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# Young People in the Digital Age: Metrics of Friendship

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## Abstract

This chapter provides a critical overview of the debates on how new developments in the digital age, such as forms of social media, specifically social networking sites, are influencing the social, cultural, and geographical dimensions of young people's friendships. As a distinctive aspect of young people's lives, friendships are regarded as sites of companionship, support, and at times intimacy but can also be fraught with anxieties or difficulties. Social networking sites are new technological platforms that exist explicitly to facilitate the practice of friendship. However, there are diverse opinions in both the scholarly and popular literature on the extent to which these sites and other forms of social media are transforming the nature and meaning of contemporary friendship. A range of commentators also debate in sometimes quite polarizing terms whether the net effects of these new social media are positive and negative. This chapter explores how social media practices shape friendship for young people and argues that it is unproductive to take a binaristic view of the effects of social media as young people in the digital age are diverse in the ways they "do" friendship and in the ways they mobilize newer social resources that have opened up to them.

**Keywords** Friendship - Social networking - Social network sites - Young people

## 1 Introduction

Young people in the twenty-first century are experiencing a rapidly changing technological landscape. One of the most significant developments of recent decades has been the growth in digital electronic

technologies that have transformed patterns of human communication, both in terms of the range of hardware products available (e.g., laptops, smartphones, tablet devices, smart watches) and applications such as Whatsapp, Viber, Skype, and Hike messenger as well as a diverse range of social networking sites. The extensive use of these technologies by young people has, in turn, spawned a great deal of attention to their growing influence and impact on young people's lives, identities, and relationalities. Broadly speaking, these digital spaces foster interactions that are interpersonal and draw on norms of everyday interaction in an online setting, norms which have both similarities and differences with the past. For example, if in earlier decades it was common for young people to have a "pen friend" or "pen pal," where one would write letters via postal mail to a friend across a geographical distance with whom one rarely or never interacted in person, young people now often utilize digital spaces such as chat rooms and social media sites which are used to forge and maintain friendships albeit with a transformation in immediacy of communication and potentially bridging greater geographical boundaries. These technologies of communication indicate that it is possible, perhaps now more than ever, to conduct friendships across distances (Ellison et al. [2007](#)), thus bridging social and geographical gaps. Yet paradoxically, these same technologies have been critiqued for exacerbating difference and promoting narcissistic and shallow associations. As Miller ( [2011](#), p. 167) highlights in his discussion of one highly popular social media platform, Facebook, "In conversations about Facebook, there is a common theme that pertains to a fear of the modern. This is the fear that we are all becoming more superficial, that Facebook *friends* represent a kind of inflation that diminishes the value of prior or true friendship." Miller, goes on to posit that conversely, "We can also theorize about how Facebook can proliferate friendship without diminishing it by observing that Facebook clearly provides greater efficiencies in friendship." (ibid). By this token, social networking sites have become integral to the "doing of friendship" (Nayak [2013](#)) by young people, especially in the current age of social media (Hampton et al. [2012](#)) in which digital and new media technologies are changing the experience of young adulthood. The question, then, is not so much if social media is a major feature of many young people's lives as this is largely acknowledged as a reality given the ubiquity of these technologies across the world. Rather, an emerging question arises of how this technology "does" friendship and how could the latter be measured particularly in a period when the ambiguity surrounding what constitutes a friend is increasingly becoming topical.

While social media has become a staple of many young people's lives internationally, there has been a range of pressing issues raised by the media and scholars in relation to young people. However, it could be said that the anxieties and fears surrounding young peoples' use of social media overlooks the key desire for social connection and the electronic devices then are not an "addiction" but rather a means to an end – friendship. Given that world's cultures are replete with stories of friendships, it is odd that this is as underrepresented as it is not simply in geography but in other disciplines. There are a few exceptions to this, for example in Leib's ( [2010](#)) theorization of friendship as a public policy concern. Leib makes a claim for friendship, arguing that as an institution much like marriage, it must be taken into more consideration by laws and legal institutions. He delineates a set of criteria, though not exhaustive, for potential use by legislators to aid in answering the question of what constitutes a friend. These are voluntariness, intimacy, trust, solidarity, exclusivity, reciprocity, warmth, mutual assistance, equality, duration over time, and conflict and modalities of conflict resolution. Of course, however, the meanings of "friend" and "friendship" vary both temporally and spatially, and no one set of criteria could be said to be universally applicable.

Michael Eve ( [2002](#)) posits two reasons for the relative paucity of engagement with friendship in social and geographical sciences. The first of these involves the association of friendship with dyadic and informal relations, and the second concerns the nature of the modern world. In his view, the social structure of "traditional" societies was/is based on personal relations "where one is not supposed to

‘use’ friends, where the ideology of merit is strong, and ‘nepotism’ is disapproved of” (Eve [2002](#), p. 389). The suggestion made that friendship is simply a dyadic relationship is an approach that is criticized by Eve who focuses on its importance within a group context and chains of connections. To say then that social science has not critically engaged with friendship is to deny the existing work on this topic, which has in turn shed light on geographical dimensions of friendship (even if friendship has not been a major focus for geographers). Drawing on diverse disciplines, this chapter seeks to bring into view digital spaces in and through which friendships are made and maintained by young people.

