10 We are All Friends Nowadays: But What is the Outcome of Online Friendship for Young People in Terms of Individual Social Capital?

Anne Rice[1]

Abstract

For contemporary young people friendship has changed considerably from previous generations and nowadays weak ties represent the bulk of youth online friendships. These acquaintances do not provide quality relationships as young people do not seek to gain anything from such friends nor do they expect to help them out. Nevertheless weak ties have an indirect benefit to social capital and are extremely important in demonstrating popularity and status. Other online friends directly benefit from the individual's social capital. Firstly, social networking provides a unique extra dimension to bonding friendship and unlike previous generations online friends benefit from instantaneous textual therapy, which promotes good health and well-being. Secondly, social networking has opened up the channels of sociability between young people and a diverse range of others. Thus linking social capital is increased and the traditional concept of youth-youth friendship has been joined by youth-professional and youth-business friendships. Young people essentially view these friends as 'in between' or 'just in case' friends who are instrumental in terms of sourcing new information while businesses and organisations welcome online friendship as a new marketing tool. As such, some online friends represent a desire to 'get ahead' rather than 'get along'.

Keywords: social networking, friendship, social capital, young people.

1. Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, Northern Ireland; michael.rice16@btinternet.com

1.   Introduction

Contemporary society has experienced large scale technological change with widespread use of new technologies including the internet and associated social networking websites such as *Facebook*. This has been accompanied by, while also contributing to, significant shifts in social interaction. In this contemporary social networking era almost everyone appears to be friends online but it remains unclear what actual resources are gained by the individual through the online network. In other words what is the social capital outcome of online friendship for young people?

This research[1] was carried out between 2010 and 2011 in a rural area in Northern Ireland and involved eleven youth focus groups (including five pilot focus groups) and thirty six in-depth interviews (carried out in pairs of parent-youth combinations)[2]. The sample population were young people in full-time education and their parents. The selection criteria for the young people was that they were in the 16-18 age range and lived at home with at least one parent or guardian.

The overall aim of the research was to investigate the impact of social networking on individual, community and family social capital. Based on findings from this investigation this chapter specifically examines the outcome of online friendship for young people's individual social capital. As such, it focuses specifically on youth, as opposed to parental accounts, of young people's social networking activity.

This chapter begins by presenting a brief overview of social capital and its relevance to online friendship. Having discussed why social capital is an important concept for understanding online friendship, the chapter then progresses to critically assess the social capital outcome of social networking.

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1. This chapter is based on findings from the author's PhD research undertaken in the School of Planning, Architecture and Civil Engineering, Queen's University Belfast under the supervision of Dr. Ruth McAreavey and Prof. Aileen Stockdale.

2. The following abbreviations indicate the source of data. MFG = mixed gender focus group, BFG = all boys focus group, GFG = all girls focus group, PCI = parent child interview, POI = parent only interview, COI = child only interview.

This reveals that for the individual online friendships are direct, indirect and often unused sources of social capital. The chapter concludes with a discussion of contemporary online friendship and how it has increased the young person's ability to nurture their own stock of social capital.

2.   Social capital
and online friendship

Social capital is, broadly speaking, the resources people gather through their relationships. Explained in basic terms, social relations matter and people working together are able to tap into resources that otherwise would not be available to them on their own. Social capital is largely upheld as a positive resource and is linked to an array of social benefits, from better health to good educational achievement. However, social capital is not always a benefit for everyone and can produce a number of negative outcomes. For example, for those outside the network it can signify exclusion (Field, 2008; Portes, 1998). Nevertheless, as for the young people in this study the online network is an inclusive space, where friends are added quite randomly, this chapter focuses on the positive benefits of social networking to the individual.

