

Chapter 7. The social context of adolescent relationships

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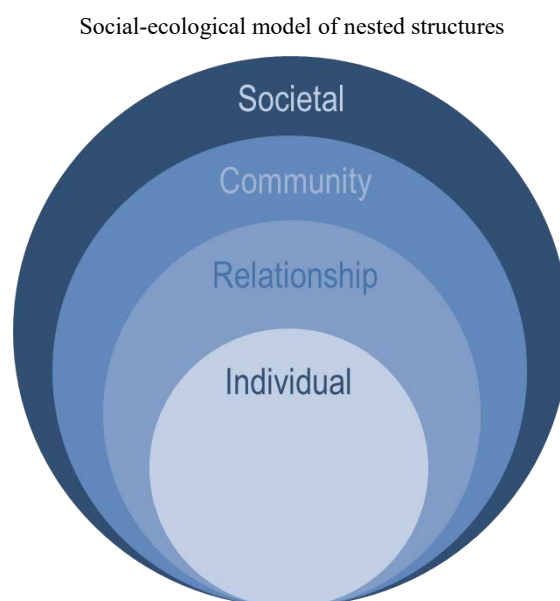
Adolescence is a critical period for development. Myriad changes have profound and long-lasting implications for youths' trajectories of economic security, health and well-being in later life. Social connection during adolescence plays a foundational role in youths' successful navigation of challenges at the individual, communal and societal level. This chapter describes the importance of social connection, and the way in which global trends affect relationship behaviour and maintenance during adolescence. It discusses how 21st century social changes in the distal context – climate change, forced displacement, individualisation and new technologies – affect adolescent development, relationships and mental health. Adolescents not only directly experience the outcome of social changes, they will also be the key driver for social change, for better and for worse. This chapter aims to stimulate future research on this important area in order to better understand the effects of today's challenges for social connection in adolescence and prepare youth for the challenges yet to come.

Introduction

Adolescence is an exciting and turbulent period of life. Although there is no clear demarcation, adolescence ranges from about 10 to 24 years and is typically considered a critical period for development (Patton et al., 2018^[1]; Sawyer et al., 2018^[2]). Adolescents have to let go of the safety of childhood and parental protection and develop a firm hold on the responsibilities, opportunities and demands of adulthood. Profound physical and physiological maturation is coupled with cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural changes, which have important and long-lasting implications for adolescents' economic security, health and well-being (Dahl et al., 2018^[3]). This multitude of changes makes adolescents particularly susceptible to the ramifications of global trends such as climate change, forced displacement, increasing individualism and new technologies. These trends can on the one hand intensify risks and vulnerabilities (e.g. exploitation, radicalisation, substance use) and on the other hand amplify opportunities and growth (e.g. learning, innovation, civic participation). Thus, given the transitional stage of adolescence, the impact of such global trends and coinciding social changes can profoundly shape their developmental trajectories.

Young people's development happens in a dynamically changing environment. Over the course of adolescence, they are increasingly involved with a variety of social contexts and institutions that have direct or indirect impacts on their development. These contexts can range from more proximal social environments in which the developing adolescent is directly involved with others (e.g. friends, romantic partners, family) to more distal social environments (e.g. communities, societies, cultural norms), all of which profoundly influence developmental processes. Bronfenbrenner (1979^[4]) conceptualised these environments as nested structures, embedded within each other (See Figure 7.1). The interaction between them is complex, because individuals and environments reciprocally influence each other and can change over time, affecting the health and well-being of adolescents (Solar and Irwin, 2010^[5]).

Figure 7.1. Environments influencing the development of adolescents



Source: Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979^[4]) and Holt-Lunstad (2018^[6])

Researchers recognise that risk and protective factors at all levels of the environment may affect development (Sawyer et al., 2012^[7]). Research examining these factors across contexts and time often finds diverging results depending on the population studied, the time period, the age group or the cultural context (Ungar, Ghazinour and Richter, 2013^[8]). Nevertheless, a large body of evidence consistently finds that social connection—being embedded in lasting, supportive, social relationships and networks—is one of the strongest predictors of lifelong (mental) health, success in education, occupational attainment and job performance (Holt-Lunstad, 2018^[6]).

