

COMMUNICATION PATTERNS WITHIN SOCIAL NETWORKS: A CASE STUDY OF AUSTRALIAN WOMEN

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Abstract: Based on the perception that “individual bonds to one another is the essence of society” (Fischer, 1982a, p. 2), this paper examines contemporary networks of friends: friendworks, of adult women in an Australian sea change community. Communication patterns are examined drawing on findings from a case study of 26 women aged 35-76 years. Among the case study participants, many have undertaken a ‘sea change’ as adults, which in most cases has led to a significant reconstruction of their friendworks. Location and lifestyle are identified as impacting factors on communication patterns with friends; face-to-face interactions are by far the most frequent and preferred method of communication among the participants. The landline telephone and internet are the main communication methods used to maintain friendships with distant loved ones, while the mobile phone is reported as the communication method employed the least. The infrequency of mobile phone use can be attributed to cost issues, highlighting a discrepancy between these women’s social and communication needs and the current Australian mobile phone policy.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how women in an Australian sea change community make new friends on relocation, how they maintain old friendships, and how they perceive these social relations by investigating communication methods used when interacting with friends. Three main themes are highlighted: friendships, communication methods, and life in sea change communities; friendships are explored as a particular subgroup within the women’s social networks and are referred to as friendworks¹ (Ben-Harush, 2009). The explored Communication methods used within friendworks include: face-to-face, landline telephone, internet and mobile phone. Finally, sea change communities; the Australian term for settlements along the coast and an increasing population mobility trend, are set as the context of the study. It is proposed that life in sea change communities influence communication use patterns.

This paper is based on findings from a case study executed in one Australian sea change

town. Twenty-six local women aged 35-76 were approached and interviewed about their relocation and social integration process; how they made new friends, how they communicate with local friends and how they keep in touch with distant loved ones. In order to address these concerns, friendworks and population mobility aspects are firstly addressed.

ZOOMING IN: FROM SOCIAL NETWORKS TO FRIENDWORKS

“Individual bonds to one another is the essence of society” (Fischer, 1982a, p. 2), and consequently they are of interest to many social studies, in addition to this case study. The individuals’ bonds which provide possible benefits are most commonly referred to as social networks (Litwin, 1996):

Individual’s relatives, friends and associates, the set of people with whom an individual is directly involved... [People] whom we know and whom we can depend on. [A social network] influences our success in life, our security and sense of well-being, and even our health. (Fischer, 1982a, p. 2-3)

The importance and significance of social networks have been long acknowledged in previous studies as fundamental to social integration and emotional well-being (Agneessens, Waeye & Lievens, 2006). They also have a direct impact on individuals’ physical and mental health (Thoits, 1982; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Thoits, 1983; House, Umberson & Landis, 1988; Lin & Ensel, 1989; Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins & Slaten, 1996; Pyszczynski, Greenberg & Solomon, 1997; Agneessens et al., 2006). Additionally, social networks are important because of their structure; the relations within the network motivate flows of support, information and companionship, enhancing efficiency of actions (Putnam, 1995; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). These studies and others show that social networks generate social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Woolcock, 1998; Narayan, 1999; Bourdieu, 2006).

Though social network is a dominant and a key social term, it is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is very straight forward – the sum of the people one knows, “a social network consists of a finite set ... of actors and the relation ... defined on them” (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 20). On the other hand, in-depth observation of the term reveals confusion, vagueness and wide generalisation in analysing whether specific people are included or excluded from one’s social network.

Moreover, when examining domestic² communication patterns, which are the focus of the described case study, family and friends are found to be the majority of contacts people interact with daily over the landline telephone (Moyal, 1992; Rakow, 1992), via the internet (Wellman, Boase & Chen, 2002), or while using mobile phones (The mobile life report 2006: How mobile phones change the way we live, 2006; Wajcman, Bittman, Johnstone, Brown & Jones, 2008). Therefore, this case study strategically targeted only one subgroup within social networks: network of friends, or in other words, friendworks (Ben-Harush, 2009). Though this term was originally coined by the author in early stages of this particular case study, it might apply to alternative areas of research in communication, psychology, economy, politics and cultural studies. A friendwork is a set of people an individual maintains a friendship with. A friendwork is one specific type (a subgroup) of social network. Other subgroups of social networks include family, work related relationships, location based ties and online-acquaintances (Ben-Harush, 2009). Participation within different subgroups of social networks intercepts and overlaps. A friendwork incorporates overlapping friendship circles from work, childhood, church, politics, and shared recreation. Even within a friendwork, a variety of social ties can be found: intimate friends, those to socialise with, others to share a particular interest, or recent casual friends. A friendwork is open to friends leaving and new ones entering.

A key term within friendworks is friend. When asked about their friends, participants were encouraged to use their own interpretations of this term. Any person they considered a friend was named, included within their friendwork and discussed regarding mutual communication patterns.

