



Online Friendships

Are Digital Connections Real?

Can you have a true friend you have never met in person?

■ B1 Reading ■ 30 min ■ People & Relationships

Level	B1 (Intermediate)
Skill	Reading
Topic	People & Relationships
Duration	30 minutes
Age Group	Teens & Adults

Learning Objectives

- ◆ Read and understand a text about the phenomenon of online friendships
- ◆ Learn 15 key vocabulary items related to communication and technology
- ◆ Evaluate arguments for and against digital friendships
- ◆ Discuss personal experiences with online and offline relationships
- ◆ Write about a personal experience or opinion on online friendship

1 Before You Read — Digital Friends

Think about your online relationships and discuss:

1. Do you have any friends you met online? How did you meet them?
2. Have you ever felt closer to someone online than to people you see every day?
3. What is the difference between an online friend and an in-person friend?

2 Reading: Friends Behind Screens

Friends Behind Screens: The New Age of Friendship

Twenty years ago, telling someone that your best friend was a person you had never met face-to-face would have seemed strange, perhaps even worrying. Today, it is completely normal. Millions of people around the world form deep, meaningful **connections** with others they have only ever spoken to through screens — via online games, social media platforms, forums, and messaging apps. The nature of friendship is changing, and the question that divides opinion is simple: are these digital friendships real?

The numbers suggest this is no small **trend**. Research shows that nearly 60 percent of teenagers say they have made a close friend online, and for many young people, the distinction between "online" and "offline" friends has become almost meaningless. They chat, share secrets, support each other through difficult times, and laugh together — the only difference is the **medium** through which they communicate.

How Online Friendships Form

Online friendships typically develop around shared **interests**. Gaming communities, fan groups, language learning platforms, and hobbyist forums bring together people who might never have met in their geographical area. A teenager in a small German town can become best friends with someone in South Korea through a shared love of a particular video game. A university student struggling with anxiety can find a **supportive** community online where people understand exactly what they are going through.

This is one of the greatest strengths of online friendship: it breaks down **barriers**. Geography, social class, age, and even language become less important when people connect over shared passions and experiences. For people who are shy, introverted, or who live in isolated areas, the internet can be a lifeline — providing social connection that would otherwise be impossible.

The Case For: Real Emotions, Real Bonds

Advocates of online friendship argue that the emotional content of a relationship matters far more than the physical setting. If you trust someone, confide in them, support them through hard times, and feel genuinely happy when you talk to them, does it matter whether you are sitting next to them or typing on a keyboard? Research supports this view: brain scans show that the emotional response to receiving a **heartfelt** message from an online friend activates the same brain regions as a hug from a friend standing beside you.

Online friendships can also be more **honest** in some ways. Without the social pressure of face-to-face interaction, some people find it easier to express their true feelings, share personal struggles, and be vulnerable. The anonymity and distance can paradoxically create a space for deeper emotional honesty than a coffee shop conversation.

The Case Against: What Gets Lost Online

Critics, however, point out that something important is lost when friendship moves entirely online. Non-verbal communication — facial expressions, tone of voice, physical touch, shared silence — makes up a huge portion of human connection. A text message saying "I am fine" can mean completely different things depending on the sender's face and tone, and without those cues, **misunderstandings** are common.

There are also legitimate safety concerns, particularly for young people. Not everyone online is who they claim to be, and the risk of **manipulation**, catfishing, and exploitation is real. Parents and educators rightly worry about children forming deep attachments with strangers whose identity cannot be verified. Digital literacy — the ability to evaluate online interactions critically and protect yourself — is an essential skill in the modern world.

The Future of Friendship

The truth, as is often the case, lies somewhere in the middle. Online friendships are real — the emotions, support, and connections they provide are **genuine**. But they work best as a complement to, not a replacement for, face-to-face relationships. The strongest social networks are those that combine both: friends you see in person regularly and friends you connect with digitally across distances.

As technology continues to evolve — with video calls becoming more natural, virtual reality creating shared spaces, and translation tools breaking down language barriers — the line between online and offline friendship will continue to blur. The future of friendship is not about choosing between screens and faces. It is about using every tool available to build connections that are honest, supportive, and meaningful — no matter where they start.

