

Self Disclosure on Social Networking Websites and
Relationship Quality in Late Adolescence

By

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ABSTRACT

Due to adolescents' increasing use of the internet for social reasons, an examination of how internet usage related to relationships with significant figures is important to investigate. Social networking websites, which contain profiles connected by links to friends, continue increasing in popularity, with many adolescents accessing these sites daily. Thus, the internet has become an increasingly important social forum. This study builds upon prior research, by examining how older adolescents utilize social networking websites on the internet.

The study examined the usage of social networking websites among 166 undergraduate college students. The study measured how self disclosure on these websites relates to relationship quality with six important figures in adolescents' lives, including mothers, fathers, siblings, same gender friends, other gender friends and romantic partners. More specifically, two relationship quality factors were examined, social support and negative interaction. Measures used include the Degree of Self Disclosure on the Internet scale, Self Disclosure on the Internet Scale, and Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI).

This study found that those who self disclose more on their social networking profiles have higher social support from same gender friendships. There was no other significant relationship between self disclosure and relationship quality found. Demographic differences in self disclosure were also measured. Females self disclose significantly more than males. Regarding age differences, younger participants self disclose more than older participants. Ethnic differences were also

measured, but no significant differences in terms of ethnicity were found. Finally, there was no significant relationship between the amount of time spent on social networking websites and relationship quality with family, friends or romantic partners. Results are discussed in terms of their implications for adolescents' social and emotional development.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Adolescents use the internet to communicate with others at higher rates than any other age group. More than 80 percent of American adolescents use the internet, and nearly half log on daily. Typically, they engage in a variety of activities online, including doing schoolwork, playing games, shopping and downloading music; however, research shows that adolescents most often use the internet for social reasons (Whitlock, Powers, & Eckenrode, 2006). Therefore, understanding how internet use potentially influences their social and emotional development is important since adolescents spend so much time on this activity. Recently, researchers have begun examining implications of adolescent social interaction on the internet (Whitlock et al., 2006).

Relationships on the internet have been studied with mixed results. Kraut et al. (1998) examined a sample of families that, prior to the study, did not have computers in their homes. They were given computers as well as internet access, and after two years, a reliable but small increase was reported in depression and loneliness attributed to internet use. A later follow up of the same sample, however, found that these possible negative effects had disappeared, and positive psychological and social outcomes were found across almost all measures of adjustment (Kraut et al., 2002).

A large random-sample survey by Howard, Rainie, and Jones (2001) found that the internet allows people to stay in touch with family and friends and extend

their social networks. Many email users report that the internet increases the level of familial communication (Howard et al., 2001). Wellman, Haase, Witte and Hampton (2001) also conclude that heavy internet users use email to help maintain long distance relationships.

Relationship formation on the internet has also been examined. In an early study, Parks and Floyd (1995) administered a questionnaire about friendship formation on internet newsgroups, which are electronic bulletin boards about special interest topics. Their results found that online relationships are similar to those developed in person in terms of breadth, depth and quality. McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) also surveyed newsgroup users and found that a large proportion of subjects formed a close relationship with someone they met on the internet. More than half of these participants developed relationships that existed offline as well.

Gross, Juvonen and Gable (2002) found that adolescents with strong social connections use email and instant messaging to reinforce preexisting friendships; those with less developed social networks tend to use the internet in anonymous ways to find new friends. Therefore, chat rooms in which adolescents can share experiences may provide a safe way for those with less developed social skills to practice social interactions (Gross et al., 2002).

Research has found that online exchange decreases social isolation among adolescents and helps them connect with others and explore their identity (Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). The internet may serve as a virtual peer support group where adolescents can express feelings and share ways to cope with stress. Adolescence is a time of increased feelings of distress and depressed mood (Arnett, 1999). Internet use

may reduce feelings of social isolation and help normalize feelings of distress through self-disclosure and social comparison (Whitlock et al., 2006).

