

Friendship

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Sitting in a coffee shop in suburban Michigan in June 2007, Tara, a Vietnamese 16-year-old, was asked about Facebook. She giggled and said that she had “an addiction” to the site. She had heard from adults that Facebook might be bad, but “like everyone says get a Facebook. You need to get one.” She made sure to log in often to check for new messages from friends, read updates about her classmates, and comment on friends’ photos. For Tara, this type of participation on a social network site is a critical element of staying socially connected. She is not alone. While the specific tools vary by geography, time, and peer group, the teens we interviewed throughout the United States regularly told us that engaging with social media is important for developing and maintaining friendships with peers. While these teens may see each other at school, in formal or unstructured activities, or at each other’s houses, they use social media to keep in touch with their friends, classmates, and peers when getting together is not possible. Skyler Sierra, an 18-year-old from Colorado, best articulated the importance of these new media to these teens’ social lives when she explained to her mother that “if you’re not on MySpace, you don’t exist.” For many contemporary teenagers, losing access to social media is tantamount to losing their social world.

We found that U.S. youth use a variety of social media to develop and maintain broader communities of peers. Teen practices when using social media mirror those that scholars have documented in other places where teens gather with peers (Eckert 1989; Milner 2004; Skelton and Valentine 1998). Just as they have done in parking lots and shopping malls, teens gather in networked public spaces for a variety of purposes, including to negotiate identity, gossip, support one another, jockey for status, collaborate, share information, flirt, joke, and goof around. In other words, they go there to “hang out.” By providing tools for mediated interactions, social media allow teens to extend their interactions beyond physical boundaries. Conversations and interactions that begin in person do not end when friends are separated. Youth complement private communication through messaging and mobile phones with social media that support broader peer publics.

In the 1980s, the mall served as a key site for teen sociability in the United States (Ortiz 1994), because it was often the only accessible public space where teens could go to hang out (Lewis 1990). Teens are increasingly monitored and many have been pressured out of public spaces such as streets, parks, malls, and libraries (Buckingham 2000). More recently, networked publics have become the contemporary stomping ground for many U.S. teens. Just as teens flocked to the malls because of societal restrictions, many of today’s teens are choosing to gather with friends online because of a variety of social and cultural limitations (boyd 2007). While the site teens go to gather has changed over time, many of the core practices have stayed the same. The changes we are seeing today are a variant of these core practices, inflected in distinctive ways as youth mobilize social media.

During the course of our study, we watched as a new genre of social media—social network sites (SNSs)—gained traction among U.S. teenagers. While teenagers have many choices when it comes to which media they use to interact with one another, two large social network sites—MySpace and Facebook—captured the imaginations of millions of U.S. teenagers in the years 2004–2007. Not all teens frequent these sites (Lenhart and Madden 2007), but social network sites became central to many teens’ practices. This form of networked public allowed broad peer groups to socialize together while other social media such as instant messaging (IM) and mobile phones allowed teens to interact one-to-one or in small groups. All of these tools can be used for a wide variety of different purposes, but what we witnessed during our study was that the dominant practices for most youth were friendship-driven and exhibited the genre of participation that we have described in the previous chapter as “hanging out.”

This chapter documents how social media are incorporated into teen friendship practices in the context of their everyday peer groups. We emphasize the practices that take place on social network sites because they emerged and took hold during our study as a central gathering spot for U.S. teens. The material used in this chapter primarily comes from studies that emphasized the friendship-driven practices of youth as they interacted with peers in their given, school-centered social networks. These studies include those conducted by C. J. Pascoe (Living Digital), Christo

social networks. These studies include those conducted by O.G. T. Uscoo (Living Digital), Christa Sims (Rural and Urban Youth), Dan Perkel (MySpace Profile Production), Heather Horst (Silicon Valley Families), Katynka Martínez (Pico Union Families), Megan Finn, David Schlossberg, Judd Antin, and Paul Poling (Freshquest), and danah boyd (Teen Sociality in Networked Publics). Unless otherwise stated, the quotes come from danah boyd's study.

