

## 2 FRIENDSHIP

**Lead Author: danah boyd**

Sitting in a coffee shop in suburban Michigan in June 2007, Tara, a Vietnamese sixteen-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 one another at school, in formal or unstructured activities, or at one another’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 eighteen-year-old from Colorado, succinctly 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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 off. 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, though, 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 at 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)<sup>2</sup>—gained traction among U.S. teenagers. While teenagers have many choices of media with which to interact with one another, two large social network sites—MySpace and Facebook—captured the imaginations of millions of U.S. teenagers while we were doing fieldwork in the years 2004 through 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 these tools can be used for a wide variety of 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 chapter 1 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 school-centered social networks. These studies include those conducted by C. J. Pascoe (Living Digital); Christo 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 chapter 3, "Intimacy," 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 seemingly 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. Chapter 6 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 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 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 on 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 youth 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 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 (Newcomb and Bagwell 1996; Berndt 1996). Children are brought into preschools, kindergartens, and elementary schools not only to learn what is traditionally taught and measured in the classroom 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 same-age peers, 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 introduce 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<sup>3</sup> 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.

### **Box 2.1 Sharing Snapshots of Teen Friendship and Love**

#### **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 sixteen-year-olds are best friends. They live in a low-income urban area of Los Angeles and attend a public school thirty miles away from home. Stephanie, who identifies as Colombian and Irish, shares a bedroom with her mother. Her twenty-six-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, the 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 also to 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 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's and Sandra's Photobucket accounts are 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 four hundred 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 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 those 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 four hundred 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. 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 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 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 were 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 they already know or are already loosely connected with (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 fourteen-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.

This is not to say that teens do not leverage social media 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 fifteen-year-old from Kansas, explained, “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 seventeen-year-old, told Dan Perkel (MySpace Profile Production) how MySpace allowed him to learn that a boy who lived up the street was really into skydiving. This prompted a conversation between Carlos and the neighborhood boy, who then invited Carlos to go skydiving, but Carlos was not old enough. While both Melanie and Carlos used social network sites to make friends, these other teens were already members of their social circles; they simply did not know them very well. Teens often use social media to make or develop friendships, but they do so almost exclusively with acquaintances or friends of friends (see figure 2.1).

While the dominant and normative social media usage pattern is to connect with friends, family, and acquaintances, there are some teens who use social media to develop connections with strangers. Some teens—especially marginalized and ostracized ones—often relish the opportunity



**Figure 2.1**

Teens socializing online and off-line. “MySpacing” photo courtesy of Luke Brassard, 2006, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/brassard/138829152>.

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 chapters 5 and 6, “Gaming” and “Creative Production,” 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 2009). 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 box 3.2). 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 who participated 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) also have taken hold for online spaces. 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 but 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 cannot find locally.

## **Box 2.2 From MySpace to Facebook: Coming of Age in Networked Public Culture**

**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 eighteen-year-old Ann, a white teenager living on the outskirts of Silicon Valley, the entrée into networked public culture came through MySpace. Throughout her junior and senior years of high school, Ann was an active MySpace user who uploaded pictures and commented on friends' comments on a daily basis. Ann also participated in what she and her friends called "MySpace parties," or sleepovers that involved dressing up and taking photographs to post on their respective MySpace pages. Ann and her friends enjoyed trying on different clothing, such as short skirts, bra tops, fishnet stockings, or other sexy clothes. They also began to make videos of "funny stuff," such as her friends dancing or imitating celebrities.

After accepting an offer to attend a small liberal-arts college in Washington State, Ann received an invitation from her future dorm's resident assistant (RA) to participate in Facebook, a social network site that (at the time) catered to the college community. Ann's RA sent her an invitation to be a member of the "Crystal Mountain" wing, part of a wider network of ninety dorm residents attending her new college. Ann admitted that in the course of two weeks she was spending hours at a time perusing different people's sites, looking for familiar names and faces and checking out friends of friends. As the summer progressed, Ann increasingly felt that she was becoming "addicted" to Facebook, checking it anytime she had a free moment for status updates (e.g., a change to someone's profile), which was an average of four to five times per day, a typical session lasting about ten minutes. Through this brief, repetitive engagement, Ann started to meet the other students slated to live in her dorm, the most important and exciting of these new connections being her future roommate, Sarah. Describing her fascination with her Facebook page, Ann explained:

And you can see everyone else's dorm room and I have groups. Like everyone in my dorm room is in this group. And you can see all the others . . . and so I can see who my RA is going to be and stuff and so it's really cool. And then I have . . . I can show you my roommate. It's really exciting. So I can see her. And so it . . . I don't know, I can just see a picture of her instead of having to wait and stuff.

During the course of the summer, Ann and her future roommate, Sarah, "poked" each other and sent each other short messages and comments.

Some of these messages were pragmatic, such as when they planned to move into their dorm room, what “stuff” they had, or which classes they planned to take. Alongside using Facebook to facilitate communication, Ann delved into the details of Sarah’s Facebook page for insight into what she imagined would be shared interests, the most obvious being her taste in music and media.

But actually her and I like a lot of the same music, I could tell from her Facebook. And so we were talking about concerts that we’ve been to this summer and stuff. So I’m sure . . . ’cause she’s bringing a TV ’cause she lives in a really, really rich area of Washington. And so I think she’s bringing a really nice TV, so I’m like I should probably bring something kind of nice. So I think I’ll bring this [iPod speakers] and then we can both hook our iPods up whenever we want. . . . I’m supposed to bring a microwave but I don’t think I’ll bring a microwave.

More than reflecting shared interests or competitive consumption, Ann’s decision about what to bring to college was aligned with a desire to construct an aesthetic balance. Buying new, trendy iPod speakers complements the “really nice TV” Sarah will be contributing to their room. Ann also hoped that the speakers might create an acoustic space wherein Ann and Sarah could hang out and listen to music together. Ann and Sarah decided to upload a few pictures of their bedrooms at home onto their Facebook pages to get a sense of each other’s style and tastes. Ann was excited when she looked at the photographs and saw Sarah’s signature colors. “I’m brown and pink stuff and she’s brown and blue stuff!” Ann surmised that this aesthetic harmony would also signify a harmonious relationship (cf. Clarke 2001; Young 2005).

