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Friends, Friendsters, and MySpace Top 8: Writing Community Into Being on Social Network Sites

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Meribeth looked at me with a puzzled expression, "*she's not my friend - she's just my Friendster.*" It was the summer of 2003 and Friendster was just emerging as the first large-scale social network site. Urban dwelling twenty and thirty somethings were flocking to the site to model their social networks and meet new people. Once on the site, users were encouraged to mark other users as 'Friends.' Friendster expected that these users would list their *actual* friends but this was not the norm that took hold among early adopters. The types of relations people

included varied immensely as did the motivations for including certain people but not others. In trying to articulate Friendship, participants were forced to navigate the nuances of what it meant to publicly display their connections to others (Donath and boyd, 2004).

Social network sites like Friendster and MySpace are constructed in a way that requires people to indicate relationships or 'friendships' with other participants. A prevalent assumption by many observers is that the articulation of Friendship is equivalent to friendship (Kornblum, 2006). In other words, if people say that they are Friends on these sites, they must be friends in other contexts as well.¹

This paper challenges that assumption. While some participants believe that people should only indicate meaningful relationships, it is primarily non-participants who perpetuate the expectation that Friending is the same as listing one's closest buddies. Failing to understand the culture of Friending that has emerged in social network sites contributes to the fear of the media and concerned parents over how they envision participants to be socializing.

¹ Many terms used in social network sites are identical to terms in everyday speech, although their meanings may differ. To help the reader differentiate which sense I'm intending when I use a particular term, I capitalize the social network terms. For example, Friends refers to the feature on Friendster/MySpace while friends refers to social relations between two people.

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By examining what different participants groups do on social network sites, this paper investigates what Friendship means and how Friendship affects the culture of the sites. I will argue that Friendship helps people write community into being in social network sites. Through these imagined egocentric communities, participants are able to express who they are and locate themselves culturally. In turn, this provides individuals with a contextual frame through which they can properly socialize with other participants. Friending is deeply affected by both social processes and technological affordances. I will argue that the established Friending norms evolved out of a need to resolve the social tensions that emerged due to technological limitations. At the same time, I will argue that Friending supports pre-existing social norms yet because the architecture of social network sites is fundamentally different than the architecture of unmediated social spaces, these sites introduce an environment that is quite unlike that with which we are accustomed. Persistence, searchability, replicability, and invisible audiences are all properties that participants must negotiate when on social network sites.

While this paper will address social network sites and Friendship broadly, two case studies – Friendster and MySpace – will dominate the discussion. I will draw on ethnographic data that I collected between 2003 and 2006. The first half of my study focused primarily on Friendster while I have primarily focused on MySpace since late 2004. My data includes interviews, participant observation, blog commentary, survey responses, focus groups, mailing list discussions, bulletin posts, and profile material.² The vast majority of my subjects and those that I observed are 14-30; my study of minors only began when I started examining MySpace. While both Friendster and MySpace have grown to attract participants from around the world, their early adopters were primarily American. I have focused solely on American participants' practices on social network sites and the context of this paper is explicitly American.

The scope of this paper is intentionally narrow; I am only addressing one particular practice on social network sites: Friending. To get a better sense of what else takes places on these sites, see (boyd 2004), (Donath and boyd, 2004), (boyd and Heer, 2006), (boyd, 2006b), and (boyd, in press). The history of these sites and their relationship with their users is complicated and may be of interest to some readers. It is also important to note that while I am addressing these sites side-by-side, I am not going to address the political and social factors that resulted in a decline of use by Friendster's early adopters during which MySpace exploded. To better understand this, see (boyd 2006a).

The Meaning of Friendship

² All of the Friendster interview data was collected independently of any university or corporation. Focus groups and surveys were all conducted while I was an employee of Tribe.net. Additional interviews on social network sites broadly were conducted while I was an intern at Google. All interviews with youth subjects and most interviews concerning MySpace took place while I was a student at Berkeley (IRB #2005-12-48).

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What constitutes a friend? In everyday vernacular, a friend is a relationship that involves some degree of mutual love or admiration. Some people exclude sexual partners and family members from this category while others talk about how such an individual is also a friend in order to indicate a degree of trust. For sociologists, friendship is an informal category without clear boundaries (like 'co-workers') or mutual responsibilities (like 'family'). Being 'just friends' indicates "voluntary relations, the content and future of the bond being always at the discretion of each party" (Fischer, 1982, p. 114). In order to make claims about friendship, social network analysts have relied on people self-reporting their friends, articulating the strength of their ties to others, or demarcating friendship based on what levels of support one is willing to offer another. These approaches have their strengths and weaknesses and sociologists are aware that such terms are ambiguously, particularly cross-culturally (Degenne and Forsé, 1999, p. 32). Indeed, friendship itself is culturally dependent and people use the term differently in different cultural communities. Adams and Allan argue that friendship must be understood in a contextual frame because "the contexts within which friendships develop influence the forms which friendship take" (1999, p. 12). Furthermore, the term itself is interpreted differently in different cultures.

