



# To share or not to share? Adolescents' self-disclosure about peer relationships on Facebook: An application of the Prototype Willingness Model



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## ABSTRACT

Adolescents are the most fervent users of social network sites, hereby disclosing a lot of personal information. In this study, we used the Prototype Willingness Model to examine whether the sharing of personal information about peer relationships follows a rational and intended pathway, or a more impulsive unconscious decision-making pathway. Data from a sample of 1314 adolescents ( $M = 16.68$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling, to assess the predictive power of the reasoned pathway (attitude and subjective norm of friends, parents and teachers), and the social-reaction pathway (prototype favorability and similarity). Results showed the unique importance of the reasoned pathway in predicting adolescents' disclosing behavior, with attitude as the strongest predictor. Nevertheless, the social-reaction pathway also significantly contributed to the prediction of the disclosing behavior. In sum, adolescents' self-disclosure on social network sites is mostly the result of a rational, deliberated process, but can be influenced by a more emotional spontaneous response to a given online situation. Therefore, policy makers, practitioners or parents might stress the possible opportunities and risks that disclosing personal information can entail, so adolescents themselves develop a more critical attitude toward sharing their information online.

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## 1. Introduction

Social network sites (SNS) have become a large, growing phenomenon on the Internet over the past several years, and it seems as they are here to stay. Millions of people across the globe have joined different SNS, with adolescents as the leading, most ardent users (De Souza & Dick, 2009; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Since its founding in February 2004, Facebook, which has over 829 million daily active users (Facebook Inc., 2014), stands at the forefront of the social media revolution. It has become an imperative part of many users' daily lives, crossing the barriers between the offline and online world (Chang & Heo, 2014).

### 1.1. Self-disclosure

SNS revolve around users' self-disclosures and the connections they make with other users. Ellison and Boyd (2013) discerned three specific aspects of a social network site as a networked communication platform: "Firstly, participants *have uniquely identifiable profiles* that consist of user-supplied content, provided by other users, and/or system-provided data. Secondly, they can *publicly articulate connections* that can be viewed and traversed by others. Thirdly, participants can consume, produce, and/or interact with *streams of user generated content* provided by their connections on the site" (Ellison et al., 2013, p. 158). Thus, SNS are only as good as the content their users share (Hilsen & Helvik, 2014). With its feature to connect to people, SNS encourage users to reveal a great amount of contact and personal information (e.g., school, location, address), part of which is obligatory (e.g., first and last name, email) (Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008). Moreover, sharing an extended amount of information about the self (such as thoughts and feelings) is mandatory in order to reap the benefits derived from SNS (Ellison, Vitak, Steinfield, Gray, &

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Lampe, 2011). When users disclose personal information about their feelings and activities, it augments the signals given to others about the self. This could help establish common ground with online contacts and induce peer feedback (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007). Consequently, users might disclose more personal information than they originally intended (Taddicken & Jers, 2011).

In general, self-disclosure refers to the process of making the self known to others (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958, p. 91). In the context of SNS, self-disclosure can be redefined as the amount of information shared on a user's profile (e.g., personal data such as contact details) as well as in the communication process with others (e.g., posting a status update) (Krasnova & Veltri, 2011). Much of this revealed information can be visible to a vast audience, depending on a user's privacy settings. This enables the observation of another user without direct communication. Therefore, the decision about whom to accept as a friend on SNS is a crucial component of the users' ability to have control over their personal information (Ellison et al., 2011). Nevertheless, even though a variety of privacy features is available, many adolescents prefer the standard Facebook settings which facilitate that wall posts, comments, photographs, and status updates are readily available to all members of the users' network (Carr, Schrok, & Dauterman, 2012).

### 1.2. Adolescents' self-disclosure

SNS may play an important role during adolescence, as young people may use SNS to attain important developmental goals, such as identity construction and the formation and maintenance of friendships and romantic relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Ellison et al., 2011; Taddicken, 2014; Taddicken & Jers, 2011). Before the emergence of SNS, Collins and Miller (1994) found that adolescents who are prone to self-disclosure, consistently feel less lonely and have higher levels of self-esteem and well-being than their peers who are unable to self-disclose. This has also been confirmed to be accurate in the online world (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010; Ko & Kuo, 2009). However, teens are sharing more information about themselves on SNS than they did in the past (Madden et al., 2013). Therefore, scholars are expressing several concerns about the use of SNS, and in particular about the disclosure of personal information by adolescents (Ellison et al., 2011). Especially, as personal information, and sometimes intimate disclosures, can be misused in the context of cyberbullying (Veenstra, Vandebosch, & Walrave, 2012) or have an adverse impact on their online reputations and future college and job opportunities (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Ponnet, 2014).

