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## Hyperfriendship and Beyond: Friends and Social Norms on LiveJournal

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Social networking services, such as Tribe, Orkut and Friendster, require users to publicly articulate their relationship with other users, often through a single binary mechanism such as friend/not friend. Articulation of such simplicity destabilizes the meaning of the relationships in the minds of the service's users (boyd 2004). Except for boyd who offers a cursory analysis, there have been no detailed accounts of the effects this public binary articulation has on social interactions and relationships. There has also been little or no research on the development or existence of social norms and codes governing the public articulation of relationships.

This dearth of research is not surprising given that social networking services rarely facilitate significant online user interaction, discussion or expression beyond relationship articulation. Thus, the impact of public articulation of relationships on social relations is less apparent or perhaps very minor.

However, when users publicly articulate relationships *and* are involved in significant public social interaction as is the case of LiveJournal, which is essentially both a blogging and a social networking service (Raynes-Goldie 2004), acts of public articulation can sometimes be catalysts for explosive social conflict, or "drama."

This observation is supported by a large body of anecdotal evidence, as well as an entire section on LJdrama.org (a site chronicling the disagreements and other dramatic social events between LiveJournal users) dedicated to extreme conflict relating to public acts of articulation.

These observations of course raise the question—why can acts of public articulation on LiveJournal lead to a kind of intense social conflict which is apparently unparalleled in more traditional forms of communication? In order to answer this question, we conducted two user studies. First, we examined user understandings of what it means to list/not list someone as a "friend" on the service. Then, based on the results of our first study, we conducted an in depth survey to examine the consistency (or lack thereof) of behaviors relating to public articulation of relationships on LiveJournal and what role they may have in social conflict.

Before presenting our results, we will first provide a brief description of the LiveJournal service and its culture. We will also discuss the methodology that we employed in our research.

## **What is LiveJournal?**

LiveJournal is a free blogging service with a strong social networking and community element. Every user gets a blog or journal - as it is commonly referred to on the service - which is augmented with the social networking component of LiveJournal. This component takes the form of a profile page and a friends page. Intertwined in these two pages is the friends feature of the system, which is where users publicly articulate their relationships through the binary mechanism friend/not friend. By visiting the profile page of another user and clicking on a button, you can specify that user as a "friend" and add them to your social network. Specifically, adding a user to your social network causes that user's name to be listed as a friend on your profile page, as well as listing your name on their profile page as a "friend of." Additionally, if you have any protected journal entries (called "friends-only" entries), the added user will now be able to read them.

Aside from showing who is connect to whom, the main intended purpose of adding friends to your social network is to make it easier to read their journal entries. When you add someone to your friends list, their entries become aggregated with your other friends on your "friends page," much like subscribing to an RSS feed.

In addition to the friends list and profile feature, LiveJournal offers community or group journals as well as a popular comment feature, where users can have threaded discussions about journal entries.

## **LiveJournal "Friends"**

In addition to being a functional system descriptor which appears throughout the interface on LiveJournal, the term "friend" has become an integral part of the service's user vocabulary and culture. Specifically, within the LiveJournal world, the term "friend" has a different meaning than its typical offline usage. Amongst users of the system, "friend" is used as a noun and as well as a verb. "Friending" refers to the addition of someone to your friends list. Likewise, to "defriend" someone is to remove them from your list. "Friending" someone is generally a one-way interaction, but the other user is free to "friend" you back if they so desire. As we will soon see, problems can arise because users do not always have the same understanding of what it means to be friends on LiveJournal.

## **Methodology**

Our study took on two main parts. First, we conducted a participatory study using interviews with several LiveJournal users. We formed our questions based on extensive browsing of publicly accessible user journals and profiles over a two year period. Participants and example cases were selected from diverse backgrounds, reflecting the cultural and behavioral heterogeneity of the LiveJournal user population. Interviews were conducted informally over instant messaging clients. Interviewees were initially asked a number of open-ended questions about usage, in order to stimulate reflexive and open-ended discussion. Theoretically loaded questions were avoided, and participants were instead encouraged to freely explore their habits, motivations and beliefs in concrete terms.

