Social Impact of Online Friending

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The research paper endeavors to examine the nuances of 'online' and 'offline friending', how each is different from the other, how one translates into the other and its social impact on an individual. The social impact would include online identity formation, interrogating honesty and deception in self presentation and the emotional and psychological effect it has on online users. The broad theoretical framework used to develop and construct arguments includes affordance theory. The paper also deals with socio technical gap in online friending, anonymity and limitations of the same.

Keywords: Social impact, Online friending, Offline friending, Social networking, Online networking

I. Introduction

Cyber social communication is a crucial point of debate and discussion in today's society. Statistical data states that the usage of social networking has risen exponentially in the last couple of years, though primarily prompted by youngsters, but now it is widely used by all demographic sections of the universal population. Online social networking has gained tremendous popularity in the recent times with people constantly logging and out of them and checking live status updates. Social networking sites, like Facebook, MySpace, Orkut, Friendster operate in a way in which there are members who create an online profile with a username and password and then share photographs, videos, personal biography with other members who are added as 'friends.' It was reported in 2012 that the total time spent in the US on social social networking sites grew 37 % in the number from 88 billion to 121billion in one year (Nielsan/Social Media Report, 2012). Globally a huge percentage of all internet users regularly operate social networking sites and are part of some member based online networking community. So basically with so many people having an online identity and communicating with each other through the online social network medium it is important to understand the concept of friending, its differences, and similarities in the online and offline context.

In order to understand the social impact of online friending let us begin with a brief discussion of what the word 'Social' would mean in terms of a person's existence and interaction on the virtual medium. The man is a social animal, and his identity is a social construct. Social identity is structured through our social interactions with others. In the present scenario, a person's existence is not just defined by his or her physical availability and interaction but is also based on visibility on the web or social media. Online information, biography, a person's communication and interaction through technology also defines or has the potential to shape identity and distinct characteristics of a persona. To elucidate the same, we may consider the role and nature of computer-mediated communication (CMC). The sender receiver relation can translate into various forms of 'online friending' with such people with whom we may have a previous acquaintance or with complete strangers based on common and shared interests. Friending would, therefore, mean adding people to friend lists on social media, either premeditated or completely random. The dictionary definition of friending is explained as sending an invitation to anybody to become a "friend" on social media. If the individual accepts, then they have access to each other's information, updates and shared posts online.

Friends may also be "defriended" or "unfriended", or "blocked" which "may be considered as much of a personal rejection as not returning phone call" (Pc mag.Encyclopedia.org). So, online friends could be people one actually knows, family members and relatives with whom one has regular communication

either online or offline. The second type would be organizational friends who belong to the same organization or workplace, and they maintain friending as a part of being in the same contact list. The third type would be complete stranger friending who are social networking 'friends' having no personal relationship at all. So the online status and representation of an individual on social networking could be different from the actual identity or sketched and structured to fit into the framework or demands of online peer to peer interaction and friending.

II. Literature Review

Danah Boyd talks about the difference between mediated and unmediated medium which creates the "fundamental architectural difference that affects social interaction" (Boyd2008, p.3). A mediated medium and a non-mediated one essentially demarcate and define online and offline friending. Our social interaction offline with any person has a definite audience, and the boundary is structurally and geographically defined. However, in an online interaction over social media, any communication between online friends can be reproduced to an unlimited audience any number of time. Danah Boyd explains this through four different types of affordances namely 'searchability,' 'replicability,' 'persistence' and 'invisible audience.' In order to understand this phenomenon of mediated medium, and its impact and influence on friending, let us focus on one of the affordances, which is 'Invisible Audience' (Boyd 2008, p.8). Since the affordance of online friending status, shared communication like photos and videos can be replicated, and expression of network public is completely free, it often interferes with the status of the relationship. To understand this better let me state an example, say on Facebook if a person wants a particular friend on friend list (any random friend) to view a video that person may be tagged. Thereafter, any number of people ('invisible audience') will get the information about two people sharing a video for an infinite time period as long as the post is visible. This often creates a breach of privacy and individual space curbing. Offline friending is bereft of any such replicable affordance with a visible third person audience who may have seen two people watching the same video at a particular point in time, and there is no 'copy' of the event. This demonstrates

the fundamental difference between online and offline friending. "Network technology thus provides users with little of the privacy that they expect and are promised. While some individuals may truly wish to be 'open books', violating most users' privacy expectations leads to serious consequences for both the users" (Anderson 2012, p.11).

Anderson further states in the essay titled "*Not That Kind of Friend: Misleading Divergences Between Online Social Networks and Real World Social Protocols*" that the basic difference between the two kinds of social networking i.e. online and offline is the extent of centralization in each of them. In the real world, no third party is required for you and me to be friends, but this model hasn't been picked up by social network operators. Instead, we have the all-trusted network operator" (Anderson 2012, p.11). So in a centralized system affordance of social networking, the operator is all pervading and mutually inclusive. On the flipside, offline friending cannot be exhibited as a switch on-switch off mechanism. Even if we do not like an acquaintance and if he or she happens to work in the same place it might be possible that we may bump into the very person again and strike a forced awkward conversation. On the contrary, online friends can be "unfriended" or "blocked" with one click and all communication can be stopped.

