



Mentoring in the digital age: Social media use in adult–youth relationships[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 July 2014

Received in revised form 6 September 2014

Accepted 8 September 2014

Available online 16 September 2014

Keywords:

Youth mentoring

Adolescents

Social media

Digital media

ABSTRACT

With digital media use on the rise among adolescents and adults alike, youth-serving organizations, and mentoring programs in particular, are increasingly in the position of having to develop policies that take advantage of the potential benefits of social media use, while guarding against potential risks. However, little data exists on program policies or use of various forms of digital communication (i.e., texting, email, Facebook, Skype, photo sharing) in the context of youth mentoring relationships. There is also a lack of research on the perceived impact of digital communication on the *quality* of mentoring relationships. Drawing on cross-sectional data from 258 mentors and 147 mentoring program staff primarily from the United States and Canada, this study examined how digital media is used in formal mentoring programs and investigates associations between digital media use and mentoring relationship characteristics, as well as staff and mentor perceptions of the influence of digital media use on the mentoring process. Results indicated that although digital media is being used, particularly in relationships with older mentees, there is substantial variation in program policies around its use. In addition, the impact of digital media use on mentoring relationship quality and duration was generally perceived by mentors and staff to be neutral or positive, and use of digital media between mentors and mentees was associated with greater relationship quality and duration. Implications for mentoring program practice and future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Use of digital media (e.g., text messaging, email, Facebook, Twitter, Skype, photo and video sharing, and other forms of digital communication) has skyrocketed in recent years in ways that are dramatically shifting how and when young people connect with their friends and family members (Common Sense Media, 2012). The expansion of both the forms of and access to social media has challenged staff in youth serving programs to create policies that are responsive to the affordances of these ever-changing forms of communication, while also guarding

against unforeseen risks and unintended negative consequences to program participants. For youth mentoring programs, which seek to foster close, enduring, growth-promoting relationships between youth and adults, social media use and its associated challenges are particularly salient. Although researchers have explored technology and digital media use in peer relationships and, to a lesser extent, in family relationships (e.g., Davis, 2012; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Turkle, 2011), few studies have examined how digital modes of communication are being used in formal mentoring programs. As such, youth mentoring programs are tasked with creating policies around the use of social media in mentoring relationships with little research or best practices to guide them. The current study represents an initial step towards filling this gap by investigating the use of digital media in youth mentoring relationships. Within this context, we conducted a survey with mentoring program staff and volunteer mentors in an effort to document program policies for digital media use and to examine associations between digital media use and mentoring relationship characteristics, including quality and duration of relationships, as well as benefits and challenges encountered.

[☆] The authors gratefully acknowledge the mentors and program staff who contributed to this study and the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

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1.1. Youth mentoring and digital media use

Youth mentoring relationships, once largely considered to be one-to-one relationships between youth and adults that were cultivated through in-person meetings or activities in the community or at school, now take a wide variety of forms with some relationships taking place solely through digital forms of communication (Shpigelman, 2014). Whatever forms these relationships may take, the interpersonal connection that develops between the mentor and youth remains at the heart of the mentoring process (DuBois & Karcher, 2014).

Digital media offers significant opportunities for engagement and connection between mentors and youth, but it can also pose potential risks. For example, texts, Facebook messages, and the like, make it easy for mentors and youth to stay in touch on a day-to-day basis and directly communicate with one another in ways that can nurture the development of the relationship by fostering feelings of connection and also help to sustain it over time. Use of digital media between mentors and mentees may allow for greater ease in coordinating meetings and staying in contact, even in the face of changing schools, addresses, and phone numbers. Some adolescents may also feel more comfortable disclosing feelings or personal information via social media rather than in person (e.g., Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008).

At the same time, social media use can pose risks to developing mentoring relationships. It raises significant concerns about safety, privacy, as well as the potential for sharing inappropriate information and blurring relationship boundaries. For example, deciding whether to become friends over Facebook is not always a straightforward choice, as mentors must then consider carefully the content they post and the potential impact on their mentee. As a Facebook friend, mentors may also view content that raises ethical dilemmas, such as what to do if they view a post by their mentee that shows the mentee engaging in some type of risky behavior.

Not surprisingly, in an earlier national survey of mentoring programs conducted in 2010, mentoring program staff reported that mentors and mentees were using an array of social media, particularly email and text messaging (Kremer, 2010). Yet few guidelines exist to help mentors and youth to navigate these forms of communication beyond brief tip sheets (e.g., *Social Networking Tips for Mentors, Mentor Michigan*) or general advice (Manza & Patrick, 2012). The approaches that programs are taking to social media use in mentoring relationships as well as how its use may influence relationships remain largely unknown.

1.2. Adolescent use of digital media

Although little is known about digital media use in youth mentoring relationships, a growing body of literature makes it clear that youth's use of these various forms of communication is high. Dubbed "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001), young people today have grown up with digital communication, and their usage rates reflect this. A recent survey of social and digital communications use by 1030 adolescents ages 13 to 17 found that 90% had used some form of social media, with texting (87%), social network sites (e.g., Facebook; 83%), email (77%), and instant messaging (63%) representing the most common formats (Common Sense Media, 2012). Other recent studies have shown that 78% of adolescents in the United States own a cell phone, with a slightly lower percentage (62%) of lower-income youth owning cell phones (Lenhart, 2012). While voice phone calling has decreased among adolescents, text messaging has increased. Older adolescents, especially girls, are the heaviest users of texting among teens, and Black teens showed the highest increase compared to White and Latino teens (Lenhart, 2012). Adolescents' preferences for how they communicate have implications for how mentors and youth might connect and communicate with one another.

