first part focuses on how FYC college students choose what communication technologies to use as a tool to avoid topics with their parents. The second part of the study asked how FYC students describe how their relationship with their parents has or has not changed since attending college and the role technology plays in these changes.

**Communication Technologies Used as a Topic Avoidance Tool**

Participants explained that they used communication technologies when trying to avoid topics with their parents. Participants reported that their parents’ technological knowledge reflected what technologies they used to communicate with them. Participants also used several strategies to avoid topics with their parents when using communication technologies. Why FYC students chose what communication technologies to use, the generation gap between parent and student’s technology use,
and what topic avoidance strategies students adapted through technology were the focus group’s main findings in answering RQ3.

**Choosing Communication Technologies** Responses from the focus group were similar to the survey results. All participants agreed that they chose to use phone calls and text messages most often to communicate with their parents. Although they preferred using these communication technologies the most, they mentioned using other communication technologies less often. Participants chose what technology to use to communicate with their parents based on technological knowledge and access, student and parent schedule, convenience, depth, length, location, and purpose of conversation. Texting and phone calls were most often used because of their convenience and ease of use.

“I just text because it’s just easy access.” – Jennifer

The purpose and length of the conversation also affected what technologies participants chose to use when talking to their parents. Phone calls were used when participants wanted to have longer and more in depth conversations with their parents. Text messages were a way for students to contact their parents throughout the day and share general information.

“I would say I call on the phone because it’s easier to have a longer conversation… so I usually tend to text my parents you know during the day, in-between classes, when I’m walking to class um, or going to get food or something.” – Andrew

Participants reported communicating with their parents more when both they and their parents’ schedules were less busy. Participants also reported setting aside time each day to talk to their parents but admitted that when school was busier such as during final exams,
they communicated with their parents less. Participants explained that they were mindful of their parents’ work schedules when using technology to talk to their parents. They would most often text during the day and call their parents when they knew they were not busy or working. Yet, if they needed to talk to their parents when they knew their parents would be busy, texting was used as a way to let their parents know they needed to talk.

“I know like the time she’s at work so I usually call her maybe around like in the evening like maybe at like 6, or like if it really is important I’ll text her and be like can you talk right now? Because I don’t want to have to interrupt what she’s doing.”

– Molly

Participants reported that their parents sometimes emailed them, but it was mostly to share information, but they did not use email for more formal conversations. Participants also reported that they rarely used social media such as Facebook and Snapchat to communicate with their parents which they reserved to communicate with friends. Molly admitted she intentionally did not add her dad on Snapchat so that he could not see what she posted for her friends to see. Although most participants said they were Facebook friends with their parents, they rarely used it to communicate with them, but parents would use it to like things they shared.

“So usually when I update my profile picture or write about my day or something like that, they’ll usually comment or like it and then ask me about it through text.”

– Andrew

Participants also chose what communication technology to use when they wanted to avoid topics with their parents. Most participants preferred texting when trying to avoid
topics with their parents. They found it easier to avoid topics through text because they could have more time to think of what to say, and their parents could not hear the tone of their voice. Participants also felt that if they had to talk to their parents about a sensitive topic, they would rather do it face to face than through technology. But if they had to, they would prefer to talk about sensitive topics such as money over the phone rather than through texting.

“But if it was a more serious subject, I would probably call them. Um just so that they can hear the tone of my voice, know that it’s something serious um, and then we would be able to discuss it more than over text.” – Andrew

**Generation Gap in Technology Use** Many participants described a generation gap between the technology they managed and the technology their parents used. While participants mentioned using multiple communication technologies, they believed they did not use some to communicate with their parents because their parents did not know how to use or have the technology.

“For me, it’s more of I guess an age barrier. Because my parents aren’t even on a lot of social media. So, I just end up calling them or texting them.” - Mike

Students reported that the generation gap between them and their parents limited what technologies students used to talk to their parents. But, none of the participants reported that their parents were not comfortable communicating through text messaging. Participants also did not think that their parents not knowing how to use social media, video chat, or other communication tools was an obstacle. Participants explained that they preferred their parents
not have access to all communication technologies that they did, especially social media, so that they could maintain some privacy.

