

Custom Communities: Choosing our Facebook ‘friends’ to meet our sense of belonging.

Commented [VB1]:

V. Bliss - NET204 Social Media, Communities and Networks (OpenUnis SP 1 2021
Curtin OUA - EXT[1])
Communities and Social Media Stream

Abstract

This paper discusses the prevalence of persistent relationships and the identified judgement of individual online personas, in a users’ creation of a customizable Facebook ‘friends’ list. It focuses on how our Facebook ‘friends’ reflect the concepts of ‘community’ and the social bonds that effects our sense of belonging. It examines how communication affordances of the social media site Facebook offers longevity of social connections, regardless of geographical proximity, by facilitating the connection and maintenance of online ‘friendships’ with relative ease through the delivery of person-to-network communications (Hampton, 2016; Chambers, 2013; Donath & Boyd, 2004). The definition of ‘friendship’ is discussed, aptly defined by Sandell (1998, p.147) as “the family of choice” and examined in the context of our Facebook ‘friends’. From here, this paper discusses choosing our community of ‘friends’ on Facebook, and how personality impressions are developed through the creation and broadcast nature of individual online personas, essentially making judgments regarding ‘friendship’ acceptance to meet our sense of belonging. It is here that this paper discusses how persistent relationships and the judgement of individual online personas develop into a customizable *personal community*, drawing on concepts of ‘community’ and ‘individualism’ to guide our friendship acceptance decision-making. Therefore, it is the position of this paper to argue that we select and shape our Facebook "friends" through persistent relationships and the judgement of individual online personas, to create a customizable, personal community that meets our sense of belonging.

Keyword tags: #community #belonging #Facebook #friends #friending #friendship
#persona #persistence #relationships

Custom Communities: Choosing our Facebook ‘friends’ to meet our sense of belonging.

The term ‘community’ holds strong nostalgic connotations for the most of us. It generates feelings of friendship and trust and defines the social bonds that effect our sense of belonging (Hampton, 2016). This can also be said of online communities, referred to as ‘virtual communities’ (Rheingold, 1993; Chambers, 2013; Delanty, 2018) where people experience belonging through communicative, virtual forms. Such forms are the framework of social media sites like Facebook, that affords its users means of persistent connections, built on intimate, casual and sociable affiliations (Chambers, 2013). In the Australian Yellow Social Media Report (2020), Facebook remains the most popular social media site (89%), with most of us using social media to stay in touch or catch up with friends and family (83%), finding or connecting with people with similar interests (31%), and meeting new friends (16%). This then, fosters the notion of communication as ‘belonging’, as Facebook - and other such social media sites – seize upon online, in-house communicative affordances to typify the broadcasting of the individual online persona and make judgments regarding ‘friendship’ acceptance to meet our sense of belonging. Scott (2014) refers to judgments made after being exposed to individuals’ online personas as providing sufficient cues to personality, resulting in increased friendship acceptance. This, combined with the persistent nature of relationships that make up Facebook ‘communities’ – more specifically our Facebook ‘friends’ list - have brought about a fundamental change to the traditional structure of ‘community’ (Hampton, 2016). It is here then that this change represents our ability to self-select and shape our Facebook ‘friends’, to custom-make an online community that meets our sense of belonging, friendship and trust, taking on the form of what Chambers (2013) refers to as ‘personal community’. Therefore, it is the position of this paper to argue that we select and shape our Facebook ‘friends’ through persistent relationships and the judgement of individual online personas, to create a custom personal community that meets our sense of belonging.

Just as the term ‘community’ holds nostalgic connotations for many of us, our sense of belonging aligns to the psychological feeling of involvement, being valued and the need to ‘fit’ in (Liu et al., 2018). This is true of virtual communities too where the communication technologies of social media giant Facebook, enhance its role in ‘facilitat[ing] the expression of many forms of belonging’ (Delanty, 2018, p.221). This can be evidenced through a Facebook users’ online membership of interest groups and pages, direct messaging services, ‘Likes’ and comments, to the self-selection of one’s ‘friends’. With passive reminders of one’s connections (birthday reminders, third-party tagging, posts on News Feed), teamed with active communication, it has never been easier to satiate the need to belong (Tobin et al., 2014).

Staying in touch or catching up with friends and family, finding and connecting with people with similar interests, and meeting new friends (Yellow, 2020), are some of the key reasons we use Facebook to meet our sense of belonging. The digital communication affordances of Facebook allow people to connect and maintain online ‘friendships’ with relative ease through the delivery of person-to-network communications (Hampton, 2016; Chambers, 2013; Donath and Boyd, 2004). In contrast, within a traditional community, people often abandon relationships due to the time and resources needed to maintain them over geographical distance in the form of person-to-person contact (Hampton, 2016). Instead, our Facebook ‘friends’ offer the affordance of persistence. Hampton (2016, p.111) explains, “[t]he low-cost, low-bandwidth, broadcast nature of person-to-network contact affords persistence, because contact can be maintained without substantively drawing from the time and resources required to maintain social ties through other forms of communication”. Not effected by transitional stages of life or geographical ties, persistent relationships in the form of our Facebook ‘friends’, offer nostalgic community connection and reconnection, stretching beyond the restrictions of space and time that reaffirms our feeling of being involved, congruence with other people and ultimately, sense of belonging (Hampton & Wellman, 2018; Delanty, 2018).