Based on the themes that emerged from our interviews and observation of the service, we developed an online survey aimed at providing a more detailed snapshot of behaviors and attitudes around friending and defriending at the current point in the community's development. This survey consisted of background questions; questions about the composition of the respondent's friends list; and questions about the respondent's behaviors and attitudes with respect to friending/defriending. Respondents answered the majority of these questions using a 7-point Likert-type scale. Respondents were also able to leave comments about issues raised in the survey, which they frequently did. We posted the survey online as a web form, posted the link to it in several LiveJournal communities, and asked users to repeat the link in their own journals in order to elicit more responses. 1830 users completed the survey in time for our data analysis, but several thousand more completed the survey after this point. We hope to use the full collection of responses in our future work.

For the rest of this essay, we will use the words friendship and friend primarily in reference to the context of LiveJournal. When we mean to discuss friendship and friends in their conventional sense, we qualify our words accordingly.

### **Interview Findings: Meanings of Friendship**

Our findings indicated that the understandings of friendship on the service were multiple, not just across users, but within individual understandings as well. We also noted that since there are no built-in mechanisms on LiveJournal to distinguish between the many definitions of friendship, it is often difficult for two users who both call each other a friend to know if they are talking about the same thing.

We found that there were seven key understandings of friendship on LiveJournal: as content; as an offline facilitator; as online community; as trust; as a courtesy; as a declaration; and as nothing. These understandings are in no way exclusive, as many interviewees reported having overlapping or multiple understandings.

### **Friendship as Content**

Just as the designers of the system had initially intended, the majority of users interviewed had built at least part of their friends lists as reading lists. Although motivations for wanting to read other journals varied, some users specifically sought compelling sources of information unrelated to actual relationships. One user described “probably ninety percent” of his LiveJournal use as “being about the content.” The nature of desirable information varied between users, but was generally considered to be, among other things, amusing web links; provocative conceptual musings; and attractive artistic output. Overall, there was an emphasis on “product.”

Thus, the friends list can act as an information filter, and friends act as a custom set of specifically chosen content providers (Raynes-Goldie 2004). By choosing friends according to the kind of things they write about, a user can ensure that the friend page is always a source of relevant data. In these circumstances, a friend is considered “someone who I like to read.”

### **Friendship as Offline Facilitator**

Another common trend amongst interviewees was the use of LiveJournal as a convenient means of facilitating offline relationships. These users made a specific point of friending any of their offline friends who also had journals. Often, these would be people with whom face-to-face interactions occurred on a frequent basis. In this case, communication on LiveJournal is used to organize offline interactions, such as posting a journal entry to announce a party or using comments to discuss meeting times. In other cases, friends would see each other infrequently, but would use LiveJournal as a way to asynchronously keep up to date with each other's lives. As one user describes:

One of my friends is rarely online for chatting and never answers his phone. He posts about once a week. And about twice a year he'll call out of the blue and say, 'Hey, I'm feeling a road trip coming on... mind if I crash at your place next week?' And by reading each other's journals we're enough aware of what the other has been up to that conversation flows more easily when he's here.

In cases where users choose friends according to who they know offline, LiveJournal friend networks tend to mimic established social webs. Another user, upon seeing a diagrammatic visualization of his own network, remarked that "the real world and the online world of LiveJournal are becoming one." In these circumstances, a friend is considered "someone I know offline."

### **Friendship as Online Community**

In contrast to the view of friendship as an offline facilitator, many users had never met the majority of their friends in person. Instead, friends were people they interacted with exclusively through LiveJournal, or other form of computer mediated communication.