“Yeah, I would say like I keep social media more of like a private thing. I like don’t really share that with my parents just because like I don’t really want them to see like everything I’m doing.” - Molly

**Topic Avoidance Strategies through Communication Technology** Participants used certain communication technologies as a tool when they wanted (a) to avoid topics that they did not want to discuss with their parents or (b) to communicate about sensitive topics with their parents face to face. Similar to the survey results, participants felt that they most often wanted to avoid discussing topics such as money, dating, and grades with their parents through technology.

“If I ever do get a girlfriend I’ll probably wait until I’ve actually seen them face to face and stuff. Like because it’s probably like be better to like actually sit down and talk to them. Then having to have like this long conversation over the phone and then something like you’re saying the wrong thing, and you hang up, and you have to like sit there with a bad feeling.” – Charles

Technology was used as a tool for FYC students to avoid sensitive topics with their parents most often when they wanted to discuss the topic face to face. Participants felt it was easier to avoid topics through texting because they did not have to immediately respond. When participants wanted to avoid topics when talking to their parents on the phone, they often were vague or tried to change the subject. Lisa explained that changing the tone of her voice suggested to her parents that she did not want to discuss that topic. Changing the
subject and delaying response were the most mentioned topic avoidance strategies. Other mentioned topic avoidance strategies included: not answering the phone, too busy to talk, and saying they will talk about it later.

These findings suggest that FYC students prefer choosing what communication technologies to communicate with their parents based on several factors. Parents access and technological knowledge also affects what communication technologies students choose to use when avoiding topics with their parents. While most participants reported being open with their parents, technology was used as a tool to avoid sensitive topics until they could talk face to face.

**Changes in Parent-Student Relationship**

To answer RQ4, participants discussed how their relationship with their parents have or have not changed since they started college. Participants also described the role technology played in these changes. Participants felt they used technology to talk to their parents more frequently or at the same rate. Students also described their relationship with their parents as similar to when they lived at home or as improving.

**Communication Technologies as Relationship Maintenance Tools** Participants who reported they were close with their parents before moving to college, they felt that technology helped their relationship stay the same or improved it. All participants described a positive relationship before college. Words most often used to describe the relationship with their parents after starting college included trustworthy and close. For participants who reported sometimes arguing with their parents when they lived at home, they felt distance helped improve their relationship. One participant, Molly, suggested clashing with her
parents was because they “were always together.” Participants also felt that their parents trusted them and allowed them to make their own decisions while at college.

“I feel like it kind of helps maintain my relationship. It’s more like they’ve known me long enough that they feel like they can trust me to be somewhat independent, and things are great and stuff.” – Lisa

Topic avoidance was also seen to benefit the relationship. Participants believed it was acceptable to avoid topics because they felt their parents trusted them and allowed them to have more freedom to make their own choices. All the participants reported that both they and their parents tried to use communication technologies to communicate regularly, suggesting that maintenance of the relationship through technology use is important to both student and parent. Communication technologies were used as a tool to maintain or strengthen parental ties.

Discussion

Both the quantitative and qualitative results provide insight into how FYC students use communication technologies to maintain parental ties while at college. The first goal of this study was to understand what technologies FYC students prefer when communicating with their parents. Further, the study examined how students’ topic avoidance and reasons for topic avoidance are related to relational closeness between student and parent. The quantitative results informed the development of the qualitative portion, the focus groups. Part two of the study focused on the students’ perspectives on what technologies they choose to use when avoiding topics with their parents, and technology’s role in how their relationship with their parents has changed since attending college.
Results suggests that while students have access to multiple technologies, they still choose to use texting or phone calls primarily to communicate with their parents. Expanding on Smith et al. (2012) results that students choose what technology to use based on convenience, depth, and purpose of conversation, students also make technological choices based on length of conversation, location, technological knowledge and access, and schedule. Students choose to text or call their parents even though they have access to other technologies because texting or calling is more convenient and affords them the most privacy.

Results showed that there was a generation gap of technology used between parent and student. What technologies students chose to use when communicating with parents was restricted to what technologies their parents knew how to use or had access to. Yet, results contradict past research (Smith, et al., 2012) as the results reported here reveal that FYC students did not describe their parents’ lack of technological knowledge as an obstacle. Instead, FYC students prefer maintaining privacy through certain communication technologies, especially social media, while they are at college. This privacy might not be afforded if parents used the same communication technology as their sons and daughters at college. Using different technologies than their parents allows FYC students to gain independence while staying connected with their parents.