In discussing Friendship with both participant and non-participant Americans, it seems as though friendship indicates an exceptionally strong relationship with expectations for emotional and practical support. In other words, friends are expected to provide a shoulder to cry on, be a partner in crime, and guarantee to bail you out of jail. For many, the category of friend carries an aura of exclusivity and intimacy unlike the categories acquaintance or contact, which suggest familiarity but not closeness. Phrases like 'best friends' and 'bestest friends' appear in the vocabulary of (primarily female) American youth, suggesting that there are hierarchies even amongst intimates. Although there are general sentiments about the exclusive nature of friendship, the boundaries between friends and acquaintances are quite blurry and it is unlikely that there will ever be consensus on a formula for what demarcates a friend.

To complicate a discussion of friendship, there is a difference in how people perceive others and how they express their perception of others. For example, consider when Heather says, "*Meet my friend William...*" and then after William leaves, "*Gah, he's so annoying.*" Such a speech act indicates that Heather does not actually think highly of William but this is not something he can show when in William's presence. Thus, she uses the label 'friend' to *save face* (Goffman, 1967). By confiding in the listener, Heather is also indicating that she trusts the listener more than she trusts William. Such backstage commentary helps solidify the relationship between Heather and the listener. The listener is then expected to help Heather *maintain face*. Should the listener expose Heather's annoyance to William, this will indicate to William that he is more important than Heather to the listener. This is a form of *backstabbing* because it is a rupture of Heather's trust.

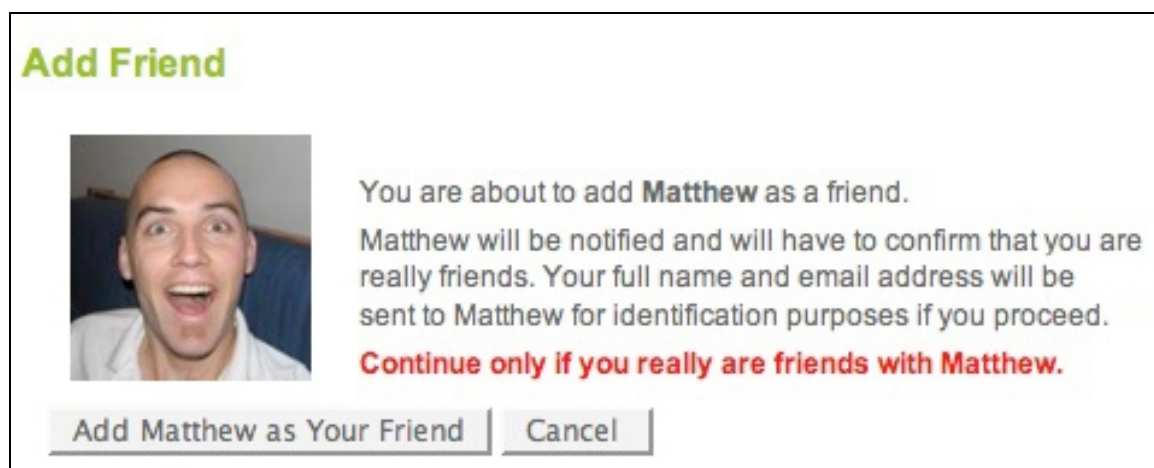
When 'my friend' is used to describe a person, it has performative qualities. It is meant to signal a certain kind of relationship, regardless of the speaker's actual feelings. It can

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be used to save face when concerning someone who is not particularly liked but it can also indicate a more powerful relationship than exists because that might make the speaker look important (e.g., "my friend Bill Clinton"). While the term can be used deceptively, this is not always the case. It can also be used to convey a meaningful relationship for the listener's attention. For example, the speaker may want to make certain that the listener understands key relationships so as to properly adjust whatever might be said about a third party (e.g., "His friend Alex..." so as to prevent, "Do you know Alex? He's such a slimeball."). The speaker may also be providing an opening for the listener to ask a favor, subtly hinting that there is a tie there that can be leveraged if only the listener will ask (e.g., "My friend Pat works at Google..." so as to prompt, "Oh, could you ask Pat..."). Because this expression has multiple meanings, it leaves room for a variety of different interpretations.

When people articulate their relations on social network sites, they are not simply projecting their internal model of tie strength. The public nature of these sites requires participants to perform their relationship to others, not unlike the examples given above. Based on an internal understanding of the audience, participants override the term 'Friend' to make room for a variety of different relationships so that they may properly *show face*. Their choice in how to do this is deeply influenced by the technological affordances of a given system and their perception of who might be looking.

The Making of Friendship



When people login to a social network site, they are required to craft a Profile. This Profile includes information about their demographics and tastes, a self-description, and often photos that provide a visual image. What differentiates social network sites³ from

³ These sites are often labeled 'social networking sites' by the media. While this phrase is problematic for numerous reasons, the primary problem is the broadness of such a phrase. The sites discussed in this paper are not all sites that allow people to meet new people, but solely those that allow people to list their relations and traverse the network through these connections.

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other computer-mediated communication sites is the feature that allows participants to articulate and publicly display their relations to others in the system, which, in turn, allows viewers to traverse the network. Once a user finds a Profile of a friend (or anyone else), they can 'add' them. This sends a message to the other user requesting Friendship. If the recipient approves the connection⁴, the relationship is visible through both users' list of Friends. The Friends list typically includes a list of photos or handles with links to that person's Profile. Thus, when users are surfing social network sites, they can hop from one Profile to another through a chain of Friendship. Beyond this general description, the details of how Friendship works are site-specific.

