

Friending: The Changing Definition of Friendship in the Social Media Era

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In just two months, I boosted my LinkedIn connections from 300 to almost 500. I was proud of winning the numbers game. However, recently when I was trying to request an informational interview via LinkedIn, I was depressed that less than 5% actually responded to me. *I think* I know most of them, but I actually don't. Or they don't think so. Maybe this is social media's fault. It creates the illusion of intimacy and closeness that doesn't actually exist. Maybe I should blame myself. I rushed to think of my social media connections as true friends that I could rely on.

I forgot the rules of friendship. Social media is a new platform for communication that expands and accelerates the way we connect and engage people, but the old rules of thumb for building relationships are still there. To understand what makes a friend a "friend" in social media, we'd better step back and think about the chemistry needed in true friendship (sans social media): To make a true friend, we first need to get to know the person well, such that we understand what she likes and dislikes, what experiences have made her who she is today, and what her values are in life. Yet knowing someone does not guarantee a lasting friendship. For example, some people know their boss pretty well, yet they may not define their boss as a friend. In addition to knowing each other well, building friendships takes time; it's necessary for both sides to have some investment in the relationship.

Now let's get back to the world of social media and reconsider the process of making friends. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and many other social media platforms have provided tons of personal information—both ongoing and historical—about people we want to know. For example, we can gain insights into someone's social life and interests through Facebook, get up-to-the-minute status updates from Twitter, and read someone's full professional experience on LinkedIn. A five-minute search on a social media platform can make us feel that

we are old friends of the person we want to make friends with. But this is only one side of the story since the person we are searching into may not feel the same way as we do. This is often the case. A one-way connection without reciprocal engagement can never be thought of as a *friendship*, even on social media.

When acquaintances share their joys, complaints or even private information on social media, does it mean that they deem all of these online connections as real friends? Probably not. But why share their private information then? My argument is that they sacrifice their *privacy* in exchange for *intimacy*. Some people may want to make more friends, attract more attention, or even enhance self-esteem with the inflated intimacy they receive from friends, acquaintances and mere strangers on social media. These shared social media updates make people feel close, but it doesn't always mean they are close.

It's not social media's fault that it helps us develop a wide net of connections, yet still leaves us wanting more. We've created the myth of building strong relationships via social media. It's possible to build friendship online, but more often we need to integrate online engagement with offline interaction. Overall, social media has changed ways people interact with each other, but it has not affected the rooted norms and socialization process of making friends either online or offline. And it's time to adjust our expectations for building relationships in this new media space.