Previous research has demonstrated that young people tend to use social media to maintain already existing off-line relationships. A

study of 251 adolescents indicated that adolescents primarily use social networking sites to connect with people they know offline and demonstrated moderate overlap in closest online and offline friends, suggesting that social media is used to strengthen offline relationships (Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012). Additionally, a study of 110 college students, comprised of mostly Latina/os and Asians/Asian-Americans, revealed that students tend to use social networking sites to keep in touch with and make plans with family and friends (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Thus, it is likely that youth would be drawn towards using social media to complement face-to-face interactions and maintain connections in mentoring relationships as well.

Given that the *quality* of mentoring relationships is associated with beneficial youth outcomes (e.g., Goldner & Mayseless, 2009; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Parra, DuBois, Neville, Pugh-Lilly, & Povinelli, 2002), it is important to explore what contribution social and digital media communications may make to mentoring relationship quality. Although this has not been examined in youth mentoring, research on other kinds of relationships provides some insight into the effects of social media on relationship quality. The majority of college students who use social networking sites reported that using these sites had not made a difference in their relationships with friends, but 20% felt that it made them closer to their friends (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). A longitudinal study of college students found that Facebook use was strongly related to "bridging social capital," even when controlling for internet use and psychological well-being (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). "Bridging social capital" is a term that refers to "weak ties" (Granovetter, 1983) or connections with others outside of one's own immediate community (Putnam, 2000; Vidal, 2004). Focus group discussions of a subset of these participants revealed that college students perceived Facebook as helping them with networking as well as with facilitating face-to-face communication (Steinfeld et al., 2008). At the same time, media use among younger girls (ages 8–12) has been shown to be associated with negative social well-being (Pea et al., 2012), suggesting that adolescents may be able to use media more effectively than younger children. Taken together, these findings suggest that social media may play a positive role in both strengthening older youth's existing connections as well as fostering new ones.

1.3. Current study

The current study drew on international cross-sectional survey data collected from mentoring program staff and volunteer mentors to investigate the use of digital and social media in youth mentoring relationships. Since there is currently little data available on its use in youth mentoring programs, the first aim of the study was to characterize how digital media is being used in mentoring relationships, including both program policies and actual use, as well as associations between mentor, mentee, and program characteristics and digital media use. Following initial characterization, we then investigated associations between digital media use and mentoring relationship quality and duration. Finally, we explored program staff and mentor perceptions of the influence of digital media use on mentoring relationships and of the benefits and challenges of digital media use.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants included mentors and program staff who were 18 years of age or older in youth mentoring organizations internationally. For the mentor survey, 277 mentors completed consent forms, 258 mentors began the survey, and 222 mentors completed the survey. For the staff survey, 169 staff members completed consent forms, 147 staff began the survey, and 121 staff completed the survey. In addition, 78 staff members provided responses to open-ended questions in the survey.

Sixty-eight percent of participating mentors were female, with an age range of 18 to 79 years ($M = 35.1$, $SD = 13.0$). Mentors were primarily located in Canada (69%) and the United States (31%), and 1% in Ireland. The majority of mentors identified as White (79%), 10% identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, 2% identified as multiracial, 2% identified as Hispanic or Latino, 1% identified as Black, and 6% identified as other. Approximately half of mentors (53%) reported a 4-year college degree as their highest level of education, 12% high school diploma/GED, 13% associate's degree, 18% master's degree, and 5% reported a higher degree. Mentors reported that the mean age of mentees with whom they were working was 12.8 years old ($SD = 3.4$), ranging from 12 to 24 years old. Sixty-one percent of mentees were female, and 51% were of minority racial or ethnic backgrounds. Ninety-two percent of the mentors were in same-gender matches.

The mean match length reported by mentors was 20.6 months ($SD = 21.8$), with match lengths ranging from a minimum of 1 month to a maximum of 100 months. Mentors were from various types of mentoring programs (mentors could endorse more than one type of mentoring), including one-on-one mentoring (84%), group (29%), team (24%), community-based mentoring (32%), school-based mentoring (37%), and a small number of e-mentoring programs (4%).

Participants in the staff survey were also primarily located in the United States (66%) or in Canada (34%), along with 1% located in New Zealand. A range of mentoring approaches was represented, with staff members endorsing as many types of mentoring as their program provided. Sixty-eight percent provided one-on-one mentoring, 34% provided group mentoring, 22% provided team mentoring, 43% provided community-based mentoring, 41% provided school-based mentoring, 31% provided site-based mentoring, and 5% provided e-mentoring.