This chapter and the Intimacy chapter focus specifically on the dominant and normative practices of high-school teenagers. For most teens, friendship-driven practices, such as those described in this chapter, play a more central role in structuring new media participation than interest-driven practices. The "popular" social media highlighted in this chapter, including MySpace and Facebook, are common tools for friendship-driven practices. While teens invested in both friendship-driven and interest-driven activities may use these services, these sites are emblematic of the genre of friendship-driven participation and support the kind of social relations that center on popularity, romantic relationships, and status. Although sites such as LiveJournal or web forums share much of the functionality of MySpace or Facebook, they inhabit a genre in closer alignment to interest-driven practices. While the dominant practice of teens in MySpace and Facebook conform to a hanging out, friendship-driven genre, kids sometimes also use these practices as jumping-off points to messing around and more "geeked out" interests. The chapter on Creative Production, later in this book, examines the kind of technical and media expertise that youth develop as part of their participation on social network sites.

This chapter focuses on the role that technology plays in establishing, reinforcing, complicating, and damaging friendship-driven social bonds. Emphasizing the role of mediating technologies, this chapter contextualizes practices involving social media within a broader discussion of youth's everyday friendship practices. After first outlining a historical and conceptual framework for understanding teen peer-based friendship, the chapter examines how social media intersect with four types of everyday peer negotiations: making friends, performing friendships, articulating friendship hierarchies, and navigating issues of status, attention, and drama. In all of these cases, we consider how the unique affordances of contemporary networked publics are inflecting existing peer learning, sharing, and sociability in new ways.

Peers and Friendship

Teen friendship practices in contemporary networked publics need to be understood in relation to the broader contexts of teen sociability as it plays out in U.S. high schools. The current debates over teen participation in MySpace and Facebook are part of a longer history of intergenerational struggle over parental authority, youth culture, and the peer relations fostered in high schools. Sociologists of youth culture identify the 1950s as a pivotal period that saw the emergence of many of the dynamics that define contemporary youth peer culture and adult attitudes toward youth. This period saw a broadening of the base of teens who attend high school, a growth in youth popular and commercial cultures, and the emergence of an age-segregated peer culture that dominated youth's everyday negotiations over status and identity (Chudacoff 1989; Frank 1997; Gilbert 1986; Hine 1999). This period also saw the growth of a new set of intergenerational tensions, evident in the emerging discourse of juvenile delinquency and tied to the recognition that "the American family itself now exercised less influence on the cultural formation of youngsters" (Gilbert 1986:17). Even as youth were developing a sense of autonomous generational identity with the aid of popular media cultures, their period of financial dependency and segregation from adult roles was expanding as more and more youth attended high school and higher education institutions. Stanley Cohen (1972:151) writes, "The young are consigned to a self-contained world with their own preoccupations, their entrance into adult status is frustrated, and they are rewarded for dependency."

For contemporary youth, the age-segregated institutions of school, after-school activities, and youth-oriented commercial culture continue to be strong structuring influences. Despite the perception that online media are enabling teens to reach out to a new set of social relations online, we have found that for the vast majority of teens, the relations fostered in school are by far the most dominant in how they define their peers and friendships. In the later chapters of this book, we consider how new media networks enable youth to reach out beyond their given social relations and to engage with intergenerational interest groups and forms of creative production and economic activity that give them a role in adult social worlds. This chapter, however, focuses on the more mainstream practices of teens that are situated within the more conservative structures

the more mainstream practices of teens that are situated within the more conservative structures of youth sociability, as largely segregated from but dependent on adult social worlds. Within these contexts of normative youth sociability, adults (whether in the role of parent, teacher, or media-technology maker) are generally relegated to the role of provisioning or monitoring youth media ecologies rather than as coparticipants.

The peer relations of children and teens are structured by a developmental logic supported by educational institutions organized by rigid age boundaries. We share a cultural consensus that the ability to socialize with peers and make friendships is a key component of growing up as a competent social being, and that young people need to be immersed in peer cultures from an early age (Berndt 1996; Newcomb and Bagwell 1996). Children are brought into preschool, kindergartens, and elementary schools for academic learning but also to learn how to develop friendships with peers (Corsaro 1985; Howes 1996). The “personal communities” that youth develop help them negotiate identity and intimacy (Pahl 2000). During the period of adolescence, kids’ social worlds become dominated by the peers of the same age, adult oversight recedes, and the status and popularity battles that we typically associate with middle school and high school take hold. This is the same period when kids transition from a largely homosocial context that dominates elementary school to one that is increasingly defined by performances of heterosexuality (Eckert 1996; Pascoe 2007a; Thorne 1993).