Conversely, social *disconnection* (i.e. isolation, loneliness, poor quality relationships) increases vulnerability to health and socio-economic risks, which have a cumulative effect over the life course (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2018^[9]). Given both the capacity for personal growth as well as the vulnerabilities of adolescence, one of the most important tasks for youth development is the formation of supportive social networks and the maintenance of social connections. Both of these play a foundational role in youths' successful navigation of challenges at a personal, communal and societal level.

Research examining the importance of social connection mainly focusses on proximal social contexts such as family, parents, friends and intimate relationships (Feeney and Collins, 2015^[10]). Considerably less is known about how distal environments may affect social connection in adolescence. Although the nested structure of environments may suggest a hierarchical order, proximal social contexts are not necessarily more influential than distal environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1988^[11]). This chapter intends to assess the potential implications of distal social change for social connection and relationships for adolescent health, well-being and life outcomes; in other words, how do global trends affect social connection in adolescence?

This chapter identifies four global trends, namely climate change, forced displacement, increasing individualism and new technologies, and analyses their potential implications for adolescents' ability to form and maintain social connections and networks. The chapter begins with a brief review of evidence highlighting the importance of social connections and relationships for health and well-being over the life course. It then describes and reviews the four global trends linked to social changes and discuss the implications of each one for adolescents' social relationships. Throughout, the chapter highlights unanswered questions that provide promising avenues for future research.

The importance and characteristics of social relationships

The current literature leaves little doubt that good relationships are good for people. This is well illustrated in a meta-analysis by Holt-Lunstad and colleagues (2010^[12]), indicating that the protective effects of social supportive networks on risk for mortality are greater than the harmful effects of other well known risk factors, including smoking. Across 148 studies including more than 300 000 participants, the researchers found a 50% increased likelihood of survival for participants with stronger social relationships. This is in line with a body of literature asserting the importance of supportive networks for well-being and (mental) health (Feeney and Collins, 2015^[10]). Research also shows that for most people, a lack of supportive networks is incompatible with a long, healthy and happy life. To illustrate, loneliness is associated with a 26% increase in the risk of premature mortality and reliably predicts depression and other mental health disorders (Cacioppo et al., 2015^[13]).

Although researchers differ in their definitions of social relationships and connection, they recognise that relationships are inherently social. In all relationships people are part of particular social contexts, like the families, communities, and societies or cultures in which they live, and these contexts are all interdependent (Kelley and Graaf, 1997^[14]). Individuals and their social contexts mutually influence each other over the short and the long run. For example, children and adolescents growing up in families that are conflictual, abusive, unsupportive or neglectful not only experience a host of adverse (mental) health outcomes over the life course, but also establish less supportive and stable relationships and networks themselves (Repetti, Taylor and Seeman, 2002^[15]).

Adolescents who are unable to control their impulses and have difficulty regulating their emotions elicit more negative and harsh parenting, which diminishes adolescents' capacity to control their impulses and emotions (Willems et al., 2018^[16]). Research studying the roles individuals take in their communities shows that people who report high levels of well-being (i.e. those who are satisfied with their lives and experience high levels of happiness) are popular and central in networks characterised by fun and companionship. Thus, positive and happy people are sought out by others for fun and excitement. People high in empathy (i.e. those who are attuned to others and responsive to their needs) are popular and central in social networks characterised by trust and support. Moreover, empathic individuals are sought out by others for emotional support, especially in times of stress (Morelli et al., 2017^[17]).

