

The Notion of Friend between Offline and Online on Facebook

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Abstract: In recent years, 'Facebook' is considered a widely used social network site, used by a vast cross section of persons worldwide, regardless of age, job and education level. Facebook was commenced in February 2004 as a social networking site for Harvard students and expanded to all over the world, thus offering an extensive attain within a defined geographical area, unlike most internet sites (Lewis, J. West, A. 2009). It is the practically 'universal social networking site and it has the highest share of users' daily visits' (Hampton, K.N. et al et al, 2011). As a result, it made communication with different people and groups in various locations possible and easy. 'Facebook's mission' is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected' (www.facebook.com). In this paper, my interest is in the term 'Friend' on Facebook. Especially, in the way it is socially shaped, and how the users are using it and understand it. In addition, the aims of this essay are to explore reasons for having friends on Facebook, and methods or ways that have been used by users to select friends. It also aims to illustrate types and main themes of conversation and chatting with friends on Facebook. However, the main purpose of the paper is to critically compare the notion of friend online and offline, via a quantitative data collection and interviews with the Facebook users.

Keywords: Social network, Facebook, Social relationship, Friend, Online, Offline, Social change

Introduction

The Concept of Friend

A common understanding of friend might refer to a person with whom we have a close relationship, who we like, usually outside a family circle. Or, as the Oxford online dictionary defines it, 'a person with whom one has a bond of mutual affection, typically one exclusive of sexual or family relations'. For Sociologists, as Boyd (2006) argues, friends can be categorised as informal, without obvious confines such as 'co-worker' or, common responsibilities like 'family'. Another condition for a person to be recognised as a friend is the matter of gaining the degree of trust. Such as a close relationship, which requires a level of familiarity and privacy (Lewis, J. West, A. 2009). However, individual relationships have other sorts of relations besides friendship. McCarty (2002) argues that there are around six groups of human relationships:

Such groups include family, neighbours, and people from one's current place of work, people from one's previous place of work, school friends and networks from another person.

On the other hand, on Facebook, these types of relationships are flattened, as Boyd (2006) cited, into the one category called 'friend'. The category of friend on Facebook 'online' is not necessarily the same as it is in real life 'offline' (West, A. et al, 2009). Basically, friends online refer to the feature for membership, or followers who have access to applications that are provided by the site. Such as, video sharing, photos and reading and writing to someone's wall and listening to music, while friends offline refers to social relations between two people. (Boyd, 2006). Furthermore, Hampton, et al (2011), have found in their research entitled 'Social networking sites and our lives', that the friend list of the Facebook users contains various groups like: High school friend, extended family, co-workers, college friends, immediate family, people from voluntary groups and neighbours. There are many other friends that cannot be classified into these categories, as well as people who have never met them before.

Friending on Facebook

The 'culture of friending' as Boyd (2006) described, is a process that Facebook presents for its users to increase social contact. The process begins with accepting a friend request before the user is entered on the list of friends (Lewis, J. West, A., 2009). The main purpose of becoming involved in Social networking friendship, a comparatively recent phenomenon, is to find a shortcut to explore relevant sources by starting with those people with common interests, like a communication channel. A Facebook member will be able to publish information about themselves; background information, photo, and hobbies, which gives a clue for other members to recognise them, or to introduce themselves to them in order to be their friend (Thelwall, 2008). The Facebook guideline for using friend service advise members to 'send friend requests to people you have a real-life connection to, like your friends, family, co-workers, or classmates', or other people that you know personally (facebook.com). However, people who are listed in the friend list on Facebook may actually be a real-life friend in a traditional sense, or be an old acquaintance, like a former high school friend, or some people that you have never had a connection with before. In offline friendship, a friend of a friend is considered as a friend, or rather say in the common sense. But in online friending this is the exception rather than the rule.

Facebook's friend list such as in real life is different from one person to another. Some users have an oversized list with numerous friends. In contrast, other users' friend list contains a relatively small group of siblings and close friends, which probably is a reflection of their real-life relationship. There is a various reason that predict dense connection in a friend list. Essentially, it depends on the period of being on Facebook as a user. The more friends they have, the less dense their friendship networks are likely to be. However, Facebook users at the beginning of the process typically include a small, core group of close and interconnected friends. Subsequently, they discover and are discovered by other users in other times and places of their life, which makes their friend list larger and less intertwined (Hampton, K.N. et al, 2012).

Facebook users obtain a variety of different sorts of support from their friends in online along with offline. Hampton et al (2011) cited that people get emotional support like advice and companionship, such as spending time with friend. Even when they are sick they get more tangible support. Also, the site gave users the ability to

keep in touch with people they had met once or twice in a particular place, or whom they knew distantly from their life (Lewis, J. West, A., 2009).

On the other hand, having many friends on Facebook is related to higher levels of social support, and receiving emotional support, yet it has its own disadvantages as well. As a result of utilising these services, people might be addicted to it and become isolated. Consequently, they replace their real social support for a less meaningful relation, Hampton, et al (2011) argued. Furthermore, Facebook can be used as a tool through friending services for 'stalking' friends' social activities, especially by parents to follow their children's activities, or by ex-girlfriends or boyfriends (Lewis, J. West, A, 2009). The outcome of this particular issue with friending made the process of un-friending people from friend list increase from 56% to 63% of social networks users in American society during 2009-2011(see Figure 1). This made Facebook develop friending services to have more choice and different categories like: family members, close friends, a 'subscription', which is button you can hear from users you are interested in, even if they are not in your friend list (facebook.com). Facebook members have the ability to unsubscribe friends from seeing content added by a particular friend on their newsfeed'. (Hampton, K.N. et al, 2012).

