Conceptualising contemporary friendship: A closeness-location model of friendship

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Abstract

Researchers examining the composition of people’s friendship and social networks typically categorise friendship into groups based on the level of closeness in the friendship. These groups often include, for example, best friend, close friend, friend and acquaintance. Research has shown, however, that friendship is a highly nuanced and personal relationship that is difficult to universally define. Using a priori definitions or frameworks of friendship may not capture the broad spectrum of friendship and may limit the scope of the study. Subsequently, further research is needed into people’s every day, personal conceptions of their friendship networks. Using data from a larger research project, this study examines the friendship and social grouping patterns of a group of 28 Facebook users. Results of a friendship-sorting exercise did not support a closeness-based model of friendship. Rather, results indicated that friendship groupings tend to consist of one closeness-based group with the remainder based on the location of the friend (i.e. where the friend was first met). Based on these results, this paper suggests that a closeness-location model of friendship best represents contemporary friendship.

Introduction

The term friendship can be exceedingly difficult to formally define, making it exceedingly difficult to research. According to friendship researchers, there are multiple reasons for the ambiguity of friendship. Firstly, there are no limits on how the term friendship can, or should, be used as it does not include a set of defining features (Fehr 1996). Secondly, most friendships often develop naturally with little to verbal confirmation or verification (Wright 1978). Lastly, unlike other relationships, a friendship between two individuals cannot be
indicated by the social position of one individual relative to another (such as ‘co-worker’ or ‘sibling’) (Allan 1989).

Despite the complexities inherent in defining and characterising friendship – or perhaps even because of them – it is common for researchers to classify or categorise friendships into groups in their attempts to study friendship. These friendship groups are typically based on the level of closeness in the friendship and tend to include such classifications as best friend, close friend, and acquaintance (Fehr 1996). This is problematic, however, as notions of closeness are subjective, and providing participants with pre-determined friendship groups based on closeness can potentially limit the scope of the research as the range of relationships included in the analysis is dependent on the instructions and questions of the researcher (Allan 1979).

Reporting on research involving 28 Facebook users, this study uses a qualitative approach to examine how people conceptualise their friendships. Unlike previous research into friendship groups, the participants involved in the present research were not provided with friendship definitions or pre-determined friendship categorisations. Instead, participants used a print-out of their Facebook Friends list to complete a friendship-sorting activity. This study found that the participants classified one friendship group according to closeness and classified the rest of their friends according to how they knew them. This paper explores the participants’ decision making process during the friendship-grouping exercise and argues that a closeness-location model of friendship best represents friendship today.

Classifications of Friendship

Friendship is often thought to be one of the most significant types of interpersonal relationship for individuals both developmentally and socially throughout the lifespan (Fehr
Establishing the boundaries surrounding friendship can be a difficult task, however, as friendships share a number of features and functions with other relationships, including romantic and kin relationships. As a result, definitions of friendship tend to be quite broad: friendship is described as involving attributes such as reciprocity, honesty, trust, support, respect, enjoyment and intimacy (Fehr 1996). Researchers note, however, that although these attributes are typical of friendship, they are not necessary present in all friendships (Fehr 1996).

Given the ambiguity surrounding the friend relationship, it is common for friendship researchers to draw on a classification approach to friendship in order to examine the importance and significance of friendship for different people. For example, Johnson et al. (2003) used a closeness-classification method to examine how close participants felt toward three different types of friend. Closeness was defined as the amount of self-disclosure in the friendship dyad, and the inter-dependence, shared interests, support and explicit expression of closeness between the parties involved. In their study, the authors asked participants to name three friends who fit into the following categories: ‘person who is presently your best friend’; ‘person who is currently a close friend but who is not your best friend’; and ‘person who is currently a friend but who is not a close friend’. The authors referred to these categories as best friend, close friend, and casual friend respectively (Johnson et al. 2003). These researchers later used the same closeness-classification method to examine whether the level of closeness participants felt toward different friends differed according to geographical distance between friends (Becker et al. 2009).

Although researchers such as Hruschka (2006) argue that it is important for social researchers to use pre-defined ‘friend’-based terms to clarify participants’ interpretations of the terms, these researcher-driven friendship descriptions are problematic. Firstly, they do not take into
account the personal or cultural differences that often define friendship. Secondly, given the dynamic and personal nature of friendship, such methods can be problematic as the idea of what constitutes a friend, a close friend and a best friend are constantly changing (Pahl 2000). Therefore, in this study I adopt a bottom-up approach to examine people’s everyday conceptualisations of friendship. By asking participants to name and create their own friendship groups rather than providing them with a classification or closeness framework, this study will address the gaps in the literature by creating a participant-driven model of friendship.

