

HYPERREAL CARTOGRAPHIES OF FRIENDSHIP FROM GEN. A TO GEN. ALPHA

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Abstract

This study, *Hyperreal Cartographies of Friendship from Gen A to Gen Alpha*, examines the evolution of friendship from Generation A to Generation Alpha, focusing on its implications for human relationships and communication. Grounded in Jean Baudrillard's Theory of Hyperreality (1981), the research utilized a historical-comparative design, analyzing archival materials, scholarly articles, and digital records to compare friendship patterns across Generations A, Z, and Alpha. A virtual content analysis of social media interactions, particularly in Generation Alpha, was also included. The findings reveal a shift from physical proximity-based relationships to digital-first, technology-mediated friendships, with varying emotional depth. Based on these insights, the study recommended that parents, educators, and caregivers encourage balanced screen time and promote face-to-face interactions; that tech companies design platforms prioritizing empathy and authenticity; and that communication experts facilitate workshops to foster healthy online behaviours and intergenerational dialogue. The study concluded that just as every translator is a betrayer, so too every form of mediated interaction is potentially deceptive, thus at the heart of true friendship is face-face communication.

Keywords: Alpha, Cartographies, Connection, Friendship, Gen. Z and Hyperreal

Background to the study

The concept of friendship has been a basis of human connection since the dawn of civilization, with evidence of close relationships dating back to ancient civilizations such as Greece and Rome. In the era of Generation A, that is, between 1900 and 1945, friendship was often forged through shared experiences, community activities, and social clubs. These relationships were often characterized by face-to-face interaction, shared values, and a sense of loyalty. With the advent of World War II, friendships were tested by the challenges of war, leading to strong bonds between soldiers and civilians alike. The post-war era saw a rise in suburbanization, leading to the development of new forms of friendship based on neighbourhood ties and community networks. Despite these changes, the core values of friendship remained intact, with trust, loyalty, and mutual support at its core.

As the baby boomer generation of 1946 to 1964 came of age, friendship began to take on new forms. The rise of youth culture and the counterculture movement of the 1960s led to the development of new forms of friendship based on shared values, music, and fashion. The idealism of the era led to a focus on social justice and activism, with friendships forged in the crucible of social change. The women's liberation movement and the civil rights movement also led to new forms of friendship based on shared experiences and collective action. (Harris, 2017).

The Gen X era, spanning from 1965 to 1980, saw a shift towards more individualized forms of friendship. With the rise of suburbanization and the growth of the service sector, friendships became more fragmented and diverse. The advent of new technologies, such as the internet and mobile phones, also began to change the way people connected and maintained relationships. Despite these changes, the core values of friendship remained intact, with trust, loyalty, and mutual support at its core. However, the rise of latchkey kids and single-parent households led to a greater emphasis on peer relationships and a decline in adult mentorship.

Those born from 1981 to 1996 are referred to as millennial generation. They grew up in an age where there was exponential growth in technological invention and application. This brought in to them a friendship approach that was virtual, online and social media regulated. Those born between 1997 and 2012 constitute what is best referred to as Gen Z (Omoko & Okhueigbe, 2025). More than ever, friendship for them was more social media and internet regulated such that friendship could be requested, accepted, declined and scopeless. Yet, COVID-19 pandemic awakened the importance of face-to-face interactions and community building (Pew Research Centre, 2020). Looking ahead, Gen Alpha, born from 2013 onward, is growing up in a world where digital technology is even more integrated into daily life, shaping friendships that effortlessly blend virtual and physical interactions. This generation will traverse social landscapes influenced by highly developed technology, bringing about deeper emotional connections and community engagement in ways that reflect their unique experiences and challenges (Okhueigbe & Aduloju, 2023).

Through these changes, the core values of friendship has been changed, with trust, loyalty, and mutual support at which used to be its core forlornly bruised. The concept of "hyperreal cartographies" suggests that man's understanding of friendship is increasingly influenced by digital representations and replications of human connection. This raises questions about the nature of friendship in the digital age, where online identities and avatars can cloud the lines between reality and fantasy. The study of hyperreal cartographies of friendship cuts across different areas of study from sociology, mass communication, psychology, philosophy, and anthropology. Sociologists have sightsaw the role of friendship in shaping social networks and community structures, while psychologists have examined the emotional and cognitive processes underlying human friendship. Philosophers, on the other hand, have struggled with the metaphysical and ethical implications of friendship, questioning whether it is a natural, situational, or circumstantial phenomenon. Anthropologists have studied the cultural and historical variations of friendship, highlighting its diverse forms and expressions across different societies. In the context of communication studies, friendship is often viewed as a fundamental aspect of human interaction, sustaining man's ability to form and maintain relationships. Digital journalism, in particular, has created new opportunities for people to connect with each other, share experiences, and build communities around shared interests.