Connecting and Collecting

When Friendster launched, its founders expected users to list only their 'actual' friends; this was not the norm amongst early adopters. Their list of Friends on the site included fellow partygoers, people they knew (and people they thought they knew), old college mates that they hadn't talked to in years, people with entertaining Profiles, and anyone that they found interesting. Not everyone took the Friendship process seriously.



"It's become a game in my circle to get tons of friends and collect all the 'gateway' friends that are not individuals but rather represent TV shows or states of common interest. I personally think that is what makes Friendster unique." --John

John's reference to 'gateway Friends' concerns a specific technological affordance unique to Friendster. Because the company felt it would make the site more intimate, Friendster limits users from surfing to Profiles beyond four degrees (Friends of Friends of Friends of Friends). When people login, they can see how many Profiles are 'in their network' where the network is defined by the four degrees. For users seeking to meet new people, growing this number matters. For those who wanted it to be intimate, keeping the number smaller was more important. In either case, the number of people in one's network was perceived as directly related to the number of friends one had.

"I am happy with the number of friends I have. I can access over 26,000 profiles, which is enough for me!" --Abby

The number of Friends one has definitely affects the size of one's network but connecting to Collectors plays a much more significant role. Because these 'gateway friends' (a.k.a. social network hubs) have lots of Friends who are not connected to each other, they expand the network pretty rapidly. Thus, connecting to Collectors or connecting to people who connect to Collectors opens you up to a large network rather quickly.

⁴ Most social network sites require Friendship confirmation (undirected graphs) but others allow one-directional connections (directed graphs). Such sites allow users to list Friends but do not require reciprocity. Examples of this include: LiveJournal, Last.FM, and Flickr.

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While Collectors could be anyone interested in amassing many Friends, fake Profiles were developed to aid in this process. These Fakesters included characters, celebrities, objects, icons, institutions, and ideas. For example, Homer Simpson had a Profile alongside Jesus and Brown University. By connecting people with shared interests or affiliations, Fakesters supported networking between like-minded individuals. Because play and connecting were primary incentives for many Fakesters, they welcomed any and all Friends. Likewise, people who wanted access to more people connected to Fakesters. Fakesters helped centralize the network and two Fakesters -- Burning Man and Ali G -- reached mass popularity with over 10,000 Friends each before the website's creators put an end to their collecting and deleted both accounts. This began the deletion of all Fakesters in what was eventually termed the Fakester Genocide.⁵

While Friendster was irritated by fake Profiles, MySpace embraced this practice. One of MySpace's early strategies was to provide a place for everyone who was rejected from Friendster or who didn't want to be on a dating site.⁶ Bands who had been kicked off of Friendster were some of the earliest MySpace users. Over time, movie stars, politicians, porn divas, comedians, and other celebrities joined the fray. Often, the person behind these Profiles was not the celebrity but a manager. Corporations began creating Profiles for their products and brands. While Friendster eventually began allowing such fake Profiles for a fee, MySpace never charged people for their commercial uses.

People connect to Fakesters, celebrities, and commercial Profiles for a variety of reasons. Some are simply entertained by the Profiles themselves. Others feel as though these Profiles say something about who they are. Still others are focused on the connecting properties -- some wanted to use Fakesters to broaden their network reach while others are looking to meet like-minded souls. One girl explained that she linked to a band because "*I wanted to stare at [the lead singer's] face.*" MySpace offers some additional incentives. Connecting to a Profile allows users to see their bulletins, which companies and celebrities often use to provide 'exclusive' information. Some companies offer incentives to beFriend them, such as being entered into a drawing. Lastly, MySpace and X-Men collaborated to offer a desirable feature that was only accessible by becoming Friends with X-Men.

Fakesters, celebrities, and commercial Profiles are not the only groups engaged in collecting. While this practice is often acceptable for these groups, people think differently of 'real' people who operate as collectors. On both Friendster and MySpace, the term 'whore' is used to label these individual. As with all derogative identifiers, this offended some and rallied



⁵ For a more complete portrait of the Fakester dynamics, see (boyd, in press).

⁶ This strategy was explained to me during a personal interview with Tom Anderson, one of MySpace's founders, on 28 September 2006.

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others. On Friendster, some people objected to Collectors because of their effect on the network. The company was particularly irritated with how these Collectors made it difficult to search and slowed the network to a halt. Thus, they tried to eliminate Fakesters and restrict how many Friends one could have in the hopes that through features they could force Friends to only include friends.⁷

The practice of Collectors really raised the issue about the meaning of Friendship.