Most users who had a large number of friends who they only interacted with through LiveJournal considered these relationships to be relatively weak. Generally, these users found more intimacy in relationships that take place offline, or in more traditional communication methods. One user related a story about another woman she disliked and avoided offline, yet she counted her as a LiveJournal friend because they had some of the same interests. In describing the relationship, she observed that "you don't have to be as discriminating because you could always just not respond to a post."

This pragmatic attitude is strongly evocative of the "strength of weak ties" - a phrase used to describe how our acquaintances provide highly specialized services to us. Garton et al. (1997) echo the common assertion that online interactions employ a network model of community that puts particular emphasis on weak ties.

Some of the most illustrative examples of the emphasis on weak ties on LiveJournal are the various "add me" communities, in which thousands of users attempt to make new friends. Quite regularly, members solicit specific services as a condition of reciprocal friendship. Posts such as the following are not uncommon:

comment on my journal + i'll add you.

note; if you plan to never comment on my entries don't bother adding me. =)

Nevertheless, users who invest a significant amount of time in their relationships that are exclusive to LiveJournal found that a few of these weak ties mature into strong ties, providing significant emotional and material support is provided. One user reported that the process of building friendships with others on LiveJournal was instrumental in getting through his depression. One woman even paid for a month's worth of his rent.

Ultimately, it is unclear whether or not the ratio of strong ties to weak ties is the same on LiveJournal as it is in offline community. Yet, all the interviewees agreed that the ratio is at least higher than in other online communities. Thus, while an instant messaging contact that one has never met is generally considered an "acquaintance," a LiveJournal friend with the same qualification can be considered anything from an "acquaintance" to a "close, personal confidante."

### **Friendship as Trust**

Since only friends are able to read a user's protected journal entries, a significant minority of users see the friends list largely as an access control mechanism. One woman put it explicitly: "I friend people that, for whatever reason I want to allow to read my locked posts." Many users have privacy concerns that lead them to make their entire journal protected. One such user explained this pattern, saying, "Once the stuff is up there, it's nearly impossible to get rid of it. [Making posts] friends only gives me control over what information I disclose." In these circumstances, a friend is "someone I trust to read my private journal."

### **Friendship as Courtesy**

As mentioned, friendship is generally a one-way function, as reciprocity is not guaranteed. Furthermore, most users consider friendship without reciprocation to be indicative of a power imbalance in the relationship. For that reason, many expect reciprocation by default, or feel that others expect it from them. Consequently, they develop a common standard specifying that friending begets friending, and defriending begets defriending. Thus, "If they add me, I'll add them. There's no harm to me to do so, so I do it out of courtesy." For these users, a friend can simply be "someone I don't want to offend."

### **Friendship as Declaration**

To some degree, almost all users see friendship as a declarative statement. That is, if a user includes someone else on their friends list, that user is understood to be saying something to the world about the pair's relationship. This conception holds even when it is not clear precisely what is being said. Likewise, the actions of friending or defriending someone send out messages of their own. Some users consider these statements to be implicit byproducts of publicly accessible friends lists. Others find that the statements are often intentional and directed. For example, one interviewee stated, "When someone I am friends with in the real world drops me it feels like a personal statement of 'you are not my friend.'"

### **Friendship as Nothing**

Some users do not perceive LiveJournal friendship as a declaration of any sort. Instead, they have a nihilistic view of the subject. For them, friending someone is merely a matter of adding another name to a list, and is by itself indicative of no relationship at all. A few of these users channel their nihilism into a kind of performance art - friending hundreds or even thousands of users spontaneously and arbitrarily. These individuals are known as “serial adders.” One serial adder described her motivation as “boredom.” Others do it “just to annoy the easily annoyed.” Still others treat friendship like a game, creating “collections” of friends, or “creating puzzles for other people to unravel.” Invariably, however, there is no implication of any relationship between serial adders and serial addees.