So, who *are* the people we select to form our Facebook ‘friends’ community? To answer this question, it is important to understand what a ‘friendship’ is. Most simplistically,

Akkas and Bakirtas (2019, p. 1317) define friendship as “a voluntary association between one or many people”. Sandell (1998, p.147) goes further to describe it as “the family of choice”. In the context of our Facebook ‘friends’, friendships come in the form of requests; sometimes from friends, sometimes from people based on persistent relationships, and sometimes from strangers. We tend to accept friendship requests from ‘strong’ ties: very close friends and family members (Chambers, 2013). These strong connections offer intimacy, as well as emotional and physical support. These are people that we interact or communicate with regularly and often face-to-face as well as online. However, not all Facebook ‘friends’ offer the same level of friendship interaction. Friendships, past and future, are no longer subject to face-to-face acquaintance, with Facebook users requesting friendships with people who they think are like them (Akkas and Bakirtas, 2019) but do not know necessarily. Chambers (2013, p.151) refers to these friendships as ‘thin’ or ‘weak’ ties of acquaintance, offering casual, informative and non-emotional exchanges. We know these friendships: that girl you went to preprimary with in 1989 and have not seen or spoken to since, or that friend of your husbands that you have *never* met. This also includes Facebook’s ‘friends of friends’ algorithm, aptly available to further our network of assorted ‘weak’ ties (like the husband’s friend mentioned above). This combination of diverse ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ Facebook ‘friends’ unites to resemble ‘the family of choice’. We accept, ignore or reject these requests of Facebook ‘friendship’ to shape a new kind of customisable community that is mediated by a highly personalized sense of belonging (Akkas and Bakirtas, 2019).

Arguably accepted and ingrained as a part of any community, people make judgments of individuals based on impressions gained from assessing particular, salient markers (Scott, 2014). We use these markers to guide our decision-making capabilities when choosing to communicate and interact with people within the community. In the context of choosing our community of ‘friends’ on Facebook, personality impressions are developed through the creation and broadcast nature of individual online personas, referred to as the *Facebook profile* (Facebook, 2021). It is within this space that users assemble their online identity by sharing personal information (such as home town, birth date, education etc.), wall posts and an overarching profile image. Research indicates that a physically

attractive profile picture increases ‘friendship’ acceptance (Akkas & Bakirtas, 2019; Scott, 2014; Greitemeyer & Kunz, 2013), particularly so for members of the opposite sex if they are found to be attractive (Wang et al., 2010). Scott (2014, p.361) writes, “[p]erceived popularity [and] attractiveness... appear to be integrated in the interpretation of SNS personas, and the fact that popularity influenced approachability demonstrates that this group of traits could directly influence online behavior.” For a potential ‘friend’, the personal persona provides sufficient cues to assessing salient markers such as attractiveness and popularity (number of ‘friends’). It also affords behavioural motive to accept or deny one’s request for ‘friendship’ based on the dynamics of the desired *personalised* community and one’s humanistic need to fit in and belong.

The term *personal community* relies heavily on the convergent concepts of ‘community’ and ‘individualism’ in the context of online friendships and community creation (Chambers, 2013). The self-selection of ‘friends’ and more individualized public of support found within our customized Facebook ‘friends’ community, emphasizes a more personal way of engaging socially within chosen and persistent ties. This can also include connecting to strangers, due to the visibility of our community of Facebook ‘friends’ to other users. Potential ‘friends’ are suggested to us through powerful ‘friends of friends’ algorithms which may make it easier to satisfy our sense of belonging but, at the same time, increases the chance of social rejection, including the act of removing a person from one’s ‘friends’ list (referred to as ‘defriending’) (Tobin et al., 2013). Through these actions we select and shape our custom personal communities through the accepting, ignoring and rejection of ‘friends’, which affords potential ‘friendship’ scalability. However, for the most part, we tend to communicate and connect with a small, select group of intimate ‘friends’ (Policarpo, 2019), with users averaging 200 Facebook ‘friends’ (Akkas & Bakirtas, 2019). Policarpo (2019, p.450) writes, “... when understood as opposed to an isolated ‘individual’, the ‘personal’ evokes the ‘social’, assuming that people and the ties they build are set in social types of belonging such as gender, ethnicity, class, spatial context and historical context (structural dimensions)”. This behaviour of personal customisation links to concepts of ‘community’ (collective interest, social commitment and notions of belonging) and notions of ‘individualism’

(identity formation, personal achievement and autonomy) highlighting a shift towards Facebook 'friendship' being regarded as a resource with significant social value, based on affiliation, trust and belonging (Chambers, 2013, p.147). It is for these reasons that Facebook 'friend' *collectors* (users who gather 'friends' on a large scale) are viewed with mistrust (boyd, 2006), as they defy the collective perception of 'community', friendship, trust, and our sense of belonging to a custom, personal community.