For Ann, and individuals like her, MySpace and Facebook have played an important role in structuring and sustaining her social worlds, including her ability to imagine her future college life in the dorm and to establish relationships with new individuals and communities. They also have provided Ann with opportunities to understand and assert her own sense of who she is and who she will become in the mediated transition from high school to college. Much like homecoming, prom, and graduation, Facebook, MySpace, and other spaces of networked public culture have now become part and parcel of the coming-of-age process for teenagers in the United States.

## Performing Friendships

Small children often seek confirmation of friendships through questions such as “We’re friends, right?” (Corsaro 1997, 164). Yet, in everyday life, most youth friendships are never formalized or verified except through implicit social rituals. One of the ways in which social media alter

friendship practices is through the forced—and often public—articulation of social connections. From instant-messaging “buddy lists” to the public listing of “Friends” on social network sites, teens are regularly forced to list their connections as part of social media participation. The dynamics surrounding this can directly affect friendship practices.

The articulation of connections in social media serves three purposes. First, these lists operate as an address book, allowing participants to keep a record of all the people they know. Second, they allow participants to leverage privacy settings to control who can access their content, who can contact them, and who can see if they are online or not. Finally, the public display of connections that takes place in social network sites can represent an individual’s social identity and status (Donath and boyd 2004).

The practice of creating an “address book” is common across many genres of social media. With email address books and mobile phone contacts lists, the collection of relations is simply meant as a reference tool to help the participant remember another person’s email address or phone number. Because these are never made visible nor are people required to approve of address book inclusion, address books are little more than a reference tool.

With IM, buddy lists are both references and the initial site of interaction. Buddy lists display a person’s contacts as well as a variety of presence information about online and idle status as well as “away messages” that convey additional personal and contextual information (Baron 2008; Grinter, Palen, and Eldridge 2006). Social network sites take this one step further by displaying the list of connections on a person’s profile in a way that is visible to anyone who can view that profile. On social network sites, “Friends” end up serving as a part of a person’s self-representation on the site as well as the foundation of access control to certain features (e.g., commenting) and content (e.g., blog posts). Teens use Friends to enact their identity (Livingstone 2008) and imagine the social context (boyd 2006).

“Friends” in the context of social media are not necessarily the same as “friends” in the everyday sense (boyd 2006).<sup>4</sup> Social network sites use the term “Friends” to label all articulated relationships, regardless of intensity or connection type (e.g., family or colleagues). Different challenges are involved in choosing whom to select as Friends. Because Friends are



displayed on social network sites, there are social tensions concerning whom to include and whom to exclude. Furthermore, as many IM clients and most social network sites require confirmation for people to list one another,<sup>5</sup> choosing to include someone prompts a “Friend request” that requires the recipient to accept or reject the connection. This introduces another layer of social processing. While teens are developing a set of shared social practices for Friending, the norms for these practices are still in a state of flux and interpretive flexibility, as is characteristic of the early years of adoption of a new technology. Further, the technology capabilities also are evolving in tandem with the development of user practices or norms. Teens’ ongoing debate and negotiation over what is socially appropriate, combined with Internet companies’ efforts to monitor and regulate these practices, is gradually stabilizing a set of practices for how youth publicly articulate their social relations on social network sites.

Teens have different strategies for choosing whom to mark as Friends. By and large, the teens we interviewed include as Friends those they know—friends, family, peers, and so on. Yet, even within the confines of this general rubric, there is immense variation. Teens may choose to accept requests from peers they know but do not feel close to, if only to avoid offending them. They may also choose to exclude people they know well but do not wish to have present on Facebook or MySpace. This category may include parents, siblings, and teachers.

Both MySpace and Facebook offer many incentives for adding people other than close friends. Many of the privacy features that were introduced during the course of our study limit non-Friends from profile viewing, leaving comments, and, in some cases, sending messages. Teens who wish to talk with peers or friends of friends are encouraged to accept requests from peers so as to open the channel of communication. Likewise, teens who use MySpace to distribute their music think it is important to accept requests from any potential fans.

Teens must determine their own boundaries concerning whom to accept and whom to reject. For many, this is not easy. In determining boundaries, there are common categories of potential Friends that most teens address in their decision-making process. The first concerns strangers. While many early adopters of MySpace gregariously welcomed anyone and everyone as Friends, the social norms quickly changed. For most teens, rejecting such requests is now the most common practice. Although teens who

accept Friend requests from strangers rarely interact with these people online, let alone offline, the same concerns that keep teens from interacting with strangers online also keep them from including strangers in their lists of Friends. Yet fear is not the only reason teens choose to deny strangers.

Trevor, a seventeen-year-old working-class white boy from a suburb in northern California, says he added only people he knew in the physical world to his Friends list on MySpace because “I don’t want anyone on here that I don’t know” (C. J. Pascoe, *Living Digital*). By denying strangers, Trevor reinforces MySpace’s claim that it is “a place for friends.” He thinks that people who accept requests from those they do not know are trying “to seem more popular to themselves.” Trevor is not alone in his criticism of those who are open with their Friends lists. Mark, a white fifteen-year-old from Seattle, complains that “there’s all these people that judge [MySpace] as a popularity contest and just go around adding anyone that they barely even know just so they can have like, you know, 500,000 friends just because it’s cool. I think that’s stupid, personally.” Those who collect large numbers of Friends on MySpace are derogatively called “MySpace whores.” While this term is both gendered and sexualized in nature and those loaded references are sometimes intended, it is applied to both boys and girls and refers to attention seekers of all types, not just those seeking sexual attention.