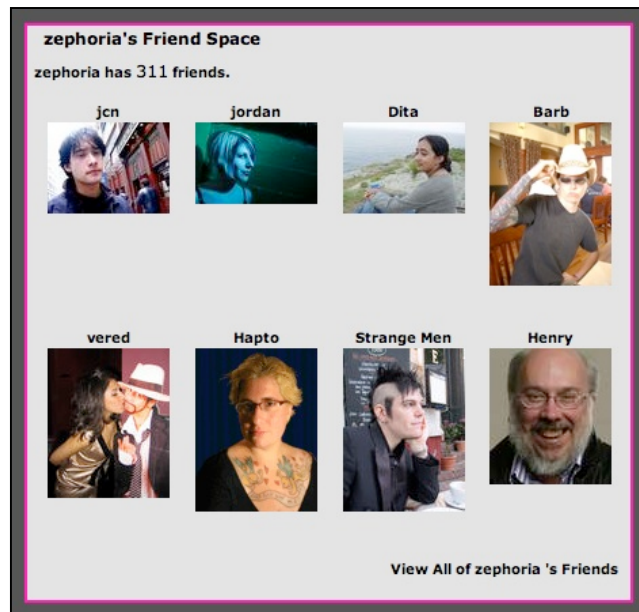
"When I see somebody with a large number of supposed friends, I suspect that they're using the term 'friend' to mean 'acquaintance,' or that their motives in getting Friendster-recorded friends are not really about the relationships for the their own sake." -- Bob

While Bob's frustration over the loss of distinction between friends and acquaintances echoes the primary confusion that many newcomers and non-participants feel, his second explanation more properly signals what is actually happening on the site. As people began using the site, they overloaded Friends to mean more than simply a representation of friendship.

To Friend or Not To Friend

A frantic professor stopped me in the hall to ask, "What do you do when your students invite you to be their friend on Facebook?" "Smile and say thank you," I replied, "because it's a sign that they respect you." Any teacher or professor knows that fraternizing with your students is ethically unacceptable because of the power dynamics involved; yet students regularly invite their professors and teachers to be Friends on social network sites. Is this friendship?

Just as the reasons for stating that someone is your friend are quite



⁷ Friendster originally limited users to 150 Friends. It is no accident that they chose 150, as this is the 'Dunbar number.' In his research on gossip and grooming, Robin Dunbar argues that there is a cognitive limit to the number of relations that one can maintain. People can only keep gossip with 150 people *at any given time* (Dunbar, 1998). By capping Friends at 150, Friendster either misunderstood Dunbar or did not realize that their users were actually connecting to friends from the past with whom they are not currently engaging.

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varied, the reasons for Friendship vary tremendously. For some participants, only the closest pals are listed while others include acquaintances. Some are willing to accept family members while others won't even include their spouse so that they can write bulletins to "*just my friends.*" Saying no to someone can be tricky so some prefer to accept Friendship with someone they barely know rather than going through the socially awkward process of rejecting them. Some will choose to list people they admire as Friends while others hope that Friending a celebrity will make them look cool.

Investigating Friendship in LiveJournal, Kate Raynes-Goldie and Fono (2005) found that there was tremendous inconsistency in why people Friend others. They primarily found that Friendship stood for: content, offline facilitator, online community, trust, courtesy, declaration, or nothing. When I asked participants about their practices on Friendster and MySpace, I found very similar incentives. The most common reasons for Friendship that I heard from users⁸ were:

- 1) Actual friends
- 2) Acquaintances, family members, colleagues
- 3) It would be socially inappropriate to say no because you know them
- 4) Having lots of Friends makes you look popular
- 5) It's a way of indicating that you are a fan (of that person, band, product, etc.)
- 6) Your list of Friends reveals who you are
- 7) Their Profile is cool so being Friends makes you look cool
- 8) Collecting Friends lets you see more people (Friendster)
- 9) It's the only way to see a private Profile (MySpace)
- 10) Being Friends lets you see someone's bulletins and their Friends-only blog posts (MySpace)
- 11) You want them to see your bulletins, private Profile, private blog (MySpace)
- 12) You can use your Friends list to find someone later
- 13) It's easier to say yes than no

These incentives account for a variety of different connections. While 1-3 all concern people that you know, the rest can explain why people connect to a lot of people that they do not know. Most reveal how technical affordances affect people's incentives to connect.

By tying Friendship to privacy settings, social network sites encourage people to choose Friends based on what they want to make visible. Above, we discussed how companies use bulletins to pass information, but it is important to note that the bulletins are used for a much wide array of practices. Bulletins are simple posts that are visible for all one's Friends to view; they are not persistent and they disappear after a few days. Bulletins are frequently used for announcing changes to one's Profile, informing Friends of an

⁸ In this section, I am focusing on everyday people. This does not include the incentives that motivate bands, corporations, politicians, porn divas, celebrities, comedians, etc.

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upcoming party, asking questions of one's Friends, and spreading memes (including chain letters, pyramid schemes, and quizzes). They are used to spread gossip, share MySpace hacks, and in a few cases, rally people to act politically. Because participants like seeing others' bulletins, people often add others just for that reason.

Collecting is advantageous for bands and companies and thus, they want to make it advantageous for participants to be fans; because there is little cost to do so, those who connect figure, "*why not?*" When Friends appear on someone's Profile, there is a great incentive to make sure that the Profiles listed help say something about the individual.

Finally, there are significant social costs to rejecting someone (boyd 2004). While it's obvious why people would link to people that they know and like, it is sometimes difficult to explain why people Friend people they dislike, people who they hold power over or who hold power over them, and other awkward relationships. In short, it's socially awkward to say no. When a Friend request is sent, the recipient is given two options: accept or decline. This is usually listed under a list of pending connections that do not disappear until one of the two choices is selected. While most systems do not notify the sender of a recipient's decline, the sender can infer a negative response if the request does not result in their pages being linked. Additionally, many systems let the sender see which of their requests is still pending. Thus, they know whether or not the recipient acted upon it. This feature encourages recipients to leave an awkward relationship as pending but to complicate matters, most systems also display when a person last logged in on their Profile. Since it is generally known that the pending list is the first thing you see when you login, it is considered rude to login and not respond to a request. For all of these reasons, it's much easier to just say yes than to face questions about why the sender was ignored or declined.

