INTRODUCTION:
What constitutes a satisfactory communication relationship between college students and their parents? This fundamental question lies within the realm of Family Communication and forms the basis of this exploration into college student-parent communication. As children begin to make the transition from home life and dependency on parents to full adulthood and independence, the communication shifts and settles into different patterns. Before examining the research questions, it is important to understand some recent trends in Family Communication research and how this study seeks to add to the body of literature.

This quantitative study seeks to examine the relationship between frequency, communication initiation as they relate to college student satisfaction with communication patterns between themselves and their parents. In part, this study is based on the work of Barbara K. Hofer and her paper entitled “Student-Parent Communication in the College Years: Can students grow up on an electronic tether?” published in 2011. In this study, Hofer, a professor of Psychology at Middlebury College in Vermont, surveyed students concerning their communication with their parents and the effects of this communication on their autonomy. Dr. Hofer relates a lack of autonomy with students’ ability to self-regulate and thus succeed in college which seems plausible but may not be directly related to communication as she has connected it.

Perhaps more interesting than this connection however, was the amount of contact her surveyed students had with their parents per week. Across the 908 students surveyed from Middlebury and the University of Michigan, women on average communicated 14.5 times per week with their parents where men communicated only 11.3 for an average of 13.4 (Hofer, 2011). This seemed like an implausible find and sparked the genesis of this study in college student communication. This current study seeks to recreate Hofer’s study but with a focus on communication initiation instead of independence development. While Dr. Hofer’s work does not show an explicit definition for communication interaction, this current study intends to examine the frequency of full or complete conversations.

Family communication with regard to college students also has a focus on privacy and boundary management. In their article entitled “College Students’ Willingness to Reveal Risky Behaviors: The influence of Relationship and Message,” Desiree Aldeis and Tamara D. Afifi examine how emerging adults, people aged 18-25, perceive confirming, disconfirming, and challenging message from parents, siblings, and peers (2013). From those perceptions, Aldeis and Tamar also look at how the emerging adults decide to reveal or conceal their risky behaviors. In the field of Family Communication and particularly in the area of emerging adults, risky behavior seems to be an indication of independence where more independence equates to more willingness to engage in risky behavior. Students engage in risky behavior for a variety of reasons not covered in the scope of this study. However, why students reveal risky behavior, according to Aldeis and Afifi, is closely tied to the message type and the interaction between the message and type of target (p. 107). This study, though more focused on content rather than other factors, touches on the importance of how students communicate. While frequency is important and content holds a strong place, the way messages are shaped plays a huge role in...
how communication is evaluated. Through content and the shaping of messages, Aldeis and Afifi speak briefly to the concept of medium as a shaper of messages but do not engage with initiation. Included in this same discussion are ideas of relationship. In their study, Aldeis and Afifi look at not only the content of messages, but the influence of the recipient. Though their study focused on parents, siblings, and peers, this study will be concerned with only the parent relationship and how initiation plays a role in students’ satisfaction. While describing every aspect would be hard to manage in the scope of this paper, focusing on communication initiation as a characteristic of student-parent relationship covers some of the same ground and is worth exploring.

In addition to frequency and message types, privacy also holds a prominent place in Family Communication relating to the college student. The study “Parental Invasive and Children’s Defensive behaviors at Home and Away at College: Mediated communication and Privacy Boundary Management” by Ledbetter, Heiss, Sibal, Lev, Battle-Fisher, and Shubert (2010) speaks on students’ defensive strategies toward their parents on matters of privacy boundaries. In their empirical study, Ledbetter describe how mediated communication impacts the management of boundaries and how invasive behaviors have decreased since a similar study was done in 1994 (p. 187). The authors use much of their discussion to examine how technology has changed the character of parent-child boundary management and underlines the need for current examinations of the communications landscape. As mediums change, the communication patterns of parents and children will have to adapt, but some fundamentals will remain the same such as the need for satisfaction in communication.

This current study hopes to expand on Ledbetter’s study by looking at initiation in light of satisfaction. Though invasive behaviors are assumed to be initiated, this study will serve to explicitly see the relationship between initiation and satisfaction.

Satisfaction serves as another anchor of Family Communication through this exploration. As emerging adults, college students are encouraged to challenge the status quo and look to their parents from independent perspectives. Leslie Baxter and Joshua Pederson of the University of Iowa, in their article “Perceived and Ideal Family Communication Patterns and Family Satisfaction for parents and their College-Aged Children,” (2013) found that there was a high correlation between perceived and ideal family communication patterns for both student and child. Through this study, Baxter and Pederson found that parent satisfaction was negatively impacted by discrepancy in conversation orientation and child satisfaction was negatively predicted from the discrepancy in conformity orientation (p. 145). Though conformity and conversation orientation are not directly included in this current examination of frequency and initiation, Baxter and Pederson’s study speaks to satisfaction and the impact of intentions on communication patterns.

