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Adult Friendships in the Facebook Era

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Abstract

Online friends are accumulated by sending virtual requests through online social networking sites. Once accepted friends have access to each other's online life, which includes some level of access to each other's entire online social network. The study presented in this paper sought to understand the connection between these online friends and offline relationships. Phase 1 data was collected using an online survey (N= 752). Analysis of survey data informed the design of Phase 2, where face-to-face sessions which incorporated semi-structured interviews and verbal protocols were conducted with 18 active Facebook users. Phase 2 participants were aged between 21-57 and provided broad insights into adult Facebook users' friendship experiences. Facebook users were overwhelmingly positive about their online activity but did highlight new friendship issues (such as 'de-friending') which have arisen as a direct result of accumulating and maintaining friends online.

Keywords

Online social networking; Facebook; Friendship; Online/offline relationships

Introduction

"What of the 'long lost friend' to the technology generation, I wonder? I suppose if you remain "lost" to people these days, chances are they don't want to find you" (anonymous survey respondent)

Social networking sites enable people from one's past and present to easily (re)connect as online 'friends'. This phenomenon presents an opportune time to reflect on the concept of friendship and explore the changing nature, if any, of friendship as a direct result of online activity. This article sets out to define the traditional notion of friendship before describing a study of Facebook users that explores their experiences of online friendship. To date the majority of research has focused on University students' online social networking activity. This study aims to fill a gap in the literature from an Australian perspective by including data from a broad age range of online social network users.

The study explores in detail the phenomenon of the 'Facebook friend' and describes how adult Facebook users accumulate and manage their online friends and the connection between their online and offline relationships.

Friendship

Friendship is a voluntary, informal and personal interdependence between two equals which develops over time ([Demir & Weitekamp, 2007](#)). Provisions of friendships include mutual assistance, relief from other roles in society, informal emotional support, advice and material help, companionship, intimacy, and can provide insights into our selves ([Carter, 2005](#); [Demir & Ozdemir, 2010](#)).

Researchers have demonstrated the importance of friendships for overall psychological adjustment, happiness and well-being and for coping with major life stressors and transitions ([Demir & Weitekamp, 2007](#); [Weisz & Wood, 2005](#)). Friendships throughout one's lifetime may vary in their intensity and level of commitment, with closer friendships at a given point in time reflecting higher levels of trust, mutuality, stability and intimacy ([Weisz & Wood, 2005](#)). For friendships to endure they require active maintenance and ongoing communication. This effort builds a level of emotional intensity, leading to **quality** friendships, which have been found to make a difference in the happiness of the individual, rather than **quantity** of friends ([Demir & Weitekamp, 2007](#); [Roberts & Dunbar, 2011](#)).

While friendships serve a personally fulfilling function, friendships are situated in a social context. The various friendships a person forms are not exclusively determined by the individuals concerned. Friendships, particularly in past generations, accord with the social conventions of the broader social and economic contexts in which the individuals are located ([Allan, 1998](#)). However changes in conditions of transport and communication technologies have resulted in more geographically and culturally diverse friendship networks. Friendships are now more likely to be based on compatibility, rather than convenience ([Allan, 1998](#)).

Friendship and Facebook

The phenomenal growth of Facebook since opening to the general public in September 2006 can be seen with 955 million monthly active users and an average of 552 million daily active users (as at June 2012) ([Facebook Newsroom, 2012](#)). Based on an average of daily visitors and page views over the past month, Facebook is ranked as the most popular website in Greece, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and the second most popular website (behind Google) in Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Portugal, South Africa, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States.

Since its inception at Harvard University in 2004 Facebook has appropriated the term 'friend' and the nature of these new online friendships has been a source of interest to researchers across the social sciences. In relation to online friendships research has primarily focused on the experience of tertiary students and, as reviewed below, studies have explored the impact of social networking sites on making new friends online and maintaining existing offline friendships.

The phenomenon of accepting strangers as online friends has been explored through survey and experimental research designs. A survey sample of students enrolled in an undergraduate social science course led [Tufekci](#) (2010) to conclude that certain personality traits indicate the likelihood of a person accepting the possibility of making new friends online. Experimental designs have been applied to identify the criteria for acceptance of strangers as online friends. [Wang, Moon, Kwon, Evans & Stefanone](#) (2009), using a convenience sample of college students, and [Patil's](#) (2012) adult population, reveal gender and the type of profile picture displayed to be a significant influence in the willingness to accept unknown persons as online friends. Overwhelmingly, however, it has been found that strangers make up a very small proportion (if any) of one's online friends ([Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe](#), 2011).