The vast majority of those who collect large numbers of Friends are adults—musicians, politicians, corporations, and both real and wannabe celebrities. Teen musicians and activists sometimes collect Friends for the same purposes as public-facing adults—to connect with fans and develop a following. Teens also do so as a form of entertainment or competition among friends. These teens are not interested in developing friendships with those they include as Friends; they simply collect them because it is something to do. One boy said that it is fun to see which attractive women would say yes to his Friend requests. Collecting attractive women is so common that spammers started making fake profiles of attractive women to lure men.

Mass Friend collecting is just one of the practices of connecting with strangers. Teens commonly send Friend requests to bands and celebrities. Teens do not believe that such connections indicate an actual or potential friendship, but they still find value in these Friends. Bands and celebrities

frequently send messages—and sometimes VIP opportunities—to the fans who are their Friends. Teens enjoy receiving these, value the occasional comment, and sometimes enjoy connecting with other fans by leaving comments themselves. Such connections serve as a public display of taste and identity (Donath and boyd 2004).

Teens also use the Friending feature to build communities based on specific affiliations. For example, Christo Sims (Rural and Urban Youth) interviewed a sixteen-year-old Haitian American girl from Brooklyn, New York, named Ono who accepts all Friend requests from people who are Haitian “because I’m from Haiti, and I want to keep all the Haitians together.” By making these connections, Ono is able to inhabit a community on MySpace that is dominated by Haitians from all over the world. She may not build personal relationships with these people, but connecting to them allows her to participate in a networked public of people like her.

While most teens who connect with strangers have no expectation of building a relationship out of this performed connection, there are teens who happily add people to whom they are attracted in the hopes that one of these connections might develop into something more. This practice is often controversial, both in adult and youth worlds. Adults are concerned that this opens the door for pedophiles pretending to be teens, even though the data show that deception is virtually nonexistent on the rare occasions in which sexual solicitation occurs through these sites (Wolak et al. 2008). Also, many teens—especially girls—think talking to any stranger is risky, as it exposes them to unknown adults as well as to fellow teens who may take an unwanted interest in them.

There is little social cost to rejecting Friend requests from strangers—because these people are unknown, teens do not worry about offending them. Rejecting known individuals, on the other hand, is much more complicated. By and large, the social convention is to accept Friend requests from all known peers, including all friends, acquaintances, and classmates, regardless of the quality of the relationship. Jennifer, a white seventeen-year-old from a small town in Kansas, always accepts requests from people she knows because “I’d feel mean if I didn’t.” She sees such requests as a sign of niceness and an opening of potential friendship. Additionally, she thinks it is important to be nice because she would be mad if someone rejected her attempt to be nice.

As Jennifer indicates, some teens use the Friend request feature to develop acquaintances into friends. When Bob, a nineteen-year-old white male from rural California, meets someone new, he turns to Facebook to learn more about the person because “it gives you a deeper level of comfort with the person after you meet them” (Sims, *Rural and Urban Youth*). Using social network site profiles to research someone’s tastes, style, affiliation, and social connections provides valuable conversation fodder in addition to offering signs of potential friendship compatibility. Furthermore, the online communication channels provide a low-cost and casual option for initiating conversations. As Bob explains, becoming Friends on Facebook sets up your relationship for the next time you meet them to have them be a bigger part of your life. . . . Suddenly they go from somebody you’ve met once to somebody you met once but also connected with in some weird Facebook way. And now that you’ve connected, you have to acknowledge each other more in person sometimes.

The ritual of Friending can permit or prompt direct interaction when the teens involved see one another in school or at a group function; it lays the groundwork for building a friendship and gives reason to single the other out from the group and initiate communications. From Bob’s point of view, Facebook allows teens to take a new relationship “to the next level immediately.”

Bob feels comfortable sending Friend requests to people he does not know well in the hopes of future connections. Yet not all Friend requests from acquaintances are attempts to deepen the relationship. Often teens send requests to everyone they know or recognize and no additional contact is initiated after the Friend request is approved. This only adds to the awkwardness of the Friend request. As Lilly, a white sixteen-year-old from a Kansas City suburb, explains, getting Friend requests from classmates does not even mean that they know who you are at school, making it difficult to bridge the gap between online and offline.

It’s just on Facebook, you’re friends. At school, you don’t have to talk if you don’t want to. . . . It’s kind of nice, but then at the same time it’s not because you know they’re your Friends. . . . You don’t say hi in the hall ‘cause maybe they just added me because somebody else had me added and they’d be like, “I don’t know who you are. Hi.”

Lilly accepts requests from all classmates, even those from classmates she barely knows, but her friend Melanie prefers to mock the dynamic that

this sets up. Melanie, a white fifteen-year-old, will approach classmates who send her Friend requests with comments such as “Hey Friend from Facebook,” simply because she thinks it is funny. Melanie’s approach to Facebook is quite unusual. Not only is she willing to call out the absurdity of being Friends online but not talking at school, but she also is willing to buck the norms by rejecting people she does not like and deleting people who annoy her. Melanie notes that Facebook “is better than real life” because while there is no simple mechanism to formally indicate disinterest in school, it is possible to say “no” on Facebook by rejecting Friend requests. Unlike Melanie, who is comfortable deleting Friends who annoy her on Facebook, most teens find deleting people discomfoting and inappropriate. Penelope, a white fifteen-year-old from Nebraska, says that deleting a Friend is “rude . . . unless they’re weird.” Yet, while she will do it occasionally, the process of deleting someone is “scary” to Penelope; she fears that she will offend someone.

Generally, it is socially unacceptable to delete a Friend one knows. When this is done, it is primarily after a fight or breakup. In these situations, the act of deletion is spiteful and intentionally designed to hurt the other person. Teen awareness of malicious deletions adds to the general sense that deleting someone is socially inappropriate. Thus, it can be problematic when teens accidentally delete people they know. Ana-Garcia, a fifteen-year-old half-Indian, half-Guatemalan girl from Los Angeles, faced this problem when her brother decided to log in to her account and delete two pages’ worth of Friends. Luckily, those she did know understood as soon as she explained what happened. Gabbie, a seventeen-year-old Chinese girl from a suburb in northern California whom C. J. Pascoe (Living Digital) interviewed, found herself on the opposite side. Her feelings were initially hurt when her friend deleted her, but she confronted him and learned that he did it by mistake. “I just asked him, I was like, ‘Why did you delete me?’ And he was like, ‘I didn’t know!’ So he added me on. But he’s one of my closest friends.”

