WE HAVEN'T TALKED IN 30 YEARS! RELATIONSHIP RECONNECTION AND INTERNET USE AT MIDLIFE

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Abstract: The phenomenon of reconnection of dormant ties using internet communication technologies has been identified as having salience for the use of social media forms by midlife and older adults. Dormant ties, as distinguished from those that are merely inactive, are those that were once operational but which have lapsed under the stressors of time, distance and circumstance, such as relationships between former college friends, neighbors, or work colleagues. Reconnection is the process by which these dormant ties become active again, and is an activity which is supported in unique ways by internet communication technologies. This study presents findings from interviews with midlife adults on how the use of email, social network sites and search engines is leveraged to enhance and support the reconnection of dormant relationships and maintain weak ties. Grounded in a life course perspective, it examines how the experiences of longevity and the life course alter perceptions of the attributes and drawbacks that these technologies offer. By examining adults at midlife, a less-well studied group than teens and young adults, this work provides a more nuanced perspective of the technological practices at varied points in life, and offers insight on how various communication technologies might be utilized at different life stages.

KEYWORDS: Reconnection, Social media, Life course, Midlife, Friendship, Older people

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps due to high adoption rates and embrace of new media forms by youth and young adults, research on the use of social network sites and microblogging by adults at older ages has been underexplored. Yet these media forms are being rapidly adopted by adults at older ages (Zickuhr & Madden 2012), and use is emerging in different use patterns than with youth, both in terms of rates of adoption and in how specific technologies are employed (Zickuhr 2010). Despite that internet use has grown steadily over the past five years, use of the internet and social media by midlife and older still lags that of younger adults (Pew Internet 2010), and this difference is often attributed to a literacy issue, with midlife and older adults lacking both access to the internet and the necessary literacy skills to navigate the emerging environment (Cutler, Hendricks & Guyer 2003; Harrison & Rainer, 1992; Morris 2007; Selwyn, Gorard, Furlong & Madden, 2003; Turner, Turner & van de Walle 2007; van Deursen & van Dijk 2009). This approach, however, diminishes the cultural and cohort differences which surface in response to progressively mediated communications (Enyon & Helsper 2010). Interpreted alternatively, the differences in use may signal that embedded relational practices and value concerns may also impact use.

Examination of internet use by midlife adults using a life course perspective (Elder 1998) which considers not only the social and historical context of the individual, but also the temporal dimension provided by life trajectories and experiences over the life span, may provide context to differing usage patterns. With respect to the use of the internet, adults at midlife are sufficiently experienced to develop a life course lens toward technology use, but are not as far along the life trajectory to have developed impediments associated with older age such as cognitive declines, failing sensory capabilities, and dependency on physical support mechanisms. Thus, research on how internet technologies are used at midlife can provide important insight into how internet use might be differentiated throughout the life course.
The socio-historic location of midlife adults means that they have experienced relationship development paths outside of the influences of the internet, and outside the use of newer communication technologies such as email, search engines and social network sites. Previous research has identified that younger adults use the internet for building and maintaining interpersonal relationships more than midlife and older adults (Thayer & Ray 2006; Zickuhr & Madden 2012), so the use of internet technologies in interpersonal connection offers a specific venue to examine differentiated use.

The phenomenon of relationship reconnection using internet communication technologies has been identified as having salience for the motivation of midlife and older adults to use newer communication technologies (Stutzman, Stull & Thompson 2009). By definition, relationship reconnections are reactivations of former relationships that have become dormant or inactive over time: social ties that once existed but are no longer utilized. Reconnections represent a bridge to an individual’s past, invoking both the life trajectories of the individuals and cyclicity of the underlying relationships. A shared history suggests that these relationships do not need to rely on substantial resource sharing or contact frequency to strengthen; instead past activity is sufficient to accelerate the relationship strengthening process (Wellman 1979). Importantly, once activated these ties provide individuals with access to additional social capital resources in the form of access to more varied sources of information, social credentials (Levin, Walter & Murnighan 2010) and as reinforcement of identity, especially past identity. The age or life stage of the individuals involved in reconnection is not insignificant: relationship reconnection can only occur with relationships that have been established and have lapsed, among individuals who have achieved the necessary longevity and life stage at which it is feasible to reestablish some form of connection.