However, the rise of digital communication has also raised concerns about the erosion of face-to-face interaction, deep conversation, and emotional intimacy. Some argue that the shallowness of online connections can lead to a sense of isolation and disconnection, undermining the very foundations of human friendship. Others contend that digital communication can facilitate new forms of intimacy and connection, enabling people to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries (Egere & Okhueigbe, 2023). The debate surrounding the impact of digital technology on human friendship is multipart and thorny, requiring a good understanding of its benefits and downsides. The study of hyperreal cartographies of friendship offers a unique perspective on this debate, highlighting the ways in

which digital representations of human connection are reshaping journalists' understanding of friendship.

Statement of the Problem

The concept of friendship has evolved significantly across generations, influenced by cultural, technological, and social changes. From face-to-face interactions of Generation A to the hyper-connected digital ecosystems of Generation Alpha, friendship has transitioned into a multi-dimensional phenomenon shaped by hyperreal environments. However, there is a lack of comprehensive research exploring how these transformations redefine the nature, meaning, and implications of human connection across generational divides. This study seeks to address the gap by examining how friendships are forged, maintained, and conceptualized across these generations, and what this evolution means for the future of human communication.

Objectives

The main objective of this work was to explore and map the evolution of the concept and practice of friendship from Generation A to Generation Alpha, focusing on its implications for human relationships and communication. The specific objectives included, to:

1. examine the defining characteristics of friendship across different generational cohorts
2. analyze the impact of technological advancements on the formation and sustenance of friendships.
3. explore the role of hyperreal environments in shaping perceptions and practices of friendship in Generation Alpha.

Research Questions

1. What are the defining characteristics of friendship in Generations A, Z, and Alpha?
2. How have technological advancements influenced the way friendships are formed and sustained across these generations?
3. In what ways do hyperreal environments impact the nature of friendships in Generation Alpha?

Literature Review

Hyperreal

The term hyperreality is a combination of two words: hyper and reality. The work is best attributed to Baudrillard. According to him:

hyperreality, the virtual reality in which we live, structured by information and technology, is sustained on an amalgamation of elements which were previously separate, such as production and consumption, and by a dissipation of the system of values based on the illusion that economy and society have a defined meaning or any meaning at all (Baudrillard, 2001, p.)

Idealized online personalities and algorithm-driven connections intensify authenticity concerns (Papacharissi, 2019). For Borroso (2019, p.41), “hyperreality refers to something that does not actually exist. However, experiencing hyperreality may be so intense and realistic that one may

confuse, even for brief moments, what is real and what is not real”. Inferably, hyperreal friendships exist in liminal spaces, challenging traditional notions of intimacy and trust (Aristotle, 350 BCE).

Hyperreal Cartographies of Friendship

Cartography as used in this work is borrowed from the field of geography to mean mapping. Cartography, for Krack and Fabrikant (2020, p. 14) is no longer limited to paper maps but has evolved into an interactive and dynamic field of visual communication, where spatial data are encoded to support spatial thinking and decision-making.” This view is well supported by Field (2022, p. 7) who wrote that “cartography today is as much about storytelling with data as it is about accuracy and scale; it’s the creative and technical process of shaping spatial understanding.” This view of the communication dimension of Cartography is pushed further by Crampton (2023, p.65) who views it as “a techno-political practice that transforms spatial information into visual knowledge, influenced by both scientific principles and sociocultural narratives.”

Generational Evolution: A to Alpha

Human relationships have evolved across generations, shaped by technological, social, and cultural shifts. Generation A (The Lost Generation, 1883-1900) accentuated community and family ties. Generation B (The Greatest Generation, 1901-1927) valued loyalty and duty. Generation C (The Silent Generation, 1928-1945) ranked loyalty and traditional norms. Baby Boomers (1946-1964) focused on family, community, and social change. Generation X (1965-1980) emphasized individualism and technological adoption. Millennials (1981-1996) were molded by digital technologies and social media. Generation Z (1997-2012) marked the beginning of digital natives (Omoko & Okhueigbe, 2025). Generation Alpha (2013-2025) grows up amidst hyperreality and immersive technologies. As generations progress, relationships moved from physical proximity to digital nearness (Effiong & Okhueigbe, 2025). Generation Alpha's hyperreal cartographies of friendship blur boundaries between authenticity and artifice. Concerns arise about mental health, social skills, and addiction. Traditional notions of intimacy, community, and identity are reexamined (Osifo & Okhueigbe, 2025). The emergence of Generation Beta (2026-2040) will likely introduce new dynamics, shaped by advanced AI, VR, and sustainable technologies. Understanding these generational shifts informs strategies for fostering meaningful relationships, addressing societal challenges, and navigating the complexities of human connection in the digital age.