One of the fundamental differences between friend online and offline is called fake profiles. Whereby, this profile considers as fake friends. Because they are not necessarily a real person, they may be characters from a movie, or a cartoon character such as Homer Simpson, or Jesus. There are other fake friends on Facebook including celebrities, icons, objects, institutions (e.g. university), and commercial profiles. Although these are called friend in Facebook, the purpose for including these pages in friend list is for following news and information about them, rather than having conversations (Boyd, 2006). Sociologist, Scott Feld, was the first person who explained the phenomenon of friendship in social networks. He argues, people, not just on Facebook, in real life as well, are more likely to be friends with those who have more friends than with those with relatively fewer friends (Hampton, K.N. et al, 2012). Generally, in terms of collecting friends, women are more likely to receive friend requests, but men are more likely to send them. In addition, education is another reason for having various social network friends. The longer people stay in school and universities, the more various people they tend to know (Hampton, K.N. et al, 2012).

Methods

For the purpose of data collection, I applied both the quantitative and qualitative methods. In order to get a general understanding of the topic, I used a survey with a questionnaire via surveymonkey.com, which I sent to the Sample's Facebook pages. The Sample included 10 MA students in the Sociological studies department; half of them were female and the other half were male. Furthermore, two other students have been interviewed with a semi -structured interview to get deeper information and their points of view about friending on Facebook.

Results

After collecting data from the responders, due the descriptive analysis, I clarified their answers in Figures (appendix). The Mean of the Sample's age is (27.6) years, with the diverse nationalities (e.g. British, Kurdish, Turkish ...etc) (see Figures 2, 3). The average friends that the Sample have in their friend list is (352) friends, which seems to be a little oversized list than in real life for a normal person such as a student (see Figure 4). One of the interesting results that I found is that, the Sample's friends on Facebook are mostly their real life friends, former school friends, or college friends. That indicates the responder's interest in keeping in touch with their offline friends, whom they found on Facebook. Furthermore, according to Figure (6), most of the responders have most of their real friends' Facebook page in their friend list. Although in a relatively less number, they have other friends like acquaintances and co-workers (see Figure 5). Most of the responders responded that they select their actual friends as a friend on Facebook, and none of them answered random collection (see Figure 7). Even though responders have relatively large number of friends online, 8 of them claimed that they are not having friendship with fake friends profiles like celebrities (see Figure 8). Consequently, almost all of the students used Facebook as a connection tool for keeping in touch with friends and family (see Figure 9). Friend request was another question that responders had to answer; most of them claim that the average request that they send and receive is less than 5 requests monthly (see Figures 10, 11). Due to the previous question, responders are not answering each and every friend request they receive. As Figure 12 clarifies, 5 students accept requests from the users that they know, and 4 students do not answer every friendship request. In addition, Figure 13 shows that 9 out of 10 responders have unfriended users from their friend list, mostly because they were bothering them (see Figure 14). In the other question about messaging on Facebook, responders claimed they usually send about 5 messages every day for their friends, mostly greeting and exchanging news and information about university life (see Figures 15, 16). Finally, in the unexpected and interesting responds, all of the responders think having a large list of friends on Facebook does not indicate popularity for the user (see Figure 17).

Discussion

Firstly, the Sample that I used for this research paper does not necessarily represent the whole picture about the phenomena of friend and friending on Facebook. It is because of the lack of time and the incapability of involving a wider group of Facebook users. However, the finding of this essay shows no significant differences between other researchers' results, which have been used as references for this essay. Basically, Facebook is a social network site used by people (students in this research), mainly for keeping in contact with friends and families. Especially, people who are living abroad. They use the communication services on Facebook more than other parts. In addition, besides having relatively large numbers of friends on Facebook, most of the Sample claims that they do not communicate with other people outside their country as much as they do inside their circle of location and culture. Also, they did not show any interest in using Facebook for dating and finding friends. I found these results a little contradictory with Facebook's mission, which is 'to give people the power

to share and make the world more open and connected' (facebook.com). Apparently, users from my research Sample are more connected to their actual friends and families on Facebook than other people they do not have a real relationship with, or who they have just met on the site. Furthermore, most of the Sample has most of their real-life friends' pages on their friend list. Intentionally, they collect their friends from high school, college, or previous jobs, in order to get in touch with them and carry on their relationship. This particular result, proves that friends online are similar to friends offline, especially when they keep in contact and are messaging about their real life. Also, acknowledging personal and daily events in their messages. Furthermore, they get birthday congratulations from their friends on Facebook and also lots of social support.

This is supporting the argument that having friends on Facebook is similar to having them offline. Users want to change their friendships in real life to be more similar to friendships on Facebook. The site also tries to shape the concept of a friend on Facebook is more social and interactive than offline, by giving the users choice to categorise their friends into groups such as family, and titles for their different position in the family, e.g. brothers, sisters, father, son-in law etc. Through multi services on the site, opportunity is given to Facebook users to practice and enjoy their time with their friends online regardless of being far away from them.