Three central tasks that are crucial to healthy social development during adolescence include the establishment of caring, meaningful relationships, finding acceptance and belonging in social groups, and establishing interpersonal intimacy (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Sullivan, 1953). Peers play an important role in this process, because positive relationships with peers is important for psychological well-being, and peer rejection is related to multiple social problems (Whitlock et al., 2006).

Hook, Gerstein, Detterich and Gridley (2003) discussed the features of intimacy. They present four main intimacy ingredients, including love and affection, personal validation, trust, and self disclosure. Self disclosure, described as “the act of revealing personal information to others” (Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005, p. 425), is especially important because an intimate relationship cannot exist if the participants refuse to reveal parts of themselves. Self disclosure encourages love, liking, caring, trust, and understanding (Hook et al., 2003). Recent research suggests that the extent to which individuals self disclose on the internet may affect online friendship formation. Dangers of face-to-face self disclosure such as being ridiculed or rejected are much less prevalent while communicating online (Peter et al., 2005)

Intimacy is an important part of human development. In Erikson’s (1959) psychosocial stages of development, intimacy versus isolation is the primary developmental task of young adults. Erikson states that individuals must meet their intimacy needs or they will be isolated. Intimacy is also related to individuals’

psychological and physiological well-being. Studies have concluded that problems with intimacy are related to many mental health disorders (Hook, et al., 2003).

Although a lack of intimacy can be harmful, the presence of intimacy works in a positive way. Erikson (1959) reported that in the period of early adulthood, intimate relationships promote creativity, productivity, and emotional integration. Intimacy has also been linked to happiness, contentment, a sense of well-being, and social support (Miller & Lefourt, 1982). The internet potentially serves as a venue for communicating with others, as well as forming and maintaining intimate relationships.

Due to the increasing adolescent internet use for social reasons, examining how such usage influences relationships with significant figures is important to explore. To date, the limited research on this topic has primarily examined e-mail usage, chat rooms and instant messaging (IM); however, one newer form of social communication on the web, social networking websites, has not been examined. These popular websites, which contain profiles connected by links to friends, include Facebook, Friendster and MySpace. Many adolescents access these sites daily, constantly updating their profiles to communicate with others (Boyd, 2006). Fifty-five percent of online teens use social networking sites, according to a new national survey of teenagers conducted by Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). This has become an increasingly important social forum, as many adolescents use these sites daily to communicate with friends and family members. Therefore, because usage of these sites has become increasingly prevalent,

the question of to what extent such usage is related to adolescent relationship quality is important to explore.

This study examined the use of social networking websites by a late adolescent population to gain information on how this population uses these websites to communicate with others. The content of participants' profiles was examined to begin understanding the relationship between self disclosure on these websites and relationships with important figures in their lives. The research questions addressed included: (1) Is self disclosure on social networking website profiles related to the quality of late adolescents' personal relationships? (2) Are there differences in the degree of self disclosure on social networking website profiles based on participant demographics such as gender, age and ethnicity? (3) Are there differences in relationship quality based on the amount of time spent communicating on personal internet websites?

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to gain a better understanding of how adolescents and young adults use the internet to communicate with others, and how the use of social networking websites correlates with relationship quality with family and friends, previous literature on these topics is explored. This literature review provides information on the internet, personal relationships, social development, and self disclosure.

The Internet

The internet has become an integral part of everyday life. Currently over one billion people worldwide have access to the internet, with over 229 million users in North America (Internet World Stats, 2006). The internet is the latest in a series of technological advances over the past 200 years that have changed the way individuals communicate. These include the telegraph, telephone, radio, motion pictures, and television. The internet combines many of these breakthrough features in one communication medium. This medium can be used for person-to-person communication, a mass medium, and as a global library. Seventy-three percent of American college students report using the internet for researching term papers more than their university library (Jones, 2002). The internet is unique because it can be easily adapted to each user's current needs (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

Montero and Stokols (2003) examined the internet from a social ecological perspective. They adapted Bronfenbrenner's (1977) theory of development, which

includes four levels of environmental interaction as settings for individual development: micro, meso, exo, and macro systems (Montero & Stokols, 2003).

