

Directions:

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading. Mark up the text with questions and/or comments.
3. Write a one-page reflection on your own sheet of paper.

Just How Many Facebook Friends Do You Need?

Twenty-somethings spend hours each day keeping their social networks going. But a thousand BFFs just may be a few hundred too many. The torture of modern friendship.

Source: Robin Marantz Henig, Samantha Henig /*Newsweek*/ October 15, 2012

Ask a group of elderly people what it was about their lives that made them happiest overall, and they'll probably mention some warm relationships with family and friends. If you're satisfied with your social life, according to psychologists, you tend to be satisfied with life in general.

From the vantage point of my 50s, I'd say that sounds about right. Some of my happiest moments are the ones I spend with my husband, a few close relatives, and a handful of very good friends who know me well and like me anyway. But the more I read about how social media are interfering with good old-fashioned friendship, creating virtual bonds that can't quite take the place of real ones, the more I wonder just how today's 20-somethings will look back on their own lives when they're my age.

After all, much crucial relationship building work is done in the 20s. According to research by the late Bernice Neugarten of the University of Chicago, who helped launch the academic study of human development, people choose most of their adult relationships, both friends and lovers, between the ages of 22 and 28. The friends we make in our 20s are not only BFFs; they're also our first truly chosen friends, people we discover as a result of our adult decisions—where to live, work, or study—as opposed to our parents' choices. And choosing how to reconfigure and commit to these friendships is an essential psychological task of the 20s. Finding intimacy—the basis and byproduct of good friendships—is one of the five major life tasks of young adults ages 18 to 30, according to Robert Arnstein, a Yale psychiatrist who was, like Neugarten, a pioneer in the study of development through the life span.

But with so much of friendship in this age group now being navigated online, an essential question is what the effect of that interaction is. And as a mother of two young adults, I feel this question personally. Will my younger daughter, Samantha, 28, some day feel that she missed out somehow on this crucial life resource?

One measure of the effect of social media on real-world social life comes from a study conducted in 2010 by Craig Watkins and Erin Lee of the University of Texas at Austin, who investigated the Facebook habits of 776 young people between the ages of 18 and 35. "No matter if it is a wall post, a comment, or a photo," they wrote in "Got Facebook? Investigating What's Social About Social Media," "young people's engagement with Facebook is driven, primarily, by a desire to stay connected to and involved in the lives of friends who live close by, far away, or have just entered into their lives."

This kind of constant contact can be efficient, but it can also be unsettling. For one thing, it adds a new layer of angst to a young person's already-heightened awareness of social ranking, giving appearance-conscious young people yet another thing to fret about. "I see other 20-somethings feeling pressured to constantly keep up a public image, especially a cyber-public image," wrote Ariana Allensworth of Brooklyn on the group blog the Twenty-somethings. "Folks are always keeping the world in the loop one way or another about what they're up to, where they're at, what projects they're working on. It can be a bit much at times." Not the most fertile ground for real-world friendship.

Robin's daughter Samantha says: I see what it is about all this that worries my mother. What especially bothers me about social networks isn't so much their effect on the institution of friendship as it is the way they make me think, to an off-putting degree, about the image I'm projecting. I hate that sometimes I say something clever in real life and actually think, I should tweet that. Or that when my friend sends an email of a flattering photo he took of me, I get annoyed that he didn't post it to Facebook, where others could see it. (I'm not yet so vain that I would post it myself.) Social networks have inserted themselves as an unwelcome filter through which I view just about everything, in much the same way the TV show My So-Called Life once hijacked my brain, making me silently narrate my thoughts in Claire Danes's voice. I'm not about to die for love of my reflection any time soon, but social networking does seem to amplify my narcissistic tendencies. The more you talk about yourself on sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr, the more successful you are. With all the self-promotional activity going on, it sometimes feels like your feed is less a virtual living room than it is a hall of mirrors.

