

## Philosophy's Role in Theorizing Online Friendships

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**Abstract:** The proliferation of online friendships with their accompanying benefits, promises, dangers, and risks propelled scholars from various disciplines – such as Internet studies, Media studies, Sociology, Psychology, among others – to theorize online friendships. However, the role of the discipline of Philosophy in such theorizing remains unarticulated, if not unclear. Fleshing out Philosophy's role in theorizing online friendship is important because it puts to the fore the contribution that Philosophy can make in thinking about online friendships – contributions that might not have been provided yet by other disciplines but are equally essential. In light of such, this paper endeavors to identify the role that Philosophy can play in theorizing online friendships. It shall show that the possible role of Philosophy in theorizing online friendships lies in: (1) the contribution it can make in answering and clarifying foundational questions asked by other disciplines about the nature of online friendship and friendship; (2) the contribution it can give in securing a good foundation for the normative claims proffered by other disciplines regarding online friendship; and (3) the contribution it can provide in crafting frameworks or lenses (based on classic and contemporary philosophical views on friendship) through which online friendship can be scrutinized by other disciplines.

**Key Words:** Online friendship; Internet studies; Cyberspace; Pandemic; Philosophy

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of online friendships with their accompanying benefits, promises, dangers, and risks propelled scholars from various disciplines – such as Internet studies, Media studies, Sociology, Psychology, among others – to theorize online friendships. However, the role of the discipline of Philosophy in such theorizing remains unarticulated, if not unclear. Fleshing out Philosophy's role in theorizing online friendship is important because it puts to the fore the contribution that Philosophy can make in thinking about online friendships – contributions that might not have been provided yet by other disciplines but are equally essential. In light of such, this paper endeavors to identify the role that Philosophy can play in theorizing online friendships. It shall show that the possible role of Philosophy in theorizing online friendships lies in: (1) the contribution it can make in answering and clarifying foundational questions asked by other disciplines

about the nature of online friendship and friendship; (2) the contribution it can give in securing a good foundation for the normative claims proffered by other disciplines regarding online friendship; and (3) the contribution it can provide in crafting frameworks or lenses (based on classic and contemporary philosophical views on friendship) through which online friendship can be scrutinized by other disciplines.

This paper shall proceed as follows. In order to provide some concrete context, the first section of this paper shall rehearse the positive and negative impacts of the Internet to our lives, with particular focus on friendships. In general, this section shall show that while the Internet and the friendships established and maintained therein provide a gamut of benefits and promises, they also carry with them a number of dangers and disadvantages. On the other hand, in line with this year's congress theme, the second section of this paper shall proceed with showing how the COVID-19 pandemic – which forced

us to migrate our shared activities with friends from face-to-face contexts to online platforms – affected the dynamics of friendship and how such dynamics propelled us to re-think our friendships. Finally, the third section of this paper shall flesh out the role that the discipline of Philosophy can play in theorizing online friendships.

## 2. THE INTERNET TODAY

In our contemporary era, it is undeniable that the Internet, especially its social networking sites and social media, has penetrated our everyday lives, both professionally and personally (Wang, Jackson, Gaskin, & Wang, 2014). Professionally, the Internet has played vital roles in the various functions of businesses such as in e-commerce; the academe such as in online journals, forums, discussion groups, and e-learning; and other professions involving media and communications. Personally, the Internet has connected people globally through the use of e-mails, chats, video-calls, and the like. Spatial and temporal limits are now transcended (Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, & Schneider, 2013). Indeed, we have become more connected and updated with the various life-events of our distant relatives, friends, colleagues, and even strangers. The Internet has also provided us with more avenues to be creative and innovative in presenting ourselves online (Huang, Unger, Soto, Fujimoto, Pentz, Jordan-Marsh, & Valente, 2014). Indeed, as Dreyfus (2009) notes, “the Internet will...put us in touch with all of reality, allows us to have even more flexible identities...and... add new dimensions of meaning to our lives” (p. 2).

Now, one of the key areas of human life that benefited from Internet technology is friendship. With the popularity of the Internet across all ages (Leung & McBride-Chang, 2013); with the increased access to the Internet (Huang, Unger, Soto, Fujimoto, Pentz, Jordan-Marsh, & Valente, 2014); and with the various affordances of the Internet, our contemporary time has witnessed a proliferation of online friendships. These friendships either come in the form of purely online interactions or a mixture of online and offline interactions (but with a higher degree of online interaction). Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, and Schneider (2013) think that one of the reasons why friendships are easily formed online is that the Internet is “an extremely effective tool for discovering like-minded others. Compared to the offline world, cyber-space offers immediate access to more people, and similarities in interests and ideals are more easily