Milner suggests that teens’ obsession with status exists because “they have so little real economic or political power” (2004:4). He argues that hanging out, dating, and mobilizing tokens of popular culture all play a central role in the development and maintenance of peer status. Working out markers of cool in the context of friendship and peer worlds is one of the key ways that youth do gender, race, class, and sexuality work (Bettie 2003; Pascoe 2007a; Perry 2002; Thorne 1993) and engage with teen-specific identity categories such as “jocks and burnouts” (Eckert 1989), “nerds and normals” (Kinney 1993), or “freaks, geeks and cool kids” (Milner 2004). Teens have flocked to social media because they represent an arena to play out these means of status negotiations even when they are away from the school yard. Mediated teen social worlds began with the telephone and continue to today’s variegated palette of communications technologies and popular media. Teens use all that is available to craft and display their social identities and interact with their peers. Just as we see in the locker rooms and cafeterias in high schools, online spaces are opportunities for kids to display fashion and taste, to gossip, form friendships, flirt, and even harass other peers. While not all teens experience bullying, most struggle with fitting in, standing out, and trying to keep up with what is cool. These dynamics are often described in negative terms, as “peer pressure,” but we can also consider them a powerful peer-based learning environment where youth are constructing and picking up social norms, tastes, knowledge, and culture from those around them.

For most teens, social media do not constitute an alternative or “virtual” world (Abbott 1998). They are simply another method to connect with their friends and peers in a way that feels seamless with their everyday lives (Osgerby 2004). Popular social media such as instant messaging, mobile phones, and social network sites are used interchangeably by teens for a variety of friendship-driven practices. At an intimate level, teens use social media to maintain “full-time intimate communities” with their closest friends, just as Misa Matsuda (2005) witnessed in Japan with youth usage of mobile phones. Yet, because of the affordances of media such as social network sites, many teens move beyond small-scale intimate friend groups to build “always-on” networked publics inhabited by their peers. Teens will usually have a small circle of intimate friends with whom they communicate in an always-on mode via mobile phones and IM, and a larger peer group that they are connected to via social network sites. Social media support a wide range of interactions, including those between close friends and those that take place among a broader cohort of peers. Social relations—not simply physical space—structure the social worlds of youth.

The relations and social dynamics that play out in school extend into the spaces created through social media. What takes place online is reproduced and discussed offline (Leander and McKim 2003). When teens are involved in friendship-driven practices, online and offline are not separate worlds—they are simply different settings in which to gather with friends and peers. Conversations may begin in one environment, but they move seamlessly across media so long as the people remain the same. Social media mirror, magnify, and extend everyday social worlds. By and large, teens use social media to do what they have been doing—socialize with friends, negotiate peer

groups, flirt, share stories, and simply hang out. At the same time, networked publics provide opportunities for always-on access to peer communication, new kinds of authoring of public identities, public display of connectedness, and access to information about others. In the sections to follow, we describe how these dynamics reinforce existing friendship patterns as well as constitute new kinds of social arrangements.

Sharing Snapshots of Teen Friendship and Love

[Show/Hide](#)

By **Katynka Z. Martínez**

It is not uncommon for Stephanie to call Sandra so that they can plan their outfits or hairstyles in anticipation of the next day of school. The two 16-year-olds are best friends. They live in a low-income urban area of Los Angeles and attend a public school 30 miles away from home. Stephanie, who identifies as Colombian and Irish, shares a bedroom with her mother. Her 26-year-old brother sleeps in the converted den of their condominium apartment. I met Stephanie at the youth group of a local community center. The center is less than a block away from her home. Stephanie volunteered to take part in a general interview regarding how youth use digital media. She also signed up for a more detailed diary study in which she recorded her use of digital media during the course of two days. Stephanie would receive gift certificates for participating in these interviews. She had the choice of receiving a certificate from iTunes, Amazon.com, or any other online vendor. She opted for a gift certificate from Best Buy, a home-electronics store where she would buy her first digital camera.

Photographs are important artifacts used by youth to capture their participation in teen rituals such as a prom or a *quinceañera* and to also document less formal social escapades with friends. Sandra takes her digital camera to school every day. On the days that she and Stephanie plan their outfits or hairstyles, they make it a point to take photos of themselves that they then post on MySpace. These photos, which they post on their individual profiles, receive many comments from friends. Typical comments include: "You look so pretty!" and "This was so much fun!"