Friendworks are the focal point of the case study. Communication methods are the means through which friendworks are mediated, maintained and reflected. Both friendworks and communication methods used in friendworks are contextualised by the specific location of the case study: an Australian sea change community. It is proposed here that the specific location influences friendworks as well as communication patterns in a distinctive manner. Therefore, the next section provides further detail on sea change communities as an example of population mobility, while focusing specifically on Ocean Shores, the town in which the case study took place.

OCEAN SHORES: A POPULATION MOBILITY PATTERN IN AN AUSTRALIAN SEA CHANGE COMMUNITY

Population mobility is a dominant aspect of the modern world which significantly influences nations as well as individuals (Larsen, Axhausen & Urry, 2006; Larsen, Urry & Axhausen, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007). Based on the recent Australian census, 43 per cent of the Australian population changed their place of residence between 2001 to 2006 (Pink, 2006, p. 4). With population growth in Australian capital cities (Pink, 2006), counterurbanisation, the movement of people outside metropolitan areas to rural places, has also been identified in the recent decades³. Specifically, relocation to rural settlements along the coast has been recently branded as a 'sea change' (Murphy, 2002; Hamilton & Mail, 2003; Burnley & Murphy, 2004). Today, over 20 per cent of the Australian population resides in sea change centres and communities⁴ (Stokes, 2004). The growth in these coastal areas is consistently higher than the national average (Trewin, 2004). Moreover, the number of people shifting to the coast is expected to increase, at least over the next ten years (Salt, 2003).



Figure 1: The location of Ocean Shores

These figures highlight the significant impact of population mobility on sea change communities taking in newcomers in great numbers. The Australian government identified this coastal growth as a national phenomenon, establishing in 2004 the Sea Change Taskforce, a national body which addresses the impact of the sea change phenomenon and provides support and guidance to coastal councils attempting to manage the impact of rapid growth.

Of all of New South Wales coastal regions, the Richmond-Tweed region (where the case study was conducted) has the fastest recent growth rate (ABS, 2009). This population increase is consistent throughout the last twenty years (Salt, 2003). According to the 2001 Census (ABS, 2001), the three shires⁵ (Tweed, Byron and Ballina) have recorded some of the highest average

annual growth in New South Wales coastal regions.

Behind these high growth figures are many Australians moving from one place to another. Therefore, population mobility is a dominant theme within the case study. It is also a major interest for local, state and federal stakeholders. While implications of population mobility and high growth rates in sea change communities are apparent in infrastructure, employment, education and health, as a social matter, it receives much less attention⁶. To fill this gap and to highlight the importance and the impact of such social issues, this study focuses on this theme when examining friendworks as a social infrastructure contextualised by population mobility in the sea change town of Ocean Shores.

Ocean Shores is a small town of approximately 5,600 residents⁷ (ABS, 2007), located on the Far North Coast of New South Wales. Brisbane is approximately 150 kilometres north and Sydney approximately 850 kilometres to the south (see Figure 1). Ocean Shores is about 20 square kilometres in size. It features a long ocean beach on its eastern perimeter and is surrounded by flora and fauna reserves (see Figure 2). Ocean Shores is a part of the Byron Shire local government area, which almost tripled its population in 30 years, from 11,000 residents in 1976 to almost 29,000 in 2006.



Figure 2: Ocean Shores' view from the local lookout

Ocean Shores was established in the late 1960s as a resort and recreation residential development intended to attract mainly retirees. Since the 1980s it has experienced a continuous growth in population across all ages. Ocean Shores is still a favoured location for the elderly, however, today it also attracts families and a younger population (with the exception of a decrease in the number of young adults aged 15 to 24, who leave Ocean Shores for the 'big' cities seeking employment). Families are moving to Ocean Shores as parents find it an attractive place to raise children while being able to enjoy the beach, the sun and the quiet lifestyle in an environment that embraces alternative cultures and the unique ambience of the 'Rainbow Region' (Kitas, 2003).

However, breadwinning is quite a challenge in a rural town originally designed for retirees. Consequently, high numbers of adults are part-time employees (40 per cent compared to 28 per cent nationwide) and unemployed (9.5 per cent compared to 5.2 per cent nationwide). In 2006, the median weekly household income was \$756, 27 per cent lower than the nationwide figure (\$1027). However, median weekly rent is \$250, 30 per cent higher than the national figure, suggesting a relatively high demand for houses in Ocean Shores, and implying that it is a desirable place to call home. Labour force occupations comprise self-employed professionals, technicians and trade workers, labourers and sales workers. The local lifestyle is generally considered modest reflecting non-materialistic lifestyle values (Kitas, 2003).

