Teen Communities

by Anabel Quan-Haase and danah boyd

Introduction

This entry discusses some of the key social issues that lie at the heart of the notion of the Western teen community, such as socializing with peers, feeling a sense of belonging, creating and reinforcing group boundaries, dealing with social rejection and isolation, and learning about social norms and values. While many of these social behaviors are not unique to teenagers, they are at the heart of teen practices. The emergence of new digital technologies—and their adoption by teenagers—has triggered scholarly inquiry that centers on how teen sociality has been affected by the widespread use of social media. As such, this entry discusses the role of some of the most widely used technologies in creating, maintaining, and expressing teen community.

Defining Teen Communities

The first challenge in the study of teen communities is articulating a comprehensive definition of the term 'teen.' The teen years in contemporary Western society are often described as the period of when childhood ends and adulthood begins—usually including those aged between 12 and 18. Nevertheless, this conceptualization ignores important cultural, social, historical, and political dimensions that influence what it is to be a teen. When the teenage years begin and end are socio-cultural demarcations that vary greatly across cultures and even within cultures. At the same time, what the teen years constitute, i.e. what are the unique characteristics, has been also under much debate. Some researchers include primarily biological markers of change, while others tend to focus on cultural and social change. For instance, teenagers may experience the adolescent period differently in developing countries than those growing up in Western societies. In developing countries, some teenagers are quickly integrated into adulthood with enormous responsibilities, such as earning their own subsistence, helping parents with labor, or even marrying and managing their own households.

Some scholars go as far as to question the very existence of a unique teen period, arguing that developmental phases are socio-cultural constructions and in reality, development is not characterized by abrupt change, but rather constitutes constant learning and adaptation. Even the term 'teenager' has fraught roots; it was devised and popularized in the 1940s to point out a demographic suddenly of interest to marketers. By creating the teenage category, products and services could be geared specifically to this demographic.

While it is imperative to consider the complexity of 'teen' as a concept and examine how it varies across cultures and generations, properly locating the term is beyond the scope of this article. For the purposes of this article, teen communities are defined as the social relationships that teens form with peers and the structuring of these relationships into larger social networks. Teen communities can be investigated at different levels, including small groups (triads), large social networks, cliques, crowds, and teen subcultures. Each of these levels of analysis provides unique insight into the ways young people affiliate with their peers.

Membership in Teen Communities

Teenagers are members of multiple communities, each corresponding to a unique social setting with a distinct set of relationships, norms, and social behaviors. For most teenagers, family ties represent their most central and influential social network. Additionally, of great importance are the communities of peers they develop at school and, historically, in their neighborhood; these are the nurseries of early friendship. Suburbanization—combined with increased fears about safety and school choice—has limited the role of the neighborhood in shaping many teens' social lives. Teen communities have become sparsely knit over geographic areas, often centered on school affiliation. In more privileged communities, organized activities—such as sports, arts, and science—often serve a social substitute.

Research has shown that teenagers have a propensity to join cliques and these represent the most important type of community for teenagers. Cliques are defined as a small, densely knit group of friends, who spend time together and engage in a wide variety of activities. Clique membership is often based on homophily, that is, members are similar to each other in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and social background, as well as in the types of interests and activities in which they engage. These cliques of close, dense relationships provide to members a sense of belonging and a basis to form their identity. At the same time, these cliques also provide a demarcation of in-group and out-group, excluding those teens that do not fit the membership requirements. A key problem identified in past studies on peer social networks is that the position teens occupy as either isolates or clique members are fairly stable. Those who are perceived as outsiders cannot easily become integrated into peer networks.

Studies have shown that teen cliques have historically found their own places for socialization, such as street corners, malls, and shops. These alternative places provide young people with a unique social space of their own separate from the adult world, where they can create and maintain a community around their own interests, values, and norms. However, the presence of teens in public spaces has historically been perceived as a nuisance, with adults citing the noise teens make, the lack of money they spend, and the perceived risky behaviors they engage in. The negative opinion of teen communities has often made them the subject of surveillance and curfews. As a result, many teens have moved toward digital technologies as an alternative space, one that is ideally uncensored by the adult world, to reach out to their peers as well as to join virtual teen communities of shared interests.

Digital Networks of Teen Communities

Like adults, teenagers have long used mediating technologies to connect with intimates, including family, friends, and romantic partners. Unsurprisingly, teenagers have embraced digital technologies to connect with those they know and those who share their values and interests. Given the patterns of early adopters, many believed that "life on the screen" would be devoid of the social constructs and restrictive categories that divided people offline. In other words, race, gender, and age would no longer matter. Indeed, many teens growing up with the Internet in the 1990s engaged in communities of interest where age was not central to participation.

Yet, more recently, the rise of social media and the proliferation of Internet access to broad swaths of the population have reconfigured the types of communities that teens form. Young people have joined online communities that revolve around hobbies, celebrities, and online games, but most teens' online communities parallel their offline social networks. While there are still "online communities" whose members know each other solely through mediated connections, the distinctions between offline and online are notably porous for teens. Teenagers go online to connect to friends from school, sports or

recreational clubs, and other offline circles and teen communities are more commonly organized by pre-existing friendships than by interests.

