

BFFE (Be Friends ForEver): the way in which young adolescents are using social networking sites to maintain friendship and explore identity.

Abstract

Children have embraced social networking sites, and their age is getting younger (Ofcom, 2008). Friendship is especially important to early adolescents, as they turn from their family to the outside world. Ethnographic research was carried out in home with children in early adolescence to find out the nature of their communication through social networking sites. The findings indicate that friendships may be maintained beyond their natural course, but that 'keeping in touch' with old friends and playing with online profiles helps to establish identity, one of the major tasks of becoming an adolescent. The use of online social networking appears to create agency and is an important source of support and comfort to the young adolescent who is experiencing transition both cognitively, physically, and through change of school.

Introduction

It is perhaps difficult to believe that the term 'social networking site' (SNS) was not widely recognised back in 2004 when teenagers in the US first discovered MySpace (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Young adolescents have only begun to use SNSs with such enthusiasm in the last three years, with the start age becoming ever younger, despite an age restriction of 13 plus (Ofcom, 2008). In the past decade there has been immense interest in looking at children's use of the internet (Clarke et al, 1998-2002; Lenhart et al, 2007; Livingstone & Bober, 2005), and the notion of looking at young people's social networking sites such as Bebo, Facebook, Piczo in the last year or two has generated several large research studies (Ito et al., 2008; LSE & TCPW, 2008; Ofcom, 2008). Many parents, perhaps prompted by media headlines that point out the 'dark side' of such sites (Sweney, 2008), are fearful of their children's use of SNSs. Mizuko Ito (2008) considers this, and argues that while adults may worry that their children are becoming social isolates, '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.' This study has focused on early adolescence (age 10-14), a significant period of transition when children's horizons grow considerably and friends become more important (Erikson, 1968, Hartup, 2000, Dunn, 2004).

The research has explored the psychosocial influences on young adolescents' lives through the use of SNSs. This paper considers changing friendship patterns, and exploration of identity within the context of SNSs, arguing that the digital world encourages young adolescents to have agency, with responsibility for shaping their own development. The ethnographic research¹ was carried out over a period of 2 years with 28 children (13 girls and 15 boys – children adopted their own names for the research), all living in south-east England including rural, suburban and urban areas. The research does not claim to be statistically representative, but was diverse in that it included children from different socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicity.

The Importance of Friendship to Early Adolescents: BFFE (Be Friends Forever)

It appears that in the digital age children really can 'Be Friends Forever'² with children's notion of 'friendship' changing radically compared to pre-digital days. This research shows that children are able to maintain friendships through SNSs in a way that would not have been possible before, with contact being kept with friends who had moved to a different country, and friendships supported online even though face to face communication was not possible. Thirteen year old friends Robbie and Will were regularly playing on the games site Runescape with Paul who had moved from the UK to Portugal, 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*

¹ Research included over 80 visits to children's homes, 50 filmed observation sessions, semi-structured interviews with children and informal interviews with parents. Diaries were kept for 1 week prior to visits, and children drew friendship maps at different stages of the research. The research also included 8 focus groups each lasting 2 hours, and an online bulletin board session with the children over 3 days in the half term holidays February 2009.

² BFFE is frequently used as a sign off on children's online SNS message boards or 'wall'.

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 (Cotterell 2007) but these networks can be interrupted by changes in circumstances, for example moving home or moving school. Such transition or change can be particularly daunting for adolescents, and feelings of loneliness and disconnection can occur. Giddens (1991:33) writes of the 'reflexivity of the self' and the expectation people have of happiness. Children in the study were reflexive with an emphasis on self, but online emotional support was given to friends through periods of change: change of school, change of relationship, change of home. Sometimes such support was manifested through deliberate displacement by conversations, pictures and online games; at other time it was in the form of direct advice and use of emoticons and pokes³.

Early adolescence is a time of transition, gradually leaving behind family and turning to friends for support. Research has shown that early adolescents are more likely to spend time talking to friends than any other single activity (Csikszentmihalyi, et al., 1977; Larson, 2002; Larson, et al, 1996) and relationships with close friends are a source of comfort and a place where concerns and feelings can be expressed (Azmitia & Lippman, 1999; Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). Children at this age are especially likely to share intimate thoughts and feelings (Berndt, 1981; Douvan & Adelson, 1966), therefore privacy is important, and many children in the research 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 children's online and off-line world (boyd, 2008; Donath & boyd, 2004; Subrahmanyam, et al, 2006). Ellison, et al (2006), Livingstone (2008) and Pfeil, et al (in Press) show that SNSs are used to strengthen existing relationships and enhance social capital. Early adolescents tend to categorise 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 be both reassuring and allow a sense of experimentation (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). The friendship maps that children drew over an 18 month period in the research indicated that friends changed as horizons widened, but instead of replacing friends, the same friends remained, and were frequently categorised into different types of relationships. Children would typically open their SNS account with around 50 'friends', and over the 2 year period of the research this grew to several hundred, with one 14 year old having over 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 relatives'*. (Lillie, 14).