2.2. Procedure

Participants were recruited to complete online surveys via emails to a number of mentoring listservs, including the Chronicle for Evidence-based Mentoring, Friends for Youth, YouthMentoring, and Big Brothers Big Sisters listservs. The email included a description of the study, as well as a link to consent forms and the web-based survey. Participants were also informed that they would have the opportunity to be entered into a raffle for an iPad as an incentive for participating in the study. Recruitment announcements were also made at conferences and workshops for mentoring program staff. The sole criterion for inclusion in the survey was that participants were mentors or staff who were 18 years of age or older. Online surveys were self-administered using SurveyMonkey software, a secure online data collection service.

2.3. Measures

Survey data included a combination of quantitative scales and single-item questions as well as open-ended questions.

2.3.1. Mentor survey

Demographic Information included mentor, mentee, and program characteristics. Mentor demographic characteristics included self-reported age, gender, racial/ethnic background, and highest level of education. Mentors also reported demographic information about their mentees, including mentee's age, gender, and racial/ethnic background. Mentors also reported program characteristics, including type of mentoring offered by the program and country in which the program was located.

Use of Digital Media was measured with a series of mentor-reported single-item questions. One question asked mentors if their program has a policy on use of digital media, to which mentors could respond "Yes," "No," or "Unsure." Another question asked mentors if they discussed with their mentee how they would use digital media to communicate with each other (from 1 = "Not at all True" to 4 = "Very True"). Mentors were also asked about their actual use of a range of modes of

communication with their mentees, including face-to-face, phone, texting, email, Facebook, Twitter, other social networking sites (Instagram, Tumblr, Snapchat etc.), instant messaging (IM), and Skype. For each form of communication, mentors were asked about frequency of use (from "never" to "more than once a week") and purpose of communication (including: logistics; checking in; socializing; in-depth conversations; sharing private thoughts or emotions; and academic support). In addition, mentors were asked if they planned to continue to communicate with their mentee via digital media after their formal relationship had ended, rating the statement on a scale from 1 = "Not at all true" to 4 = "Very true."

Mentor Perception of Influence of Digital Media was assessed with two single-item questions. One question assessed mentors' perception of how use of digital media influenced their relationship with their mentees on a 5-point Likert scale in which 1 = "Worsened"; 2 = "Worsened a little"; 3 = "Neither"; 4 = "Improved somewhat"; 5 = "Improved." The second question assessed mentors' perception of the influence of digital media on how frequently they communicated with their mentees. Specifically, mentors rated how much they agreed with the statement, "Digital media has helped my mentee and I communicate more frequently" on a scale ranging from 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree."

Mentoring Relationship Quality was assessed using two distinct mentor-reported measures. The 11-item mentor-reported version of the *Relational Health Indices (RHI)* was used to assess relational-experiential dimensions of relationship quality, focusing on factors such as engagement, authenticity, and empowerment (Liang et al., 2002). Sample items included, "I feel that this mentee cares about our relationship" and "I feel uplifted and energized by interactions with this mentee." Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = "Never" to 5 = "Always." Cronbach's alpha was .90, indicating good internal consistency. The *Mentor Strength of Relationship (MSoR)* scale is a 14-item measure that also assesses mentor's perspectives on their relationship with their mentee, but focuses specifically on factors contributing to mentors' satisfaction and frustration in mentoring relationships and includes environmental/logistical dimensions of the relationship, in addition to affective dimensions (Rhodes, Schwartz, Willis, & Wu, 2014). Sample items included, "Being a mentor is more of a time commitment than I anticipated" and "I feel my mentee and I are well-matched." Items were scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree." Cronbach's alpha was .84, indicating good internal consistency.

Current and Expected Mentoring Relationship Duration was assessed by asking mentors to report how long their mentoring relationship had lasted (rated in months) and by asking mentors how long they expected their mentoring relationship to last (rated in months).

2.3.2. Staff survey

Program Characteristics included the types of mentoring offered by the program and the country in which the program was located.

Digital Media Policy was assessed through a series of questions asking staff to report their program's policy on a range of types of digital media. Response options included: "prohibited," "discouraged," "neutral," "encouraged," "mandatory," and "not addressed/discussed." Staff also reported whether their agency has a written policy on social media, whether mentors and mentees were permitted to "friend" each other over Facebook, and whether the agency monitored digital media communication between mentors and mentees. In addition, staff members were asked whether mentor training explicitly discussed the use of digital media and if the program offered training or skill development on cyber safety and cyber bullying.

Influence of Digital Media was assessed through three single-item questions. The first asked staff to assess, in general, what the effect of digital media use has been on the quality of mentoring relationships, using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = "Very negative" to 5 = "Very positive." The next two questions asked staff to assess the effect of digital

media use on frequency of contact and duration of contact, respectively, using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = “Greatly decreased” and 5 = “Greatly increased.” For each of these three questions, staff participants were also asked to describe a specific example in an open-ended response.

2.4. Data analysis

A series of hierarchical ordinary least square regression models were used to investigate the relationship between digital media use and relationship characteristics (specifically, mentoring relationship quality and mentoring relationship duration). The first level consisted of mentor and mentee demographics and program characteristics, which included whether the program had guidelines around digital media use, based on mentor report. The second level focused on digital media communication, including whether the mentor and mentee had discussed how they would use digital media, as well as frequency of face-to-face contact, phone contact, texting, email, and Facebook use.