Another line of investigation in this field is the use of online social networking to maintain existing offline friendships. A random sample of 450 undergraduate students surveyed by [Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe](#) (2011) suggests that initiating behaviours aimed at meeting new people through Facebook was the least common online activity, while using the site for communication to maintain existing offline relationships was most common. The data also revealed a preference for social information-seeking activity directed at learning more about people with whom offline connections are shared. This activity also known as 'facestalking' ([Young](#), 2011).

Research has revealed new and unique friendship behaviour to emerge as a direct result of online social networking; the need to 'de-friend'. That is, deleting friends who have previously been accepted into an online friendship network. This need arises for various reasons including, having too many online friends, disliking the content posted online by that person, diminishing of an offline friendship or disliking an offline behaviour ([Lewis & West](#), 2009; [Sibona & Walczak](#), 2011).

[Tufekci](#) (2010) suggests there is continued ongoing debate about whether social media can expand people's social network, and whether online friends can be 'real' friends. However, emerging data consistently reveals that online friend networks are primarily manifestation of offline networks and used to maintain existing relationships ([Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe](#), 2011). Concerns that online activity might diminish adults' offline friendship network sizes have likely been unfounded. [Wang and Wellman](#) (2010), in their study of adult friendship network sizes from 2002 to 2007, conclude that friendships were abundant and actually grew in the period under study and this trend is similar among Internet non-users, light, moderate and heavy users. [Vergeer and Pelzer](#) (2009) found that when using an online social networking site one's total network size stays the same, only the manner in which people communicate with network members changes. The positive trend continues across age cohorts of online social network users, with [Hogeboom, McDermott, Perrin and Osman](#) (2010) claiming a statistically positive difference in frequency of contacts with friends and family for Internet users aged over 50 years, compared with non-users. Further, it is suggested use of online social network services such as Facebook results in people having a 20% more diverse social network than non-users ([Hampton, Sessions, Her & Rainie](#), 2009). Facebook friends have been found to comprise close friends; acquaintances; former school friends; family members and people met in temporary jobs and travelling and therefore closely reflect one's offline friendship networks ([Lewis & West](#), 2009).

Studies examining the online/offline friendship networks of college students have concluded that social networking sites are used to promote social interaction and reinforce important offline relationships ([Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter & Espinoza, 2008](#)). The use of online social networking sites supplement and extend other forms of communication, rather than replace traditional friendship activities. Online social network sites are used to connect and reconnect with friends and family members and so online friendship networks are a replication of offline networks ([Kujath, 2011](#); [Subrahmanyam et al., 2008](#); [Vergeer & Pelzer, 2009](#); [Young, 2011](#)).

As the number of older persons engaging with online social networking continues to increase, important research is emerging which highlights issues of cross-generational online friendships. While older persons may struggle to accumulate online friends, younger persons are found to be more reluctant to have their parents and other older relatives and colleagues as online friends. Where this does occur it often requires specific negotiation of behaviours ([Lewis & West, 2009](#); [Williams & Mertens, 2008](#)).

Review of current literature, as described above, reveals that strangers are less likely to be accepted (or desired) as Facebook friends compared with known persons. Facebook is used to maintain existing offline relationships and, rather than decreasing the number of friends one engages with, online social network users are found to maintain existing levels of friendship and often increase the number and variety of persons with whom they interact. Facebook has also been found to provide an additional means of communication to enhance traditional forms of engagement.

Based on emerging empirical data, the premise of this study is that there is great potential for sites such as Facebook to facilitate friendship and these sites provide an authentic context to explore the ways in which online friendship replicates traditional notions of friendship or, indeed, determine if a new interpretation of friendship is required in the Facebook era.

Research Design

This research set out to understand the experiences of adult online social network users and explore issues affecting Facebook users across a broad age range. The research provides insights into the Facebook phenomenon as it occurs in its natural state and expands the existing body of knowledge which has primarily focused on adolescent and University students' use of social networking sites (see, for example, [Boyd, 2006](#); [Lenhart & Madden, 2007](#); [Livingstone, 2008](#); [Valkenburg, Peter & Schouten, 2006](#)).