Empirical Review

Table I: Defining characteristics of friendship in Generations A, Z, and Alpha

Generation	Key Characteristics of Friendship	Technology Influence	Hyperreal Impact
Generation A (1900-1945) Traditionalists	Face-to-face, community-based, lifelong bonds	Limited, mainly letters and early telephones	Minimal impact, friendships based on physical proximity
Generation B (1946-1964) Baby Boomers	Close-knit, family-oriented, shared activities	Televisions and early forms of media	Increased awareness of friendships through media influence
Generation X (1965-1980)	Independent, skeptical, balance of online/offline	Email, early social media, personal computers	Growing impact of online interactions, but still valued face-to-face relationships
Millennials (Gen Y) (1981-1996)	Networked, value authenticity, experience-driven	Social media, smartphones, instant messaging	Blurred boundaries between online and offline friendships; value in both
Generation Z (1997-2012)	Digital-first, superficial, trend-driven	Social media, texting, instant messaging	Ephemeral, influenced by online trends and platforms
Generation Alpha (2013-present)	Avatar-based, immersive, gamified friendships	Virtual reality, avatars, immersive digital worlds	Hyperreal friendships, blurred line between real and virtual

Impact of Technological Advancements on the Formation and Sustenance of Friendships

Technological advancements have significantly restyled how friendships are formed and maintained, particularly in Generations Z and Alpha. In Generation Z, the dawn of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat has led to a shift from physical proximity-based interactions to digital-first relationships (Omoko & Okhueigbe, 2025). These platforms enable prompt communication, allowing friendships to be sustained despite geographical barriers (Boyd, 2014). However, these relationships tend to be more superficial, often influenced by trends and the structure of online environments (Papacharissi, 2010). In contrast, Generation Alpha experiences an even more weighty transformation with the rise of immersive technologies like virtual reality (VR) and gaming worlds such as Roblox and Fortnite, where avatars and digital facades mediate interactions. These friendships, while enabling global connectivity and continuous interaction, often lack the emotional depth found in face-to-face relationships due to the absence of physical presence (Baudrillard, 1981; Anderson et al., 2022). Overall, technological advancements have expanded the reach and accessibility of friendships, but they have also raised concerns about the depth and authenticity of these connections (Turkle, 2015).

Table 2: *Impact of Technological Advancements on the Formation and Sustenance of Friendships*

Generation Z (1995-2010)	Shift to digital-first friendships through social media; instant communication replaces physical proximity. Friendships are trend-driven and often superficial.	Boyd, D. (2014). <i>It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens</i> . Yale University Press. Papacharissi, Z. (2010). <i>A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age</i> . Polity.
Generation Alpha (2010-Present)	Immersive technologies (VR, gaming) dominate, with avatars and digital personas mediating friendships. These relationships transcend geographical limits but lack emotional depth.	Baudrillard, J. (1981). <i>Simulacra and Simulation</i> . University of Michigan Press. Anderson, C., et al. (2022). <i>Virtual Communities and Friendships in Gaming</i> . Journal of Digital Sociology.
General Impact of Technology	Technology has facilitated global and continuous interaction, making friendships more flexible and accessible but often reducing the emotional connection.	Turkle, S. (2015). <i>Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age</i> . Penguin Press

Hyperreal environments impact the nature of friendships in Generation Alpha

Generation Alpha's friendships are shaped by hyperreal environments, where the distinction between real and virtual is blurred (Baudrillard, 1981). Virtual gaming worlds and metaverses like Roblox, Minecraft, and Fortnite facilitate avatar-mediated interactions, allowing for global connectivity and 24/7 engagement. These friendships are flexible, accessible, and screen-mediated but often lack emotional depth due to the absence of physical presence (Anderson, 2022; Wang, 2023). According to Baudrillard's Simulacra Theory (1981), hyperreality replaces reality, and Goffman's Social Interaction Theory (1959) emphasizes how digital performances shape identity. Turkle's Virtual Intimacy Theory (2015) further explores how technology redefines human connection. Empirical findings, such as surveys from Pew Research Centre (2020), indicate that 70% of Gen Alpha maintain friendships online, while case studies by Hamari & Koivisto (2015) examine the prevalence of hyperreal friendships in gaming communities.

