Chapter 35
Online Friendship

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ABSTRACT

This entry reviews and discusses several issues regarding online friendship. After introducing two opposite perspectives: the cues-filtered-out perspective and the social information process theory, it examines empirical studies with particular focuses on online friendships development, comparisons between online friendship and its offline counterpart, and the impacts of online friendship on the offline life.

INTRODUCTION

Online friendship refers to friendship formed in cyberspace which either stays online or moves to offline settings at different development stages. But what is friendship? Hays (1988) pointed out:

The term 'friendship' is used very loosely and idiosyncratically, by both the general public and social scientists, to describe a diverse range of relationships. A 'friend' may be a casual companion with whom we play racquetball once a week, an intimate confidant with whom our most private thoughts and feelings are shared, someone we interact with every day, someone who lives

across the country and we only exchange letters with several times a year, someone we just met a few days ago, or someone we've known all our lives. (p.391)

This suggests that friendship is an elusive term. Nevertheless, since friendship may refer to a range of relationships, a good starting point for a meaningful definition is to differentiate and clarify these relationships.

One of the earliest accounts of friendship is offered by Aristotle (1955), who distinguished three kinds of friendships. The first one depends on utility. Both parties in this kind of relationship fulfil instrumental ends for each other. When one fails to do so, the relationship may come to the end. The second one is based on pleasure. Equally,

when one party cannot provide pleasure for the other, such a relationship may break up. The third one focuses on goodness. This is the perfect and ideal friendship. Though the friend is useful and pleasant, this is not the underpinning reason for this kind of relationship. Rather, in this friendship, one loves the other for his/her character, and cares for the other's well-being for his/her own sake. Aristotle's account is still influential and relevant today, and many recent discussions differentiate friendships in similar ways. This implies that friendships differ in the types of social support/ resources that they provide. As such friendship can be understood as a range of voluntary and informal interpersonal relationships that involve varying types and degrees of practical assistance, companionship and fun, and emotional support and intimacy (see also Hays, 1988). The more types of resources it provides the higher quality and the more developed the friendship would tend to be (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). This probably explains why Aristotle saw the third type of friendship to be the perfect one as it is likely to involve all types of support.

OVERVIEW

Computer mediated communication (CMC) is the key to online friendship. Therefore it is not surprising that the relevant research attention was first turned to the nature of the medium and its implications for interpersonal relationships. In this respect, the social presence theory developed by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) in the context of telecommunication has been influential. Social presence is related to the bandwidth of the medium: the acoustic, visual, and physical cues that it is able to convey. It argues that more cues will increase the social presence of communicators and make the interaction more intimate, warmer and more sociable. Along a similar line, Daft and Lengel (1984; 1986) developed the media richness theory which proposes that communication media

differ in their capacities to process rich information. The theory assumes that face-to-face (FtF) is the richest medium, while written documents are media of low richness, due to their different capacities to carry non-verbal cues and provide immediate feedback.

CMC, especially in the early days, is largely text-based and is regarded to be a low richness medium with narrow bandwidth (Rice, 1992). As a result, Ronald E. Rice and his colleagues' research (Rice, 1984; Rice & Case 1983) suggested that CMC was less appropriate for social and emotional tasks but more suitable for straightforward information exchange. Though they found CMC was able to convey socio-emotional contents, Rice and his colleagues seemed to assume that this should not be overemphasized to overshadow the largely impersonal and task oriented nature of it (Rice, 1992; Rice & Love, 1987). In a similar way, Sproull and Kiesler (1986; 1991; Kiesler, 1986) argued that CMC filters out social context cues without which communicators feel a greater sense of anonymity and less inhibited from conducting anti-social behaviour. These stances are commonly referred to as the cues-filtered-out perspective which assumes that CMC is inherently impersonal and not conducive to interpersonal relationship development.

By contrast, Joseph B. Walther (1992; 1996) developed the social information process (SIP) theory which suggests that given enough time CMC can foster interpersonal relationships. He argued that communicators can overcome the lack of social presence by adapting to the CMC environment and using linguistic code to convey social information. The absence of social and nonverbal cues does not stop social information exchange but merely slows down the exchange rate. Consequently, the SIP theory holds that CMC is not inherently impersonal and that it facilitates normal though temporally retarded relational development compared with FtF interaction. Furthermore, according to this theory, because physical cues are filtered out, senders can be selective in self

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