### **Survey Findings: Attitudes and Behaviors**

Given the multiplicity of understandings of the term “friend”, we were curious to see if there was a similar multiplicity of behaviors surrounding friending and defriending. We wanted to know if the behaviors and attitudes frequently discussed in our interviews and observed on LiveJournal were really common enough to be considered social norms. Since social norms govern or reflect people’s expectations of behavior; determine the connotation of people’s actions or inactions; and reflect what is acceptable and unacceptable in situations, we were also curious about what role these initially observed norms (or lack thereof) played in social conflict.

Our findings suggested two key trends. First, social norms regarding friending are multiple and not universally agreed upon. Second, users who participated in normative behaviors tended to experience higher levels of drama.

### **Social norms**

Based on our results, we concluded that there are a number of emerging social norms which regulate friending on LiveJournal. Specifically, we found that there are enough people engaging in certain normative behaviors such that they could be identified as norms. However, there do not appear to be any norms or sets of norms which the majority of the user population agrees upon. Furthermore, there is no consistency in the combinations of norms which users subscribe to. In fact, some sets of norms are adhered to by some, while dismissed entirely by others. As we discuss later on, this lack of consistent and agreed upon norms is very likely a key factor in social conflict on LiveJournal.

This inconsistency with respect to social norms is most apparent in the distributions of responses to our survey questions about various friending/defriending behaviors and attitudes. More specifically, we witnessed three trends in these distributions.

The first trend was a polarization of responses into the two categories of “strongly disagree” and “neutral” to nine of our questions. Four of these questions related to situations where defriending would be considered necessary and two related how that defriending should be carried out. The remaining three concerned attitudes towards the concept of the friends list, such as whether or not listing someone as a friend was an

endorsement of that person.

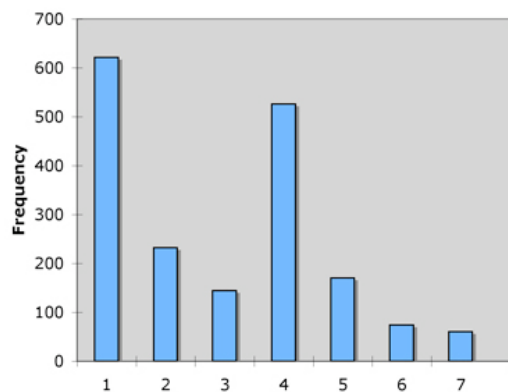
Based on these results, it appears that there are a variety of behaviors and attitudes about which the user population is divided. There are those that eschew these norms entirely and there are those that are unsure or ambivalent about their usage of them. This observation hints at the existence of two very different kinds of users. The first type of user is either strongly opposed to the emergent set of norms that regulate friending/defriending, or to the idea of social norms on LiveJournal entirely. In the latter case, users perceive friending as trivial and see social norms as unnecessary. Essentially, they see friendship on LiveJournal as simply a functional system descriptor or something so minor as to not be a source of conflict or strife. Thus, these users feel they should be able to do as they please. If another user gets upset, it is because they take LiveJournal too seriously. This is similar to the attitude towards friendship which we observed in our interviews, where users see friendship as meaning nothing. Many survey respondents left comments that are illustrative of this ethos, such as the following:

No, there isn't any [conflict]. The whole idea is just absurd. I friend people if I want them to be able to read my friends-only posts, or if I want to have their posts show up on my friends page. End of discussion. No need for drama or whining!

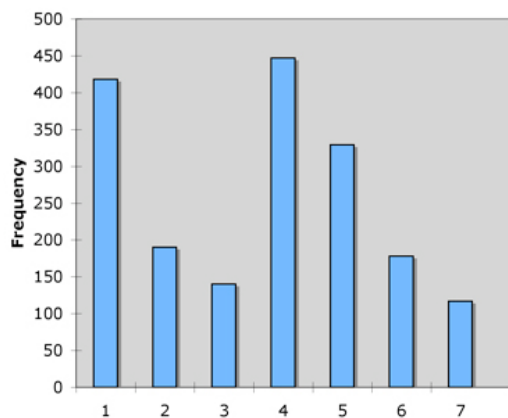
The second type of user, on the other hand, is open to the idea that there should be rules of etiquette - and possibly subscribes to some - but is generally far from a staunch proponent of them. Most of these users are aware of the norms that are out there, but are not sure how stringently to adopt them. Some of these users appear more inclined to adhere to these norms, whereas others feel less inclined.