A thematic analysis of the open-ended staff responses describing examples of how digital media influenced mentoring relationships was conducted according to the guidelines provided by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#).

3. Results

3.1. Program policies and use of digital media

According to staff report, 51% of programs have a written policy on mentors' use of social media with mentees. Ninety percent of staff report that they would consider terminating the relationship if a mentor–mentee match violated a policy around use of digital media; in contrast to 9% reporting that they would definitely terminate the match and 10% reporting that they would definitely not terminate the match. Program policies and attitudes towards use of specific forms of media are presented in [Fig. 1](#). In each of the major categories, with the exception of speaking on the phone, a small proportion of programs (2%–16%) reported that the specific form of communication was not addressed or discussed in their program. In contrast, 72% of program staff reported that they discuss use of social media in mentor training; however, only 17% reported actually monitoring digital media communication between their mentors and mentees. Fifty-nine percent of programs permit mentors and mentees to “friend” each other over Facebook, whereas 41% prohibit or discourage Facebook use. In recognition of a growing awareness of the role of the internet in youth's lives as

well as the risks involved, 43% of staff reported that their program offers training or skill development to mentors and/or mentees on cyber safety and cyber bullying. Interestingly, when mentors were asked if their program has guidelines around the use of digital media, the most frequent response (44%) was “unsure,” while 42% reported that they did have guidelines, and 15% reported that they did not have guidelines.

Mentors' use of digital media with their mentees is presented in [Fig. 2](#). Mentors commonly reported using phone calls (64%) and text messages (49%) to communicate with their mentees, and some mentors indicated they also used email (27%) or Facebook (17%) for this purpose. Only a small percentage (2%–8%) reported using other forms of communication, including IM, Skype and photo/video sharing. Mentors were also asked to report on their purpose behind using various forms of communication. Notably, such contact, particularly phone calls, texts, and email, appeared to be used primarily for check-ins and logistics, while in-depth conversations and sharing private thoughts or emotions were reported to occur primarily during face-to-face contact (see [Fig. 3](#)).

3.2. Predictors of digital media use

A number of mentor, mentee, and program characteristics predicted use of digital media. Specifically, mentors with higher levels of education reported less frequent use of Facebook ($\beta = .17, p < .05$). Mentors with older mentees reported significantly more frequent use of digital media including email ($\beta = .30, p < .01$), texting ($\beta = .42, p < .01$), and Facebook ($\beta = .19, p < .05$), and mentors with female mentees reported marginally more frequent use of texting ($\beta = .24, p = .06$). Mentors in school-based mentoring programs reported less frequent use of texting ($\beta = .18, p < .05$), and mentors in community-based mentoring programs reported more frequent use of Facebook ($\beta = .15, p < .05$). Mentor gender, mentor age, and mentor and mentee minority status did not emerge as significant predictors of digital media use.

3.3. Digital media use and relationship characteristics

Following initial characterization of use of digital media in mentoring programs, we investigated associations between digital media use and relationship characteristics.

3.3.1. Digital media Use and relationship quality

For the RHI, which focuses on relational-experiential dimensions of relationship quality, mentor and mentee demographics and program characteristics accounted for 18% of the variance in relationship quality,

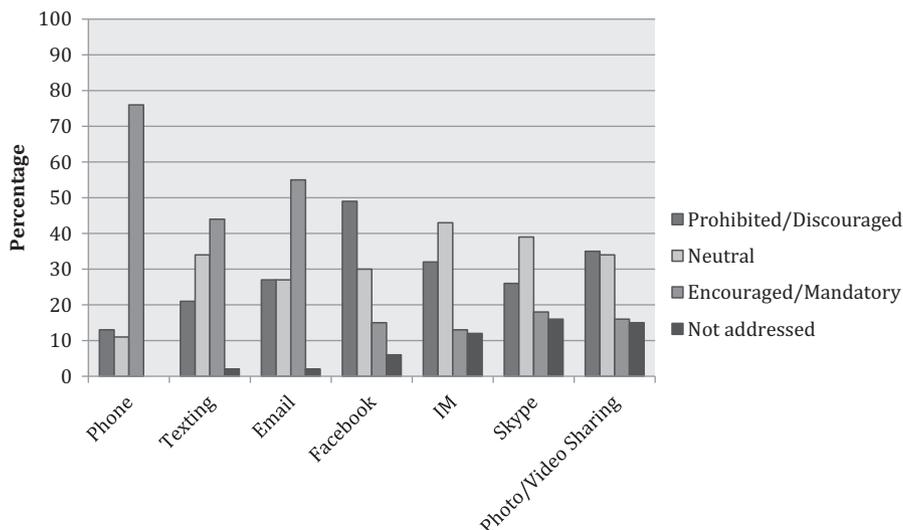


Fig. 1. Program policies by media.