## 2 Friendship in the Digital Age: The Debates

Digital technologies and social media sites have altered ideas of friendship and relationship practices for young people in innumerable ways. Existing research on this dynamic relationship between social media and young people is largely divided between optimistic and pessimistic accounts of the impact of these technologies on young people’s lives.

Friendship, as an interpersonal and, at times, intimate relationship, has received scarce scholarly attention particularly in human geography with the exception of a small number of studies (e.g., Bunnell et al. ( [2012](#)); Neal and Vincent ( [2013](#))). For reasons discussed previously, friendship has also been relatively marginal to the mainstream sociological literature. There are new analytical windows opening up with the view to examining the temporal and spatial reconfigurations of social and human relations through digital forms and one of the ways in which this can productively take place in through the combination of the sociological discourses with work in social geography. An engagement with other perspectives and disciplines will offer a more complex and nuanced theorization of digital technologies in relation to human relations and geographies rather a binaristic view which either overstates or reduces the role of new media.

In *Born Digital*, John Galfrey and Urs Gasser (2008) identify three digital groups in their analysis of how friendship patterns have altered as a result of increased online activity:

1.

*Digital natives*, composed of children who were born into and raised in the digital world;

2.

*Digital settlers*, comprised of those who grew up in an analogue world but have helped shape the contours of digital environments; and

3.

*Digital immigrants*, composed of those who have learned to use digital technologies later in life but who are not as highly dependent on this compared to their counterparts.

They argue that a clear distinction between online and offline world by and large does not apply to contemporary young people, classified as digital natives, as this is a group who have been born into and have grown in a digital world. They argue that their approaches to human relationships are different to digital settlers and immigrants in many ways, and friendship is just one relationship which is approached in a different manner. Since the launch of social networking site Facebook in 2004, and its rapid subsequent growth, social networking sites have come to fuel, document and detail millions of relationships globally. The explosion of Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, Tumblr, Google +, Friends Reunited, Gaydar, and Instagram, VK, and Weibo, to name some key examples, has been widely

acknowledged as platforms widely engaged with by young people (Livingstone and Brake [2010](#); Nayak and Kehily [2013](#)) to facilitate forms of self-representation, peer interactions, and hubs of interpersonal communications. Both smaller-scale qualitative studies and larger-scale surveys conducted in diverse contexts are largely in agreement that social media has become deeply embedded in the lives of young people. Yet, the bulk of studies into social network sites and friendship have focused predominantly on adolescent groups. Boyd's ( [2008](#)) ethnographic study was an important contribution to youth studies and practices in relation to social media use but was confined to users under 18 years of age. There is also an emerging body of research on the relationship between digital technologies and ethnicity, race, and religion (Everett [2009](#); Nakamura and Chow-White [2013](#)). However, there remains a limited understanding of the multidimensional relationship between online "life" and practices and their merging into physical spaces which has significant implications for geographers and other social scientists today.

Moreover, there have been a number of issues that have moved into the academic limelight related to the perceived effects of social media such as privacy; an increase in cyber-bullying (Sellgren [2014](#)); an allegedly narcissistic fascination with posting selfies as a means of displaying one's self (Coulthard [2013](#)); isolation from the real world (Turkle [2011](#)); and the risk of sexual harassment (Palfrey and Gasser [2008](#)). New digital technologies have come to be a major bone of contention from educators, media, and the state who frequently debate how and if these should be regulated (Thorne [2009](#)). In their review of social networking sites, Livingstone and Brake ( [2010](#)) comment extensively on the rewards and risks of this medium for young peoples' well-being and how these spaces function as one of play, creativity, flirtation, and opportunities. They also highlight the need to balance anxieties held by adults about the trend of digital friendships. The positive picture painted of these new digital expressions run counter to media and even cinematic depictions of the latter as sites for sexual harassment, grooming, or unsolicited out-of-control house parties amongst other negative potentialities. This can be seen in the film *Project X* ( [2012](#)), partly based on a true story, where details of a house party go viral and in a matter of minutes, the power of social media manifests in the hundreds of students who descend on and trash the property while the parents are out of town. This escalates rather quickly and eventually riot police are called to quell the commotion.