3 Key Vocabulary

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
connections	relationships or links between people	Millions form meaningful connections with people they meet online.
trend	a general direction of change or development	Online friendship is a growing trend, especially among young people.
medium	the method or channel used to communicate	The only difference is the medium — screen versus face-to-face.
interests	activities or subjects that you enjoy and care about	Online friendships often form around shared interests and hobbies.
supportive	providing encouragement, help, and emotional care	Online communities can be incredibly supportive for people in difficulty.
barriers	obstacles that prevent movement or progress	The internet breaks down barriers of geography and social class.
advocates	people who publicly support or recommend something	Advocates say online friendships are just as real as offline ones.
heartfelt	deeply and sincerely felt; genuine	A heartfelt message online can be as meaningful as a hug.
honest	truthful and sincere; not hiding anything	Some people find it easier to be honest online than face-to-face.

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
critics	people who express disapproval or disagreement	Critics argue that something is lost when friendship moves online.
misunderstandings	situations where someone fails to understand correctly	Without body language, online misunderstandings are common.
manipulation	controlling or influencing someone unfairly or dishonestly	The risk of manipulation exists in all online relationships.
genuine	truly what it appears to be; authentic and real	The emotions in online friendships are genuine and meaningful.
complement	something that completes or adds to something else	Online friendships work best as a complement to offline ones.
evolve	to develop gradually over time; to change and improve	As technology evolves, the line between online and offline blurs.

4 Useful Collocations

online community · social media · video call · virtual reality · digital literacy · face-to-face interaction · shared interests · emotional support · personal information · private message · friend request · screen time · online safety · build trust · stay connected · long-distance friendship

5 Reading Comprehension

1. What percentage of teenagers say they have made a close friend online?

- a) About 30%
- b) About 45%
- c) About 60% ✓**
- d) About 80%

2. How do most online friendships begin?

- a) Through random contact from strangers
- b) Through shared interests in games, forums, or communities ✓**
- c) Through school assignments
- d) Through dating apps

3. What do brain scans reveal about online friendships?

- a) That online messages do not affect the brain
- b) That a heartfelt online message activates the same brain regions as a real hug ✓**
- c) That online friends cause stress in the brain
- d) That the brain cannot distinguish between friends

4. Why can online friendships sometimes be MORE honest?

- a) Because people must use their real names
- b) Because there is less social pressure, making vulnerability easier ✓**
- c) Because computers detect lies automatically
- d) Because online friends never disagree

5. What is the biggest safety concern about online friendships?

- a) That they cost too much money
- b) That people may not be who they claim to be ✓**
- c) That they take too much time
- d) That they replace the need for exercise

6. What does the text conclude about the future of friendship?

- a) Online friendships will completely replace offline ones
- b) Only offline friendships are worth having
- c) The best approach combines both online and offline connections ✓**
- d) Technology is destroying all human relationships

6 Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blanks

Complete the sentences with the correct word from the box:

connections · barriers · medium · supportive · misunderstandings · genuine · complement · manipulation

1. Millions of people form deep, meaningful _____ with friends they have never met.
2. The internet breaks down _____ of geography, class, and language.
3. The only difference between online and offline friends is the _____ of communication.
4. Online communities can be incredibly _____ for people going through difficult times.
5. Without body language, _____ are more common in text-based conversations.

6. The emotions in well-established online friendships are _____ and meaningful.
7. Digital friendships work best as a _____ to face-to-face relationships.
8. Parents worry about the risk of _____ and dishonesty in online interactions.

7 Answer Key

■ Vocabulary Exercise Answers

1. connections
2. barriers
3. medium
4. supportive
5. misunderstandings
6. genuine
7. complement
8. manipulation

8 Speaking & Writing Tasks

■ Speaking Task: Discussion

Discuss these questions with a partner or your teacher:

- Do you consider your online friends 'real' friends? Why or why not?
- What are the biggest risks of forming friendships online? How can you stay safe?
- Do you think future generations will see no difference between online and offline friends?
- Is it possible to truly know someone you have never met in person?

■ Useful Phrases for Presenting Both Sides

- **On the one hand**, online friendships allow people to connect across borders. **On the other hand**, they lack physical presence.
- **Some people argue that** digital connections are just as real as face-to-face ones.
- **However, others believe that** something important is lost without body language and touch.
- **While it is true that** online friendships can be honest, they also carry safety risks.
- **In my view**, the best approach is to combine both online and offline friendships.

 **Writing Task: My Online Friend**

Write a paragraph (120–160 words) about this topic:

"Do you have a friend you met online? Describe how you met, what you have in common, and why this friendship is important to you. If you do not have online friends, explain why and whether you would like to."

Use vocabulary from this lesson. Include your personal opinion on whether online friendships are as valuable as face-to-face ones.