Millennials are more likely than past generations to have their parents involved with their college life and decision making (Monaco & Martin, 2007). Despite past research on helicopter parents’ influence on millennial students (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Price, 2010), this study found that FYC students did not negatively describe their parent’s technology use.
Instead, participants often contacted their parents at the same frequency. These results contradict past research on helicopter parenting because millennials have grown up in a digital world and have used technology as a tool to maintain close relationships, and likely privacy before attending college. Therefore, millennial students might have established an agreement on the frequency of technology use. What previous generations might view as excessive communication or helicopter parenting may be a normal practice for today’s FYC students.

Findings from this study support the belief that millennial students are exceedingly close to their parents even during the transition to college (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007), and at the same time suggest that technology is a tool used by both parent and student to maintain close relationships. Although parents might frequently use technology or struggle with the appropriate amount of technology use to communicate with their child, students do not see it as negatively influencing their new college independence. This might be because students can also choose to manage how frequently and what technologies they use to communicate with their parents. Advances in technology such as caller identification and ignore call have allowed students to easily know when their parent is calling them, and they can decide to take or ignore their call. As technology allows students and parents to easily contact each other, it also allows them to decide to accept, reject, or end the conversation.

Future university programs should acknowledge the Millennial generation’s close ties and communication strategies with their parents when providing resources for parents about improving their child’s transition to college. Communicating too much with parents might
delay the student’s development of independence (Price, 2010), but not communicating enough could cause strain on the relationship and college experience.

Caughlin and Afifi’s (2004) findings suggest that topic avoidance can benefit close relationships by avoiding discussions about negative and sensitive information. While the results show that topic avoidance and reasons for topic avoidance are significantly slightly correlated, the regression model showed no significant results. Yet, this might be because technology was the focus of the study. Therefore, students who are close with their parents might engage in high levels of topic avoidance when not using technology. The qualitative results still suggest that communication technologies were used to avoid topic avoidance through multiple strategies. Participants most often reported avoiding topics about money, dating, sexual experiences, grades, and drinking when using technology to communicate with their parents. Similar to Guerrero and Afifi’s article (1995a), gender differences were not detected in topic avoidance with their parents. Yet, both male and female students reported using communication technologies to communicate with their mothers more than their fathers.

Participants reported that technology allowed them to maintain their relationship with their parents, and some believed it allowed them to become closer. All focus group participants described a close relationship with their parents before and after leaving for college. These findings suggest that communicating frequently through communication technologies can benefit the parent-student relationship during the transition to college. Findings suggest both parents and FYC students engage in strong communication practices
with technology to become closer or maintain their relationship during the transition to college.

Participants reported speaking to their parents every day to even multiple times a day. Yet, parents might have to adapt to their student’s future communication practices after college which might involve less communication and more independence. These results raise several questions: (a) Will parents and children both be willing to continue these communication practices further into adulthood, (b) How will future technological developments affect these communication practices, (c) Will topic avoidance increase or decrease in adulthood? and (d) how will future technology practices affect the parent-child relationship?

Overall, these findings suggest that communication technologies are an important tool in the maintenance of student-parent relationships during students’ transition to college life. At the same time, communication technologies can be used as a tool to engage in topic avoidance, which allows FYC students to maintain relationship closeness with their parents while maintaining privacy and independence. This study suggests that more research is needed to understand technologies role in how students avoid topics with their parents and maintain parental ties.

**Limitations and Future Research**

A limitation to this study is that participants were all from one southeastern university. Other Further, the two focus groups had limited participation. Future research should include larger and more focus groups in their studies. Participants were also required to have used technology to communicate with their parents to participate in either part of the
study. This might have caused all participants to report being close with their parents and left out the population of students who are not close or do not speak with their parents. Participants from the focus groups all reported that their parents lived in North Carolina and some reported seeing their parents frequently. Further studies should focus on how technology and topic avoidance play a role in students who do not see their relationship with their parents as close or see their parents less frequently. Since parent and student schedules were a factor in what technologies students used and when they used these technologies to communicate with their parents, different time zones might change communication technology practices.

By using a mixed-method approach, the study generated insight into the FYC student’s perspective of their relationship with their parents, communication technology use, and topic avoidance strategies. Future research can extend on this mixed-method approach by including the parents’ perspective on communication technology use and relational outcomes during the transitioning to college and emerging adulthood. While this study focuses on the life stage of emerging adulthood, it only studied first year college students. Future research should look at how communication technology is used as a relationship maintenance tool for emerging adults who have left the home and are not attending college. Future studies should continue to explore technologies impact on close relationships.

