



Social Connections In-person & Online

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AIM: To explore experiences of belonging, friendship and social media use with youth voice data collected via Tō Mātou Rerenga - Our Journey app.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

- Young people most often felt a sense of belonging with friends and whānau.
- Talking was the main method for connecting.
- Good friends were often described as being like themselves and on the same wavelength, while good friendships needed to be reciprocal in nature, and were cherished and valued.
- Social media can facilitate social connection, but online engagement involves risks that young people generally understand, but feel are unavoidable.

What do we know?

Having a sense of belonging and good friendships are essential across all life stages but are particularly significant during adolescence¹. During this developmental period, young people spend considerable time with peers in and outside school and friendships often surpass familial relationships in perceived importance^{2,3}. Existing research highlights the vital role of a sense of belonging in adolescents' emotional wellbeing and personal growth^{3,4}. The increased accessibility of social media platforms has made social media a uniquely contemporary component of young people's social lives, enabling new ways to connect.

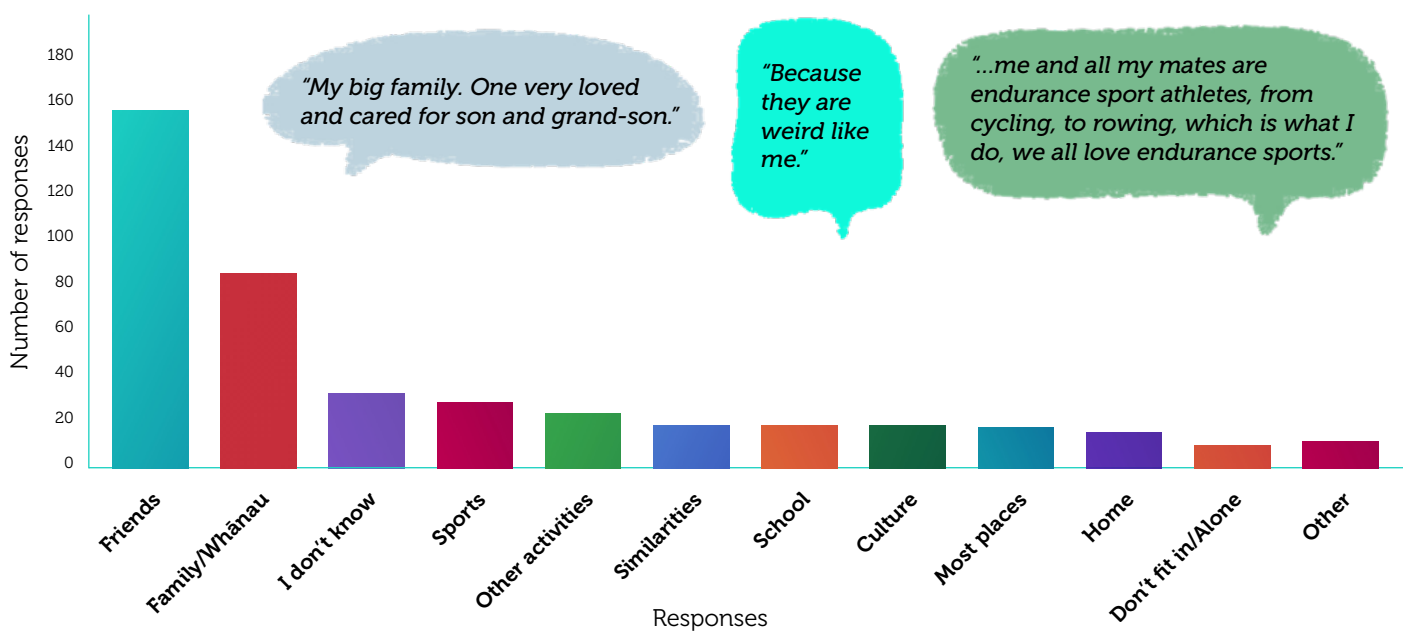
What can we learn?

