**Introduction**

McKenna, Green, and Gleason (2002) argue that the unique structure of the Internet and such communities may provide a “head start” (p. 11) to relationship formation by allowing people to meet others with similar ‘niche’ interests, which would otherwise be hard to do if restricted to one geographical location. This initial shared interest base established, users can move more quickly to discussing other topics and discovering other shared interests and values. (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013)

Social networking sites can encourage new friendships, so long as they are pursued only with honesty and goodwill, and without the expectation that they will always remain exclusively ‘behind the screen’ (Forbes, 2016).

Social networks provide possibilities for friendship, but it remains unclear what factors ensure that online communication grows into a meaningful relationship. The present overview aims at highlighting research findings that may contribute to understanding of this process. All findings are grouped into four major categories: noticing/attraction, initial contact, emotional connection, and maintenance of the relationship.

1. **Noticing/attraction**

People must address diverse audiences with the same messages, presenting only one identity to sets of people (Baym, 2012).

The importance of publishing content is high, studies show: people who publish photos online may find a large audience that not only views photos but also appraises them, while users who avoided uploading their photos remain secluded and fail to make friends or receive comments (Schwarz, 2010).

Self-disclosure exerts positive effects on friendship formation, interpersonal attraction, as well as liking (Gibbs et al., 2006, as cited in Pang, 2018).

Shared attitudes stimulate positive feelings that support the formation of a social connection (Byrne, 1961, as cited in Orben & Dunbar, 2017).

Offline communication is characterized as directed and reciprocal self-disclosure, while social media users passively consume social information made available to them by these media. Passive consumption occurs when a person examines the social media posts of another user without interacting with them (Orben & Dunbar, 2017).

Online and offline self-disclosures affect relationship development via a similar (or identical) pathway. Passive consumption, while a novel form of communication, is nonetheless governed by the same or similar rules as interpersonal face-to-face communication. Perceived appropriateness and homophily mediate how intimacy affects relationship development. It is not the self-disclosures themselves, but their interpretation that determines relationship change (Marston, 1976). Posts deemed inappropriate hinder relationship development, instead of supporting it. (Orben & Dunbar, 2017)

On social media, users can upload and share self-disclosures with their entire social network (O'Sullivan, 2005). These ‘posts’ are then consumed by other users, many of whom will not interact with the posts (Orben & Dunbar, 2017).

**Thus,** one of the questions is: what makes one person interact with the self-disclosure of another person? What makes a person establish the initial contact?

1. **Initial contact**

Users compliment each other’s photos, not necessarily because they find each other beautiful, but rather calculatedly, in order to receive a compliment in return and establish an acquaintance (Schwarz, 2010).

Social media users post more about positive experiences. Positive posts increase relationship intimacy and liking, especially when the relationship is weak (Orben & Dunbar, 2017).

Despite the similarities between online and offline interactions, young people stated in the focus group discussions that they made their friends offline within traditional institutions of secondary socialization. Meeting people in person and to interact offline are considered to be important pre-requisites to develop friendships (Décieux et al., 2018).

We could partially refute this one? Kind of use it as the other-side-of-the-coin opinion?

Offline, a friendship tends to develop gradually and only after a certain stage is reached will friends open up and ask for assistance. Online, however, a strong friendship may be formed by the seeking, giving or receiving assistance as the opening gambit (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013).

1. **Emotional connection**

Only when individuals express their inner thoughts and feelings could they establish and maintain meaningful connections (Trepte et al., 2018, as cited in Pang, 2018, p. 2234).

Offline self-disclosure intimacy (mutual confiding) affects relationship change. Relationship develops with this increasing self-disclosure intimacy. Higher self-disclosure intimacy promotes feelings of trust and increases liking (Orben & Dunbar, 2017).

Social media platforms allow young people to convey friendliness, build intimacy or express strong emotions (Baym, 2010, as cited in Décieux et al., 2018).

Users report feeling more able to convey their “true selves” to others online than in face-to-face settings (Bargh et al., 2002, as cited in Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013).

People called ‘friends’ online may be anything from strangers to acquaintances to lovers to family to best friends and more: the use of the term is ambiguous (Baym & Ledbetter, 2009; Boyd, 2006; Fono & Reynes-Goldie, 2006). In the offline world, we readily distinguish between friendships of different quality (intimate friends, best friends, good friends, just friends, acquaintances, etc.) that correspond to the layers identified in personal social networks (Dunbar, 2017). Social media platforms do not normally make these distinctions (Sutcliffe, A., Binder, J. & Dunbar, R., 2018).

The intimacy constructed between celebrities and fans online is often understood as illusory (Beer, 2008; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). But there is evidence that celebrities can experience intimacy — or at least intimate moments — with their fans online (Baym, 2012).

Social support researchers have noted that one form of social support is the realization that you are needed and matter to others (Cutrona & Russell, 1990).

Different forms of online communication may foster friendships with different levels of intimacy (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009).

Hu, Wood, Smith, and Westbrook (2004) detected a positive relationship between the frequency of Instant Messaging and the degree of perceived intimacy, demonstrating that participants feel closer to their Internet partner as time progresses (Farci et al., 2016).