Although teens leverage technology to manage pre-existing social networks, technology also complicates their social world in new ways. Social network sites like Facebook and MySpace require participants to explicitly and publicly articulate social connections as "Friends." As teenagers began embracing social network sites en masse, they were forced to work out the social consequences of who to include and who to exclude online. While the mere act of articulating one's relationships is not new, the persistent, public, and hierarchical formalization required by these Web sites complicates how teens manage their social connections.

As children begin to make sense of others around them, they learn to label some people as "friends." These connections have sometimes been publicly marked through friendship bracelets and best friend necklaces. Through experience, youth learn to work out who they can trust and the social implications of befriending certain individuals. For example, choosing who to invite to one's birthday party can be a fraught experience. Tremendous learning takes place as youth learn to interpret the social dramas, popularity hierarchies, and social categories that shape their worlds. Technological systems that require the articulation of connections demand that youth formalize a process that is already contested, thereby complicating the social dynamics that are already unfolding. Nowhere was this more visible than when teens were encouraged to list their "Top 8" on MySpace in order of importance. Top 8 was meant to reflect each network member's eight closest friends. Such formalization of networks can be destabilizing. The boundaries of any social community are always amorphous, yet the design of many social technologies requires strict markers of inclusion and exclusion. Hence, social processes similar to those that teens experience in the offline world are played out in their online communities.

The networks that teens articulate online do not neatly map to their offline social worlds. Many teens feel forced to connect with people they don't particularly like from school while also actively connecting with cousins or friends from summer camp who don't live nearby and whom they don't see often. The high degree of overlap between teens' online and offline worlds means that their everyday social lives are intertwined with online technologies in salient ways. Conversations that begin online continue when teens are in shared space; dramas that take place at school are reproduced in digital settings. Teen communities are not simply online or offline, but increasingly mediated. As such, teens use technology to strengthen friendships, begin connections with familiar strangers, and maintain connections when distance separates them.

Teen communities are important for identity development, feelings of belonging, and social support, regardless of whether or not they are mediated. However, not all teens are equally integrated into peer networks. Teens often have to deal with issues of rejection and exclusion. Peer rejection has been linked to the development of aggressive behavior, dropping out of school, and low levels of self-esteem. This too extends into the mediated environment where social stigmas and social hierarchies are reproduced. That said, technology can also be used by socially stigmatized teens to find new communities where they feel more connected, thereby reducing their sense of isolation. Well documented, the power of online communities is especially salient for queer youth.

In leveraging technology for social purposes, teenagers are forced to contend with each site's unique social infrastructure and the demands of mediated sociality. Yet, they learn to do so. Through experience, some teens also learn that certain connections are better maintained through mediated channels. While face-to-face encounters are often preferred, synchronous chat and collaborative

engagement through gaming can engender different types of interactions. Teens also take advantage of specific technical affordances to achieve social goals. For example, a teen running for school president may recognize the multiplicative power of Facebook and embrace this to reach out to all of her classmates. As teens develop an understanding of how technology can empower them to connect and share in new ways, they use this for both positive and problematic endeavors. While the potential school president loves the scalability enabled by Facebook, a troubled teen can just as easily manipulate that affordance to escalate a bullying incident. In both cases, teens reasonably presume that all of their peers are deeply connected and that their message can reach everyone who matters quickly. This illustrates how online communities have become an integral part of teenager's everyday live and the social effects they have on young people.

Conclusions

Teen communities are at the center of the teen experience. While a wide range of types of teen community exist, the clique is the most prevalent structure for teen socialization. These cliques consist of a group of densely knit friends who socialize exclusively with one another. While the boundaries of teen communities, such as cliques, are not clearly demarcated, some teens are included and others are excluded. Exclusion can have negative effects on teenagers' self-esteem as well as on long-term outcomes, such as school performance.

While digital technologies provide opportunities for teens to build and maintain community, access to and participation in these mediated environments varies greatly. Not all teens have equal access to or interest in digital technologies and, accordingly, social media plays different roles in different teen communities. Even if the "digital divide" is closing, a new "participation gap" has emerged, rendering some teens invisible in the contemporary mediated landscape. Because of the interplay between online and offline interactions, lack of access or failure to participate in mediated settings can result in a new form of exclusion. Social media has reconfigured many teen communities, where online participation is frequently essential to being included.

For all of the popular attention given to the negative potential of social media when teenagers are involved, much of what takes place online is simply an extension of what has long been. Teenagers leverage social media to socialize, gossip, share information, flirt, and simply hang out. Although adults often dismiss such encounters, they are the source of tremendous informal learning and essential to the production of teen communities. Furthermore, it is through the communities that teens develop that they learn to work out the social structures of daily life, develop a sense of what's appropriate in specific situations, and acquire the social skills that will allow them to flourish in a variety of social and professional communities as they grow older. While the notion of teen communities often triggers fears about delinquency, participating in teen communities is crucial to coming of age.

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See Also: Adolescent Networks, Children's Networks, Facebook, Gangs, Twitter.

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Further Readings

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