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The Trouble with Friends

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The popularity of social media has created a new social communication paradigm. Within this new paradigm, the definition of “friend,” [1] as many have known it, has now expanded. This is due primarily to Facebook’s (the most popular online social networking application) [2] use of the term “friend” as the mutually agreed upon connection between two users. The term has underlying meaning as it represents the major element of this application. For example, when I discovered that my cousin was on Facebook, I sent her a friend request that she accepted. My profile now displays her as one of my Facebook friends and vice versa. Among other things, this friend connection allows us to access each other’s profile information (photos, personal information, etc.), as well as receive real-time updates on what each of us posts on Facebook. Becoming someone’s Facebook friend is almost imperative if one wants to take full advantage of the features offered for connecting with that user.

During my frequent lectures and talks with students, faculty, and civic organizations regarding all aspects of social networking, this issue is usually raised. Because of its immense popularity among those populations, Facebook tends to become a focal application for discussion. When speaking to audiences with members older than 35, inevitably someone will comment or ask a question pertaining to the Facebook “friending” nature of younger generations. It has recently become apparent to me that a generational divide exists with regard to this simple term and what it means in online social networking. In this paper, I discuss the reasons for this divide and why this seemingly innocuous term has created angst among many in the older generations.

How Older Audiences View Friends

Older adults with whom I speak often express incredulity over the volume of “friends” that younger generations have. “How can anyone really have that many friends?” they ask when they realize that typical college-aged Facebook users list hundreds to thousands of friends. Their
perception is that this large volume of friends is the result of nothing more than vanity or ill-advised connections with unknown people. Over time, I have come to realize why this question comes from older generations and never from the younger generations. The two generations are operating under different paradigms of social communication and therefore view the term “friend” differently.

Older generations define a “friend” as someone with whom a close personal relationship has been formed. This relationship has typically involved substantial face-to-face communication and implies more than just a casual acquaintance from school, work, or other social event. The word “friend” holds deep meaning and is not a label doled out freely to everyone encountered. To them, friendships do not occur at the click of a mouse, but are developed over time. They reserve friendship for the select few with whom intense bonding has occurred and in whom they have placed substantial trust. When asked how many friends (of the traditional sense, not Facebook) they have, the answer ranges from 3 to 50, indicating the exclusivity of the term. Friend is not a title to be bestowed upon others without some form of personal connection. The word is so deep-rooted among some over the age of 35 that they are reluctant to accept friend requests from former real life friends due simply to a disconnect over the years. That they have not seen or spoken with someone for twenty years places some sort of mental barrier to calling them a friend.

Why are there Generational Differences?

I attribute part of the generational differences in the definition of a Facebook friend to the evolution of social networking and its use by the different age groups. When Facebook was first developed, college students were the only users. Similar to other rites of passage, Facebook became another method of conveying one’s personality and interests to the rest of the world. Making and strengthening friendships is an important element of young people’s lives and Facebook provided a perfect medium to facilitate this. The desire to learn more about someone met in history class is a perfectly valid reason for sending a Facebook friend request. Friending someone on Facebook and allowing access to personal profiles became the new equivalent of face-to-face conversations with regard to the personal backgrounds of new acquaintances. Because people in this age group are frequently in situations with new acquaintances, their Facebook “friends” lists grow rapidly.

Now, contrast this with older generations of users who adopted social networking long after it became popular with younger audiences and you will find different reasons for adoption and, therefore, different perspectives of use. Those 35 and older joined Facebook primarily to renew old friendships and connect with family members [3]. Of course, there are some who also joined to monitor their children! Establishing and facilitating new relationships is typically not of major importance for their decision to adopt Facebook. To these users, a Facebook friend is typically a real-life offline friend of many years. In other words, their Facebook friends are customarily friends in the traditional sense of the term. The word friend still holds significance in how it is elaborated online, and therefore most users of older generations have not quickly amassed hundreds of Facebook friends.
Who are Friends in the New Paradigm?

Facebook friending behaviors vary among individuals, and what I have stated thus far are generalized observations. Each person has his or her own philosophy on Facebook friending. Whether my philosophy is typical or not with others in older generations can be debated, but it is worth exploring in order to examine this new definition of online friends. My personal philosophy is that I usually do not send friend requests to others unless they are someone with whom I have had a traditional friendship. However, I do accept all friend requests from others unless I have never met or communicated with the person in some other format.

My Facebook friends list tends to be quite diverse. I of course have friends who are my real life, offline friends. I have friends from my hometown, friends from elementary school, friends from high school and friends from college. Co-workers, neighbors, fraternity brothers, relatives, and in-laws also compose a large percentage of my friends. Former students, education and pharmacy colleagues across the country, and friends of my wife are also represented. Some of them I know intimately and have close, real-life connections with; others though, I have only had passing relationships with over time. From the perspective of someone a little older than the majority of Facebook users, do I consider all of those people “friends”? No, I do not. If I were to ask a college student if she considered all of her 984 Facebook friends as friends, I suspect she would answer the same. Younger audiences can easily separate their “true” friends from their Facebook-only friends; therefore, the angst over the term is unfounded. This becomes clear when one relinquishes his/her grasp on the traditional use of the term friend, and realizes that it is just a term indicating an acquaintance (regardless of how strong the relationship is).

Conclusions

Within this new Facebook world, the term friend does not really mean “friend” as many of us define it. “Connections”, “links”, “relationships”, or many other terms may be more accurate descriptors, but Facebook has established the term “friend” and therefore we must recognize it. It is interesting to think that one software application initially developed for a small group of college students has begun to revolutionize what the term “friend” connotes to many. While younger generations never question the semantics of Facebook friends, many older users tend to be concerned with the use of this moniker. Some become overly concerned to the point that they cannot understand the many benefits of online social networking. If they begin to understand the paradigm differences in the definition, maybe they could become more comfortable with how others use these applications for building and maintaining relationships. Just because we view and use social networking applications differently does not mean that one generation has it right and the others have it wrong. It simply means that each person uses it for his/her own unique purposes and will determine for him or herself how to react to the word “friend”.

Endnotes

3 THOUGHTS ON “THE TROUBLE WITH FRIENDS”

Poster Name: Jenn Hernandez

Message: As different people have varying ideas of what social networking means to them, they may also have different motives for clicking that request or accept button. I believe that the individual chooses their own definition of “friend” and how they use their contacts—to network, catch up, objectify, etc. Some may feel perfectly fine with accepting every friend request they receive, but I don’t. I saw that you commented on my article in the September 2009 issue of Interface, which runs along a similar vein, though not necessarily considering age as a factor (http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2009/07/article.php?id=95). All in all, I believe that Facebook doesn’t need to be taken at face value by any means. For some it’s just fun.

Poster Name: Jeff. Cain

Message: Like you, I’m not comfortable with accepting every friend request. My reasons for using Facebook have changed over time; from first connecting with “traditional” friends, to an expanded role as a networking tool. Because of this, my criteria for what constitutes FB friend-worthy has changed. I was speaking on e-professionalism at a conference this week, and it is interesting that this topic came up again. The crowd consisted primarily of those older than 30 and I could just “feel” the uneasiness toward the generally more liberal FB friending tendencies of youth. As time passes, I think this tension will ease, but we are still in a time of adjustment for the new paradigm.
Sheldon Stutler on January 30, 2014 at 6:15 PM said:

I have been absent for some time, but now I remember why I used to love this website. Thanks, I will try and check back more frequently. How frequently you update your site?