In 2006, most Ocean Shores residents were Australian citizens (88.2 per cent) and were born in Australia (78 per cent), though the number of people born overseas is increasing

(from 14 per cent in 2001 to 16 per cent in 2006). This is in line with the national policy which encourages immigration. However, Ocean Shores is populated with more people who were born in Australia (78 per cent in 2006) than those reported in the nation-wide data (71 per cent in 2006). This signifies that Ocean Shores is mostly an internal migration destination, and is less attractive to immigrants who in most cases choose to live in metropolitan areas (Stimson & Minnery, 1998).

THE CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

Ocean Shores was chosen for this case study as an example of the sea change nation-wide demographic phenomenon. Including participants from the town aimed at capturing local social relationships as well as examining the influence of distance on friendworks. As the researcher lives in Ocean Shores, a deeper understanding of this particular location and the social relations within it, contributed to executing the research as well as analysing the findings.

The research design included a case study of 26 women aged 35-76 residing in Ocean Shores. Six main topics have been examined: the move to Ocean Shores, the process of making new friends, the current friendwork composition, communication patterns within friendworks, mobile phone use and the impact of mobile phones. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods were used to address these topics, including online surveys, in-depth, semi-structured interviews, friendwork tables⁸, mobile phone logs and diagrams of friend networks⁹. Interviews that lasted on average an hour and a half were conducted in participants' homes between December 2008 and January 2009, and were recorded digitally and later transcribed. The interview transcripts were coded thematically using NVivo qualitative research software.

The decision to focus on four communication methods, rather than one, draws on previous communication studies emphasising that when people communicate with others within their social network, multiple methods of communication are usually employed (Chen, Boase & Wellman, 2002; Wellman et al., 2002; Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003; Baym, Zhang & Lin, 2004; Boase, Horrigan, Wellman & Rainie, 2006; Foth & Hearn, 2007; Geser, 2007; Hearn & Foth, 2007). Different situations engage different communication methods. This approach derives from the communication ecology theory, where communication is understood "as processes that involve a mix of media, organised in specific ways, through which people connect with their social networks" (Tacchi et al., 2003, p. 17). The case study refers to some, but not all, communication technologies in use. Four of the main interactive communication methods are explored in this study: face-to-face, landline telephone, internet and mobile phone.

Drawing on two seminal telephone use studies (Moyal, 1989; Rakow, 1992), only adult female participants were recruited through a process of 'snowball sampling'. The researcher (aged 39 years) has been included within the case study sample. The focus on participants aged 35 to 76 derives from the actual underrepresentation of this segment of population within recent Australian mobile phone studies which either focus on the overall population (Mackay & Weidlich, 2007, 2008; Wajcman et al., 2008; Mackay & Weidlich, 2009) or on much younger age groups (Media and communications in Australian families 2007, ; Donald & Spry, 2007). This study addressed this literature gap.

RELOCATING, BEFRIENDING AND SPATIAL PROXIMITY

Two notions of place primarily affected participants' friendworks; firstly, the actual move to a new dwelling place which redefined spatial proximity to (or distance from) existing and new friends and secondly, the local ambience of a sea change community which motivated increasing face-to-face interactions with local new friends.

Most case study participants named a number of dwelling places before they arrived at Ocean Shores. No interviewee was locally born. Few lived in the Byron shire before moving to Ocean Shores, but kept changing their dwelling place every few years. For most women, the move to Ocean Shores will not be their last relocation. Overall, participants reported living in Ocean Shores for less than one year to a maximum of 20 years, providing wide perspectives on local life as newcomers as well as veteran residents. In accordance with national statistics regarding population mobility (Pink, 2006, p. 4), 42 per cent of the case study participants (total of 26 women) moved to Ocean Shores less than five years ago and were regarded as newcomers, while roughly the other half are considered locals. The case study participants came to Ocean Shores from various locations, however, most participants moved from larger distant population centres.

Women who move to a sea change community as adults establish their friendwork based on previous dwelling locations. When settling in the new dwelling place, adult women reform their friendwork to include new local friends, while excluding existing weak distance ties. The Ocean Shores case study participants who lived in Ocean Shores for over four years reported that most of their friends live up to a one hour drive away and vice versa; while most newcomers' friends still reside in their previous dwelling location. Friendworks are constantly under reconstruction and manipulated by time and place.

Fischer (1982a), in a seminal study on friendships in the US, mentions that people's dwelling place plays a key role in shaping their natural relations to one another (1982a, p. 1). He also emphasises the influence of spatial proximity on friendships (1982b). Both statements are evident in the case study interviews. Participants regard life in a small town along the Australian coastline as fairly relaxed and intertwined with frequent face-to-face encounters within a small familiar community. The spatial proximity aspect of life in a small community increases frequency of face-to-face encounters (Mok, Wellman & Basu, 2007), which consequently reinforces these relations.

Bearing in mind that this particular dwelling location implies spatial proximity and a relaxed lifestyle, the case study explored how women communicate with their friends face-to-face or via mediated communication of landline telephone, internet and mobile phone. The findings are discussed in the next section.

