

FRIENDING ONLINE – BRIDGING AND BONDING ON SOCIAL NETWORK SITES FOR ROMANIAN ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

Our article deals with the process of young Romanians (11 to 18 years old) (be)friending other people on social media through processes of bridging and bonding, as one of the crucial developmental tasks in adolescence is creating and maintaining meaningful relationships. Using a rather processual approach to social capital (as opposed to seeing it as an outcome), we explored the phases of bridging, bonding and maintaining relationships and their interconnectedness in the process of Friending online. Drawing on a qualitative methodology (12 single-sex focus groups conducted in spring 2016 in two urban areas of Romania), our analyses focused on young people's friending practices on Facebook and Whatsapp, taking into account gender and developmental differences, as well as specific affordances of social media platforms as mediated by young people's digital and social media skills. Our results revealed complex processes in place, including the transformation of 'latent' ties into 'weak' ties, bonding in groups and decluttering mechanisms as a reaction to digital crowding through platform-enabled actions, such as unfriending, blocking or unfollowing.

Keywords: adolescents, social capital, bridging, bonding, social network sites, befriending, friends.

INTRODUCTION

The defining characteristic of SNSs (Social Network Sites) is the friendship system that “allows participants to articulate and publicly display their relations to others” (boyd, 2006). By publicly displaying the List of Friends on a SNS

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(Donath&boyd, 2004), Friending² which used to be a social act becomes an identity performance affected by social pressure and technological affordances of the platform (boyd, 2006, Ahn, 2012).

The Friending process becomes especially important when adolescents are concerned, as this is a period when they usually change the school and meet new friends whom they should get to know (Antheunis et al., 2014) and when they also liberate themselves from parents' influence while entering peer pressures (Pasquier, 2008). The increasing importance of peers in adolescence is due to their contribution in the essential process of identity building by providing a feeling of belonging (Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2013), feedback and support in a less normative and less restrictive manner than parents would (Antheunis et al., 2014). However, there is a paucity of literature on the topic of SNS and friendship with regard to adolescents. Antheunis and colleagues (2014) explained, for instance, how the use of SNS affects the friendship quality and the social capital in early adolescence, while Ahn (2012) studied the influence of the platform used on adolescents' social capital. Heirman and his colleagues (2016) focusing specifically on the process of Friending showed that both intra-individual factors (i.e. personal attitudes) and extra-individual factors (i.e. perceived social norms, control over external resources) are important in adolescents' decisions and intentions of accepting unknown people in their List of Friends, the most important being the social pressure.

Moreover, of our knowledge, few studies had focused on the very process of Friending (boyd, 2006, Heirman et al., 2016), the majority of them considering the results of the process, namely the social capital (SC). The results of these studies (Ellison et al., 2007, 2011, Steinfield et al., 2008, Ahn, 2012, Lin, 2015) generally testify to a link between the use of a SNS (measured by time of use of the platform or number of Friends or the Facebook Intensity scale, Ellison et al., 2007) and one or more forms of SC, as bridging, bonding (Putnam, 2001) or maintaining SC, the latter meaning "one's ability to stay connected with members of a previously inhabited community" (Ellison et al., 2007, p.1143). Bridging is an inclusive form of SC, with weak ties, allowing access to new and non-redundant information while bonding is an exclusive form of SC which deepens the ties with existing connections offering access to limited resources, such as emotional support (Putnam, 2001).

Although, as previously stated, the publicness of the List of friends is the scaffolding of SNSs, an important bundle of studies approach SNSs with the privacy concerns. During adolescence, the privacy function of online communication has been linked to important developmental tasks such as creating meaningful bonds with their peers, whereas the function of establishing limited and protected

² By Friending, we will refer to the process of constructing the List of Friends (by adding people as Friends). We will continue the usage of capitalised word Friends when referring to SNS.

communication through mutual self-disclosure spaces has been associated to the developmental task of building intimate relationships (Peter & Valkenburg, 2011). However, this task becomes challenging in the context of cumulative effects of social media use, such as digital crowding or personal data misuse online. In the context of Friending as the SNS norm and the number of Friends as measure of popularity (Heirman et al., 2016, Walther et al., 2008, boyd, 2006), Joinson et al. (2011) coined the concept of digital crowding for defining the ‘excessive social contact or insufficient personal space’ that negatively impacts on users’ privacy and on the quality of relationships through overlapping social spheres (Joinson et al., 2011; boyd, 2006). The effects of digital crowding can be met with several coping strategies, which can significantly vary according to the perceived controllability one has over the medium (Heirman et al., 2016), from withdrawal and lesser engagement with the platform, to limiting new additions to the Friends List, or to ‘cleaning’ the List and keeping fewer Friends but stronger ties, in order to achieve a better sense of ‘social privacy’ (Kramer & Haferkamp, 2011).