Method

Participants

Given the exploratory nature of this research, the selective criteria for both focus group and interview participants were broad in scope. Participants were eligible to participate in the study if they: were aged 18 years or over, had a current Facebook account, and were currently based in Melbourne, Australia. Participants were recruited in four ways: the snowball method; an electronic university newsletter; a postgraduate online noticeboard; and a limited number of university subject websites.

Over 80 individuals expressed interest in taking part in the focus groups. Although the sample was drawn purposively to include diversity of age and gender, the participants were allocated into groups according to their availability rather than according to identifying information. All focus group participants were aged between 19 and 50 years of age and were university-educated or currently undertaking tertiary study. A total of five focus groups were conducted comprising a total of 28 participants. The sample comprised 11 males (39%) and 17 females (61%) ranging from 19 to 50 years of age with a mean age of 27 (SD=7.75).
**Materials and Procedure**

Prior to the focus groups, participants were asked to print a copy of their list of Facebook Friends to assist in the sorting exercise. Participants were provided with instructions on how to do this. Considering that friendship on Facebook is often “a modelling of one aspect of participants’ social worlds” (boyd 2006: 18), using a pre-generated list of the participants’ Facebook Friends list was deemed an appropriate method to capture the participants’ friendships and social networks. During the friendship-sorting activity, participants were instructed to cut out each of the names on the list and separate these people into different friendship groups, giving each group its own name. Other than asking participants to think carefully about the decisions behind their grouping choices, no further parameters were given to participants. At no time during the exercise were participants provided a definition of ‘friend’ or ‘friendship’. Rather, participants were instructed to group them in a way that they felt reflected their friendships.

**Results and discussion**

Participants commented that the use of a pre-generated list of friends and acquaintances (i.e. their Facebook Friends list) stimulated recall, positively impacting their friendship grouping results. For example, one participant noted that if they were to complete the exercise without their Facebook Friends list there was “heaps of people who [she] wouldn’t even remember” (Anne 24, FG2); and another noted that they “wouldn’t have thought about so many people which are on this Facebook list ’cause they’re not present in my mind all the time” (Caroline 22, FG5). Participants indicated that in some cases, the accidental exclusion of friends due to poor recall would have resulted in the omission of some friendship groups entirely (e.g. Tania 35, FG5).
On average, participants created a total of 9 friendship groups, ranging in number from 5 to 16 groups. Groups ranged in size from single-member groups to groups comprising over 100 individuals. Participants typically grouped one group of friends according to closeness (the ‘close friends’ group) and categorised their remaining friends according to their social context (i.e. how they knew them). In order of prevalence, the groups other than ‘close friends’ reflected 10 broad categories: (1) family, consisting of immediate and extended family members and family friends; (2) work, including colleagues both present and past; (3) school friends, including both primary school and high school, (4) random, a group consisting, for example, of people the participants met throughout their life, fake names made up for Facebook gaming, or unknown people whom they couldn’t remember; (5) university friends; (6) club, group or team, such as friends met through sport, music or community groups; (7) overseas, people met through travelling, exchange programs etc.; (8) friends of friends, including friends of their partner, friends, or family; (9) hometown or place of birth friends; and (10) networking. Of the 28 focus group participants, 25 participants used at least three of the aforementioned categories (including both the close friends group and the ten location-based categorisations) to sort their friends into groups.

Although the participants generally described their friendships as falling into the 11 broad categories described, for the majority of the participants the boundaries between these groups blurred and it was difficult for them to group their friends. This difficulty appeared to be attributed to the participants’ need to acknowledge their close or important friends. Moreover, comments made by the participants during the activity suggested that they felt they were doing some of their friends a disservice if they simply were grouped according to where they met. The participants’ method of drawing friendship distinctions appeared to be influenced by their desire to claim the significance of specific friendships, which, for most of them, was
marked by closeness. For example, when reflecting on their grouping decisions, participants shared notions of emotional closeness:

“...and then I have a special group of the special special people that transcend the other groups and transcend all the countries” (Jessica 25, FG2);

“...they’re in a different category because I’m much closer to them than I am to the other ones...because I felt like there’s a certain bunch of people that I see a lot of...who deserve to have their own category created for them, so I duplicated a few names” (David 43, FG1).

