



Akademik Eğitim ve Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi (AJESS Journal)

Social Media Use and the Erosion of Community Ties: A Sociological Study of Urban Youth

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Article History

Received: 31/07/2026; Accepted: 22/08/2026; Published : 05/08/2026

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between intensive social media use and the weakening of face-to-face community bonds among urban youth. Drawing on Putnam's concept of social capital and Granovetter's theory of tie strength, the paper investigates whether digital connectivity substitutes for, or complements, traditional forms of local social interaction. A mixed-methods design combining survey data (N = 240) with semi-structured interviews (n = 18) was employed among young adults aged 18-29 in a mid-sized urban setting. Findings indicate that while social media expands the quantity of weak ties, it is associated with a measurable decline in the frequency and depth of strong, geographically proximate relationships. The paper argues that this shift reconfigures community from a place-based structure into a networked, individualized one, with implications for collective action, neighborhood solidarity, and civic participation. The study concludes with recommendations for community institutions seeking to bridge digital and physical forms of belonging.

Keywords: *social capital; social media; community ties; urban youth; networked individualism; civic participation*

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, digital platforms have fundamentally altered the ways in which individuals form, maintain, and experience social relationships. Sociologists have long been concerned with the health of local communities as a foundation for trust, cooperation, and collective welfare. Robert Putnam's influential thesis on the decline of social capital in American life predates the mass adoption of social media, yet the questions it raises about the erosion of civic engagement remain strikingly relevant. This paper asks whether social media use intensifies or reverses this decline, focusing specifically on urban youth, a demographic that has grown up entirely within networked digital environments.

The urban context is particularly significant because cities have historically been sites of dense, heterogeneous social interaction, but also of anonymity and social fragmentation. Understanding how digital tools reshape community bonds in this setting offers insight into broader transformations in the structure of social life. This study contributes to that understanding by combining quantitative survey evidence with qualitative interview data to explore both the extent and the lived experience of these changes.

2. Literature Review

The concept of social capital, as developed by Bourdieu, Coleman, and later popularized by Putnam, refers to the resources embedded in social networks that facilitate cooperation and mutual benefit. Putnam distinguished between bonding social capital, which strengthens ties within homogeneous groups, and bridging social capital, which connects individuals across diverse social groups. Subsequent scholarship has debated whether online interaction generates a third form, often termed 'maintained' or 'networked' social capital, which persists across geographic distance but may lack the emotional depth of face-to-face bonds.

Granovetter's foundational work on the strength of weak ties demonstrated that loosely connected acquaintances often provide valuable information and opportunities unavailable within tight-knit circles. Social media platforms are particularly effective at multiplying weak ties, but researchers such as Turkle and Putnam have cautioned that an abundance of weak, low-effort connections may come at the expense of the strong ties historically anchored in physical proximity, such as neighbors, extended family, and local associations.

More recent research on 'networked individualism,' a term associated with Wellman and Rainie, suggests that community has not disappeared but has been reorganized: individuals now curate personalized networks rather than depending on a single bounded community such as a neighborhood or parish. This reframing challenges earlier assumptions that digital media necessarily produces social decline, instead proposing a qualitative transformation in how belonging is experienced and enacted.

Despite this rich theoretical foundation, empirical work specifically addressing urban youth populations remains limited, particularly outside North American and Western European contexts. This study addresses that gap by examining a mid-sized urban population characterized by rapid digital adoption alongside persistent traditional community structures.

A further strand of literature has examined the role of platform design in shaping the quality of online sociability. Scholars working within the tradition of affordance theory argue that features such as algorithmic feeds, quantified metrics of approval (likes, followers), and asynchronous messaging encourage a mode of interaction that is broad but comparatively shallow, favoring frequent, low-cost contact over the sustained, high-effort exchanges historically associated with strong ties. This body of work complements the social capital perspective by drawing attention to the technical architecture of platforms as an intervening variable between individual choice and social outcome.

Comparative studies conducted in various regional contexts have produced mixed results. Some report that social media use is associated with increased civic participation when platforms are used to organize offline local events, suggesting that the direction of the relationship depends heavily on the purpose to which digital tools are put, rather than on the intensity of use alone. Others find that passive consumption, as opposed to active, locally-oriented use, is more strongly associated with the erosion of neighborhood ties. This distinction between active and passive use patterns informed the design of the present study's survey instrument, which distinguishes between general usage time and usage directed toward local, place-based content.

