

Goodreads in the development of personal relationships on discussion boards through shared common interests.

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Abstract

This paper will explore the development of relationships through discussion boards on Goodreads by arguing that online discussions give young people who are unable to communicate offline a chance to connect with others through a shared interest. This paper will also argue how through anonymity and pseudonymity young people have a chance to create a personal persona that aids them in the development of self.

Discussion

Online discussion boards, chat groups, and public groups offer a safe place for individuals to participate in a social activity without pressure. Without the fear of embarrassment in face-to-face situations, Internet use allows people to express and interact with peers and others in a comfortable situation (Yu, Tian, Vogel, & Kowalski, as cited in Ginsberg, 2013, p. 47). Having a safe place online where users can connect under a common interest is vital as too often young people may not have a safe place in the offline world, or may not be able to connect with others in face-to-face situations. Having an online presence allows people to develop a distinct personal voice as well as create deep friendships that will last online as well as offline. Thus, this paper will argue that the development of online discussion boards on Goodreads gives young people a safe place to interact with other users without offline pressures, which aids them in the development of deeper relationships through the use of shared common interests.

Internet culture has developed in a way that allows anyone with local internet access the ability to enter online networks and participate, either by blogging, connecting with

friends on social media networks and sites, gaming, or answering questions on discussion boards. While member participation can range from helpful, to playful, to trolling, and some participants' interaction can be negative, this paper will focus on the helpful participation of group members. Due also to limited research available on the Goodreads website and usage of the site, many of the articles present in this essay deal with the broader topic of online discussion boards not relating specifically to Goodreads. However, the research can still be applied to this essay and to Goodreads as Goodreads discussion boards function much the same as any other discussion board.

Goodreads is an online virtual bookshelf that allows users to create a page with brief details about themselves and requires at least a first name, email and password to create an account. Once logged in users may choose whether to reveal their real identity or remain anonymous. Some usernames are embellished with symbols to give their profile name a unique appearance. It is a convoluted site that allows users to fill out their virtual bookcase with the books they have read, are reading, and wish to read. Goodreads has a variety of discussion groups that members can frequent which focus primarily on the discussion of books and authors. However, there are also groups that can be found under the tag 'Just for Fun > Totally Pointless' that range in topic from name games, to role playing, to groups whose sole purpose is to gain members, as well as groups created to connect with other members (Goodreads, <https://www.goodreads.com/group/subtopic/89-totally-pointless>). It is on this last section that this paper will focus on, the discussion in groups that focus primarily on user interaction on any topic.

Research has shown that commonly most social media users are young adults aged 18-31, and that three quarters of online users under 25 years of age have a social media

profile (Lenhart, as cited in Ozguven & Mucan, 2013, p. 518). This means that in formative years young people have access to online content and the ability to traverse online culture and integrate themselves in an online community that will offer different aspects of social interaction and behaviour. This is due to social media websites being designed specifically to be easy to access and attract populations (Ozguven et al., 2013, p. 518). Ozguven et al. (2013) continue that therefore it is not uncommon to find on websites segregated groups united by common interests such as nationality, age, education level, and hobbies (p. 518).

How people react and participate online also depends on what technology they are using and how easy it is to use. Goodreads discussion boards and groups are not limited to just one mode of use such as a computer, but the site can be accessed across all mediums such as mobile phones and tablets. Because of the different technologies in place, interaction with social networking sites may differ. As Best, Manktelow and Taylor (2014, p. 28) state, both introverts and extroverts benefit from using social media technology and both may use different platforms depending on their ability. As an example, Best et al. (2014) suggest that extroverts may prefer the use of Facebook and the wide access and openness it offers, while introverts may prefer chat rooms due often to the available anonymity (p. 28).

Goodreads only form of communication between users is discussion boards and groups. Built as a virtual bookshelf it does not have an option for private messages like many social networking sites. However, many private conversations still end up taking place. Due to the openness of the site, all conversations that a person takes part in is shown on their own personal profile so that anyone may see their interactions with other users. This openly viewed interaction takes on a “glass bedroom” metaphor as Pearson describes

it (2009, para. 11). The metaphor works as a bedroom with glass walls and doors, and inside the bedroom are private conversations. However, the people having these private conversations are seen by the people outside the bedroom. If viewers want they can participate, or they can see the conversation and move on. It is not a private space; however, users still use discussion boards as if they are. Pearson (2009, para. 22) argues that in virtual spaces, strong ties utilize performative behaviour by creating an accessible privacy where users are aware of the openness of the conversation and so behave in a manner that suits the environment. But Pearson (2009, para. 23) also states that because the space is mediated through written text, it allows also for mediated intimacy that allows users to develop stronger ties with other people that they may not be able to develop in person.

Donath (1999) explains how in communication knowing who the other person is is vital to the interaction and in understanding whom you are talking with (para. 1). However, in a virtual world, an identity is ambiguous and therefore cues about who you are talking with are absent (Donath, 1999, para. 1) as their chosen username may omit whether they are male, female, young or old, and their profile may omit the same. Goodreads users commonly submit their first name, so that understanding and a general cue of whom you are dealing with is there. There is still a possibility of fake accounts where the username, profile picture, and personal biography information are misleading. Alternatively, there are real accounts where the user has decided not to divulge that personal information about themselves. However, as Haimson and Hoffmann state, “What constitutes an ‘authentic’ or ‘real’ identity – both online and off – is a point of contention” (2016, para. 2). While common information such as gender and age may be false or omitted, through interactions with other online users a pattern of their behaviour will appear and an identity created.