Raynes-Goldie and Fono (2005) also found that there is a great deal of social anxiety and drama provoked by Friending in LiveJournal (LJ). In LJ, Friendship does not require reciprocity. Anyone can list anyone else as a Friend; this articulation is public but there is no notification. The value of Friendship on LJ is deeply connected to the privacy settings and subscription processes. The norm on LJ is to read others' entries through a 'Friends page.' This page is an aggregation of all of an individual's Friends' posts. When someone posts an LJ entry, they have a choice as to whether the post should be public, private, Friends-only, or available to subgroups of Friends. In this way, it is necessary to be someone's Friend to have access to Friends-only posts. To locate how the multiple and conflicting views of Friendship cause tremendous conflict and misunderstanding on LJ, Raynes-Goldie and Fono speak of 'hyperfriending.' This process is quite similar to what takes place on other social network sites, but there are some differences. Because Friends-only posts are commonplace, not being someone's Friend is a huge limitation to information access. Furthermore, because reciprocity is not structurally required, there's a much greater social weight to recognizing someone's Friendship and reciprocating intentionally. On MySpace and Friendster, there is little to lose by being loose with Friendship and more to gain; the perception is that there is much more to lose on LJ.

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There are so many reasons why people link to strangers that there seems to be little incentive to be selective about Friendship. If someone seems interesting or you want to get to know them better, what's the loss in Friending them? As far as most participants are concerned, Friendship doesn't mean anything really, so why not? Often, the greatest concern comes from parents of teens who use these sites because they are afraid that these Friends will use their visibility and access to prey on their children. Yet, since most participants are not particularly interested in meeting these Friends in everyday life, they see little reason to be afraid. With LiveJournal, it is a bit trickier since it is about sharing personal content regularly rather than simply sharing what amounts to an accessorized digital body.

But Am I Your *Best* Friend?

By having a loose definition of Friendship, it is easy to end up having hundreds of Friends. While Collectors on MySpace have thousands and sometimes millions of Friends, many active users have hundreds. Because of how these sites function, there is no distinction between siblings, lovers, schoolmates, and strangers. They are all lumped under one category: Friends.

While users can scroll through their list of Friends, not all Friends are displayed on the participant's Profile. Most social network sites display Friends in the order in which their account was created or their last login date. By implementing a 'Top 8' feature, MySpace changed the social dynamics around the ordering of Friends. Initially, 'Top 8' allowed users to select eight Friends to display on their Profile. More recently, that feature was changed to 'Top Friends' as users have more options in how many people they could list.⁹ Many users will only list people that they know and celebrities that they admire in their Top Friends, often as a way to both demarcate their identity and signal meaningful relationships with others.

⁹ Eight was the maximum number of Friends that the system initially let people have. Some users figured out how to hack the system to display more Friends; there are entire bulletin boards dedicated to teaching others how to hack this. Consistently, upping the limit was the number one request that the company received. In the spring of 2006, MySpace launched an ad campaign for X-Men. In return for Friending X-Men, users were given the option to have 12, 16, 20, or 24 Friends in their Top Friends section. Millions of users did exactly that. In late June, this feature was introduced to everyone, regardless of Friending X-Men. While eight is no longer the limit, people move between calling it Top 8 or Top Friends. I will use both terms interchangeably, even when the number of Friends might be greater than eight.

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Edit Your Top Friends!

Top 8 ▼

Just Drag-and-drop your buddies into the "Top Friends" area - the red squares. Browse through your friends as much as you like without losing your work -- save only when you're done!

Please Note: You can only order your Top Friends. [[help](#)]

There are many advantages to the Top Friends feature. It allows people to show connections that really say something about who they are. It also serves as a bookmark to the people that matter. By choosing to list the people who one visits the most frequently, simply going to one's Profile provides a set of valuable links.

Of course, it is not that simple. "*Who are we kidding? ... MySpace Top 8 is psychological warfare,*" says Tonya. There are tremendous politics behind the Top 8, not unlike the drama over best and bestest friends in middle school. "*It is hard to believe that rearranging your 'top' friends can create drama but it can,*" says Janet. While people of all ages talk about the dynamics of Top 8, the younger MySpace users express a lot more frustration with this feature. Their experience with Top Friends on MySpace is probably quite similar to their issues in negotiating status amongst friends at school (Milner, 2004).

