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Friends Forever: How Young Adolescents Use Social-Networking Sites

Barbie Clarke, *University of Cambridge*

Children use social-networking sites to establish identity, and to find support and comfort as they go through the cognitive, physical, and emotional transitions of early adolescence.

I t is perhaps difficult to believe that the term *social-networking site* (SNS) was not widely recognized back in 2004, when teenagers in the US first discovered MySpace. Young adolescents have only begun to use SNSs with such enthusiasm in the past three years, with the starting age becoming ever younger,

despite these sites' minimum age requirement of 13. In the past decade, there has been immense interest in looking at children's use of the Internet, and in the past year or two, the notion of studying young people's SNSs such as Bebo, Facebook, and Piczo has generated several large research studies.[1–3] Many parents, perhaps prompted by media headlines warning of the "dark side" of such sites, are fearful of their children's use of SNSs. Mizuko Ito considers this, and argues that although adults might worry that their children are becoming socially isolated, "what's interesting … with the Internet and gaming is that most of these activities are being conducted in a social context, even though the kids may not be physically together."[4]

My research has explored the psychosocial influences of SNSs and digital media on children in early adolescence (ages 10 to 14), a significant period of transition when children's horizons grow considerably and friends become more important, but when they frequently leave old friends

behind as they change schools. This article considers changing friendship patterns and exploration of identity within the context of SNSs, arguing that the digital world gives young adolescents a sense of agency and encourages them to take responsibility for shaping their own development.

My ethnographic research took place over a period of two years and involved 28 children living in southeast England—in rural, suburban, and urban areas. The group included 13 girls and 15 boys; children adopted their own names for the research, and all names have been changed. The research included more than 80 visits to children's homes, 50 filmed observation sessions, semi-structured interviews with children, and informal interviews with parents. Children kept diaries for one week prior to visits and drew friendship maps at different stages of the research. The research also included eight focus groups, each lasting two hours, and an online bulletin-board session with the children over three days during the

midterm holidays in February 2009. Although the research was not statistically representative, it was diverse in that it included children from different socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnicities.

The Importance of Friendship to Early Adolescents

In the digital age, it appears that children really can "be friends forever." The abbreviation of that phrase, BFFE, is a frequently used sign-off on children's SNS message boards, and it appears that children's notion of friendship has changed radically compared to predigital days. My research shows that children can maintain friendships through SNSs in a way that would not have been possible before, remaining in contact with friends who have moved to different countries and supporting friendships online even though face-to-face communication is not possible.

Robbie and Will, both 13, were regularly playing on the Runescape games site with their friend Paul, who had moved from the UK to southern Europe, maintaining dialogue with him through the private chat facility. Molly had met "best friends" at summer camp and maintained regular contact, even though they lived several hundred miles away:

> I went to (summer camp) and met some friends there and we were there for a week and I can call some of them my best friends because they're really, really nice and I still talk to some of them on MSN and Facebook and I only knew them for a week … in such a short period of time you can become so close to people and I even cried when we had to go back.—Molly, 12

By early adolescence, friendship circles can be wide, but these networks can be interrupted by changes in circumstances—for example, moving homes or changing schools. Such transitions or changes can be particularly daunting for adolescents, and feelings of loneliness and disconnection can occur. Anthony Giddens writes of the "reflexivity of the self" and the expectation people have of happiness.[5] Children in the study were reflexive with an emphasis on self, but gave online emotional support to friends through periods of change: changes of schools, relationships, and houses. Sometimes such support was manifested through deliberate displacement in conversations, pictures, and online games; at other times, it was in the form of direct advice, emoticons, and pokes. (An emoticon is a symbol that depicts an emotion—for example, a smiley face. A poke is a visual "nudge" on Facebook, intended to attract the attention of a particular "friend." Children in the study sent and received these quite regularly—especially "hugs" and "kisses.")

