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Friendship in the Internet Age

In this age, the Internet is used for everything from socialization to education. For these purposes the Internet has many advantages; anyone with a computer with Internet access can find that information, and anyone with a connection can add to that information, which makes the Internet the collected knowledge of millions of people. Perhaps the most popular use of the Internet, though, is its use as a tool for socialization. From forums where people gather to talk about the same interests, to Facebook where people socialize with friends and acquaintances, the Internet has revolutionized how we interact with people. Because of this dependence on the Internet, our relationships with other people are weakened, according to Clifford Stoll, because human relationships rely on face to face interaction for creativity and maintenance. In “Isolated by the Internet”, Stoll explores some of the effects this change from primarily face to face interaction to text based interaction has on people’s emotions. Stoll poses the theory: “The overwhelming majority of online friendships simply aren’t deep. One participant ‘appreciated the e-mail correspondence she had with her college age daughter, yet noted when her daughter was homesick or depressed, she reverted to telephone calls to provide support’” (Stoll 650). Stoll expresses the idea that while the Internet is useful for regular communication with all sorts of people, it cannot replace phone calls or face to face interaction in building relationships and providing support. Similarly, Daniel Akst’s article, “America: Land of Loners?” seems to corroborate Stoll’s theory. Akst states, “Today ‘friends’ are everywhere in our culture-the average Facebook user has 130-and friendship, of a diluted kind, is our most characteristic relationship: voluntary, flexible, a ‘lite’ alternative to the caloric meshugaas of family life” (Akst 25). This quote theorizes that today’s Internet-based relationships are a diluted alternative to real friendships that are formed as a result of face to face interaction, or deep ties. The metaphor of low calorie “lite” food and the bland friendships we experience over the internet is used to emphasize the difference between these two types of friendships, as light foods are considered flavorless imitations of the original. This is the comparison Akst wishes to make between friends online and face to face relationships. Friends on Facebook have the ability to comment on people’s statuses, have their statuses commented on, and use the chat function for one on one interaction, but these features are rarely used unless individuals are friends outside of Facebook. Friends in real life on the other hand, are seen fairly regularly and their relationship is built on trust and affection that is fostered by face to face interaction. Yet while the Internet has changed, and perhaps diluted, the meaning of friendship by conditioning people to accept this “lite” alternative to friendship, it provides an invaluable resource for information, interaction, and maintenance of close friendships which complicates the idea that the Internet is detrimental to human interaction, because the Internet allows people to maintain existing relationships but hinders the creation of new friendships.

The prevalence of social media today means that people can seek out vague acquaintances to be their “friends” on Facebook, their “followers” on Twitter, or any number of names given to online relationships, yet these names rarely truly encompass the relationship described between two individuals. Friendship is defined by Akst as “a state of strong mutual affection in which sex or kinship isn't primary,” and while people often know the people they have “friended” on Facebook, oftentimes their relationship cannot be classified as having strong mutual affection as Akst defines it. This means, in today’s Internet-centric society, the people we call “friends” on the Internet are often more akin to acquaintances in real life, and before friendship was redefined by social networking were unlikely to be referred to as friends. Richard Fisher, author of “Unfriend Me Not”, comments on this development and change of the definition of friendship, and the impact the Internet has on our ability to cope with the increased number of relationships. Fisher states, “Online tools have changed that, helping each of us to build a social ‘supernet’: a network of easily accessible contacts that is bigger than any we have ever been able to manage” (2). This confirms that it would be extraordinarily difficult to be friends with the entire content of our Facebook friend list in the way that Akst defines, if it is indeed true that our average friend list on Facebook is 130 people. This creates a disparity between Akst’s definition of friendship and what appears to be the current definition of friendship to the average Facebook user, which undermines the importance of deep ties to our emotional wellbeing.

The prevalence and influence of weak ties, in lieu of deep connections in our society shows how much the concept of friendship has changed in American culture, creating a definition of friendship that has little in common with the commonly accepted view of friendship held in the past. As the Internet is accessible to anyone with a computer and a connection, it is logical that forums, chat rooms, and other places for people to interact have sprung up in uncountable numbers. Many of these online forums have a theme such as gardening or classical music and provide an environment for people all over the world to gather and discuss their interests without ever leaving the privacy of their homes. Yet Stoll cautions against dependence on these weak ties, stating, “Hardly surprising that strong personal ties come about when you’re in close proximity to someone… It’s been that way for millennia. Suddenly, along comes the Internet, reducing the importance of distance and letting you develop new relationships” (Stoll 649). In contrast to the weak ties formed by the Internet, Stoll describes deep ties created by interaction on a regular basis and face to face and the Internet’s discouragement of the formation of these relationships because a user can discover people with the same interests from any corner of the globe, without distance mattering. Fisher also discusses the prevalence of weak ties in our society and the disproportionate influence they have on our lives, thanks to social networking. Fisher observes, “In 1973 sociologist Mark Granovetter showed how the loose acquaintances, or ‘weak ties’, in our social network punch far above their weight and influence over our behavior and choices.” Thus, the influence that Facebook users have over our everyday choices is disproportionate to the influence they would have without the connection between people Facebook creates. But these people are rarely engaging in true friendships, complete with arguments and personal interaction, which help create deep ties, because their interaction mainly occurs online and lacks the depth of communication allowed by regular interaction offline.