"As a kid, you used your birthday party guest list as leverage on the playground. 'If you let me play I'll invite you to my birthday party.' Then, as you grew up and got your own phone, it was all about someone being on your speed dial. Well today it's the MySpace Top 8. It's the new dangling carrot for gaining superficial acceptance. Taking someone off your Top 8 is your new passive aggressive power play when someone pisses you off." -- Nadine

There are a handful of social norms that pervade Top 8 culture. Often, the person in the upper left ("1st" position) is a significant other, dear friend, or close family member. Reciprocity is another salient component of Top Friends dynamics. If Susan lists Mary on her Top 8, she expects Mary to reciprocate. To acknowledge this, Mary adds a Comment to Susan's page saying, "*Thanx for puttin me on ur Top 8! I put you on mine 2.*" By publicly acknowledging this addition, Mary is making certain Susan's viewers recognize Mary's status on Susan's list. Of course, just being in someone's list is not always enough. As Samantha explains, "*Friends get into fights because they're not 1st on someone's Top 8, or somebody else is before them.*" While some people are ecstatic to be added, there are many more that are frustrated because they are removed or simply not listed.

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When Emily removed Andy from her Top 8, he responded with a Comment¹⁰ on her page, "*im sad u took me off your Top 8.*" Likewise, even though Nigel was never on Ann's Top 8, he posted a Comment asking, "*y cant i b on ur top 8?*" These Comments are visible to anyone looking at Emily or Ann's page. By taking their hurt to the Comment section rather than privately messaging Ann and Emily, Nigel and Andy are letting a wider audience know that they feel 'dissed.' The process of removing a Friend on MySpace signals a shift in relationship status that is often not easily articulated in everyday life. There is no clear social script for ending a friendship; presenting a (former) friend with "*let's just be acquaintances*" does not have the same ring as stating "*let's just be friends*" during the break-up of a more intimate relationship, even if they are both about downgrading the status of the relationship.

Throughout MySpace blogs, participants (predominantly youth) talk about the effects of people getting hurt and the drama that ensues. In doing so, they vent while trying to convey that things like Top 8 don't matter.

"Myspace always seems to cause way too much drama and i am so dang sick of it. im sick of the pain and the hurt and tears and the jealousy and the heartache and the truth and the lies.. it just SUCKS! ... im just so sick of the drama and i just cant take it anymore compared to all the love its supposed to make us feel. i get off just feeling worse. i have people complain to me that they are not my number one on my top 8. come on now. grow up. its freaking myspace." -- Olivia

Even as people try to say it doesn't matter to them, others point out that the expression of distance is precisely because it does matter. "*Unless you're always randomly rotating these people, there is no way you can say that it doesn't matter. It still matters*" (Tonya). While the limit was upped, this does not alleviate the problem. Rather than worrying about leaving out number nine, participants now have to think about how number 25 might react. The change itself is even controversial. "*I'm in a war with some of my friends as to whether Top 12 should be allowed.*"

The Top Friends feature requires participants to actively signal their relationship with others. Such a system makes it difficult to be vague about who matters the most, although some tried by explaining on their bulletins what theme they are using to choose their Top 8 this week: "my Sagittarius friends," "my basketball team," and "people whose initials are BR." Still others relied on fake Profiles for their Top 8.

"Tila Tequilla (a MySpace phenomenon with over 1,000,000 friends) proposed a

¹⁰ Most social network sites allow Friends to leave messages on each other's Profile. These messages are visible by anyone who can access the Profile. On Friendster, these messages are called Testimonials; on MySpace, they are Comment. While Friendster designed this feature to allow people to testify about the worthiness of their friends, they were repurposed in a variety of ways. Amongst teenagers, it is common to use Comments to talk to the person in the witness of all of their Friends. Thus, Comments tend to take on a conversational tone (boyd and Heer, 2006).

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novel solution - she produced 8 profiles named F, U, C, K, T, O, P and 8 and chose THEM in order (reading 'FUCK TOP8' in bold red font on black background) as her Top 8" -- Jeff. (MySpace eventually deleted these Profiles.)

Top Friends requires participants to expose backstage information. In a culture where it's socially awkward to reject someone's Friendship, ranking them provides endless drama and social awkwardness.

Over time, this drama appears to subside. Older MySpace participants are less emotionally invested in the social dynamics behind Top 8 than younger ones. Furthermore, after people have been participating on MySpace for a while and understanding the social issues behind Top 8, some are more willing to just accept that it is a limitation of the system and take it less seriously. This is probably quite similar to what (Milner, 2004) recognizes with the status dynamics of high school freshman versus those of seniors – once one has status within the system, one no longer needs to be as invested in working through status issues.

Friending as Context Creation

"Friendster is like having a collection of baseball cards of all of your friends." -- Cathy

While Friending is a social act, the actual collection of Friends and the display of Top Friends provides space for people to engage in identity performance. As Judith Donath and I argued in "Public Displays of Connection," people display social connections to reveal information about who they are (Donath and boyd, 2004). While the bulk of one's Profile is completely within the participant's control – the demographics, photos, self-description, tastes – what photos Friends choose to use as their primary image and what they write as Comments is less controlled. (It is not completely uncontrolled as people can reject Comments, delete Friends, and pressure Friends to write Comments or change their photo.) This external material complements the personally written material to paint a broader picture of an individual. Turned around, 'guilt through association' simply means that your friends' performance reflects highly on you.

"so my utter hatred of myspace and my peers decided to fuse into one fun after-school activity! i used the friend finder on myspace to find a popular kid at school, and surfed through their top 8. yea, it's creepy, but it's HILARIOUS! you find out all sorts of lol-worthy information, such as kim loves porn, jen's pic was taken outside my 6th grade classroom, and michelle can't blow gum for shit." -- Suzy

As an exercise in self-esteem building, Suzy decided to explicitly frame one girl through the lens of her Friends. This is well supported on social network sites because Friends are linked from Profiles. As people navigate Profiles, they build an image of who people are through their Friends.