Before Stephanie had a digital camera she would rely on Sandra to take pictures. Stephanie explained, "I have the iPod and she has a digital camera. We just work together." Working together meant that the two girls shared passwords to their Photobucket accounts. Photobucket is an image-hosting and photo-sharing website. Individuals create an online album where they upload photos, videos, and any other images they may have found online. Users have the option of setting their album to private (accessible only through a password) or public (accessible to anyone online). Stephanie and Sandra's Photobucket accounts are both set to private but the girls, as mentioned, have shared their passwords with each other. While Sandra uploads photos that the girls took together, Stephanie searches through public Photobucket albums and uploads images that she may want to share with friends via MySpace. Stephanie accesses Sandra's album, finds pictures of herself, and uploads these onto her own MySpace page. She rarely posts pictures of herself on Friends' pages. However, the images that she finds via public Photobucket albums are eventually posted as comments on her Friends' MySpace pages.

While showing off her Photobucket account, Stephanie proudly proclaimed that she had more than 400 images in her album. As she described her typical session on Photobucket, it became clear that a shared understanding of friendship and romance was being constructed by her and other Photobucket users:

I save a picture, save a picture, save a picture. How do I decide? Well, the first thing like, you know, girls think about . . . I typed in "love." And then things from *The Notebook* came up. Different things. Then so I liked that so I was like, "Oh, I'll type in *The Notebook*." And then I typed in *A Walk to Remember* because, you know, it's another love movie.

Stephanie begins describing her Photobucket activities with the assumption that the first thing girls her age think about is love. After conducting a Photobucket search for the word "love" she finds that many users have tagged the film *The Notebook* with this word. It is not

love. She finds that many users have tagged the film *The Notebook* with this word. It is not surprising that the film would be associated this way. *The Notebook* won the 2005 MTV Movie Award for “Best Kiss,” an award that is voted on by MTV viewers. Like these viewers, Stephanie was a fan of the film. However, she also typed in the name of “another love movie,” *A Walk to Remember*, and continued typing in modified versions of the word “love” to find additional images. She explained, “If you change the word, it’s always different. ‘Young love’ like to see what comes up. And then I typed in . . . and in ‘young love’ you saw ‘high school sweethearts.’ And then I typed in ‘high school sweethearts.’ It all connects.”

It does, indeed, “all connect.” Sometimes these connections are made by Photobucket users who have used the word “love” to tag snapshots of themselves with their boyfriends or girlfriends. Other times the connection is made by users who use the word “love” to tag stock footage of actors or models displaying trite acts of affection (such as kissing on the beach amid shallow waves). Also common on Photobucket are banners or boxes of text with greetings, sayings, and words of encouragement. For example, a “love” banner states the following in glittered letters: “It only takes a second 2 say I luv u, but a lifetime 2 show it!” Stephanie has many similar banners stored in her Photobucket album and plans to eventually post them on Friends’ MySpace pages. She hopes that the “Get Out of Jail Free card” will add humor to the MySpace page of a friend who knows someone who is incarcerated. Stephanie is also storing images for future developments in her friends’ lives. She displayed a banner with an inspirational quote and explained, “Like if a guy broke up with my good friend or something, then I’ll send her this.”

Most of the images in Stephanie’s Photobucket album allude to the importance of friendship. For example, one proclaims: “Inside jokes, midnight calls, crazy at night, equals best friends.” While going through her album, Stephanie explained, “And then I’ll type in ‘best friends’ and then ‘friends’ and then ‘boyfriend’ and then ‘girlfriend.’ You can go on forever.” Sitting and watching Stephanie search for additional images and navigate through the 400 saved in her photo album, it was easy to see that she very well could “go on forever.” The search engine served as a type of thesaurus for Photobucket users. Having witnessed how engrossed she was in these searches, one might wonder if this online quest would also manifest itself in her approach to schoolwork that incorporates online research.

Katynka: And then so do you ever do searches like this, for homework?

Stephanie: For homework?

Katynka: Yeah. Like for a research paper or anything like that?

Stephanie: No.

Katynka: No? Do you use the Internet much for homework or not really?

Stephanie: Kind of. But they make it so hard. Like for English, you can’t use Wikipedia. I understand that because whoever could, like, write in whatever. But then they say we can’t use websites that have .com on the end. Only .edu. I think they said. Or .org. So it’s hard.

Katynka: Uh-huh. So do they explain the difference to you between .edu and . . .

Stephanie: Yeah. For that I will just use, like, the Internet at school because they have this special library thing. I forgot what it’s called. I’ll show you. “So long and good night” I wrote, I posted on the bulletin. I put: “I’m going to bed now.” Because that’s when I turn off the computer. “I want what I want.” “I want to love somebody like you.” “I want to be your favorite hello and your hardest goodbye.” “Texting is love.” “Cell phone love.” “My cell phone is love.” “Best friends.”