Table 3: *Hyperreal environments impact on the nature of friendships in Generation Alpha*

Characteristics	Effects	References
Avatar-mediated interaction	Reduced emotional depth	Anderson (2022), Wang (2023)
Global connectivity	Increased accessibility	Pew Research Center (2020)
24/7 interaction	Flexibility, potential social isolation	Hertz (2019)
Hyperreal intimacy	Blurred lines between real/virtual relationships	Baudrillard (1981)
Virtual shared experiences	Enhanced collaborative learning	Hamari & Koivisto (2015)
Algorithm-driven connections	Influenced friendship formation	Király et al. (2019)
Curated online personas	Shaped identity, potential authenticity concerns	Turkle (2015)
Immersive technologies	Enhanced engagement, potential addiction risks	Kuss & Griffiths (2017)
Screen-mediated communication	Reduced face-to-face interaction skills	Prensky (2017)

Theoretical Framework

This study is moored on **Jean Baudrillard's Theory of Hyperreality (1981)**. Baudrillard's theory holds that in the postmodern era, reality is replaced by simulations and representations, creating "hyperreal" experiences where the distinction between the real and the virtual liquefies. This framework is particularly relevant to understanding how digital environments reshape friendships, especially for Generation Alpha, who principally experience connections through virtual spaces. The hyperreal nature of digital interactions hazes the line between genuine and sham relationships, posing precarious insights into how technological advancements redefine human connections and communication across generational divides.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a historical-comparative research design, which is highly suitable for analyzing the evolution of friendship across generations without needing fieldwork. By leveraging existing data, such as archival materials, books, scholarly articles, and digital records, the design eases a systematic comparison of friendship patterns across Generations A, Z, and Alpha. Additionally, the study integrates a virtual content analysis of social media interactions and digital communities, focusing on Generation Alpha. This approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of historical and contemporary contexts, emphasizing the interplay of technology, culture, and human connection without the need for direct participant engagement.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of friendship across Generations A, Z, and Alpha shows notable changes in relationship dynamics influenced by technological expansions and changing societal contexts. In the earlier generations, such as Generation A (1900-1945), friendships were largely molded by physical propinquity and community immersion, with close-knit, lifelong bonds rooted in family and shared experiences. These relationships were often formed through face-to-face interactions, meetings, and technologies such as letters and early telephones had a limited impact on altering the nature of these bonds. The defining feature of friendship in this era was the stress on fidelity, stability, and a sense of belonging to a close community. The relationships were grounded in face-to-face socialization, and the communication technologies available at the time did not yet have the capacity to redefine the traditional understanding of friendship. This fact supports the idea of *continuity*—relationships formed mainly around physical presence and real-world connections, with technology playing a secondary role.

As time moves into Generation B (1946-1964) and Generation C (1965-1980), the technological landscape started to shift, introducing media, televisions, and the early stages of the internet, which subtly altered the way friendships were developed and sustained. These generations valued loyalty and familial bonds, but they also started witnessing the impact of mediated interactions. While friendships were still heavily rooted in physical spaces, such as neighborhoods and social circles, the rise of mass media and early social technologies provided new paths for connecting with distant friends or consociates. Generation X (1965-1980) progressively embraced technology, becoming the first generation to integrate digital tools like email and early social media platforms into their relationships. These tools allowed individuals to maintain friendships beyond physical boundaries, but still, face-to-face interactions were vital and practiced. Friendships during this time were characterized by a balance of both online and offline relationships, leading to a new type of *hybrid friendship*—one that mixed both digital and real-world connections. However, even with the rise of digital technologies, the core values of friendship, such as loyalty, community, and authenticity, remained crucial.

The advent of Generation Z (1997-2012) and Generation Alpha (2013-present) marks a histrionic shift in how friendships are formed and sustained. With the dawn of social media, texting, and instant messaging, Generation Z developed friendships that were often superficial and trend-driven, intensely influenced by platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. These digital-first friendships were fleeting, often based on image and online endorsement rather than long-term commitment. Friendships in this generation were increasingly shaped by the desire for public recognition and online status, with platforms offering immediate ways of connecting but also contributing to a *performance of friendship*—relationships that prioritized visibility over depth.

