

- How can I, as a designer, create an online environment where people can create valuable internet relations?

WHAT IS FRIENDSHIP?

About this research

Because friendship is not a working field of my own, I decided to keep this research on a human level and not dig too deep. Therefore I got the very readable book *Just Friends*, by the American sociologist and writer *Lillian B. Rubin* as a base. From there on, I constructed an anonymous survey which was distributed to students from 18 to 30 of whom 32 responded with some very useful answers. Nine of them agreed to participate in a more in depth questionnaire. Various articles, conversations and discussions, both on and offline is what gave me the following answers. These will provide me with a basis for part two and three of my research.

In addition to friends, you don't pick your family, yet, there are all kinds of implied relations. A father, a mother, a brother, an uncle or an aunt – they all perform a certain role within the family. Both you and the outside world know roughly what responsibilities come with these titles. In friendship, these kind of roles seem not to exist. It was pointed out to me that we do make a difference between acquaintances, friends and best friends.¹ But unlike family these are still not as descriptive.

In the book *Just Friends* family seems to be "(...) so deep and firm, that it is the most occurring metaphor to describe intimacy."² The weird thing is that you don't pick your family, yet, there is this bond just because there is a blood relation. So, where lies this connection with friends? What is a friend and where do you meet them?

Research on friendships means coming across a lot of ambiguous and contradicting aspects part of this subject. There are so many ways to become friends and so many reasons to be friends that it is hard get to one fitting description for all. It is important to realize is that friendships can be very different for every person and occur in very different ways.

Using the next couple of questions I will try to determine some main aspects and 'rules' in these valuable relations.

HOW DO DIFFERENT PEOPLE DESCRIBE FRIENDSHIP AND WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT IN IT?

Friendship can not come from just one direction, it goes both ways. Many describe it as "being there for each other". They need to know what to expect from the other person and be able to trust them. This trust is what enables them to empty their mind about not only the good things but, maybe more importantly, also the bad times. "Someone I can call at 3am when necessary." ³

Weirdly enough this feeling is more often one sided than mutual. *Lillian B. Rubin* found that 64% of the people who were described as "best friend" did not even name the person who had called them a friend at all. In only 14% of the cases the feeling was actually mutual. ⁴

Friends are described as people that can have serious and meaningful conversations and discussions with each other: Talk about anything and everything. People with whom they can both laugh and cry their heart out, with whom they can be themselves.

"You complete me" can be another reason to be friends. They can fill holes, like "the brother I never had", or be able to be a big help in a particular aspect of life the other person lacks the skills or courage for.

But most people name having the same interest and same view of life as one of the major reasons they are friends. This view of life is often the result of growing up in the same time and thus being around the same age. For others it is the kind of environment they either grow up in or want to be in.

Next to these deep meaningful values of a relationship more than two thirds point out that "having fun together" is another very important reasons to be friends.

Just about all of the above would take quite some time to find out about each other. How does that work? Where did they meet and when do they realize they were friends?

HOW DO YOU MEET FRIENDS?

We meet people every day, there is very few whom we speak to, and even less that stick around. So why do some become friends and others silently pass by? About 65% of the people who filled out my survey tell me that many of their friends are the result of spending time together at either school or work.⁵ Which means they were thrown into the situation of interacting with each other and for quite some time as well. Of course they could not have interacted with these exact people, but there is a basis of (in the first place) being stuck with each other.

At my girlfriend's school they change the class formation every 10 weeks. That means having to interact with new people every time, yet, when all the classes are together (at a lecture for example) just about every group that forms is based on people who were together in the very first class formation. They went through their first school impression with each other and shared everything new. Those were the people they were stuck with the moment they arrived at this big scary new institute.

A similar thing happens when a plane is late, a train crashes or the fire alarm in a hotel goes off. All these people who never spoke with each other are now forced into a new unfamiliar communal situation where they feel connected.

So, would it work to just tell two people they are now friends? According to *Robert Brain* in the book *Friends and lovers* the Bangwa of Cameroon have a similar arrangement to the arranged marriage, where a "best friend" is picked out by the parents. Those friends keep certain responsibilities towards one another.⁶ It is doubtful yet interesting whether or not this would work in a modern western society.

Hobbies and interests were mentioned by 62% as something that connects them with their friends. Interests of course being quite a wide expression for most things they enjoy in their life's and the ways they spend their time. This way they already have this communal situation, be it at different times and not with each other.

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There is "something" to talk about, something similar. That is the first connection. Until the point where there is more in common between two people, the connection gets stronger and the potential of becoming friends grows.

And then there is this seemingly magical connection when asked any further to what exactly it is why friends are their friends. "It just felt right", "chemistry", this one little thing that seems to make all the difference between acquaintance and a friend, a friend, or best friend.⁷

HOW DO YOU BECOME FRIENDS OVER THE INTERNET AND IS IT ANY DIFFERENT?