The recognition that individuals and social contexts are interdependent, that relationships are developed between people rather than within one person, is necessary to understanding social connection in adolescence. Relational interdependence underlines that on the one hand, adolescents need the capacities to foster, engage in and sustain relationships with others. They need to be able to function in pairs and groups such as families, neighbourhoods, communities and cultures. In addition, it is crucial for them to be able to feel connected to others, ask for and provide social support or help, show empathy, communicate caring, cooperate with others, tolerate and understand that others have different perspectives from their own, and be responsive to others' needs (e.g. Cacioppo, Reis and Zautra (2011^[18]) and Feeney and Collins (2015^[10])). On the other hand, adolescents also need to perceive the reciprocity of that relationship demonstrating that others care about them, value them and are responsive to their needs (Reis, Lemay and Finkenauer, 2017^[19]).

While adolescents' proximal social context (e.g. the family) is a key determinant of their ability to develop these social connections and relationships, external factors in the distal context that are further removed from direct influences are increasingly influential in shaping adolescents' environment (e.g. globalisation). To highlight this, Chen and colleagues (2005^[20]) found changes in the adaptive value of shyness between cohorts of Chinese children studied in 1990, 1998 and 2002. While shyness was positively associated with social connection and educational achievement in 1990, the association disappeared in 1998 and was negative in 2002. In just one decade, a valued trait had become a risk factor for social disconnection and mental health problems. The authors suggest that this finding may be due to the rapid social and economic change in China, which increasingly requires "assertiveness, self-direction, and exploration in the challenging market-oriented society" (Chen et al., 2005, p. 193^[20]).

This chapter explores four 21st century global trends that may have implications for social connection and relationships in adolescence: climate change, forced displacement, increasing individualism and new technologies. Each of these can pose challenges or

opportunities for young people's ability to develop and maintain stable, harmonious relationships with others in different types of social contexts. They also have implications for the extent to which young people may perceive that others care about them. The chapter examines each of these trends in turn.

Climate change

Climate change is one of the major challenges of the 21st century that poses a significant threat to people across the globe. Impacts range from declines in agriculture and decreasing biodiversity to rising sea levels and more intense heat waves. While the effects of climate change on the environment are well documented, the research on its effect on societies, and in particular social relations within these societies, is more nascent. Early research suggests that climate change shapes societies by challenging community networks and increasing levels of aggression in social relations (Burke, Davis and Diffenbaugh, 2018^[21]; Watts et al., 2018^[22]).

Climate change has intensified competition over resources (e.g. limited harvest and water resources, forced displacement), putting stress on social relations. Meta-analyses show that phenomena such as rising temperatures or declining rainfall are predictive of intergroup conflict and intergroup aggression (Hsiang, Burke and Miguel, 2013^[23]). For example, decrease in rainfall has been connected to land annexations in Brazil (Hidalgo et al., 2010^[24]), the Hindu-Muslim riots in India (Sarsons, 2015^[25]), and political conflict and war (Couttenier and Soubeyran, 2014^[26]). Overall, Burke, Hsiang and Miguel (2015^[27]) estimate that for every 1 standard deviation increase in temperature, violence between groups is at risk to increase by 11.3%.

The link between severe weather events, such as rising temperatures and heavy rainfall, and violence is particularly high in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and communities. Therefore, those who already are at higher risk of adverse impacts related to climate change are also more likely to be affected by higher rates of violence (Mares, 2013^[28]). While the proposed association between high temperatures and violence does not account for alternative explanatory factors (e.g. economic or societal), it does illustrate the link between climate change and social relations.

At the individual level too, climate change, rising temperature and climate disasters are related to higher rates of interpersonal conflict and violence. A number of studies have shown that increased levels of distress from extreme weather events put strains on social relationships and connection. For example, researchers showed an association between exposure to Hurricane Katrina and reactive aggression in adolescents (Marsee, 2008^[29]). In a different sample, Harville and colleagues (2011^[30]) showed higher prevalence of intimate partner violence in families exposed to Hurricane Katrina, even when controlling for diverse socio-economic influences. Similarly, Keenan and colleagues (2004^[31]) who investigated family dynamics in the aftermath of Hurricane Floyd, found a stark increase in child maltreatment in families exposed to this weather disaster.