COMMUNICATING FRIENDSHIPS

Participants were asked about their communication patterns with friends; used and preferred methods of communication with friends, as well as communication frequency, in order to better understand social relations within friendworks.

The most common method participants reported using when communicating with local friends is face-to-face (67 per cent). The second common method is the internet (15 per cent), primarily email communication. The third communication method is the landline telephone (13 per cent), while the least common method is the mobile phone (5 per cent), as presented in Figure 2. The high percentage of face-to-face interactions is partially explained by spatial proximity; participants experience frequent face-to-face interactions mainly in local public spaces such as the supermarket, schools, sports centres and on the beach, but also regularly dropping past friends' dwellings. However, even when examining participants' overall friendworks, i.e. their global friendwork regardless of the friends' dwelling location, communication methods are still ranked in the same order, though in different ratios (face-to-face 40 per cent, internet 26 per cent, landline telephone 22 per cent, mobile phone 10 per cent). When analysing the communication method mostly dominant per user (total number of friends communicated in

each method, by each participant), 14 of 25 participants marked face-to-face (56 per cent) as the mostly used communication method, five participants the internet (20 per cent) and the final five respondents (20 per cent) indicated mostly using the landline telephone. Mobile phone was reported as the most common method by one participant (4 per cent).

Moreover, when participants were asked in general, which of the communication methods they most commonly use (see 'participants response regarding the dominant communication method' in Figure 2), 47 per cent reported face-to-face, 26 per cent internet, 21 per cent landline telephone and 5 per cent (one respondent) mobile phone. When asked for the favourite communication method with friends, regardless of practical limitations (such as distance, time differences and cost), the results were even more extreme, again in the same ranking order; 77 per cent of the participants chose face-to-face, 19 per cent favoured landline telephone and 4 per cent (1 person) preferred the internet. No participant nominated the mobile phone as the most favoured communication method. Figure 3 presents used and preferred communication methods as detailed above.

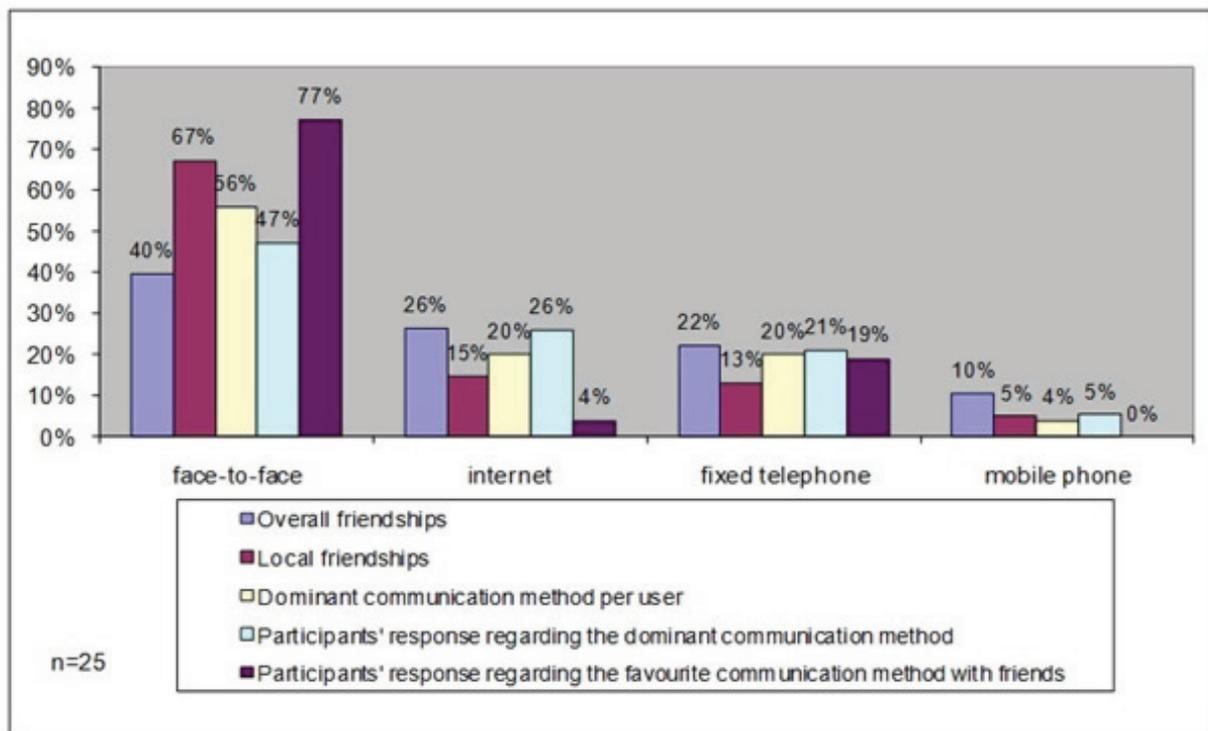


Figure 3: A comparison of mostly used and favoured communication method with friends

Based on these case study findings, face-to-face is the most preferred and practiced communication method within local and global friendworks. Preference of face-to-face encounters over alternative communication methods has been reported in previous studies (Reid, 1977; Wellman & Tindall, 1993; Bordia, 1997; Baym et al., 2004; Mok et al., 2007; Dare, 2009). Some of the reasons for this preference are detailed shortly. Face-to-face interactions are particularly used within local friendworks implying that spatial proximity motivates physical encounters. However, even within global friendworks, face-to-face interactions are mostly practiced, though due to distance restrictions greater use of mediated communication methods is evident, particularly internet and the landline telephone.