However, membership on Facebook requires no effort, nor payment. It is free for everyone, everywhere. That makes it attractive for everyone to have access to free sharing of photos, music, videos, and statements about anything they want to express. This fact makes Facebook of use for other purposes besides friending, such as commercialisation for products, TV and even for things that do not exist in real life (e.g. movie characters). These are more like fake friends rather than actual friends, but still they are titled 'friend' on Facebook. The fake friend might represent company, policy, or collective of the person in the name of institution (e.g. university). As R2 (interviewee) said '*... I just add them as a friend, I wanted to follow them hear what they say*' (Appendix 2). This can be considered as memberships, fans, or followers than actual friends. Because friends as R1 (interviewee) mentioned '*It is like a kind of relationship and care for the other person to be able to call him friend ...*' (Appendix 2). That is one of the fundamental differences between friends online and a common understanding of the term in real life.

Furthermore, another noticeable difference between online and offline friending is the matter of having the chance to see them in person. When I asked R1 about her understanding for the term, she answered:

I have friends if I never talk to them, or don't remember who they are, or I have seen them once, I have them qualified as a friend, but they really are not in real life my friend.

Apparently, being a friend offline required physical interaction, such as face to face meeting besides the social and emotional integration. Even though, Facebook provided a free direct camera for their users, whereby every one can see each other through a webcam. Still, it is not adequate for friends to fulfil their needs for seeing and interacting with each other.

One of the services that make Facebook different from other social networks is the user's ability to share in their

wall. At the same time, this might be the other reason that makes friends different to offline. Through sharing, people can follow your activities on Facebook, as R2 explained:

.... *you just want to know what they are doing now. It just comes from curiosity. But in reality, you can't, you can't follow any one really.*

In addition, both of the interviewees mentioned that, because of sharing statements, or photos on their walls, they had to be more careful than in real life, because almost everyone can access the Facebook page. But in real life you have the ability to limit your friendship with people. As a result, many users start to un-friend people from their friend list: *'Recently, I un-friended someone who posted some 'stupid' political stuff' (R2)*. The process of un-friending is as easy as accepting a friend request on Facebook. However, both processes of being a friend and un-friending are completely different, and it needs time and social skills to do it.

Besides all of the differences that I have mentioned above, sometimes friendship in Facebook translates to being a real-life friend, as R2 described about one of his friends on Facebook: *'we were messaging and we met afterwards, and now, she is my friend'*.

Conclusion

Friendship is one of the various human relationships, which integrates people outside the family circle, and is specified by its emotional bond, which is related with the truth and exchange of love. The social network site Facebook especially, tries to input real life values such as friends on their site. The reason behind such a process is to make the cyber space more like real life. Whereby, people can keep in touch with people they care about, in the digitalised approaches that are supposed to make life easier. According to the result of this particular research, friends on and offline are not necessarily totally similar. However, it depends on the number of friends in their friend list, and type of friends as well. In a general sense, the process of making friends online might differ comparably in real life. Users may prefer to transfer their friendship style in real life more similar to the Facebook vision of friending, because it might be easier for them to keep in contact with who they care about on a daily basis. On the other side, Facebook also has potential to reconcile norms and social values on the site in order to make it more suitable for the new style of life in the digital age.

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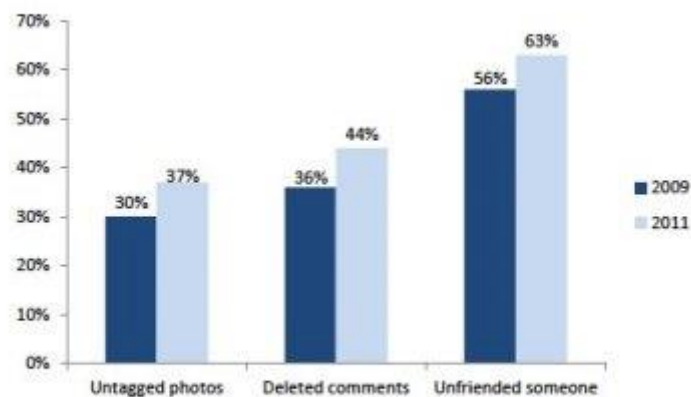
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Appendixes

Appendix One: Figures

Figure (1)

More privacy and reputation management on social networking sites
% of social networking site users who have taken these steps on their profile



Source: The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, April 26 – May 22, 2011 Spring Tracking Survey; n=2,277 adults ages 18 and older, including 755 cell phone interviews. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Margin of error is +/-3 percentage points for SNS users (n=1,015)

Figure (2) Age

Age	Responders	Percentages
24	2	%20
25	1	%10
26	1	%10
27	3	%30
29	1	%10
32	1	%10
35	1	%10
total	10	%100

Figure (3) Nationality

Nationality	Responders	Percentages
Trinidadian	1	%10
British	1	%10
Kurdish	1	%10
Turkish	1	%10
Arab	1	%10
Iraqi	1	%10
Chinese	1	%10
Pakistani	1	%10
Czech	1	%10
Korean	1	%10
Total	10	%100

Figure (4) How many Friend on Facebook

Friends number	Responders	percentage
Less than 100	1	%10
100-300	4	%40
300-500	1	%10
500-700	3	%30
More than 700	1	%10
Total	10	%100