While deleting known people can be seen as malicious, it is socially acceptable to choose to move from an open profile to a closed one and delete strangers. In fact, this is often encouraged. Lolo, a Latina fifteen-year-old from Los Angeles, says: “At the beginning, I was just adding people just to get friends and just random boys living in New York or Texas. Then my boyfriend kinda like, ‘You don’t know them. You don’t know them,’

so I deleted them and then I had three hundred and I really knew them.” Deleting strangers, like rejecting their initial Friend requests, is viewed as having no social repercussions.

The Friends feature forces teens to navigate their social lives in new ways. Although youth are in a process of actively negotiating the underlying social practices and norms for displaying friendship online, we have observed an emerging consensus about socially appropriate behavior that largely mirrors what is socially appropriate in offline contexts. The process of adding and deleting Friends is a core element of participation on social network sites. It allows teens to negotiate who can gain access to their content, but it also means that teens have to manage the social implications of their decisions. Because the peer groups that teens connect with on social network sites are the same as those they socialize with in everyday life, decisions about whom to accept and whom to reject online directly affect their offline connections. By facing decisions about how to circumscribe their Friends lists, teens are forced to consider their relationships, the dynamics of their peer group, and the ways in which their decisions may affect others. These processes make social status and friendship more explicit and public, providing a broader set of contexts for observing these informal forms of social-evaluation learning. It makes peer negotiations visible in new ways, leading to heightened stakes as well as opportunities to observe and learn about social norms from their peers.

### Friendship Hierarchies

A Friend connection alone says nothing about its strength. By accepting all acquaintances as Friends, teens can avoid offending peers who might believe there to be a stronger connection. Yet an additional feature on MySpace—“Top Friends” (formerly “Top 8”)—complicates matters by forcing teens to indicate whom they are closest with among their Friends. While MySpace designed this feature to allow participants to showcase their actual close friends, many teens highlight that this feature is the crux of what makes MySpace filled with social drama. These practices of displaying friendship hierarchies online are controversial and more fraught than the simple articulation of Friend connections.

Rhetoric such as “best friends forever” (“BFF”) is common among children, especially young girls (Thompson, Grace, and Cohen 2001, 62). This

stems from a desire by children to understand the strength of their relationships and embedded in this is an expectation of affirmation and reciprocity. Most friendship declarations take place verbally between friends, but girls have used symbolic accessories such as “BFF” heart charms and friendship bracelets to formalize and display their connection. While these practices exist, they are far more common with elementary-school children and middle-school tweens than with teenagers. The idea of “best friends” does not disappear in high school, but the formal symbolism fades.

In many ways, MySpace’s Top Friends forces teenagers to publicly articulate their best and “bestest” Friends. This feature requires participants to list up to twenty-four Friends’ names in a grid. Designed to help participants add nuance to their Friends list, this feature quickly became a social battleground as participants struggled over who should make the list and, more important, who should be in the first position. Anindita, an Indian seventeen-year-old from Los Angeles, explains:

People will be like, “Why am I number two? You’re number one on my page.” I was like, “Well, I can’t make everyone number two. That’s impossible.” Especially with boyfriends and girlfriends, get in a fight like, “Why is she before me? I’m your girlfriend. I should be higher than her.” I’m just like, “Okay.” I don’t really think it’s a big deal, the top thing. If you’re friends, you shouldn’t lose your friendship over that.

Like many teens, Anindita finds the social dynamic around Top Friends annoying. Yet she is not immune to its effects. Even though she thinks it should not be important, it is a topic of regular conversation among her friends. While Anindita may see her friends’ attitude as cattiness, Top Friends surfaces insecurities by forcing teens to face where they stand in the eyes of those around them. As Nora, a white eighteen-year-old from Virginia, explains on her MySpace: “It’s like have you noticed that you may have someone in your Top 8 but you’re not in theirs and you kinda think to yourself that you’re not as important to that person as they are to you . . . and oh, to be in the coveted number one spot!” Many teens see the Top Friends feature as a litmus test of their relations and this prompts anxieties in teens about where they stand.

Reciprocity plays a central role in the negotiation of Top Friends. Many teens expect that if they list someone as a Top Friend, that person should list them in return. Teens worry about not being listed and about failing to list those who list them. Jordan, a biracial Mexican-white

fifteen-year-old from Austin, Texas, says: "Oh, it's so stressful because if you're in someone else's [Top Friends] then you feel bad if they're not in yours." The struggles that teens face in constructing their Top Friends resemble those involved in choosing whom to invite for a special occasion. Nadine, a white sixteen-year-old from New Jersey, described this on her MySpace:

As a kid, you used your birthday party guest list as leverage on the playground. "If you let me play I'll invite you to my birthday party." Then, as you grew up and got your own phone, it was all about someone being on your speed dial. Well, today it's the MySpace Top 8. It's the new dangling carrot for gaining superficial acceptance. Taking someone off your Top 8 is your new passive-aggressive power play when someone pisses you off.

While there are parallels among Top Friends, speed dial, and the birthday party, there are also differences. Top Friends are persistent, publicly displayed, and easily alterable. This makes it difficult for teens to avoid the issue or make excuses such as "I forgot." When pressured to include someone, teens often oblige or attempt to ward off this interaction by listing those who list them. Catalina, a white fifteen-year-old from Austin, Texas, says: "If you're in someone else's, you have to put them in yours." Other teens avoid this struggle by listing only bands or family members. While teens may get jealous if other peers are listed, family members are exempt from the comparative urge. This is the strategy that Traviesa, a Hispanic fifteen-year-old from the Los Angeles area, takes to avoid social drama with her friends:

It's very difficult to choose a Top 8 because when you do, your friends are like, "Well, why didn't you choose me?" And this and that, and I'm like, "Well, all right fine, I'll just choose," like I choose my cousins now because I can't deal with it. Like everybody's always like, "Why didn't you put me on, why am I not on your Top 8? You're on mine."