Two sets of survey responses are really particularly indicative of this trend. The first set is in response to the statement "I consider having someone on my friend of list to be an endorsement of that person." The second set is in response to the statement "I consider having someone on my friends list to be an endorsement of that person." The distributions of responses to these statements are shown in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

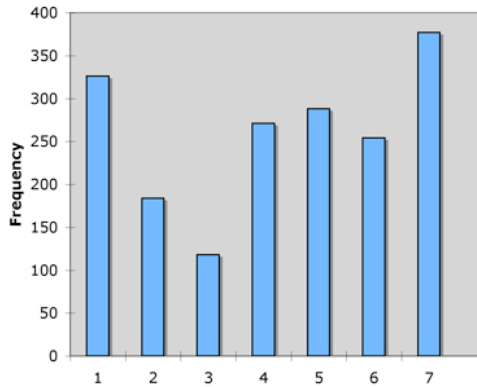
In Figure 1, users of the first type are clearly distinguishable from the rest, as those who responded with a rating of 1. There are also many users of the second type, who responded with a rating of 4.



**Figure 1. Responses to the statement, "I consider having someone on my friend of list to be an endorsement of that person." (1=Strongly Disagree, 7=Strongly Agree)**



**Figure 2. Responses to the statement, "I consider having someone on my friends list to be an endorsement of that person." (1=Strongly Disagree, 7=Strongly Agree)**



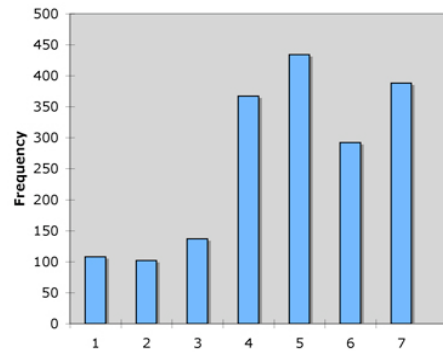
**Figure 3. Responses to the statement, “When I want to friend someone I don’t know, I ask permission.” (1=Strongly Disagree, 7=Strongly Agree)**

Overall, 63% of the responses were either a 1 or a 4. This pattern reoccurs to Figure 2, but to a lesser degree. In this case, there is also a notable number of users who responded positively or negatively, without being entirely in disagreement or strictly neutral. This difference is understandable, because the implications of friending - as an explicit action - are clearer than the implications of being friended, which requires more thorough negotiations to work out. This difference is also indicative of the ongoing evolution of many norms towards the second trend that we observed.

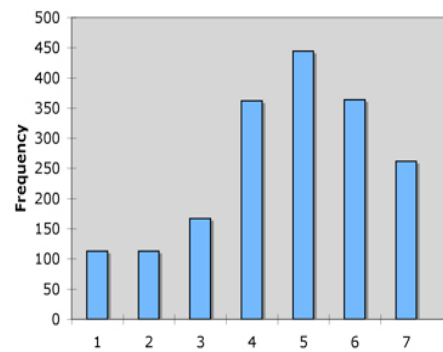
In the second trend we observed, responses were evenly distributed across negative and positive ratings. While the specific patterns in these distributions varied, the most noticeable characteristic amongst them all was the lack any degree of agreement amongst users. This type of distribution appeared in the responses to six questions. Two of these questions related to maintaining reciprocity in friending relationships, such as defriending someone because they defriended you first. Another two of these questions related to discussion around friending, such as asking permission to friend someone. The final question asked whether users felt hurt when they are defriended without warning.