Figure (5) How are the friends on the friend list

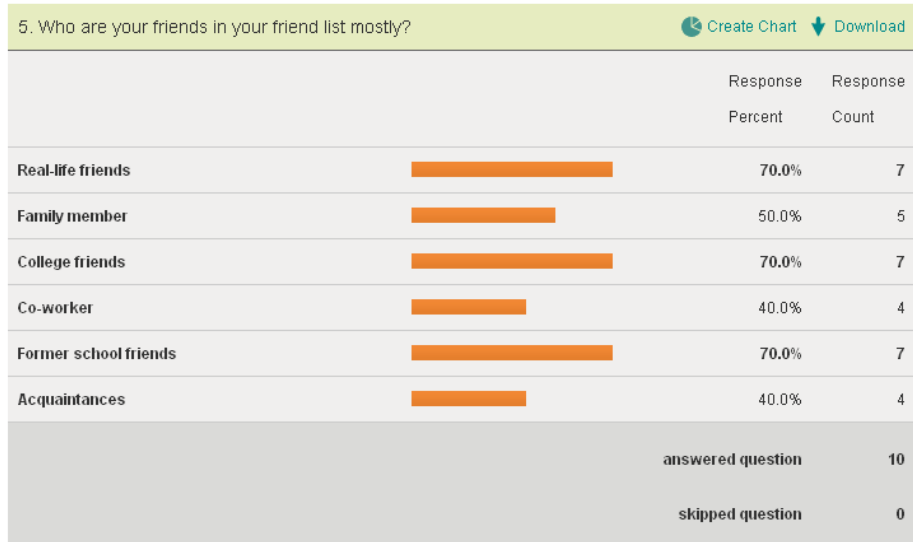


Figure (6) How many of your real life friends' pages are in your friend's list?

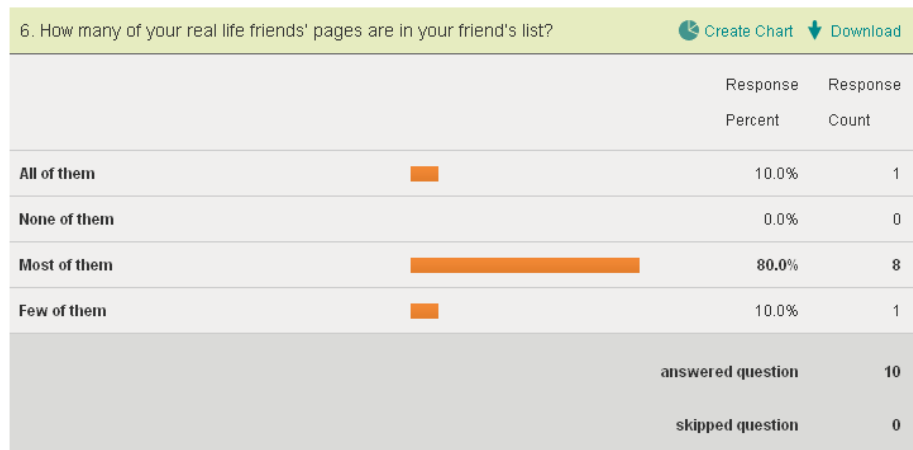


Figure (7) How do you select friends on Facebook?

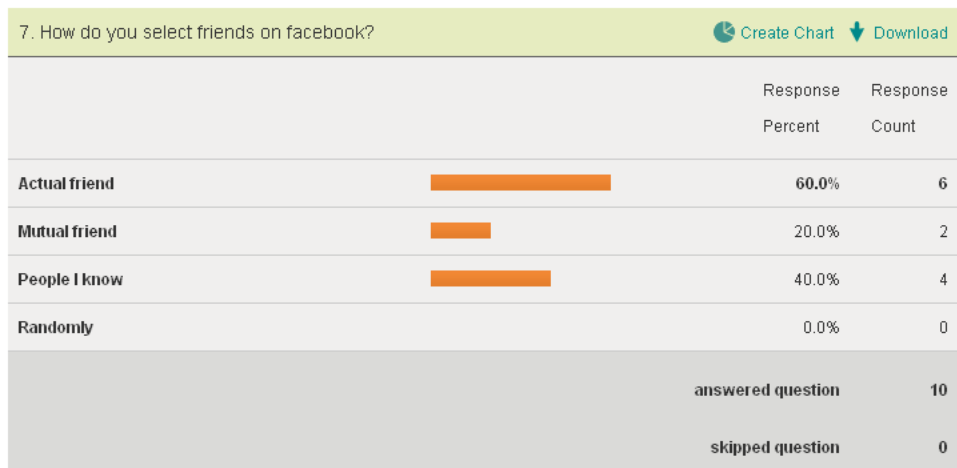


Figure (8) Fake friends

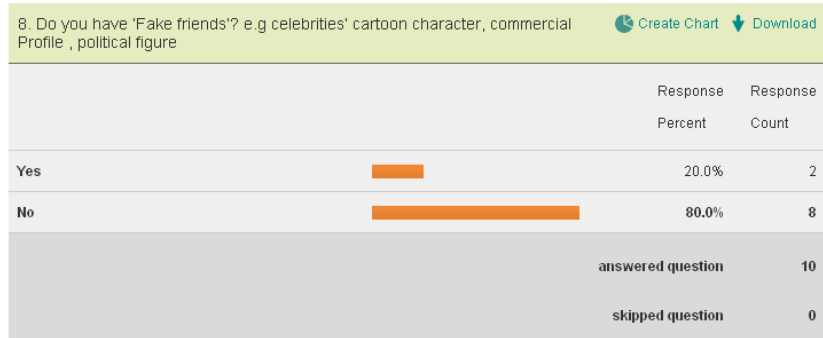


Figure (9) What was the main purpose to join Facebook?

