

Friendship 2.0: Teens' technology use promotes sense of belonging, identity

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(Medical Xpress)—With adolescents seemingly glued to cell phones and social networking websites, experts are investigating whether the near-constant digital activity changes youths' development.

A new study from the University of Washington shows that digital media helps teens reach [developmental milestones](#), such as fostering a sense of belonging and sharing personal problems. But the study also raised questions about whether digital connectedness might hinder the development of an autonomous sense of self.

Katie Davis, an assistant professor in the Information School and an expert on digital media use during adolescence, calls it "Friendship 2.0."

"What they're doing is different from generations of teenagers from before the digital era, but it comes from the same place of basic developmental needs. It's just that they're using different tools to satisfy these needs," said Davis.

She is the author of a study on the role of digital media in adolescent [friendships](#) and sense of identity, an important factor in psychological well-being. The study will be published in the November issue of the [Journal of Adolescence](#).

Davis interviewed 32 [adolescents](#), aged 13 to 18 and about an even mix of boys and girls, living on the island of Bermuda where teens have similar digital media habits as teenagers in the United States. She asked

them about how they use media to communicate with friends, and came up with an inventory of their media use:

- 94 percent have cell phones.
- 53 percent have Internet-enabled cell phones.
- 91 percent have Facebook profiles.
- 78 percent use online instant messaging, such as [MSN](#), [AOL](#) or [Skype](#).
- 94 percent use YouTube.
- 9 percent use Twitter.

These percentages are similar to what Davis found when she surveyed 2,079 youths living in Bermuda, an affluent British-dependent territory located about 640 miles off the coast of South Carolina. Though more Bermudian teens use [social networking sites](#) and own cell phones than [American teens](#), Davis says that her findings from the island where she grew up and worked as a school teacher can provide insights on U.S. teens because the two countries share cultural ties and the role of digital media in teens' lives is similar in both places.

Davis asked about the content of their digital conversations and analyzed 200 examples shared by the teens. Casual chatter about homework or what they did that day occurred three times more than intimate conversations about feelings or problems.

Looking more closely at the casual exchanges, Davis found that friends stay connected through frequent check-ins, sharing something funny that happened or asking what they're up to or how they're doing. These off-the-cuff conversations can last throughout the day, with breaks for going to class or having dinner.

Most – 68 percent – of check-ins occur on Facebook, and include groups

of friends commenting on photos or YouTube videos. Nearly half of the participants in the survey talked about posting photos of themselves with their friends and then tagging their friends, allowing them to discuss a shared experience and promote a sense of belonging to a circle of friends.

Intimate exchanges, discussed by 69 percent of participants – usually girls – included how they were feeling, whether they were having a bad day or other problems that they hoped to get their friends' help with. Youths, especially those describing themselves as shy or quiet, said that it was easier to share these personal thoughts digitally than in person. Some felt typing rather than speaking their feelings gave them more control.

Some participants considered the ability to connect anytime and anywhere with their friends to be not just convenient, but necessary to stay up-to-date and to avoid feeling isolated or being left out of group activities.

"Adolescents are interacting with their peers constantly, and the question arises as to whether they can still develop an autonomous sense of self," Davis said. This isn't known yet, but she suspects that this constant connectivity may support the development of an outward-looking self, one that looks to others for affirmation rather relying on an internal sense of worth and efficacy.

"Relying on others for self-affirmation suggests a relatively fragile sense of self, but our study doesn't say for sure that that is what is going on," Davis said. "What we can say is that adolescents are using [digital media](#) to promote their sense of belonging and self-disclosure of [personal problems](#), two important peer processes that support identity development."

More information: www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0140197112000334

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