In a recent American late-night talk show and news satire television program, the subject of online harassment and revenge porn is surveyed and the segment which ends with a parody of how the Internet is used both as a tool and as a weapon ( *Last Night with John Oliver* [2015](#)). Drawing on old AOL (American Online) commercials, the parody casts two male actors in a 1990s get-up who explain to male viewers how, due to the immediacy and convenience of the Internet, they can harass females in a much shorter timeframe. While this is an entertainment broadcast, it illustrated how the perils of the Internet noted by many commentators have a gendered dimension to this. It illustrates how pictures and videos of young women are posted on pornographic sites by ex-boyfriends, who until recently often did so with impunity, without fear of any kind of prosecution. As Ridley ( [2015](#)) explains for the UK context, "the Malicious Communications Act has been the main legislation used to try to tackle revenge porn offenders – along with others Protection from Harassment Act – as there was no specific law forbidding it." This, along with other forms of online harassment such as cyberbullying, has severe consequences: for example, in some case the posting of such material has led to victim humiliation, death threats, and suicide attempts. Though as of 2015 after calls from campaigners and politicians, a new clause was added to the Criminal Justice and Courts Bill which under English and Welsh law legally classified revenge porn as a criminal offense. Other countries are considering taking similar actions as digital spaces become a battleground for sexism, racism, and other ideologies. Ideas about gender and race, among other vectors of social difference, are configured

through social media so in one sense, gender and race are processed and produced continually in these digital spaces. Boyd ( [2013](#), p. 210) discusses this in her study of online teen friendships in which she found that “clearly dominant racial groups went unmarked, but labels like ‘*the blacks*,’ ‘*the Chinese people*,’ ‘*the Hispanics*,’ ‘*the Mexicans*,’ ‘*the white people*,’ and so forth were regularly employed to define social groupings. Substitutes were employed so as to avoid being labeled racist as Boyd goes on to explain that ‘the word’ ‘*urban*’ signals ‘*black*’ when referring to a set of tastes or practices.” The formalization of raced online communities such as Black Twitter and Ya Native, among a number of others, along with online hate groups as reviewed by Jessie Daniel’s ( [2009](#)) *Cyber Racism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on Civil Right* are just a few examples of how race is represented and produced in digital spaces.

With the growing range of interventions and positions taken on the role of digital technologies in youth culture, one thing that has been absent from these studies has been a discussion of how to study the multifaceted complexities of these digital spaces and spatialities in specific empirical settings. For while Facebook is the most visited social networking site in the world, there are regional preferences for example in India, Fropper, indiandost, and wayn.com are a few examples of popular social networking sites with the view to friendship. On these Indian sites, users can access other people’s profiles and choose from a drop-down menu for preferences based on location, gender, and age. The practices and access to social media differ according to geographical location in addition to other markers, and this is only lately gaining traction in recent geographic research. Given the immensity of digital technological forms, in particular social media, being woven into the fabric of young peoples’ daily routines and rhythms, it is important to ask what does this technology holds for how young people relate to each other and how they understand their own identities. This digital environment has now become an iconic space of young people’s sociality, not unlike drive-in cinemas in 1950s America or the shopping mall in the 1980 and 1990s (Vanderbeck and Johnson [2000](#)). However, it is also important to understand that cyberspace has not replaced material space in any straightforward way but rather there is an overlap of social spaces across both offline and online worlds.

The importance of spaces to “hang out” has been much commented on by urban planners and other commentators (e.g., Oldenburg [1998](#)). Whereas the archetypes of these spaces to “hang out” for youth in different eras have included “drive-ins” and “shopping malls,” for the current generation of young people, described as millennials by popular media and some social scientists (Strauss and Howe [2000](#)) or other descriptors such as “cyberkids,” “google generation,” “n-geners” (Holmes [2011](#)) arguably flock to social media for more or less the same reasons as their predecessors which is to congregate, gather, play, and to socialize. And this is not exclusive to virtual life as this form of digital media becomes a mode and means to real social life with material effects so online worlds arguably become just as “real” as physical worlds. Broadly speaking then, young people’s engagement with social media can be theorized as a tool to find, form, and cultivate friendships. In a leading ethnographic study on young people’s social media practices, Ito and Eds ( [2010](#)) found that friendships and shared interests were the main motivation in their engagement with new media. While fears of control and exploitation (Schor [2014](#); Livingstone and Brake [2010](#)) are valid, the media narrative is dominated by this fear especially in relation to young people. As Livingstone ( [2008](#)) points out, “Popular and media discourses all too often reflect a puzzled dismay that young people live in such a different world from the (nostalgically remembered) youth of today’s adults. Media panics amplify the social anxieties associated with social networking.” This commonly held view then does not recognize the diverse and diffuse ways in which social media are utilized as the ways in which digital spaces influence the latter are very complex and this is significant, particularly in terms of human relationships. Moreover, a competent navigation of the social media landscape by young people indicates that while their identities are performed and edited across audiences, it also requires an ability to move around in what



Manuel Castells ( [2001](#)) calls a “technical geography of social media.” This type of performance in a way affords a temporal sense of place as young people take on a spirit of play and become adept performing with various dimensions of this technology.

