

## Chapter 2

# Internet Affordances and Teens' Social Communication: From Diversification to Bonding

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### ABSTRACT

*As the Internet has been adopted and integrated in the daily lives of an increasing number of young adolescents in western countries, scholars and commentators are debating and speculating on the impact of these new media on the activities, social relationships and worldview of the young generation. The communication environment has become more and more complex, as youth combine the use of electronic mail, open forums, chat rooms, instant messenger and social networking sites. In this chapter the author argues that the use of different social applications, partially define the structure and content of social communication and association. In this chapter the author reviews the literature on the motivations for the use of each social application and the impact of the use on the type, size and quality of social ties that are maintained and created.*

### INTRODUCTION

The incorporation of social software into everyday life is redefining the social networks of youth. Fast and interactive online communication supports the formation, maintenance and expansion of social networks. As information and communication technologies are developing a rapidly advancing history of technological innovations, the past, present and future of youth associations and communication

are indistinguishable from the various technologies that were and are available. From electronic mail and newsgroups, from open forums to open chat rooms, from Instant Messenger to social networking sites, the prevailing technologies partially define the structure and content of social communication and association. Furthermore, young people's communication environment has become increasingly complex, as the different technologies listed above are used simultaneously.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the motivations for the use of each technology and the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-926-7.ch002

impact of this use on the social circle of adolescents. In particular the analysis will address a number of issues. First, whether different motivations shape the use of email, chat rooms, instant messenger and social networking sites. Second, the effect of the use of each technology on the size and quality of social ties that are maintained or created. Third, the effect of media choices on adolescents' access to social support, sociability and social capital.

Our understanding of teens' use of social media is dominated by several tensions that will be addressed in this chapter. One tension concerns the impact of social media on young persons' social circles and the extent that social media isolate teens from their friends or liberate them from the constraints of place and social similarity. A second tension refers to the extent that the effect of social media diversifies social networks or expands social bonding with known individuals. The third tension is the extent that social media replace strong ties by weak ties. The main argument of the chapter is that our understanding of the impacts of social media will benefit from a grasp of the specific characteristics of each social software and the motivations for its use. Thus, social media effects are dependent on both the teen motivations and the tool that is used.

## **YOUNG PEOPLE'S COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT**

In the last 10 years the communication environment of youth has changed as more and more teens have gained access to computer-mediated communication and cellular phones. A recent study in the USA found that 63 percent of all teens avail of cell phones, and access to the Internet is almost universal. Most of the use is for social purposes, as 93 percent send and receive emails, 68 percent send and receive instant messages, 55 percent have a profile in a social networking site, 28 percent have created or work in an online journal (blog)

and 18 percent visit chat rooms (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). In Canada, a recent study shows that 77 percent send and receive instant messages, 74 percent send and receive electronic mail, 24 percent visit chat rooms and 19 percent have created or work in an online journal (Media Awareness Group, 2005). In Europe figures vary according to country, but the trend in the use of social applications is similar. For example in the UK 81 percent send and received email, 78 percent send and receive instant messages and 20 percent participate in chat rooms. In Italy the percentages are lower: as 59 percent of the youth send and receive email, 49 percent send and receive instant messages and 33 percent participate in chat rooms (MediAppro, 2005). The distinguishing characteristic of these data is that the use of the different applications varies, and as the communication partners differ according to the application being used, variation in the outcomes can be expected.

Online communication, then, is frequent among youth in the Western world. But unlike the early years of online communication, the existence of different applications now calls for a reevaluation of the unique affordances of each one and the theoretical frameworks that are relevant to the understanding of online communication and relationship formation and maintenance in adolescence. Before we turn to this topic the importance of the latter subject will be addressed.

## **YOUTH AND FRIENDSHIP FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT**

Adolescence is an important developmental stage, during which social relationships outside the family expand; their quality has been linked to various behavioral outcomes (Giordano, 2003). Social interaction with peers provides a forum for learning and refining socio-emotional skills needed for enduring relationships. Through interactions with peers, adolescents learn how to cooperate, to take different perspectives, and to satisfy growing

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