The purpose of this article is to examine the attitudes and perceptions that midlife adults bring to their use of email, social network sites and search engines, and how these may relate the use of these technologies for relationship connection and maintenance. It reflects the results from a broader study that aims to address the question of how the life course connects to internet use, privacy and identity expression online, and how these connections may be related to differences in the adoption and use of individual technologies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

*Life Course and Midlife*

In social science research, age is often a conflated variable as it represents the effects of each of these three distinct age-related dimensions: (a) the aging effect, or physical and cognitive change associated with maturation; (b) the period effect, or the consequence of influences that occur through time and which tend to be uniform across cohorts; and (c) the cohort effect, or the effect that results from the unique socio-historical time at which the individual (or group of individuals) is born. The life course paradigm (Elder 1998) attempts to segregate out these effects in its recognition that cohorts, or that group of individuals born at the same point in historical time, do not age alike; thus, one goal of life course research is to identify the distinctive experiences that a cohort shares, and also the differential effects these cause between adjacent cohorts (Settersten 2003). Taking a more holistic approach, which connects the macroscopic aspects of social structure and social change with the microscopic dimensions of an individual’s life trajectory and developmental processes (Giele & Elder 1998), the life course perspective considers an individual’s social and historical contexts, social relationships, personal agency and the timing of and adaptation to major life events into a conceptual framework for explaining differences in life course outcomes for individuals (Giele 2009; Giele & Elder 1998).

Life course studies partition the life experience into three major phases: education and training, which encompasses childhood, adolescence and establishment of the individual to independence and permanently in the workplace, and usually ranges in age from birth to early/mid-twenties; continuous
work, which encompasses the majority of adult life experience including partnering with significant others, parenting, and career accomplishments, and usually ranges in age from mid-twenties until early/mid-sixties; and leisure, often considered as post-employment and retirement inclusive of old age, and usually ranges in age from mid-sixties until death (Settersten 2003). Midlife typically takes place in the continuous work phase of life, and is considered a stage that is qualitatively different from other life stages (Neugarten 1968).

While clearly delineated from a conceptual point of view, midlife defies definition from an objective calendar point of view (Wahl & Kruse, 2005). It is viewed as a period in the middle, both comprising a conduit life phase between younger and older generations (Hunt 2005; Neugarten 1971) and also defining the midpoint of the life course of the individual’s own existence. Previous research has indicated that midlife represents a developmental vantage point at which individuals recognize that they are aging (Atchley 1988) and have an increased awareness of the finite nature of their own life (Carney & Cohler 1993). Often this leads to an engagement in life review processes and reflection (Lachman et al. 1994; Lachman 2004; Stewart & Vandewater 1999), processes through which individuals naturally look back to see what has been done and look ahead to see what is still left to do while the possibility to make changes still exists (Lachman et al. 1994). It is the characterization of midlife as a ‘turning point between the rise and decline of the flow of life’ (Wahl & Kruse 2005, p. 7) that perhaps has been echoed most strongly regarding the midlife period in the life course.

From a cognitive performance perspective, developmental tasks and everyday demands are not comparable between midlife adults and those at other ages (Martin & Zimprich 2005). Unlike adults at younger and older ages, midlife adults experience both growth and loss: professional expertise and proficiency in family matters (such as dealing with adolescents) are finally realized, while high level physical functioning (such as with team sports or fertility) begins to decline (Heckhausen 2001). Family obligations peak at midlife due to aging relatives and children leaving the home to establish their own families (Martin & Zimprich 2005) and job demands and workloads are relatively stable (Townsend 2001). Contrasting with younger ages where cognitive development is strongly influenced by education and training and older ages in which physiological declines play a major role, cognitive performance at midlife is seen as being at peak levels for such high order and complex functions as vocabulary, verbal memory, inductive reasoning, and spatial orientation (Willis & Schaie 1999).

Significant role changes may occur at midlife (Putney & Bengston 2001): children often move out of the family home to establish their own households leaving empty nests; aging older relatives may shift caregiving; and career transitions may occur due to workforce reentry, efforts to hold ground against younger colleagues, or declines in career opportunities. Despite these transitions, self-esteem is typically highest at midlife (Robins et al. 2002) and the sense of personal control and power is at its peak (Dörner, Mickler & Staudinger 2005). Midlife adults tend to be more secure about themselves and the paths they are following, unlike their young adult counterparts, and most have achieved balance between societal expectations, personal goals and environmental demands (Dörner, Mickler & Staudinger 2005).

Adults at midlife have a well-developed identity and sense of self, and are effective at regulating emotions (Magai & Halpern 2001). Studies of narrative identity at midlife emphasize the growing significance of physical and temporal aspects of identity, suggesting that these become more frequent in thoughts and feelings (Dittmann-Kohli 2005). There is an awareness of past identity in later life, which provides a ‘remembered context and conditions to the development of the present identity and selfhood’ (Dittmann-Kohli 2005, p. 341). Work identity, a central aspect of midlife, can be threatened due to perceptions that innovation is more easily absorbed at younger ages and chances at career success become fewer (Dittmann-Kohli 2005); yet work goals and perceived success become more personal and less conventional at midlife, as individuals obtain a clearer picture of their own strengths and deficits, and adjust goals and ideals accordingly (Axelrod 1999).
A recognition of life’s finitude at midlife (Carney & Cohler, 1993) often leads to an engagement in life review and reflection (Lachman, 2004; Lachman, Lewkowicz, Marcus & Peng, 1994; Stewart & Vandewater, 1999), processes through which individuals naturally look back to see what has been done and look ahead to see what is still left to do while the possibility to make changes still exists (Lachman et al., 1994). This may encompass an assessment of important relationships, both family and friends, and sometimes leads to individuals to attempt to reconnect with former friends and colleagues who were once important to them, but with whom connection had lapsed or fell dormant. Relationship reconnections at midlife are thus an interesting mix of nostalgia and reunion, often filling the space previously taken up by career development and family obligations (Spencer & Pahl 2006).