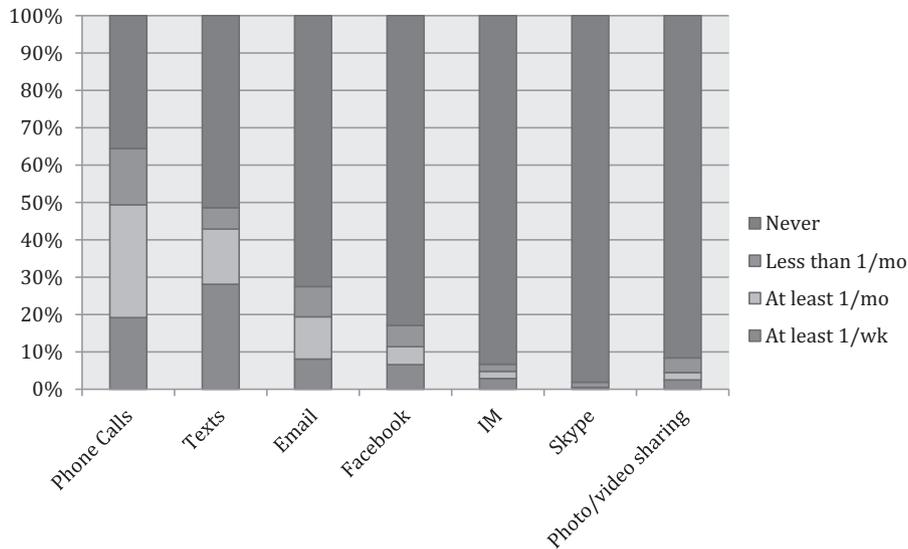


Fig. 2. Mentor-reported use of digital media in the mentoring relationship.

and use of digital media accounted for an additional 7% of the variance (see Table 1). Greater use of Facebook was significantly associated with higher relationship quality ($p < .05$).

For the MSOR, which focuses on environmental/logistical and affective dimensions of relationship quality, mentor and mentee demographics and program characteristics accounted for 10% of the variance in relationship quality, and use of digital media accounted for an additional 6% of the variance (see Table 1). Greater use of Facebook was marginally significantly associated with higher relationship quality ($p = .07$). Interestingly, more discussion of how digital media would be used in the relationship was significantly associated with lower relationship quality ($p < .05$).

3.3.2. Digital media use and relationship duration

Mentor and mentee demographics and program characteristics accounted for 22% of the variance in current relationship duration and 18% of the variance in expected relationship duration; use of digital media accounted for an additional 10% of the variance in current

relationship duration and an additional 5% of the variance in expected relationship duration (see Table 2). Mentors in programs with guidelines about digital media use reported shorter current relationship duration ($p < .05$) and expected relationship duration ($p < .01$). More frequent face-to-face contact was associated with shorter current relationship duration ($p < .05$). More frequent use of Facebook was associated with longer current relationship duration ($p < .01$) and marginally significantly longer expected relationship duration ($p = .05$). Discussion of how digital media would be used in the relationship was significantly associated with shorter current relationship duration ($p < .05$).

3.4. Mentor and staff perceptions of the influence of digital media use

3.4.1. Quantitative results

The majority of mentors (59%) reported that digital media had neither improved nor worsened their relationships with the mentees,

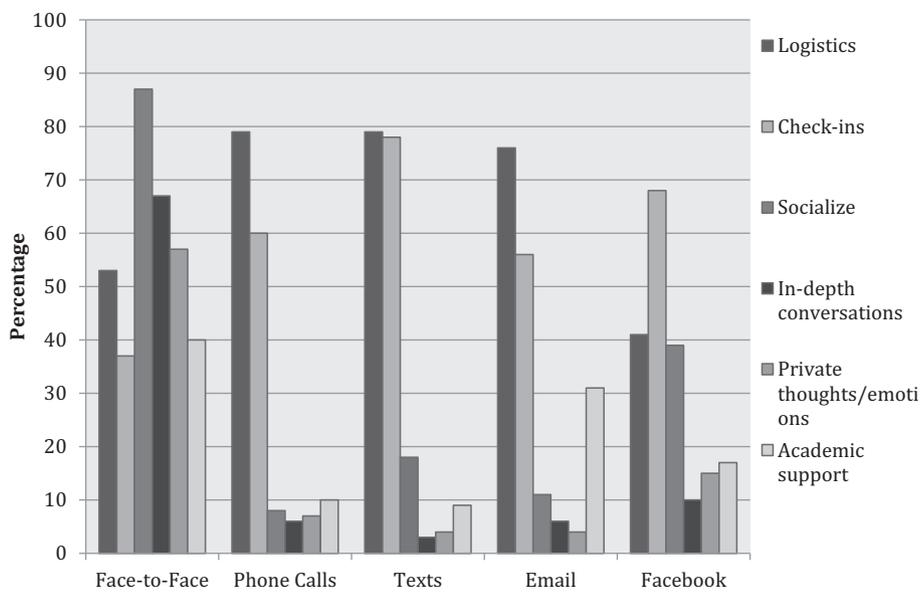


Fig. 3. Mentor-reported purpose of digital media use in the mentoring relationship.

Table 1
Standardized regression coefficients for use of digital media as a predictor of relationship quality.