Contrary to the first questions which focused on the most common communication method used when interacting with friends, the latter question focuses on the participants' conceptual preferences ("What is your favourite way of communicating with friends?") regardless of their de facto behaviour. In this case, preference for face-to-face is even higher, indicating it is the most desired method. However, another interesting finding is favouring landline telephone calls over the internet, despite the most-commonly-used-method findings indicating that the internet is more popular than the landline telephone when communicating with friends. This indicates that theoretically people prefer using the landline telephone over the internet, though in practice the opposite is done. Internet use with friends has been found more common than landline telephone calls. The different charging policy of internet (generally a fixed monthly payment) and the landline telephone (generally a monthly post-paid payment) might be an influencing factor manipulating use patterns, though this needs to be examined in greater detail to better understand the underlying motivations. Lastly, the low mobile phone use reported when communicating with friends, as well as the fact that no one chose this method as the most favoured within the case study friendworks, suggests that other communication methods better address participants' needs. Therefore when compared with other methods, the mobile phone is clearly deficient.

The dominance of face-to-face interactions is also apparent when analysing the frequency of communication with friends by communication methods. The case study participants communicate with a higher number of friends face-to-face than via telecommunications when interaction is frequent (everyday 58 per cent, a few times a week 46 per cent, and once a week 56 per cent), implying that most face-to-face communication is executed with spatially proximate friends. In cases of less frequent interaction (a few times a month or less), participants primarily use the internet and the landline telephone (over two thirds of the participants when communication frequency is less than once a week). These results are presented in Figure 4. Again, the least used communication method across all frequency interactions is the mobile phone.

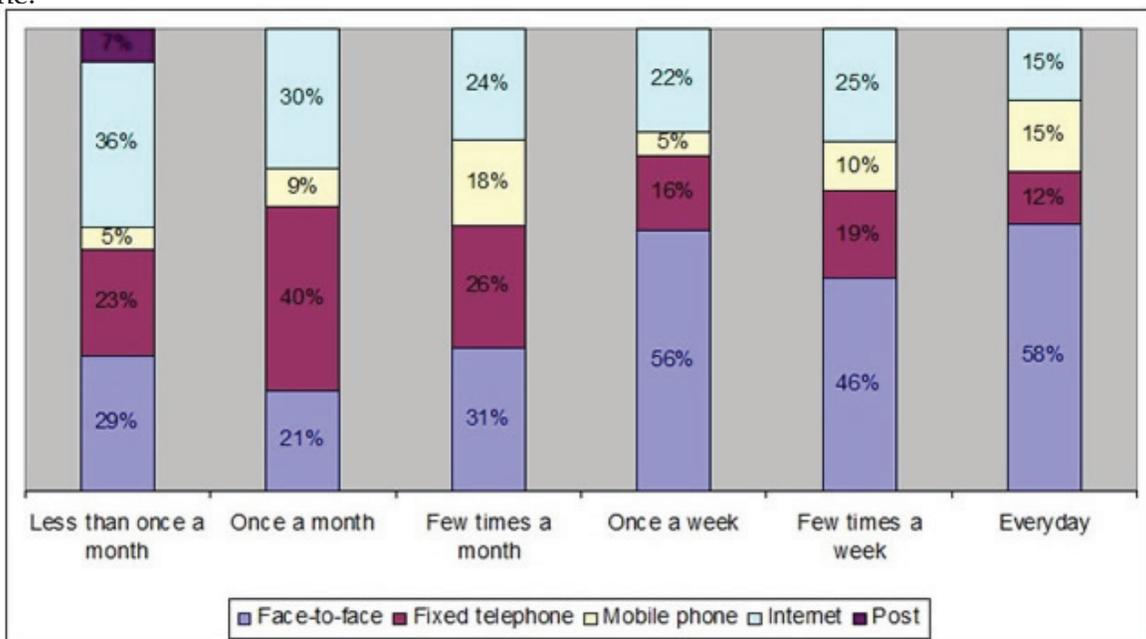


Figure 4: Communication method and frequency of use of case study participants

According to the ABS social survey (Pink, 2007), 96 per cent of informants reported having contact in the previous week (in person, via telephone, mobile, mail or e-mail) with family or friends not occupying the same household. Of those, 79 per cent had contact in person while an even greater proportion (93 per cent) had weekly contact via telecommunications including landline telephone, mail or e-mail. Both studies show that most people frequently meet close people (friends and family) in person, while simultaneously interact via mediated communication methods.