Another limitation in the literature that we identified is related to the studies that explore Friending processes on Whatsapp. The majority of studies on communication that takes place on this platform investigated the efficiency of it on various communicational context (e.g., educational settings or family context, Miller et al., 2016). Miller and his colleagues (2016) coined, thereat, the concept of ‘scalable sociality,’ to explain how users choose between different platforms from the polymediated environment in an attempt to fit with pre-existing cultural norms.

Chambers (2016) puts the concept of ‘scalable sociality’ to the test of political and economical theory of ‘algorithmic friendship,’ arguing for a synthesis of the two that would acknowledge both the agency of the users and the impact technology (with its economical dimensions) has on networked intimacy. But, as far as we know, there are no studies that would investigate the very process of Friending on Whatsapp as regards youth.

The aim of our study is to fill some gaps in the existing literature, focusing with a qualitative methodology on the process of adolescents’ Friending on Facebook, using an approach that transforms social capital from an outcome to a process. In other words, we want to see how the phases of bridging, bonding and maintaining relationships switch from one to another in the process of Friending. In addition, compared to previous research (Ellison et al, 2007, Johnstone et al., 2010, Ahn, 2012), our study brings an original contribution as it employs a qualitative methodology and focuses on friending practices on Facebook and WhatsApp, in line with other researchers stressing the importance of platform’s affordances in shaping Friending (n.a. boyd’s 2006 analyses were related to other platforms, whereas the study of Heirman et al., 2016, about motivations of accepting unknown persons, like most other studies exploring social capital, used quantitative approaches).

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on the qualitative data gathered from the first round of data collection in the Friends 2.0 project in Romania in spring-summer 2016. The research took place in selected schools (low secondary school and high schools, as the project interest was in 11–18 years old children) from Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca following ethical guidelines for conducting research with children and young people (e.g. children participation in research had been preceded by obtaining the informative consent; even so, children had the possibility to withdraw from the project at any moment, without any justification).

In order to map the meaning of friendship and companionships for Romanian youth in the context of social media use, 12 single-sex focus groups were conducted, in which 48 children participated, as the experience from previous projects (EU Kids Online and Net Children Go Mobile) made evident that this was a responsive approach to sensitive topics, such as personal data misuse situations (Smahel & Wright, 2014). In regards with age, in the qualitative stage, children were grouped in three age groups (10-12, 13-14 and 15-18 years old), justified on the fact that the younger group consisted of children under the minimum age required for having an account, the middle group were legally on Facebook and they are also in secondary school (that means that they probably haven't yet change the school and in Romania are preparing for the first big exam they face, the 'national exams') and the third group consisted of children from high school (a single age group). The main focus of the interview was on the quality of Friendship, conceptualised in Leary and Kowalski's (1993) theoretical framework, and on misuse of personal data, but an important part of discussion was related to Friending online (including processes, experiences and perceptions) and on specific affordances brought by different social media platforms, such as Facebook versus WhatsApp.

Thematic analyses were conducted by project team members using Nvivo software. The codes used for this article were 'creating the list of Friends' and 'managing the list of Friends'.

RESULTS

STARTING THE LIST BY BOUNDING THE EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS

Young people in our study revealed there is a continuous line between bonding and bridging practices, with the list of online contacts initially created by adding a few known close friends and siblings and later extended to add more people. The 11 and 12 year olds in our study started by befriending people they

mostly know, sometimes beginning by using a parent's account and later starting their own, as most parents of "underage" Facebook users are aware of and approve of their children having a profile on social media (Barbovschi et al., 2015). In some unusual cases, boys report taking over ("inheriting") and entire account with a list of contacts from a friend, as it was reportedly easier than starting from scratch. Boys and girls alike report a rather tight parental involvement in their social media activity (e.g., parents helping them with solving problems). Our younger respondents (11–12 year olds) report caution with adding unknown boys over rude/"wrong" messages (girls, 11–12), whereas boys mostly befriend new peers through online games or shared interests "in real life", e.g., sports, camps, or online, e.g., movies or programming (boys, 11–12).

Extending the network by bridging

The second age group (13–14 years old) are already settled into online social life and are more preoccupied with extending their network (starting with known friends then using the Facebook suggestions) and with receiving identity validation and approval from peers (as the two are deeply intertwined). They are the ones who are mostly keeping their profiles public in order to attract "Likes", although girls are usually more cautious than boys with adding only people they likely know and will probably meet.