To conclude, for the most of us, our sense of belonging inspires a psychological feeling of involvement, being valued and the feeling of congruency within the group. Staying in touch or catching up with friends and family, finding and connecting with people with similar interests, and meeting new friends, are some of the key reasons we use social media sites like Facebook, to find our sense of belonging. In contrast to friendships within a traditional community, our Facebook 'friends' offer the affordance of persistence. Not effected by transitional stages of life or geographical ties, persistent relationships in the form of our Facebook 'friends', offer nostalgic community connection and reconnection, stretching beyond the restrictions of space and time that reaffirms the feeling of being involved, congruent with other people and ultimately, sense of belonging. Facebook 'friendships' come in the form of requests; sometimes from friends, sometimes from people based on persistent relationships, and sometimes from strangers. We accept friendship requests from very close friends and family members that offer strong connections. However, not all Facebook 'friends' offer the same level of friendship interaction. Friendships, past and future, are no longer subject to face-to-face acquaintance, with Facebook users requesting friendships with strangers who they think are like themselves. Personality impressions of 'friends' are developed through the creation and broadcast nature of individual online personas. For a potential 'friend', the personal persona provides sufficient cues to assessing salient markers such as attractiveness and popularity (number of 'friends'). We accept, ignore or reject these requests of Facebook 'friendship' from persistent relationships and impressions made from personal online personas to shape a new kind of customisable community that is mediated by a highly personalized sense of belonging. For the most, however, we tend to communicate and connect online with a small, select group of intimate 'friends'

(Policarpo, 2019). In doing so we select and shape a custom *personal community* through the acceptance of 'friends'. Therefore, these behaviours reaffirm that we select and shape our Facebook 'friends' through persistent relationships and the judgement of individual online personas, to create a custom personal community that meets our needs of friendship, trust and ultimately, sense of belonging.

References

- Akkas, C. & Bakirtas, H. (2019). Would you like to be my Facebook friend? *Sexuality & Culture*, 24, 1315-1336. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09684-6>
- boyd, d. (2006). Friends, friendsters, and top 8: Writing community into being on social network sites. *First Monday*, 11(12), <http://firstmonday.org/article/view/1418/1336>
- Chambers, D. (2013). Virtual communities and online social capital. In *Social media and personal relationships: online intimacies and networked friendship*, 142-161. Palgrave Macmillan UK. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/curtin/detail.action?docID=1138349>
- Delanty, G. (2018). Virtual community: belonging as communication. In *Community: 3rd edition* (3rd ed., 200-224). Routledge. <https://doi.org.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/10.4324/9781315158259>
- Donath, J., & boyd, d. (2004). Public displays of connection. *BT Technology Journal*, 22(4), 71-82. <https://search-proquest-com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/docview/215202769?pq-origsite=primo>
- Facebook. (2021). *Your profile and settings*. https://www.facebook.com/help/239070709801747/?helpref=hc_fnav
- Greitemeyer, T. & Kunz, I. (2013) Name-Valence and Physical Attractiveness in Facebook: Their Compensatory Effects on Friendship Acceptance. *I*, 153(3), 257-260. <https://www-tandfonline-com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/doi/full/10.1080/00224545.2012.741629?scroll=top&needAccess=true>
- Hampton, K. N. (2016). Persistent and Pervasive Community: New Communication Technologies and the Future of Community. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 60(1), 101–124. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764215601714>
- Hampton, K. N., & Wellman, B. (2018). Lost and Saved . . . Again: The Moral Panic about the Loss of Community Takes Hold of Social Media. *Contemporary Sociology*, 47(6), 643–651. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094306118805415>
- Liu, Q., Shao, Z. & Fan, W. (2018). The impact of users' sense of belonging on social media habit formation: empirical evidence from social networking and

- microblogging websites in China. *International Journal of Information Management*, 43(2018), 209-223. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2018.08.005>
- Policarpo, V. (2019) The personal life of Facebook: managing friendships with social media. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 8(3), 445–461. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204674318X15313160549810>
- Sandell, J. (1998). I'll be there for you: friends and the fantasy of alternative families. *American Studies*, 39(2), 141-155. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40642973>
- Tobin, S.J., Vanman, E.J., Verreynne, M. & Saeri, A.K. (2014). Threats to belonging on Facebook: lurking and ostracism. *Social Influence*, 10(1), 31-42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15534510.2014.893924>
- Wang, S.S., Moon, S., Kwon, K.H., Evans, C.A., & Stefanone, M.A. (2010). Face off: Implications of visual cues on initiating friendships on Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26(2), 226–234. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2009.10.001>