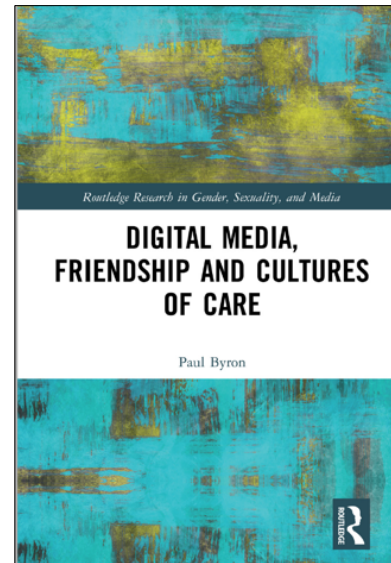


Paul Byron, **Digital Media, Friendship and Cultures of Care**, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020, 200 pp., \$44.05 (eBook).

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The concept of “digital cultures of care” offers a productive model through which to consider young people’s experiences and practices of giving and receiving support, as well as how friendships and other intimacies are shaped by, and give shape to, digital media practices. (pp. 1–2)

In his most recent endeavor, **Digital Media, Friendship and Cultures of Care**, author Paul Byron draws on over a decade of research experience to highlight the use of social media in youth culture as a means of deepening and/or developing friendships by both providing and benefiting from support networks, what he refers to as digital cultures of care. The book serves as a call-to-action for researchers and youth practitioners alike to push beyond the tendency of using a risk-based approach to youth and media, as well as dismissing peer-based, informal care as an inaccurate source of information and/or support.



Conclusions and analyses in the book are primarily drawn from six qualitative research initiatives in various parts of Australia that Byron (along with a variety of other scholars) conducted between 2009 and 2019. All of these projects focus on young people’s use of social media, particularly surrounding themes of sex, identity, and mental health. While all of the cited research generally speaks to young people, a particular focus is given to LGBTQ+ youth and their social media practices surrounding both mental and sexual health. This is fitting, as Byron draws on queer (and feminist) theory throughout much of the book.

Chapter 1 focuses on conceptualizing friendship, before further specifying to online friendship practices. Byron draws on previous theorizations of friendship from Aristotle and Foucault, as well as from popular culture examples, such as The Spice Girls and *Broad City* (Glazer & Jacobson, 2010–2011). Discussion then leads to social media platforms as a potential setting for everyday, informal cultures of care. Overall, Byron suggests that youth go online to further develop existing friendships rather than to seek new ones, therefore disproving pre-existing arguments of online friendships lacking the same validity as offline friendships. These online/offline relationships are interchangeable, and online is often a place where intimacy and care among friends is further developed.

In chapter 2, Byron draws on the previous chapters’ discussion of friendship to contrast it against the pre-existing notions of peers and peer education within the health sector before introducing the concept of peer support. Peer education used for youth intervention in areas such as sexual wellness or mental health differs greatly from the examples of informal support witnessed online. Formal peer education maintains the

“top-down” approach used in traditional education settings rather than the horizontal forms of peer support and guidance that are seen in digital cultures of care.

Chapter 3 highlights young people as social media experts, and Byron argues that this theme is often overlooked in health sectors when designing youth-oriented interventions. This ties into the previous chapters’ critique of current peer education pedagogies, encouraging the health sector to utilize young people’s expertise on digital platforms to create more accurate forms of digital outreach and support. This methodology aligns with an emerging approach to researching youth in which young people assume a participatory role by being interviewed for insight on a certain phenomenon rather than simply being observed. Recent studies such as both Goldstein’s (2020) work with youth and sex education and Berger and colleagues’ (2021) work on LGBTQ+ youth online support networks reinforce Byron’s argument of better incorporating youth voice into research.

Chapters 4 and 6 extend themes of friendship into an intersectional space with sex and intimacy. Both chapters focus on the intimate knowledge of friends’ sex practices among young people, from details of sex lives and assisting friends in using dating/hookup apps to having sex with friends for purposes beyond the traditional reasons for sexual intimacy. This further supports Byron’s argument that young people have much deeper insights, not only into the digital platforms they use but also into their peers’ needs surrounding sexual health. Furthermore, fact-based education provided by formal care resources does not account for the cultures of care that extend beyond the space of education and into that of support.

Finally, chapter 5 highlights levels of peer support surrounding mental health for LGBTQ+ youth. Most of the discussion focuses on digital cultures of care for LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse youth on Tumblr. Tumblr provides a unique architecture for peer support, as it allows for a certain amount of anonymity, and much of the support comes from sharing lived experiences among unknown peers, differing from common digital cultures of care seen in heterosexual and cisgender youth, who often gain support from pre-existing friendships.

The book in its entirety provides noteworthy recurring themes that I argue are relevant today in the field of youth and media research. Byron makes a point not to rigidly decipher between online and offline realities, acknowledging that “online” refers to a multitude of interconnected platforms that serve different audiences, and to move beyond a risk-based approach to researching young people’s online cultures.

This work showcases how friendship—for youth—serves as a main source of constructing meaning surrounding themes of intimacy and sexuality, with social media platforms serving as key spaces where they can put this into practice. Byron approaches social media as an interconnected web of digital platforms that differ from one another and are used often in tandem to achieve specific goals. His work presents the idea that social media needs to be considered as an omnipresent existence that extends youth networks. Byron uses the term “digital cultures of care” to fully acknowledge that the care both given and taken from social media benefits from the intimacies of friendships and the structure of certain platforms, leading to a level of care that is not achieved through traditional “hierarchies of care” (p. 174).

Byron’s work serves as a call-to-action to healthcare professionals, encouraging the health sector to implement the benefits of digital cultures of care into their practices. Byron critiques traditional health promotion for neglecting to see friendship networks as areas of shared identity and judgement-free listening,

where youth work together to negotiate and construct meaning around mental health and sexuality. Additionally, he points to the ineffectiveness of moving formal care online, as it simply injects pre-existing messages into informal spaces without considering how care is already being given and sought out in these spaces. His work also adds to the literature that demonstrates that binary conceptions of online and offline life are inadequate for understanding modern digital cultures of care. Often, "offline" friendships are further strengthened through online modes of care, making this yet another binary that is outdated.

I strongly recommend *Digital Media, Friendship and Cultures of Care* to anyone who feels that they would benefit from better integrating digital youth culture into research and/or praxis application. This book serves as a refreshing reminder to academics and researchers alike that studying youth digital culture can be approached from an optimistic perspective. Throughout the book, it is apparent that Byron and all of his former research associates have addressed questions of online digital culture by highlighting young people's voices, blurring the dichotomy of online versus offline relationships, and removing social media from its risk-ridden framework to discover potential benefits of digital youth culture. These findings fill a gap in youth research that focuses on how young people showcase peer support online, rather than the risk-based approach that limits youth to being vulnerable, gullible receivers that need protection. Instead of seeing social media as a *potentially* hazardous setting for youth, Byron leans into the *realities* of online youth culture and utilizes young people's expertise to further knowledge about the intersectionality of these platforms.

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