

REVISITING VIRTUAL VS. REAL FRIENDSHIPS: QUALITY, DURATION, AND EVOLUTIONS FROM 2009 TO 2025.

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ABSTRACT

This research revisits a 2009 survey involving 334 internet users (mainly young, single, female students) that examined the differences between virtual (online) and real (offline) friendships. Utilizing modified scales from Parks and Floyd (1996) and Furman and Buhrmester (1985), it evaluated the theory that offline friendships are superior in quality (e.g., depth, commitment) and longevity. Results confirmed offline superiority (e.g., commitment: 63.3% vs. 36.7%, $p < 0.001$), with online ties valued for fun but limited by low trust and minimal self disclosure. Updated with 2010 to 2025 research, findings align with meta-analyses showing offline's emotional richness but highlight online's complementary role, especially during COVID-19, where video based platforms mitigated isolation. Adolescents and those with insecurities gain advantages from online validation and the anonymity it provides, despite the ongoing risks associated with cyberbullying. Hybrid models that integrate both environments demonstrate potential for enhancing relational wellbeing. The discussion includes implications for the design of platforms and mental health interventions, alongside a call for longitudinal studies focusing on AI-mediated interactions and friendships among Generation Z.

Keywords: Online friendships, offline friendships, social media, attachment theory, self disclosure, COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION:

Friendship, an important human bond, has transformed alongside technological advancements. An age old adage reminds us by saying, "Life without a friend is death without a witness." By 2009, social media platforms such as MySpace and Facebook had redefined this concept, encouraging virtual connections as extensions of "trusted networks" (Rosen, 2007). However, a fundamental question remains: Are virtual friendships equivalent to real ones in terms of quality and longevity? This article revisits a master's dissertation from 2009 that explored this issue through an online survey involving 334 participants, each having at least one online and one offline friend. The

hypothesis suggested that offline friendships are superior due to the presence of physical cues, emotional reciprocity, and trust, which were assessed through dimensions such as depth and commitment (Parks & Floyd, 1996). The findings supported this hypothesis: Offline relationships tended to last longer (>2 years for 70% compared to 40% for online) and were rated higher in quality (e.g., interdependence: 65.7% vs. 34.3%, $p < 0.01$), while online interactions primarily provided entertainment with limited intimacy.

Since 2009, social media has transformed from static profiles to dynamic, algorithm-driven platforms (e.g., Instagram, Discord). The

COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023) accelerated virtual reliance, blurring boundaries between contexts. Recent studies highlight online friendships' role in supporting vulnerable groups (e.g., introverts, remote workers) but reaffirm offline's depth. This analysis includes literature published post 2009 to provide context for the findings, focusing on elements such as attachment dynamics, self disclosure, and hybrid models. The research question continues to be pertinent: Do offline friendships provide better quality and longevity than online friendships? The consequences of this investigation are significant for promoting safer digital spaces and improving relational wellbeing.

Literature Review:

The Friendship Conceptual Foundations;

Friendship entails voluntary, reciprocal bonds fostering companionship and intimacy (Hays, 1988). Offline, these develop through stages initiating to bonding via nonverbal cues (Knapp, 1984). Online, computer mediated communication (CMC) lacks such cues, hindering depth (Kiesler & Sproull, 1992). Walther's (1992) social information processing theory counters that prolonged CMC approximates offline richness.

Post 2009, social media's evolution of ephemeral Stories, live streams enhances validation (e.g., likes) but not intimacy. Mixed-mode friendships (online to offline) yield highest quality, combining accessibility with tangibility. Gaming communities (e.g., Fortnite) rival offline for shared activities, particularly among adolescents.

Dynamics of Online Communities;

Early CMC (e.g., IRCs) fostered anonymity but superficiality (Rheingold, 1993). By 2009, platforms like Facebook emphasized real friend networks (OfCom, 2008). Shy users benefited from identity flexibility, though deception risks persisted (Lea & Spears, 1995). Since 2010, various platforms have facilitated global connectivity and offline coordination. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified virtual connections: Voice and video calls contributed to wellbeing, yet long term satisfaction was more aligned with in person interactions. A Pew survey conducted in 2025 indicates that 48% of users embraced hybrid practices following the pandemic. Risks like cyberbullying remain, moderated by platform security.