### 3 Social Media and Friendship

Following Anoop Nayak’s (2014) claim that social networking sites are spaces for the “doing of friendship,” it is useful to look at how this particular form of digital media is defined. Boyd and Ellison ([2007](#), p. 211) consider social networking sites (SNS) to be:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

This definition has been critiqued by David Beer ( [2008](#), p. 519) for its limited analytical value and broadness. Beer argues instead for the term “Web 2.0” where the emphasis is placed on practices of networking and the effects of social media use on society rather than the uses society has for social media. Additionally, the dichotomy posited by Boyd and Ellison ( [2007](#)) between physical friendships which exist in real space and time and virtual friendships which exist solely in digitally mediated interactions is rendered problematic by Beer ( [2008](#)), who contends that online socialities are often translated in physical ones and vice versa. This adds color to the debates about the future of new media and the distinction between online and offline, where it could be argued that this distinction is increasingly being rendered obsolete. Another example of the merging between offline and online is the newly popularized trend of measuring world populations to include not just countries but “user populations” of social media. In a Youtube video showcasing the power of social and mobile, Erik Qualman , author of *Socialnomics* ( [2012](#)), shows the top ten world populations in his 2015 Youtube video as follows: 1 – Facebook, 2 – China, 3–India, 4 – TenCent, 5 – Whatsapp, 6 – Google +, 7 – Linkedin, 8 – United States, 9 – Instagram, and 10 – Twitter. In other words, such is the sheer immensity of social media and mobile technologies that these sites, he argues, can be conceived of as populated territories in their own right and not in opposition to the physical world. Although claims about the production of territories in this manner are problematic in that they imply occupation by a group or an institution, of a bounded space in which social relations and infrastructures are bordered. This is somewhat paradoxical as social media, as a digital territory, is elsewhere largely conceptualized as transcending borders yet to frame SNS in such a territorialized manner seems to set up different, yet similar social dynamics as that of a physical territory and its attendant inclusions and exclusions.

Most of these sites are free of charge and open to new members; however, how these are managed, edited, and controlled varies according to users. For example, one user may post content and block certain other “friends” from their viewing this particular post for a number of reasons hence creating a hierarchy of sorts within their contact list. Given that social media provides a form of participatory infrastructure, what is shared and to whom can be regarded as a process of inclusion and exclusion. Deborah Chambers ( [2013](#), p. 94) gives an account of these types of process in her description of MySpace, where a feature called “Top Friends” compelled users “to declare their most intimate friends or so-called ‘bestest friends’ .....It confirms young peoples’ need for acceptance and affirmation. The Top Friends feature encourages young people to create a friendship hierarchy or friendship ranking by listing up to 24 names on a grid and ordering them from first to last. This generates all sorts of drama...” The intricacies and complications of real-world friendships cannot be

neatly mapped onto social network sites yet such rankings interpellate friends in such a fixed and abstract manner that invariably these have offline consequences such as “social drama” (Ito et al. [2010](#)). This is a term that can refer to gossip, tensions, cliques, choosing sides, and eventual fall outs. What social media is then regarded as doing is exacerbating the asymmetries of friendship. The question of how friendship is defined on social networking sites is one which is frequently addressed in media. Indeed, adding a friend onto a list of contacts is by no means an indication of any kind of relation but rather, this is an example of a practice employed to expand one’s social network. Boyd’s (2006) and Dwyer’s ( [2007](#)) works put forward a distinction between friendship as a close relation between two people and online friendships as superficial. Madianou and Miller ([2013](#), p. 169) develop the concept of polymedia “to understand the consequences of digital media in the context of interpersonal communication” and as a way of capturing the radical transformation in human communication which arguably has only taken place in the last few years. Yet, beyond a limited number of studies, there are no distinct theoretical frameworks to study social media, its practices, and the complex relationship between this and real-life relationships. In trying to understand if social media strengthens or weakens friendship ties, Ellison et al. ( [2011](#)) found that American undergraduates possessed a mean of 300 Facebook “friends,” but that 25 are considered “actual” friends. This, along with the private groups created on social media, point to a process of gradation in friendship (mirroring a distinction made between “friends” and “acquaintances” that has had currency in some contexts). However, this also brings into focus the critique frequently leveled against social media, that is, are these “actual” friends authentic and/or real? The exchange and dissemination of self-disclosure publicly might be conceived of as a way of accessing social capital (Ellison et al. [2011](#)), but the production and reproduction of interpersonal bonds is far from being a straightforward process. The participation of young people in social media life is indeed a complex one which suggests a wide range of social, cultural, political, and economic geographies. Furthermore, a young person may be on cross-connected platforms but representing themselves differently on these. Scholarly discussions must consider how these new social media practices allow and disallow discrete spheres of life, arguably a more helpful approach than fixating on whether a friendship is “real” by some historical standard. It is therefore imperative to capture and analyze the fields of social media as dynamic sociocultural and geographical systems rather than fixed types. While this may prove to be a daunting challenge for scholars, it is an area worthy of serious and concerted research efforts. The advent of the social media age has been characterized as altering the social scene of young people significantly, particularly in regards to the definition of “friend.” Where this term traditionally implied one had at some point face-to-face interaction with the person deemed a “friend,” today it includes a person we may have never met in person. Though this chapter does not make the claim that social media has revolutionized friendship, the ease of convenience with which one can accumulate Facebook friends or Twitter followers has not only heralded a new era of digital jargon with the use of emojis to convey a particular emotion, verb constructions such as “to friend,” “unfriend,” and acronyms such as FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), LOL (laugh out loud), “netizen” among many others. It has also sparked heated discussions about what friendship actually means in this age: what is it, who are “real” friends, and how do these friendships shape identities? “Authenticity,” as one value by which friendship tends to be judged, is one which has been frequently pitted against real-life relationships and in arguments against use of social media, for example through questions such as how authentic are the posts by a user on a SNS. The question, though, of the standards by which authenticity can be judged is an important one to consider as this varies among individuals, and the lines between what is perceived as “real” and “fake” are often fuzzy and contested. Indeed, friendships take time and their formation and maintenance is a process: as Aristotle ( [1987](#)) once articulated, “The desire for friendship comes quickly. Friendship does not” (quoted in Pattakos 2010). Social media