In addition to having to decide whom to include, teens must also decide in what order those Friends are listed. Zelda, a fourteen-year-old boy from Brooklyn who was born in Trinidad, told Christo Sims (Rural and Urban Youth):

It's just your best friends; you just put them in the top whatever. If you had a girlfriend or a boyfriend, you put them first. And, then, you just go down like people that you're cool with and then people who are just normal friends. It just keeps on going down. But, it's mostly, if the people who you're really friends with, they stay



at the top. And, then, sometimes, because people will be, they get mad 'cause they're like, "Oh, I'm not your friend. I'm not your best friend."

The most valuable position—the "first"—is the one in the upper left corner of the grid. This position is usually reserved for a person's "best" friend, significant other, or a close family member. While few object to a significant other's appearing first, some teens, especially girls, get jealous when other same-sex peers are listed above them on the page of the person they believe to be their closest friend. Exceptions are made for family members and it is common in some teen circles to list family first. While some teens list family to avoid conflict with friends, others do so because they see a family member as their closest friend. This is exemplified by Laura, a white seventeen-year-old with Native American roots from suburban Washington State, who said: "My sister is in position number one because she is one of my best friends and she will be there for me most likely longer than anyone else."

Although most teens find a way to manage the Top Friends feature, others prefer to avoid it altogether. Some intentionally leave Tom Anderson, the site's founder, in the first position while others find more creative solutions. One teen explained that she changed her Top Friends every month, creating themes such as "all Sagittarius Friends." After getting frustrated with the resultant social drama, Amy, a biracial black-white sixteen-year-old from Seattle, found code that allowed her to not display her Top Friends on her profile, and, thus, no one could be upset with her. While Amy's approach is uncommon, it highlights the power of this feature in shaping how teens interact with the site.

Not all teens participate in the social dramas that result from Top Friends, but it does cause tremendous consternation for many. The Top Friends feature is a good example of how structural aspects of software can force articulations that do not map well to how offline social behavior works. Top Friends suggests a single, context-free, hierarchical ranking of friends and a hard cut between "Top" friends and everyone else. This results in social drama for multiple reasons. First, teens do not necessarily think of their friends as hierarchically ranked, but the technology forces this ranking. Second, teens might feel closer to different friends in different contexts and along different dimensions. Friends from a sports team might be different from friends in geometry class. All those situational distinctions are erased in the Top Friends feature. As a result, friends from different

contexts are forced into a single spot for comparison. Finally, people might feel close to some friends because they get them invited to parties and close to other friends because they help them with their homework.

Because of the ways in which Top Friends collapses the complexities of social relations and hierarchies, teens have developed a variety of social norms to govern what is and is not appropriate. While common practices ease some tensions, the Top Friends feature still causes anxieties and social pressures. Most of these stabilize through time but not without a few battle scars.

The process of articulating and ranking Friends is one of the ways in which social media take what is normally implicit and make it explicit. When teens are enmeshed in dramas about social categories, cliques, and popularity, the forced nature of Friending can be turbulent. Like the practices of accepting or rejecting Friend requests, the practices of ranking Friends translates certain forms of social connectedness into an online representation. The problem with explicit ranking, however, is that it creates or accentuates hierarchies where they did not exist offline, or were deliberately and strategically ambiguous, thus forcing a new set of social-status negotiations. The give-and-take over these forms of social ranking is an example of how social norms are being negotiated in tandem with the adoption of new technologies, and how peers give ongoing feedback to one another as part of these struggles to develop new cultural standards.

### **Status, Attention, and Drama**

The issue of whom one is friends with, and whom one is “best friends” with, is embedded in a broader set of struggles over status among peers at school (Milner 2004). Because social media are used in a variety of friendship-driven practices, they are also home to the struggles that occur as a natural part of this process. Teens use social media to develop and maintain friendships, but they also use them to seek attention and generate drama. Often the motivation behind the latter is to relieve insecurities about popularity and friendship. While teen dramas are only one component of friendship, they often are made extremely visible by social media. The persistent and networked qualities of social media alter the ways that these dramas play out in teen life. For this reason, it is important to pay

special attention to the role that social media play in the negotiation of teen status.

Teens seeking to spread rumors or engage in drama often use social media. These acts may be lightweight parts of everyday teen life or they may snowball in magnitude and become acts of bullying. Regardless of the intensity, our research shows that the acts of drama involving social media are primarily a continuation of broader dramas. Stan, a white eighteen-year-old from Iowa, said: “You’d actually be surprised how little things change. I’m guessing a lot of the drama is still the same; it’s just the format is a little different. It’s just changing the font and changing the background color really.” While the underlying practices may be the same, Michael, a white seventeen-year-old from Seattle, pointed out that social media amplify dramas because they extend social worlds beyond the school.

MySpace is a huge drama maker, but when you stick a lot of people in one thing, then it’s . . . it always causes drama. ‘Cause, like . . . MySpace is, like, a really big school . . . school’s filled with drama. MySpace is filled with drama. It’s just when you get people together like that, that’s just how life works and stuff.

Properties of social media can alter the visibility of these acts, making them more persistent and more difficult for participants to get a complete picture of what’s happening or interpret the acts accurately.

Gossip and rumors have played a role in teen struggles for status and attention since well before social media entered the scene (Milner 2004). When teens gather with friends and peers, they share stories about other friends and peers. New communication channels—including mobile phones, IM, and social network sites—have all been used for the purposes of gossip. Some teens believe that the new media tend to replace the older media as a tool for gossip. Trevor, a white seventeen-year-old from a northern California suburb in C. J. Pascoe’s “Living Digital” study, argued that “the Internet has taken the place of phones . . . it spreads all rumors and gossip.”