The internet seems to have some difficulties in the friends department. First of all there is the argument of internet friends not being real friends. I don't want to get into that too much, but by simple reading all of the above, physically meeting (although often the case) doesn't seem that important. Only 7% puts it down as a must to be able to call someone a friend, where 24% tells me they know people over the internet they would call friends, and in total even 40% have met new people over the internet.⁸

Everywhere on the internet exist communities, groups of people with similar interest. Designers, car enthusiast, Apple fans, football supporters, first time mothers: all of them will share stories and gain some sort of support from the group. They will all have at least one similar interest or experience, the reason they came to that particular community, the very basis of a friendship.

A similar thing happens in online games. Here people all have the same goal, winning. During a game there is almost always a way to communicate which will be used to play the game better, but at times also for social activities. Messages, either spoken or text, will go back and forth and connections will be made. Talking about daily activities, or the simple question of "What is your real name?" (because nicknames are often used) can be the start of a friendship.

On Social Network Sites this seems to be a bit more difficult, but more about that later. Replying to a photo of a friend of a friend (of a friend), or responding to messages to certain topics in a section of the site could still be an opener to finding out more about that other person and making a connection.

For all of the above examples goes that the amount of information available of someone is completely up to them. More personal information will mostly only be released in one-on-one conversations through personal messages, emails or chat. Pictures, names, identities, everything can be either left out or changed (though you would have to be quite a good actor to keep that up). How well you will get to know that other person is up to them and visa versa.

This is where the big difference with making friends in real life is. Some find it easier to open up to someone on the internet, because they don't know any of the same people. A secret feels safe. Others find it hard to open up because they have no affiliation with whom they are talking. And because it is much easier to hide or leave something out, the person who they are talking to will not know it, can not respond to it and another possible connection is lost.

HOW WELL DO CURRENT SOCIAL NETWORK SITES HELP YOU TO MEET INTERESTING PEOPLE TO BASE VALUABLE RELATIONSHIPS ON?

There are lots of different types of Social Network Sites. Some specialize on a certain topic, working field or country. Others (mostly better known) are open for everyone to join. That means there is no implied communal experience or interest. Partially these websites are used to stay in contact with people you already know, so there is the option to search for names. But do these websites provide any of the information and ways friendships naturally occur as described in the previous questions.

About this research

To find out what has already been done I took the list of Social Network Sites *Wikipedia* provides me with and signed up on every general websites to see what options I have to get to know someone who I might find interesting.¹ Based on the knowledge gained from the previous part of my research I looked at the available information in profiles and while searching. I also looked at different ways that naturally get me started at making friends, without actively searching for them.

I did a similar thing with a small list of Dutch dating websites to see what solutions they have come up with for connecting people. These sites are aimed at bringing new people together, so it should be interesting what methods they use.

HOW CAN I FIND SOMEONE?

By finding someone in this case I mean the result of actively searching. Typing and selecting the options the search functions a website provides. Because a search is limited to whatever is stored in the database and accessible by the search option this is a very important feature.

The majority of sites provide me with the option to search for names, but I am not searching for names because I don't know who I'm looking for yet. Another option often available is to search for people in a certain country which isn't necessarily of any use. Being friends over the internet eliminates the reason for anyone to be near to one another.

Having at least one, but preferably more, things in common is a good start, but only 2 out of 26 provide me with this option. Another two websites give me the option to type in words to search for. Although this is a nice start, the problem here is that when I type in "sporty", and someone has typed in their profile he or she does tennis and rock climbing I won't find that person even though in theory fits my description.

Other websites provide me with a huge list of options such as age, which can be useful because that increases the chances of having a connection. But right next to that are often height, body type, hair and eye colour, drinking or not, smoking or not and education, which are all fairly irrelevant when meeting someone new over the internet. Then the results from this search are almost always displayed as a list of photos with names. This doesn't help in any way and turns the search results in to a meat market.²

HOW CAN I RUN INTO SOMEONE?

Other than searching for someone that seems interesting websites can already suggest people based on a profile. I looked at how different websites implement this, if they even attempted to. What is especially interesting in this are that the dating sites and websites seem to offer dating like services.

Leaving out the dating websites out for now, more than half the sites offers some way to get in contact with someone without having to actively search for them. In some of these cases friends of friends are suggested. Even though this is not more than an invitation to go have a look at their profile, it is a start. I have things in common with my friends, so I might have something in common with theirs.

Something else that is often used is showing the people who are online, who's birthday it is or who has been on your profile. This way you get to see the more active users on the website, which does not necessarily mean you have something in common, but it can be a reason to see if you have. Being on the website can be the communal experience.

"People you might like" is another way often used to show other users. But I can't help but wonder what those suggestions are based on. Every time I have a look at the profile of a suggested person, I see little to no similarities. Only two website (*Youniverse* and *Parship*) show me the results of the comparison. Although these results are not necessarily a direct reason to get in contact with someone, it could give me a reason to ask something on a specific topic.