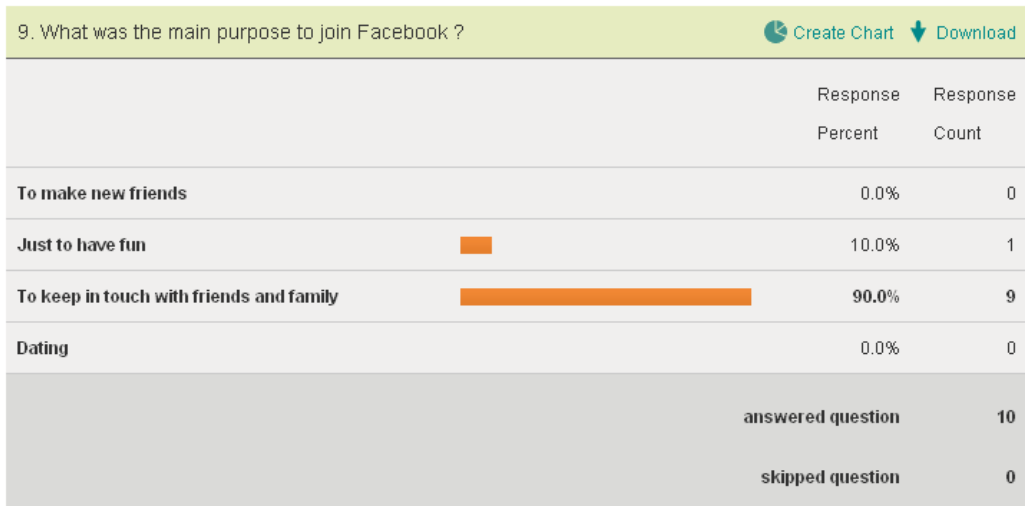


Figure (10) Receiving Friend requests

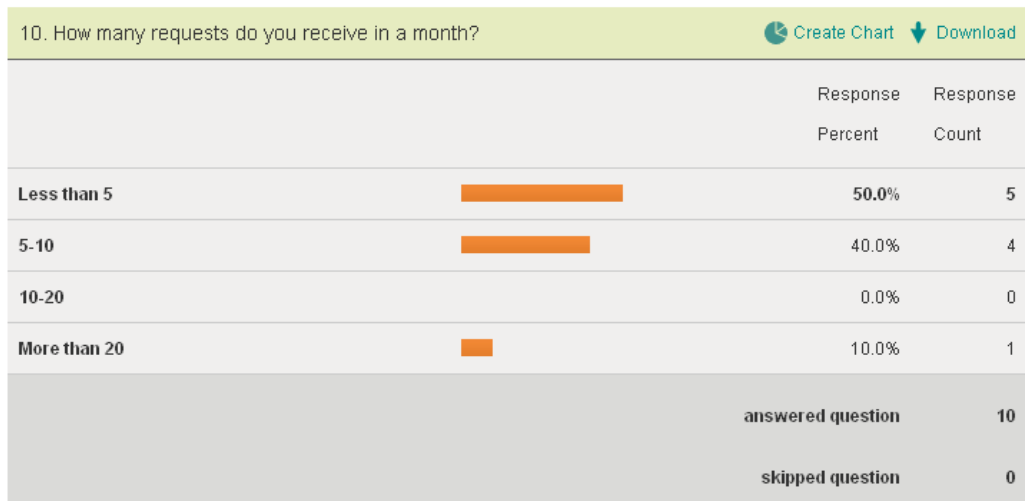


Figure (11) Sending friend requests

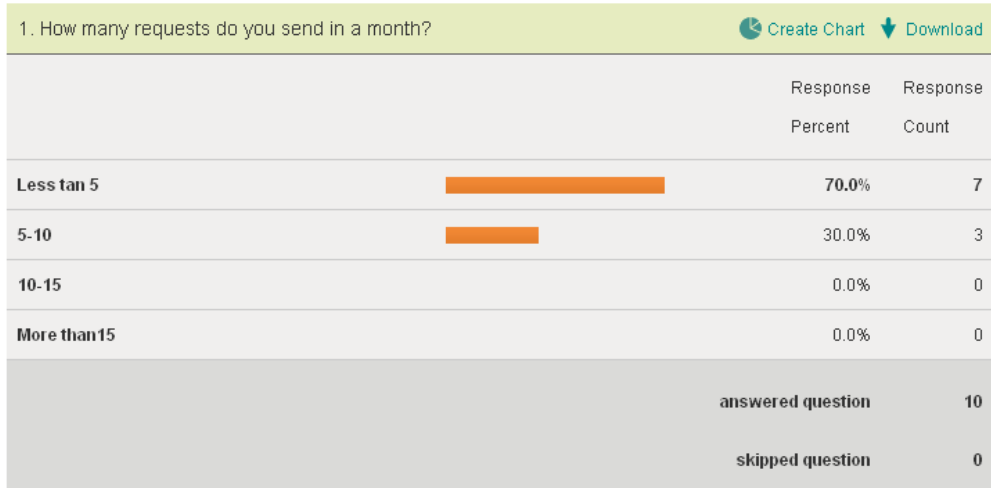


Figure (12) Do you accept every friend request?