Relationships

Friend relationships span across a continuum of intimacy, encompassing a range of forms from acquaintances to casual friendship to close friendships (Blieszner & Roberto 2004), and terms such as social connections, social ties, and friendships are used interchangeably to designate these informal, personal associations (Fingerman & Lang 2004). While friendships play an important role in well-being at midlife, having large number of friends is not as important at midlife than it is for younger adults (Carstensen 1992), and large social networks become less satisfying than at earlier points in adulthood (Carney & Cohler 1993). Because of the high number of social roles filled at midlife, it is a period that allows for the least time for friendships (Antonucci, Akiyama & Merline 2001). However, weaker forms of relationships, such as neighbors and those found through membership in volunteer organizations and religious groups, provide important sources of support at midlife, which translates into increased health and well-being for individuals (Antonucci, Akiyama & Merline 2001; Pillemer et al. 2010). The primary transition with respect to relationships at midlife is the way in which they are experienced: ‘What may have brought satisfaction in younger life may no longer do so in older age’ (Carney & Cohler 1993, p. 217).

Research on friendship reveals several important themes. First, the context of relationships, that is the circumstances under which they are generated, plays an important role in their significance. Contextually relevant relationship subnets have been identified as social spheres (Simmel 1955) and focal points (Feld 1981; Kadushin 1966), and include an individual’s interests, social structures such as schools and houses of worship, cultural organizations, and individuals, places and social positions. Second, relationships that endure over time become increasingly important as the individual ages (Matthews 1986; Rawlins 1992; Spencer & Pahl 2006), oftentimes despite geographic distance and sporadic contact. ‘Old’ friends are often considered ‘best’ friends (Rawlins 1992), but friendships that lie dormant for a period of time and are then reactivated when circumstances become favorable also are often characterized similarly (Matthews 1986; Nussbaum et al. 2000) and may continue to provide an important source of identity validation despite infrequent contact (O’Connor 1992).

Major life transitions such as the entering and exiting of major romantic partnerships and having children serve as critical junctures for the strengthening and weakening of friend relations. For midlife adults in particular, life events such as children leaving the home and retirement serve as points of relationship renaissance when individuals once again have time to re-establish contact or make entirely new friendships based on new activities and hobbies (Spencer & Pahl 2006). Finally, the characteristics of modern societies have complicated the friendship process: increasing rates of short-term cohabitation, divorce and remarriage create difficulty in maintaining friendships throughout the life course; higher levels of geographic mobility, longer work hours and an increase in business travel hinder the maintenance of friendships made in other contexts (Spencer & Pahl 2006). Communication strategies have evolved to be particularly important to friendship maintenance (Blieszner & Adams 1992; Duck 1991), especially for longer distance relationships where the frequency of contact and
communication mechanism (email, periodic face to face visits, annual Christmas cards) factor heavily in the strength of the relationship connection (Finchum 2005).

Granovetter’s (1973) characterization of interpersonal relationships as being made up of ‘strong,’ ‘weak’ and ‘absent’ ties has strongly influenced how researchers conceive of relationship connections, yet this characterization dichotomizes relationships and overlooks the contextual influences and subtle variance that friendship relationships hold. An additional weakness of this approach is that the evaluation of relational quality presumes a connection that is active in nature; yet, research on friendship indicates that interaction frequency is not necessarily a measure of relationship quality (Marsden & Campbell, 1984) and friendships that lie dormant for a period of time and are then reactivated when circumstances become favorable are often characterized as close (Matthews 1986; Nussbaum et al. 2000).

Weaker forms of relationships provide distinctly important and non-redundant access to social capital resources: they extend access to information, good and services; promote social comparison with dissimilar others; facilitate low-risk discussions of high-risk topics; and foster a sense of community (Adelman, Parks, & Albrecht 1987). Weak ties tend to serve more limited functions than strong ties, but by doing so they contribute to an individual’s sense of self-esteem and identity in their service as developmental benchmarks (Fingerman 2004).

Related to strong and weak ties are what Granovetter referred to as absent ties, but what might also be characterized as ‘suspended’ or ‘situationally dormant’ (Babchuk & Bates 1963) or ‘latent friendships’ (Adams 1998): relationships that were once active and relatively strong, but which have lapsed under the stressors of time, distance and circumstance. These psychologically important relationships hold memory of past interaction that enables temporal distance to be overridden with mere contact, especially in extreme situations or emergency (Wellman 1979), and they do not require substantial resource sharing or frequency of contact for re-strengthening to occur.