Figure 2 identifies the internet as the second preferred and practiced communication method by participants, while the landline telephone was consistently reported as slightly less dominant. These findings differ from data collected throughout the ABS social survey (Pink, 2007) which found that landline telephone is the most popular mediated communication method used when interacting with family and friends among people aged over 35 years (comparing similar age groups to the case study's, on average, 93 per cent of 35-74 years reported using the landline telephone to communicate with family and friends, with no significant gender difference found). This tendency increases with age; a higher percentage of older people reported using the landline telephone to communicate with family and friends than younger respondents, as presented in Figure 5. The internet (41 per cent) was reported to be used by fewer people than those reported using mobile phone voice calls (68 per cent) for the same purpose, but slightly more than using SMS (38 per cent).

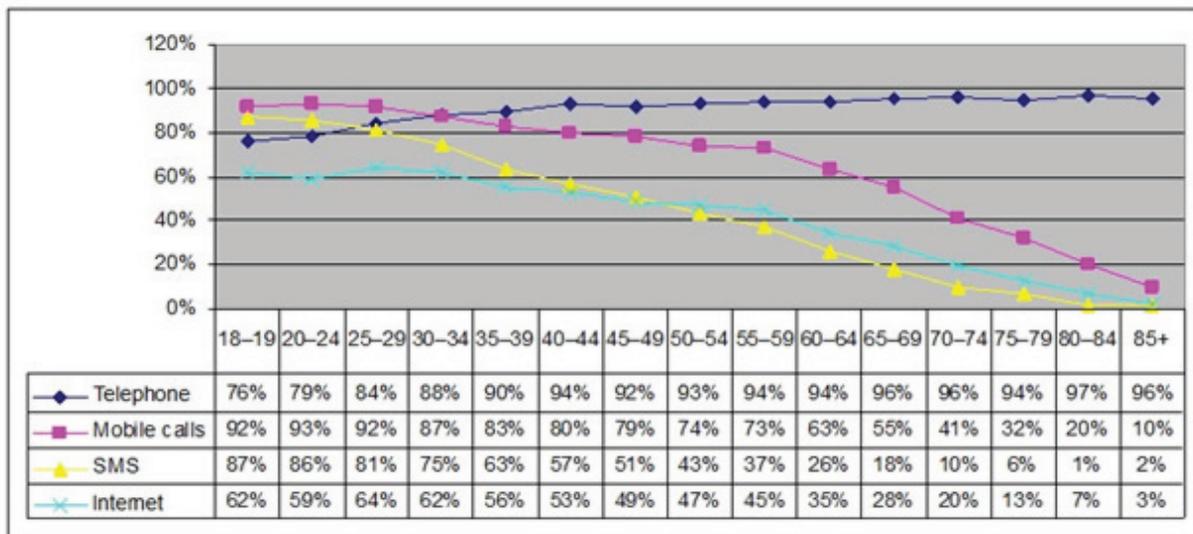


Figure 5: Type of contact with family or friends living outside the household in last 3 months (Pink, 2007)

According to the case study findings, the mobile phone was found to be the least used and least favoured communication method with friends. This also varies from the ABS survey results (Pink, 2007), where mobile phones, mainly voice calls, are found to be used by more people than the internet to communicate with family and friends across all ages.

The dissimilarities between the two studies primarily result from different inquiries. The ABS survey asks about any mediated communication method (excluding face-to-face) used (respondents could mark multiple answers) in the last three months, while the case study specifically focuses on the most dominant or favoured way of communication (only one method in each category) regardless of time limit. Therefore, the two studies examine

different communication aspects and generally should not be compared. However, the ABS survey emphasises the popularity of the landline telephone when communicating with family and friends (almost all respondents use this method, especially those over 35 years). The high mobile phone rates could be explained by the fact that the ABS survey targeted family members as well as friends, while the case study addressed friends only. However, more than anything, the ABS survey emphasises that the case study findings do not fall within the national average. One way to explain this is by associating unique social characters to adult women in sea change communities that differentiate their friendworks and the way they communicate with friends compared with the communication between family and friends at a national level. These issues are examined later. Firstly, the reasons participants prefer one communication method over the other needs to be highlighted.

GRATIFICATIONS OF COMMUNICATION METHODS

The uses and gratification theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974) examines communication methods in light of the social and psychological needs of individuals. Though this theory was originally developed to explain the uses of mass communications, its principles are relevant in this study of communication methods. According to the uses and gratification theory, media users play an active role in choosing and using communication methods. Users take an active part in the communication process and are goal oriented in their use. They look for a communication method that best fulfils their need. Usually, there are alternate choices to satisfy users' needs. Drawing on this communication theory, this section presents gratifications participants reported while using different communication methods and choosing one method over the other.