**Conclusion**

This study explored what technologies students choose to use when communicating with their parents, how they used these technologies to engage in topic avoidance, and the role technology plays in maintain parental ties during the transition to college. Through both
quantitative and qualitative methods, insight is given into how emerging adults rely on technology to maintain close relationships with their parents while gaining privacy and independence through topic avoidance strategies. Technology has a deep impact on millennial student’s relationship with their parents. This study contributes to the topic avoidance and family communication literature by focusing on how technology now plays a bigger role in maintain parental ties.
References


APPENDICES
Appendix A

Communication Technology Use Measure

How often do you use each of the following technologies to communicate with this parent?

1= Never/ 5 = Always

1. Email
2. Social Networking Sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)
3. Text Messages
4. Multimedia Messages (Emojis, Videos, Images)
5. Online Instant Messaging (Facebook Messenger/Google Hangout)
6. Phone Calls
7. Video Chat (Skype, Facetime)
8. Other

Unidimensional Relationship Closeness Scale (Dibble, Levine, & Park, 2012)

Please think about your relationship with this parent/parental figure when responding to the following statements. Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1 = Strongly Disagree/ 7 = Strongly Agree

1. My relationship with my parent is close.
2. When we are apart, I miss my parent a great deal.
3. My parent and I disclose important personal things together.
4. My parent and I have a strong connection.
5. My parent and I want to spend time together.
6. I’m sure of my relationship with my parent.
7. My parent is a priority in my life.
8. My parent and I do a lot of things together.
9. When I have free time I choose to spend it alone with my parent.
10. I think about my parent a lot.
11. My relationship with my parent is important in my life.
12. I consider my parent when making important decisions.

Topic Avoidance Scale (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a; 1995b)

Please think about your technology use with this parent when responding to the following statements. Since you left home for college, please rate the degree to which you avoid
discussing these topics when using communication technologies to communicate with this parent.

1 = Never Avoid/ 5 = Always Avoid
1. Relationship norms, rules, roles, expectations, and acceptable behavior.
2. State of the relationship, discussion of feelings toward one another and how the relationship is going.
3. Negative relational behavior, defined as discussing past behavior that caused strain on the relationship.
4. Discussing past/present romantic relationships and dates.
5. Discussing past negative personal experiences, including traumatic events and face-threatening behaviors.
6. Discussing failures, such as doing poorly in a class or being fired from a job.
7. Discussing past sexual behavior and preferences.
8. Discussing current friendships with others, as well as feelings about friends.

Reasons for Topic Avoidance Scale (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a; 1995b)

Please think about your technology use with this parent for the following statements. Please indicate your level of agreement with these reasons for topic avoidance.

1 = Strongly Disagree/ 7 = Strongly Agree

1. It would leave me too vulnerable.
2. I would be embarrassed to disclose.
3. This person may judge me.
4. I prefer not to replay negative experiences.
5. Disclosure could lead to conflict.
6. It might ruin our relationship
7. It might make this person angry.
Appendix B

Focus Group Question Outline

1. What three words describe the relationship you have with your parents? Has the relationship between you and your parents changed since you started college, and if so how? Do you rely on technology to maintain your relationship with your parents?

2. Survey respondents reported communicating with their parents the most through text messages and phone calls. They also reported communicating with their parents the least through social networking sites, and email. Why do you think students choose texting and phone calls when communicating with their parents rather than social networking sites and email? What technologies do you use most often and least often to communicate with your parents and why?

3. Are there any topics you try to avoid when using technology to communicate with your parents? Are there technologies you prefer when you need to discuss sensitive topics with your parents? For example failing a class or asking for money.

4. Describe a recent conversation you had with you parent when using technology where your parent asked you about a topic you wanted to avoid. Why did you avoid discussing it with your parent? How did you avoid the discussion with your parent? Do you think technology affected how and why you avoided the topic? Why or why not?

5. Survey results indicated when college students perceived their relationship with their parents as close, the more they avoided sensitive topics such as sexual experiences
with their parents. Does it make a difference if you are communicating with parents through technology when discussing sensitive topics? Why or why not?