

Teens Set New Rules of Engagement in the Age of Social Media

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Generation redefines friendship as virtual communication plays increasingly important role in relationships

ROCHESTER, N.Y., and NEW YORK—October 31, 2006—For today's teen, friendships are developed in areas beyond the school walls or their neighborhoods. Email and social networking sites such as MySpace®, Sconex, and Facebook™ allow young people to expand their social connections by contacting and becoming friends with people who they have not necessarily met in person. Alloy Media + Marketing and Harris Interactive® findings from a collaborative study offer an emerging picture of what friendship means to today's youth. New technologies shift means of communication across this digital generation, as teens come to define their closest circles by those they are connected with both online and offline.

Online social networks are providing fertile ground for teens to practice social behaviors, to try out different personas in their exploration for identity, and to nurture friendships. In some cases, online social networks allow for more intimate connections than offline relationships. The study depicts a generation more at ease through virtual communication, with many reporting they are more likely to reveal their true selves and to share more personal information with friends online than face-to-face.

According to Suzanne Martin, Ph.D., Research Manager Youth and Education Research, Harris Interactive, "The Internet plays an increasingly important role in kids' friendships. Social networking websites aid in youth development by providing an arena to build meaningful relationships, establish independence, strengthen their identity and become connected to a community that is not limited to their physical community."

Virtually Connected

Friendships play an increasingly important role in young people's lives as they grow up. While more tweens (ages 8 to 12) prefer spending time with their parents than with their friends (58% vs. 31%), by the teen years (ages 13 to 17), this preference has dramatically reversed. More than twice as many teens say they prefer spending time with their friends than with their parents (56% vs. 22%).

Youth connect with each other in a variety of ways and favor certain means of connecting over others. Both tweens and teens are most likely to spend time with their friends in school and outside of school, by getting together with friends in person and speaking to them on the telephone. Teens are much greater users of email or Internet Messaging (IM) (74% vs. 26%) and text messaging (37% vs. 9%) than their tween counterparts.

Talking to friends in person is the most cited favorite way for teens to stay in touch (53%); however this preference is strikingly higher among tweens (81%). Fewer teens and tweens favor staying in touch with their friends through technologies such as IM (16% vs. 2%), cell phones (11% vs. 3%), email (4% vs. 1%) and text messaging (4% vs. <1%). Tweens are more likely than teens to favor landline phones as a way to stay in touch with their friends (12% vs. 8%).

More is Better

Social circles have widened in the age of digital media, causing a shift in perception of social status among today's youth. The number of friends young people attract to their social network profiles is an indicator of their status among peers. Most teens (59%) report having between one and ten friends while more tweens (69%) report having that many friends. However, the number of friends appears to increase when the term "friend" is put in the context of an online profile or IM buddy list. Teens that have these types of lists have an average of 75 people on their online profile, 52 on their IM buddy list, 39 on their email contact list and 38 contacts on their cell phone.

"Today's teens look to their friends above any other influence for guidance and approval. The extensive accessibility to friends in the current media environment and the evolving definition of friend affords peer networks greater importance," commented Samantha Skey, SVP, Strategic Marketing, Alloy Media + Marketing.

Further commenting, "The shift extends to brands endeavoring to reach this influential audience as advertisers look to use the power of youth connectivity and the evolving definition of friend to enable online propagation of their message."

Friends I've Never Met

For many teens, meeting in person is not a prerequisite for being considered a friend. Online connections have provided a socially accepted platform for teens to form friendships. More than one-third of teens (36%) have friends whom they've never met in person, but have only "talked to" online. This is four times the number of tweens who have such friendships (8%). However, most teens use the Internet to augment relationships they have in the "real" world. Nearly nine in ten (87%) have friends whom they talk with both in person and online; this is more than the number of teens who have friends whom they only talk to in person/on the phone (and never "talk to" online) (79%).

Online Status

Friendships that are nurtured in both the "real" and "virtual" worlds define a teen's closest connections, depicting relationships that are more long-standing and intimate than those that are carried out in only one or the other. Nine in ten teens (89%) who have friends that they talk to both in person and online have known them for at least one year, and three-quarters (77%) consider these friends to be extremely or very close. In contrast, friendships that exist only in the "real" world are slightly less likely to be of such long-standing; 82 percent report that they have known these friends at least a year.