Early adolescence is a time of transition, when children gradually leave family behind and turn to friends for support. Research has shown that early adolescents are more likely to spend time talking to friends than any other single activity,[6] and relationships with close friends provide a source of comfort and a context in which they can express concerns and feelings. Children at this age are especially likely to share intimate thoughts and feelings, so privacy is important. Many children in the study expressed a preference for using a laptop rather than the family computer because, as one 11-year-old put it,

> it's private and mum and dad can't watch what I do.—Jessica, 11

There is a link between teenagers' online and offline worlds. Sonia Livingstone shows that teenagers use SNSs to strengthen existing relationships and enhance social capital.[7] Early adolescents tend to categorize themselves and their friends into different typologies:

> At school there is like "the populars" and like the people who don't have many friends—the geeks/nerds/brainy people—I talk to the popular people.—Rosie, 12

The notion of popularity is important to adolescents; the group effect can both be reassuring and allow a sense of experimentation. The friendship maps that children drew over an 18-month period in the study indicated that friends changed as horizons widened. But instead of replacing friends, children kept the same friends in their maps and frequently categorized them into different types of relationships. Children typically opened their SNS accounts with around 50 "friends," and over the two-year period of the research this number grew to several hundred. One 14-year-old had more than 1,000 friends on her Facebook site:

> I sort of know them all. I wouldn't say all of these people are my friends, they are either close friends, friends, friends of friends, people in my school, or relative.—Lillie, 14

Much has been written about parents' lack of knowledge of SNSs.[8] One mother in the study refused to let her 13-year-old son have a Facebook or MSN account (although he had one at his father's house) yet happily allowed him to play World of Warcraft online and Xbox Live, not realizing that he was chatting away to complete strangers in those venues. Children were aware of the dark side of the Internet and of safety

issues, and they regarded parents who discouraged their children from using SNSs as being at best misled, and at worst downright cruel.

> you should let your child use social networks as they are a great way of developing friendships with people you are not that friendly with. I no [*sic*] they are not always but you should trust your child and know that they will be sensible on the networks.—Jessica, 11, writing on the bulletin board

Identity and Friendship

Emerging identity is an important aspect of early adolescent development. In our existing digital culture, children have an immense opportunity to explore their world, be creative, play with identity, and experiment with different social mores. Using SNSs is not only entertaining for children, it is also highly creative and allows them to assert their identity in a totally unique way, checking out what their friends think of their creative endeavors. Livingstone observes that highly stylized SNS sites are a reflection of age, with younger children importing images such as hearts and glitter.[7] However, my study indicates that it might also be a matter of expertise; the more sophisticated children became online, even at 11 or 12 years old, the more they were likely to insert their personal identities in the form of their own unique photographs, creative text, and tags, rather than imported icons, clip art, and logos:

> I've got all like pictures and different albums and people comment on them, and say there's a picture that they really like, then they say "can I own this picture?" so you have to remember the tag you put on it … when you want people to comment you on your pictures you put

"pc4pc" which means picture comments. They comment on you and you comment on them … I love checking to see what people are saying about my pictures all the time.—Rachael, 13

Erik Erikson believed that the successful transition from adolescence to adulthood depends on the establishment of an identity.[9] In early adolescence, a child can define himself or herself by adopting a social role. The children in the study commonly defined themselves by adopting "gangsta rap," a language that can exclude many adults. The fickle way children change their SNSs and online profiles is similar to the way adolescents change their appearance. Online, many children appear to adopt a persona that they acknowledge does not necessarily reflect their sense of self truly, but that is nevertheless fun to play with. And they are aware of themselves changing:

> In the past 18 months my taste in music and friends has changed, and the quality of friends I have now, and I have longer hair.—Patrick, 12¾, writing on the online bulletin board

> We used to be best friends but now we have drifted a bit apart. I see her every day at school and on MSN and Facebook. Our interests are now very different. She plays football. I play football a bit but I get bored with it. She's a bit sporty.—Tamsin, 11

At this age, children begin to recognize that they are different from their peers, and these differences help to establish their sense of self, but they do not discard their old relationships, maintaining contact through SNSs.