Parship is one of the dating sites I looked into. This website asks me to complete the so called "Parship test" where they ask 75 questions (which took me about half an hour to fill out!) on what I like, how I would react in certain situations and so on, to determine what kind of person I am.³ They will then suggest people who match up the best. On a profile is also a chart where I can compare all the aspects of my personality.

Some sites are doing similar things where I can (but don't have to) fill out some questions and can then compare the answers to someone else's. *Youniverse* provides me with quizzes where the answers are pictures. At the end it tells me what type of person I am, show me other users and how I compare to them.

Last but not least, a few websites provided me with some sort of dating game, where I can vote for who I like while flicking through a bunch of photos sometimes with, but more often without, a description of that person. Which is yet another meat market concept that doesn't rely on any of important friendship qualities.

WHAT INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE OF SOMEONE?

My general impression of profiles is: "Now I still don't know anything". Basically there are three types of profiles used throughout the websites. The first one is asking a new member as much questions as possible. This way a user doesn't have to think about what he or she should write about or what to say. The other type sometimes used is simply an "about me" box where a user can tell and write whatever they like. The third option is a mix between those two.

All have their pros and cons. Filling out a long list of questions can be daunting which can prevent people from even bothering to fill them out. They may also feel there are questions missing or write things down differently than they would have done if they wrote something about themselves. A good thing about this method is that it makes it easier to compare answers and determine what kind of person someone is.

Leaving a big blank space for someone to write whatever they like gives a person the opportunity to bring forward what is most important to them and leave out what they'd rather not talk about. This can work really well for people who know what they want to tell about themselves, but for others who don't it can remain a big empty space. From the perspective of finding similar people, this method makes it harder to compare people.

Maybe the most annoying thing in profiles are closed profiles. This is another meat market concept when it comes to meeting new people; There is nothing to base interest on, other than a pretty picture.

WHAT ARE THE BEST EXAMPLES?

Some of the sites have features that stand out, most of them (luckily) in a good way. To get some perspective on what works, let's have a look at what currently seems to work very well.

The Parship test

Although very annoying to fill out and filled with very awkward questions, it does provide both the computer program as well as the user with some useful information, personal characteristics and interests to base a connection on. The test makes a profile very personal and may also tell me something about myself that I never realized.

Youniverse

Youniverse is a website that provides a totally different way of filling out questions. When asking a question, it gives me the choice of 12 pictures, always leaving the exact answer in the unknown yet providing both the test and the profile with something more interesting than text. They create a visual DNA for me which can easily be compared to others.

MyYearBook Match

Although very much a meat market concept as well it provides the option to show mutual interest before becoming friends or sending a message. Match lets me click through profiles, mainly based on a picture, but also with a small personal tag line. If I click the "interested" button this person will be send an email and then have the choice to guess who of twelve users said he or she was interested. If he or she succeeds there is made a Match.

Bolt

They show a lot of the latest 'this and thats' on the first page. New photos, members, blog posts, videos, forum posts and so on. It feels a bit like a mess, but because there will be so many different topics, there will almost always be something you want to read or see. And since everything is posted by a person, that is a very first and quite possibly very useful first connection.

NOTES

What is friendship?

1. This was specifically asked in the emails. "In sommige niet westerse culturen zijn meerdere woorden voor 'vriend' om deze in verschillende stadia uit te drukken. Je kunt dus goed verschil zien tussen bijvoorbeeld 'vrienden die iemand net heeft ontmoet', en 'vrienden die iemand als z'n hele leven heeft'. Denk je dat dit een verrijking van de taal zou zijn? En denk je dat dit beter zou zijn voor vriendschappen (bijvoorbeeld omdat iemand weet waar die staat)?" often used argument not to use any more specific words then we currently use is that it might hurt someones feelings. Friends might not feel the same way about it (which often turns out to be the case, note 4).
2. Vriendschap, 1985, 24. "She's like family" is the kind of sentence that is referd to here.
3. The bond of "being there for each other" is described in various ways in my Survey. "someone who is always there for you", "someone who is always there for you" and more.
4. Vriendshap, 1985, 15. What is important to keep in mind is that the research of Rubin is done in a little different demographic, people between 25 and 55. This means the chances of having moved away is a lot bigger then the demographic I researched.
5. The first three questions of my survey are all used as a source for this. Some name it as the reason they became friends, some name it as one of the biggest similarities.
6. In Western societies there is not much tradition around friendships. Brain researched the cultures of Cameroon where these traditions turned out to exist.

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7. Answering the question why exactly someone is a friend often turns to this “feeling”. In both the survey as well as the emails people often turn to chemistry or just that they don’t know.

8. Survey results.

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1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites 10, February 2010.

2. “Meat market” is the term I will use more often for ideas and concepts that are very typical for guys who want to meet girls purely based on a physical attraction. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=meat+market>

3. The “Parship test” is a scientifically based test which will tell you more about who and how you are. <http://www.dating-wijzer.nl/parship.html>

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ANNEXES

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