Stephanie never did go to the “special library thing” that she briefly mentioned above. Instead, she continued clicking through her album and eventually shared her Photobucket password with me. This openness and collaborative spirit is at odds with her school’s approach to online sources of information. The fact that her school has restrictions against

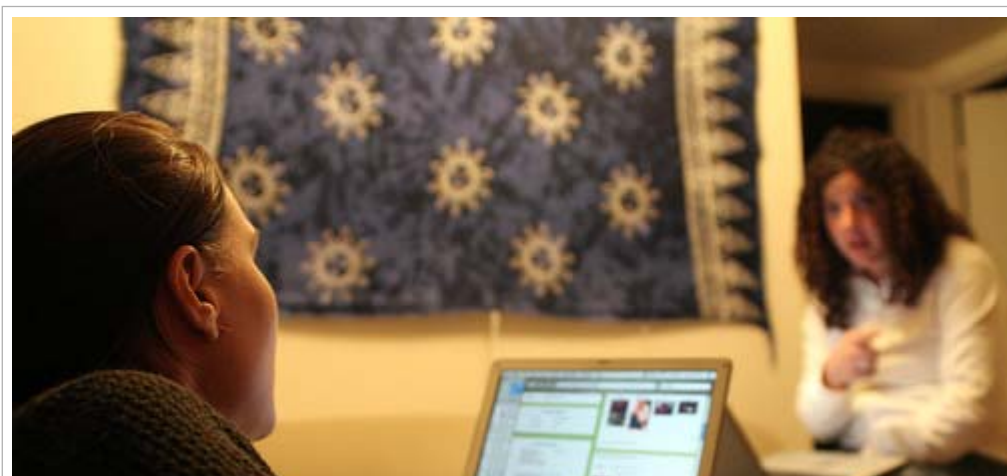
referencing Wikipedia frustrates Stephanie but she ultimately understands that the school would take this stance because “whoever could, like, write in whatever.” Yet it is precisely this collaborative feature that makes Photobucket so appealing—you are able to see the images that other users have associated with terms such as “love” and “best friends.” Many times these images simply reproduce conventional gender roles and a culture of consumption. However, youth are able to pick and choose from among the images and, perhaps most important, contribute their own works—some of which will challenge the representations of teen friendship and love that have been created by outside forces without any understanding of how youth actually negotiate relationships. Youth today are taking portraits at social events, snapping pictures in the halls of their schools, and borrowing from the photo albums of people they’ve never met. The fact that they draw from all of these sources suggests that youth’s friendship maintenance is in tune with a discourse of love and friendship that is being widely displayed and (re)circulated.

Making Friends

Teens may select their friends, but their “choice” is configured by the social, cultural, and economic conditions around them (Allan 1998). Studies have shown that most friendships that American youth develop are between youth of approximately the same age, in part because of age-stratified school systems and other cultural forces that segregate youth by age (Chudacoff 1989; Montemayor and Van Komen 1980). Likewise, these friendship groups tend to be relatively homogenous (Cohen 1977; Cotterell 1996), resulting in what sociologists call “homophily” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Homophily describes the likelihood that people connect to others who share their interests and identity. Most of the teens we interviewed tended toward building friendships with others of similar age who shared their interests and values. While teens’ friendships are not completely segregated by race, ethnicity, religion, and gender, none of these factors was absent either.

Social media theoretically allow teens to move beyond geographic restrictions and connect with new people. Presumably, this means that participants could develop relations with people who are quite different from them. Research that tests this premise is sparse. One survey of Israeli teens suggests that those who develop friendships online tend toward less homogenous connections than teens who do not build such connections (Mesch and Talmud 2007). While this suggests tremendous possibilities, developing friendships online is not a normative practice, at least not for U.S. teens. Surveys of U.S. teens indicate that most teens use social media to socialize with people whom they already know or with whom they are already loosely connected (Lenhart and Madden 2007; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 2008).

Even though MySpace is commonly viewed as a site for networking with new people, teens consistently underscored that this is not what they do. For example, Sabrina, a white 14-year-old from suburban Texas, explained that while she uses MySpace, she never uses it to meet new people. “I just find my friends and hang out.” Teens emphasized that IM and social network sites were primarily valuable as media for socializing with those they knew from school, worship centers, summer camps, and other activities.