	Relational Health Index		Strength of relationship	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Step 1				
Mentee age	.00	-.11	-.03	.00
Mentee gender	.03	-.05	-.02	-.03
Mentee minority status	-.11	-.09	-.16‡	-.12
Mentor age	-.10	-.10	.02	.02
Mentor minority status	-.07	-.09	.08	.06
Mentor education level	-.08	-.06	.00	.01
Group mentoring program	.34**	.34**	.19*	.21*
Team mentoring program	-.26**	-.24**	-.12	-.08
School-based mentoring program	.06	.09	.13	.15‡
Site-based mentoring program	-.04	-.07	-.02	-.07
Program digital media guidelines	-.12	-.09	-.06	-.01
Step 2				
Face-to-face contact		.01		.12
Phone contact		.10		.06
Text contact		.14		.08
Email contact		.11		.09
Facebook contact		.16*		.15‡
Discussed use of digital media		-.02		-.22*
R ² change	.18	.07	.10	.06
F change	3.1**	2.2*	1.6	1.7
Total adjusted R ²	.12	.16	.04	.06

‡ $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

and a substantial number of mentors (37%) reported that digital media had either somewhat improved or improved their relationships with the mentee, while only 3% reported that digital media had worsened their relationships. Most mentors also felt that digital media either had no impact on frequency of communication (49%) or helped them communicate more frequently with their mentee (42%). The majority

Table 2
Standardized regression coefficients for use of digital media as a predictor of relationship duration.

	Current relationship duration		Expected relationship duration	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Step 1				
Mentee age	.28**	.27‡	.02	.02
Mentee gender	.01	-.01	.00	-.01
Mentee minority status	-.03	-.04	-.02	-.02
Mentor age	.12	.14*	-.05	-.03
Mentor minority status	-.09	-.13‡	-.06	-.10
Mentor education level	-.18*	-.16*	-.06	-.04
Group mentoring program	.14‡	.14‡	.25**	.23*
Team mentoring program	.15‡	-.14‡	-.17‡	-.14‡
School-based mentoring program	.16*	.19*	.10	.13
Site-based mentoring program	.08	.03	.09	.05
Program digital media guidelines	-.16*	-.10	-.30**	-.25**
Step 2				
Face-to-face contact		-.16*		-.06
Phone contact		.08		.10
Text contact		.08		.07
Email contact		-.05		-.07
Facebook contact		.26**		.16‡
Discussed use of digital media		-.19*		-.14
R ² change	.22	.10	.18	.05
F change	4.3**	4.0**	3.2**	1.6
Total adjusted R ²	.17	.25	.12	.14

‡ $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

of mentors (69%) also planned to continue to communicate with their mentees via digital media after relationship termination.

Similar to mentors, the majority of staff (55%) reported that digital media had a neutral effect on relationship quality, and 43% reported a positive effect, while only 2% reported a negative effect. The majority of staff members (52%) perceived use of digital media to slightly increase or greatly increase contact between mentors and youth, while 45% perceived it to have no impact, and 3% reported that it slightly or greatly decreased contact. Staff members perceived use of digital media to have less of an influence on duration of relationships, with 67% reporting that it has no impact on relationship duration, while 32% reported that it increased relationship duration, and 2% reported that it decreased relationship duration.

3.4.2. Open-ended responses

Responses from open-ended questions in the staff survey revealed a number of ways that the use of digital media influenced mentoring relationships. The most common theme that emerged was the way in which digital media increased mentor and staff access to mentees. One staff member stated, "We have to go where the participants are." Twenty-eight percent of open-ended responses specifically referenced that social media, particularly Facebook, may be the only means of contacting youth who do not have consistent phone access or phone numbers. Staff also frequently described mentors and mentees using digital media as a supplementary form of contact between face-to-face meetings (23% of responses), and in some cases, deepening relationships (13% of responses). One staff member described digital media use in mentoring relationships, stating, "It enhances, but does not replace, face-to-face contact." Some staff members commented on the immediacy of digital media, allowing mentees to communicate information or feelings in the moment. For example, a staff member noted, "Mentees in their teen years (13+) can communicate with their mentor over Facebook messaging and sometimes have deeper conversations or have someone to confide in immediately after something happens with a friend or family member." Another staff member observed, "Many mentees will initiate contact more frequently by texting their mentor and share things that are bothering them more easily via text giving mentors the opportunity to discuss it with them when they meet." Staff also specifically noted that their mentees are "usually more comfortable communicating through social media than over the phone (especially when the relationship between the mentee and mentor is just forming)."

In addition to allowing for increased contact during the relationship, staff also described social media increasing relationship duration and allowing for contact to be maintained after mentors leave the program or after youth move (62% of responses). A staff member shared the story of her relationship with her own mentee, explaining,

"I do know that as youth age out of the program, mentors (including myself) switch to social media to connect with our previous mentees. I have been so blessed to watch my mentee grow into a young woman, and have her own family thanks to Facebook! We message each other periodically, but mostly keep in touch by commenting on photos. Prior to Facebook, we touched base about 3 times a year. She is now 31."

Although the majority of responses were positive about the impacts of social media, concerns also emerged. Specifically, a number of staff members (14% of responses) reported that mentors had encountered inappropriate or disturbing material on youth's Facebook pages. In a small number of cases (4% of responses), staff reported that mentors were able to turn the experience into a positive "teachable moment." For example, one staff member described "a mentor talking to her Little Sister about some things Little Sister was posting that were not appropriate" and using this as an opportunity to talk with her "about her future and her online reputation." Another staff member described a

mentor addressing cyber bullying with her mentee. More often, however, these experiences were described as negatively influencing the mentor–mentee relationship, with 10% of responses describing inappropriate mentee posts having a negative influence on relationships. As one staff member noted,

“In my experience, sharing information through Facebook has been an issue. Mentors need to have appropriate postings on their page and expect the same from their mentees. Unfortunately, that's not always the case. Kids post crazy and funny things and mentors misinterpret them and become upset.”