Social capital has been valuable in the analysis of youth social relations (Raffo & Reeves, 2000; Seaman & Sweeting, 2004). Similarly in terms of advancing knowledge about online relationships formed through social networking, social capital is frequently the lens of inquiry. This inquiry has largely focused on the bridging/bonding distinction of social capital. This differentiation splits social capital into two groups; bridging, i.e., information produced from weak ties, or bonding, i.e., emotional support produced from close bonds (Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital stems from emotionally deep relationships such as family, close friends and relatives. This is an inward looking form of social capital that facilitates exclusive identities, reinforces homogenous groups and acts as the "sociological superglue" (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). Bridging social capital is found in connections between people which assist with information seeking but do not offer deep emotional support. Unlike bonding social capital

it is outward looking, facilitates inclusive identities, is accessed by individuals outside of their usual social circle and acts as the "sociological WD-40[1]" (Putnam, 2000, p. 22).

Early indications point to social networking mainly assisting with the development of bridging social capital, in other words the formation of weak ties (Donath & boyd, 2004; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). For example, a study by Ellison et al. (2007) consisted of an online survey of 286 undergraduate students and concluded that the social networking website, *Facebook*, encouraged bridging social capital among the students. However, as the authors point out the positive correlations with social networking and bridging social capital may have much to do with a focus on the university and the undergraduate experience.

For the young people in this study the school environment also produces an extensive amount of bridging ties (and a small subset of close bonding friends) but the majority of these ties collectively produce side benefits of belonging to a large network. They are not directly utilised in terms of social capital. Therefore it becomes useful to think of social capital and its associated benefits not simply in terms of a distinction between bridging and bonding but also in terms of direct and indirect social capital. Focusing on the direct/indirect social capital benefits of online friendship, the following section shows that young people benefit directly from small subsets of close and linking friends while the remaining large body of weak ties generates indirect and unused benefits.

3.   The direct benefit of social networking to young people's social capital

For the most part young people are drawn to *Facebook* because it is a multi-purpose website where they share and receive photos, comments and status

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1. WD 40 is "the trademark name of a penetrating oil and water-displacing spray […] originally designed to repel water and prevent corrosion" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WD-40).

updates between a large number of online friends, while at the same time view which of their friends are online and available for private (textual) chat. Chloe explains that *Facebook* appeals because:

> **Chloe**: There are always friends online and you will always be able to talk to someone. You can see who's on private chat and that's handy if you want to have a private conversation with your close mates. For the rest of them, you get to see what they are saying, through their status updates and their comments on people's walls[1]. (COI)

Thus social networking incorporates two spaces, occupied by two types of friends. On private chat, close friends communicate privately from the rest of the online network. This one to one textual communication cements bonds between close friends.

The public space is home to the rest of the online network, individuals who are added as friends but only share loose connections with each other. While this loosely connected network has a lack of relevance to their own lives, young people continue to view details about a wide range of others. For example, Olive refers to *Facebook* as:

> **Olive**: A place to find out about people and somewhere you see what others are up to. (PCI)

In terms of social capital, it is private chat that generates a direct benefit for young people. For the young people in the study, school is the main source of close friendships. Outside of school these friendships are supplemented with online communication. While this is often mainly a mundane recap of the school day, this virtual after school club also serves as a vital support in more stressful times. Janet and her friends outline the therapeutic value of social networking during examinations:

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1. In order to preserve the anonymity of the participants all of the data contains fictional names. The researcher is referred to as Anne in the in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Janet: Especially round exam time and you're revising, or suppose to, you get a sort of comfort that someone is as bogged off as you.

Paula: Yep when you're cracking up in your room you get relief from the fact that you're not the only one doing nothing or feeling the way you do.

Janet: When you *Facebook* it's all written and it's totally out of your system. Then you can see what's happening more clearly cus you can read what you're saying and when you've so much in your head there's no other way you can deal with it.

Amanda: Yeah you can't tell your family cus they don't really get it like and so *Facebook* is the best way you can cope like. (GFG)

Two interrelated features of online friendship are thus shown to directly benefit the individual. Firstly, it promotes communication between intimate friends and this is therapeutic as friends play a vital role in mental health and well-being (Brown & Harris, 1978; Sherbourne, Hays, & Wells, 1995). For the young people in this study, this is especially the case during examinations, when online communication through social networking functions as a wider counselling forum for close friends as opposed to providing support with subject-specific revision.