Anonymity online is a chance for a person to be who they want to be without the peer pressure of having to maintain the persona their friends and family know them as. Being able to be yourself in a safe online environment is pertinent to a young person's development of self.

According to Ozguven et al., "In spite of the increasing importance of social networking websites, research into social media use in relation to personality traits remains rather limited. Nevertheless, there is some evidence of that differences in individuals' personality traits determine their online behaviors" (p. 518). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue that the more times a person spends online, the more the social behaviour of others around them that they communicate with influence their own behaviour (as cited in Ozguven et al., 2013, p. 519). The use of social networks is generally to keep in contact with offline relationships or create new relationships (Ozguven et al., 2013, p. 519). The online discussion boards of Goodreads establish connections from all over the world and unite them through a common interest: books and authors.

Trepte, Reinecke, and Juechems (2012) claimed that "Similarity of attitudes, demographic characteristics, traits, interests, and hobbies have been shown to influence attraction and liking in offline, as well as in online environments" (p. 834). Studies on online use have reported that youth are more likely to upload their personal information online and in return this has shown that they have more emotionally connective communication than adults (Best et al., 2014, p. 32). Through their openness, they are able to connect better with other users because other users see them as "real" as opposed to fake accounts that commonly plague online website discussion boards. Continued research states positive feedback between online communication and wellbeing, with users

receiving increased social support, lower social anxiety, with online communication helping their self-esteem and reducing their social isolation (Best et al., 2014, p. 32). Thus, online usage and interaction on discussion boards on Goodreads helps young people in their development of self and to be self-confident in their presentation. The relational ties they construct through the opportunity to be the self they want to be without fear of judgement will carry through offline.

Despite youth being open to participation online and their willingness to upload personal data about themselves, there is no evidence to suggest that these habits fit specifically only with a demographic of males or females. Ozguven et al (2013) reported that different demographics were found to use and prefer specific sites. Extraverted and anxious males were more likely to use social media, while women who used social media were found to develop further extraversion and openness through usage (Ozguven et al 2013, p. 518).

The more times a person uses an online discussion board and creates relationships, the more times a person is likely to continue the interaction. If there is a common interest there is more chance of them influencing others who share their interest. Ginsberg (2013, p. 47), a high school English teacher, hypothesised that by incorporating technology into her teaching class it would increase students' reading habits. She provided them with computer access and introduced them to Goodreads and set assignments and activities around the site to see their interaction. Ginsberg's studies discovered that 25% of her students accessed the website daily while 60% accessed the site weekly (2013, p. 48) The assignments begun and introduced by Ginsberg eventually turned into letting the students create their own discussion groups on Goodreads to discuss topics and books of their own

choosing (2013, p. 49). This allowed students to read their own books, give reviews, read the reviews of books by other students and in turn hear about books they previously would never have encountered. By the end of the semester some students had read over 50 books, and two years after the course ended, six out of the twenty students still posted weekly (Ginsberg, 2013, p. 49).

Throughout Ginsberg's course, her students had the chance to interact with each other on a deeper, more personal level through common interests. This interaction carried across school hours into personal online time. Trepte et al. (2012) states that the more individuals socialise with each other, then the closer they get to each other and the further their relationship develops (p. 834). This familiarity with each other promotes closer relationships due to interacting over a similar theme or interest (Trepte et al., 2012, p. 834). Goodreads does not only help users interact with each other and deepen relationships, but it also helps users by opening up a world of opportunities in books. Levin, Walter, Appleyard and Cross (2016) argue that "stronger ties often lead to a greater exchange of useful knowledge. In particular, tie strength increases people's motivation to be more easily available, treat each other well, and assist each other" (p. 419). Through interacting with each other on Goodreads, the students were able to strengthen their relational ties by sharing what they know which made them more open to absorb what other students had to say.

Ginsberg (2013) concluded her study by evaluating how her students boost in their reading confidence was not only influenced by the use of technology in the class, but also by the use of group discussion boards and achievement of reading goals (p. 51). Before taking the course, Ginsberg asked her student to rate their reading habits out of poor, fair,

good, or excellent. Many of the students rated their reading habits as fair, but by the end of the course all but one rated their reading ability as good or excellent (Ginsberg, 2013, p. 48–51). The common denominator, books, increased their interest in each other and in reading.

In conclusion, there is nothing terrifically special about Goodreads or the service it provides. On most any social media site there is a platform for discussion that users may participate in and interact with others on. However, Goodreads is a respectable site that allows, primarily, book lovers to get together in a safe, mediated place and interact with other book lovers. It allows youth who are generally shy or introverted to be able to talk about their passion unhindered by the possible judgement of peers. As the use of real names are not required on Goodreads, users can use that to create an individual identity by using the name of popular book characters, colours, book/movie quotes that resonate with themselves, and even use the space to update followers and friends on situations in their lives such as the changing of accounts. The anonymity that the discussion boards' offer allows them to create their own individual, personal, persona that allows them to interact with others that sets their online voice aside from their offline persona. This experience gives them the chance to develop online a self that they are confident in that they can then easily transfer offline. Due also to the effort it takes to hold a conversation over different time zones on a public discussion board, stronger and more meaningful relationships may develop.

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