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the current landscape of digital media policies and use in youth mentoring programs, as well as to explore mentor and staff perceptions of the influence of digital media use on relationships and associations between social media use and relationship quality and duration.

4.1. Digital media policy, use, and associations with relationship characteristics

The majority of program staff participants who reported having policies regarding digital media use appeared to take this issue seriously. Nearly three-quarters of staff (72%) reported discussing the use of digital media in mentor training, and 90% report that they would consider terminating a mentoring relationship if a mentor–mentee pair violated a policy around use of digital media. Yet, interestingly, only half of all programs surveyed indicated that they had a written policy on mentors' use of social media with mentees. An even greater percentage of mentors either reported that their program did not have guidelines or that they were unaware of their program's guidelines. Indeed, only 17% of programs reported actually monitoring electronically mediated communication between mentors and mentees.

These inconsistencies in how mentoring programs address digital communication appear to reflect the substantial variability in program policies regarding the use of specific forms of digital media. For example, programs tend to be less encouraging of Facebook, IM, Skype, and photo and video sharing forms of communication compared to the more traditional types of electronically mediated communication—phone, email, and texting. Despite the concerns that programs seem to have regarding digital media use, it appears that there is widespread use of these technologies by mentors and mentees, particularly texting, Facebook, and email in matches with older mentees. Moreover, our results demonstrate that digital media use, and Facebook use in particular, is generally correlated with higher relationship quality and longer relationship duration. In support of these findings, only a negligible percentage of the mentor (3%) and program staff (2%) respondents reported that digital media had a negative impact on mentoring relationships, with the majority perceiving digital media as having a neutral or positive impact. At the same time, open-ended responses revealed the potential for misunderstandings (largely on the part of mentors) and, in particular, for information to be disclosed via social media that may negatively influence relationships, although such issues appeared to be relatively rare.

In terms of contact and duration of mentoring relationships, participants reported that digital media either had no impact on or increased the frequency of mentor–mentee communication, rather than reducing communication. Similarly, a majority of staff members reported that digital media had no impact on or increased relationship duration. These generally positive findings may be because digital media use tends to supplement, rather than replace face-to-face contact. Open-ended responses suggested that digital media extends

relationships because it allows for contact to continue after mentors leave or mentees age out of mentoring programs.

4.2. Connections to existing research

These findings suggest that digital media use in mentoring relationships in many ways mirrors digital media use in other contexts. For example, consistent with previous research that indicates that older adolescent girls are the heaviest users of texting (Lenhart, 2012), our results showed that texting is more likely to be used in mentoring relationships with older girls. Additionally, both quantitative data and open-ended responses indicated that digital media was typically used to coordinate plans and to supplement face-to-face meetings. This supports a growing body of research demonstrating that, in general, digital media is used to facilitate existing connections, rather than replacing closer contact (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Zilberstein, 2013).

More generally, these findings are consistent with other research on the largely positive influences of social media in older adolescents' other types of relationships. For example, counter to concerns that parents “friending” their child on Facebook might be experienced as an invasion of privacy by the latter, it actually was associated with decreased conflict and increased closeness in the parents' relationships with their college-aged children (Kanter, Afifi, & Robbins, 2012). Similarly, social network sites have been shown to help friends not only maintain relationships with each other, but engage in new behaviors that contribute to relationship escalation (Sosik & Bazarova, 2014). At the same time, the potential for misunderstandings and unintentional disclosure of information via social media that some staff members reported in our study has also been shown to pose dilemmas in professional “helping” relationships such as psychotherapy relationships (Tunick, 2011).

Previous research also suggests that digital media use varies based on contextual factors such as geographic distance and gender among the communicators. For example, college students used phone calls to stay connected to local friends and family, but internet-based media were more effective in long-distance relationships (Boneva, Kraut, & Frohlich, 2001; Cummings, Lee, & Kraut, 2006). Our results also suggest that mentors and mentees may increase their use of social media and decrease face-to-face meetings as their relationship progresses. Other research on Big Brothers Big Sisters mentoring relationships has suggested that the frequency of meetings decreases as the relationship progresses (Brady & Dolan, 2014). It may be that this decrease in face-to-face meetings can be supplemented through social media communication.

4.3. Implications for programs and policies

Our study findings on the potential benefits of digital media use supplementing face-to-face contact in mentoring programs bring to bear a number of implications for programs and policies. First, given the widespread use of digitally mediated communication modes among mentors and mentees, it is imperative that program policies are developed, preferably included in the program's policies and procedures manual in written form, and communication of those policies to mentors and mentees be administered clearly and consistently across programs before the start of each mentor match. Interestingly, the results of this study showed that mentor–mentee discussion of how digital media would be used in their relationship was significantly associated with lower mentor-reported relationship quality. It is possible that this is because discussions about media use are occurring after problems related to digital media use have already developed in the relationship. It is also possible that for these mentors, program staff did not clearly communicate digital media policies to both mentors and mentees (as well as the mentee's parents or guardians), leaving the mentors in a tenuous position of setting limits or undertaking difficult conversations that disrupted the development of the relationship. Thus, early and clear communication by program

staff may help prevent problems before they arise, and in turn protect the evolving mentoring relationship.