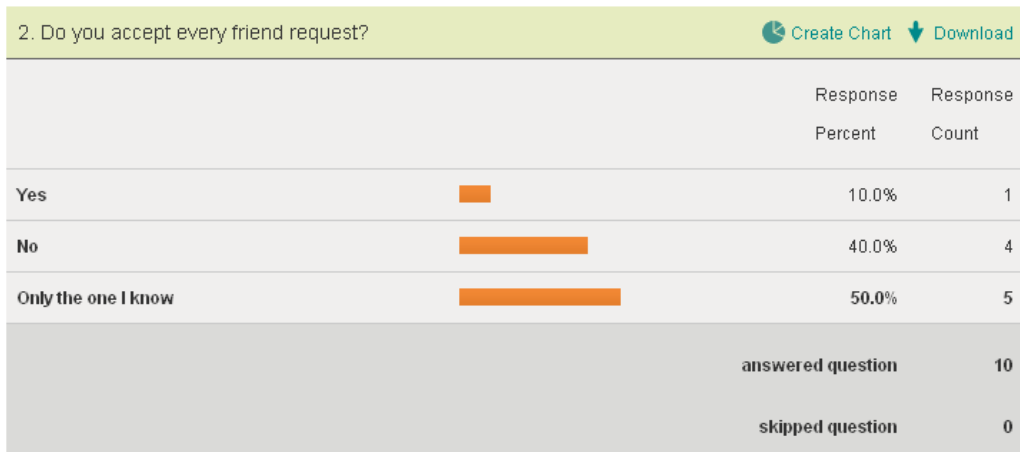


Figure (13) Have you un-friend any one?