In answering these questions, respondents were often confident in their responses, but these responses varied widely. For instance, in response to the statement, “When I want to friend someone I don’t know, I ask permission,” 18% of the respondents gave strongly negative ratings (1 or 2), and 35% of the respondents gave strongly positive ratings (6 or 7). The full distribution of responses to this question is shown in Figure 3. These results depict a set of norms towards which users exhibit less confusion than they do to the norms grouped into the first trend, but which still elude any sort of consensus.

Conversely, in the third trend we observed, responses tended noticeably towards higher ratings. The two distributions which exhibited



**Figure 4. Responses to the statement, “I am careful about who I friend.” (1=Strongly Disagree, 7=Strongly Agree)**



**Figure 5. Responses to the statement, “If someone friends me, I will friend them.” (1=Strongly Disagree, 7=Strongly Agree)**



this property were in response to the statements, “I am careful about who I friend,” and, “If someone friends me, I will friend them.” These two behaviors are the closest things we witnessed to universally accepted social norms on LiveJournal. These distributions are shown in Figures 4 and 5, respectively.

The difference between responses to the statement, “If someone friends me, I will friend them,” and “If I friend someone, I expect them to friend me back,” is telling. Responses to the first statement fit into the third trend, whereas responses to the second statement fit into the first trend. Most people will friend someone who friends them first, but most people will not expect this same behavior from others. This disparity is indicative of the confusion and diversity amongst norms that regulate friending/defriending behavior. Even when the majority of users follow a certain norm, the lack of consensus with respect to norms in general prevents them from being aware of the compliance of others.

### **Norms and drama**

We found that users who experienced a high degree of drama tended to be the same users who reported a greater degree of adherence to the norms relating to friending/defriending behavior. In particular, these users tended to believe that certain situations should warrant defriending of another user, such as a lack of updates on that user’s journal. These users also carried out their defriending acts in accordance with certain protocols, such as those prescribing notification of the user who is being defriended. Finally, these users also exhibited certain reactions when defriended, such as feeling hurt or expecting an explanation. The correlations of greater adherence to these norms with greater experiences of drama were generally weak (correlation coefficients were in the range of 0.07 to 0.29), but significant ( $p < 0.001$  in all but a few cases). The behaviors and attitudes with the strong correlations to heightened drama were avoiding defriending for fear of causing conflict (correlation coefficient 0.29,  $p < 0.001$ ); defriending people who in response to being defriended (correlation coefficient 0.19,  $p < 0.001$ ); and tending to defriend many people at once (correlation coefficient 0.19,  $p < 0.001$ ).

We also observed two correlations relating to the composition of a users’ friends list and a higher level of drama. First, we found that the more people on a user’s friends list which the user has either a strongly positive or strongly negative relationship, the more drama they reported experiencing. Not surprisingly, there was a stronger correlation with negative relationships than with positive ones. Secondly, we found a lower experience of drama with users who reported that many of the people on their friends lists had journals they liked to read.

Finally, we found that users did not hold to individual norms but rather to sets of them. There were many weak but significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) positive correlations between reported behaviors and attitudes, forming a densely connected network of relationships. These correlations are too numerous to list, but the correlation coefficients were in the range of 0.07 to 0.59 (correlating “I am careful about who I friend,” and, “I consider having someone on my friends list to be an endorsement of that person”).

There are three possible explanations for the higher reported experience of drama in users who adhere to certain codes with respect to friending on LiveJournal. The first is that the practice of such behaviors elevates drama by creating rituals which act as a site of strife. The second is that the kind of people who adhere to friending norms are also the kind of people who would be predisposed to participating in social conflict. The third explanation is that people who practice these behaviors do so because they have experienced drama in the past.

These results correspond to our findings regarding social norms, where many users strongly stated that they did not participate in certain behaviors while others were markedly more ambivalent about them. This ambivalence, and the generally inconsistent patterns of what norms are practiced together indicate that these norms are definitely not firmly entrenched in even the population that practices them; however they do seem to be coalescing. These findings are to be expected from such a young medium.