3.1. Teens socializing online and offline (“MySpacing” Photo courtesy of Luke Brassard, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/brassard/138829152>)

This is not to say that teens do not leverage social media in order to develop friendships. Teens frequently use social media as additional channels of communication to get to know classmates and turn acquaintances into friendships. Melanie, a white 15-year-old from Kansas, explained that “Facebook makes it easier to talk to people at school that you may not see a lot or know very well.” She found Facebook to be helpful in getting to know some of her classmates. Social network site profiles can also become valuable tools for learning more about acquaintances. Carlos, a Latino 17-year-old, told Dan Perkel (MySpace Profile Production) a story about how MySpace allowed him to find out that a boy who lived up the street was really into skydiving. This prompted a conversation between the two and the neighborhood boy invited Carlos to go skydiving, but he was not old enough. While both Melanie and Carlos used social network sites to make friends, these other teens were members of their social circles whom they did not know well. Teens often use social media to make or develop friendships but they do so almost exclusively with acquaintances or friends of friends.

The dominant and normative social media usage pattern is to connect with friends, family, and acquaintances, but there are some teens who use social media to develop connections with strangers. Some teens—especially marginalized and ostracized ones—often relish the opportunity to find connections beyond their schools. Teens who are driven by specific interests that may not be supported by their schools, such as those described in the Creative Production and Gaming chapters, often build relationships with others online through shared practice. Likewise, many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) teens who feel isolated at school often find social media valuable in making social connections with other LGBT youth (Gray Forthcoming). In addition to these interest- and identity-driven motivations for building connections, some teens connect with strangers precisely because they are strangers. One of the boys Christo Sims spoke with in his Rural and Urban Youth study valued the opportunity to talk anonymously with other youth without facing social consequences (see the Bob Anderson’s Story sidebar in Intimacy). Social media allowed him to discuss intimate matters—such as going through puberty—that would be difficult to bring up in the local context for fear of embarrassing himself and damaging his local—and persistent—reputation. He was not interested in meeting his Internet friends or connecting them to his everyday peer group, but he valued the social support he gained through these connections.

While there are plenty of teens who relish the opportunity to make new connections through social media, this practice is heavily stigmatized. Jessica, a college freshman in the Freshquest study, told Megan Finn that she had been very shy in middle school so she started meeting people through IM. While she made a close friend that way, she believes that such connections are rare—“I don’t know anyone that has any Internet friends.” She also highlights that her classmates think she’s “weird” and label her a “freak” for meeting people online.

The stigma that Jessica faces is not simply kid-driven. While there is a stigma for not being able to make friends at school, developing friends online is further vilified by cultural fears that meeting people online is dangerous. The same “stranger danger” rhetoric and “terror talk” that limit youth from interacting with strangers in unmediated public spaces (Levine 2002; Valentine 2004) have also taken hold online. There are school assemblies dedicated to online dangers, primarily the possibility of sexual predators. Mainstream media, law enforcement, teachers, and parents reinforce the message that interacting with strangers online is risky. While the percentage of teens who have experienced unwanted sexual solicitations has declined through the years (Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor 2006), the fear that youth—and especially girls—are at risk has increased (Cassell and Cramer 2007; Marwick 2008). At a deeper level, the public myths about online “predators” do not reflect the actual realities of sexual solicitation and risky online behavior (Wolak

et al. 2008). Not only do unfounded fears limit teenagers unnecessarily, they also obscure preventable problematic behavior (Valentine 2004). During the tenure of our project, we watched as this stigma was amplified by a moral panic that formed around MySpace.

While social media have the potential to radically alter friendship-making processes, most teens use these tools to maintain preexisting connections, turn acquaintances into friendships, and develop connections through people they already know. Social media offer a platform for teens to take friendships to a new level. Those teens who seek new friends through networked media are a minority, often because developing online connections is stigmatized and set against a backdrop of adult fears of stranger danger and mainstream youth norms that center on school-centered sociability. Even against this backdrop, some teens value the opportunity to gain social support that they can not find locally.

From MySpace to Facebook: Coming of Age in Networked Public Culture

[Show/Hide](#)

By Heather A. Horst

One of the fundamental shifts in American youth culture revolves around kids' engagement in what has been termed "networked public culture," or "those cultural artifacts associated with 'personal' culture (such as home movies, snapshots, diaries, and scrapbooks) that have now entered the arena of 'public' culture (such as newspapers, cinema, and television)" (Russell et al. 2008). For young adults such as 18-y