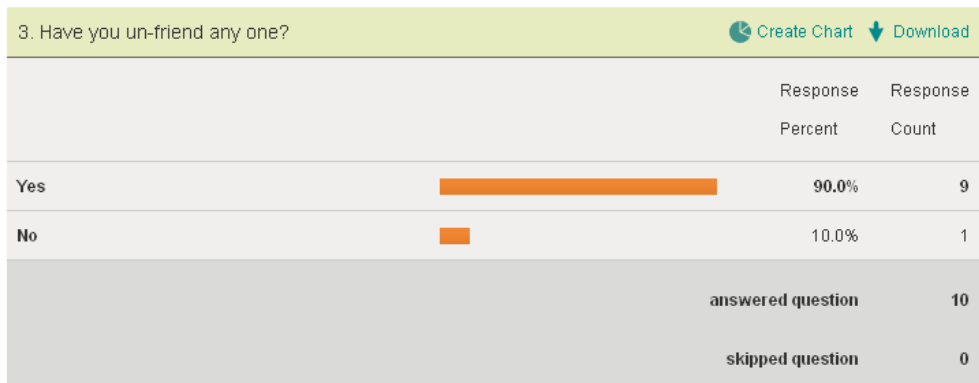


Figure (14) Reason to un-friending

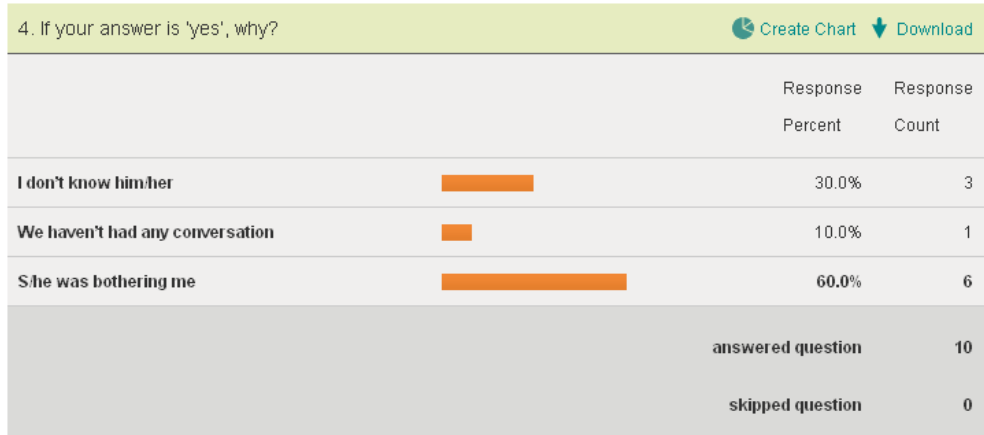


Figure (15) Sending message

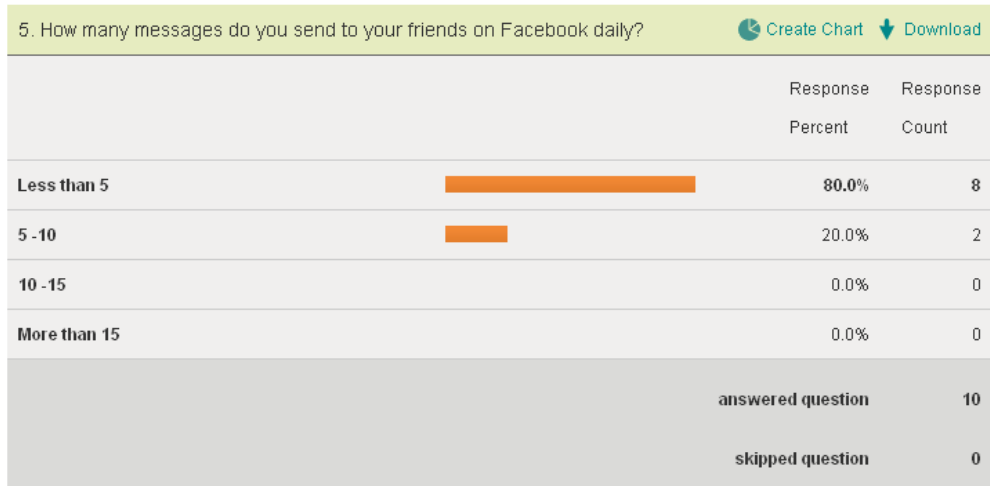


Figure (16) The main theme in the message

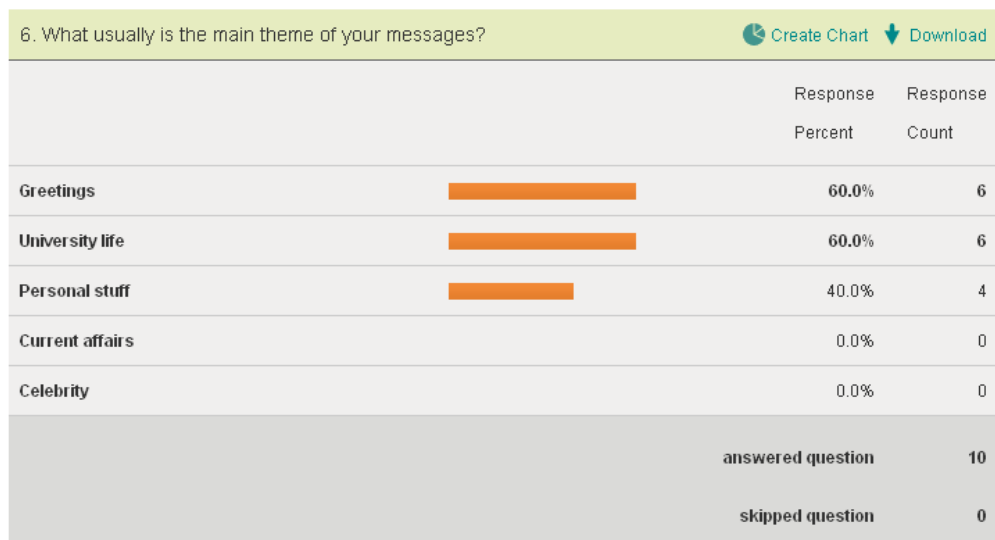
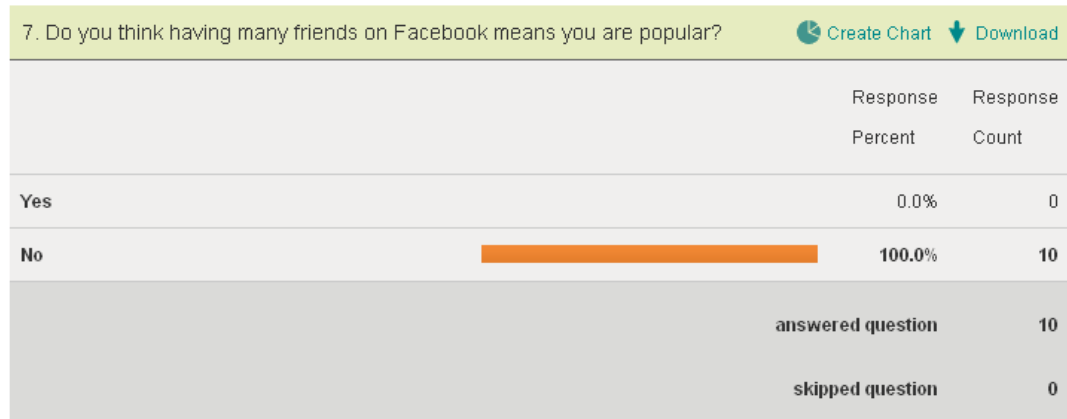


Figure (17) Popularity



Appendix Two: Interviews

First semi- structured interview:

This interview recorded on 15/09/2021 at 3:30 at IC (Information Common library) .

Interviewer: Aram Hamasaiid (+)

R1: Interviewee: Natalia Concha (-) Female, 24 years old, student.

+ Can you tell us how many friends you have on Facebook?

- I am not sure about how many exactly, but think it is more than 600.

+ Can you categorize your friend list? How many of them your real friend, your family member...Etc.?

- Well, I use to add a lots of people even I don't know them, but now I am more like careful about whom I add. So, before I got a lots of friends even people I don't really know them , but ... yes I can recognize who are my really and who are my family , but exactly I don't really know .

+ Obviously, you have lots of friends in your friend list, have start un-friending friend on Facebook?

- No, but I categorized some of them in different group such as family member. Otherwise every one is in the same position. Because I am not really organize.

+ So, you are not using it so much?

- Well, I used every day, I open it every day, but I am not really into it, like, using every services. But I use the basic life sending messages.

+ What is your main purpose to use Facebook?

- Well, for me I use it for basic communications to my family and my friends from my country since I've been abroad. I am not really publishing everything that happening in my life like my pictures and everything. My usage just kind of strict communication

+ Alright, in terms of sharing as you said sharing photo, statements, are you share them with everyone on Facebook?

- No, I find like because I got too many friends , and I just changed my privacy on my Facebook like one week ago , so before that, it was like public and I realize every one could see my pictures , you know ,

they know what is happening in my life , and I am not really ... I don't mind sometimes sharing information about myself and every things, but sometimes I find like it's really gossip around , you know you don't have to share (...) about your life to everyone and I find some time like if you publish a lot of things some people just , you know .. I am in the IC , I am I the Coffee , I am drinking beer ,everything , everything. I am not quite agreeing with that.

+ Have you ever had a problem with this things (gossiping) that you said before?

- Personally, no, but I have seen a lot of couples breaking up, finish relationship, even fighting, whatever, because of the Facebook. You have to be careful with the pictures, the people that tagged you, I don't know I don't have anything to hide, some people do, and it is dangerous.