Much has been written about parents' lack of knowledge of SNSs (Byron, 2008; Ofcom, 2008), and one mother in the research refused to let her 13 year old son have a Facebook or MSN account (although he has one at his father's house), and yet was happily allowing him to play World of Warcraft online, and XBOX LIVE, not realising that he was chatting away to complete strangers. Children were aware of the 'dark side' of the internet, and of safety issues, and regarded parents who discourage their children from using SNSs as being misled at best, and by some as 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 aged 11 writing on the Bulletin Board).'*

Identity and Friendship

Emerging identity is an important aspect of early adolescent development and 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, but it is

³ An 'emoticon' is a symbol that depicts an emotion e.g. a smiley face, and 'poke' is a visual 'nudge' on Facebook intended to attract the attention of a particular 'friend'. Children in the research were observed receiving and sending these quite regularly especially 'hugs' and 'kisses'.

also highly creative and allows them to assert their identity in a totally unique way, checking out what their friends think of their creative endeavours. Livingstone (2008) observes that highly 'stylised' SNS sites are a reflection of age, with younger children importing images such as hearts and glitter. However this study indicates that it may also be a matter of expertise; the more sophisticated children became online, even at 11 or 12 years, the more they were likely to insert their personal identity 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).

Erikson (1965, 1968, 1977) believed that the successful transition from adolescence to adulthood depended on the establishment of an identity. At this age a child can define themselves through the adoption of a social role (Kroger, 1996), and the children in the research commonly defined themselves through the adoption of 'gangsta rap', a language that can exclude many adults. The fickle way children change their online SNSs, and their profiles is similar to the way an adolescent might change their appearance. Online many children appear to adopt a persona that they acknowledge is not necessarily a true reflection of their sense of self, but nevertheless is 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, 12 ¾ on 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 recognise that they are different from their peers, and these differences help to establish their sense of self, but they do not discard the old relationship, maintaining contact through SNSs.

Erikson (1977) believed that the identity of young people had a psychosocial nature; the community in which the child lived shaped their adolescence. In a world that is now so much bigger through the 'global playground' (Clarke, 2002) of the digital world, this community is now open to many more influences. Kroger (1996) 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 each other. boyd (2008) aptly describes young people's obsession with social networking sites as a means of defining who they are, a process she describes as 'identity production' which involves them trying to 'write themselves into being' (pp129).

Identity and Power at a Click

Children in this research admitted to lying about their age online, partly because to join a SNS they have to be 13, but many believe they have to be 16 (Clarke & Cooke, 2008). They have a sense of power that has probably never been available to children at this age. Acknowledging that there is a fair amount of exaggeration that occurs, this can reflect values or strengths that are perceived to enhance their status, but it can be fun and entertaining also to exaggerate, even though this may sometimes be a little 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 also give them a sense of power; they are in control: *'erm, well I have once or twice .. I have said stuff like 'oh I am a model' to get some guy 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 aged 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 about online security and safety. Post-modernist theory has been applied to ways of understanding identity online (Haraway, 1991). New media communication challenges our sense of fixed identities such as gender, social class, and race, and it could be argued

that it is a way of reconstructing society. Studies have shown that adolescents pretend to be someone else online (Gross, et al, 2002), but that they also share emotional communication (Bargh, et al, 2002; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). When children reach 11- 12, gender identity becomes important. Turkle (1995) claims that online sexuality, which can include flirting and playing with gender roles, can start at 10 years old, and Valentine & Holloway (2002) found that children who adopt different personas online inevitably choose to be more desirable or more powerful, with girls frequently choosing to be older, and boys stronger. In the research 13 year old Jamie proudly showed his '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').

Conclusion

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 (Coleman & Hendry, 1999), and with 59 per cent of 11-12 year olds in the UK and 49 per cent of 11-12 year olds in the US accessing SNSs (LSE & TCPW, 2008), the way in which children form friendships and play with identity online will become significant. Children in this research see friendship as an ever-evolving circle that can extend online as their interests and experiences expand. They believe they will be friends forever. Emotional support is given and maintained through various transitions such as moving home, moving school, and moving relationships. Those children without access to SNSs are viewed with pity and a sense that they are missing out on what is happening in the wider digital community. While parents are anxious about their child's safety, and appear to be keeping them at home more than ever before (Layard & Dunn, 2009), 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, customising their sites with unique photos, text and tags. They are playing with their identity also but feel 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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