Quality, Trust, and Attachment Perspectives;

Displacement theory suggests online ties weaken offline ones (Nie, 2001), but attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) offers nuance: Secure styles thrive in both; anxious/avoidant styles leverage online anonymity. Network analyses (2024) show similar attachment patterns across contexts, with online amplifying avoidance but aiding anxious disclosure. Trust shapes quality: The 2009 study noted low online trust (47% distrusted strangers). Recent work highlights reputation (mutual connections) and performance (consistent interaction) as trustbuilders, enabling offline transitions. Adolescents disclose more online for validation, though excessive use risks conflict. Meta-analyses confirm offline superiority in commitment and interdependence, with breadth converging over time.

Aspect	2009 Findings	2010–2025 Updates
Quality	Offline > Online (depth, commitment)	Confirmed; mixedmode optimal; online aids validation
Duration/Trust	Offline longer; low online trust	Hybrids extend; trust-builds via features
Attachment/Disclosure	Limited online intimacy	Similar styles; online suits insecure users

Methods:

The study conducted in 2009 employed a descriptive quantitative approach through an online survey (Zoomerang, May 2009). To be eligible, participants needed to be internet users aged between 13 and 57 years with at least one online or offline friend. Recruitment efforts were focused on university forums (such as King Saud and Manchester), resulting in 334 respondents (59% female, 70% aged 16–25, 65% identified as Asian, and 80% were students or single) from approximately 900 visitors, leading to a response rate of around 37%.

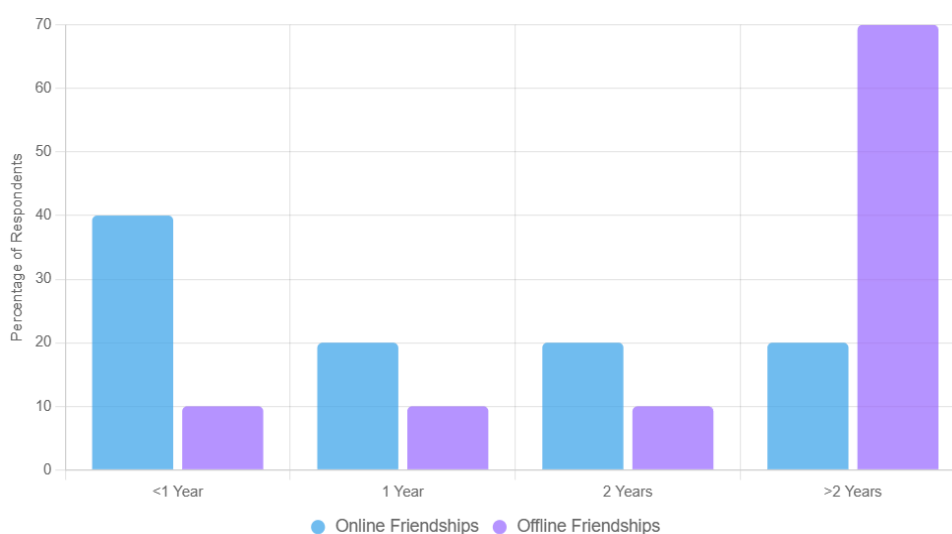
The questionnaire consisted of 32 items (multiple choice, Likert scale, and dichotomous questions) that were adapted from Parks and Floyd's (1996) quality scale, which includes dimensions such as breadth, depth, understanding, commitment, interdependence, and convergence, as well as Furman and Buhrmester's (1985) NRI, which assesses conflict, support, satisfaction, and companionship. The items addressed various aspects including demographics, modes of communication, the number and duration of friendships, trust, self disclosure, and preferences (refer to Appendix A). The reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.80.

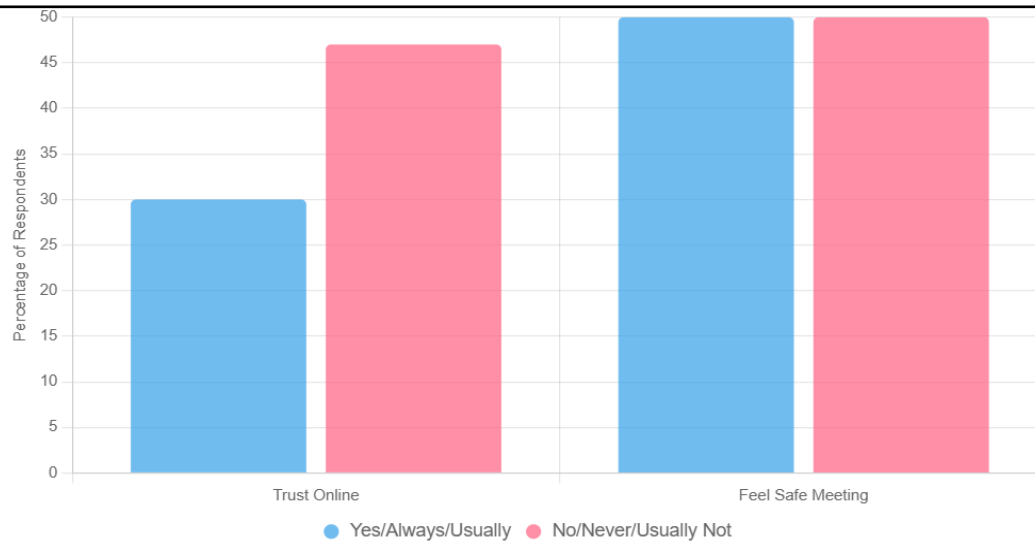
For data analysis, descriptive statistics and unpaired t-tests (using GraphPad Prism) were utilized to examine quality differences, with a