While this study intends to examine college student communication, it should be noted there is a difference between the family communication patterns of first year students and the rest of the undergraduate student body. Dr. Maureen E. Kenny, lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania, examined parental connection among first year college students in her paper, “The extent and Function of Parental Attachment Among First-Year College Students” (1987). In that study, Kenny used a psychological model of attachment with regard to first year college students to highlight their unique status within the college student population. Through the study, she saw that most students viewed their parents as a secure base which encouraged student independence and gave a source of support. She cites research that supports this idea that the purpose of family is to provide a base from which to explore (p. 18). This current study does not seek to engage
with the turbulence of establishing communication patterns, though freedom to explore does seem to factor into satisfaction especially with regard to parents as a secure base.

This current study seeks to explore how this satisfaction between family communication and the college student is impacted by two key variables, frequency and initiation. Though Baxter and Pederson were able to study both the parents and the students, this study will focus solely on the students and how their communication informs their satisfaction. Toward the end goal of exploring satisfaction, this study engages with two key research questions:

RQ 1. What is the relationship between frequency and satisfaction in College Student communication patterns with parent(s)?

RQ 2. How does initiation affect satisfaction in the College student-parent relationship?

Using the body of existing literature to inform the results, this study seeks to expand the field of Family Communication in the area of college student transitions in communication. Students are unique because they straddle the boundary of family life and independence (Hofer, 2011). After college, the students are expected to be self-regulating and autonomous with a degree of independence not found in childhood and thus constitute a unique transitional population. Aldeis engages with the importance of content and interaction of message type with receiver which informs how students engage with different responsive mediums. Where Ledbetter engages with privacy management, this study will take a broader view to examine how initiation plays a role in the discussion between student and parents. This current study hypothesizes that college students will be most satisfied with their communication pattern when the communication frequency is equal to or less than seven times a week and the conversation initiation is evenly split.

METHODOLOGY:

Because quantitative is a popular effective vehicle of Family Communication research, an online ten question survey was created to examine the intersection of frequency, initiation, and satisfaction. This survey will serve to define the frequency as well as outline communication initiation. Using the professional survey service, SurveyGizmo, this survey was divided into two sections: Demographics and Communication Patterns. In the four question Demographics section, the survey asked for Gender, Age, Full-time student status, and class standing. The purpose behind these questions was define the sample by age and gender and eliminate outliers such as first year student and part time students who likely have unusual communication patterns.

The communication pattern section contained five questions with multiple choice answers and one question that was a drag-and-list where the respondents would drag answers from one box to another and rank in the box all the applied. In his book on communication research methods, Arthur Berger paints survey questions in two categories: open-ended and closed-ended (Berger, 2014, p. 258). This survey used close ended questions in order to limit the answer pool, with the exception of the drag-and-list question. That question was designed to straddle the line between open-ended and close-ended by allowing respondents to choose as many as applied to their situation while also providing common answers.

Once the survey was constructed, it went through two researcher revisions and a review from research advisor Dr. Kate Simcox before being sent out through the Messiah College Mass
email service to the entire Messiah College undergraduate student body student email inbox. Because the survey was constructed using SurveyGizmo, it could be linked in the mass email allowing respondents to answer the questions through their own computer. In addition to describing the study, the body of the email also assured all responses would be kept anonymous.

Once the mass email was sent out, the survey was kept open for 7 days and then closed to analyze the results. To analyze the results, the SurveyGizmo “Summary Report - Auto Run” program and Microsoft Excel were used to analyze the data and create a table and graph.

Of the 194 completed responses, 77.3% of the respondents were female and 22.7% were male. With regard to the other demographics questions, 100% were between 18-24 years old and full time students at a mid-size private college in the northeastern United States. Of these students, 27.3% were sophomores, 30.4% juniors, and 42.3% were seniors.

RESULTS:

In general, students (n=194) chose verbal communication as their most often used medium at 53.1% with text based communication such as social media, email, and texting holding second place with 38.7%. The third medium, visual and audio communication mediums such as the video calling service Skype, only had 3.6% of the respondents select it as their most used medium.

