

SOCIAL NETWORKS

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KEY FINDINGS

- Millennials spend at least as much time with relatives or friends, and hanging out at bars, as preceding generations.
- This commitment to relatively high rates of face-to-face interaction continues even as millennials use social media at unprecedented rates.
- The millennial generation—unlike previous ones—has all but closed this digital divide between poor and nonpoor.

For the millennial generation, it is the best and worst of times. Stocks are booming, unemployment is low, college attainment is high, and violence continues to decline. Yet income and wealth inequality have reached historic heights. The low unemployment rate masks the hundreds of thousands who have simply stopped looking for work and the millions who work in unstable positions with few benefits. The educational debt of millennials is greater than that of any preceding generation. And the cost of housing is far greater than it has ever been, leaving many millennials to wonder if they will ever own a home.¹

Given this environment, the ability to manage uncertainty and instability is as essential as ever, and one of the most important ways of doing so is by turning to one's social networks. Networks play a role in just about every aspect of managing such circumstances, including how people find jobs, how much they borrow for college, whether they go to college at all, how well they invest their wages, and whether they buy or rent a home. In precarious times, networks are especially important as buffers; as people lose a home, a job, or a spouse, networks affect whether a short-term shock becomes a long-term problem. Networks serve as sources of instrumental, informational, and emotional support; they lie at the intersection of economic, social, and emotional conditions that determine how well people fare during uncertain times.² The purpose of this article is to examine

the types of networks that millennials are forging and how those networks are serving them.

Connections

How well connected are millennials? The first generation to grow up online, millennials are said to be socially disengaged—so attached to the internet and social media that they have disconnected from real social ties and developed less meaningful relationships than those of generations that preceded them. Journalists have suggested that Facebook and other social media may be making everyone lonely.³ For millennials, living online may have undermined the formation of protective social networks.

To assess these claims, we turn to the General Social Survey (GSS). Since the early 1970s, the GSS has asked representative samples of Americans several questions about their social networks. The results are instructive.⁴

One widely believed change has probably not taken place. About a decade ago, the national media reported on the results of a study that seemed to show that Americans had fewer confidants than they did in the 1980s. However, those reports were based on a single study that reported on one GSS survey question, asked in 1985 and 2004, which elicited from respondents whom they turned to when they had important matters to discuss. Subsequent research unveiled several problems with the 2004 survey, problems that undermined its ability to help us understand

trends in the number of confidants. Americans continue to have, on average, about three people they talk to about important matters.⁵

But there are other ways of understanding social connectedness. The internet and smart-phones have been said to affect the very nature of socialization—rather than socializing with family, friends, and neighbors, people are said to lose themselves online, mindlessly scrolling websites for hours on their phones. Millennials are the first generation for whom such changes were a possibility.

Figure 1 shows the extent to which people aged 20–35, at different points over the past 40 years, socialize with relatives, with neighbors, with friends, and with anyone at a bar. Millennials spanned that age bracket in 2016. For comparison, Gen Xers did so in roughly 2000; baby boomers in approximately 1984.

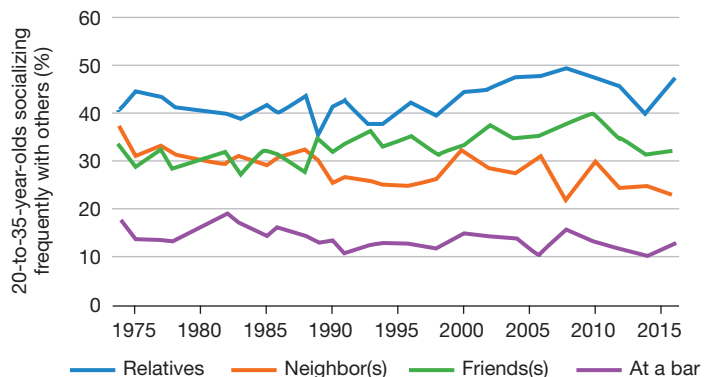
The figure makes clear that millennials spend at least as much time with relatives or friends, and hanging out at bars, as 20-to-35-year-olds have been doing since at least the 1970s. More than 47 percent socialized with relatives at least several times a week; more than 30 percent did so with friends; more than 13 percent did so at bars. If we include those who only saw relatives, friends, or anyone at a bar several times a month, the corresponding figures are 67 percent, 57 percent, and 27 percent, respectively (not shown). None of these percentages have declined substantially over the past four decades.

There is only one major change: Millennials spend a lot less time with their neighbors than previous cohorts did, a decline in frequent socialization among 20-to-35-year-olds from 37 percent in 1974 to 23 percent in 2016. It follows that millennials build and maintain relations interpersonally just as much as their predecessors did—but their neighbors play a notably lesser role in the process.

Social media

A more complicated picture emerges when we examine social media. Different media do different things, and they can help people manage economic uncertainties in different ways. LinkedIn is a way to make professional connections, not to maintain intimate friendships. Twitter has become, among other things, a way to mobilize collectively around economic and political issues, as evidenced by #OccupyWallStreet and #BlackLivesMatter.

