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**Research Proposal: A Study of Noting Behavior Among Middle-Aged Keepers of Online Diaries**

**Research Problem**

What characteristics determine why the diaries of some members of online diary communities receive many friendly notes from fellow community-members, while other diarists receive hostile notes, and still other diarists receive few notes or none at all?

Online diary communities typically allow the diarist to post entries, daily or more frequently, followed by space for noters to respond with notes either about the diary entries themselves or about other subjects. (See Attachment #A.) Online diaries are distinct from the more recent “blog” genre by being for the most part inward-looking and personal in nature, with references to issues of the day secondary in importance to the events of the writer’s own life. The Yahoo! directory lists twenty-two online diary communities, and there are countless other special-interest diary communities (for example, the thriving pro-ana/mia [eating disorders] community). (See Attachment #B.) Out of Yahoo!’s list of twenty-two, three sites are dedicated especially to the diaries of teenagers, and most other diary sites are also dominated by the diaries of teenagers.

It is quite easy to download free diary-keeping software to an individual home page; indeed, special software is not necessary simply to keep a record of one’s daily thoughts: people have been typing diary entries into their personal sites since about 1995. Since 1999, however, many people have chosen to keep their diaries online on free, searchable sites that specifically
invite readers to comment on entries. The first and largest of the online diary communities, Free Open Diary, for example, currently lists around 50,000 separate online diaries, although many of these diaries are seldom updated. Free Open Diary’s site allows the user to sort by age, location, and recency of updating—and people are able to develop a Favorites list to check preferred diaries quickly for updates. A popular diary writer can expect to receive nine or ten notes after each entry, followed by encouraging advice or simply “Hugs!” Over time, diary writers form relationships with the writers they note; certainly, if the diarists are candid, they know as much about each other’s lives as real-life friends might expect to know.

Much has been written about the phenomenon of online friendship, but research results have been contradictory. Some studies show that online friendships are not only inferior in intimacy level to “real” friendships, but also that spending too much time in computer-generated relationships can hinder an individual from forming “real” friendships. Cummings, Butler, and Kraut (1998) assert that many Internet users report spending less time with their real-life family and friends since meeting online friends, and that the quality of their relationships with online friends is almost always lower than it is with their real-life friends. A group of thirty-nine college students, asked to keep a diary in which they recorded communications experiences over a period of four hours, ranked their online encounters as providing significantly less satisfaction than either real-life or telephone encounters. Cummings, Butler, and Kraut also observed communications levels among members of two hundred and four email-based listservs and noted that the idea that personal relationships are formed in these venues seem mostly illusory, that few instances of actual one-to-one communication actually occurs through listservs.

On the other hand, Katz and Aspden (1997) found a representative sample of Internet users to be every bit as involved in community organizations as non-Internet users, and that
Internet users were no less likely than non-users to be involved in religious, leisure, and community groups. Katz and Aspden noticed also that a significant minority (14 percent) of their Internet-using sample reported forming online relationships that they considered genuine friendships, and that around 61 percent of the time, those online friendships eventually led to face-to-face meetings. They estimate that the Internet has led to at least two million face-to-face meetings among people who consider themselves friends that would not have occurred in pre-Web situations. Bower’s 2002 roundup of research results on online friendships confirms the view that researchers have not come to a consensus as to whether Internet friendships are desirable or not, both because there are so many different types of possible interactions among people that can be categorized as friendship, and because the Internet’s features are so varied that no one study can hope to look at all the different possible social arenas where people meet online.

There is also a distinct possibility that the people who use the Internet for social contact are not a random sample: it is possible that Internet users are more likely to enjoy social interaction in general more than other people, and of course not everyone who participates in online social activities forms friendships. Utz (2000) points out that the game-players who form relationships in MUD environments are those who “scored low in skepticism” about the chatroom-type features included in the MUD software–that a certain openness, on the Internet as in life, is necessary for friendships to form.

The keeping of a public diary would seem to be one of the less straightforward ways of forming online friendships, but in fact one of the reasons writers continue to keep their diaries on sites like Free Open Diary, Dear Diary, DiaryLand, LiveJournal.com, My-diary.org, MyDearDiary, Blurty, and DeadJournal, despite frequent but unsurprising technical problems
with these huge and constantly accessed databases, is because of the communities of like-minded diarists that soon form, as writers either with or without similar interests find each other and begin to note.