An important focus of research on relationships and technology has been the extent and effects of media use. Research has demonstrated that the oral/written nature of messages and the public/private nature of communication media are relevant factors in relationship strength, though message synchronicity/asynchronicity may also be relevant in gender-predominant or largely textual communication environments (Hargittai 2007; Ledbetter 2009). Social network sites in particular are seen as a medium that supports the creation and maintenance of a larger number of weak connections (Donath 2007) and their use has been demonstrated to support weak tie relationships in the building of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007; Subrahmanyam et al. 2008); weak ties, not strong ones, experience growth through the use of internet technologies within a community (Hampton 2003; Haythornwaite 2004).

METHOD

Because internet use, and particularly the use of email and social network sites, was a key characteristic of the targeted sample, a dataset available from the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Pew Internet 2009) was used to derive dimensions of internet use through a principal component analysis (Quinn 2012). The items which comprised the resultant factors were then replicated in an online prescreening survey to discern a variety of internet uses by potential participants. The prescreening survey was promoted via discussion board postings such as those available within LinkedIn groups, social media wall postings on individual and group pages in LinkedIn and Facebook, and public and private email listservs.

The prescreening survey was completed by 176 potential participants and, based on the responses, a sample of 31 internet-using adults was invited to participate in 45 to 75 minute interviews. The sample was purposive, using a strategy aimed for maximal variation (Patton 2002) of social media use and internet access. Potential participants were given an option to participate in interviews either in
person or via a VOIP protocol such as Skype. There were no geographic restrictions employed in the recruitment strategy, however as the researcher’s location was identified in the promotion materials and follow up invitation to interview, it is possible that potential participants may have made a determination on their participation in the interviews on the basis of geography. Of the 31 invitations, 23 individuals agreed to be interviewed, and this data was used for this analysis. Fifteen females and eight males participated in the interviews, with ages ranging from 46 to 64 years; ten participants fell into the younger, 45 to 54 year old, age range and 13 participants fell into the older, 55 to 64 year old, age range; 17 participants used both Facebook and LinkedIn, while six individuals used one or the other exclusively. Participants were interviewed in a location convenient to the participant, typically public libraries and coffee shops, and all interviews were conducted in face to face settings in a large U.S. Midwestern metropolitan area.

Interviews were transcribed and using qualitative data analysis software, the dialogs were categorized into themes using a concept-driven structure (Gibbs 2007) which included attitudes regarding the internet, privacy and social media sites, and social strategies related to reconnecting, privacy protection and identity management. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger study which explored internet use by midlife adults, and this article specifically highlights the analysis and findings related to reconnections behaviors, strategies and perceptions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Internet communication technologies of social network sites, email, and search engines are used in many ways by midlife adults in this study to create and maintain interpersonal relationships, and in particular to support reconnection activities. Interviews with participants suggest that these technologies support reconnection and weak relationship maintenance activities in three important ways: (1) by providing the ability to search with context; (2) by enhancing the temporal management of reconnection events, and (3) by facilitating the social monitoring of weak connections. These affordances are discussed in the following subsections, along with implications for the relationship between life course position and internet use.

Searching with Context

An increased availability of time to devote to weaker relationships, which is connected to the stage in the life trajectory, factors significantly into the reconnection process, and was described by one participant:

But, I mean, admittedly that was a stretch of years where you’re raising kids, and you know, I lost touch with a lot of those friends, because I’m busy raising kids, chasing them, coaching, working and traveling for work…. Now my kids are, my last is going to be a senior at [name of university], and my time is a whole lot freer now… I admittedly have more time to say, “You know, I really want to reconnect with people that were important to me…” So the first thing is we have to find each other.

Dan, Male, Age 54

Context assures accuracy - The process of making relationship reconnections is strategic, and greatly aided by the online availability of both self- and systemically-generated personal information. Locating the correct, sought-after individual is a step in the reconnection process that can present challenges to searchers. Geographic mobility, name variations produced by marriage and divorce, and changes in employment easily thwart simple, search engine-based location efforts, but profiles on social network sites, and even email distribution lists, provide opportunities for contextual associations that aid in identifying the correct, targeted individual.

1 See Case (2012) for a discussion of the use of context in everyday information seeking.
The importance that context plays in relationship formation and development is reflected in reconnection practices, as it becomes one form of identification in locating the alter of a dormant, dyadic relationship. In short, information about the relationship context combined with the online availability of personal information lends assurance that the found individual is definitively the correct searched-for person. Another participant described how employer information aided his search for former work colleagues:

Well it was harder [before], because you didn’t necessarily know how to find them. [LinkedIn] makes finding people a whole lot easier.... And you don’t know where people are, or where people may have migrated to. And if they have a very common name, it could be very difficult to find them. And that’s where LinkedIn helps, because people normally post on their page where they’ve worked and all that stuff.