While it is unclear whether or not the Internet has changed the frequency of gossip, social media certainly alter the efficiency and potential scale of interactions. Because of this, there is greater potential for gossip to spread much farther and at a faster pace, making social media a catalyst in teen drama. While teen gossip predates the Internet, some teens blame

the technologies for their roles in making gossip easier and more viral. Elena, a sixteen-year-old girl from Armenia who was adopted by a Mormon family in suburban northern California, explained:

And the thing on a lot of MySpace is it brings a lot of drama. A lot of drama. Because it's like, oh, well, "Jessica said something about you." "Oh, really?" "Yeah, we heard it from this girl, Alicia." So then you click on Jessica and talk about comments that Alicia did and then you go from Alicia to her friends. It's this whole going around. And then I'm like, "I was on Alicia's email last night and she's saying this about you." It just gets really out of control, I think. And you're in everyone's business. . . . That's what happened with me and my friends. We got into a lot of drama with it and I was like, anyone can write anything. It can be fact, fiction. Most people, what they read they believe. Even if it's not true. (C. J. Pascoe, *Living Digital*)

Social media provide another stage on which dramas can be played out. Some of these dramas are truly dramatic, while others are mundane parts of everyday life. When content is persistent (e.g., comments on social network sites), teens can gain access to the content even when they were not present for the situation being referenced. The public nature of social network sites, in particular, makes it much easier for teens to "overhear" what is being said. Furthermore, because teens' presence as observers may not be noticeable online, social network sites can allow them to "stalk" their peers, keeping up with the gossip and lives of people they do not know well but with whom they are familiar. Penelope, a white fifteen-year-old from Nebraska, said: "If [the popular kids are] having a fight you know about it. They confront each other. They say, 'Well, if you're going to leave a comment like that on her page then you'd better send a comment to everybody because this is a war,' or something like that."

While teens can surf through their MySpace or Facebook Friends' profiles to read their comments, Facebook introduced a feature in September 2006 that made this process much easier: the News Feed. When teens log in to their Facebook, they are presented with a News Feed that lists actions taken by their Friends on the site. Some of the actions that are announced on the News Feed include when two people become Friends, when someone leaves a comment on someone else's wall, when a Friend uploads new photos, and when two people break up. Although teens can opt out of this, many of them do not, either because they do not know about the option or because the juicy updates are too alluring.

Cachi, a Puerto Rican eighteen-year-old from Iowa, finds the News Feed useful “because it helps you to see who’s keeping track of who and who’s talking to who.” She enjoys knowing when two people break up so that she knows why someone is upset or when she should reach out to offer support. Knowing this information also prevents awkward conversations that might reference the new ex. While she loves the ability to keep up with the lives of her peers, she also realizes that this means that “everybody knows your business.”

Some teens find the News Feed annoying or irrelevant. Gadil, an Indian sixteen-year-old from Los Angeles, thinks that it is impersonal, while others think it is downright creepy. For Tara, a Vietnamese sixteen-year-old from Michigan, the News Feed takes what was public and makes it more public: “Facebook’s already public. I think it makes it way too like stalker-ish.” Her eighteen-year-old sister, Lila, concurs and pointed out that it gets “rumors going faster.” Kat, a white fourteen-year-old from Salem, Massachusetts, uses Facebook’s privacy settings to hide stories from the News Feed for the sake of appearances.

As a feature that amplifies public acts, Facebook’s News Feed helps rumors posted publicly to spread farther faster. Yet, according to the teens we interviewed, the vast majority of rumors spread through more private channels such as IM and text messaging. IM allows teens to converse with multiple people at once as well as copy and paste conversations to spread information. Through forwarding, text messaging can help create gossip chains. Thus, even though these channels may be more “private,” information can become public through incessant sharing.

While gossip is fairly universal among teens, the rumors that are spread can be quite hurtful. Some of these escalate to the level of bullying. We are unable to assess whether or not bullying is on the rise because of social media. Other scholars have found that most teens do not experience Internet-driven harassment (Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor 2007). Those who do may not fit the traditional profile of those who experience school-based bullying (Ybarra, Diener-West, and Leaf 2007), but harassment, both mediated and unmediated, is linked to a myriad of psychosocial issues that include substance use and school problems (Hinduja and Patchin 2008; Ybarra, Diener-West, and Leaf 2007).

Measuring “cyberbullying,” or Internet harassment, is difficult, in part because both scholars and teens struggle to define it. The teens we

interviewed spoke regularly of “drama” or “gossip” or “rumors,” but few used the language of “bullying” or “harassment” unless we introduced these terms. When Sasha, a white sixteen-year-old from Michigan, was asked specifically about whether or not rumors were bullying, she said:

I don't know, people at school, they don't realize when they are bullying a lot of the time nowadays because it's not so much physical anymore. It's more like you think you're joking around with someone in school but it's really hurting them. Like you think it's a funny inside joke between you two, but it's really hurtful to them, and you can't realize it anymore.

Sasha, like many of the teens we interviewed, saw rumors as hurtful, but she was not sure if they were bullying. Some teens saw bullying as being about physical harm; others saw it as premeditated, intentionally malicious, and sustained in nature. While all acknowledged that it could take place online, the teens we interviewed thought that most bullying took place offline, even if they talked about how drama was happening online.

When teens told us about being bullied, they did not focus on the technology. They were distressed that others—often former friends—were maliciously spreading rumors about them to others at school. For example, Summer, a white fifteen-year-old from Michigan, described how her best friend decided to reject her because she was not popular enough. Her former friend began by spreading secrets, but these quickly got modified and exaggerated as they spread. Summer did not know how the rumors were spreading, but she knew that everyone in school knew them fast and that many believed them. In Summer's eyes, the bullying that she experienced took place offline. Yet she also acknowledged that IM was extremely popular among her classmates at the time. It is likely that some of the rumors had spread through IM or phone conversations in addition to conversations in school. For Summer, it did not matter whether it was online or offline; the result was the same. In handling this, she did not get offline, but she did switch schools and friend groups.