detected” (p. 34). The Internet also provides an avenue for online friends to engage in shared activities such as playing online games especially massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) which do not come without benefits such as the exercise of a variety of cognitive and social skills (Leung & McBride-Chang, 2013). On a different sphere, Zezelj, Ioannou, Franc, Psaltis, and Martinovic (2017) argue that online intergroup friendships are able to facilitate a decrease in prejudice and an increase in positive feelings towards rival groups among youths of post-conflict societies such as Serbia, Cyprus, and Croatia. Chan (2020) also maintains that online friendships have become beneficial for hidden youth in Hong Kong. Although society perceive them as deviant, Chan (2020) reveals that “hidden youth make friends on the Internet” (p. 3) and that “Just like ordinary youth, hidden youth can maintain intimate relationships, only that their relationships have migrated from real-life context to online contexts” (p. 6). On the other hand, on a more individual level, Buote, Wood, and Pratt (2009) contend that online communication provides an opportunity for less socially skilled individuals to form friendships. “Insecure individuals, who typically have less friendship experience, might benefit from the many opportunities to practice initiating friendships without the tremendous costs associated with face-to-face relationships” (Buote, Wood, & Pratt, 2009, p. 562). Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, and Schneider (2013) affirm Buote, Wood, and Pratt (2009) in saying that “those who do not or cannot benefit from ‘real world’ companionship of offline friends, cyber-companionship can have meaningful benefits” (p. 36). Hood, Creed, and Mills (2018), in a similar vein, argue that online friendships can serve to compensate the lack of friendships in the face-to-face offline world.

While the Internet brings with it a gamut of benefits, it is not without a number of disadvantages, dangers, and risks. In the area of friendship, Buote, Wood, and Pratt (2009) argue that although the Internet has some benefits for less socially skilled individuals, “it is also possible that the virtual environment could further limit successful friendship formation” (p. 562). The prevalence of cyberbullying online cannot also be overlooked. With the anonymity that the Internet affords, cyberbullies may come in the form of not just a “ganging together of bad kids” but also “ill-intentioned adults pretending to be teens” (Leung & McBride-Chang, 2013, p. 163). And as friends largely draw, influence, and shape each other’s selves, there are concerns about online friends’ unhealthy norms, habits, and behaviors. “Exposure to

risky content posted by friends can cultivate unfavorable norms that are then rapidly spread through the online networks and contribute to the adoption of risky beliefs and behaviors” (Huang, Unger, Soto, Fujimoto, Pentz, Jordan-Marsh, & Valente, 2014, p. 509). One of the unhealthy behaviors that worry scholars is the excessive use of Internet technology to the point that such use “interferes with face-to-face interaction or other aspects of daily living”; hence, becoming pathological or addictive (Smahel & Brown, 2012, pp. 381-383). As a consequence, it “steals time spent on actual interactions, leading to isolation of its users” (Lima, Marques, Muiños, & Camilo, 2017, p. 3) as well as propelling young people “to locate friends and pursue relationships via online activities” (Smahel & Brown, 2012, p. 382). Such consequences alarm scholars like Wang, Jackson, Gaskin, and Wang (2014) because such relationships “tend to be superficial, shallow and short-lived” (p. 230). Meanwhile, Pope Francis in his recent encyclical *Fratelli tutti: On fraternity and social friendship* also expresses the same concerns about online relationships. Pope Francis (2020) considers what he calls the “illusion of digital communication” (p. 28) as one of the “dark clouds over a closed world” (p. 7) today. Pope Francis (2020) in *Fratelli tutti 43* writes that “Digital relationships, which do not demand the slow and gradual cultivation of friendships...have the appearance of sociability. Yet they do not really build community... Digital connectivity is not enough to build bridges” (p. 29).

### 3. FRIENDSHIPS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Internet penetrating almost every aspect of our lives is bolstered by the advent of the Corona Virus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. With the accompanying physical distancing that is required to mitigate the transmission of the virus, we are forced us to migrate face-to-face offline activities to the online realm. In the case of friendships, this meant that shared activities that are usually done by friends face-to-face offline had to be done online. “In the early days of the pandemic, there was a rush to socialize in novel ways” (Kitchener, 2021). Friends utilized existing features and affordances of Internet technology to maintain their friendship (Kitchener, 2021; Borresen, 2020; Rogers, 2020).