Secondly, writing is an activity that has a longstanding recognition in psychology for its potential to reorganise thoughts and feelings (Bucci, 1995). Social networking is well placed within this psychological tradition, as with the exception of its visual dimension (the sharing of photographs and the creation of ones profile picture) it is essentially a textual mode of communication through comments, status updates and private online chat. As the therapeutic power of writing is especially beneficial following a traumatic experience (cognitive change theory) or for those who do not openly talk about their emotions (inhibition theory) (Graybeal, Sexton, & Pennebaker, 2002) online chat is therefore, in some instances, more valuable than face-to-face communication

between friends. This is because online chat, due to its textual nature, helps to clarify thinking, especially in the face of trauma, and brings extra benefit to those who typically do not engage with others about their problems.

In this study, as is typical of qualitative research in general, "snippets" of other people's experiences and lives emerged (Holland, 2007, p. 18). In the focus group environment, these fragments of others lives were often discussed in a more forthcoming manner than the details discussed about their own lives. For example, Amanda and her friends speak openly about a close friend (who is not present) and the online support they give her following the death of her mother.

> **Amanda**: A girl in our school's mum passed away recently and the chat between her and us on *Facebook* was really deep and we were consoling her through it and she was devastated. I think it really helped her cope, I do. And it was comforting for her to let it all out without actually seeing everyone in person.

> **Paula**: If you had to go and knock on her door you would kind of not know if she was up for people calling and then there'd be the thing with not knowing what to say to the rest of the ones in her house. But *Facebook* was good and she was able to like draw on support from us at a time when she really needed her friends. (GFG)

For Amanda and friends social networking provides support that would be more difficult through physical contact. While the awkwardness these young people demonstrate may be linked to puberty and growing up, not necessarily a response to death, it nevertheless makes the benefit of a visit and the value of physical support interaction debatable. They choose *Facebook* as the space to discuss grief and offer support while remaining at a distance and avoiding the uncertainty of a face-to-face encounter. This type of 'intimacy at a distance' cannot be underrated as the quality of online peer support has recently been described as equal to the more formal web or telephone-based sessions offered by fully trained counsellors (Fukkink, 2011).

In addition to improving well-being during times of sadness, social networking has a positive impact on a variety of other sensitive teenage issues, such as those related to sex and relationships, depression, eating disorders or drug and alcohol use (Gould, Munfakh, Lubell, Kleinman, & Parker, 2002; Leung, 2007). However, support during the sadness connected to death is highly significant compared to sadness induced by other experiences. Death, along with divorce and moving house, is a 'critical moment' when the individual's experience is different from their everyday routines and that of those around them (Giddens, 1991). Therefore the direct benefit of online friendship to well-being does have wider applicability, not just in terms of examinations and typical collective situations, but to a range of life experiences at an individual level. These include not only 'typical and passing' teenage issues but also the more critical and acute ones such as the death of a parent.

Despite online friendship's wider remit to help young people cope with a number of sensitive teenage issues, in the focus group environment, only the value of online friendships to cope with examination stress was divulged. This reluctance to discuss other more sensitive issues is not surprising and relates to the peer setting of the focus group and the way the 'group effect' influences the group discussion. The group effect causes participants not to give their own opinions but rather reflect those of other group members (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

In contrast, in-depth interviews with young people reveal that online friends support each other on a much wider range of issues than examinations, including those which concern them directly, such as teenage pregnancy, and those connected to family members such as divorce and illness. For example, Emma reveals how social networking helped her cope with her younger sister's illness:

> **Emma**: Like the whole family were really worried because my sister was going through tests…

> **Anne**: Did you speak with your friends about it?