In addition, climate change has severe consequences on health and mental well-being, adding yet another stressor to the stability of relationships. It is linked to the prevalence of diseases, such as cardiovascular and respiratory problems due to air pollution and heatwaves, increased transmission of infectious diseases, malnutrition as a result of harvest failures, mental health problems and mortality resulting from extreme temperatures (Clayton et al., 2017^[32]; Watts et al., 2018^[22]).

In this context, unsupportive social networks are a critical risk factor during times of adversity (Holt-Lunstad, 2018_[6]; Kaniasty, 2012_[33]). A longitudinal study among young adolescents in the Southern United States who were exposed to Hurricane Katrina showed that lower levels of peer and family support during the hurricane were related to more depression and anxiety even years later (Banks and Weems, 2014_[34]). Critically, higher levels of hurricane exposure were related to lower levels of social support from family and peers. This suggests that extreme weather events resulting from climate change may undermine individual and community resources to provide social support at times when it is most needed.

Prolonged stress, trauma, loss of houses and jobs, and economic decline in the aftermath of disaster all put severe strain on the development and maintenance of supportive relationships. This may be because anxiety, stress and uncertainty about one's future may reduce people's capacity to show empathic concern, to focus on the needs of others and to de-escalate conflict. This reduced capacity to respond to others' needs amplifies strain on social connection and hampers individuals' ability to maintain strong social networks and foster social connection (Finkenauer et al., 2017_[35]). Vulnerable groups are especially likely to experience adverse effects of climate change-related stressors. Helping young people confronted with the adversity of climate change and disaster to form and maintain social connection to avoid isolation clearly is an important research and public health priority (Clayton et al., 2017_[32]).

Climate change has significant consequences that can be seen from the global level (global warming, weather disasters) to the individual level (interpersonal relationships and health). While climate change poses challenges, it also offers opportunities for social relations. This is well reflected in the increasing awareness among youth of how their own future will be shaped by the consequences of climate change, leading to more civic engagement and (international) social connectedness.

In fact, the next generation is taking steps to confront political leaders with the need to act, urging them to fight climate change. For example, Swedish school student Greta Thunberg started a solo climate protest in August 2018 by striking from school, which was soon followed by school strikes by more than 20 000 children around the world. Greta stated, "Since our leaders are behaving like children, we will have to take the responsibility they should have taken long ago" (Carrington, 2018_[36]).

Following Greta's example, on January 24, 2019, about 35 000 Belgian youth skipped school to demand climate action from political leaders. They marched through the streets in Brussels holding demonstration signs with messages such as "This can't wait till I'm grown-up", "The planet is hotter than my boyfriend" and "There is no planet B".

Next, this example was followed in many cities around the globe where youth marches under the flag of youth for climate. Clearly over the next fifteen years, today's youth will directly experience the outcomes of climate change, which are likely to bring with them scarring effects for other life domains such as health, well-being and social connectedness. At the same time, they will also be the key driver for identifying pathways toward a sustainable future by mobilising a broad range of agents and stakeholders around the world. Their belief in opportunities for success through socially coordinated efforts may allow them to make a change and contribute to the realisation of sustainable development goals.

Forced displacement

A historic rise in conflict and violence has led to the global crisis of forced displacement. As of the end of 2017, a record number of 68.5 million people were forcibly displaced from their homes (UNHCR, 2017^[37]; WeiWei, 2017^[38]). This includes 40 million internally displaced people (IDPs), 25.4 million refugees and 3.1 million asylum-seekers, 52% of whom are children below 18 years of age (UNHCR, 2017^[37]). The main drivers of this are war and conflict, but displacement induced by climate change has also increased (Missirian and Schlenker, 2017^[39]). Children and youth, in particular those who are unaccompanied by adults, are among the most vulnerable groups of displaced people (Fazel et al., 2012^[40]). Forced displacement is a major global challenge today with severe and long-lasting impacts on individuals, societies and countries. Consequently, adolescents who are forcibly displaced face significant challenges to their ability to form social relations and build resilient social connections.