On the contrary, boys are more keen in bridging, the reasons for which they accept a stranger's Friend request or would initiate one themselves being as diverse as possible, sometimes exhibiting an improbable or random activation of 'latent ties', as opposed with meaningful activation (Ellison et al., 2007).

R: How do you Friend? How do you enlarge your List of Friends?

B1: I'm looking at Friends of my Friends profile and if we have many commons (Friends) I just send them a Friend request, to be able to socialize with them. But I also receive many Friending requests.

R: And in this case, you usually just accept them?

B2: no, I firstly search for his/ her profile and only if I know the person I accept it.

B3: I don't really care who such a person is.

R: so basically you accept any request?

B3: well, sometimes, I could may be search to see who that person is.. but may be he or she just know me and...

B1: (mocking him that he could be such a 'star') Common, stop lying yourself...

R: But if you have a common Friend, but in fact don't know that common Friend at all...

B4: Then, I would ask him or her who he/ she is and where they are from... A girl once answered me: 'Why do you ask me this? I am not allowed (to send you a Friend request)?'. Other guys just tell me 'I just had nothing else to do' and still others 'I didn't have any to have a little chat with' (boys, 13–14)

Respondents in our middle group (13–14 year olds) report also adding new contacts through online games and gambling, and searching of common friends (boys), while being careful about new connections (although less so with cute girls); another practice of extending the circle is going out with friends and adding newly met people or adding people met on holidays or camps (girls). Although they use Facebook suggestions, they do question the safety of the tool and are wary of becoming visible through communication practices, one of the most important privacy challenges of bridging practices:

"I don't know, I'm thinking ...sometimes there are some suggested people that I don't know and seem dubious, and I am thinking that just as these people are suggested to me, so can I be suggested to some of those people I don't like... I don't know, I've thought about it many times, but I said what can I do anyway..." (girls, 13–14)

The older teenagers in our group report the most diverse practices in terms of expanding their social circle, with networks that have extended in time, usually with their circle of friends, and with each new life situation (e.g., going on holidays with family or school camps) adding an extra layer of friends. Some report having in their list people they have not met, but show concern and start doubting adding them in the first place (girls, 15–17). Most of them befriend friends of friends in school or other peer circles. Other aspects of life come into play (e.g., if single, will chat with cute boys, if not, they refrain), along with different privacy affordances of competing social media platforms (e.g., WhatsApp is more restrictive, as one has to give away their phone number, so preference given to Facebook for adding people they don't know personally).

Several rules became apparent as our respondents talked to us about their networking practices, and admit to having developed (or discovered) them over time, as when they were younger they were less aware of the social rules in approaching others. As they get older, they tend to conform to gender roles (girls) and become aware of the distinction between online and offline:

"In my opinion, it is a bit weird to have a friends and say: I am very close to you but I have never seen you in real life. But like this for example, I have three friends I met in a common group and after two days I met them and talked to them" (boy, 14)

Bonding the ties by using groups

Nonetheless, one of the most important tasks for adolescents is creating and maintaining meaningful relationships. This is where bonding with close friends and strengthening existing connections becomes extremely important on social media, now that those have become ubiquitous and part of young people's everyday lives.

One particular manner for doing this is by using the option of groups, one of the facilities each platform offers. Shaped by the specificity of the platform (Facebook versus Instagram or WhatsApp), these groups differ also according to the type of use, children's age and their social media skills. We distinguished therefore three types of groups: functional groups (e.g., class-group for sharing school information, or a group set ad-hoc, for an event or project), family groups – for bonding with the expanding family or with close family regardless the geographical distance – and elective affinities groups–based on common interests, it appears mainly at older ages, and as a sign of in proficiency in SNS's usage

Our younger respondents use WhatsApp and Facebook to coordinate for common activities in peer groups (e.g., homework, meeting outside, messing around), but also for keeping in touch sporadically with relocated family members or friends (girls, 11–12). The middle group reports having rather volatile, multiple groups on WA, with a quick migration of relatively stable groups across WA to avoid overload of messages (boys, girls, 13–14); most of them have already a class group on FB or WA, but report little to no privacy customization according to different contacts in their list. Some report trying to re-link with and re-track old friends with whom they have lost contact, as one of the opportunities provided by social media (girls). The older group (15–17) also report short lived WA groups to avoid crowding but also for messing around (boys, girls), in addition to the general using of WA and FB groups for keeping in touch, chatting, checking notifications and other activities with close friends, etc.