The microsystem is the relationship between the individual and environment. At this level the use of the internet is based on interactivity between the user and computer. Furthermore, this interaction occurs in a particular setting such as the individual's house, office or school. Also, according to this perspective, the system is composed of many interactive subsystems. Within the mesosystem, a mutual relationship between settings is essential. Emotional and cognitive adaptations occur as individuals conduct research online, interact in chat rooms or communicate via email. The exosystem refers to the interrelationships between the formal systems such as health systems or government agencies, and informal systems such as school, home or social groups. People in low income neighborhoods have less access to the internet than those in high income settings. Finally, the macrosystem considers the ideological and cultural influences on individual development (Montero & Stokols, 2003).

The increasing availability and flexibility of the internet has dramatically added to the means of human interaction. People now interact via the computer by e-mail, in chat rooms, on bulletin boards and other similar ways (Strizke, Nguyen & Durkin, 2004). Although there are many uses for the internet, research finds the main reason people log on is to communicate with other people over e-mail, and the primary reason people send e-mail messages to each other is to maintain interpersonal relationships (Bargh & McKenna, 2004, Hampton & Wellman, 2001). There are a variety of electronic venues available on the internet where people can communicate

with others who share common interests. Major internet websites such as Yahoo, Excite, and Geocities enabled the creation of electric communities or special interest groups around specific topics, where thousands of such communities have been set up (McKenna & Bargh, 1999).

More recently, social networking websites such as Facebook, Friendster, and MySpace have become popular websites for sharing profiles and discussing interests, thoughts and values. Specifically, MySpace, which was launched in 2003, has over 50 million accounts and has more pageviews per day than any site on the web except Yahoo. Many adolescents access these sites daily to communicate with friends and meet new people (Boyd, 2006).

Obviously, the internet is likely to have a significant impact on individuals' psychological well-being and social life; however, researchers disagree on the extent, nature and value of this impact (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). There is limited research to date on the impact of the internet on interpersonal relationships. A good deal of what exists in the internet literature focuses on the ability to be anonymous, especially when participating in electronic communication. Anonymity has important consequences for relationship development (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002).

The internet, a unique venue for communication, allows individuals to be anonymous if they wish and socialize in various ways. The ability to be anonymous permits users to experiment with different versions of themselves (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002); In fact, the anonymity provides opportunities to take on various personas and express oneself without fear or disapproval. The concept of multiple senses of self or personas was introduced by Jung (1953), who distinguished between

the public self and inner self. Jung (1953) believed that a person's real individuality was found in the unconscious self rather than the conscious ego.

Rogers (1951) also discussed multiple personas and referred to a true self and an ideal self. He stated that the true self exists psychologically, but is not fully expressed in social life. The internet provides a unique opportunity for self expression, in which people can show those aspects of self that they have the strongest need to express (Turkle, 1995). Therefore, the true self might be more easily expressed on the internet than in traditional face-to face communication.

There are fewer costs to disclosing negative or taboo information on the internet. Anonymity online reduces expectations and constraints from others. In face-to-face interactions if one does not conform to the expectations of their social group, they may face disapproval (Bargh et al., 2002).

Research has also addressed how computer mediated communication (CMC) is not conducted face-to-face, and therefore nonverbal features of communication are absent, such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and potentially influential interpersonal features such as physical attractiveness, skin color and gender. A number of articles address how the absence of these features affects the process and outcome of social interactions (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

Another approach authors have taken to understanding the link between internet use and psychological well-being has been to study people who are considered heavy users. Morahan-Martin and Schumacher (2000) examined college students who were at risk for pathological internet use (PIU). PIU was measured based on responses to a symptom questionnaire, which measured if students had