users through their practices such as clicking a “like,” posting or retweeting a comment, sending a friend request raises questions about how young people prize friendships, when compared to the age before social media. Arguably, the ubiquity of digital spaces, while on one hand has bridged geographical distances has ironically created more distance. To maintain constant connectivity in which one manages a multitude of connections is to be in a state of flux where one must balance the quantity versus the quality of friends and friendships. Indeed, to be constantly connected is the dominant narrative of sorts and to depict a stylized virtual identity is an imperative for the majority of young people worldwide. While agency, choice, preference, and proclivities would paint a more prosaic picture, there is broadly speaking a collective need to be connected and a deviation from this has material effects such as social ostracism and invisibility. As Blatterer ( [2010](#) ) says, online visibility is pursued at the expense of privacy. To take the position of being “Facebook-free, a Twitter quitter, or Insta-invisible” ( *Selfie* [2014](#) ) is not one that many young people consider viable because to do so would risk social invisibility or place them in a disadvantaged position (Bobkowski and Smith [2013](#); Turkle [2011](#)).

Yet despite the ongoing anxieties about the effects of social media on social relations and traditional ties, there is growing evidence to suggest that digital spaces are important ones for “doing friendships.” According to Chambers ( [2013](#), p. 84), “Social network site engagement tends to involve co-present relationships within peer groups, confirming the *spatial* embeddedness of online social ties for teenagers.” Ito et al.’s (2010) landmark study attests to the role of social media in developing social relations in the school environment and is one of the more significant studies in exploring young people’s friendships. In this, 23 case studies were conducted on the experiences of digital media use among young people, aged 12–18, across the United States. The researchers observed that social media platforms act as a site from which negotiations of one’s status take place in and out of school environments. This is not restricted to one platform but across multiple channels and technologies, for example mobile phones, private messaging, texting, as well as through other electronic devices.

### 3.1 Friends or Followers: The Impact of Social Media on Friendship

In an attempt to navigate the tricky terrain of digital spaces, the chapter now turn to contemporary debates which position social networking as either empowering or risky. By examining the research literature on actual young peoples’ experiences of social media, it has been found that their active engagement is a strategic one in which social capital is built by organizing the various levels of friendship and expanding on social media’s potential for self-expression (Ellison et al. [2010a, b](#)).

It may seem safe to say that digital media usage emerges as a centripetal, but not the ultimate, defining standard by which a friendship is measured for young people but a distinction should be made between friends and friendship. As Blatterer ( [2014](#), p. 45) explains, “In this social media age of ours we can confidently add that knowing of each other, or simply appearing on someone’s Facebook page is good enough to be identified as a friend. What hasn’t changed, however, is that friendship connotes the kind of intimacy that friends in the broad sense can do without. ”Friendship on Facebook then could be understood as offering a different layer of intimacy which is less interdependent on two people and a more fleeting form of social connection. As SNS exponentially increase our capacity to create and communicate with larger volumes of networks, friends may become more amplified in the web of human sociality.

Given the immense proliferation of social network use, not only by young people but by virtually most age groups, it is not surprising that there is a rich and growing body of scholarly work on this in addition to novels such as *Rich Kids of Instagram* (Sloan [2014](#)), television shows such as *Selfie*, and

even in films such as *Men, Women and Children* ( [2014](#)) which casts a spotlight on the debilitating effects of social media on personal relationships. What these works have in common is the underlying notion that narcissism, superficiality, and shallowness, more often than not, are the dominant perceptions of social media. The danger with this however is an oversimplification which does not take into account the affordances that permit young people to develop. Boyd and Ellison ( [2007](#)) have identified four broad areas of research on this theme. The first of these concerns friendship performance and “impression management” in which research explores how users manage their profiles and how these influence friendship formations (Boyd [2008](#)). While the act of misrepresenting oneself whether it is, for example, standing by a luxury car that the person does not own or photoshopping one’s appearance may be conceived of as a deceptive practice, another way of exploring this, according to Boyd, is that impression management is a way of expressing an idealized or higher version of oneself.