The research is designed from an interpretivist perspective and is directed toward *verstehen*; an understanding or interpretation of meaning in human activities from the participant's perspective ([Crotty 1998](#)). The underlying assumption is humanistic, where participants are constructed as active agents with capabilities that enable them to direct, control and make decisions about their social lives. Aligned with this perspective, the research is focused on individuals and their life-worlds with an emphasis on their subjective experience.

Exploration of online social networking activity in its natural state aligns with principles of ethnographic research, and, more specifically, online ethnography. Online ethnography incorporates traditional ethnographic methods such as interviews and also involves

systematic observation of chosen web sites to study the relationships between online and offline life ([Miller & Slater](#), 2000). This methodology recognises the changing nature of ethnographic research as a result of the Internet, which is highlighted by [Leander and McKim](#) (2003), who ask, what happens to meanings and uses of spatial constructs, such as 'place', knowledge about local identities, and participant observations when the research site or locations for ethnographic study moves into the virtual worlds of the Internet?

Research questions

To explore the phenomenon of adult friendships and Facebook, four research questions are addressed in this paper:

1. How do adult Facebook users accumulate online friends?
2. How do they define these online friends?
3. How do they manage large numbers of online friends?
4. What is the relationship between online and offline friendships?

Research design and participants

The research was conducted in two distinct phases. To scope the field, Phase 1 used an online survey comprising of both quantitative and qualitative questions. Analysis of this data informed the Phase 2 online ethnography which incorporated semi-structured interviews and verbal protocols (that were obtained while participants were actively engaged with their own online profile) under the observation of the researcher.

Phase 1 – Survey

To canvass the experiences of active online social network users an online survey was distributed via email to students in two Faculties at a Sydney-based University. The initial recipients of the online survey were asked to further distribute the survey to family and friends who may be interested in sharing their online social networking experiences. This snowball approach was effective in recruiting a broader sample, beyond current University students. There were 752 respondents aged 15-65 years and a breakdown of demographics is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Survey Respondents Demographic Overview

Male	N=183
Female	N=569
University student	N=354
Student (other)	N=4
Full-time employment	N=268
Part-time employment	N=100
Not working	N=8
Homemaker	N=14
Retired	N=4

The results of this survey have been reported in detail in [Young](#) (2009). To provide a more complete picture of adults' experiences using Facebook and compensate for

weaknesses of survey-based research the second research phase employed in-depth qualitative research methods ([Denscombe, 2007](#)).

Phase 2 – Interviews and verbal protocols

In the second phase of the research 18 participants self-selected from the original survey to engage in individual face-to-face sessions with the researcher. These participants were aged 21-57 years. Each research session included a semi-structured interview. To overcome some limitations of self-reporting in interviews and to more thoroughly investigate the online component of each participant's life, verbal protocols were used where each participant viewed his/her online profile while talking aloud to the researcher about its content. This technique is extremely valuable in uncovering usually covert thought processes (in this instance, the development of an online profile) and immerses the participant and the researcher in the phenomenon being studied ([Young, 2005](#)). This data was captured using audio/video-screen capture software.

The timeframe and budget constraints of the study did not enable a representative sample of the entire population of individuals who have an online presence. Indeed, in qualitative research this is not essential, particularly during early investigations into a relatively new phenomenon such as that being explored here. However, although the study does not claim to represent the population, the participants do reflect the desired gender and age diversity, where the aim was not to draw comparisons but present the collective experiences of a diverse range of adult Facebook users.

Demographic information of Phase 2 participants is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Phase 2 Participant Demographics

ALIAS	GENDER	AGE	OCCUPATION
Doug	M	57	P/T Self-employed economist
Christine	F	37	F/T (not stated)
Elanor	F	37	P/T Personal assistant
Mia	F	37	F/T Homemaker
Alison	F	36	F/T Homemaker
Jason	M	35	F/T Information Technology
Leroy	M	35	F/T Graphic design
Olivia	F	35	P/T Journalist / mother
Linda	F	35	F/T Home-maker
Anna	F	33	F/T Lawyer
Nathan	M	29	F/T Lift mechanic
Natalie	F	28	F/T (not stated)
Ivan	M	28	F/T Mining
Gail	F	28	F/T Admin assistant
Thomas	M	25	Various P/T
Amy	F	23	University student
Elizabeth	F	21	University student
Amanda	F	21	University student

Data Analysis

The intention of this research was not to test a given theory but to interpret the ways in which the participants' activities and behaviours reflect, modify or adapt social communications and cultural norms ([Denscombe, 2007](#); [Denzin & Lincoln, 1998](#)). In accordance with the interpretive perspective thematic analysis was applied to the participants' interview transcripts and verbal protocol data.