Dan, Male, Age 54

The contextual search capabilities offered by social network sites extend beyond being able to search specific details of employer or educational institutions: information on individuals’ relationships with others also offers an alternative means of identification. The visibility of friend/connection networks, typically made available in profile data, becomes an important finding aid in reconnection, serving as contextualizing information and extending the reach of a search effort.

Context supports reconnection - Because some fragments of pre-existing social circles often endure through time, locating one individual from one’s past often leads to reconnection with others that share the context. Participants described how reconnecting with one person, for example a high school classmate, led to access to other individuals that shared the same high school context. One participant described how becoming connected with one long lost friend resulted in an entire subnet of childhood neighborhood friends being reunited. In this case, the presence of the more enduring sibling relationships aided the group in reconstituting itself:

Well, my friend Suzy found me. And then she has three sisters. And then she friended my brother, and then my brother, a friend from the neighborhood found him. And then he friended me. And then, you know, his sister was my best friend growing up. And she friended me, and you know. You know, so, it kind of, between the bunch of us who started friending each other, it kind of was a spiral, you know.

Sue, Female, Age 54

Friend recommender algorithms, such as Facebook’s Friend Finder or LinkedIn’s People You May Know, provide a more systematized form of this contextual search. The automated analysis of an individual’s network of connections and personal information facilitates and encourages the reconnection process by presenting potential reconnection candidates. One participant explained how the automated prompting of LinkedIn’s People You May Know algorithm facilitated his reconnection with a former colleague:

And it was because of LinkedIn [that I reconnected with her]. I knew where I could get in touch with this woman [previously], but I never bothered. But since it was so easy, it was served right out there in front of me, I wrote back to her.

Neil, Male, Age 64

In addition to encouraging known connections, this systematized form of contextual search often incorporates information that may not be visible to the searcher, such as detecting individuals who may share a common educational institution or hometown. Once this information is weighted into the recommender algorithm, additional potential reconnection candidates may be presented to the searcher, and can result in unexpected reconnection possibilities. A participant described his surprise at how the recommender algorithm identified the sister of one of his high school friends, which eventually led to reconnection with his long lost friend:
And, while I was in those two groups, you know, somebody came up on like “You Might Know,” and it was like, “Wow!” You know, this is somebody that I knew like a million years ago. And I knew her, actually was good friends with her older brother. And so, you know, I connected with her.... And I’ve since connected with him.

Ed, Male, Age 55

In a sense, contextual search can be seen as a feature that enables individuals to preserve face in the reconnection process, as the initiator can be assured that the correct person has been located, and thereby avoiding any embarrassment that may be associated with a misidentification. Contextual searching also aids reconnection by presenting additional reconnection mechanisms to the initiator: in addition to conventional messaging features and email (if such information is present in a profile), contextual associations introduce the ability to call on mutual connections to make re-introductions and facilitate the transition. These aspects are salient as they enable an increased level of control of the conditions of the reconnection process, and resonate with the heightened senses of self-assurance and personal control that are experienced at midlife.

Temporal Management Capabilities

Aside from providing mechanisms to reconnect in the form of contact information and profiles, internet communication technologies offer some important benefits for individuals to manage the process of reconnection, including features that alter the temporal aspects of the experience. As individuals, we assume continuity in our identity over time (Vinitzky–Seroussi 1998) and occasions such as class reunions and relationship reconnection enable us to achieve and enhance this sense of continuous identity. Relationship reconnections are, by their very nature, temporal experiences which require individuals to acknowledge past identity as well as enact the present. Awareness of past identity and a well-developed sense of self, both present in midlife, are invoked and accentuated in the reconnection process.

Temporal identity compression - Social network sites, particularly, offer the means to integrate these multiple contexts of past and present both in profile information that is made available and in the opportunities for providing updates, commenting on the postings by others or even by liking certain groups or products. Participants described an awareness of the subtle ways in which comments and profile details signaled the multiple dimensions of identity, yet seemed comfortable with blending these contexts. Their selectivity in making connections, a shared past history, and expectation that significant individual changes may have occurred over dormant periods in the relationship each contribute to a level of ease with mixing past and present contexts. One participant indicated his awareness of these subtleties, and acknowledged that the trust in his connections is what lessens the identity threat that occurs with multiple contexts collapsing into one online space:

Some of my other friends that I’m connected to don’t understand what that person and I had in common with a certain concert or a band that we liked [in our youth] or whatever. And they may view that and think, well, “Why would he like that kind of music?” Or, “I never thought he liked that kind of stuff.” And it really doesn’t bother me one way or the other. It’s just you’re conscious of the fact that certain friends don’t know other friends, and they may not know the context of why you’re talking about certain things. ...So the way I look at it is if I put it out there, it’s only my friends that are seeing it. And if they’re the only ones seeing it, I, I trust them, because they’re my friends.