Research into young people's social connections often relies on quantitative methods, which may not capture the diverse perspectives young people hold. Furthermore, little attention has been given to cultural and societal factors specific to Aotearoa. The rise of social media has also been accompanied by concerns among parents, educators, researchers, and policymakers about the negative impacts of social media on rangatahi mental health and wellbeing^{5,6}. Having the ability to explore the experiences of belonging and friendship both in-person and online offers rich, culturally informed insights to both protect and improve young people's wellbeing.

ABOUT OUR VOICES The Our Voices project aims to better understand the diverse and complex journey our young people experience growing up in Aotearoa to inform policy and services targeted to supporting their wellbeing. *Tō Mātou Rerenga - Our Journey* is an app co-designed with young people to share their lived experiences and resulted in the collection of rich qualitative multi-modal information from almost 1,000 13-year-olds participating in the *Growing Up in New Zealand* longitudinal study. The collaborative research programme uses innovative research methods and policy partnerships to help shape the future for generations to come. The project was funded by the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment and involves a multidisciplinary team of national and international experts. For more information visit <https://ourvoices.auckland.ac.nz/>.

WHERE DO YOU BELONG?

The most common responses for the places and groups where young people felt they belonged were with friends and whānau. Young people also discussed feeling a sense of belonging due to shared interests or similarities, for example via sports teams, art groups and cultural activities. However, 7.5% of participants responded that they did not know where they fit in.



Being in a group and doing things together, and sharing history, food or culture were common themes for belonging.

These activities enabled rangatahi to feel a part of something bigger than themselves. Structured or unstructured activities with frequent training or rehearsing increased young people's sense of belonging and consolidated the identity and meaning of the social group. The same process occurred through frequent cultural or religious activities organised through the family network.

What helps you to feel connected to your people?

"People who share the same humour, political beliefs, and smarts as me."

"We go out and have a feed sometimes after school and we put the money we have to buy it all together."



Ways of connecting

Talking was the main method for connecting with others. Different levels of communicating were used depending on the type of relationship, for example, higher levels of self-disclosure occurred with close friends, *“I can tell them anything and be myself around them.”* **Social media** was also mentioned as a useful way to connect with others.



Emotional engagement and support

Feeling positive emotions was a factor contributing to belonging. Having fun together helped young people connect with their friend groups. Providing and receiving emotional support was another important factor, especially during tough times. Qualities that were important within friendships were acceptance and trustworthiness.

“I like to bring up everybody’s spirits, I bring a lot of energy and excitement to things helping people stay in great moods and with enough energy to get things done.”

Emotional support from family and whānau appeared to be especially important to rangatahi with comments describing **love, encouragement, reassurance, comfort, care, belief in the young person, safety, understanding, and empathy.** However, there were some young people that responded that they did not have any support.

“I make sure that all my friends know that I’m there for them, and they tell me that they’re there for me too, for anything.”

Contribution and participation

Being in a relationship requires an exchange of interactions. Contributions that young people made to their groups and individual relationships included participation and engagement in various activities. Other contributions included following instructions and sharing their own skills such as leadership, coaching, counselling, and their labour.

There were also a range of responses in relation to not contributing or participating in groups and activities. One young person commented that they do not have a community or group to contribute to, while another young person stated, *“Not much because I have nothing to offer.”* This indicates low self-esteem or low self-confidence in some young people.

“I am in several activity groups such as sports and music groups. I contribute by putting my all into what I do and having a good attitude.”



“I’m the person they come to if they need to talk. I think they depend on me for advice and guidance.”



“I don’t really, I would like to, but I don’t.”





Experiences of friends and friendships

Many of the experiences young people discussed about good friends and friendship overlapped with their values and expectations of friendship. This suggests most rangatahi experience friendships that are fulfilling and meet their expectations. Good friends and friendship experiences encompassed these three components:

01 Friends needed to be on the same wavelength. Young people experience harmony and resonance with their good friends across all stages of their friendship - from surface-level, fun interactions to deeper, more meaningful connections.

02 They acknowledged the critical role of balanced exchange in sustaining a good friendship. They consistently identified reciprocity, a mutual give-and-take, as essential to their experiences of friendship.

03 Young people demonstrated a deep appreciation for their friends and friendship experiences. They conveyed a strong sense of gratitude and attachment, viewing their friendships as something to be cherished.