Thematic analysis resulted in three categories related to participants' perception of their online friendships: accumulation, definition and management. These themes are explored and then applied to understand connections between online and offline friendships of adult Facebook users.

Findings

The first of three themes to be explored is how adult Facebook users accumulate online friends. Survey respondents reported the number of their online friends, as shown in Table 3, with 62% having 50+ friends.

Table 3. Number of online friends

Number of friends	%
1-5	6
5-10	8
10-20	8
20-50	16
50-100	20
100-200	27
200+	15

Qualitative data suggested that accumulating large numbers of online friends who aren't considered 'real' friends was not valued: *"If they have a few hundred, say maybe 500 friends...it's kind of like, you don't actually know all those people...that just seems to me bit pointless"* (Amy, 23) and *"It seems like an old-fashioned popularity contest to me. People become 'friends' with somebody they met once at a party in 1997 – ridiculous!"* (survey respondent) and when asked who is accepted as an online friend Nathan (29) states: *"Someone that I have ties with not just some random person who gets to be a number on my account"*.

Some participant questioned their initial quest to accumulate large numbers of online friends. In some instances deletion of friends (de-friending) is seen as appropriate *"I deleted some people just because I thought I am never going to talk to them, they're never going to talk to me, what's the point of me being able to see their life and them being able to see mine.... like not to say I don't care about people, but like they're just not on your radar, they're not in your life"* (Elizabeth, 21) and *"I've heard people saying "Oh my God" I've got 350 friends or 500 friends. I spent all weekend getting rid of half of them"* (Doug, 57).

Statistics on the number of friends a person has accumulated does not reveal the

composition of these friendships. Survey respondents were asked to identify who made up the majority of their online friends. Results revealed the majority of online friends are people with whom they socialise offline and very few respondents have online friends who they have never met in person, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Composition of online friend networks

Composition of online friend networks	%
Real friends who I spend time with outside the Internet	29
Current colleagues/school/university friends	23
Past colleagues/school/university friends I usually only communicate with online	22
Family members	13
People I have met out socially but don't see regularly	7
People I have some friends in common with but don't know well	4
People I have never met	2

In response to survey question on the importance of online social networking to 'meet new people' half of respondents (49%) stated it was very unimportant, with only 3% identifying online social networking as a very important tool to meet new people.

The small proportion of online friends reported as 'unknown' by survey respondents was confirmed by Phase 2 participants who suggested that an association offline is a prerequisite for accepting an online friendship request: *"If I can't recognise their face then I won't add them...if you have mutual friends, that is sometimes a trigger...if I don't know them I just don't bother"* (Elizabeth, 21); and *"There have been quite a number of requests from people I don't know – these I have ignored, having not had a connection with them prior"* (Christine, 37).

Exceptions are made, although these were relatively infrequent and were justified through another connection. Gail (25), for instance, being an animal lover, accepted a friend request from a person who she found was part of a global animal network. Similarly, Doug (57) accepted a friend request: *"... because he was born in a city that not many people have been to in China, where I've been and I liked, so I thought there's a contact. So I accepted him as a friend."*

Qualitative data revealed a perception that the word 'friend' in the online sense is *"not the true use of friend that's, in the real world, face-to-face"* (Anna, 33) and is a *"very very loose description"* (Leroy, 35). Doug (57) claims *"it disturbs me a bit that Facebook has appropriated the name friend, because I suppose the semantics of it disturb me a bit."*

When considering the composition of her online friends Olivia (35) suggests *"It's similar to the 'outside' world, if you like, you have people who are acquaintances, then people you are closer to and consider friends, and even amongst them people who are in your inner circle. The same structure exists in Facebook"*. Online friendship is aligned with familiarity *"people you've been friends with in the past or present, friends of friends if you've got something in common"* (Gail, 28) and *"anybody who I am familiar with and am willing to share insight into my personal details/life"*

with" (Jason, 35). The range of friends crosses *"real friend, foe, frenemy (friend & enemy), work associate, client, past acquaintances, ex school mates"* (Alison, 35) to *"people I once knew and people I admire and want to learn from, network with"* (Linda, 35). Doug (57) concludes *"... it's a bit like a fan, not in the usual sense of a celebrity but you're just looking at what people do which is the same as what fans do"*.