However, with the pandemic getting worse as months went by and with the overwhelming personal and professional activities done online, friendship is

one of the key areas of life that experienced a technology fatigue (Kitchener, 2021). Borresen (2020) notes that what had been an exciting and relaxing time for friends became yet another task in one’s to-do list that have to be routinely and taxingly accomplished. With the technology fatigue comes a further dissatisfaction towards online friendships. “[V]irtual hangouts tend to be less fulfilling than in-person ones and leave us longing for that physical connection” (Borresen, 2020). Although social media and the online activities that it offers provide some solace in these trying times, Hoppner (2021) reveals that for “younger people...they’re no replacement for real life friendships.” Mull (2021) also contends that while Zoom and FaceTime are useful for maintaining relationships, they “couldn’t re-create the ease of social serendipity, or bring back the activities that bound us together.” As a consequence of technology fatigue and online friendship dissatisfaction, more people are choosing to focus more on their close friends rather than attempting to connect to everyone. “This time of hunkering down doesn’t leave much room for those casual friends or acquaintances” (Bonos, 2021). Some relationships had to be put on pause for the sake of relationships that bring more meaning and purpose in these trying times (Borresen, 2020).

While some relationships are only put on a pause, others are ended altogether. Hamedy and Ebrahimji (2020) identifies physical distance as a reason for the rift between friends during this pandemic, but other scholars think that the sudden differences in values, attitudes, and priorities pertaining to the pandemic is a more pressing reason. Violation of COVID-19 related policies especially when done by a friend causes rifts among friends during this pandemic (Kale, 2021; Watson, 2021). Suddenly, friends are seen in a different light revealing fundamental differences in the ethical dimension (Kale, 2021). This possibility of discovering differences, not noticed before, leads to what Kitchener (2021) calls a “friendship doubt.” With the anxiety that this pandemic brings, some had been overthinking the status of their friendships such as “dwelling on anything said that might have come off” during online interactions (Kitchener, 2021). “This isolation can make us doubt our friendships, leading us to wonder: Do my friends like me as much as they used to?” (Kitchener, 2021).

The changes that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to our relationships especially to our friendships, however, is not without insights that many realized in the course of the past year.

Accompanying the overthinking (whether negative or positive) about friendship is a reflection or questioning of our understanding of friendship especially in terms of its nature and its significance to our lives. Watson (2021) almost always gets an affirmative answer from her respondents in asking the question: “Do you think the pandemic has made you reflect on the significance of your friendships?” Watson (2021) further shares, “Many speak to me using these clear terms: they illustrate what they have learned, or what they notice is now missing” in their friendships. Watson (2021) even goes to the extent of saying that “suddenly everyone is an expert” on friendship and “was surprised by how much people had to say” about how they “tried (or failed) to sustain their friendships under restrictions.” The support or company we get from our friends suddenly becomes more highlighted during this pandemic (Watson, 2021). Mull (2021) adds, “the pandemic evaporated entire categories of friendship, and by doing so, depleted the joys that make up a human life...But that does present an opportunity...we’ll now know what it’s like to be without them.”

#### 4. PHILOSOPHY AND ONLINE FRIENDSHIPS

The foregoing has shown that, indeed, Internet technology – whose indispensability has been revealed by the COVID-19 Pandemic – has penetrated the various areas of our contemporary lives of which friendship is part. While the Internet has various benefits, advantages, and even promises, it also has dangers, risks, and disadvantages that needs to be addressed. In terms of online friendships, various scholars from different fields such as Sociology, Psychology, and Media Studies proffered a variety of ways to address the risks, dangers, and disadvantages accompanying the proliferation of online friendships. While we do not have the space to elaborate on these proffered solutions, suffice to say that there is an agreement among scholars about the inevitability of touching upon the nature of “online friendship” and for that matter the nature of “friendship” in the process of analyzing the phenomenon of online friendships and in thinking of ways on how to address its problems. Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, and Schneider (2013) note, for instance, that “The advent of Facebook has been seen by many to have modified the definition of the word ‘friend’ among some of the many millions of Facebook users...” (p. 33). And in their review of the literature that deals with the

implications of electronic communication to friendship, Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, and Schneider (2013) argue that such literature “is based on a highly oversimplified concept of what friendship is and means” (p. 33). Hood, Creed, and Mills (2018) agree with Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, and Schneider (2013) in saying that “Another consideration when examining online ‘friends’ is that the definition of ‘friend’ is likely to be broader than that used in other contexts” (p. 101). Amatulli, Guido, and Barbarito (2014), in fleshing out the implications of their study about online friendships to fields such as marketing, also share the same view in maintaining that the “nature of friendship on SNS [social networking sites] is different from friendship in offline contexts” (p. 16).