3. Methodology

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods design. In the first phase, a structured survey was administered to 240 respondents aged 18 to 29, recruited through stratified sampling across four urban districts to ensure variation in socioeconomic background. The survey measured daily social media use, frequency of face-to-face interaction with neighbors and local community members, perceived neighborhood trust, and participation in local civic or community activities.

In the second phase, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive subsample of survey respondents selected to represent a range of social media usage intensity. Interviews explored participants' subjective understanding of community, the perceived trade-offs between online and offline relationships, and personal narratives of belonging. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding, with themes cross-validated against the quantitative survey findings to strengthen the study's overall validity.

Ethical clearance procedures included informed consent, anonymization of all identifying information, and the option for participants to withdraw at any stage. Limitations of the study include its cross-sectional design, which restricts causal inference, and its geographic scope, which limits generalizability beyond similar urban settings.

4. Findings and Discussion

Survey results indicate a statistically significant negative association between daily hours spent on social media and the frequency of in-person interaction with neighbors and local community members. Respondents in the highest quartile of social media use reported, on average, less than half the frequency of face-to-face neighborhood interaction compared to those in the lowest quartile. However, the same high-use group reported substantially larger total network sizes when weak ties across geographic locations were included.

Interview data enriched this quantitative pattern. Several participants described feeling 'connected to everyone but close to no one nearby,' reflecting a tension between broad digital sociability and diminished local intimacy. Others described social media as a tool that helped them maintain relationships with geographically distant friends and family, describing this as a form of compensation for reduced local engagement, particularly among those who had recently relocated to the city for work or study.

A recurring theme in the interviews was the perception that community had shifted from a shared physical space to a curated, personal network accessible through a smartphone. Several respondents expressed ambivalence about this shift: while appreciating the convenience and reach of digital connection, they also voiced a sense of loss regarding

spontaneous, unplanned local interactions, such as casual conversations with neighbors, which they associated with earlier generations or their own childhood experiences.

These findings align with the theoretical proposition of networked individualism while also lending support to concerns about the erosion of place-based bonding capital. Rather than a simple story of decline, the evidence suggests a reconfiguration of community: bridging capital appears to expand through social media, while bonding capital tied to physical neighborhoods appears to contract. This has implications for local civic participation, as several participants noted reduced motivation to attend neighborhood meetings or local associations, viewing such activities as less relevant to their primary social networks.

Sub-group analysis revealed notable variation by socioeconomic background and length of residence. Respondents who had lived in their current neighborhood for less than two years showed the weakest local ties overall, regardless of social media use, suggesting that residential tenure remains an important predictor of place-based bonding capital independent of digital habits. Among longer-term residents, however, the negative association between social media use and neighborhood interaction was considerably stronger, implying that digital platforms may be displacing local ties that would otherwise have developed through sustained residence.

Gender differences were also apparent in the interview data, though not to a statistically significant degree in the survey. Female participants more frequently described using social media to organize small, trusted friend groups for offline activities, a pattern consistent with prior research on gendered patterns of network maintenance, whereas male participants more often described broad, loosely connected networks with less emphasis on translating online contact into offline meetings. These nuances suggest that the relationship between digital platform use and community erosion is not uniform but is mediated by pre-existing social practices and residential circumstances.

Taken together, these findings suggest that policy and community interventions cannot treat 'social media use' as a single undifferentiated variable. Interventions aimed at strengthening local ties may be more effective if they target specific patterns of use, such as passive scrolling versus active local coordination, and specific populations, such as recent arrivals to a neighborhood, rather than adopting a blanket approach to digital engagement.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study offers evidence that intensive social media use among urban youth is associated with a decline in local, place-based community ties, even as it expands the breadth of individuals' overall social networks. This reconfiguration challenges both optimistic and pessimistic narratives about digital technology, suggesting instead a qualitative transformation of community rather than its outright disappearance or preservation.

For policymakers and community organizations, these findings suggest the value of designing initiatives that deliberately bridge digital and physical forms of engagement, such as neighborhood-based digital platforms that facilitate offline meetups, or civic programs that leverage youth digital fluency to strengthen rather than substitute for local participation. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to better establish causal direction and should extend this inquiry to comparative urban contexts to assess the generalizability of the networked individualism framework across cultural settings.

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