The importance of online social networking to interact and communicate with this diverse range of online friends was captured through survey data, as reflected in Table 5. It was revealed that although online friendship was less important to overall social life, it was deemed an important vehicle for communicating with others, keeping in touch and following what is happening in the lives of family and friends.

Table 5. Importance of online social networking to social interaction

	Very important %	Somewhat important %	Neutral %	Somewhat unimportant %	Very unimportant %
My social life	7	32	23	16	22
Enable me to communicate with others	23	47	13	8	9
Keep in touch with family/friends/colleagues	32	47	9	4	8
Follow what is happening in the lives of others	16	51	14	7	12

Participants were pro-active in accumulating friends but consensus was that a friend request would only be made where there was *"great confidence they would accept! I don't want to be rejected... and I don't want people feeling obliged!"* (Christine, 37). Survey data revealed around half of all respondents did not feel concern based on rejection of friend requests, but there is a portion (18% and 16%) who are negatively affected by this behaviour, as shown in response to the statement 'Online social networking makes me feel unhappy if presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Rejected friend requests

	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Someone rejects my friend request	30	24	28	15	3
I reject someone's friend request	31	25	28	14	2

Thomas (25, the son of interview participant Doug, 57) presented an important insight into issues affecting older generations in their quest to accumulate online friends:

"I do feel kind of sorry for some of the older folks who get on Facebook and find that it is mainly young people and there's just not that many people for them to associate with on it... I felt that maybe I should add to

their list of friends, you know give them a bit more of a reason to explore the world of Facebook because there is a lot of interesting things and I think increasingly older people will get into it and find they can network with people that they went to school with ... I know my parents can't find any of their old school friends, but hopefully one day it will be a nice way for them to catch up."

In his interview Thomas' father Doug (57) concurred:

"You realise there seems to be very few people of my age group on... I have great difficulty in finding people to be friends in my age group. I asked a couple of people if they wanted to be on it [Facebook] and they said no."

The accumulation of online friends leads to investigation of the ways in which adult Facebook users manage large numbers of online friends. Internet technology enables communication with substantial numbers of people, *"someone did some research, and you can really only remember 100 names properly, like put a name to a face, for instance when you're at university in that context... you've got limitations. But, of course things like email and Facebook have expanded that capacity considerably... we have prompts that we never used to have"* (Doug, 57). It became apparent these participants manage large numbers of online friends through active (reciprocated) engagement with only a small percentage of their online friends. Amy (23) indicates of 161 online friends there are only about 30 with whom she would regularly communicate with on Facebook, while Anna (35) estimates she has some (limited) communication with about half of her online friends, generally only to make a comment on a photo or pass on birthday wishes. Similarly, *"... the concept that I've got 135 friends, I worked out realistically even if I was an assiduous Internet user, I could really only service 30 friends a month."* (Doug 57).

Participants recognise that they can realistically only engage with a small proportion of their online friends with any regularity through the Facebook site. This limitation transfers to the number of online friends they actually engage with offline.

As reported in [Young](#) (2009) survey respondents answered two relevant questions, see Table 7.

Table 7. Online friends seen and telephoned each week

How many online 'friends' do you see in person each week?		How many online 'friends' do you phone or SMS each week?	
No.	%	No.	%
0	8	0	9
1-2	12	1-2	15
2-5	22	2-5	24
5-10	25	5-10	28
10-20	17	10-20	16
20-50	10	20-50	5
50+	1	50+	0

Phase 2 participants provided qualitative support for these statistics, as Elizabeth (21) who has 300+ friends explains "... *I don't know if I know 300 people but obviously... apparently I do. Probably about 10-15 people that I would have a close relationship with, like good friends, then there's like the acquaintance circle which you know you'd want to talk to but just don't all the time*" and Amy (21) "*One hundred and sixty-one, but with that number, the amount of people I actually talk to on a regular basis is maybe 30*". It is apparent that whilst online social networking facilitates the accumulation of hundreds of friends, realistically only a small portion of these online friends are regularly communicated with either online or offline.