> **Emma**: Yeah but only two of my closest friends but not much in school like in front of the others, more at home using private chat. We never actually talked about why that was but I think they knew I'd have burst into tears thinking or talking about it in school. They were always kind to me and tried to cheer me up. (COI)

The unspoken rule not to discuss the illness in school is similar to the awkwardness Amanda and Paula display in response to the death of their friend's mother. Emma's friends, while sensitive to the situation, are unsure how to cope with her emotional state. Consequently, like Paula and Amanda, they resort to only discussing it online rather than in person. In both instances peer support is not public, either in the school setting (in Emma's case) or in the home of the bereaved girl, but is facilitated by private chat on *Facebook*. Thus in the two situations the social awkwardness of face-to-face and place-based contact and support is circumvented and the quality of the communication is enhanced through social networking.

4. Exploiting vertical links to 'get ahead' rather than 'get along': the direct but short term social capital benefit of linking with those outside the peer group

While bonding friends avail of a direct social capital benefit through active textual communication (from peer group friends), young people also receive direct social capital benefits from linking online with those outside the peer group. Unlike bonding friends, who serve as confidants, these linking friends do not maintain an actual friendship. They are 'informational friends', and reflect an instrumental and exploitive dimension to contemporary friendship. While these easily created links do provide direct social capital benefits to the individual, these are only short-term.

The transient nature of such links, and the way they are frequently and effortlessly dissolved is explained by Sean:

Sean: I actually plan to get rid of her (delete his female politician friend) cus I don't need her now. I only added her for my cousin. He was having no joy getting a new wheelchair but only for her she got the ball rolling. I get updates from her but I don't really even read them now. I am actually going to delete her when I get round to it. (PCI)

Sean's friendship with this politician has served its purpose and he now ignores the *Facebook* updates and information he receives from her. Unlike the early days, when he was trying to help his younger cousin obtain a new outdoor powered wheelchair, the friendship is irrelevant and he has no qualms about deleting her altogether.

In contrast to Sean, who has no offline connection with this politician, other young people reveal that an offline connection with linking friends, such as teachers, sometimes brings asymmetrical power relations into play. For example, the inclusion of a teacher as a linking friend, presents a unique dilemma.

Anne: Would you ever add teachers?

Michaela: Yes we have added certain teachers that we are not going to name, not a good idea.

Carroll: It's so easy to go on *Facebook* and rant about a teacher and say things like I so hate her or whatever but then even if you haven't them added but you have other teachers added they will tell them. It has happened and people end up getting shouted at and stuff… (MFG)

Teachers, unlike other linking friends, have a daily offline connection with young people and are often referred to negatively in the daily chat sessions that recap the school day. Consequently, schools are beginning to formalise policies on teacher-pupil online friendships as Sheila, a parent and school secretary, highlights:

Sheila: Before the end of term the principal asked all staff and teachers

to delete anyone under eighteen off their friend list as a way of obviously protecting children and us as staff also. (POI)

While current pupils and teachers tend not to be *Facebook* friends, a small minority of teachers have online contact with some past pupils. After their daily offline encounters have ceased (due to pupils moving to another school to complete A Levels or progress to further/higher education or employment), these past pupils enrich their social capital by linking online with teachers. For the teachers the decision to accept past pupils' requests is based on the recognition that the young person is genuinely motivated by positive reasons stay in contact, such as wanting to further their education or career.

Rosie provides an insight into how such a friendship comes about. She requests a former male teacher as an online friend in order to obtain help with their future studies. His friendship is a resource she plans to use in the transition from school to university. This is explained by Rosie, who says:

> **Rosie**: Well I actually requested my biology teacher before school broke up.

> **Anne**: Why?