Media convergence complicates bullying dynamics. Both offline and online elements played a role in many of the stories we heard. When teens are harassed online, it is often by people they know offline. Cruelty that takes place offline is often fueled by mediated rumors. Technology provides more channels through which youth can potentially bully one another.

That said, most teens we interviewed who discussed being bullied did not focus on the use of technology and did not believe that technology is a significant factor in bullying.

While bullying exists, the teens we interviewed did not see it as commonplace. They did, though, see rumors, drama, and gossip as pervasive. The distinction may be more connected with language and conception than with practice. Bianca, a white sixteen-year-old from Michigan, sees drama as being fueled by her peers' desire to get attention and have something to talk about. She thinks the reason that people create drama is boredom. While drama can be hurtful, many teens see it simply as a part of everyday social life.

The teens we talked with were also quick to point out that most drama and gossip comes primarily from girls, not boys. As Penelope Eckert notes in her study of girls transitioning to middle school, adolescent girls take on the role of "heighteners of the social" (1996). Mark, a white fifteen-year-old from Seattle, explained that drama happens more often with girls "because they always take it more seriously." While girls are more likely to be agents in talking about drama, boys are frequently cited as the cause. A lot of drama that takes place involves crushes, jealousy, and significant others.<sup>6</sup> For example, girls get mad when their friends text message or IM their boyfriends or leave comments on their social network site profiles. In general, using technology to communicate with someone who is not single can be seen as an affront.

Anindita recounted the story of how she stopped speaking to her former best friend, Meghana. Anindita was dating a boy and Meghana started telling him privately to break up with her, even though the girls were supposedly friends. One day, Anindita's boyfriend showed her a text message he received from Meghana. The message read, "You're the guy I love and you don't understand." This angered Anindita and she ended the friendship. From Anindita's point of view, social media took what she saw as typical "Indian drama" and magnified it out of control. She thought that her peers enjoyed the opportunity to start a fight for no reason other than that it was possible.

Although some drama may start out of boredom or entertainment, it is situated in a context where negotiating social relations and school hierarchies is part of everyday life. Teens are dealing daily with sociability and

related tensions. Lila, a Vietnamese eighteen-year-old from Michigan, sees drama as the substance of daily life while her sixteen-year-old sister, Tara, thinks that it emerges because some teens do not know how to best negotiate their feelings and the feelings of others.

**danah:** Do you think that drama has value?

**Lila:** You have something to talk about. . . . And you're like, you want to fit in, kind of thing. You know, like way back when, when you don't know who you are, kind of. Not like I know now, but you know, when you're in middle school.

**Tara:** You have something to do, like to be honest, to resolve. . . . You feel like you're mad at somebody and you don't know how to handle it. So you just kind of turn on them like that. So it's just like, just not like having enough experience with dealing with things.

While drama is a part of teen life and Tara and Lila are accepting of it, many teens are insecure about their friendships, unsure of whether or not friends are truly loyal and trustworthy. Social media can feed drama and complicate interactions, especially when things are already heated. At the same time, social media also can be used to try to ease tensions among friends. Teens can use the ability to publicly validate one another on social network sites to reaffirm a friendship. Social media are used also to negotiate attention. Teens use different channels to reassure their friends that they are still thinking of them. So, while drama is common, teens actually spend much more time and effort trying to preserve harmony, reassure friends, and reaffirm relationships. This spirit of reciprocity is common across a wide range of peer-based learning environments we have observed. Trying to be nice when someone else is being nice is one example of how this plays out. Penelope, a white fifteen-year-old from Nebraska, believes in responding to comments because "if someone's nice enough to say something to you then you have to be nice enough to say it back."

Others view the social script of reciprocity from a more cynical point of view, believing that teens are being selfish when they leave a comment. From this perspective, commenting is not as much about being nice as it is about relying on reciprocity for self-gain, as in this example of Christo Sims's interview with Brooklyn-based Derrick, a sixteen-year-old boy who was born in the Dominican Republic:



**Christo:** Why do you think people put those, the pictures and all that stuff on there?

**Derrick:** They just MySpace people. . . . That's what MySpace people do. They send each other comments all the time.

**Christo:** Do you have a sense of why do you think they're doing that, though?

**Derrick:** That's how they talk to each other, though. They just want to let people know that people talk to them. So if you go to their page you see that they got a lot of comments. That makes them feel like they're popular, that they're getting comments all the time by different people, even people that they don't know. So it makes them feel popular in a way. (Rural and Urban Youth)

While some teens leave comments to be nice, others hope that they will get comments in return. This can be viewed as selfish, but it also can be seen through the lens of insecurity. Many teens worry that they may appear lame if they have too few Friends or too few comments. Some opt out because they fear that these tools would simply highlight the ways in which they are not cool. Alternatively, some who view Friends and comments as markers of social worth believe that they must have many Friends so as not to be alienated from their peers. Kevin, a white fifteen-year-old from Seattle, believes that getting comments is cool "because it lets everyone who goes to your page know that you're not just a guy that has MySpace; you're a guy that has friends and a MySpace."

Successful participation is not simply about having an account on a social network site but about having one with status. Yet insecure and marginalized individuals sometimes seek the markers of cool even if they themselves are not actually perceived as cool. Teens want to be validated by their broader peer group and thus try to present themselves as cool, online and off. Even when status is not necessarily accessible to them in everyday life, there exists hope that they can resolve this through online presentations.

Two of the teens Christo Sims (Rural and Urban Youth) interviewed in Brooklyn spoke about becoming an "Internet gangster," which involves trying to act tough in your profile even if you are shy in person. Shy, a fifteen-year-old Guyanese American girl, and Loud, a seventeen-year-old Jamaican American girl, both see value in getting attention online, even when it is not available offline:

**Shy:** Like, when you have your MySpace account, you can portray yourself differently than you do on the street. You can picture yourself, somebody that's cool and whatnot on MySpace, and do all these other things to get all the attention that you don't really get when you're with your families or with your . . .