A majority of forcibly displaced youth are exposed to severe traumatic experiences prior to and during migration, with death of a loved one, physical or sexual maltreatment, fear for a significant other or one's own life and separation from family members frequently mentioned (El-Awad et al., 2017^[41]; World Bank, 2017^[42]). While observed prevalence rates differ considerably across studies and populations, youth who seek asylum report experiencing on average more than four traumatic events prior to or during displacement (Goosen, Stronks and Kunst, 2013^[43]; Jakobsen, Demott and Heir, 2014^[44]; UNHCR, 2017^[37]).

This exposure to adverse life events by forcibly displaced youth is of specific concern, as a growing body of research across the behavioural and biomedical sciences demonstrates that exposure to traumatic events during childhood and adolescence affects physical and mental health across the lifespan (Ehrensaft et al., 2003^[45]; Felitti et al., 1998^[46]; Miller, Chen and Parker, 2011^[47]). Notably, while some individuals may recover quickly and regain a level of adjustment, others may experience chronic mental and physical dysfunction and distress for years after the stressful event (Bonanno and Diminich, 2012^[48]).

Children and adolescents exposed to multiple traumas have a two-to-three times higher risk of detrimental outcomes like smoking, heavy alcohol use, cancer and heart disease, a three-to-six times higher risk of sexual risk taking and mental ill-health, and a seven times higher risk for problematic drug use, interpersonal violence and suicide (Hughes et al., 2017^[49]). Although future research needs to establish the direction of causation, these results suggest that exposure to multiple traumatic events represents a major risk factor for healthy development across the lifespan and, because many trauma victims will become parents themselves, this poses a considerable risk for the transfer of trauma to future generations (Hughes et al., 2017^[49]; Patton et al., 2018^[1]; Willems et al., 2019^[50]).

In addition to traumatic experiences prior to and during migration, displaced youth may experience post-migration social stressors in their everyday lives; some are common to all youth, such as conflicts with friends and parents (El-Awad et al., 2017^[41]; Stefanek et al., 2012^[51]). However, others are specific to the displacement, or in some cases, the acculturation context, such as discrimination and social exclusion. Forcibly displaced persons can experience hostility in their host communities often due to a perceived increase in competition for welfare services, jobs or housing. In these cases, the relationship between host communities and refugees is further strained, which complicates the development of

strong social relations. These stressors increase the risk of depression over time, even when considering war-related risk factors and trauma (Keles et al., 2017_[52]).

Friendships, feeling included and accepted, supportive networks and social connectedness in communities buffer the effects of these adverse life events and stressors experienced in the host country and host communities (de Vroome and Van Tubergen, 2010_[53]; Fazel et al., 2012_[40]). However, traumatised youth and their social context mutually influence each other. On the one hand, forming and maintaining healthy relationships are key for the recovery of traumatised youth, their (mental) health and their integration in a host country or community. On the other hand, traumatic experiences, mental health problems and social stressors after arriving in the host environment impede their ability to form supportive relationships (Fazel et al., 2012_[40]).

More specifically, the adverse events that initiated the displacement are often only the start of a long period of uncertainty. Most forcibly displaced persons experience dangerous travels to seek asylum in an unfamiliar country, have to deal with complex legal systems upon arrival, face ongoing uncertainty regarding their residence rights and often experience discrimination. Similarly, IDPs and refugees in camp settings face heightened uncertainty and insecurity in their environment. Clearly, these uncertainties impair the ability to trust others. This volatility may prevent them from developing and maintaining relationships, both directly (e.g. moving housing, language barriers, cultural differences) and indirectly (e.g. not being able to express needs, feelings of shame and fear, which prevent others from providing adequate social support and care).

For many forcibly displaced youth, building and maintaining trusting relationships requires not only physical safety and psychological support, but also developing relational interdependence. Specifically, traumatised youth need to learn to trust others, ask for support and be able to receive support. Furthermore, those who engage with traumatised youths (e.g. professionals, teachers, office workers) need to be able to build and repair trust and be trustworthy (Finkenauer and Righetti, 2011_[54]).