> **Rosie**: I want to do Bio chemistry at Queens [a local university], if I get in, he [her biology teacher] has told us to stay in touch and he is the sort of person that would help you. It's like he has such a broad knowledge about everything so I suppose it's for security. Two of my friends have applied for the same course and they have added him too. He's big into *Facebook* but he doesn't request people. But if you request him he will add you ok. We are all really good friends with him. That's what happens when you do A-levels your teachers talk to you differently than if you were in year 8 or 9 and they become more like a friend. (COI)

From this excerpt, it is clear that the girls perceive their former teacher as a 'just in case friend,' used, as Rosie puts it as 'security', to branch out from the smaller teacher-led surroundings of school into the larger and more independent

university environment. Close friends often share mutual goals (Salmela-Aro, 2007) and for these girls it is to settle into their university course and so they collectively decide to add this teacher as a friend. As this study is a snap shot of young people's lives as opposed to a life-span or developmental analysis the exact way this connection will endure is unclear. Nevertheless, it is possible to predict, based on Sean's example of the short shelf life of some online links, that when it has served its purpose and their goal is achieved, the online friendship will probably end accordingly.

In contrast to the short term benefit of linking with certain people from outside the peer group, 'business type' friends produce a more enduring benefit in terms of individual social capital. Urshla has strategically added linking friends whom she refers to as 'business type' friends, and they account for 19 of her total 480 friends. The local dress hire shop is one example of Urshla's linking friends.

> **Anne**: Why did you add the lady from the hire shop?

> **Urshla**: Well round the time of the formal last year I added her because I wanted to see her updates. It was things like special offers or things like what evenings she would have free appointments. Now I'm not interested in that as much but I still love to see what new dresses she has in.

> **Anne**: Do you consider yourself to be a friend of the business or the lady?

> **Urshla**: Neither they are not your friend but you are connected with them. People link to loads of 'businesses type' friends because they all have a *Facebook* account now, football clubs, garden centres, toy stores, night clubs.

> **Anne**: How do you feel about businesses knowing what you have on *Facebook*?

> **Urshla**: It is not a worry because they have so many people added and they are not going to really focus on what one person is getting up to. You

don't mean anything to them apart from the fact that they want to get their message out to you in order to get your custom. (COI)

This extract underscores two important points. Firstly, young people are not concerned that these 'business type' links will want to focus on them as individuals. In contrast, young people do not perceive such friendships as opening windows into their social lives, but simply as reflecting a business-customer relationship. Secondly, in contrast to the 'people type' friends such as politicians or teachers, young people do not contact 'business type' friends to request specific information; instead the flow of information is one directional, from the business to the young person and contains notification of promotional offers and events. For example, Chloe explains:

> **Chloe**: I have loads of friends added that aren't people, like I have nightclubs added… and that way I know who is going to be playing in them and what type of drink promotions they will have on. (COI)

Contemporary friendship no longer encompasses personal relations but is a mixture of various connections, some of which are purely informational.

While Urshla feels no strong connection with the dress hire shop or the lady that owns it, young people do tend to view 'business type' linking friends as actual friends when they are more closely connected to them offline. For example, Olive spends a lot of time at her local sports club and works on a voluntary basis to fundraise for it through sponsored walks and helping out at events. She explains:

> **Olive**: I have the camogie[1] club added as a friend and then I get to see all the things happening and it helps me plan out what is coming up. When they update it comes up as a newsfeed. If you missed training all you have to do is log on and usually that night Gillian [her sports coach] will have it updated.

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1. Camogie is a female sport played in Ireland that is similar to hockey.

> **Anne**: Do you consider the club as a friend?
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> **Olive**: Yeah if you have a hundred friends and you add it then it becomes that you have 101 friends so yeah they are a friend. I suppose they are more of a proper friend than the hairdresser, she's just a business I added. (COI)

Like many others in the study, she associates the club as a 'proper' online friend whereas she sees her other linking friends such as a local hairdresser not as a social friend but 'just a business I added'. Therefore, linking friends range in quality from those with a very short life-span, to those which are more long term, such as organisations like the camogie club where there are actual offline friendships.