III. Research Overview

The affordance of online mediated environment and space creates a complete binary set up which is operational on social networking system. Just as a binary state is represented by two numbers 1(occurrence of an event) and 0(non-occurrence of an event), we can represent a person on Facebook as either a friend (in state 1) or not a friend (in state 0) of someone. By the process of friending i.e. by clicking on the 'add as a friend' or 'accept as a friend' button on any person's profile, a person gets the title of a friend which is like a binary 1 and is added to the existing list of friends and with unfriending we go back to the 0 stage which means the person no longer exists in the personal account of the said person. This binary relationship exists only on social media; however, this is not how we make friends in real word. We don't explicitly call a person a friend or not a friend. Additionally, this binary relationship on social media

also determines the visibility of a person on another person's contact list of friends. In such a binary set up, people who are not much social or shy away from social interaction may make use of asynchrony1 . This can give them an opportunity for thinking, reflection, planning and before answering back to others or presenting themselves online. Alternatively, the lack of constant and immediate feedback which is generally instant, and could be through the message, comment, chat or video and voice calling may pose several types of challenges in relationship building. At the same time insecure individuals, who usually have fewer friends and communication experience, might benefit from the options and opportunities available in online friending to initiating friendships.

Online friending also has other friending initiation methods such as sharing posts, personal profiles and inviting friends for playing games, poking, etc. However, online friending prevents access to prevalent social information expressed through gestures, facial expressions, reactions, a proximity which may be crucial for both participants in the conversation. Noted Critic N.S Baron has further argued that though online friending and communication have provision for 'some socio-emotional communication' both through the use of text and emoticons (Baron 2004), these cannot be taken as an alternative for perfect human emotions or for reaction based gestures. Yet the use of emoticons or stickers (very recent addition) is an example of the bridging chasm and attempts at merging and blending of online and offline interaction.

IV. Research Analysis

Social media caters to identifiable profiles supplied content and consume and produce connections. Now when we link this up with online friending, we realize that when users find an increasing number of friends both randomly added and previously known it may result in some kind of ego boosting and increased self esteem. This positive psychological impact has been stated, "By allowing people to present preferred or positive information about the self, allowing to add unlimited friends and followers, Facebook is a unique source of self-awareness stimuli in that it enhances awareness of the optimal self"

(Ellison,p. 82). On the contrary, few users who view others people's social media content, shares, comments and profiles and posts may acquire feelings of inadequacy, lower self-esteem, lack of confidence when they compare themselves to other positive peer groups. Also often after friending people, we expect some kind of interaction or feel the social expectation of a reply and when deliberately ignored it can create emotional turmoil. Also, one cannot deny the huge psychological impact of social exclusion and the feeling of being left alone. Danah Boyd states that a teenager may be active on social networking only because that is the place where all other friends are and not being a part of it would indicate social exclusion and expulsion from the peer group.

Social Identity: Real vs. Deception

Through careful profile creation and selectively articulated self-representation which we may call the affordance of environment and space, multiple identities may be shaped. But these multiple identities that one may have online may or may not be in accordance to a person's offline persona. These multiple accounts of a person on the same site or various sites reflect the multiple facets, aspects, and variations of his or her identity. This may even impact relationships and development. For instance, when two individuals meet one another online, after say friending each other and indulge in online interaction for some time, they tend to develop certain preconceived notions and expectations out of each other. When, in reality, these online friends meet face to face there is a possibility that they may get more disappointed than people who just meet each other face to face offline. In such a case people are not or less aware of the multifaceted persona of an individual depicted in social media already, and consequently, there is less expectation and judgment from either side. Social networking sites bring individuals who are strangers together to form a friendly relation and through the mediation of technology there is minimizing of asynchronous communication and creation of constant connectivity. Instant messaging, constant chatting, tagging friends, adding emotions through emoticons (like Facebook has options like 'feeling sad, happy, disgusted, lonely etc. with' so and so and then one may

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1 Asynchronicity refers to the phenomenon of taking time by an individual to carefully think about the content of a message

before sending a suitable reply to the other party in a mediated communication (social media, emails, etc).

tag a friend and post a befitting emoticon), gives a glimpse of the lifestyle, persona and habits of individuals. Easy Video chatting and voice calls too add to the dynamics of the same. But at the same time friend who indulge in video chatting as a better perception, reality check of each other and a better understanding of how one would be behaving in an offline setting.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) ,when as an affordance, that incorporates social media networking and online random friending often complicates the formation of identity and its process. One reason that can be attributed for this would be that in CMC every user is an individual who tends to have complete control of his or her self-presentation and depiction of the self online. Not only this, there is no mediating source for self-fashioned messaging, profile creation or online identity creation. How an individual decides to present oneself, tampering, manipulating or improvising on identity cues like gender, family, education, profession, age, interests, etc. is completely in control of the user. This selective and motivated self presentation is otherwise not possible to reflect in offline setting or to alter accordingly. Therefore, as per survey, people want to maintain positive impressions which may be remotely different from offline persona. Sometimes online personality deception comes in a way of preference. This particular trend has been discussed by Danah Boyd through an example of cocaine as a preferred drug. When someone gives a preference of a drug like cocaine while filling up a personal data information box as part of profile creation, it may not be necessary that the person uses the drug, but it best defines his or her personality, choices and attracts other people of the same likeness to form a common group. (Boyd, 2008)