**Loud:** Or in your school.

While some teens are happy to attain status solely within the context of a social network site, most hope that if they look cool online, their peers will notice and validate them. This is often not successful. Dominic, a white sixteen-year-old from Seattle, said:

I don't really think popularity would transfer from online to offline because you've got a bunch of random people you don't know; it's not going to make a difference in real life, you know? It's not like they're going to come visit you or hang out with you. You're not a celebrity or something.

Achieving status purely through social network site participation may not be viable, but participating and being popular online can complement offline popularity. Just as having the "right" clothes or listening to the "right" music can be an indicator of status in everyday peer groups, participating in the "right" social media in a manner that is socially recognized is often key to offline status. As with clothes and music, online participation alone is not enough to achieve status, but it is still important.

Gossip, drama, bullying, and posing are unavoidable side effects of teens' everyday negotiations over friendship and peer status. What takes place in this realm resembles much of what took place even before the Internet, but certain features of social media alter the dynamics around these processes. The public, persistent, searchable, and spreadable nature of mediated information affects the way rumors flow and how dramas play out. The explicitness surrounding the display of relationships and online communication can heighten the social stakes and intensity of status negotiation. The scale of this varies, but those who experience mediated harassment are certainly scarred by the process. Further, the ethic of reciprocity embedded in networked publics supports the development of friendships and shared norms, but it also plays into pressures toward conformity and participation in local, school-based peer networks. While there is a dark side to what takes place, teens still relish the friendship opportunities that social media provide.

## Conclusion

Social media, and especially social network sites, allow teens to be more carefully attuned, in an ongoing way, to the lives of their friends and peers. Social media are integrally tied to the processes of building, performing, articulating, and developing friendships and status in teen peer networks. Teens value social media because they help them build, maintain, and develop friendships with peers. Social media also play a crucial role in teens' ability to share ideas, cultural artifacts, and emotions with one another. While social warfare and drama do exist, the value of social media rests in their ability to strengthen connections. Teens leverage social media for a variety of practices that are familiar elements of teen life: gossiping, flirting, joking around, and hanging out. Although the underlying practices are quite familiar, the networked, public nature of online communication does inflect these practices in new ways.

First, social media tend to accentuate the longer-burning trend through the past century toward teens' developing social and cultural forms that are segregated from adult society. Although some of the later chapters in this book look at countervailing trends, the mainstream, friendship-driven teen practices covered in this chapter and chapter 3 indicate how same-age cultural forms and sociability are being reinforced by always-on communication networks. Adults' efforts to regulate youth access to MySpace are the latest example of how adults are working to hold on to authority over teen socialization in the face of a gradual erosion of parental influence during the teen years. For the most part, adults participate in these practices as provisioners of infrastructures and as monitors, not as competent peers or coparticipants. Youth are developing new norms and social competencies that are specifically keyed to networked publics, such as how to articulate friendships, how to be polite to their peers, and how to create, mediate, or avoid drama. For youth who hope to succeed socially in their school-based peer networks, these kinds of new media literacies are becoming crucial to youth's participation. Given the prominence of social media in both contemporary teen and adult life, learning how to manage the unique affordances of networked sociality can help teens navigate future collegiate and professional spheres where mediated interactions are assumed.

Second, the particular properties of networked publics (e.g., persistence, searchability, replicability, and scalability [boyd 2008]) mean that certain

forms of sociability are reinforced and heightened. Teens are able to keep in closer and ongoing touch with one another and to support the relationships that they are nurturing in their local peer-based networks, which most see as their primary source of identity and affiliation. They develop “always-on intimate communities” with their broader peer group. However, articulating those friendships online means that they become subject to public scrutiny in new ways; teens are able to display new dimensions of themselves but they also may have their self-representations reframed by others in a public way. This makes lessons about social life (both the failures and successes) more consequential and persistent. While these dynamics have played out through fashion, appropriating spaces and lunchrooms at school, or congregating with friends in public spaces such as the mall, social network sites make these dynamics visible in a more persistent and accessible public arena.

Social media mirror and magnify teen friendship practices. Positive interactions are enhanced through social media while negative interactions are also intensified. Teens who are growing older together with social media are coconstructing new sets of social norms with their peers and through the efforts of technology developers. The dynamics of social reciprocity and negotiations over popularity and status all are being supported by participation in publics of the networked variety as formative influences in teen life. While we see no indication that social media are changing the fundamental nature of these friendship practices, we do see differences in the intensity of engagement among peers, and conversely, in the relative alienation of parents and teachers from these social worlds. Youth continue to experience their teenage years as a time to immerse themselves in these peer-based status negotiations and to develop their social and cultural identities in ways that are independent from their parents, and they are aided now in these practices by a new suite of communication tools.

## Notes

1. [http://headrush.typepad.com/creating\\_passionate\\_users/2006/03/ultrafast\\_release.html](http://headrush.typepad.com/creating_passionate_users/2006/03/ultrafast_release.html).
2. For an overview of social network sites and their history, see boyd and Ellison (2007).

3. We use the term “social media” to refer to the set of new media that enable social interaction between participants, often through the sharing of media. Although all media are in some ways social, the term “social media” came into common usage in 2005 as a term referencing a central component of what is frequently called “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly 2005 at <http://www.oreillyn.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>) or the “social web.” All these terms refer to the layering of social interaction and online content. Popular genres of social media include instant messaging, blogs, social network sites, and video- and photo-sharing sites.

4. To distinguish between connections displayed on social network sites and everyday relations (boyd 2006), we capitalize “Friend” when referring to the social network site feature.

5. AOL’s IM client (AIM), popular among U.S. teens, does not require this.

6. There is also a large amount of drama between significant others that plays out using social media. This is discussed in more detail in chapter 3.



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Kids Living and Learning with New Media

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