5.   Social networking: the indirect benefit of inactive online friends

Linking friends and bonding friends apart, the net social capital value of the large online network is an indirect one. However, these fringe or indirect benefits are perceived as valuable to young people. Indeed they are the part and parcel of the desire to go online. For example, while it is non-obligatory for young people to set up an online account, compared to going to school or doing homework, it is however almost compulsory to have an online presence in terms of peer pressure. This is summed up when Emma says that:

> **Emma**: You're under so much pressure at school to have the right things, the right phone, the right shoes and all. Having a profile and being online is one of them. Because everyone strives to have these things they become almost the norm and you stand out as unpopular or weird if you don't have them. (PCI)

Thus social networking is much more than a means of communicating, it is a

desirable product in youth consumer culture which is used to ensure acceptance and popularity among the peer group.

While peer acceptance and being popular has always been important to young people (Coleman, 1988), it has taken on a new public dimension in the social networking era. This is because online friend lists display the precise number of friends each individual has and also because this calculation reaches a wider audience than would be possible offline. Popularity is no longer only visible to those physically present, such as the school yard or the youth club, but has a more permanent existence which transcends physical space and time.

For young people, the world of social networking offers the promise that their popularity can be showcased through the size of their friend list. This list expands rapidly during the initial weeks and months of having an account, with frequent requests to become friends and the accumulation of new friends gaining pace. Subsequently, the rate of accumulation of new friends reduces. This pattern is highlighted in the discussion below:

> **Janet**: Yeah when you're up and running you only add about one maybe two proper requests every couple of months and like you can't count the usual crap you get from other countries like. If I was only going on it now instead of about two years ago like then it'd be different cus all my friends they'd all want me to be adding them like all at the one time you know but it's different now cus they're all on it.

> **Anne**: Is this the same for everybody?

> **William**: Yeah pretty much everyone has a massive amount of requests but then that falls after the… what would you call it? The honeymoon period (laughter)… (MFG)

The post 'honeymoon period' is one in which requests dwindle and numbers of online friends level off. Nevertheless, young people by this point commonly

have several hundred online friends and are satisfied that their friend list has a high impact in terms of demonstrating popularity.

6.   The bulk of online friends are an unused social capital resource

Despite these fringe benefits, such as demonstrating popularity, the bulk of young peoples' online friends represent an unused social capital resource. In many ways this is contrary to what might be expected considering that, in comparison to close friends, weak ties have their own particular value in that they generate additional information (Granovetter, 1973). It would therefore appear that social networking is a valuable information resource and a favourable location for young people to develop and nurture their own stock of bridging social capital. Social capital can be, as shown earlier, either bridging or bonding. As young people share ongoing information among extensive numbers of weak ties it appears that social networking has the potential to increase bridging social capital to almost endless possibilities.

Yet in reality these many inactive online connections only provide tenuous links, as social networking essentially concerns split-level communication. Private chat is home to communication between close friends. The remaining body of weaker ties generally inhabit the more public space where comments are posted, statuses updated and photos uploaded. These weaker ties share information which is ongoing and easily accessible but often irrelevant and meaningless. For example, during Malachy's interview, (when asked to scroll down his friend list and pick a friend who he feels he has added but knows very little about) he reads aloud a status update which announces:

> **Malachy**: I definitely caught something… mouth tastes like crap, headache, burning stomach, double vision… Must be the new Wine Flu.

Malachy is unsure if she is joking, making a joke at someone else's expense, or if she actually is feeling unwell and he comments quite dismissively:

Malachy: It probably means something to some of her friends. (COI)

This abstract shows that communication with weak online friends, unlike close friends, is detached from physical place, with no tone and body language[1] to rely on. The absence of a physical dimension to their friendship often results in misinterpretation as opposed to enriched social capital. This is reiterated many times throughout the study. For example, Richard explains:

Richard: Like your status its written so people who maybe don't really know the way you go on might think you are being serious when you are not. Or think you are joking when you are serious. Things like lol [laugh out loud] after a comment doesn't really do it cus people now just put lol at the end of every message. If you say something in the café or the chippy people get your meaning cus they see you and can hear the way you are saying it. Yeah I think there is a big potential for people who don't really know you to get the wrong end of the stick on *Facebook* like. (MFG)

Therefore, although young people are really well connected virtually, this does not compensate for place-based connections which yield a richer social capital outcome and a better understanding of others.