Joe, Male, Age 54

Temporal identity management - It is noteworthy that midlife adults have more control and editorial power over how their younger selves are presented online, because the everyday minutiae of their earlier selves were not captured in digital formats and repositories such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. This lessens the potential of the temporal panopticon (Mayer-Schönberger 2009) for midlife
adults, unlike what may be occurring for youth and young adults. Participants indicated that there is little incentive to invite this form of revelation on social network sites. As one participant described, lived experience prevents her from posting information that may be considered too compromising or too telling about her past or her present:

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\text{So it's all pretty innocent stuff, I mean, I don’t really do anything that’s \textit{[risky]}. Because I'm aware of that as well. I mean, I’m aware of employers are looking at that stuff. And other people are looking at that stuff. So, you know, you don’t really want too crazy of stuff on there right? But like I said I’m, I’m past that, I’m old, I’m too old for (makes noise), you know, for crazy Spring Break pictures or anything like that.}
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Laura, Female, Age 46

This diminished presence of a digital history and the ability to control much of what is created digitally about one’s past sets midlife adults apart from younger internet users. Participants did not report the creation of photo archives from their childhood on Facebook, nor is there widespread access to records of their youthful interactions with one another in digital formats. Without the autobiographical capture mechanisms that are built into technologies such as social network sites and email, midlife adults may have greater control in crafting a temporal identity than what will be available to youth and young adults who use these technologies in active ways.

This editorial control extends to an ability to be selective about the reconnections actually initiated, making reconnection among midlife adults a selective and special process. In contrast, the reconnection process could potentially be much more automated for younger internet users, as digital technologies such as social network sites and microblogs are built in ways to encourage slow decay of connections. Weak connections can remain weak, but active, through the use of these technologies, unlike in pre-internet time where an unmaintained relationship often went dormant when exposed to benign neglect or change (Blieszner & Roberto 2004). Unless an individual actively disassociates with another, or ‘unfriends’ them, online social network sites predispose weak connections to prevail over time.

Temporal dimensions of asynchronous communication - In addition to providing a means for managing temporal identity, the asynchronous nature of internet communication technologies create opportunities for temporal management of reconnection events. Through its use, asynchronous communication results in different expectations for response than what participants experienced with other, more immediate, communication modes such as a phone call or a face-to-face encounter. These include a diminished expectation for an immediate response and recognition that even receiving a response may be somewhat uncertain.

Because the content of reconnection communications is seen as personal, it has a reduced immediacy relative to other, especially work-related, communications. One participant described how her response to a personal communication differs from communication that she receives in a work context:

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\text{Um, if [it’s], you know, a work-related thing I usually try to respond right away. Well, there’s a hierarchy. If it’s from your boss, as soon as possible (she laughs). A colleague, soon or not necessarily--go to the lady’s room first if you have to--to respond. Or just walk down the hall to wherever this person is. But, if it’s a personal email, you know, you have your choice almost.}
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Uma, Female, Age 54

It was not uncommon for participants to describe sending a connection request or an email to a dormant connection, and experiencing a delay in response. In addition, several participants suggested that a response to a reconnection opportunity may have a somewhat optional quality, or that the expectation for a response, and especially an immediate response, is diminished. One participant
explained how the asynchronous nature of email provides these temporal management capabilities allow for time management, but suggests that these capacities diminish his expectation for response:

*I like asynchronous communication myself. You know, as I said earlier, it’s like I don’t necessarily like people who call me on the phone, because you know, most of the time I’m doing something. And, yeah, I look at the phone call as interruption. And I think I feel that same way about making phone calls. But you know when I send somebody an email, I figure okay if they’re looking at email, they’ve got time to look at email, and then if they want to respond that’s fine. If they don’t, they can delete it.*

Ed, Male, Age 55

These reduced expectations for interaction may be related to the asynchronous nature of the communication medium with which there exists a reduced sense of social presence (Biocca, Harms & Burgoon 2003), but also may be related to temporal distance of the relationship. Because the relationship is set in the past and distant from the here and now, requiring an immediate response, or even a response at all, acknowledges neither the relationship cyclicality nor the life trajectory of the other person.

And at midlife, adults are conscious of both of these temporal dimensions, and this perhaps also contributes to the diminished response expectation.