Increasing individualism

Increasing wealth, education, urbanisation and technology are drivers of yet another global trend: increasing individualism (Chen et al., 2005_[20]; Greenfield, 2018_[55]). Individualism as a value system prioritises independence and self-expression, whereas collectivism emphasises interdependence and fitting in (Santos, Varnum and Grossmann, 2017_[56]; Wheeler, McGrath and Haslam, 2019_[57]). Individualism promotes a view of the self as self-directed, autonomous and separate from others.

It is important to note that individualism does not indicate that people are necessarily selfish or egotistical. Rather, individualism fosters self-expression, freedom of expression and equality of opportunities (Inglehart and Welzel, 2010_[58]). Furthermore, it is related to behaviour and social norms that encourage less reliance on others and greater attention to self-expression and the fulfilment of personal needs (Wheeler, McGrath and Haslam, 2019_[57]). It also entails the belief that people have the right, or obligation, to seek psychological growth and personal happiness in their education, careers and relationships.

Socio-demographic changes on a distal level can produce changes at the level of proximal social environments. Santos and colleagues (2017_[56]) mapped indicators of individualism in 78 countries over a period of 51 years, including behavioural indicators such as household size, living alone and divorce, as well as relationship values such as the importance of friends versus family, the value of promoting independence in children and

the preference for self-expression. Their findings showed that since 1960, individualism, as reflected in behavioural indicators and in relationship values, increased by about 12% worldwide, and was not confined to developed or rich countries. However, the authors also concluded that cultural differences remained sizeable and that these differences were primarily linked to socio-economic development.

The increase in individualism coincides with changing social perspectives of close relationships. Over time, the perception of relationships has shifted from being a social obligation to a decision based on personal fulfilment (Campbell, Wright and Flores, 2012_[59]; Finkel et al., 2014_[60]). The perception of marriage has changed from a formal institution promoting family and economic stability to a means of obtaining love and companionship and, more recently (in the late 20th century), to a means of pursuing personal fulfilment and self-expression (Cherlin, 2004_[61]). Additionally, romantic partners more frequently require their partner to provide the emotional and physical resources to fulfil their needs for stability and companionship that communal institutions used to provide (e.g. the family, the church, the village). On the one hand, these changes provide more individual freedom in partner choice and relationship forms. On the other hand, they indicate that committed relationships can be dissolved when individuals feel that the partner does not meet their personal needs for self-expression and a new partner may better meet these needs.

Increasing mobility, changing norms about marriage and romantic relationships, high expectations, and emancipation are but some of the factors associated with an increased risk of divorce worldwide. Children of divorce or parental separation have a higher risk of divorce or separation themselves (Amato and Patterson, 2017_[62]; Salvatore et al., 2018_[63]). Abundant research shows that high quality parent-child relationships, high-quality parent-parent relationships, and adequate economic and social resources (e.g. financial stability, social connection) are key to the healthy development of children and adolescents. Parental divorce impairs all three of these factors, and children with divorced parents and living in single-parent families consistently show lower well-being on various indicators (Amato, 2010_[64]).

Furthermore, the intergenerational transmission of divorce is partly due to the fact that children learn and inherit relational skills and capacities from their parents which they extend to their own intimate relationships (Kamp-Dush et al., 2018_[65]; Willems et al., 2018_[16]). Parents who divorce tend to have poorer communication skills, provide less social support to each other and engage in more destructive conflict that tends to escalate (Birditt et al., 2010_[66]; Lavner and Bradbury, 2012_[67]). Young adults who witness parental divorce or separation are more likely to have poorer relationship quality and more destructive conflict in their own intimate relationships (Amato and Patterson, 2017_[62]), suggesting that one mechanism by which divorce may be transmitted is that children learn from their parents.