7.   Conclusion

The bridging/bonding distinction of social capital still has relevance in understanding how individuals nurture their own stock of social capital in the social networking era. However, a fuller understanding can be obtained by examining the distinct social capital benefits of social networking. These benefits are best understood as a continuum that ranges from direct (maximum benefit), to indirect (mid range benefit) and unused benefits (low benefit). This chapter reveals that the maximum benefits are directly sourced by individuals (bonding

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1. This is not something that is exclusively problematic to social networking but something that has been found to also limit email communication and internet communication in general (Ryen, 2004; Silverman, 2007).

and linking social capital). These direct benefits are consciously recognised by the individuals as improving their lives. Mid way on the continuum is bridging social capital, which is found in the indirect or fringe benefits of belonging to the large online network. These benefits are often taken for granted and less obvious to the individual. Finally, the lowest benefits are those which are unused and often remain an untapped social capital resource.

From exploring the social capital benefits of social networking it becomes clear that the principal transformation that social networking has brought to contemporary friendship is the individual's capacity to directly nurture their own stock of social capital. For example, close friendship yields a direct social capital benefit to the individual. While close friends may have always been a direct source of social capital for the young person, social networking provides 'textual therapy', a resource that was unavailable to bonding friends in the pre internet era. This has a positive impact on health and well-being and it would appear that it has replaced 'talking therapy' as a social capital resource previously provided by the telephone.

On the surface this shift from 'talking' to 'textual' therapy appears to be a symptom of a depersonalised modern society, however bonding friendship and the textual therapy it offers is heavily reliant on regular face-to-face encounters. Therefore, in order to avail of the textual benefit of social networking, contemporary youth must first invest in and sustain personal relations. Hence social networking, at least in terms of bonding friends, does not contribute to a depersonalised society; instead it emphasises that despite the many ways young people can connect with each other, social relations in a physical place remain of critical importance for the individual to directly nurture their social capital.

Links with others outside the peer group also directly enhance the individual's social capital, something that was less possible for the youth of previous generations. Unlike the small subset of bonding friends, these links have endless possibilities and can potentially develop social capital across a wider scale, as such online friendships do not require in-person contact, and function better when dislocated from physical hubs of interaction, such as school. Unlike bonding

friendship, these links open up and strengthen connections with young people and professionals, businesses and organisations. Consequently youth friendship is stretched from horizontal links between young people themselves to include vertical links with a range of others outside the peer group.

However, this benefit is short lived as it is based on the desire to source information rather than to nurture an actual friendship. These fragile and easily terminated links with those outside the peer group are often perceived by young people as nothing more than a *Google* search for information. While acquaintances in the past may have been treated the same way, previous generations did not have access to the wide range of linking friends that social networking grants access to. As such, contemporary online friendship appears to be more about self-interest, exploitation and ambition than that of previous generations.

However, when a youth-organisation link is strong in an offline sense, the online link represents less of an individualistic pursuit. Links between organisations and young people provide mutual social capital benefits to the organisation as well as the individual. Indeed organisations have never been in a better position to consolidate their presence in the lives of young people, at least those who are already involved with them. The fact that online links can strengthen existing social capital is welcome news given the reported decline in organisational vibrancy (Putnam, 2000).

The information shared between online linking and bonding friends sits in sharp contrast to that generated by the remaining online friends who make up the young person's friend list. This large body of inactive friends often share information which is not useful or specific. As such, young peoples' relationship with the large network is one of 'information gazing' and not 'information seeking'. Subsequently, information from inactive friends does nothing to enhance the quality of these weak ties and so the social capital outcome is – while not entirely non-productive in that young people are kept informed, enjoy finding out about others and can showcase their popularity – often at best an indirect and at worst an unused benefit.

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