The second area looks at the structure of networks (Hogan [2008](#)) and how the processing of data from SNS into useful information for example to predict consumer trends. While SNS generates an enormous amount of personal data that can potentially be valuable for businesses and organizations (as represented by attempts to harness and use the so-called Big Data generated online), the continually expanding volumes of data make it almost impossible for useful information to be collected with a certain timeframe. Beyond data collection and presentation, there has been little analysis on different groups or underlying structures of a social network according to Malika and Malik ( [2011](#)). The third area looks at the closing gap between offline and online networks. These studies argue that social network sites are used to both maintain and expand on connections to existing offline relationships (Ellison et al. [2007](#)). It could be argued that to look at offline and online relationships as discrete processes is inappropriate but rather young people can be seen to be customizing their friendships through both digital and face-to-face modalities.

Finally, the fourth area addresses issues of privacy and the extent to which personal information posted on social network sites can potentially expose users to identity theft or online harassment (NCPSS 2015). This is a polarizing debate with scholars arguing on one hand that the general public is demanding more stringent online privacy and protection (Madden [2012](#)) and on the other, a widespread acceptance that, to quote Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, “privacy is dead” and that open sharing of personal details renders privacy an illusion (Debatin [2011](#)). Enhanced regulation is one of the more effective ways of dealing with privacy issues but while social media use will continue to soar, user attitudes and strategies such as restricting networks and limiting access will help towards lessening the risks to privacy.

The seeming ubiquity of social networking sites is a widely acknowledged notion but despite claims to universal access, there exists a digital divide as access to these sites is spatially and socially uneven. That being said, it is enormously popular as Adams ( [2005](#)) says, this has led to a far-reaching construction of the self as the process of socialization has shifted from focusing on one-to-one ties to multiple connections. As Warf ( [2014](#), p. 300) elucidates, “the geographies of everyday life have become greatly complicated, often involving complicated webs of interpersonal interactions filled by wormholes and tunnels, a notion that mirrors the rhizomatic structure of the Internet and resembles the origami-like spatialities of post-structuralism.”

### 3.2 Social Media and Community

This section considers the ways in which forms of “community” can be considered to be produced via young people’s uses of social media. That new communication technologies have collapsed the

distances between places is not a novel idea. The sheer ubiquity of mobile phones, digital devices, and the Internet is now the norm and has in turn enabled new online communities through platforms such as Facebook, twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Youtube, and so on. The social practices of blogging and tweeting which involve posting images, narratives, and content on various platforms takes place within communities and also produces them. For example as Crampton (2007, p. 96) says, "Bloggers link to each other, comment on each other's sites, mention each other in their blogs, create 'fansigns' (buttons or cool graphics mentioning the site's name, or webcam pictures with the site's name inscribed somewhere on the body) thus creating friendships and mutual support. "A diverse array of connection techniques such as status updates, profile descriptions, comments, group messages, geotagging, uploading videos, picture tagging, hashtagging, live tweeting, instant messaging, and "liking" are just some of the ways in which friendships are constructed. Through presenting edited versions of one's self, young people engage in a process of self and public reflexivity which is validated by their peers, or depending on their privacy settings, by the wider public through practices such as liking and commenting. This act of inscription as interacting with other virtual identities is a millennial version of Benedict Anderson's ( [1991](#)) coinage, the "imagined community," that emerges as a product of the imbrication of social media, practices, and people. In his explanation, the ties of a people extend beyond their geographical confines and national communities only become real when the members see them as real. Such was the power of this conception that it can be readily adopted and included in discussions on online communities fostered by social media. For example the "Chilean Winter" youth protests (Valenzuela et al. [2012](#)) in which high-school and college students organized themselves through social media to demand changes in education and energy policy could be viewed as a digitally mediated form of community. The rise of the Arab Spring protests in 2011, which inspired a revolution across the Middle East, is a highly cited example of the power of social media in its critical function of connecting activists and disseminating real-time information. As a form of community building in which Arab members from different countries congregated to revolt against brutality and unjust acts by the government, this was a globally significant event which highlighted how the new platforms of social media played a particular role of communication and how young people in their organizing demonstrated political entrepreneurship in ways which would have been nowhere near possible decades ago (Howard and Hussain [2013](#)). Another example is the Occupy Wall Street movement which was "born on the Internet, diffused by the Internet, and maintained its presence on the Internet" (Castells [2012](#), p. 168) to protest social and economic inequalities and in which social media was located as a key driver of the protests alongside human actors.