The global increase in individualism may also represent a challenge for the delicate balance adolescents have to develop between independence and interdependence. Over the course of development, adolescents gradually acquire independence and autonomy from their caregivers. An optimal balance enables adolescents to develop a healthy sense of self-reliance, agency and freedom when things go well, but the ability to call on family and friends, or their community when things go awry (Finkenauer, Engels and Meeus, 2002_[68]). However, individualism may tip the balance toward prioritising independence and self-reliance over interdependence and asking for social support. Individualism may foster a belief among young people that asking for help is a sign of weakness and may be seen as

failure, even when faced with personal hardship, mental health problems or adverse circumstances (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2010_[69]; Orehek and Kruglanski, 2018_[70]).

In line with this suggestion, research finds that adolescents, more than adults, prefer self-reliance when facing mental illness and problems, and are reluctant to seek help (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2010_[69]). Individualistic relational values may thereby undermine adolescents' capacity to express their needs and feelings and be receptive to social support.

Overall, increases in individualism seem associated with changes in social behaviours and relational values that influence the development of the social, cognitive and behavioural skills necessary to form and maintain lasting relationships and supportive social networks during adolescence. They may also undermine young people's motivation to remain committed to relationships, for example, during times of hardship (e.g. due to illness, loss) or when relationships require work and maintenance strategies (e.g. sacrifice, negotiation, forgiveness), insofar as they are perceived as limiting personal fulfilment. Crucially, new technologies have made it simpler and easier to access and find alternative relationship partners. The rise of new technologies that have expanded opportunities and challenges for social connection is the fourth global trend to be addressed.

New technologies

New technologies, in particular information and communication technologies and social media, are rapidly developing and increasingly ubiquitous. Generally, social network platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat occupy 30% of people's online time (GlobalWebIndex, 2017_[71]). Adolescents are at the forefront of Internet adoption with 71% of adolescents (ages 15 to 24) using the Internet versus 48% of the overall population (UNICEF, 2017_[72]).

The use of new technologies and social media in adolescence is a double-edged sword for social connections and results are mixed. On the one hand, the emerging use of new technologies and social media can be beneficial, because they provide opportunities to connect with others anywhere and anytime, facilitating social connections nearby and far away, self-directed learning and active citizenship, and promoting independence (Uhls, Ellison and Subrahmanyam, 2017_[73]). Research among adolescents and young adults reveals associations between time spent using social media and increased self-esteem, increased social support accessed through one's social network and safe identity exploration (Best, Manktelow and Taylor, 2014_[74]). Social and mobile media make it easier for individuals to maintain a larger and more diverse social network (Hampton, Sessions and Her, 2011_[75]). They may make it easier to initiate interaction and help young people seek information and support from both weak and strong social ties. New technologies can thereby provide adolescents with opportunities to develop social skills and strengthen social connections.

On the other hand, research reveals that the use of new technologies and social media is linked to negative impacts on mental health and social development, particularly in adolescence. For example, exposure to others' ideal self-representations within social media can intensify adolescents' own body image concerns and sense of social alienation (Grabe, Ward and Hyde, 2008_[76]; Uhls, Ellison and Subrahmanyam, 2017_[73]). Exposure to new technologies and frequent use of social media can have negative effects on closeness and feelings of social connection by decreasing the quality of conversations, perceived

understanding and empathy (Hales et al., 2018^[77]). Use of social media may also decrease trust and lead to more jealousy in intimate relationships (Billedo, Kerkhof and Finkenauer, 2015^[78]; Kerkhof, Finkenauer and Muusses, 2011^[79]).

Research has yet to examine how the relational benefits and costs vary as a function of relationship types (e.g. friendships, intimate relationships, family relations, acquaintances), medium (social media, new technologies), context (private communication, public space) and extent of use (being off the grid, Internet addiction). Some early results indicate that Facebook deactivation in adults is associated with reduced online activity, including other social media, and increased offline activities such as watching television alone and socialising with family and friends, as well as increased well-being (Allcott et al., 2018^[80]).