I have found nothing in the literature about the writing of online diaries by adults as a method of communicating and forming relationships. Because the form is so popular among teenagers, it is not surprising that articles that touch upon the issue do so in relation to teenagers. For example, Stern (2002) observed the Web sites of ten teenaged girls and noticed the girls’ Web sites were in fact very similar to online diaries, and often kept for the same apparent reasons: the opportunity to connect with a larger number of people than one can in real life; the opportunity to meet people more similar to one’s own self than may be possible in real life; the ability to control very precisely how much of one’s own self to reveal; and the opportunity to disclose parts of one’s personality anonymously to people who also are anonymous.

Methods of Investigation

Because they have not been studied at all, I have decided to limit my research to online diaries kept by people over the age of 40 and of those, to look only at those diaries with at least a hundred entries, in order to limit my study to people who have shown extreme fidelity to their diaries and to their readers. I plan to examine the diaries of at least three different online communities, just in case the population who keeps their diaries on MyDearDiary turns out different from the one that keeps their diaries on Digital Expressions.

My first step will be to codify the diaries I see, classifying them according to range of subjects discussed. (Love relationships, children, work, original poetry, responses to surveys, and nostalgic memories are popular topics.) Other categories that may prove important insofar as how many notes a diarist receives include how often the diary is updated; the relative
optimism or pessimism level of the diary; the quality and creativity of the writing in the diary; the extent to which a reader is likely to be able to identify with the life situation of the diary writer; the diarist’s level of self-disclosure; the level of drama in the diarist’s life; and how often the diary writer notes other diarists). As I do with the diaries, I will also have to classify the contents of the notes I read (for example, short, long, supportive, hostile, advice-giving, sharing information about the noter) and determine whether relationships of friendship form among individual diaries who note each other.

After looking at these mostly qualitative concerns, I will look at quantitative issues, counting the number of notes each diarist receives, and noting who the notes come from, and whether there are observable, measurable trends as far as the relationships among noters are concerned. Do mutual noters, for example, mention Instant Messaging, talking on the phone, or actually meeting over time? On the other hand, does the number of notes between individual diarists tend to dwindle after a certain period of time?

**Time Schedule**

**Week one.**

Identify diary communities and individual diarists. If a large number of diarists in my 40+ population makes it necessary, form a stratified random sample (by age and sex) of diarists.

**Week three.**

Classify Diaries into categories, based on diary characteristics.

**Week five.**

Begin counting and charting the number of notes each diarist receives. Note especially those writers who receive a large number of notes and those who receive hostile notes or only a
very few notes, and whether there are pairs or clusters (or cliques) of diarists who tend to respond to one another and may be considered to have formed friendships.

**Week seven.**

Begin categorizing the notes received by diarists according to predetermined note characteristics.

**Week nine.**

Begin looking for trends over time relating to individual diaries insofar as relationships between diarists and noters are concerned. Draw conclusions related to the characteristics of diaries and diarists who receive the most positive online notes, as well as to those who receive few or no notes, or who receive actively hostile notes.

**Projected Impact of Study**

I expect to find that the greatest predictors determining who receives positive notes are the diarist’s level of self-disclosure (even when that disclosed information is negative); the diarist’s expressions of support of other diarists through noting; and the diarist’s willingness to continue noting even writers who do not initially return notes. I expect that the greatest predictor of who receives negative or hostile notes is a predisposition to sending hostile notes to other diarists, rather than anything specifically content-related to the diarist’s actual diary. I expect that design factors (no capital letters, tiny typeface, no paragraphing) and a disinclination to send notes will be the greatest factor in determining what diarists receive few notes.

Adams, as long ago as 1998, asserts that “examining the changes in technology serves as a reminder of how dramatically the context of friendship has changed, and surveying the literature on interaction among friends serves to demonstrate how slowly sociologists have changed their perspectives on relationships to reflect these developments.” I think my study will
show that the keeping of an online diary, in certain cases, is a genuine way for the diarist to form lasting friendships. Looking at what online circumstances are necessary for these friendships to develop will teach us more not only about the Internet but also about the nature of friendship itself.
References