If social media has been heralded as opening a new era of communications and exponentially increasing the power of young people, for example, through political activism as seen above, it also raises the fraught question of whether young people's participation in online communities is necessarily a positive thing. Earlier in 2011, the world had witnessed the Twitter and Facebook revolution in the Middle East and Occupy protests worldwide but then not too shortly after, the same technologies were used to other ends, for example the London Riots in 2011. The role of online networks and community groups were cited by the mass media as a key tool in organizing unrest and uproar in certain locations across the capitals and some parts of the UK (Halliday [2012](#)) and the media coverage of these events presented heightened moral panics particularly in relation to young people. This was a largely simplistic picture of the events and technologically deterministic, given that the political and capitalist underpinnings of these riots were largely ignored in the media coverage which was, in turn, predominantly focused on the dangers and exploitation of social media by young people. A social research inquiry conducted by The Guardian newspaper and the London School of Economics largely reject the notion of social media exploitation and state that "Contrary to

widespread speculation at the time, the social media sites Facebook and Twitter were not used in any significant way by rioters. In contrast, the free messaging service available on Blackberry phones – known as “BBM” – was used extensively to communicate, share information and plan in advance of riots.” ( [2011](#), p. 4). The study goes on to suggest that “Despite the attention paid to social media by government and the press.....traditional media, particularly television, played a large part. More than 100 of the project’s 270 interviewees referred to hearing about the riots via pictures on television news – more than Twitter, texts, Facebook, or BBM. Some rioters also said the dramatic nature of the TV coverage tempted them to get involved with the unrest.” ( [2011](#), p. 33).

There is no shortage of reports from many contexts, driven by a sense of moral panic, commenting on perceived addiction or extreme usage from think-tanks, organizations, and the media. To name a few examples, cyberbullying, revenge porn, exposure to sexual predators, peer surveillance, shaming, and online harassment are some of the main dangers that commentators have identified and decried in relation to young peoples’ use of social networking sites and participation in online communities. Another often commented consequence to emerge from high social media usage is the heightened anxiety of using a digital acronym FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) and social isolation but one that is shared by the many who are “alone together” (Turkle [2011](#)). The heightened concerns for the safety of children and young people is such that “Safer Internet Day” was launched in 2011 in the UK to promote safer and more responsible use of online technology globally (UK Safer Internet Centre [2015](#)). Charities such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) have conducted qualitative studies on the impact of digital technologies, specifically sexting, a practice which involves the “exchange of sexual messages or images” and “creating, sharing and forwarding sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images” (Lilley et al. [2014](#)) for young people (see also Moran-Ellis [2012](#)). The rapid distribution of these types of pictures can augment feelings of distress and shame and in many respects can be seen as more damaging than offline bullying because of its fluid dissemination. Studies have shown that young people reporting cyberbullying are likely to be socially anxious, depressed, or demonstrate poor academic performance (Hinduja and Patchin [2010](#); Raskaukas and Stoltz [2009](#)). Scholars have broadly categorized cyberbullying in two ways. First, there is direct bullying (Stassen Berger [2007](#)) in which cyberbullies attack victims explicitly verbally, nonverbally, or physically, for example, by sending a virus or infected material to the victim’s electronic devices. The second category is indirect or “behind my back” (Stassen Berger [2007](#), p. 95) cyberbullying, which takes place through gossip, sending out sensitive information, or hacking the victim’s account and sending out emails that tarnishes the victim. There are differences in the effects on victims and while it may seem an obvious choice to compare cyberbullying to offline bullying, there are distinctions of the former in that the bullying does not take place in a material space such as the schoolyard or classroom and bullies can reach victims online any time after or even during school hours. While media literacy training, parental supervision, and platform provider assistance are just a few ways of dealing with the phenomenon of cyberbullying, studies of parental and platform mediation have been scarce to date save for a few exceptions such as studies by Shin ( [2013](#)) and Warren ( [2015](#)).

These may be a few of the dangers facing young people when navigating these digital environments but on the other hand, social media as part of this environment, enables a type of social support and interaction that would not have been possible before the age of the Internet, as seen in the earlier discussion on youth activism. However, this interaction can vary according to the type of social media platform, for instance as Kaplan and Haenlein ( [2010](#)) propose that the levels of self-disclosure and self-presentation in blogs would be higher than a platform such as Wikipedia. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 62) propose the following typology of social platforms which they classify into six groups: blogs and microblogs (e.g., Twitter), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), content communities

(e.g., Youtube), virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life), collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), and virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft). It could be said that a common feature across all these groups is that these enable different types of sociality, and hence different forms of “community.” Communications that take place repeatedly in these digital spaces extend into more than just social relationships – they can translate into feelings of community, belonging, and friendship. This can be heard not just in digital jargon but in everyday vocabularies, for example in phrases such as “Hit me up on Facebook” or “Get at me on twitter” “which are used when trying to rekindle an old friendship or build a new contact, whether personal or professional. Indeed, there are gains to be had in both personal and professional spheres of young people’s lives through engagement with social media. For example, this was attested by LinkedIn, a social networking site primarily targeted towards working professionals, who recently lowered its age limit for member subscriptions to 13 years of age in a bid to attract career-oriented teenagers and to enable them to research university choices. While this move was criticized from the current users who expressed discomfort at this younger demographic joining a professional network and by columnists for demonstrating a “distasteful failure to allow children to be children by inflicting upon them the inherent melancholy of the knowledge that one’s destiny is merely that of a wage slave in a riddled service-based economy” (Cosslett [2013](#)), it was concurrently met with praise, for example, by Dr Bernie Hogan of the Oxford Internet Institute who says that young people would be able to “differentiate between the public profile they want for employment [and] the personal profile they share on Facebook with their friends and family”(BBC [2013](#)). The possibilities for creativity and greater self-expression have also increased exponentially as social media has produced a generation of young people who, no longer reliant on content producers in old media such as television, film, and radio, write and produce their own content and if successful, go on to become digital media stars. Whether as Youtube sensations, fashion video bloggers or digital activists (The Guardian [2014](#)), social network sites have created platforms for young people who in turn have gained access to lucrative career opportunities which may not have historically been available to them.