Qualitative survey data revealed a portion of online social network users who felt strongly about the role of this tool to maintain friendships. When asked in the open-ended survey question "If my online social networking profile ceased to exist I would feel..." strongly emotive words and phrases emerged: "*disconnected*", "*isolated*", "*cut off*", "*out of the loop*", "*detached*" and responses described a sense of loss of an important tool to keep in contact with family and friends, even going so far as "*like the link to my outside world no longer existed*". However, there was some consensus that losing access to Facebook would not affect close friendships as those persons were seen and spoken with regularly using traditional forms of communication, the loss would, however, significantly impact ties with the large number of people with whom communication only occurred online.

Although overwhelmingly positive reports of the role of online social networking and friendship it is important to note that negatives experiences were reported. As seen in Table 8, in response to the statement 'Online social networking makes me feel unhappy if', negative feelings emerged for some when there was a lack of online communication or where this communication was negative.

Table 8. Online social networking makes me unhappy

	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
I go days/weeks without communication from friends	30	27	20	21	2
If people send me negative messages/actions	21	11	28	33	7
People do not respond to my messages/actions	22	21	25	28	4

Some participants reported feelings of intrusion into their offline life "*My dad's brought on a whole range of family, and some of the things that I participate in on my weekend adventures, I don't want my family to see photos of me in that state*" (Thomas, 25) and "*It initially concerned me when some people I was, at the time working with, requested my friendship. I can be an intensely private person, especially when it comes to keeping my social life separate from work life and it concerned me that they would be seeing a more casual, less serious side of me.*" (Christine, 37). Although the diversity of online friends may not necessarily be of concern to older users as Linda (35) notes "*I'm pretty much the same person in all of these domains so don't feel my personality requires managing. I guess if I were*

younger and had parents monitoring my Facebook it might be different".

Problems also arise when an offline relationship disintegrates. Thomas (25) describes, *"My ex-girlfriend constantly deletes me and reinstates me as her friend and deletes me.... I do worry about the things she might write on my page about me"*. Amanda (21) has experienced a similar problem *"... we broke up and he keeps trying to add me on Facebook, I guess to know about my life 'cause that's the only way he will know"*. This issues was also raised in qualitative survey responses: *"My ex-girlfriend was using it to blackmail and cause trouble"* leading to a sense of relief if the site ceased to exist *"glad that my ability to stalk other people and look at their lives (ex-boyfriends etc) is over"*.

There was frustration that even though one might 'de-friend' a person who they no longer have an offline relationship with the nature of Facebook means that person can still have some level of access where mutual online friends are shared: *"it's annoying that one of the guys I am dating now is on my friends list and I hate that my ex can see that... he can't see his profile but can at least see what he looks like and I find that annoying"* Amanda (21). This causes some to modify their behaviour, such as Anna (33) *"Although I am friends with the brother of an ex I do sometimes think to myself, if I write something on his wall, my ex is going to see it, so I always think, I don't want him to see that"*.

The organisation of events online can also cause unexpected conflict between friends. For instance, Elizabeth (21) *"... if one of your friends is in different circles, if you say you can't go out with one friend and then you organise something else through Facebook and you forget and they can look at your wall and they'll be like, I thought you said you were busy that night"*. Similarly, Amy (23) reports *"... I wasn't organising the trip [to Argentina] but not everyone was invited. It wasn't a private thing but the trip got mentioned, kind of publicly, on Facebook and a friend of mine who wasn't invited was kind of unhappy, hurt by the fact he wasn't invited"*.

It is important to note again, the participants overwhelmingly reported positive social experiences using Facebook and these findings formed a significant part of the research findings and are reported ([Young, 2011](#) and [Young, forthcoming](#)).