Our findings suggest the importance of ongoing training and support regarding social media use. In particular, training may address media literacy, boundary issues, and the appropriate content for social media. Again, proactive and systematic training, rather than addressing problems after they happen, may be essential to protecting the mentor–mentee relationship. In our study, program staff noted that when problems occurred, such as mentors encountering inappropriate material on mentees' Facebook pages, only in a small number of cases could mentors turn the situation into a positive "teachable moment." In most cases, the situation seemed to be associated with negative consequences in the mentoring relationships. Although our study did not examine the relational processes in such situations, one possibility is that the way in which mentors confronted mentees about their social media misuse led to shame among the latter or left them feeling like their mentors just did not understand them. Indeed, it may be most effective to include mentees in contributing to training adult mentors and program staff on the use of these communication tools given their inherent expertise as "digital natives." Such a reciprocal environment for training and teaching may level the playing field and enable greater positive communication regarding the ins and outs of media use.

In addition, it is important to recognize that, although positive associations have been demonstrated between being Facebook friends and positive relationship characteristics, these associations are not necessarily causal. Indeed, it is likely that mentors and mentees agree to become Facebook friends in the context of more enduring relationships in which trust has already developed through in-person interactions. Being Facebook friends may serve to enhance the connection in an established relationship, but is unlikely to improve a relationship where there is little connection. On the contrary, due to the potential for misunderstandings and blurring of boundaries when mentors and mentees become friends over Facebook, it may be important to already have a strong relationship and good communication to be able to navigate any challenges that arise. One possibility would be for programs to consider policies that provide different guidelines around use of social media during different stages in a mentoring relationship. For example, programs may limit social media use in early stages of a relationship and then support its use as the relationship progresses.

Finally, the study findings also suggest a number of important implications for the ending of formal mentoring relationships. Notably, more than two-thirds of mentors reported that they planned to continue to communicate with their mentees via digital media after relationship termination. Given that digital media makes it possible for relationships to continue beyond the formal end of the mentoring contract, "termination" may be thought of more as a transition to a new type of relationship where different strategies for maintaining and escalating the connection become possible. Moreover, given the reality that many mentors and mentees plan to maintain contact through digital media following termination of the formal mentoring relationship, it is important that programs develop policies and training for the appropriate boundaries and nature of the evolving and continuing relationship.

4.4. Limitations

The current study is subject to several limitations. First, it is a cross-sectional study, based on correlational analyses, and thus we cannot conclude causal relationships. For example, it may be that stronger mentoring relationships lead to greater use of digital media, rather than media use leading to better relationships. It is also possible that a third variable is associated with the connection between mentoring relationship quality and media use. Specifically, youth with good social skills and positive relationships in general may tend to use media more and may tend to have better relationships with mentors. Future studies should include a longitudinal design and structural equation modeling to take the next step towards examining causality. It also

will be beneficial to explore whether there are certain individual, relationship, or program characteristics in which use of digital media is more or less helpful.

Additionally, the current study focused on relationship characteristics as dependent variables. Future research should also include other youth outcomes, including academic, behavioral, and social–emotional outcomes that may be associated with electronically mediated communication. For example, although our findings suggest that digital media use was associated with positive mentoring relationship qualities, the former may have negative consequences for youth themselves, such as an over attachment to technology, and even an unhealthy internet addiction. Researchers should raise questions via qualitative research regarding the more nuanced and complex reasons for digitally mediated mentor–mentee communication, as well as processes and outcomes of such communication. Our results are also subject to bias due to shared method variance, which may inflate associations. Multi-respondent studies may extend this research querying mentors and program staff by including the perspectives of youths and parents/guardians, enabling us to further clarify processes and outcomes.

This study also suffers from self-selection bias. Given that the study involved a voluntary online survey with an iPad incentive, the study may have drawn only those respondents who had a high level of media literacy, access, and interest, and inadvertently excluded those who might more likely report negative aspects of digital media use. Moreover, the study primarily involved mentoring programs in the U.S. and Canada, and White mentors. Again, these populations may be biased towards a more favorable view of digital media use than are individuals with less digital media access and literacy. It will be important for future studies to draw upon more diverse populations.

4.5. Conclusion

In sum, digital media is widely used among mentors and mentees of formal mentoring programs. Our findings show that this media use does not seem to detract from the closeness and quality of face-to-face mentoring relationships, but may actually supplement and strengthen them. In order to derive the maximum benefits of digital media communication, as well as prevent any harmful usage, it seems important to address the lack of consistency with which programs communicate guidelines and administer ongoing training to mentors and mentees on media use. Moreover, it may be helpful to engage youth themselves in training mentors and program staff on media use to create an environment of reciprocity and mutuality, and reduce the chance of shaming and patronizing youth regarding the technology they are in some ways more adept with using than are the digital immigrant adults who mentor them.

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