The cyber-styling has seeped into online dating, too, leading to what Marina Adshade, an economist at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, calls "beauty inflation." People browsing the profiles at OKCupid.com or Match.com are seeing only the most flattering photos and most witty reflections, which

can lead to an unrealistic sense of who is out there in the dating pool and of what kind of partner they can actually get. It's like a mating bubble.

Through social media, young people are constantly being pinged about a whole slew of potentially better matches or social activities. Today's 20-somethings complain of a pervasive feeling that there's something better going on somewhere else that they haven't been invited to: a rowdier party, a more interesting conversation, a funnier movie, a better hookup. This feeling is nothing new, of course, but it's more intense now—and more likely to be a feeling they'll twist themselves in knots to try to do something about.

Samantha says: In my mother's day, even if you knew in theory that people were sometimes doing fun things without you, you didn't have to see photographic evidence of it, unless your friends invited you over for a slide show of their trip to Europe. Now you see that stuff daily: look, there are eight of your friends in some Facebook photo together at ... is that a barbecue? Who had a barbecue? Why wasn't I at that barbecue? By keeping tabs on a wide group of people's every check-in, you feel you're less likely to miss out on something awesome—or even just mildly better than whatever you're currently doing. But you're also more likely to spend much of your night preoccupied with smoke signals arriving via cellphone and wondering which are worth following rather than just settling in and focusing on the choice you've already made.

All of which leads to the crux of what makes friendships different for young people today: the nefarious Fear of Missing Out. It's because of FOMO that 20-somethings are so focused on their smartphone screens, so preoccupied with potential friends that they forget to be with the friends they already have. The FOMO mentality is leading millennials to become smartphone-addled cyber-sluts, constantly texting and emailing, always on the prowl for the next better thing.

There's also a limit to how far a true social network can extend. Nature sets that limit. Back in the 1990s, anthropologist Robin Dunbar of Oxford University calculated the maximum number of friends it's possible for any one person to have. The ceiling, which has come to be known as Dunbar's Number, is based on his observation that in primates, the size of the social group is directly proportional to the size of the neocortex of the brain—the bigger the neocortex, the more individuals any primate can keep track of. In humans, Dunbar's Number is 150—well, 147.8, plus or minus.

“Partly it's a cognitive challenge just to keep track of more people than that,” Dunbar has explained. “And it's a time-budgeting problem: we just don't have the time in everyday life to invest in each of those people to the extent where you can have a real relationship.”

Dunbar's Number was calculated pre-Internet, but it applies to social networks, too. A study conducted in 2009 for *The Economist* found that people with 500 Facebook friends had actual interaction—such as leaving comments on people's walls or “liking” their links or photos—with an average of just 17 friends for men, 26 for women. And one-on-one communication, such as individual messages or Facebook chats, was even more limited: men had two-way contact with an average of just 10 of those 500 friends, women with just 16.

Facebook itself has figured this out and has developed an algorithm that restricts the updates you'll see on your friend feed to those from the people whose updates and links you most commonly interact with. Other social media startups, including Path, Highlight, GroupMe, Frenzy, Rally Up, Huddl, Kik, and Shizzlr, also offer ways to limit groups to a more manageable size, a reflection of how friendships work in real life: an inner circle for true intimacy, an outer circle for all the benefits of a community at large. And when Google+ launched in 2011, many early adopters were excited about the chance to start sorting their e-friends from scratch.

The new apps suggest that maybe we've come full circle, using technology to make real-world friend encounters more satisfying instead of less so. That would be a relief. Because the fact remains that most human interactions are still occurring in the real world, and friendship circles are still restricted by time, space, personal preferences, and the limits of the neocortex. The real thing young people should fear is missing out on those few, true, long-term friendships that make for a richer, happier life.

Possible WN topics

- Do you suffer from FOMO? Explain.
- Reflect on how Facebook and other sites have affected your friendships.
- Choose a passage from the article and respond.