**Temporal and spatial management of reconnection events** - The asynchronous quality of email or social network site messaging also provides an important advantage to participants on the receiving end of a reconnection attempt: it allows time and space to process conflicting emotions such as surprise or guilt for not maintaining contact in the intervening period. These accepted and expected communication lags enable participants to produce appropriate responses to the reconnection efforts of others, particularly with relationships that may have been left on a less than positive note. One participant described his reaction to a reconnection attempt by a former roommate, a relationship that had been left on less than desirable terms at their last point of contact:

*Well the initial contact, since it’s online, I had a chance to think about it before I did anything about it. As opposed to a phone call, where you’re put out, you’re in the moment and you have to make a conscious choice. Do I want to participate or what?*

Oscar, Male, Age 58

The participant further explained how the asynchronous quality of the communication medium takes the sting out of a rebuffed reconnection attempt by allowing participants to compartmentalize the process, suggesting the medium serves as a filter or buffer. The buffer enables him to process emotion in stages, both as an initiator and receiver of connection attempts:

*You know, I think, at least for me, it was a lot easier to reach out and try to create a connection with somebody versus the phone call… You felt the sting of rejection, and with the Internet for some reason, with my friend who contacted me, I had that filter. I feel like as the initiator you also have the benefit of that same type of filtering and distancing from the emotional. You could take the emotional piece in stages and the emotional risk of rejection or confusion or whatever. I think the Internet helps you mask that. I think it helps a great deal with some of the social anxieties stuff.*

Oscar, Male, Age 58

The ability to process emotion on one’s own terms resonates with midlife adults, who are viewed as regulating their emotions deftly (Magai & Halpern 2001). The timing differential is critical to helping participants preserve and display an appropriate self, which at midlife is integral to identity, and can be instrumental in repairing damaged relationships. Another participant described how the asynchronous nature of the reconnection communication enabled her to craft an appropriate self, preserving a composed and thoughtful identity that was crucial to enabling a reconnection:
And I liked being able to have some time. You know, she wasn’t someone I ran into on the [commuter train], and suddenly couldn’t think. You know, because that would be harder. Then you blurt out the first thing on your mind or something. But, in an email you can even take a little time and actually write a few paragraphs that make sense. ...So that was the one reason I liked to take the time to do it, because sometimes, my first reaction is not the one I want people to know.

Uma, Female, Age 54

The presentation an appropriate self is valued by midlife adults, who have a highly developed sense of self-esteem (Robins et al. 2002) and proficiency at dealing with personal relationships (Heckhausen 2001). Because this ability is enhanced through the use of asynchronous communication, the use of social network sites and search engines for the purpose of reconnection is viewed as acceptable and appropriate.

Social Monitoring and Social Capital

Asymmetric reconnection - Finally, reconnection is an undertaking that is not always reciprocal or reciprocated. Several participants reported that locating a targeted individual and gaining information on the individual’s life journey was sufficient to satisfy their curiosity, and they stopped short of making reconnection. The availability of profile information enables a searcher to learn details about others as what Vinitzky-Seroussi (1998) describes as ‘objects of curiosity.’ Vinitzky-Seroussi’s work involved identity constructions through high school class reunions, and she detailed how these former friends and connections serve as a looking glass or benchmark, allowing for validation of identity and personal growth. Similar to a personal encounter at a class reunion, social network profiles provide specifics on the lives of others that enable a similar type of social comparison. Participants reported using profile information in much the same way, as this participant described:

Now I didn’t know them well enough, or it’s 40 years ago and we haven’t stayed in touch, so there’s no point in friending them necessarily, because I don’t necessarily care what they’re doing day-to-day. But I did use it [Facebook] to go ahead then and see what had happened to a whole bunch of people that I hadn’t talked to in ages. You know, what happened to that guy that I had that crush on in 10th Grade (she laughs). “Wow, that’s what he’s doing.” That sort of thing.

Gail, Female, Age 63

The ability to engage in this form of ‘lightweight social surveillance’ (Ellison, Lampe & Steinfield 2009, p. 7), or the act of monitoring profiles and status updates for ephemeral events or major life changes, provides opportunities for social comparison and also provides the occasion for social monitoring once a reconnection has been made. Participants reported that once reconnected, they often keep in touch at a distance: commenting on photos or news items that others post; monitoring status updates for major events in others’ lives such as job changes and children’s weddings; or sending birthday greetings. For some this only meant brief initial correspondence, as one participant detailed:

Interviewer: Do you stay in touch with them by any other means other than the Facebook connection?

No, and it’s usually once or twice. You know, “Oh, hi. Glad to know where you are. Did you attend the reunion? Are you going to? No.” That’s enough. Yeah, there’s a, I think there’s a high school class page that I look at from time to time. And that’s sufficient. And if I have anything to say, I’ll [post] on that.

Neil, Male, Age 64

Reconnection as a resource - In other instances, however, reconnections spark a stronger bond that is maintained through periodic email correspondence and the private messaging functions of social network sites. This form of relationship maintenance parallels the process of intensional networking
(Nardi, Whittaker & Schwartz 2000, 2002), a workplace practice of maintaining an awareness of the activities and whereabouts of teammates and colleagues and keeping in touch via carefully chosen communication media with those contacts who may prove useful in the future. Like reconnections of dormant ties, intensional networks are grounded in a historical context of a social relationship; they are additionally characterized by the ongoing process of communicating and remembering, with an expectation of future professional benefit.