### **Hyperfriendship and Beyond**

Based on our findings, we concluded that the public articulation of relationships on LiveJournal is a source of social conflict as a result of three factors. The first of these factors is a phenomenon that we call *hyperfriendship*.

Drawing on Baudrillard's (1983) notions of hyperreality, hyperfriendship describes the situation that we observed in our interviews where LiveJournal users have differing and multiple views of what "friendship" means. The original meaning of the term has largely been replaced with multiple meanings specific to LiveJournal, many of which emphasize and exaggerate isolated aspects of conventional friendship. Semiotically speaking, the term "friend" used in the context of LiveJournal has no fixed signified from which the entire user population can derive shared meaning. It is this reflexivity and multiplicity of meaning that causes much of the social anxiety, conflict and misunderstanding on LiveJournal.

In employing "friend" as a signifier within their system architecture, the LiveJournal designers inadvertently caused a slippage of meaning in the term (Derrida 1976). Certain meanings of friendship on LiveJournal have no relationship to the meaning of friendship in offline life. Instead, "friend" sometimes signifies constructions exclusive to LiveJournal. For instance, users who think that a friend is "someone you like to read," are thinking of friendship as something that depends on the existence of a friends page. Obviously, there is no such thing as a friends page outside LiveJournal. Thus, the meaning of a friends page depends on the definition of a LiveJournal "friend". Yet this definition is clearly reflexive, thus demonstrating that the original referent has been lost.

As we saw in our interviews, the motivation for one user friending another is a complex interpolation of these many understandings of friendship. Likewise, there are usually different motivations behind different groups of friends on a user's list. Many of the users interviewed specified a two-way split between the kinds of friends on their lists. Some of them identified three or four distinct groups. None of them expressed a singular, unifying rationale behind their choices of friends. The word "friend" is used ubiquitously, without

qualification, to describe each of the different kinds of friends that actually exist. Thus, when someone specifies someone else as a friend, two questions arise: Does it actually mean anything, and if it does, then what? If two users call each other friends, then how do they know if they are talking about the same thing?

Users rarely acknowledge these questions, and so the ambiguity in meaning manifests as conflict and drama between individuals and in groups. One interviewee described such a debacle:

I've had one example where I'd friended someone who didn't befriend me back. We seemed to have great conversations whenever we do converse (online), so not being friended felt a bit like rejection of some kind. But then later I read in his LJ info that his friending patterns have nothing to do with his relationships—just that he didn't want to read.

Situations of this nature arise because users have no common understanding of friendship. Instead of establishing a shared framework, the user might assume that the other party is operating under the same understanding as her own. In this situation, the interviewee assumed that friending was a declaration of acceptance and approval. However, the other user thought of his friends list merely as a reading list. In this instance, and in many others we heard about, the existence of hyperfriendship caused noticeable conflict.

The problems resulting from hyperfriendship are compounded by the lack of fixed social norms that we found in our survey. Since hyperfriendship is the destabilization of the meaning of friendship, the paucity of reliable norms makes it difficult to resolve the subsequent conflict. This paucity is the second factor contributing to social conflict on LiveJournal. As we saw in the results of our survey, there are multiple social norms regarding friending/defriending, but none of them are adhered to in a clear pattern, nor are they adopted by the majority. As well, some norms are adopted by some, but dismissed entirely by others. The result is that users' expectations of each other's behavior - as well as their own - can vary widely. This inequality of expectations can lead to drama. For example, one survey respondent shared the following scenario:

Someone who I had a once-good friendship with... and then maintained a decent daily email exchange with... announced she'd be trimming her list and to comment if you didn't want to be culled. I find this groveling for comments very immature, so I didn't reply. She defriended me. I asked her why, she said it was because I didn't comment, and I shrugged and said whatever. I didn't unfriend her. A few days later she re-friended me. But... can't say we're "friends" now. Just was some stupid drama.