Earlier in the chapter, there was reference made to the advantages of electronic technologies in providing a tool for young people to sustain their friendship networks over longer distances. Moreover, the usage of this as a means of constructing the self is in direct contrast to theoretical models of an autonomous subject. In fact, many of the pro-social media arguments hinge on the notion that the latter allows for a sociality which in turn enhances the importance of relationalities, thereby presenting a different form of the self than that which is portrayed in some accounts of the self. Adams ( [2005](#)) expands on this idea as the “boundless self,” one which is not tied down to physical and temporal limits of the body or geographies that bound by the insidious effects of scale and distance. There is a body of literature which holds that social media replicates emotional depth of real-life contacts (Hampton and Wellman [2001](#)) and that online interactions are challenging geographically bound communities as the main vehicles of sociability. As a means of connecting emotionally while geographically distant, social network sites and mobile technologies are also used as a way of negotiating social differences.

## 4 Conclusion

It would be difficult to argue with the notion that the rise of digital technologies and new media has triggered profound changes in human cultures. As these technologies have become more enmeshed in contemporary global culture, there have been important implications for the nature of communications and relational ties changed, although it is also important to recognize significant continuities with the



past. Much like any other type of human relationship, friendship has geographical dimensions. As illustrated throughout this chapter, friendships are formed, rekindled, made, remade, and even ended in and through digital spaces, particularly social network sites. These simultaneously allow and disallow spatialities of sociality and possibility. The concept of Friendship 2.0, as described in this chapter, has much scope as an analytical concept for not only human geography but for other disciplinary arenas as a way to think about transformations in the meaning and practices of friendship within the context of new communication technologies and digital environments. As social media has come to organize practices and people in the real world, these applications and platforms have critical implications. Digital social spaces and physical spaces are mutually constituted so it is worthwhile to observe, analyze, and critique both of these spaces as constitutive of each other rather than in opposition to each other, especially as this is a worldview taken up by millennials.

Over the last decade, a rich and developing body of work on digital spaces has contributed to knowledge about youth cultures but there is an insufficient consolidated research on the role of social media in the production of space and sociality. The Pew Research Center provides extensive quantitative reports on young people and social media in the United States, but these are not complemented by qualitative analyses or geospatial models. The balance of scholarly and popular comment on the effects of social media on young people has emphasized negative consequences. Although some of the potential implications are real and well documented (such as cyberbullying), there is also a moralizing dimension to some of this commentary. In a number of respects, social media has arguably proven to be a beneficial tool whether it is to redefine one's identity, access avenues of social capital which were previously denied or inaccessible, or as mentioned earlier rekindle and strengthen friendships, old and new. Friendships are diverse and diffuse, therefore to paint a one-dimensional picture of social networking in the lives of young people is inadequate. As Palfrey and Gasser ( [2008](#), p. 5) say, "Online friendships are based on many of the same things as traditional friendships – shared interests, frequent interaction – but they nonetheless have a very different tenor: They are often fleeting; they are easy to enter into and leave, without so much as a goodbye; and they are also perhaps enduring in ways we have yet to understand."

Yet there remains a divide between accounts of the positive and negative implications of practices of social networking and their impacts on young people's lives. If, on the one hand, studies herald a celebration of digital media as empowering and bridging difference then, on the other hand, there are studies countering this with the perception of digital media as risky, hostile, and damaging. It is hardly productive to take a dichotomous view of the practices of digital media and their impact as these perspectives do not explore how young people utilize these technologies in the development of their social relations nor do these ground young people's experiences in empirical analysis. A review of the studies on social media noted in this chapter suggests that this is certainly a focus which warrants further research and given the vitality of work emerging in this area, it is expected that the robust body of work on the uses and impacts of digital technologies will continue to grow. It is worth bearing in mind that despite the diverse and extensive ways in which friendships have now come to be constituted in the digital age through stylized self-presentations and manipulatable virtual identities, this has not erased "traditional" modes of friendship but intersects with it in all sorts of ways. This becomes clear in the growing evidence from young people who enjoy the experiences of face-to-face contact, hanging out or meeting up for a social activity, and practices which are fundamental to a meaningful friendship. Newer and multiple socialities are practiced across multiple platforms that do not destroy the quality of human interactions, nor do these collapse a bounded sense of place but rather potentially allow a more fluid and reflexive sense of place.



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