While some participants such as David duplicated names to sort his friends into groups, another participant, Jason (24, FG1), created a group called ‘once close friends’ as he felt it was “more appropriate to put [these people] in the more intimate group”. These were just two of the methods used by participants to navigate notions of closeness in their various friendships.

![Figure 1. Closeness-location model of friendship](image)

The participants’ broad categories of friendship together with the emphasis they placed on closeness indicated the existence of three main social typologies: location-specific friends, location-specific close friends, and close friends (see Figure 1). Rather than viewing these
typologies as separate groups, these typologies are better described as occupying a space across a continuum of friendship. Location-specific friends refer to people that are known to the individual via the place through which they met. Examples of this typology include work friends or school friends. As feelings of closeness between the individual and these people, these people move to the location-specific close friends groups. Location-specific close friends are people whom the individual considers a close friend, yet whom are still partly conceptualised as a friend specific to where they met. In this typology, for example, a university friend begins to be considered as a close university friend. The last transition occurs when these friends supersede their location and the individual no longer deems their location as an adequate friendship identifier. These people are then classified as close friends irrespective of where they first met.

Limitations
Although this activity was able to capture a portion of the participants’ social networks, it must be acknowledged that a user’s Facebook Friends list is not a complete, accurate representation or record of their social network. As stated by boyd in the quote I referred to earlier, friendship on Facebook is often “a modelling of one aspect of participants’ social worlds” (boyd 2006: 18; emphasis added). There are several broad reasons for the inability of the Facebook Friends list to capture the entirety of one’s social network. First and foremost, not everyone has Facebook. This means that some of a user’s core connections (including friends, family etc.) may be missing from their Facebook Friends list. Second, an individual’s entire social network consists of both strong ties and weak ties (e.g. Garton, Haythornthwaite and Wellman 1997). Research suggests that Friending practices on Facebook can be highly strategic in order to establish control over one’s potential, diverse audience. For example, Ellison et al. (2011) show how some Facebook users Friend strangers, others Friend people with whom they share an offline connection, while some only Friend their close friends (see
also Robards 2010; Tufekci 2008). Lastly and more broadly, an individual’s social network is large, dynamic and ever changing and accurately capturing these networks is challenging irrespective of Facebook (Spencer and Pahl 2006). Despite these limitations, however, using an individual’s Facebook Friends list in such a way does allow for an exploration of what constitutes friendship for a group of Facebook users and provides insights into how Facebook users understand their friendships.

Furthermore, the research participants were university educated men and women based in Melbourne, Australia. It is possible that Facebook users with different educational backgrounds or users located in other regions of Australia or other nations would vary in terms of their use of the site. Additionally, as friendship is personally, socially, and culturally constructed, it is likely that participants from other regions of Australia or from other countries (particularly non-Western countries) would also differ in their conceptions of friendship. There were, however, a number of participants who had only recently moved or travelled to Australia involved in this research: hence, there was some demographic diversity. Although the research is limited by these boundaries, part of the value of this research stems from its specificity in the Australian context given the penchant for Facebook research/ers to focus on American college students.

**Conclusion**

Following the tendency for social researchers to provide a pre-established framework to participants in studies of friendship and social network composition, the purpose of this study was to examine the friendship and social grouping patterns of a group of 28 Facebook users. The results emerging from the friendship exercise do not support a closeness-based model of friendship. Instead, they support a closeness-location model of friendship involving one group of friends based on the level of closeness and the remainder based on their location.
The participants’ grouping decisions did not appear to be arbitrary: rather than grouping their friends according to a closeness-location model of friendship because of ease, the participants’ grouping decisions were purposeful and strategic. Many of the participants seemed to group their friends in such a way as to assign meaning to their friendships. Many of the participants, as typified in the extracts of Jessica and David, grouped their friends in such a way as to acknowledge the closeness inherent in some of their friendships as they felt they were doing these friends a disservice if they were simply grouped according to their location. The participants’ method of drawing friendship distinctions appeared to be influenced by their desire to claim the significance of specific friendships as marked by closeness.

The results from this study indicate that friendship conceptualisations are reliant on a process of individual negotiation and strategic deliberation. Thus, friendship researchers should be cautious in applying pre-established frameworks to the study of friendship as these may be unable capture the nuances and intricacies of the friend relationship. Friendship is a significant relationship throughout the lifespan and research suggests that friendship is undergoing a shift thanks to social media like Facebook. In their attempts to examine contemporary friendship and social networks at large, researchers should endeavour to use alternative methods that are able to uncover the subtleties of friendship.

References


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