When asked to rank which mediums they would prefer to use, respondents chose Telephone call and Face-to-Face with Texting, Skype and Email rounding out the top 5. Because this question was not required in order to complete the survey, only 181 students responded. Using the total score evaluation from SurveyGizmo, where the items ranked first are valued higher than the following ranks and the score is the sum of all weighted rank counts, table 1 was created to illustrated the stratification between the top two preferred mediums, the next three, and the last five.

On a 5 point scale of satisfaction, 35.6% and 42.3% rated this communication with their parent(s) as Very Satisfied and Satisfied respectively while 5.7% and 0.5% of students rated their satisfaction as Dissatisfied and Very Dissatisfied respectively. 16.5% of the students chose the Neutral option with 0.5% choosing Not Applicable.

When asked to select who initiates the communication between the respondent and the respondent’s parents, 24.4% selected themselves as the primary initiator, with 21.1% selecting their parents. The third option, Initiation is evenly split, was selected by 54% of the students. Graph 1 illustrate how people responded to communication initiation in light of their satisfaction. By percentage and numbers, more people ranked their satisfaction a five when the communication was evenly split between the parents and the students.

When prompted to select how many times respondents communicated with their parents per week, with communication defined as having a “full conversation,” 86.6 % of students responded 0-7 times per week. 2.6% selected over 21 times per week with 10.8% of students choosing not to select an answer.

DISCUSSION:

This study was only partially successful in supporting the hypothesis that college students will be most satisfied with their communication pattern when the frequency is equal to or less than seven times a week and the student predominantly initiates the conversation. Because 97% of the respondents who selected an answer to the question selected 0-7 times a week, this study cannot conclusively say at what point students are most satisfied with their communication.
Though the frequency aspect of the study was not conclusive, it seems to indicate the survey results from Hofer are higher than normal among college students. Further research would benefit by further refining the question to ask respondents to select single unit answers like 1, 2, 3, or 4. With 97% of respondents to this question selecting 0-7, the likelihood of including the majority of students in those smaller categories is high.

Though there was not enough information to support the first aspect of the hypothesis and answer the first research question, the second aspect and question, initiation, does seem to correlate with satisfaction. As seen in Graph 1, the respondents who rated their communication satisfaction a 4 or 5 were twice as likely to describe their communication initiation as evenly split rather than predominantly parent initiated or student initiated. Upon examination of this trend through the light of privacy management and self-disclosure, further research can be done on how invasive and defensive behaviors are related to initiation. Similarly, one could point to the high percentage of verbal communication usage as a way to compare more responsive mediums and communication initiation patterns.

Implications of this study also include further opportunity to examine the role initiation plays in parent-adult communication. Does this aspect of family communication change when the student graduates from college? This study seems to indicate that at least in college, the most satisfying communication pattern is one where both parties reach out and open dialogue.

Before analyzing the data set, all respondents who identified as outside the 18-24 range were also eliminated. The reasoning behind it was that students outside this age range will most likely have different communication patterns than those who are going through college at the traditional time. Of the original 215 responses numbered 304-518, 13 partial answers were removed. Important to narrowing the study, all students who did not respond with 18-24 were removed from the results. Through this criteria, 3 respondents aged 25-34 and 1 aged 0-17 were removed. These refinements plus the four self-identifying first year students brought the total sample size to 194.

This study has several limitations. Because of the construction of the survey, there is no account for the unique communication patterns of transfer students. For the purposes of this study, all first year student responses were removed in order to avoid the turbulence of establishing communication patterns that many first-year students go through during their first year as outlined in Dr. Kenny’s study. With this refinement, 4 respondents were eliminated in order to isolate those who have been in college at least a year and who have, to some degree, assimilated to college life. That being said, refinement does not account for transfer students who may share similar experiences and communication patterns with first year students.

Another point to consider addresses how students who are studying abroad communicate with their parents. Through this instrument, students who studied abroad were not treated differently than those who are studying at the home campus in Pennsylvania. Though there were only study abroad respondents in this survey, their unique perspectives were not highlighted and could be an area for further research. The independence of studying in a foreign country away from parents requires a level of independence that may lend to different communication patterns with family back home. Though the survey was not explicit, it implied that this study was restricted to ‘normal’ communication patterns when the students are on main campus.
Appendix A:

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium preferred for an important conversation, with all that apply being ranked.</th>
<th>Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Telephone call</td>
<td>1625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-Face</td>
<td>1508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texting</td>
<td>1099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>1082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>1051</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Mail</td>
<td>528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Hangouts</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Graph 1

Communication Initiation

- Predominantly Your Parents
- Predominantly You
- Evenly Split

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predominantly Your Parents</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predominantly You</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evenly Split</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Works Cited