Interdependent relationships nonetheless require investments and maintenance behaviours from both partners. Partners need to communicate to each other that they value, accept and care for each other, and that they are committed to their relationship and network. For example, Utz (2015^[81]) found that intimate disclosure is linked to more closeness in private communications on Facebook, but less so in public communications. This research also suggests that partner responsiveness to one's needs in online communication is less relevant to people's feelings of closeness to others than responsiveness in offline communication. Although these studies point to important differences between online and offline communication in relationships, studies on online communication are often limited to self-reports by the disclosing person and rarely examine the dyadic processes needed to fully examine relational interdependence.

Studies that compare online and face-to-face communication find that face-to-face communication is more impactful in strengthening and maintaining relationships. To highlight some examples, face-to-face support is more comforting than online support for military family members after a disruptive event (Lewandowski et al., 2011^[82]), and face-to-face interactions protect older people from depression while email and telephone interactions do not (Teo et al., 2015^[83]). However, it is important to note that interpersonal relationships are increasingly developed and sustained through integrated online and offline interaction. Online interactions often reinforce offline ties, and vice versa. Also, mixed-medium friendships are increasingly common, whereby relationship partners find each other online but migrate into offline communication channels. Often such mixed-medium relationships are rated similar in quality to offline-only relationships (see Chapter 5). Clearly, online communication is becoming more important to modern relationships, where the online and offline are not mutually exclusive means of communication but rather used in concert, often reinforcing and amplifying the effects of disclosure on relationship.

One aspect that has received little attention in the comparison of online and offline communication is physical touch, which is crucial in creating and strengthening close relationships. Tactile physical affection is strongly correlated with relationship quality, and conflicts are resolved more easily with increased amounts of physical touch including hugging and cuddling/holding (Gulledge, Gulledge and Stahmann, 2003^[84]). Also, daily interpersonal touch promotes physical and mental health by signalling intimacy and closeness (Debrot et al., 2013^[85]). So, while you can send a "hugging emoticon", it's not the same as actually hugging a person.

In short, the global trend of the rise of new technologies provides opportunities and challenges for social relationships. For youth, and their multiple social contexts, it will be a challenge to understand how to enhance the benefits offered by new technologies while mitigating some of the associated challenges. The processes underlying the benefits and

costs for relationships and social connection, and the exact mechanisms by which communication across different media are implicated in personal and social well-being, are not well understood. It is also unclear whether online communication in isolation is still less impactful and important than face-to-face communications for the younger generations that use as much (or more) online as offline communication.

Crucially, new technologies and social media rapidly change: in the time that research establishes its opportunities or challenges, the social medium platform – and likely the research results – may already be outdated. As such, the rise of new technologies remains an exciting field to investigate, especially as we are heading for a future where ‘being offline’ is increasingly becoming unthinkable.

Adolescent relationships in the 21st century: Concluding remarks

The formation of lasting social connections is one of the most important developmental tasks in adolescence. It is facilitated by a number of well-researched processes in family and peer relationships, and abundant research suggests a strong association between supportive relationships and (mental) health and well-being over the lifespan. Considerably less is known about how global trends affect relationship behaviour and maintenance among youth. This chapter proposes that social connection is key to unravelling the developmental trajectories of adolescents. Specifically, it argues that to understand social connection and relationships in youth, it is essential to recognise that they form these connections in social contexts, ranging from proximal to distal.

Social changes in the distal context – such as climate change, forced displacement and the lifelong impacts of trauma, individualisation and new technologies – are necessary to explain and understand the social development of adolescents and their relationships. These relationships are inherently interdependent: young people both influence their social environments and are shaped by them. Beyond providing an overview of the implications that four global trends may have on social connection in adolescence, we hope that this chapter will stimulate future research on this fascinating and important area of research, which we expect to blossom in the years to come.

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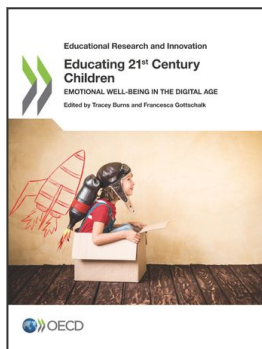
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