Discussion

The desire to accumulate large numbers of online friends has mixed findings. [Ofcom](#) (2008) reports that collecting friends and competing with offline friends for the most friends online is a high priority. However, this is not supported by [Boyd](#) (2006) who reports an adolescent's attitude: *"it's cool to have friends online but if you have too many Friends, you are a seen as a MySpace whore"* (p.13) and accumulating large friendship numbers was also not supported in this study of adult Facebook users. Indeed it has been found in this study and others (e.g., [Lewis & West, 2009](#)) that problems emerge if large numbers of friends have been accumulated and the users would like to reduce this number to a manageable size (ie. de-friending). Rejection of online friend requests and de-friending are new friendship issues to emerge as a result of online social networking. In some ways sending an online friend request can be viewed as a non-confronting way to test if a person wants to commence or revive a friendship, which would be far more difficult to test through face-to-face interaction. While de-friending

can send a clear message to another that they are no longer part of your friendship network which again, may be a more simple process than traditional forms of communication (e.g., not taking calls, rejecting offers to meet). There are concerns, however, that expired offline friendships might be given continued 'life' online through shared friendship networks. Participants were found to either be accepting of this as an unavoidable consequence of online social networking, or act on these issues by altering their own online behaviour.

Acceptance of friendship requests can stem from feelings of guilt if a request was rejected, particularly in relation to family. [Boyd](#) (2006) found adolescents also reported feeling pressure to accept connections with people so they can avoid facing the challenges of rejection and similarly [Ofcom](#) (2008) note that "*some users accept as friends people who they do not like or do not wish to talk to, as they feel it would be socially awkward to reject them*" (p. 37). This study concurred with the findings of [West, Lewis and Currie](#) (2009), that acceptance of older persons as Facebook friends may initially be done out of a sense of obligation. There is a real possibility, however, that intergenerational online friends could have two very positive outcomes. Firstly, older persons who engage in online social networking are provided with insights into issues affecting younger generations that would not usually be available to them. They are also exposed to language and cultural references that usually divide generations. Secondly, the acceptance of older friends (whether family members or work colleagues) may force younger users to more closely monitor their online postings and this forced self-censorship could benefit them in the longer term to avoid harm to their reputation.

Participant Doug (57) suggested that it is realistically only possible to maintain active friendships with a relatively small number of people. His perceptions are supported by psychological research which asserts that the limit of social relationships an individual can achieve, is about 150 with about five in the innermost closest circle ([Dunbar](#), 2007; [Roberts & Dunbar](#), 2011). Similarly, [Spencer and Pahl](#) (2006) report the number of close friends people have ranged from 5-41. The survey and interview data presented suggests that although Facebook users can now claim a large number of online friends, the number of close friendships being maintained has not been affected by their use of online social networking. Online social networking may support the maintenance of larger social networks but it has not altered the number of meaningful friendship that are maintained ([Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe](#), 2010). Data continues to emerge which suggests that online social networking either makes little difference in the quality of existing friendships or brings them closer and is important for supplementary communication ([Lewis & West](#), 2009; [Subrahmanyam et al.](#), 2008; [Young](#), 2011).

The categories of friends identified in this study are supported by other research in the field, such as those defined by [Lewis and West](#) (2009) and were found to run the gamut from close relationships to very distant and/or weak acquaintances (friend, relative, acquaintance, colleague, associate, peer). Acceptance of strangers as online friends was rare for these participants which results in an authenticity in the friendships existing online. This study has confirmed the findings emerging with other cohorts of users and from other locations, that online friends are real friends. This conclusion brings us back to consider the key characteristics of friendship identified at the commencement of this article. Table 9 considers the key principles of friendship in the Facebook era.

Table 9. Friendship in the Facebook Era

Friendship characteristic	Facebook experience
Voluntary	We could assume that the acceptance of a friend request is primarily voluntary in nature; however, there are times where these requests are accepted out of a sense of obligation. A perceived obligation to accept a person as an online friend might initially seem inconsequential, as there is no requirement to subsequently communicate online. However, the user is, unless privacy settings are used, enabling access into their life through viewing of wall post and photos, thus developing a level of intimacy that would not normally exist.
Informal	The nature of the Facebook site facilitates and promotes informality of relationships. The difference between traditional friendships and online friendships, however, is that communication is now publically available and has a level of permanency not previously experienced.
Two equals	The composition of Facebook friends suggests online friends are not necessarily 'equals' in that older relatives and work superiors could comprise one's online friendship network. In other ways power relationships may be diminished online as individuals have insights into each other's social lives.
Develops over time	One of the key features of Facebook is that it allows friendships to be maintained indefinitely. Rather than dissolving as a result of distance or time constraints communication can be regular and ongoing.
Requires ongoing maintenance and communication	The strength of online social networks is the ability to communicate in a cost-effective and convenient manner. This enables maintenance of both close and distant friends. The site provides opportunity for connections to be maintained through a wall post, tagged photo or 'like' of a status update.
Providing mutual assistance/support/advice	New forms of support are emerging as a result of sites such as Facebook. The ability to post messages of support and comfort or offer advice or assistance can be far wider reaching than traditionally experienced. The immediacy of assistance and support and advice could be perceived valuable in strengthening friendships.
Companionship	A new form of companionship may be emerging from the online social networking experience. Rather than traditional face-to-face interactions limited by time and space, virtual companionship means that online friends, especially from a global perspective, can be accessed and available around the clock.
Provide insights into ourselves	The co-construction of online profiles provides a new avenue for individuals to explore their own personality and the characteristics of their friends. Posting/tagging photos online and posting/responding to comments on a wall enable new, public displays of communication that reveal aspects of personality which may previously have been hidden.