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The networked nature of impressions does not only affect the viewer – this is how newcomers decided what to present in the first place. When people first joined Friendster, they took cues from the people who invited them. Three specific subcultures dominated the early adopters – bloggers, attendees of the Burning Man¹¹ festival, and gay men mostly living in New York. If the invitee was a Burner, their Profile would probably be filled with references to the event with images full of half-naked, costumed people running around the desert. As such, newcomers would get the impression that it was a site for Burners and they would create a Profile that displayed that facet of their identity. In deciding who to invite, newcomers would perpetuate the framing by only inviting people who are part of the Burning Man subculture.

Interestingly, because of this process, Burners believed that the site was for Burners, gay men thought it was a gay dating site, and bloggers were ecstatic to have a geek socializing tool. The reason each group got this impression had to do with the way in which context was created on these systems. Rather than having the context dictated by the environment itself, context emerged through Friends networks. As a result, being socialized into Friendster meant connected to Friends that reinforced the contextual information of early adopters.

Much to the chagrin of the developers, the early adopters of Friendster framed the social norms, not the system's designers. Taking advantage of the technological affordances, early adopters used the site to meet their needs. In turn, because of the networked structure of Friendster, they passed on their norms to their friends. Their Profiles signaled what type of people belonged and their communication practices conveyed what types of behavior one could expect.

As the site grew, different groups started joining. The centrality of the network decreased at the same time that people were forced to face conflicting social contexts. While the site proliferated amongst Burners, gay men, and bloggers, it also spread into new groups. As those on the periphery of these communities extended invitations to their friends who were not members of one of those initial subcultures, different social practices began to evolve and context collisions began to take place. It did not take long before the early adopters came face to face with their bosses and high school classmates. This created an awkward situation as participants had to determine how to manage conflicting social contexts.

The growth of MySpace followed a similar curve. One of the key early adopter groups were hipsters living in the Silverlake neighborhood of Los Angeles. They were passionate about indie rock music and many were musicians, promoters, club goers, etc. As MySpace took hold, long before any press was covering the site, MySpace took off

¹¹ Burning Man is an arts festival that takes place in Nevada during the week leading up to the first weekend in September (Labor Day). Attendees often call themselves 'Burners.' For more information, see <http://www.burningman.com/>

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amongst 20/30-something urban socializers, musicians, and teenagers. The latter group may not appear obvious, but teenagers are some of the most active music consumers – they follow music culture avidly, even when they are unable to see the bands play live due to age restrictions. As the site grew, the teenagers and 20/30-somethings pretty much left each other alone, although bands bridged these groups. It was not until the site was sold to News Corp. for \$580M in the summer of 2005 that the press began covering the phenomenon. The massive press helped it grow larger, penetrating those three demographics more deeply but also attracting new populations, namely adults who are interested in teenagers (parents, teachers, pedophiles, marketers).

As I discuss in (boyd, in review), there are social consequences to the types of growth that these social network sites have seen. In particular, the varied populations who began to participate and define context through their Friends were faced with context collision when people from different facets of their lives joined the site. To fully address the dynamics of context in social network sites is outside of the scope of this paper, but I want to highlight one particular aspect that is very relevant to people's Friending choices.

When context is defined by whom one Friends, and addressing multiple audiences simultaneously complicates all relationships, people must make hard choices. Joshua Meyrowitz highlights this problem in reference to television (Meyrowitz, 1985). In the early 1960s, Stokely Carmichael regularly addressed segregated black and white audiences about the values of Black Power. Depending on his audience, he used very different rhetorical styles. As his popularity grew, he began to attract media attention and was invited to speak on TV and radio. Unfortunately, this was more of a curse than a blessing because the audiences he would reach through these mediums included both black and white communities. With no way to reconcile the two different rhetorical styles, he had to choose. In choosing to maintain his roots in front of white listeners, Carmichael permanently alienated white society from the messages of Black Power.

The users of social network sites are faced with the same conundrum, particularly those who must simultaneously interact with their peers and those who hold power over them. Teenagers, for example, have no way of being simultaneously cool to their friends and cool to their parents. Thus, they often choose to represent themselves as they want to be seen by their friends, even when this presentation outrages their parents.

Because social network sites do not provide physical walls for context, the context that users create is through their choice of Friends. They choose people that they know and other Friends that will support their perception of what public they are addressing through their presentation of self, bulletins, comments, and blog posts. This completely inverts the norms in early public social sites where interests or activities defined a group (Usenet, mailing list, chatroom, etc.) and people chose to participate based on their interest in the topic. In these environments, search collapsed context by connecting disconnected groups. Furthermore, these groups were simply unable to scale. While it was once possible to gather all cat lovers into one Usenet group, the size of this group would be beyond unbearable today. By restructuring social clusters around networks of

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Friends, social network sites have allowed for a new way to build social context.

Egocentric Networks Replace Groups

Social network sites provide a new organizing mechanism for developing context. Instead of slicing interest first and people second, the Friending process allows people to choose people first and interests second. People define their community egocentrically. Their list of Friends defines the context and this, in turn, defines the audience that they believe they are addressing whenever they modify their Profile or post a bulletin. Combined with Profile content, Friends serve as a signal to all visitors about the relevant context.

