Friendship 2.0: Adolescents' experiences of belonging and self-disclosure online

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A B S T R A C T

This study explores the role that digital media technologies play in adolescents' experiences of friendship and identity. The author draws on findings from in-depth interviews with 32 adolescents (15 girls, 17 boys) ages 13–18 ($M = 15.5$ years) attending one of seven secondary schools in Bermuda. The adolescents were asked to describe the nature of their online exchanges with friends and the value they ascribe to these conversations. A thematic analysis of their responses revealed that online peer communications promote adolescents' sense of belonging and self-disclosure, two important peer processes that support identity development during adolescence. At the same time, the unique features of computer-mediated communication shape adolescents' experiences of these processes in distinct ways. Gender and age differences show that adolescents' online peer communications are not uniform; the characteristics that distinguish adolescents offline also shape their online activities.

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Introduction

In recent years, digital media have assumed a prominent role in adolescents' lives and provided them with new contexts to undertake key developmental tasks. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of U.S. adolescents with internet access use social network sites (Purcell, 2011), and 75% of all adolescents in the United States own a cell phone (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). For most adolescents, their digital media use is driven by a desire to communicate with existing friends (boyd, 2007; Ito et al., 2009). In fact, a 2009 survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project suggests that text messaging has become the dominant form of adolescent peer communication (Lenhart et al., 2010). When asked what method they use regularly to contact their friends outside of school, 54% of U.S. teens reported using text messaging, compared to 38% who said they talk on their cell phone and 30% who talk on a landline telephone. Remarkably, text messaging is even more popular than face-to-face communication. Just 33% of teens reported engaging in daily face-to-face interactions with friends outside of school. Social networking and instant messaging are also among adolescents' favored forms of regular communication, with 25% and 24%, respectively, reporting daily communication with friends via these platforms.

Scholars have begun to explore how these new patterns of communication may be shaping adolescent development in new ways (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). I contribute to this emerging body of literature by drawing on findings from in-depth interviews with 32 adolescents (13–18 years) to investigate the role that specific forms of online communication play in adolescents' experiences of friendship and identity. I also examine age and gender differences in participants' patterns of online communication and the meaning they ascribe to them.

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Theoretical context

Peers' contribution to adolescent identity development

Questions of identity—the sense of who one is and in what one believes—loom large for adolescents in Western societies. It is during this stage of development that individuals contemplate for the first time such questions as "Who am I? How do I fit into the world around me?" Their answers to these questions are important, since a positive sense of identity has been linked to psychological well-being (e.g., Berzonsky, 2003a, 2003b; Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2008; Marcia, 1993; Meeus, 1996; Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999; Waterman, 1992). Indeed, Erikson (1968, 1980) contended that the formation of an identity that is both personally meaningful and validated by others constitutes the primary developmental task of adolescence.

Peer relationships and the social contexts in which they are experienced become central to the identity formation process during adolescence (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Brown, 1990; Pugh & Hart, 1999; Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Prior to adolescence, parents serve as primary sources of identification (Erikson, 1968). Though parents continue to serve as models of identity during adolescence, peers assume a new importance as adolescents begin to spend more time interacting with their friends than they do with their parents (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). These interactions occur within dyadic relationships and larger peer groups, and may include engaging in shared activities, exchanging jokes, and talking about daily events (Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). Boys and younger adolescents tend to organize their relationships more around shared activities, while girls and older adolescents tend to spend more time in conversation with one another (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987).

During the course of their peer interactions, adolescents develop and reinforce shared norms, such as distinct language use, clothing styles, and music preferences (Arnett, 1996; Brake, 1985). They use these norms as identity markers to define themselves in relation to their peers and as distinct beings from their parents. In the process, they experience a sense of belonging with those who share their interests and values (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). This sense of belonging plays an important role in validating adolescents' developing sense of identity (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). In early adolescence, individuals tend to identify with one core peer group, or clique (Brown, 1990). As adolescents grow older, they begin to participate in and identify with multiple peer groups whose boundaries are increasingly fluid (Rubin et al., 2006). This loosening of peer bonds coincides with a growing sense of autonomy (Kroger, 2007).

Another way peers contribute to the identity development process is by providing adolescents with opportunities to engage in intimate self-disclosure (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). Through intimate self-disclosure in the context of lengthy conversations, friends listen to, encourage, and give each other advice (Rubin et al., 2006; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). This identity-supporting peer process distinguishes childhood and adolescent friendships. In childhood, friendships are defined instrumentally by shared activities and interests (Rubin et al., 2006). As adolescents' perspective-taking abilities improve, their friendships are increasingly defined by mutuality, empathy, and reciprocity (Selman, 1981). These qualities help to create intimacy between friends. Within the context of their intimate peer relationships, adolescents articulate their sense of themselves and provide each other with feedback on and validation of these articulations. In the process, they learn what they share with others as well as what makes them unique (Sullivan, 1953; Youniss, 1980).

Intimacy through self-disclosure is particularly characteristic of female adolescent friendships (Berndt, 1996; Brown & Larson, 2009; Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Youniss, 1980; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Boys do engage in self-disclosure with their friends, though to a lesser extent and beginning later in adolescence than girls (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). For both genders, self-disclosure and intimacy increase with age, though the intensity and exclusivity of their intimate friendships tend to decrease during the course of adolescence (Brown & Larson, 2009; Buhrmester & Prager, 1995).

New contexts for adolescent development

Digital media have become central to the way adolescents experience their peer relationships. Friends use cell phones, social network sites, and instant messaging platforms to "hang out" with each other round-the-clock (Ito et al., 2009; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). Text messaging is a particularly effective way for adolescents to maintain a constant connection to their friends regardless of where they are or what they are doing. These messages are typically "lightweight" in nature, serving primarily to create a sense of "co-presence" between friends (Ito & Okabe, 2005). With respect to social network use, boyd (2007) found that adolescents use sites like Facebook and MySpace to hang out in a more public way, by posting pictures of themselves with their friends, leaving messages on each other's pages, and listing their closest friends on their profiles. Furthermore, groups of friends often adopt a similar tone and style on their respective profiles. Similarly, in her study of 40 teen blogs, Bortree (2005) observed that teens used their blogs to communicate with offline friends and to document activities they had shared with these friends. Like boyd, Bortree found that friends tended to influence the content of each other's blogs, for instance by adopting similar terms and posting the same internet quizzes. In this way, online hanging out, like its offline counterpart, allows adolescents to solidify their peer group membership and define themselves in relation to their peers (Livingstone, 2008). Empirical evidence suggests that adolescents' online peer communications have a positive effect on the quality of their friendships (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009, 2011).