But perhaps of more interest, fewer teens describe "in-person only" friendships as close, compared to those that friends to whom they maintain ties both in person and online. Only half (52%) of teens describe these friendships as extremely or very close. Friendships that exist only online are more recent, and thus not surprisingly, less close. Fifty-one percent of teens who have friends whom they only talk to online say they have known these friends for six months or less, and two-thirds (66%) describe these friendships as not at all or somewhat close. As these data show, even for teens, friendships that exist only online do not trump those with people they know in the "real" world as well.

Virtual Confidants

For some teens communicating online allows them to show more of their true selves. Three in ten teens say they can share more with a friend online (30%) and that they are more honest when they talk to friends online (29%). Online friendships play different roles for teens and tweens. A majority of teens (62%), compared to only 49% of tweens, report that talking to their friends online makes them feel that they are always connected. Online friendships for tweens are as much an emblem of growing up. Half of tweens (52%), versus only 34% of teens, say that talking to their friends online makes them feel cool.

For young people, a friend is "someone I care about that I can talk to about anything," "someone who cares about me", "someone who is always there for you and you always hang out with", and "someone you can trust." For most teens, email, IM and social networking sites provide another way to nurture friendships with people they know in person as well. But the length of a friendship is also an important factor in its closeness. Since many of teens' "online only" friendships are more recent, only time will tell how those will evolve.

Downloadable PDF files of previous issues, and the current issue of Trends and Tudes, containing this information and more can be found at: http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/newsletters_k12.asp.

About the Survey

This survey was developed in collaboration with Alloy Media + Marketing. This research was conducted online by Harris Interactive among 1,487 children and teenagers (ages 8 to 18) within the United States between August 16 and August 24, 2006. Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, parental education, and region were weighted where necessary to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.

With pure probability samples, with 100 percent response rates, it is possible to calculate the probability that the sampling error (but not other sources of error) is not greater than some number. With a pure probability sample of 1,487 one could say with a ninety-five percent probability that the overall results have a sampling error of +/-3 percentage points. Sampling error for data from sub-samples would be higher and would vary based on sample size. However that does not take other sources of error into account. This online survey is not based on a probability sample and therefore no theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

About Alloy Media + Marketing

Alloy Media + Marketing is one of the country's largest providers of nontraditional targeted media and promotional marketing programs connecting with 85 percent of the millennial audience (ages 5 - 29) daily. With large-scale networks, unique and exclusive media and promotional partnerships, and offices located in major markets across the country, Alloy Media + Marketing services over 1500 companies including half of the Fortune 200. Alloy Media + Marketing ranks fifth on the Advertising Age list of Top 100 Marketing Services Agencies and ranks among the World's Top 25 Ad Organizations. Alloy Media + Marketing is part of Alloy, Inc. (NASDAQ: ALOY). For further information regarding Alloy

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About the Harris Interactive Youth and Education Research Practice

The Youth and Education Research Practice conducts research among children, teens, parents, educators, administrators and policy makers that assists in understanding the lives of children, teens and college students. The team specializes in research related to marketing geared toward the young consumer, to public policy related to youth and education, to family and parenting issues, and satisfaction studies and research that measures the standards of K-12 and higher education in districts across the nation. The practice conducts custom and syndicated studies both for non-profit and for-profit organizations.

About Harris Interactive

Harris Interactive is the 12th largest and fastest-growing market research firm in the world. The company provides research-driven insights and strategic advice to help its clients make more confident decisions which lead to measurable and enduring improvements in performance. Harris Interactive is widely known for The Harris Poll, one of the longest running, independent opinion polls and for pioneering online market research methods. The company has built what could conceivably be the world's largest panel of survey respondents, the Harris Poll Online. Harris Interactive serves clients worldwide through its United States, Europe and Asia offices, its wholly-owned subsidiary Novatris in France and through a global network of independent market research firms. The service bureau, HISB, provides its market research industry clients with mixed-mode data collection, panel development services as well as syndicated and tracking research consultation. More information about Harris Interactive may be obtained at www.harrisinteractive.com.

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