Erikson believed a young person's identity has a psychosocial nature; the community in which the child lives shapes his or her adolescence.[9]

In a world that has grown much larger through the digital world's global playground, this community is now open to many more influences. Jane Kroger argues that in cultures that are technologically advanced, adolescence is prolonged through education, affluence, smaller family size, longer dependency on parents, and technology that allows teenagers to communicate and interact with one another.[10] Social-media researcher danah boyd aptly describes young people's obsession with SNSs as a means of defining who they are, a process she describes as "identity production," which involves them trying to "write themselves into being."[11]

Identity and Power at a Click

Children in this study admitted to lying about their age online, partly because in order to join a SNS they have to be 13 (and many believe they have to be 16). Joining SNSs gives them a sense of power that has probably never been available to children at this age. They acknowledge that they also exaggerate about other characteristics, to reflect values or strengths that they perceive as enhancing their status; it can also be fun and entertaining to exaggerate, even though from an observer's perspective it can sometimes appear risible or even dangerous:

> I think that people show off about themselves so that people will want to become friends with the person so that they will be popular.—William, 13

> Some people say they have loads of money, or their uncle is Simon Cowell just so people will like them.—Jessica, 11

> I have heard at other schools there have been fights and people try to make

themselves sound harder by exaggerating how brave or strong they were in a fight.—Alex, 13

The opportunity to exaggerate or lie online can allow children to experiment with being older, and it can give them a sense of power, or of being in control:

> erm, well I have once or twice … I have said stuff like "oh I am a model" to get some guy [to] ask for my msn and say like 'oh will you go on cam' and stuff like that so I just delete them on the site I am using.—Rosie, 12

This can be alarming to adults, but Rosie (slightly overweight) appeared to know what she was doing, had older siblings to advise her, and was one of the most knowledgeable children in the study about online security and safety.

When children reach age 11 or 12, gender identity becomes important. Sherry Turkle claims that online sexuality, which can include flirting and playing with gender roles, can start at 10 years old.[12] Gill Valentine and Sarah Holloway found that children who adopted different personas online inevitably chose to be more desirable or more powerful, with girls frequently choosing to be older, and boys stronger.[13] In the study, 13-year-old Jamie proudly showed the "r8 ma galz" ("rate my girls") section on his site, in which he spoke with adulation about various girls, and one in particular "shes dere 4 every1" ("she's there for everyone").

Scholars have applied postmodernist theory to ways of understanding identity online. New-media communication challenges our sense of the fixed elements of identity, such as gender, social class, and race; it could be argued that this new communication is a way of reconstructing society. Studies have shown that adolescents pretend to be someone else online, but that they also share emotional communication.[14]

Children in early adolescence are extending friendships beyond their natural course, and are able to maintain them and play with identity in a way never possible before. The means by which children form and maintain friendships at this time, and the interaction they have with larger groups, is believed to have a significant role in adolescents' psychosocial development.[15] With 59 percent of 11- to 12-year-olds in the UK and 49 percent of 11- to 12-year-olds in the US accessing SNSs,[2] the way in which children form friendships and play with identity online will become significant.

Children in this study see friendship as an ever-evolving circle that can extend online as their interests and experiences expand. They believe they will be friends forever. They view children without access to SNSs with pity and a sense that they are missing out on what is happening in the wider digital community. Although parents are anxious about their children's safety, and appear to be keeping them at home more than ever, children are embracing the global playground and using it to explore their identity in creative and new ways, asserting their sense of self in a highly personal form. They play with their identity but also feel that they are in control of what they show and what they keep back; they are responsible for shaping their own development. ◻

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THE AUTHOR

Barbie Clarke is a trained child and adolescent psychotherapist and youth researcher. She has just completed her PhD in child psychosocial development at the University of Cambridge, where she carried out ethnographic research on adolescents' use of social-networking sites. She has also been working on the Nuffield-funded Changing Adolescence project at the University of Cambridge. Contact her at bhc24@cam. ac.uk.

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