
Residential Mobility, Technology & Social Ties

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Abstract

This research uses the disruption associated with residential mobility, to develop a deeper theoretical understanding of the role of communication technology in the initiation, maintenances and dissolution of social relationships. Residential mobility is a common yet stressful event. It represents a natural experiment, because it puts people in a situation where some of their previous face-to-face interactions must stop or decline, leaving mediated communication as a way to retain contact. Recent movers, who relocate to unfamiliar locations, also face the sometimes daunting task of meeting new people. This research is focused on understanding how movers use the Internet to cope with these changes in their physical and social environments and the effect such changes have on their psychological well-being.

Keywords

Information communication technology, stress, distance, residential mobility, social relationships

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

The Internet is first and foremost a communication technology, with the potential to change peoples' social interaction. As reviewed in my prior work [6], some researchers have argued that the Internet improves people's ability to form new close relationships, especially if they are otherwise isolated. Others have suggested that Internet use is associated with declines in time spent in face-to-face interactions. For a large proportion of Americans the Internet has become an integral part of everyday life [2], yet its role in our social relationships and other important aspects of our lives remains a question of empirical interest [6].

In my dissertation, I am interested in what role social uses of the Internet play in initiation, maintenance and dissolution of personal relationships. Could those who use the Internet for socializing enrich their social relationships by maintaining more relationships? Would they add new dimensions to existing relationships? Alternatively, would conducting a social life on the Internet deter people from face-to-face interactions, encourage more shallow relationships, or take time away from building intimacy?

Personal relationships are difficult to study because they need a lot of time to develop. Once developed, most personal relationships tend to remain stable for substantial periods of time. This stability poses a problem for studying initiation and dissolution of relationships. To pursue answers to the above research questions, I used the disruption associated with residential mobility to develop a deeper theoretical understanding of the role of the Internet in how relationships are initiated, maintained and dissolved (Figure 1).

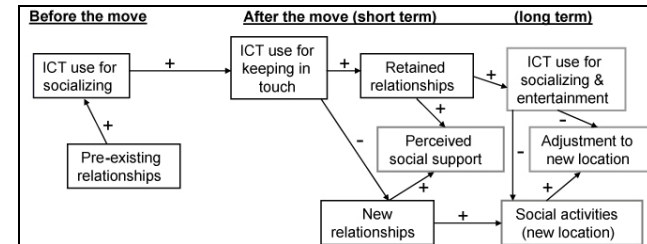


Figure 1: A theoretical model of the impact of residential mobility on social integration and personal relationships (ICT = Information & Communication Technologies, i.e. the Internet and cellular phones)

Background

Residential mobility is common in the United States. Although moving rates have declined somewhat over the past 50 years, according to the US Census, 14% (over 40 million people) of the country's population moved in the year 2002-2003 [5]. While more than half (60%) of the annual moves are local, made for various housing reasons, nearly 20% of yearly moves are made long distance, across state lines [5]. Historically, technology has been associated with residential mobility through advances in transportation, information access and long distance communication [3]. Although internet use has been a question of interest to researchers over the last decade, little is known about what impact internet use may have on how people cope with changes in their social relationships due to residential mobility.

Research on relationships tells us that people tend to construct and maintain relationships that are consistent with their psychological goals, cognitive abilities and social demands [4]. In other words, people tend to make friends with others like them. Long distance residential mobility may negatively affect individual social

relationships that are not easy to replace. Fischer [1] purports that relationships die if faced with adversity. In the case of residential mobility, distance is one kind of adversity that relationships face. When people move far away, they may engage in cost-benefit analyses, deciding whether the costs of upkeep of a relationship are worth the benefits it brings [1]. Over the course of adjustment to a new location, individuals may replace some relationships but keep others.

Prior to easy availability of the Internet and national cell phone plans, long distance communication was costly and its occurrence signaled the value of each particular relationship. Over the last decade, however, the financial costs of long distance communication have drastically decreased. This allowed users to invest more time into particular communication episodes, thus, potentially maintaining more long distance relationships. The financial burden of communication is no longer a consideration or an excuse for reduction of the frequency of communication episodes.

Despite the proliferation of mediated communication technologies such as e-mail or instant messenger, most of the individual social relationships tend to be geographically proximate. Recent studies of computer mediated communication have shown that people tend to use cellular phones and instant messaging most with geographically proximate partners [9], while using email both for proximate and distant partners [9].

I hypothesize that using the Internet for social purposes may reduce costs of financial and emotional upkeep for long distance relationships, retaining more ties that were established prior to the move. This could increase movers' perceived social support and social integration

as they engage in more social activities online. However, relationship scholars suggest that individuals usually maintain a small number of "active" relationships, even though they may theoretically "know" a very large number of people [1]. It is possible that ability to retain more existing relationships may adversely affect movers' proclivity and desire to initiate relationships in a new location. This could negatively affect movers' adjustment to the new location and their level of social integration as they may be less likely to participate in social activities in their new location rather than online.

Research Design

The research described here includes two components: qualitative interviews and a longitudinal panel survey.

The qualitative study had an ethnographic interview design. The goal of this study was to gather rich experiential data on recent (or imminent) long-distance moves. Movers' stories about their experiences helped me understand moving from the movers' point of view [8]. One of the main findings was that cell phones and email did not replace physical presence regardless of the level of fidelity, nor did they give people the sense of shared social context so important in friendships. Nevertheless, respondents did report that using communication technologies gave them a sense of support and reassurance. I used insights gained from the qualitative work to develop the empirical model to be tested with the quantitative survey (see Figure 1).

The longitudinal national panel survey followed approximately 1000 recent movers over the course of 2 years as they adjusted to the new location after the move. The survey instrument contained questions about the process of the move itself and adjustment after the

move. A specific social network elicitation component asked respondents to nominate social contacts in the old and the new locations and describe several relationships in detail. The survey also included a technology use portion and questions that assessed respondents' social integration and psychological well-being.

Progress to date

Some of the early results demonstrated that movers who used the Internet for social purposes showed better social integration after a residential move [7]. Internet-based communication, in general, was associated with higher levels of perceived social support after the move. However, changes in psychological well-being in response to a move drove changes in Internet use patterns. For example, higher levels of loneliness after the move predicted decreases in using the Internet for communication over time. Higher levels of depressive affect shortly after the move also predicted decreases in use of the Internet for communication for women, but not for men. These results suggest a complex relationship between psychological well-being and patterns of Internet use [7].

Further analyses will focus on how specific relationships fare after relocation and whether computer mediated communication plays a significant role in helping movers cope with changes in their social environments. In particular, future analyses will focus on whether using technology to maintain old relationships hinders creating new relationships in the new location.

Impact for HCI

This research will contribute to HCI theories about the relationship of technology to people's lives. This research uses longitudinal survey designs, collecting measures

from the same people over time: a method that allows causal analysis in cases where experiments are not feasible. I hope that results of this work will improve our understanding of how internet use for communication can influence how people maintain existing social relationships or create new ones. This work will also address the connection between patterns of internet use and changes in psychological well-being due to a residential move.

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