Generation Alpha takes this trend even to advanced level, growing up with technologies such as virtual reality, avatars, and immersive digital worlds. Friendships in this generation are often avatar-based and gamified, where interactions occur largely in virtual spaces, with much less emphasis on the need for physical presence. The hyperreal nature of these friendships, where the distinction between real and virtual blurs, challenges traditional impressions of intimacy, emotional depth, and identity. These friendships, while offering unmatched connectivity, raise concerns about the development of social skills, emotional intelligence, and the long-term effects on mental health. As these relationships evolve, they reflect a *redefinition* of social connection, where the lines between authenticity and artificiality are increasingly difficult to

discern, reflecting the complex interplay of technology and human connection in contemporary society.

The analysis of the impact of technological advancements on the formation and sustenance of friendships across Generations Z and Alpha reveals insightful shifts in relational dynamics. In Generation Z, the transition from physical proximity-based relationships to digital-first interactions marks a significant departure from traditional modes of friendship. The spread of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat has enabled instant communication, exceeding geographical barricades. However, as stressed by Boyd (2014) and Papacharissi (2010), these digital relationships are often feigning, influenced more by online trends and the structure of virtual spaces than by deep emotional connection. The friendships in this generation are increasingly characterized by "trend-driven" and "surface-level connections," suggesting that while these platforms facilitate widespread and continuous interaction, they lack the emotional depth inherent in face-to-face relationships. This shift reflects a larger *thematic* trend in which technology democratizes access to relationships but at the cost of intimacy and authenticity, often raising concerns about the long-term psychological and social impacts of such interactions (Turkle, 2015).

The experience of Generation Alpha presents an even more dramatic transformation, as the advent of immersive technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and online gaming worlds like Roblox and Fortnite redefines social engagement. In this generation, avatars and digital personas have become central to the friendship experience, where interactions occur in virtual spaces rather than in physical spaces. Baudrillard's (1981) concept of *simulacra* and *simulation* provides a critical lens to understand how these friendships distort the lines between the real and the virtual. These immersive environments facilitate global connectivity and continuous interaction, yet as Anderson et al. (2022) and Baudrillard (1981) suggest, the relationships they foster often lack the emotional depth of traditional face-to-face friendships. The *meta-syntactic* code of "global yet emotionally shallow" reflects the dyad of technological advancements in friendship formation—enabling access to a broader social world while simultaneously eroding the richness of relational bonds. The broader *content analysis* of this shift accentuates the tension between enhanced connectivity and the erosion of authentic human connection, highlighting the need for critical reflection on how these technologies shape the emotional and social fabric of future generations.

Meta-synthetic analysis, integrating findings from multiple studies, reveals a complex interchange between technology and human connection. Discourse analysis identified overriding narratives, including the tension between authenticity and artifice, and the redefinition of intimacy in the digital age. Content analysis of surveys and case studies (Pew Research Centre, 2020; Hamari & Koivisto, 2015) stressed the commonness of hyperreal friendships in gaming communities and the influence of algorithm-driven connections on friendship formation. Király et al.'s (2019) findings on the curatorial nature of online personas were particularly insightful, highlighting the performative aspect of digital identity. This study validates the need for adaptive, dynamic approaches to understanding friendship in hyperreal environments, recognizing both the benefits (e.g., enhanced collaborative learning) and hitches (e.g., reduced face-to-face interaction skills) of these evolving relationships.

Conclusion

Friendship is an integral aspect of human existence, deeply plaited into the fabric of societal structures and relations, and cannot be easily traded or weakened by kinship systems. Throughout history, it has manifested in various forms, from the weighty and loyal bond between David and Jonathan, to the tragic yet penetrating love of Romeo and Juliet, and, at its most painful, the betrayal between Julius Caesar and Brutus. Despite the fluctuations in its expression, friendship has survived across generations, cultures, and historical contexts. To retain its authentic relevance in the modern world, however, it must go beyond mere communication, with physical presence remaining a crucial component. Just as every translator is a betrayer, so too can every form of mediated interaction be seen as potentially deceptive. Fundamentally, humans are physical beings, driven by emotions and interests that can only be fully realized through direct, face-to-face engagement. This physical connection lies at the heart of true friendship, providing the essential space where human bonds are formed, nurtured, and sustained.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, these recommendations were made:

1. Parents, educators and caregivers should help to create a balance by helping those under them to limit screen time, promote face-to-face interactions, and engage in community activities to foster deeper friendships.
2. Tech companies, game developers, and social media platforms designers should prioritize emotional depth, empathy, and authenticity in online interactions.
3. Communication experts should provide workshops, training, and inter-generational dialogue to promote responsible online behavior, digital citizenship, and healthy friendship skills.

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