In addition, adolescents show a higher tendency to engage in risk-taking behavior (Albert & Steinberg, 2011), and seem more prone to self-disclose on SNS than adults. Moreover, adolescents' decision making processes are more stimulated by short-term rewards than long-term perspectives, and they are less inclined to evaluate potential risks (Albert & Steinberg, 2011; Taddicken & Jers, 2011). Also, the presence of peers on SNS augments the allure of immediate rewards, and a reduced focus on the potential costs (Albert & Steinberg, 2011). Moreover, by sharing personal information online, adolescents might instantly wish to achieve a more positive and pronounced self-presentation, hereby transgressing the traditional social norms of privacy (Jordán-Conde, Mennecke, & Townsend, 2014).

Until today, most studies directed on the self-disclosure of adolescents on SNS, adopted a more empirical and not a theoretical approach. In most studies, a broad, general measure was used to investigate the concept of self-disclosure (Chen & Sharma, 2013; Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2011; Krasnova, Spiekermann, Koroleva, & Hildebrand, 2010; Sheldon, 2013; Wang & Stefanone,

2013). More particularly, previous studies focused on the disclosure of contact information in a SNS user's online profile (e.g., day of birth, telephone number, address) (Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Liu, Ang, & Lwin, 2013; Taddicken, 2014). When the timeline was launched in 2011, Facebook became organized around a stream of constantly updated content, minimizing the role of the individual user's profile (Ellison et al., 2013; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). The importance of profile information decreased, and the ongoing disclosure through status updates, comments and wall posts became the most prominent form of communication. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has investigated how much adolescents disclose about specific topics that are central in adolescents' lives. In this study, we will focus on the disclosure about peer relationships, as relationships and the social environment in which they develop, are key in adolescents' identity formation process (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Brown, 1999).

More specifically, the aim is to examine the predictors of adolescents' self-disclosure behavior on Facebook, focusing on the public ongoing communication about peer relationships through status updates, comments and/or wall posts. By using a theoretical basis for this research, we can establish a clearer picture of the relative importance of individual and social factors that can influence their self-disclosure. It can be interesting to closely examine adolescents' self-disclosure on Facebook for several reasons: Practitioners may gain insight into this population most at-risk for potentially damaging self-disclosing behavior on SNS. Moreover, based on previous research on teens' offline self-disclosure, the subject of peer relationships has been perceived as a topic of great importance during adolescence (Magno, 2009; Miller, Berg, & Archer, 1983; West & Zingle, 1969). In addition, Facebook is highly relevant to examine, because of the amount of self-disclosure that is often displayed through this medium (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014).

### 1.3. Prototype Willingness Model

Given the rapid development of SNS and their important role in adolescents' exploration of identity, sexuality, and intimacy, a risk-based approach to online self-disclosure can be expanded by including adolescents' social and developmental context (Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012). To gain a deeper understanding of the possible factors influencing adolescents' disclosing behavior, the present study utilizes the Prototype Willingness Model framework (PWM) developed by Gibbons and colleagues (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1995; Gibbons, Gerrard, Blanton, & Russell, 1998). This framework relies on a dual-processing approach (Stroebe, 2011), and was developed to examine cognitive factors that mediate the effects of the environment (e.g., familial, social) on adolescent risk behavior (Gibbons et al., 1998). The central premise of the theory is that not all health behavior, particularly risk behavior of adolescents, is completely intentional or planned like other behavioral models presume (e.g., Theory of Planned Behavior, which states that behavior is a rational decision-making process) (Rivis, Sheeran, & Armitage, 2006). In contrast, these behaviors may be the result of the interplay of risk-conductive social situations that adolescents often encounter (Gibbons et al., 2004). PWM has been very useful in predicting adolescent risk behaviors in the past, such as smoking behavior (Gibbons et al., 1998) and substance use (Gibbons et al., 2004).

The PWM framework consists of two pathways that predict risk behavior; a heuristic social reaction path and a reasoned path (see Fig. 1). In the reasoned path, attitudes and subjective norms toward the behavior are antecedents of decisions or behaviors that involve deliberation through intention (Gerrard, Gibbons, Houlihan, Stock, & Pomery, 2008), as outlined in the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The theory states that

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