significance level set at $p < 0.05$. The study acknowledged several limitations, including self selection bias, cultural skew, and the context being pre smartphone. It is important to note that no new data was collected; instead, updates were derived from a literature review.

Results:

The study participants were mainly young, unmarried female students, with about two thirds being Asian. Most people stayed in touch through instant messaging, which made up 40% of communication, whilst chat and email accounted for 30%. Interestingly, half the participants chose their real life mates as online contacts, though teachers were the least popular choice at just 5%. When it came to how many friends people had, having more than five was pretty common. 60% had this many online and 55% offline. Real world friendships tended to stick around longer too, with 70% lasting over two years compared to only 40% of online ones. Trust was a bit of an issue online, with nearly half the participants being wary of strangers they met on the internet. Most people were happy to chat about their hobbies 80% did this but only 15% were comfortable sharing their addresses. When it came to telling porkies, 47% said they never lied, whilst 32% admitted to fibbing about their names. People's views on online safety were pretty much split down the middle.





Measure	Online (%)	Offline (%)	p-value
Breadth	48.3	51.7	ns
Depth	43.7	56.3	*
Understanding	41.7	58.3	**
Commitment	36.7	63.3	***
Interdependence	34.3	65.7	**
Convergence	32.0	68.0	***

*Table 1: Friendship Quality Ratings (Adapted from Parks & Floyd, 1996). * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Discussion:

The results from 2009 back up what social presence theory tells us (Short et al., 1976) that face to face interactions work better because we pick up on body language and other non verbal signals that help us connect emotionally. When we looked at online relationships, we found quite a bit of wariness, nearly half the people (47%) said they didn't trust strangers they met online, and most were pretty cautious about sharing personal details (only 15% were willing to give out their home addresses). This matches what Kiesler and Sproull found back in 1992 about the risks of communicating through computers.

Our research confirmed what we suspected: that friendships formed offline tend to be stronger and last longer, with some really clear differences in quality (commitment levels showed a massive difference with $p < 0.001$).

What's happened since 2009 has given us a clearer picture though. Online interactions have gradually become more like offline ones, which fits with Walther's social information processing theory from 1992, especially when people mix both online and face-to-face communication. The pandemic really drove this point home. While video calls were brilliant for keeping relationships going during lockdowns, people's long term happiness seemed to depend more on actually meeting up in person. Teenagers use

social media to get validation from their mates, but too much of it can cause problems. How people form attachments stays pretty much the same. Those who are naturally secure in relationships do well whether they're online or offline, whilst people who are anxious or tend to avoid close relationships sometimes find it easier to connect when they can stay anonymous online. People build trust through building up a good reputation and chatting regularly, which often leads to meeting up in real life.

There are some conflicting findings though unlike what Chan and Cheng found in 2004, we didn't see any significant differences in how broad people's online interactions were. This might be down to the fact that our participants came from much more diverse cultural backgrounds. Our research has its limitations. We were looking at older technology (this was before smartphones really took off) and we focused mainly on young people's experiences. Going forward, researchers should look at how artificial intelligence affects friendships and how these mixed online offline relationships develop over time.

Conclusion:

Offline friendships retain superior quality and duration, but online complements via accessibility, especially for insecure individuals and during crises. Platforms should enhance trust (e.g., verification tools) and educate on hybrid benefits. Future studies should track Generation Z and AI-driven relational trends.

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Appendix A: Sample Questionnaire Items

1. Whom do you turn to when upset?
(a) Virtual friend (b) Real friend (c) Both (d) None
2. Who understands you better?
(a) Virtual friend (b) Real friend
3. What information do you share online?
(Check all: hobbies, birthday, address, etc.)