In this situation, the user in question expected the survey respondent to react in accordance with a set of codes that determine proper behavior in the event of a "cull." The respondent refused to abide by these codes, and conflict resulted. When the policies of the respondent became clearer, the other user subsequently altered her own behavior,

so as to end the conflict. However, their relationship suffered as a result of the exchange.

Misunderstandings such as these were a common underlying thread in many of friending/defriending conflicts we observed on LiveJournal. One would expect that social norms serve to reduce social conflict by standardizing expectations. However, in the case of LiveJournal, where there is not uniform adoption, norms have become a source of drama.

In Baudrillard's hyperreality, the degradation of existing meanings prompts an exaggeration of signifying characteristics well beyond realistic categories. Therefore, we might expect hyperfriends to exhibit unrealistic expectations of one another, and that these expectations would further compound social conflict. Indeed, the third factor that contributes to social conflict on LiveJournal is the *hyperpersonal interaction* (Walther 1996) inherent to the medium as a form of computer mediated communication (CMC). In this type of interaction, users conversing over CMC technology develop inflated or unrealistic conceptions of one another. Walther argues that this inflation results from a number of features of CMC. Specifically, CMC allows for selective self-presentation; removes verbal, visual and contextual cues that are usually present in face-to-face communication; and increases the amount of time a user has to compose a response. These factors collude to create an environment where users perceive only fragments of other users' identities, and fill in the blanks using their own assumptions or desires based on the meager information available. Thus, users project identities upon each other that are largely oversimplified or idealized (Weinberg 2002). The effect is more pronounced when users have no physical exposure to one another.

This hyperpersonal interaction can lead to heightened emotions in social conflict, because users expectations of each other are often unrealistically high. We witnessed the effects of this phenomenon in the results of our survey, where 53% of users reported experiencing conflict exclusively with people that they only knew on LiveJournal. We also witnessed the phenomenon in our interviews. For example, one user claimed that LiveJournal friendship is often held to a higher standard than everyday romantic love:

On [LiveJournal] there's a feeling of animosity if you drop someone and they drop you back. As if, 'well then why did you add me in the first place? You must not really like to read me then if me dropping you changed things!' No one would say that to a girlfriend.

To some users, friendships are so intensified that real life rejection is less devastating than being defriended by the same person:

One of my friends got very upset when someone she barely interacted with defriended her. But I know for a fact half the people on her list aren't really her 'friends' in a conventional sense.

Ultimately, we have found that while hyperfriendship is at the root of much social conflict around issues of friending and defriending, the lack of reliable social norms and

the existence of hyperpersonal interaction serve to intensify these conflicts.

### **Conclusion**

We have presented a detailed account of the effects of binary public articulation of relationships amongst users of LiveJournal. In particular, we examined how using the term “friend” as a label for this articulation has affected users’ interpretations of “friendship.” We also explored the social norms that regulate articulation of these relationships. In both cases, we found that user opinions, behaviors, understandings and attitudes varied widely.

Furthermore, we found that it is the lack of consistent interpretations and social norms that cause the social conflict around the articulation of relationships. Specifically, the destabilization of the meaning of friendship is indicative of hyperfriendship which frequently is the cause of misunderstandings amongst users. The lack of regulating norms compounds this conflict, as does the hyperpersonal interaction inherent to computer mediated communication.

Based on our findings, we believe that designers of future social networking applications should take into account the diversity of possible relationships amongst users, and allow users to gracefully negotiate the space of possible interpretations. Similarly, designers should take care when choosing terminology to describe relationships. On the one hand, using the term “friend,” which is loaded with existing connotations, has proven to cause difficulties on LiveJournal. At the same time, Sunir Shah (personal communication, September 21, 2005) points out that use of the term “friend” has been integral to building the strong sense of community that exists on LiveJournal. Thus, finding the appropriate words is a matter of walking the fine line between avoiding ambiguity, and leveraging it.

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