Good friends

Young people defined a good friend in different ways but there were three key themes that reflected their values and expectations of friendship:

01 They see a good friend as someone like themselves and possessing qualities they admire. In this way, a good friend is like a mirror, reflecting both who the young people truly are and who they aspire to be.

02 A good friend acts as both a constant companion and a source of emotional and practical support.

03 Young people noted that a good friendship requires individuals to share responsibilities, such as mutual respect, honesty, and trust.

Not everybody has friends or close friends

Some young people did not consider themselves to have close friends or positive friendship experiences. Instead, some rangatahi cited their parents and family as people they could be themselves around. Others seemed to have good friends in real life, but did not elaborate on what they thought made a good friend.

"IDK."

"Nobody because I don't have friends."

"...I have a lot of friends but no one that close."

The role of social media

Social media can facilitate social connection. Young people use social media to feel connected to *friends, family, others, everyone*, and *the world*. This built a sense of community and closeness, particularly when physical distance was a barrier to socialising. These friendships are often based on groups of people who have the same interests or shared experiences. Social media also enables connectedness by allowing young people to stay up to date with things going on in different domains of their lives, such as school, friends, current events and social trends.



"I use Discord because I enjoy talking to my friends."

"Usually, it's just a great way to contact my friends and stay in touch."

"I get to stay updated with everything that [is] going on in the world."

"Entertained and keeps me up[-to-date] with memes and trends."

Young people are aware of the risks associated with using social media

One of the main threats to young people's mental health when using social media is bullying. The prevalence of online/cyberbullying may be particularly high because users can 'hide behind their screens'. This anonymity is different from other forms of bullying. Bullying experienced via social media made young people feel *"bad"* and *"saddened"*, with one participant emphasising, *"how hurtful comments and people on those platforms can be which can seriously degrade a healthy wellbeing"*.

These risks are not necessarily avoided by abstaining from social media use, likely reflecting its omnipresent nature. Furthermore, while social media is a specific context in which bullying occurs, the impacts of this bullying extend beyond this context.

CONCLUSION

Feelings of belonging in young people arose from a complex mix of factors, including past relationships, new friendships, relationships with whānau, individual characteristics and skills, and emotional engagement. Friends however were the most important group⁷. Young people belonging to groups provided opportunities for social and cognitive skills to develop, increased self-esteem and provided a buffer during transitions⁸.

Using qualitative methodologies provided a detailed understanding of friendship dynamics, revealing how young people define and experience (good) friendships. Specifically, friends cherish and value each other and treat one another equally. While friends may share similarities and differences, in a good friendship, friends are supposed to be on the same wavelength. Friends can be a great source of emotional and instrumental benefits, and critically, these should be positive and reciprocated.

Social media is an important part of many young people's lives. Despite these young people only recently becoming of age to create a social media account, they demonstrated a wealth of lived experiences and knowledge about the online landscape. Efforts to promote healthy and safe interactions could focus on strategies to reduce the likelihood of bullying. This can help rangatahi to enjoy the benefits of social media in facilitating connection while protecting them from its more negative aspects.



APPENDIX

App questions used:

- Who are your people?
- Where do you feel like you fit in?
- What helps you to feel connected to your people?
- How do your people support you?
- How do you contribute to your groups and families?
- What do you think makes a good friend?
- Tell us about a person you can be yourself around.
- Describe how you know them, what you do together, and what makes them special to you.
- How does using social media make you feel?
- Do you avoid any social media platforms and why?



Method of data analysis: Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative (text) data^{9,10}. Researchers developed themes that represented patterns of meaning that centred on a key idea or concept. A theme offered a rich description of the experiences or perspectives shared by participants. Braun and Clarke¹⁰ outline a six-step process for reflexive thematic analysis but note that this type of research is iterative in nature. A key component of reflexive thematic analysis is that the researcher is valued as an important and integrated part of the research process. This means that different researchers may develop different themes and reflects the complexity and richness of both researchers' and participants' lived realities.

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This report is part of the *Our Voices Summer Snapshot Series*. These reports focus on rangatahi understandings and lived experiences of wellbeing in Aotearoa, including school experiences and social support.

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