While it is true Facebook allows us to see and comment on the happenings of an acquaintance’s life, we really do not maintain a deep relationship with that person. Facebook and other social networks give us the ability to interact and keep up to date on the daily lives of our close friends and acquaintances. Fisher comments on this phenomenon: “Today, our number of weak-tie acquaintances has exploded via online social networking. ‘You couldn't maintain all of those weak ties on your own,’ says Jennifer Golbeck at the University of Maryland in College Park, who studies our use of social media. ‘Facebook gives you a way of cataloguing.’” This asserts that because of the development of social networks we can easily maintain a variety of contacts with whom we are not deeply connected or dependent upon for emotional support. Seeing a status update about their lives, or commenting on the Youtube video they share, does not automatically make people close friends, even on the Internet. Just like relationships in real life, Internet relationships require one-on-one interaction, usually in the form of personal messages between users. However, the Internet allows people to carry on multiple one-on-one conversations at a time, something impossible in real life, and further divides one‘s attention. In “Are Social Networks Messing With Your Head?,” David Disalvo speaks of the difficulties of balancing the online world with the real world and the dangers of letting interactions that take place over the Internet displace real world interaction. Disalvo acknowledges: “The challenge will be to keep a constant deluge of social connectedness from diluting our real-world relationships by drawing us into trivial interactions. Social networking is what psychologists call a thin-strand technology, lacking many of the essential elements of communication, such as body language and touch” (50). This hypothesizes that Internet relationships create a flood of information and opinions that can be hard to cope with, and that Internet relationships can make real life relations less meaningful because of the contacts created by social networking. It also expresses the idea that Internet relationships are less meaningful because they lack the subtle shading of tone and body language that real life friendships have. Yet this is not entirely true, especially when the people engaged in a web-based relationship have a close friendship prior to moving the relationship online, such as when friends are separated because of college. In these situations, the Internet becomes a convenient tool for keeping up to date with one’s close friends’ lives. In fact, Internet relationships can take more effort than real life interactions because of the limiting medium of text. Not only does a user need clear expression, that user must also understand the person with whom interacting to prevent misunderstandings; and when misunderstandings inevitably occur, both parties must be willing to understand each other’s feelings.

While the Internet is a hub of interaction and activity, it is best used for maintaining existing relationships, and it makes creating new relationships challenging, if not impossible. Because of the lack of personal face to face interaction on the Internet, forming emotional connections that can be relied upon is a daunting task. Disalvo asserts the idea: “Online social networking appears to be ‘very good for servicing relationships, but not for building them de novo,’ says Dunbar. He argues that our evolutionary roots mean we still depend heavily on physical and face-to-face contact to be able to develop ties” (49). Fisher expresses that humans are programmed by evolution to rely on auditory and visual cues to interact with others, something that is clearly lacking on the text- based Internet. Unlike real life, the Internet allows a user to be selective with interaction, which can lead to problems with other people being easily avoided, unlike if people were interacting face to face on a daily basis which would force them to come to an agreement. Disalvo corroborates Fisher’s theory that the Internet is a poor way of creating relationships, stating, “The social networkers who fare the best are ones who use the technology to support their existing friendships.” This idea expresses that the Internet and social media are tools that are useful for supporting existing friendships, and that the people who use social media like that are happier in the long run, likely because they interact with their friends both on and off line.

The Internet is a tool for communicating and sharing, just like a telephone or the postal service, the only difference being the ease of use and accessibility. Yet none of these are a vital substitute for real human interaction. While the Internet can increase loneliness and depression, this mainly occurs when people attempt to use the Internet and their online friends as a replacement for the deep ties of close friendships, and the feelings of disappointment occur when they try to treat these weak ties as close personal relations. The Internet can become a force that keeps friends and family close, yet it can be the tool that enables people to avoid people and their problems. Interaction on the Internet can bring people closer together, but people need a prior relationship in order for the Internet to prove useful, because the lack of personal interaction on the Internet creates a nearly insurmountable barrier.

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