Preference to face-to-face interaction over the other communication methods can be explained by increased feelings of enjoyment and closeness, richer conversations ("you can talk about a lot more things"), physical closeness ("you can give them a hug") and emotionally stronger experiences. Dorothy (66)¹⁰ attests to this by saying she feels a "much greater sense of closeness. You can reach out and touch them. You can laugh together. You can see their facial expressions". Ella (36) commented that "face-to-face is much more personal. It allows better communication - a variety of expressions of feelings, or more conversation topics. Usually mmm... it takes longer".

Those preferring face-to-face but admitting that in practice they use the landline telephone more explain this by saying "it's easier to make a phone call rather than get in the car and go and see them. I keep in touch over the phone" (Beverly, 76). Most women state practical reasons, "it is the cheapest and it is available", "it does not require pre-coordination", and "it is simply more convenient", to clarify their preference of landline telephone over face-to-face interactions. When comparing face-to-face, landline telephone and the internet, Dorothy (66) explains:

The telephone is somewhere in between. It's more like a conversation, because I am not as deliberate and thoughtful as I am [when] doing email. But at the same time, you are not seeing the person face-to-face. That's why skype [Voice over IP application] is such a good thing because it's almost like being on the telephone, but you can see them. More like face-to-face.

Voice over IP applications enable communication based on converged visual, audio and textual information and therefore offer an interactive experience closer to face-to-face meetings. However, in practice, only few participants reported using such applications. All are overseas-born with extensive friendworks abroad, suggesting again that cost is the main motivation for using VoIP over landline telephone calls which are significantly dearer.

Suzanne (45) emphasised another advantage of the telephone, “it’s often good to be talking on the phone cause sometimes you can say things you don’t necessarily say face-to-face”. Caroline (37) noted that “most of the time I don’t have time to be with friends face-to-face”. Holly (42) emphasises the popularity of the landline telephone, “it’s part of life for local and distant contact”, while Joanne (67) reinforced this notion when relating to landline telephone use as a habit and “you tend to stick to habits”.

Preference for internet communication is mainly associated with practical considerations. Participants found the internet convenient (“I don’t like to call people late. You can send emails at any time”, and in another: “we are both busy and you can read emails later”), cost effective (“I like emails cause it’s free”), and suitable for global communication (“with the American friends, because of time difference, email is ideal”). Additionally, some participants reported that emails allow them to better express themselves:

When you are emailing, you have the time to compose your thoughts, which I certainly do. Most of my emails are fairly well thought out. I think: what would they like to hear about? What interesting anecdotes could I tell them? I try to think of composing a message that will actually amuse and inform them, which I don’t think when I am talking face-to-face. Face-to-face we just chatter. Email for me is more reflective and thoughtful and deliberate (Dorothy, 66).

For Dorothy, such qualities made the internet a very comfortable medium to use: “email is so much a part of my life that I feel much better about sending an email”. Aligned with this attitude, she describes her approach to the landline telephone:

When the telephone rings, someone at the other end feels compelled to answer it. We are like Pavlovian conditioning. We could ignore it, but most of the time we don’t. So, although the telephone used to be a major communication for me before the internet, it’s less and less, because of that convenience factor...I am always concerned that I will interrupt someone else. I don’t think that the telephone is as agreeable communication form as it used to be. I much prefer either face-to-face or email.

Dorothy is very decisive and keen in using email and internet in general over the landline telephone. This is interesting since Dorothy is a retiree, and the national findings show that the older the people the more they use the landline telephone (Pink, 2007). It is proposed here, that again, cost plays a key role in motivating users to embrace more cost-effective technologies that better suit their needs, regardless age or gender, specifically in financially restricted scenarios. However, this needs further investigation.

Though internet is the second most popular communication method with friends, when focusing on communication methods with distant friends for emotional support rather than instrumental aid, face-to-face interactions are preferred over landline telephone conversations, proceeded by internet use. Though some respondents use email for emotional communication (usually reporting a certain condition or asking for advise), “it feels more remote because the person is not right there” (Dorothy, 66). However, as in previous telephone studies (Moyal, 1992; Rakow, 1992), the case study participants considered the landline telephone as the closest substitute to face-to-face meetings, especially because it enables simultaneous feedback like face-to-face interactions, and it is more commonly used than voice over IP applications.

The case study participants showed a clear preference of face-to-face interactions over mediated communication methods. Prioritisation of the mediated communication methods: internet, landline telephone and mobile phone, suggests that telecommunication succeeds in

connecting people but is not as favoured or desired as face-to-face interactions. In most cases, people use telecommunication only when face-to-face interaction is impossible. In sea change communities, face-to-face interactions are still quite common, hence alternative communication methods are used less. That is, most participants' social needs are fulfilled by face-to-face encounters.