Participants in social network sites want to be public where public means interacting with all people who might have similar tastes or be entertaining or provide useful information. They do not wish to exist in a public where they are harassed or where they have to deal with people who have power over them. This is not unlike everyday public spaces where people invite the opportunity to meet with like minds that recognize their fashion signals or otherwise find them intriguing. In both spaces, people assume that everyone else will just walk on by and rebuffed invitations to engage will be respected and not pursued. For many, social network sites are not a friends-only space, but they are a public space with some assumptions about the scope of that public. While technical barriers do not provide scope, Friends are a critical signal in conveying the expected social boundaries.

Because context is egocentric and networked in social network sites, the speaker always sets the relevant context. The speaker addresses their Friends. Some of those Friends may wish to react and address their Friends but the audience of this response differs from the audience of original statement. The context shifts. This is also how viral messages spread when new recipients share it with their Friends and those for whom it resonates pass it on.

Consider what happened on 27 March 2006 when, after a weekend of immigration protests, tens of thousands of teenagers walked out of class on a Monday morning for their own protest (Jablon 2006). While many of the teen protestors did not fully understand the issues involved, they learned of the protests through their Friends on MySpace (Melber 2006). When I asked MySpace to query the bulletins for "4437" (the number of the bill that they were protesting), I learned that 75,000 bulletins were posted referencing that number the weekend before the protests, 50,000 on the day of the teen protest, and 60,000 on the following two days. While these bulletins could be discussing the bill completely separately from the protests and there are bound to be plenty of bulletins that never addressed the bill by number, one would be hard pressed to argue that conversation concerning immigration was not flowing in MySpace during that period. Combined with numerous accounts from students of how they learned about the protests through bulletin messages from their Friends on MySpace, these numbers show that significant information flow is possible on the site. After seeing a post about the protests

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on their bulletin, many students (primarily Latino students) would repost it for *their* Friends to see, recognizing that just because they received it did not mean that all of their friends did as well. In this way, each received the information in one context and reposted to another.

Such acts of information dissemination certainly raise possibilities concerning the political efficacy of social network sites but the important point here is that when content is relevant to individuals, they consume it and then share it. This act shifts the context to be defined egocentrically which means that rather than information being shared based on a common interest, it is shared based on an affiliation with an individual. The poster presumes that anyone who is interested in being Friends should also be interested in receiving such content.

What allows information to spread and Friends to connect has everything to do with the underlying architecture of social network sites. By making Friendship visible, people are able to find other participants and make meaning from their networks. At the same time, properties that have been present in all mediated spaces persist, complicating many social behaviors on these sites. Four properties in particular play a key role: persistence, searchability, replicability, and invisible audiences. These elements help participants structure context but they also make it more difficult to manage collapsed contexts.

Conclusion

Jenny Sundén (2003) argues that, in order to exist online, we must write ourselves into being. From the flow of text in chatrooms to the creation of Profiles, people are regularly projecting themselves into the Internet so that others may view their presence and interact directly with them. Social network sites take this to the next level because participants there write their community into being through the process of Friending. In doing so, they help define themselves and the context in which they are operating. In this way, Friendship serves as a necessary substitute for the lacking structural definition of a situation.

While most participants surf the site through the networks themselves, most newcomers and non-participants use the search feature and are absolutely horrified by what they may see. Although there is a large network of religious youth discussing Jesus on MySpace, if one wishes to find pornography, it is not that hard. While this is part of the broader network, as it is part of broader society, it is not what the religious teens are seeing when they login to speak with their community. They have defined their context through youth ministers, missionaries, and fellow churchgoers. Even when they talk about television shows or the events of the school day, the context that they created for themselves is a religiously supportive one. The Friends that read their messages understand the religious context in which they are speaking.

While networked context shifts the focus away from interests onto people, it is also

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vulnerable to the architectural aspects of mediated environments. Even though most participants are primarily focused on the contexts in which they participate on social network sites, search (combined with massive media panic) has once again allowed adults to rain on teens' parade and bosses to invade employees' personal space. While the future of situational management in mediated environments is quite unknown, the context collisions in social networks have raised numerous questions about the right to privacy in digital public spaces. Context matters and people want to have some level of control over their audience. After all, "*it is MY space!*"

Part of what makes the negotiation of Friendship on social network sites tricky is that it's deeply connected to participant's offline social life. Their choice of Friends online is not a set of arbitrary personal decisions; each choice has the potential to complicate relationships with friends, colleagues, schoolmates, and lovers. Social network sites are not digital spaces disconnected from other social venues – it is a modeling of one aspect of participants' social worlds and that model is evaluated in other social contexts.

In thinking about Friendship practices on social network sites, it is crucial to evaluate them on their own terms, recognizing the role of technology and social navigation rather than simply viewing them as an extension of offline friendship. As these sites proliferate and become more culturally embedded, I suspect that we will see shifts in how Friendship relates to offline relationship management. I also suspect that a study of non-American practices would introduce entirely different dynamics. Perhaps Friendship articulation resonates differently in other cultural settings. Regardless, it is critical that we watch what people are doing and understand why their choices make sense to them.

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