

Friendships On- and Off-line: The Effect Posting on Instagram has on Adolescent Friendship Qualities

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Abstract. Although decades of research have highlighted the development and importance of (offline) peer relations, social media has complicated the ways adolescents interact today. Digital interactions create novel, permanently recorded and quantifiable reflections of relationships and may affect offline peer relations in important ways. With a sample of older adolescents ($n = 409$, grades 10-12, 62.1% female), we explored the ways online and offline interactions affect adolescents' friendships, including reasons for making positive posts about friendships online. Exploratory factor analysis suggested adolescents make "friendship posts" for two primary reasons: 1) to show off their friendships and gain popularity (4 items) or 2) to express caring and support for a friend (3 items; Cronbach's alphas = .86, .91, respectively). Supporting convergent validity, concurrent correlations suggest that adolescents who make both types of posts were rated as more interested in gaining digital status by their peers, but only adolescents who made more "showing" posts endorsed a desire for popularity via self-report. Longitudinal regressions suggest "caring" posts at time one reduced in-person best friend conflict one year later (time two), while "showing" posts increased in-person best friendship conflict at time two, over and above the effects of peer-rated digital status seeking, self-reported desire for popularity, and conflict at time one. "Showing" and "caring" posts were not associated longitudinally with best friend companionship or intimate disclosure. Our findings suggest that rather than merely reflecting the state of in-person relationships, adolescents' posts online can have downstream effects on the quality of their in-person best friendships. Moreover, though making any "friendship post" might appear innocuous on its face, the poster's intent may matter, as posting with the desire to gain popularity appears to increase offline friendship conflict. Previous research suggests that (offline) friendship conflict, though stressful, is an important setting for learning about social structures, communication, and collaboration. As adolescents' technology use continues to increase, it is crucial that researchers consider how teens' online and offline worlds overlap and transform each other and how these changing social interactions affect their development.

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