The last part of the argument based on affordance of CMC states that a user may not have a distinct online and offline identity but a blurred identity that is functional and operational in both the realms. The blurred identity is when the online merges or overlaps in to the offline persona of an individual and vice versa. The online medium is generally segregated as a virtual medium or a sphere clearly segregated from the offline real world. But how one behaves or presents himself or herself online may be an extension or a new dimension of the offline identity and personality of the individual. The online self can be as real as the offline personality.

This idea has also been elucidated by Ellison in his essay, which is an extension of his argument with Boyd (Ellison, 2013). CMC, when seen as an affordance, may result in reflecting a different nuanced version of the online and offline faced, However, compared to other aspects of CMC, in social networking sites people also often indulge in friending with people they know offline and there is less chance of fabricating a deceptive self or exploring varied type of identity process.

Socio Technical Gap and Social Anonymity

Online and Offline mode of communication may often be challenged by a certain amount of social and technical gap. While interacting with them on the web, we encounter two aspects of online friending: social and technical. While the communication part with another person is the social reality, the use of a medium and an operating system to sustain this interaction may be called the technical part of online friending. In offline mode, however, only the social part is relevant as there is no role or influence of technology.

Often in online interaction, there occurs a certain socio-technical gap. For instance, MySpace and Facebook have certain in built apps and games where a user is supposed to name and rate five best friends from the list of friends in his or her profile. Now, in reality, the friends classified as top 5 friends is an explicit declaration that may have little or no connection to reality but could be a deliberate choice because of privacy factor, because it is public, posted on the wall and can be viewed by an 'invisible audience' and one may not like to disclose facts. So the top five friends reflected on someone's profile may have no connection to reality as a person never declares his top 5 best friends in real life. Similarly, often social media has apps where a friend may be declared 'your best friend' based on the number of photos shared together or events attended together, such friends could just be a regular acquaintance who prefers visiting places together or give each other company. So technological intervention in social life and social interaction may lead to unnecessary assumptions and third party judgments. Other people viewing these posts might think these two people to be great friends who always visit places together. While offline whether two people are only giving each other company or doing things together or they are friends is assumed by others on

gestures, movements, a way of speaking, etc. Technological declarations are often based on surface data and may be different from social reality. Such gap or chasm is unlikely in offline friending where no other mediated medium interferes. In the online scenario people often take advantage of selective self presentation which has been discussed earlier to give a deceptive version of reality. To make his idea concrete we may think about online dating sites where individuals first view profile then based on shared interests indulge in friending. In such situations if one hides or lies about identity cues or physical appearance it is a reflection of deceptive self presentation or falsified identity depiction.

There could be several reasons as to why an individual would want to be a part of a social networking site using the pseudo name and thus preventing his or her real identity from becoming public. Of late Google+ and Facebook has started insisting on using the only real name for its users. But considering the importance of anonymity, one should be given the choice of concealing or revealing his or her real identity and lifestyle practices. Several users could be a part of oppressed minority groups like LGBT community; some could be voicing dissent against government policies or expressing political opinions, or someone may have had a difficult past and would want a new start. Anonymity may also encourage self revelation without fear and identification.

However, real name policies and account information are attractive to social media companies for advertising and marketing. It is a trend and marketing strategy of multinationals and promotional brands to search, identify and create a data base for advertising their products. Through profile information and location on social networking sites, promotional methods are adopted. First, user's preferences are carefully observed, say shoe brand sites visited or liked (in the case of Facebook), then the location is identified, and IP address is traced, popups and invitations to like and share a page is requested through personal messaging. So identifying a potential customer and linking his or her behavior, choices and preferences on online social media through real user name and location is a marketing trend for advertising companies.

Social media definitely presents challenges in the arena of identity questions through the process of impression, information and profile management. It is further complicated because one can never be certain about the variety or the type of data that is captured, circulated, shared and reproduced in the context of an invisible audience affordance. Advertisers, marketing analysts, sales executives are examples of such invisible audience. So posting updates, check-ins, tagging, likes are all source of the data base which is linked with our online identity for advertising and promotion.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, we may say that online profile of an individual may be an extension of   identity or a completely different aspect of his or her persona. Friending online and unfriending operates as binary on offs which complicates and challenges relationship building and man to man bonding. While it expands the doors of exploration and self reflection through anonymity and asynchrony, it also generates potential for reusing and reproduction of shared information.

New developments in the online mode of communication like the use of emoticons, stickers, video conferencing are bridging the gap between online and offline friending with an attempt to relate and communicate every human emotion through the virtual medium. The speedy rate of technological innovation and advancements means that individuals are now required to negotiate constantly and grapple with their online and offline identity and image, striking a perfect equilibrium between both.

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