“On Instagram, for example, there are and you can make personal groups, with certain people, and then, when you want to share a picture with certain friends, you can do it... but usually, at least I, I don't have more than two or three groups, in which there are maximum three people.” (girl, 17)

Bonding the ties by unfriending, blocking, and unfollowing

For younger adolescents (boys 11–12), the cleaning of lists is combination of sporadic cleaning up (boys) and quarrels resulting in deleting and blocking peers who swear at them (some reporting the events, others not), with sometimes parents helping them in handling the problem. In the beginning, the adolescents in the middle group (13–14), who already have a social media history, might have added

people they don't know and now it feels weird to delete them (they only delete if there's something wrong with them), some try to clean up their list and delete (unfriend) or block (girls). Boys do, however, block or unfriend over quarrelling in real life (sometime resuming the friendship online once the fight is solved; they also engage in common blocking/reporting of other boys who annoy them. For some, unfriending or blocking is a symbolic act, a sort of 'spring cleaning', others report blocking or withdrawing when something gets too noisy, with the possibility to reconsider later those actions. As boyd showed (2006) there is "little incentive to be selective about Friendship" so the norm and the practice associated, at least in some stages, is of Friending. Nevertheless, older adolescents (15–17) declare having started to clean up their contact list, as some have started with lots of strangers which they later had slowly excluded/ unfriended:

"And first of all I... used to add all sorts of people from Constanta, Pitesti, who requested my friendship, and I don't know them but I accepted them, and after a while, after a month...sort of, I gathered courage and deleted anyone I didn't know, because it felt....I don't know how to tell you, I have never met you, I have never seen you in real life and I have you in my list of friends". (boy, 14)

Some adolescents report discomfort over un-friending and are more comfortable with the idea of cleaning Instagram list of followers, than Facebook list of friends, because unfollowing has a different, more objective connotation (it is about a content) than unfriending (which seems rather a betrayal, as it is about a person). On the other hand, some of them reported a lack of interest in their List of Friend from Facebook as a result of their daily use of other platforms.

"For instance, I do not use Facebook so much these days, except when I share some posts, therefore I'm not so interested in my Lists of Friends. I'm not even checking it anymore so presently I do not know who am I Friend with. But yes, I have recently cleaned my Instagram list, as at a moment I was notified only by commercial accounts so I unfollowed them." (girl, 17)

Unfollowing – or even promoting some of the Friends to be seen first, detrimental to others whose content is not of interest – has developed into a strategy to manage unwanted content but still keep the network of people (boys), with reported differences across platforms (easier done on Instagram than on FB, as there is less breaking of social netiquette).

"I also unfollowed some form my List. Because I'm doing a sport that is also practiced by younger children. And apparently, they have Facebook

accounts. We are talking here about 10, 9, 8 and even 6 years old—as I remember that was a girl. So, I Friended some of them. But they post such crappy things that I cannot look at them. When I go on Facebook, I would like to see what my close Friends do. But now, I’ve discovered that things, that you can star some Friends and see their content first. So currently I have some 20-30 stared Friends and I can see firstly everything that happened to them, and then news in which I’m interested.” (boy, 17–18)

Blocking, for most of them remains a rather emotional reaction to an unpleasant situation:

“Yes, well... because he was annoying me... he was annoying me because he was checking my pictures and I knew he was checking, and he wasn’t giving me any Likes [all girls laugh; Ilinca is a bit embarrassed, they all laugh at the situation and at her sincerity]. He was... a very close person to me and he bugged me that he did this on purpose. And then I said he should not be able to see my pictures if he doesn’t give me Likes. So I blocked him, I mean I blocked that person”. (girl, 17)

DISCUSSION

Arguably SNSs have brought significant changes in how friendship exchanges occur between young people, in both their deepening of ties and expansive mechanisms. Our study on Romanian adolescents revealed complex processes at place in creating and maintaining connections, processes which are highly integrated into specific developmental processes at different stages of adolescence, as well as imbedded in the affordances of specific social media platforms and mediated by the digital skills (including awareness) of young users. Our respondents were aware of the changes the SNSs have operated in the meaning of friendship as they reflected on what it entails to have friends you haven’t seen in real life or have a large number of connections in their online contact list. Many of their sociality practices are focused on the close network, adding friend of friends and transmuting the relationship from offline to online (e.g. schoolmates and neighbors, friends of friends), while bridging practices are connected with sporadic offline activities (e.g. going on summer holidays, camps) or connecting through online games.