Figure 1. Millennials socialize with friends and families as frequently as prior generations.



Note: Percent of respondents who socialized “almost daily” or “several times per week.”
Source: General Social Survey; 2016 data from the 1972–2016 cross-sectional cumulative data.

Facebook, the largest social media site by far, has multiple uses, including venting and receiving social support.

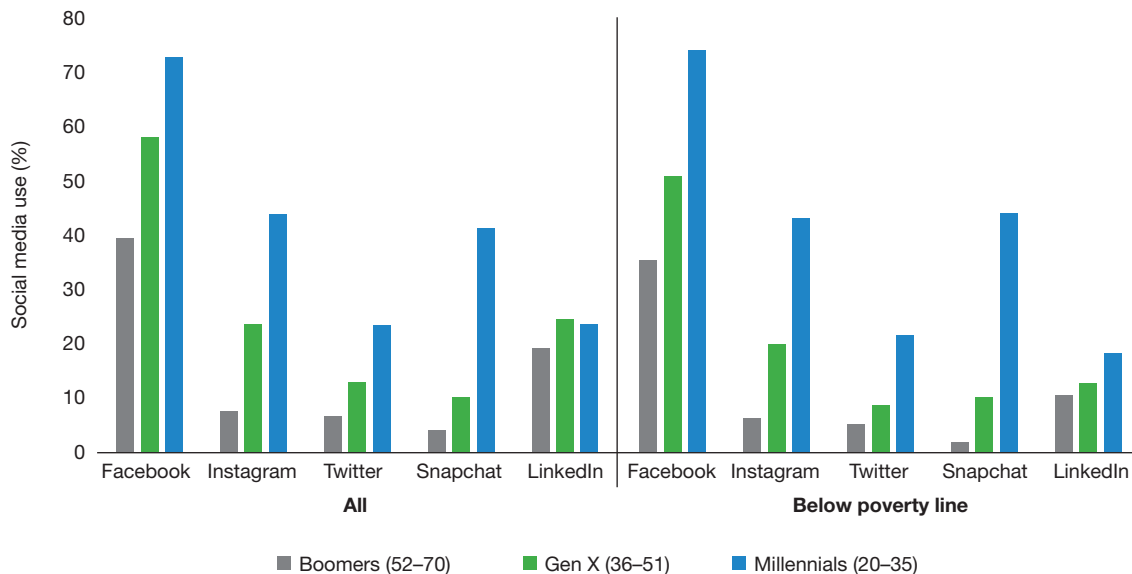
Figure 2 shows the rates of social media use in 2016 by representative samples of millennials, Gen Xers, and baby boomers in the United States. The left panel is for all respondents; the right one for those whose income falls below the poverty line. Several patterns are worth noting.

First, the left panel shows that, as expected, millennials (gray bars) use social media sites more frequently, with Facebook being all but ubiquitous in this generation.

Second, a comparison of the left and right panels shows that the social media divide between poor and nonpoor is smaller among millennials than among Gen Xers or among baby boomers. Low-income millennials use almost every social media site reported about as often as millennials in general.

Third, the most professionally oriented site, LinkedIn, shows an interesting exception to these patterns. Low-income millennials use it notably less than other millennials. And millennials in general, as shown in the left panel, do not use it more (at 24%) than Gen Xers (25%), and they use it only slightly more than baby boomers (19%). This reduced use of LinkedIn might arise because many millennials are still in college or otherwise

Figure 2. The social media divide between poor and nonpoor is smaller among millennials than prior generations.



Note: Poverty line is defined as \$26,000 in real family income.
Source: General Social Survey; 2016 data from the 1972–2016 cross-sectional cumulative data.

not yet in the professional world. Or it is possible that they are using their regular, or new, social media sites for work connections.

Conclusion

Millennials appear to have as much access to face-to-face social networks essential to managing economically uncertain times as previous generations. They also socialize online at unprecedented rates. It is *not* the case that millennials are replacing face-to-face networks with online ones. Rather than substituting one form of socialization for another, millennials are successfully merging a commitment to online socializing with maintain-

ing face-to-face ties. This conclusion holds for poor and nonpoor millennials alike.

For these reasons, millennials would seem to have ample social resources at their disposal to manage uncertainty. As the digital divide has receded, even low-income millennials have developed substantial online resources. Yet it remains to be seen whether these resources are substantial enough to protect millennials against what may prove to be an especially stormy 21st century.

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Notes

1. See Fry, Richard. 2017. "It's Becoming More Common for Young Adults to Live at Home—And for Longer Stretches." Pew Research Center.
2. Small, Mario L. 2017. *Someone to Talk To*. New York: Oxford University Press.
3. Marche, Stephen. 2012. "Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?" *Atlantic*, May.
4. Fischer, Claude. 2011. *Still Connected: Family and Friends in America Since 1970*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
5. For a discussion of these issues, including the debates, see Small, 2017.