In much the same way, relationship reconnections serve as a source of potential social capital, the value in maintaining these connections for midlife adults, both from a professional and personal standpoint, lies in this potential as a resource. They might provide information, professional connection or social support, or offer to fulfill such future needs as assistance in a job search, provide access to or locate sought-after information, or generate personal satisfaction in the form of companionship and camaraderie. Perhaps this potential is best summarized by one participant’s experience of tapping into these resources:

"[Facebook] is a lifeline for me. It’s been a lifeline for me since I had to go through a really bad time with my divorce—friends rallying, gathering, so many new friends that were old friends, people back in my life. It’s actually been a lifesaver for that, because you could feel really alone in a situation like that…. It’s been a savior in that way."

Sue, Female, Age 54

The shared history and memory of past interaction quickly reduces the temporal distance of reconnected dormant ties, and these relationships do not require substantial resource sharing or contact frequency to grow stronger; instead, past activity and current interest is sufficient to accelerate the relationship strengthening process (Wellman 1979). Thus dormant ties exhibit efficiency as a source of social capital: they are reactivated at a significantly accelerated pace and require less investment than newly established ties (Levin, Walter & Murnighan 2011). Importantly, once activated these ties provide individuals with access to additional social capital resources in the form of access to more varied sources of information, social credentials and as reinforcement of identity, especially past identity.

CONCLUSION
The characteristics of social media and email are especially important to enabling reconnection at midlife: the increased online availability of personal information and the ability to manage the temporal aspects of this process facilitates interaction and eases the tension inherent in the reconnection process. In a more conventional sense, an increased availability of personally identifying information provides contextual search capabilities for those looking to reconnect, allowing for the assurance that the correct individual is being located and providing contact mechanisms. But perhaps more importantly, the asynchronous nature reconfigures the experience of the reconnection process by permitting time to process emotion and preserving the ability to appropriately present the self. Identity management is enhanced through the ability to create online profiles, enabling a presentation of self that is at once continuous and consistent, facilitating a bridge between the past and present. A prior shared history with those reconnecting enables reactivation to take place at an accelerated and efficient rate relative to new connections, making these relationships a key source of potential social capital in midlife, a point in life where the view forward might suggest such resources may have real value.

Reconnections enrich our understanding of friend relationships. As internet communication technologies facilitate more durable weak bonds and the ability to convert dormant connections into weak forms of relationships, they enable relationships to continue through processes of strengthening and weakening over time and throughout the life course. This moves us to expand the conceptualization of friendship to include a character that is textured and elastic, and not merely a trajectory that rises and falls. It also prompts an enhanced awareness of friendship’s gradations and varied roles at differing points in life, and points to a potential for internet communication technologies to open additional
avenues for midlife adults to obtain social capital resources, which ultimately may impact life outcomes significantly and positively.

In contrast, reconnections with truly dormant ties are rarer for younger persons. Relatively shorter life spans suggest these are events which younger adults don’t readily experience in the present, and may experience quite differently in the future. Engagement with social network sites and email at earlier points in the life trajectories may mean that youth and young adults may not find themselves trying to reconnect with former friends and colleagues in the ways that current midlife adults do, because the technologies have been built in a way as to preserve connection. Norms regarding disconnection, or ‘unfriending,’ are beginning to emerge in recognition of varying levels of the meaning of connection (Quercia, Bodaghi & Crowcroft 2012; Sibona & Walczak 2011), and these too will impact the process of reconnection in the future. Further, though they enable the re-discovery of former friends and colleagues, the technologies also provide a concurrent inability to shed one’s past. This may, in time, alter our sense of past identity and also impact reconnection practices, because the detail of everyday life is captured in more permanent and digital ways.

This research illuminates patterns of internet use that diverge from those of younger adults and teens, more well-studied populations. Documenting how midlife adults use internet communication technologies to rekindle and sustain reconnections, therefore, not only demonstrates the breadth of uses for these technologies, but also how they might be utilized differently at various points in the life course. As one of the participants succinctly summarized:

\textit{And I think you reconnect with those people, because there’s technology out there that makes it so much easier. I mean, I think that if you didn’t have all this would you reconnect with those people? And I would say, “You know, probably not, because it’s so difficult, it would be so difficult to do that.” You know, how did you do it in the past? Well, you had maybe family reunions or what have you. But what if they weren’t your family members? Would you go through all that effort to reconnect with them? Or would you even know how to find them? You know, people are able to move pretty readily now so, they may not live in the same areas that when you knew them they lived in. Chances are very good that they don’t live in the same area. So, how would you find them? Well the technology, I think, is making it easier to find them. And if you can, then it’s a quick and easy way to relive the good old days and reminisce and reacquaint and find out what people are up to now, you know.}

Joe, Male, Age 54

Word Count: 7,790
REFERENCES


