

Friendship in Cyberspace: A New Form of Interpersonal Communication? (Poster)

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Introduction

The flourishing of contemporary communication technologies within most levels of society has led to the transition of a large part of traditional face to face (FtF) interpersonal communication to the virtual space (Barak, 2007; Mesch & Talmud, 2006). This process has enabled the breaking of traditional patterns of human contacts and the creation of web friendship (Hewitson, 2003). Intensifying and expanding the volume of online relationships outstands especially among adolescents, who are the first generation of the digital world and seem to maintain online and traditional friendships side by side (Beentjes, 2001; Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, & Smallwood, 2006; Fromme, 2003). For them, the internet is a natural communication environment in which they spend a great deal of their leisure time (Carlsson, 2006).

One of the issues that researchers of communication technologies are concerned with is the question whether online friendship relationships signify a new type of friendship, or whether they are essentially the same traditional phenomenon, conducting itself on a virtual platform (Mesch, & Talmud, 2006). Research literature focuses on the potential of the internet in creating online relationships. However, it lacks studies on the dimensions of online friendship from the point of view of those who experience it.

In this study, the experience of friendship was examined in a sample of 400 adolescents (ages 12-16) in an Israeli urban environment. Our point of departure was a friendship model (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994) that was developed before the possibility of online relationships became a reality. In this model, an index was built for traditional (FtF) friendship, comprising six dimensions: companionship, balance, conflict, help, security and closeness. In order to test the applicability of the index to the subjective experience of adolescent friendship in the internet era, we developed questionnaires examining personal and socio-demographical variables that may be relevant to mapping online friendship relationships.

A high frequency of maintaining online friendship relationships was found among participants: approximately 30% of participants reported that at least one of their five best friends is an online friend. Moreover, we found that online friendship is not maintained only by those who hold especially high computer skills or accessibility to computers. In addition, no relationship was found between socio-demographic variables and having or lacking an online friend. Nonetheless, we found that those who have an online friend have better English language skills and spend less time in offline social activities than those who do not have an online friend.

Findings

Participants who have an online friend reported that both their traditional and online friendship experiences are weaker than those reported by participants who do not have an online friend. Finally, some of the aforementioned six dimensions of traditional friendship do not fit the experience of online friendship. In certain dimensions, online friends are ranked relatively low, despite being perceived as very close friends.

The data are currently being further analyzed, and the results may well promote the understanding of the phenomenon of online friendship among adolescents.

Keywords: Traditional friendship, online friendship, inter-personal communication, adolescence, computer mediated communication (CMC)

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