The importance of digital literacy on social and emotional practices (Livingstone, 2014) became apparent in the case of young people “inheriting” entire accounts from peers with sometimes undesirable contacts (which they later had to sort through) or in the case of losing the account over privacy violations

(e.g. hacked accounts) and deciding to create an entire new account instead of recovering the old one (n.a. which means losing list of friends and having to track them down again). Digital skills were also relevant in the case of parental involvement in either creating the account or the list of friends or in the case of parental intrusions, where the child learnt to hide their list of friends to keep away from prying parental eyes.

At times, the social compensation hypothesis (Sheldon, 2008) came to mind, a theory which stipulates that introverted adolescents can benefit more from communicating online through overcoming anxieties usually experienced face to face. Moreover, as Lin (2015) proved, the attachment style (i.e. secure, avoidant and anxious-ambivalent attachment style) play a role in the social capital as an outcome of Facebook use. Particularly, the anxious-ambivalent style positively associates with bonding social capital (Lin, 2015). On the other hand, as the (early) adolescence is a period when boys and girls alike adjust to their physical and emotional changes (Antheunis et al., 2014), it is also a stage characterized by an anxious-ambivalent behavior. In this context, as our respondents stated, Facebook use could be beneficial both, for bridging and bonding, visible for instances when adolescents declared it was easier to befriend other-gender peers on social media than face to face as they held tighter control over online self-disclosure and emotional costs of rejections seemed lower.

In terms of balancing social opportunities with privacy practices and in line with Donath and boyd (2004) ideas about the publicness of the List of Friends in SNSs, some adolescents mentioned the importance of keeping the friends list visible in order to be able to Friending friends of friends, as an act of voluntary self-disclosure. However, at times this comes with costs of privacy violations and personal data misuse. Arguably, there are privacy costs in terms of establishing trusted communication and forging meaningful bonds when faced with the digital overcrowding that social media can bring. Some of the solutions that young people employ is cleaning up the list of contacts, for mainly two reasons: one is privacy and needing to choose (more) carefully the perceived audience (boyd, 2006) of their published content (usually a shift in the concept of privacy and boundaries as a result of psychological development); the other is losing interest in content / being in the audience of a person (a voluntary decision mentioned also by older boys which leads to unfollowing and not necessarily unfriending). In the same vein, unfollowing someone is a rationally justified decision and targets rather the content and not the person, while blocking or unfriending is more of a emotional/humoral reaction as a response to a specific unpleasant situation.

Even though justified as above mentioned, the downgrade of a relationship is an “awkward process”, without any “social script” and with sometimes significant “social costs” (boyd, 2006). Our respondents spontaneously considered and analysed this process, finding some context that mitigate the awkwardness (“if you have a thousand or so, it won’t be so visible that you unfriend”, boys, 17-18) or

just, as boyd (2006) suggested, older users (meaning with a long history of usage) are less emotionally invested and they just tend to consider platform facilities and limitations.

The results are in line with previous studies, showing that by bridging, either when adolescents use Facebook's suggestions or when they perform an active social-information seeking behavior (Ellison et al., 2011), our respondents mainly transform "latent ties" (Haythornthwaite, 2005) in weak ties (Ellison et al., 2011), in an egocentric-based community (boyd, 2006). We therefore agree that talking about the direction of Friending (either from online to offline, or vice-versa) is currently obsolete and meaningless (Ellison et al., 2011), as our respondents strongly rejected the idea that they are Friending with strangers, albeit their relationships not being previously actual (but latent) in their offline life.

Last but not least, the theory of scalable sociality and the theory of polymedia (Miller et al., 2016) are useful to understand how our respondents choose between platforms (e.g., Facebook and WhatsApp) to achieve or to maintain different types of friendship.

Our article shed lights on the process of Friending online, highlighting how it varies with individual factors (e.g., age, level of digital and social skills), social factors (i.e. social pressures) and technological affordances of the platform or the device. It reflects on the specific situation of Romanian teen, which brings into consideration the relevance of the cultural context (boyd, 2006). Methodological limitations, such as our initial option for single-sex group interview or the choice of focus groups over more complex methods (e.g., ethnography) are to be accounted for (we used single-sex groups due to sensitive topics, such as misuse of personal data, while we can imagine that the dynamic of discussion would differ in a gender-mix context). Likewise, an ethnographic, longitudinal approach would probably capture more details, as the motivation of some practices would be more reflecting decisions in the moment, and not biased by the "looking-back" gaze. Future studies are needed for assessing the spreading of one or another form of Friendship and how they associate with the above-mentioned factors.

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