There is evidence that hidden youth are not socially isolated as normally perceived by mainstream society, but rather, virtual intimacy exists between them (Chan, 2020; Chan & Lo, 2014). Just like ordinary youth, hidden youth can maintain intimate relationships, only that their relationships have migrated from real-life contexts to online contexts (Chan & Lo, 2014).

There is evidence that the positive relationship between social support and intensity or frequency of social media use may not translate into satisfaction (Sutcliffe, A., Binder, J. & Dunbar, R., 2018).

People who revealed their genuine self-features in the online environment, such as their inner thoughts and emotions, or who openly and honestly shared them with other users, would lead to cultivation of a close relationship and maintenance of such connection (Pang, 2018).

1. **Maintenance**

Friendship maintenance is generally defined as actions, activities, or practices individuals engage in with the objective of sustaining the dyadic friendship at a satisfying and committed degree (Davis, 2012, as cited in Pang, 2018, p. 2234).

One of the major functions of friendship in adult relationships is the provision of social

support, or help that is provided for personal rather than professional reasons (Baym, 2012). Among the benefits of receiving social support are better psychological adjustment, higher perceptions of self-efficacy, better coping, improved task performance, better disease resistance and recovery, and lowered risk of mortality (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002).

Friends are expected to engage in self disclosure with one another, an expectation that

raises dialectical conflicts between being open and honest and protecting the self and the

other (Rawlins, 1983).

Comments function as gifts, both because most comments are compliments, that is, public recognition of the receiver’s worth; and because (independent of its content) every comment raises the receiver’s comment-count (Schwarz, 2010).

According to Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), the richness of information

exchange is directly associated with the number of channels available for communication and the amount of cues exchanged.

The relationship between the strength of ties and media multiplexity is mutually influential; when strong ties are more likely to lead to multiple media use, media multiplexity will in turn further strengthen the ties and influence relationship development (Sheer, 2011). More intimate friends will tend to use multiple communication channels (Chan, 2020).

Dunbar's Social Brain Hypothesis (SBH) (1998) asserts that we may naturally form only a small number of very close friendships (the support group ~5), with more good friends (sympathy group ~12-15) and about 150 in our active social network of friends and

acquaintances (all individual ties with contact frequency of more than once a year and a genuine personal relationship) (Hill & Dunbar, 2003).

Roberts, Dunbar, Pollet, and Kuppens (2009) found a negative relationship between active network size and mean emotional closeness between ego and others in their network, suggesting that time and cognitive constraints may result in a trade-off between the number of relationships in the network, and their emotional intensity.

According to Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2013), early theories of computer-mediated communication, such as social presence theory (Short et al., 1976) and Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), suggested that because of the reduction in the number of nonverbal and social-context cues that can be transmitted via electronic communication, such media would increase conflict between communication partners. Similarly, proponents of such theories argued that computer-mediated communication is not rich enough to manage conflict once it arises.

The content of electronic messages is likely to be interpreted more negatively than intended (Byron, 2008; Walther & D’Addario, 2001). This misinterpretation may lead to increased conflict in online friendships (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013).

So, consequently, **my question is:** what if it’s the opposite? What if the knowledge of the reduction in the number of nonverbal and social-context clues can potentially strengthen the communication between two people and deepen their bond?

In a study of relationship formation among newsgroup users, McKenna et al. (2002) found that 79% of friendships formed online were still intact after 2 years. In addition, most of these friendships became stronger and closer over time (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013).

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**Corresponding to the interview questions**

**Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013**

**NB:** For the question “Do you find it easier to make friends online or in real life? Why?”

(Or could be used for a general comparison between offline/online friendships, proving that one is not inferior to the other)

Against online friendships/relationships:

* Scholars have reported that computer-mediated modes of communication are seen by users as inferior to face-to-face communication for maintaining personal relationships (Cummings, Butler, & Kraut, 2002);
* Others have found that people report less intimacy in their online relationships than in their face-to-face friendship bonds (Cummings et al., 2002; Scott, Mottarella, & Lavooy, 2006);
* In one study comparing relationships developed online to more ‘traditional’ offline ones, the latter were characterized by greater interdependence, understanding, and commitment (Parks & Roberts, 1998).

In favor of online friendships/relationships:

* McKenna et al (2002) described online friendships as meaningful, beneficial, and intimate;
* Buote, Wood, and Pratt (2009) found that intimacy, friendship quality, and satisfaction did not differ for friends met online versus offline. Moreover, participants reported more self-disclosure with their online friends.

**NB:** For the question “Have you met your friend in person?”

It is also important to note that ‘online’ friendships are not always limited to electronic interactions. Friends who meet online may well shift their relationships offline.

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**About the development of the app/platform**

**Farci et al. (2016)**

Since Facebook is never perceived as an environment guaranteeing anonymity (Wittwoker, 2014), words are often considered to be too revealing. Personal images are functional in providing access to certain aspects of private lives, but they are considered less explicit than written text, due to their potential for carrying multiple messages below their public surface

**Thus,** will our app/platform be more text- or image-based? Or the mix of both?

Routines that are part of Farci’s (2016) idea of networked intimacy (showing rather than telling, tagging, etc), based on the use of the affordances provided by the platform, become part of friendship maintenance (Bucher, 2013).

**Thus:** what built-in affordances on our platform/app could serve for the purpose of friendships maintenance?

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