

The 'Friending' rules: Social norms of connection and disconnection at midlife

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Abstract

'Friending' is most commonly understood to convey the idea that some relationship exists between individuals, yet the unnuanced and decontextualized nature of social media connections and their discursive association with friendship has obscured the meaning of this practice. This study explores the meaning of the practices of connection and disconnection on social network sites at midlife. Using data from interviews with social media users between the ages 45 and 65 years, this research demonstrates contrasts in the meaning of such practices from those reported in studies of younger adults, and suggests differences in how these technologies are used to support relational development and maintenance.

Keywords

friending, social media, older adults, relationships, connection

Introduction

"The medium is the message," McLuhan's (1964/2001) snapshot phrase, captures the interdependence between the means of communication and the communication of meaning. Today this phrase serves as a reminder that not only do communication technologies convey meaning by their mere selection and ability to deliver a message, but they often shape how we understand and make meaning from the messages that are received. Like messages, the practices undertaken within and through today's communication technologies are communicative acts that reflect a similar symbiosis between medium and meaning. One practice in particular has attained notoriety for the recursive effects between message and medium: 'Friending' is most commonly understood to convey the idea that some relationship exists between individuals, yet the unnuanced and decontextualized nature of social media connections and their discursive association with friendship has obscured the meaning of this practice.

The purpose of this study is to explore the meaning of the practices of connection and disconnection on social network sites at midlife. Using data from interviews with social media users between the ages 45 and 65 years, this research demonstrates contrasts in the meaning of such practices from those reported in studies of younger adults, and highlights how the use of these technologies may support or detract from relationship development processes at different life stages.

Background

Friend relationships span across a continuum of intimacy, encompassing a range of forms from acquaintances to casual friendship to close friendships (Blieszner and Roberto 2004), and terms such as social connections, social ties, and friendships are used interchangeably to designate these informal, personal associations (Fingerman and Lang 2004). The socio-historic location of midlife adults means that they experienced relationship development paths outside of the influences of newer communication technologies such as email and social network sites, thus their expectations related to relational development may be substantially different than what is experienced by today's youth and younger adults. Previous research has identified that younger adults use the internet for building and maintaining interpersonal relationships more than midlife and older adults (Thayer and Ray 2006; Zickuhr and Madden 2012). Further, while friendships play an important role in well-being at midlife,

having large number of friends is not as important as it is for younger adults (Carstensen 1992), and large social networks become less satisfying than at earlier points in adulthood (Carney and Cohler 1993).

The social norms surrounding relationship development specify behaviors that should be performed or avoided in order to optimize social efficiency (Bryant and Marmo, 2012), and relationships develop or dissolve based on whether expectations embedded within such norms are met or broken (Felmlee, 1999). Previous research has identified that the norms of connection on social network sites to include actions related to connection, disconnection and expectations for interaction (Bryant and Marmo, 2012; Lewis and West, 2009; McLaughlin and Vitak, 2012; West, Lewis and Currie, 2009), however these studies concentrated on populations of young adult social media users. Midlife and older adults experience different motivations and usage patterns in using social media (Brandtzæg, Lüders, and Skjetne, 2010), so a focus on how young adults view relational norms may diminish the cultural and cohort differences embedded within these practices and the differing values that arise among users of varying life experiences. Understanding the ways in which expectations are met or broken in social media practice at varying points in life can enhance our understanding of how these technologies support or detract from relationship development processes.

Method

A purposive sample of 23 Facebook and LinkedIn users between the ages of 45 and 65 years was interviewed, and the resulting data analyzed for this study: 15 females and eight males participated; 17 participants used both Facebook and LinkedIn, while six individuals used one or the other exclusively. Interviews were transcribed and the dialogs were categorized into themes using a concept-driven structure (Gibbs, 2007) which included attitudes related to the internet, privacy and social media sites, and social strategies related to connecting with others and privacy and identity management. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger study which explored internet use by midlife adults, and this paper specifically highlights the analysis and findings related connection, disconnection and expectations for interaction with social media use.

Findings

The meaning of connection on social network sites was highlighted in the way connections, disconnection and decisions not to connect are understood and enacted by the midlife adults participating in this study, and in the perceived and expected norms for interaction once connection is established. Despite arguments that social network site connections do not possess characteristics of friendship (Condella, 2010; Tedesco, 2010), connection on social network sites for participants has substance: connections are not just passing acquaintances, but are grounded personal history, and do not include those who might share only a peripheral interest. Most participants report “knowing” their social network site connections, though this description takes on different interpretations depending on whether it is applied in personal or professional contexts. In contrast, research reports of young adult connections report that a majority are comprised of acquaintances (Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe, 2011; West, et al., 2009).

Despite knowing most connections, participants did not use social network sites to actively engage with close friends and family. Though acknowledging connections with these close ties, social network sites were utilized by participants primarily to communicate with extended networks or groups; other, more intimate, modes of communication are reserved for close connections. This differs from research on young adult usage patterns, which have reported that social media is a primary communication vehicle for close friends (Bryant and Marmo, 2012).

In contrast, the decision not to friend is often based on ‘not knowing’ the person making the request, though often there is a common connection. Requests of this nature are often ‘ignored’ and reevaluated at a later point if the relationship progresses to a more substantial level. Ignoring requests for connection is uncomfortable however, despite that it is widely used as a means of evading undesired connection requests. A fear of appearing rude or discourteous by ignoring requests was commonly expressed, similar to how this behavior would be perceived in an offline context. In contrast, studies of young adults indicate that friend requests from acquaintances of a similar undetermined nature are often accepted and then deleted in an effort to avoid the appearance of discourtesy (McLaughlin and Vitak, 2011).

Unfriending, the process of disconnection, is seen as unusual and unnatural by participants, especially given the careful consideration given to the connection decision. Participants noted ignoring a request is preferred over a later decision to ‘undo’ a connection in such a public forum. Unfriending arises most frequently when the costs of interaction outweigh the benefits: costs include time, ‘noise’ or unwanted/undesired information disclosure, and loss of information control. Though conventional wisdom might suggest that social network sites incur a low cost for maintaining online connection (Donath and boyd, 2004), participants were clear that these types of costs were not negligible.

Finally, the expectations for interaction reflect a preference for professional etiquette and minimum levels of online interaction from those with whom one is connected. Participants noted that once a connection is established, certain behaviors are anticipated in the online environment, typically because they are also anticipated offline. These expectations are similar to those anticipated by younger adults (Bryant and Marmo, 2012), and include common courtesies such as sending birthday wishes.

Implications

This study demonstrates that the anticipated social norms of connection and disconnection differ in some meaningful ways between younger and older adult users of social network sites, potentially leading to differences in how these technologies are used to support relational development and maintenance. Life experiences are connected to the use of the internet through the attitudes we bring and in the technologies we choose to employ. By examining how these vary at different points in life, we arrive at a deeper understanding of what it means to grow up and grow old with technology. Ultimately, this gives us a more complete grasp of the place technology occupies in everyday life.

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