MOBILE PHONES AND THE USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY

The case study participants ranked the mobile phone as the least used and least favoured communication method with friends, and their general mobile phone use was found to be much more basic and minimal than reported in recent Australian mobile phone use studies (Wajcman et al., 2008; Mackay & Weidlich, 2009). This pattern repeated with most case study participants, indicating that they share similar motivations and gratifications for mobile phone use as influenced by a wider context of moving to and living in a sea change community.

In general, when moving, friendworks are reformed to include new local friends and to exclude distant weak ties. Accordingly, communication patterns with friends change as well. Such a turnover in communication patterns with friends is evident in mobile phone use. Domestic mobile communication is mostly executed between local family and friends (Sørensen, 2006; Mackay & Weidlich, 2007; Wajcman, Bittman, Jones, Johnstone & Brown, 2007). When people move to a new place, they do not have many local friends, hence their mobile phone use capacity significantly decreases.

Moreover, a decrease in mobile phone use is evident when analysing mobile phone use based on the uses and gratifications theory. Leung & Wei (2000) define seven types of gratification: mobility, immediate access, instrumentality, affection and sociability, reassurance, fashion and status, and relaxation. The case study findings indicate that the most relevant gratification for adult women residing in a sea change town is instrumentality. A relaxed lifestyle diminishes the need to use mobile phones for affection-and-sociability, immediate access, reassurance, fashion and status, or relaxation.

The case study participants reported deliberately restricting their mobile phone use to instrumental purposes: micro-coordination (Ling, 2004), mainly due to cost issues. Yet, even use of the mobile phone for micro-coordination with friends is fairly minimal since participants reported meeting friends in person on many occasions, reducing the need to coordinate face-to-face interactions. This is yet another reason for participants' basic mobile phone use pattern.

CONCLUSION

This paper focuses on communication patterns within friendworks of adult women in one Australian sea change town. Specific communication patterns are evident when examining face-to-face, landline telephone, internet and mobile phone use. Face-to-face interactions were found to be the most common and preferred communication method with local as well as distant friends. The internet, followed by the landline telephone, are used more often to communicate with distant friends. Lastly, mobile phone use was the least practiced communication method, mainly due to cost issues.

Drawing on the social history of the landline telephone, one can observe a similar pattern applicable to the mobile phone. Both were initially marketed as business tools (Martin, 1991) hence used strictly to control the incurring costs. Later as use costs reduced, both technologies were widely embraced for domestic communication, addressing instrumental as well as emotional gratifications.

Seminal landline telephone studies highlight the social and emotional support that the

landline telephone facilitates, especially for women (Moyal, 1992; Rakow, 1992). The Australian government followed Moyal's recommendations with relevant legislation regulating a policy of untimed local calls (fixed rate for local telephone calls), which facilitates longer local communication. The decreasing costs backed by government policy were crucial in turning the landline telephone into the most common telecommunication device for social purposes.

However, this was not evident in mobile phone use among the case study participants. Though mobile phone cost has significantly dropped since this technology has been available in Australia (ITU, 2009), participants reported it is still considerably high and perceived as higher than the landline telephone. As a result, they choose to limit their social communication over the mobile phone.

This paper follows the uses and gratification theory to explain the poor mobile phone use pattern among the case study participants, especially in comparison with cross-national findings (Pink, 2007; Wajcman et al., 2008). The current mobile phone policy and primarily cost issues do not adequately address the case study participants. It is proposed that this incompatibility is ascribed to a wider population, primarily sea changers, but also retirees, single parents, the unemployed and other of "society's most vulnerable groups" (1989, p. 83).

A closer examination of the needs of these population segments is required in order to better address their gratifications when using telecommunications. Drawing on similar studies of landline telephone use, needs should focus on social and emotional aspects; crucial for individuals' well being, yet consistently underestimated.

ENDNOTES

1. A friendwork is one network-of-friends of one person. The plural form, friendworks, is used whenever a few networks of a few participants are collectively discussed.
2. Unpaid activity not for business purposes.
3. Counterurbanisation was originally observed during the 1970's in the United States (Champion, 1989) as well as in Europe (Boyle & Halfacree, 1998).
4. This figure excludes residents of capital cities along the coast.
5. A shire is a local government area (a third level of government under the federal and the state levels). Within the Richmond-Tweed region (which is a part of the Northern Rivers area of NSW), there are six local government areas.
6. See for example the agenda of the last Australian Coastal Councils conference held in Western Australia on March 2009: <http://www.seachangetaskforce.org.au/Conference.html>.
7. All mentioned statistics are based on housing and population data by The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007).
8. Participants were asked to name all their friends while providing further information on each friend.
9. For each friend, participants graphically marked the most dominant communication method as well as overall interactions' frequency.
10. Next to each quote, the participant's age is enclosed in brackets.

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