

The Meaning of Friendship

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With technology taking precedence over reality, people in today's society are losing sight of the true meaning of friendship. Social networks, such as MySpace and Facebook, are popping up all over the Internet, allowing for a unique form of communication. "Friending" others on these sites has become a popular form of entertainment, but when people add someone they do not know, it may be going too far. Due to the ability to manipulate identities, true friendships cannot be formed on these networks, but existing friendships can grow stronger. The rise in popularity of social networks as a way to meet people is detracting from the true meaning of the word "friend."

The Webster's Dictionary definition of a friend is "one attached to another by affection or esteem." If a person considers someone else to be a friend, then they need to actually know each other. Friendship has to do with identity, and the best way to make friends is to meet in the real world in order to determine who they are. This allows people to find out what others are really like and what they truly have in common. It is okay for people to meet in reality and then request each other as friends on social networks, but it should never be the other way around. Friends need to have a sense of loyalty and trust, which cannot be formed online. "Real friendship involves accepting others' imperfections" (Doup), but it is too easy to appear perfect on social networks. True friends also know more personal facts that may not appear in a person's profile (Stuart). Friends are always there for people when they need them, and can be told more personal

information than an acquaintance. It takes time, not just a click of a button, to really get to know a person.

Friendships that are strictly online are not true friendships. According to one article, “With Internet pals you’re sharing words —sympathy, encouragement or understanding—but not shar[ing] experiences” (Doup). Social networks also allow people to add others that they may not know. Friendships formed in this manner can be dangerous because the Internet lets people post whatever they choose, whether it be fact or fiction. This means that people cannot truly get to know each other just by talking online. Even though MySpace and Facebook post warnings about adding unknown people, many choose to ignore the message in order to meet new people or even just to find more friends. The number of friends people have on their profiles has become a new way of determining social status. Many teenagers can agree with journalist Joel Stein when he says, “I can’t stop running up my tally of MySpace friends or I’ll look like a loser.” The idea is that the more friends a person has, the “cooler” that person is. The reality of the situation is that people who have hundreds or more friends do not actually know all of those people or have real friendships with them. I have been able to prevent receiving friend requests from people I do not know on MySpace with the privacy feature that requires my last name or e-mail address. Unfortunately, Facebook does not have this option, so I have received quite a few requests while using that site. Whether people are adding others in order to have the most friends, or just to meet new people, online friendships are simply not real.

Furthermore, online friendship is the root of many problems in today’s society. On social networks, like MySpace, users can assume false identities in the form of screen names. This can cause a trust issue. Many people, especially teenagers, are too trusting when it comes to talking to people online. People may think they are getting to know new friends, but these “friends” may

not be who they say they are. If caution is not used, this type of situation could lead to bullying or worse. One teenager believed she was talking to her new friend “Josh,” who was actually a friend’s mother, when he suddenly turned on her, leading her to commit suicide (Hewitt). People need to make sure they actually know the person they are talking to. Teenagers need to be especially careful because “[t]hey don’t understand it until they become a victim” (Brubaker). In order to prevent bad situations online, people should just use their common sense and ignore friend requests from unfamiliar people. Taking advantage of the many privacy settings will also help, but these settings will only work if the user permits (Brubaker). The only surefire way to keep out of dangerous situations on social networks is not to have a profile in the first place. Despite the term “friend” used on networking sites, when people meet others online, they are not forming true friendships.

Social networks should be a place to build upon existing friendships, not to make new ones. Sites like MySpace or Facebook offer a new way for existing friends to communicate and reconnect (Stein). Unlike online friends, real friends should already know what is true about someone, eliminating the trust issue. Social networks should be a place for real friends to connect and share thoughts and ideas only with people they know and trust. Many people today are busy, so social networks are an easy way to keep up with what is going on in a friend’s life in between talks in real life. I only add people that I know, making my social network experience more like glorified e-mail rather than a place to meet people. I have moved back and forth from Michigan to Louisiana several times, so Facebook has been a convenient way to keep up with friends that I do not get to see as often as I would like. Networking sites allow people to keep in touch online when they cannot talk face to face (Doup). Talking online is not as good as talking

to a friend in person, but sometimes it is just the easiest option, especially with faraway friends. But again, only existing friendships can truly benefit from social networks.

The meaning of friendship is changing due to the popularity of social networks. True friendships are formed in person, not online. Social networks are considered by many to be a fun way to meet people, but meeting people online is not really getting to know them. The Internet allows people to post what they choose, whether it is true or not. This can lead to a variety of dangerous situations. Despite the negative aspects, if used in the right way, social networks can allow existing friendships to grow through a unique form of communication. If people could be smart about what they post online and follow the rules, then the positive aspects of these sites would be more apparent to the world. Although new definitions of the word “friend” are created within the world of technology, people need to consider the true meaning of friendship.

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Ms. Acosta's Comments: Samantha did a great job of finding current research on a contemporary issue. Her effective use of that outside information provides an even-handed examination of the virtual world.