+ So, you mean that... as much as you are protective and private in real life, you have to be the same on Facebook.

- I think even more, because in real life , you know , if you are in the city just the people you know have access to you, but in Facebook it almost all the world, the people can access to your page, to your pictures, and to your stuff. So, that's why I think you have to be more careful on Facebook than in real life.

+ So, in your opinion, can you tell me what is the different between friend on Facebook and friend in real life?

- In real life I qualify, and say this is my friend, and my real friend, and I know them. I kind of interact with them. But in Facebook just if somebody or just somebody suggests a person as a friend for you, or you know because of a friend of a friend, but if you know them and you see that you got friend in common, and you just add them, just click a button you and then you become a friend. But in real life it a lot of (...) to be friend with some body. It is not just by click a button.

+ Yes, you mean on Facebook, the friend refers to just a figure, as a picture, or something like a button. But in real life it is a relationship, and matter of trust. That's why you can see a friend...

- Yes, in real life you have to meet a person, you know. For me to say this is my friend it has to be really my friend, I have to know the person. Even if somebody introduce me a friend like kind of real contact or relationship with him this is I can say it is my friend, whereas in Facebook i know this person , I've seen them once , or somebody say it's a friend of him, so I just gonna add him as a friend, but he is not have a real relationship, even ... , I have friends if I never talk to them , or don't remember who are them , or i have seen them once i have them qualified as a friend ,but they really are not in real life my friend .

+ So, We know the differences. Now, what are the similarities between friends in Facebook and offline, you think it is just a name or there are other similarities?

- Well, if I the word 'friend' that means for me, is more than every thing. It is like kind of relationship and care for the other person to be able to call him friend. But, the similarities in generally speaking all of them friend, like the people you know in general. But of course as in real life, in Facebook you got friends that really know, you are in touch with them and you talk to them like in the real life. so I think in the similarities the people that I really, really are your friend like in a relationship with you can carry on this relationship as it was in real life , even if you see a person you can communicate with them by

Facebook, and then see them in the next minute

+ **Thank you for your time.**

- You welcome!

Second Semi- Structured Interview:

This interview recorded on 15/09/2021 at 5:30 at IC (Information Common library).

R2: Interviewee: Melih Sever (-) 25 years old, student

+ **Let's start by this question, are you regular user of Facebook? or how many friends do you have on Facebook?**

- I have 640 friends.

+ **Can you tell me who are your friends mostly in your friend list on Facebook.**

- There real life friend, college friends and co-workers from my teaching years.

+ **Can you be more specific about what kind of friend you have; i mean major part of your friend list, so do you have 600 friends in real life?**

- I don't think so, some people, some people in my Facebook, they are like famous people in turkey they are like ...

+ **Celebrities?**

- Yeah, I just add them as a friend I wanted to follow them what they say. And, some other people like my relatives.. and other s like magazines , TV pages ...

+ **Like 'Fake friends'?**

- Yeah, like that.

+ **So, what is the main purpose to join Facebook?**

- At the moment, I am sending messages through facebook, just for communication .Because it is free, isn't it?

+ **As you said before that your friend list fluctuated, having said that, have you un-friend anyone from your list?**

- Because I realize that some people posting 'foolish stuff' on Facebook wall, and I don't like the posts, so I Un-friended them. Recently, I un-friended some one who posted some 'stupid' politic stuff.

+ **How about privacy?**

- Yeah, I changed the privacy settings on Facebook.

+ **Alright, can you tell us what the Facebook means is for you, as a social network site?**

- For me, Facebook means, when I get bored I look photos of others, and I message people.

+ **For having fun and communication, isn't it?**

- Exactly! , but sometimes I know some people wrote something useful for me, and then I read it and get to use it.

+ **Are you shearing everything, I mean photo, video, and statements with all your friends? Or, you just show them for a group of your friends?**

- Not at all, some stuff may be once a month, but for everyone, and I don't have privacy for a certain

group.

+ **So, you don't categorize your friend list for groups?**

- No, I don't know how to do it before.

+ **Have you meet any of your Facebook friends that you didn't know him/her before?**

- Actually it is happened (...), we were messaging and we meet afterwards, and now, she is my friend.

+ **what is your understanding for term 'friend' on Facebook? Do you find it different from real life?**

- I mean, you know some people from high school, even if you don't like them, you add them as a friend. Because they are your high school friends. So, you just wanna know what they are doing now. It just came from curiosity.

+ **But can you do that in real life?**

- You can't, you can't follow any one really.

+ **Alright, can you tell me other difference? Like conversation on and off Facebook.**

- May be your more relaxed on Facebook, because you don't see them, isn't it? Or , maybe you don't wanna share too much stuff because you far away from them.

+ **Do you think one of the purpose that people having friends because of the capacity of having friend in outside your location, country? Through facebook , it is easier to find friend outside your country.**

- Yeah, that's another way to making friends on Facebook, but I am not really using it in that way.

+ **So, what are the similarities between Friend on and offline?**

- As I said, who doesn't like you, they wanna have you on Facebook. They want to following you, because they envy you, they are jealous, Curiosity. But, in real life when you see them, you want greeting with them, you want talk with them. It because been on Facebook don't require any efforts , anything you just can add then , and then , have look , if anything useful for you take it .people take advantages of Facebook , that's the way I understand it.

+ **So, can you think about disadvantages of friending on Facebook?**

- Some people publishing stupid thing intentionally and unintentionally, and they are bothering me.

+ **Anything else?**

- No, that's all, thank you.

+ **Thank you.**