The findings of this study have enabled consideration of how principles of friendship are consistent across face-to-face and online interactions and where new issues have emerged. Given the importance of friendship to promote well-being research which examines the impact of online friendship, such as that presented here, are useful in building understanding of the possible positive impacts and also negative consequences of online friendship interactions.

Limitations and Future Directions

To elicit the online friendship experiences of participants this study employed multiple methods of data collection and recruited a diverse range of participants reflective of the composition of Facebook. However, there are some important limitations of the study that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the Phase 1 survey was distributed through two Faculties at an Australian University and, although respondents included family and friends of these University students the data is limited to persons who are either University educated or associated with a past or current University student. Also, the participants in Phase 2 self-selected to participate and may represent only a certain type of active Facebook user.

The use of interviews and verbal protocols enabled participants to talk about their experiences and demonstrate their practices in an authentic online context. Being an active Facebook user, the interpretivist approach to data analysis was strengthened through the researcher's emic perspective ([Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983](#)). This insider perspective meant the researcher and the participants had a shared language through which to communicate about the phenomenon. The combination of insider perspective and the survey data provided a strong foundation for the design of Phase 2. The semi-structured interview questions and the use of verbal protocols provided important insights into the experiences of the participants. However, establishing online friends is not a one-way process. This research design only allowed for the perspective of one friend (the participant) in isolation. In future, research should engage a number of associated friends to examine the interactions between various friend networks ([Young, 2013](#)).

It is important to note that in order to accumulate and maintain friends online the individual must create an online identity. The online identity continues to evolve through a co-construction process with the user's friend network. Further, the act of engaging with friends on Facebook occurs within a context governed by site design and constructs. The scope of this paper was not sufficient to enable exploration of online identity and the communicative and socialisation functions of Facebook but the research did address these issues and they are reported elsewhere ([Young, 2011](#); [Young, forthcoming](#)).

The online context presents new ethical challenges for researchers. It requires reinterpretation of traditional ethical principles to maintain research integrity and minimise risk or harm to participants. At present there is no consensus in the research community about using online communications that may be publically accessible but were, for all intents and purposes, created for a select audience. Issues also arise in the publication and presentation of online data where the visual nature of content jeopardises anonymity. Also, the need for consent from a participant's friendship network (those who have co-constructed the participants online profile) should be considered. It has proved difficult to present and publish screenshots useful to illustrate research themes from the data

presented in this paper. Even where a participant has explicitly consented to use of visual data in publications, publication has been limited because informed consent was not obtained from the participants online friends who have co-constructed the profile being analysed (Young, 2012).

Conclusions

This paper set out to explore the phenomenon of adult friendships on Facebook. It did this by addressing four research questions which examined the accumulation, definition and management of online friends and explored the connection between online friendships and offline relationships. In doing so, several issues of concern were identified by participants relating to a perceived obligation to accept friend requests, 'de-friending', dealing with relationships that have ended offline and the public exposure of events or activities to people who did not participate. Overall, however, survey respondents and follow-up participants were positive about their friendship experiences on Facebook and any problems encountered were not considered a deterrent from using the site to maintain friendships. The study revealed that participants valued online social networking activity as a convenient, economical and valuable tool to strengthen existing relationships and maintain ties with a broad range of people who are met throughout life. The findings have provided useful insights to begin reflecting on the current defining characteristics of friendship and the ways in which Facebook reinforces or defies traditional principles of friendship.

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