These social scientific studies about online friendships also went to the point of inquiring about the “unreality” or “non-genuineness” of online friendship in contrast to the “reality” or “genuineness” of face-to-face offline friendship. Leung and McBride-Chang (2013), for example, in their recommendation, suggests that “future studies should include longitudinal comparison of online friendship in MMOGs [massively multiplayer online games] versus friendship in real life to provide a clear pattern of whether online friendship could actually replace or reduce the quality of real life friendship or not” (p. 178). Amatulli, Guido, and Barbarito (2014), on the other hand, reveal that “individuals accrue an extremely wide number of friends on SNSs [social networking sites] but they do not consider their virtual friends as real friends” (p. 17). Amatulli, Guido, and Barbarito (2014) conclude that “online relationships are not genuine relationships” (p. 15).

Now, these endeavors to reflect about the nature of “online friendship” and “friendship,” whether done consciously or unconsciously, are endeavors that are by nature foundational. Questions such as “What is the nature of online friendship?”; “What is the nature of friendship?”; “Are online friendships really/genuinely friendships?”; “Are the essential features of friendship in the face-to-face offline world realizable in the online world?”; “Is my online friend really a friend?”; “Does online friendship have a value?”; “If it does have a value, what kind of value does it have?”; “How should we approach online friendship given the kind of value it has?”; “Should we cultivate it, nurture it, develop it? Or should we confront it with suspicion, or even throw it away altogether?” are foundational questions whose answers serve as the foundation on which our other



beliefs and ways by which we think about “online friendship” and “friendship” rests. As such, by virtue of the foundational nature of the aforementioned inquires, philosophers have an opportunity to participate in efforts to think about how Internet technology changed the way we live our contemporary lives and how such changes propelled us to re-examine the way we think about the nature of “online friendship” and “friendship.” Construed as a discipline that endeavors to examine and clarify the foundational concepts upon which other concepts that matter in our lives rest, Philosophy surely has something substantial and meaningful to offer in the on-going discussions.

The contribution of philosophers to on-going discussions becomes more pressing when one realizes that the direction by which the discussion is taking is already inquiring about the “reality”/ “genuineness” or “unreality”/ “non-genuineness” of online friendships – an inquiry that is proper (though not exclusive) to the discipline of Philosophy which has been concerned, since time immemorial, about the reality (metaphysics) and value (axiology) of things that exist in the world. Surely, the on-going discussions may benefit from philosophers clarifying the bold claims about the alleged “unreality”/ “non-genuineness” of online friendships in contrast to the alleged “reality”/ “genuineness” of face-to-face offline friendships (Jeske, 2019).

It is also worth noting that the ongoing non-philosophical discussions about online friendships contain normative claims about how we ought to approach online friendships. For instance, Lima, Marques, Muiños, and Camilo (2017) write that the “digitalization’ of our lives should not replace the value of promoting and keeping offline friendships... [T]he possibility of living a ‘second life’ in a digital context, where multiple social media networks co-exist, is an interesting possibility, but one that should be regarded with great caution” (p. 10). Leung and McBride-Chang (2013), on the other hand, take a more positive position in saying that “We should keep an open mind when evaluating the potential risks and benefits that children and adolescents may have in the cyber world” (p. 176). The discipline of Philosophy can surely contribute to this evaluation of potential risks and benefits of online friendships by examining the reasons provided by non-philosophy scholars upon which the normative claims about online friendships rest. Through such examination, Philosophy (especially Applied Ethics) will be able to aid in securing a good foundation for the

said normative claims or be able to aid in clarifying such normative claims.

Finally, friendship has been, in one way or another, a concern of philosophers throughout the history of Philosophy – from Confucius and Aristotle to Kant and Nietzsche and beyond. As such, the classic and contemporary philosophical views on friendship can serve as frameworks or lenses through which online friendships can be scrutinized and interrogated. In addition, engaging in recent issues on online friendship is an opportunity for philosophers to re-cast or re-shape the classic and contemporary views on friendship in light of online friendship, considering that these classic and contemporary views are views about friendship prior to the rise and proliferation of Internet technology and consequently prior to the rise and proliferation of online friendships. It would be interesting to see how these classic and contemporary views on friendship will stand (or not) in the face of these recent developments in technology and friendship. There may have been new facets of friendship that arise in online friendships that classic and contemporary philosophical views on friendship may have overlooked or failed to take into account.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion has shown that, indeed, Philosophy, just like the other disciplines, has a role to play in theorizing online friendships. By virtue of Philosophy being foundational and analytical in nature, it can contribute to answering and clarifying foundational inquiries about the nature and value of online friendships, as well as securing a good foundation for the normative claims about online friendships made by other disciplines. And by virtue of Philosophy being concerned about friendship throughout its history, it can provide frameworks or lenses (based on classic and contemporary philosophical views on friendship) through which other disciplines can examine online friendships.

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