



## Research Report

# Online social networking behaviors among Chinese younger and older adolescent: The influences of age, gender, personality, and attachment styles



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## ABSTRACT

Risks associated with adolescents' uses of social networking sites (SNSs) propelled investigations concerning how online privacy and security behaviors are related to young people's general activities online. To explore adolescents' SNS behaviors, among a group of 531 volunteered adolescent participants during their junior or senior middle school years in Beijing, this study ran exploratory factor analysis based on statements from non-structured interview targeting their Renren SNS uses, and further investigated the levels of and the associations between SNS behaviors based on developmental factors of age, gender, personality, and attachment styles. Results suggest most Chinese younger and older adolescents were likely disclosing real names and photos on SNSs, and their latent utilization, socializing, and privacy disclosure SNS behaviors were influenced by age, gender, personality, or attachment styles. Moreover, the negative associations of privacy disclosure with utilization or socializing behaviors were likely affected by personality and attachment categories. Although Chinese adolescents showed some levels of concerns in their SNS privacy disclosure, education of SNS privacy and security along with adolescent care in general are perhaps helpful for providing a better online experience for young people.

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## 1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) were popular among teenagers. It provides personal profile pages where status, albums, notes, music, and videos can be shared, updated, and viewed by others; and it offers instant online interactions supported by tool including popup windows and message boards. In China, the site of Renren has often been dubbed as the local Facebook (Davidoff, 2011). Being continuously popular among Chinese college and highschool students (Lam & Li, 2013; Qiu, Lin, & Leung, 2013), the site hosts approximately 210 million activated users and monthly unique log-in users of over 51 million (Renren, 2014). Against the background of the overall Chinese Internet traffic, some 288 million accessed SNSs between December 2012 and June 2013 (CNNIC, 2013). In total, adolescent users, defined as age between 10 and

19 years, now comprised of 23.2% of the total Internet user population.

Recently, the Lacet journal proposed a global focus on the improvement of adolescent care (Sawyer et al., 2012). They argued that adolescence is a life phase for which future patterns of adult health were established. The wellbeing of adolescents, more specifically, is influenced by specific role changes shaped by social determinants and risks and protective factors. As Internet (especially SNS) uses have become an inseparable part of adolescent life, there is a greater need for providing a secure and welcoming online environment for young people and the development of their future wellbeing.

Unfortunately, reports of online abuses were often found in developed and developing countries. For instance, in the United States, 40% of girls aged between 14 and 17 years reported experiencing online sexual advances, and 26% reported meeting someone for whom they had met online in offline settings (Noll, Shenk, Barnes, & Putnam, 2009); others were identified as potential victims or perpetrators of electronic aggression (Pyzalski, 2011). These incidents were not absent in the developing world context of China, but were less tackled in research literature (Jolicoeur &

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Zedlewski, 2010; Li, 2006). In other words, few indigenous studies have systematically investigated the psychological or developmental underpinnings of maladaptive behaviors in the online context.

### 1.1. General literature review

Previous literature have on one hand identified many underlying psychological factors both for healthy and maladaptive online behaviors. This includes the influences of gender, personality, sensation seeking, group identity, and self-esteem to utility motivation (Barker, 2009; Wang, Jackson, Zhang, & Su, 2012), and gratification, leisure boredom, loneliness, self-esteem vulnerabilities associated with online addiction (Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009; Wu, Cheung, Ku, & Hung, 2013; Zhou & Leung, 2012). On the other hand, the vulnerability to releasing self-relevant information on public domains were studied, which inevitably increased by online self-expression and socializing promoted by psychological or contextual factors. Its impact on individual security and privacy were estimated (e.g., Gross & Acquisti, 2005). Additionally, sociocultural factors may also play crucial roles in online behaviors (Chen et al., 2013; Jackson & Wang, 2013).

Concerning the risks associated with SNS uses, previous empirical studies have identified a number of characteristics that underlies vulnerable online behaviors. For instance, in building new online relationships, the levels of trust were weakened as compared to face-to-face encounters (Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007). Many individuals failed to preserve personal information even though claimed to understand privacy issues (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009; Stutzman, 2006). On contrary, other studies considered that individuals are apt to develop complex strategies for managing online privacy and social interactions when their uses of SNSs accumulate (Robards, 2010). In detail, diversified types of online activities were often associated with heightened sophistication in the modification of privacy settings in young adults (Hargittai, 2010; Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008).

Despite fruitful findings, the samples of these studies were predominantly among adults rather than adolescents. It was thus less clear whether adolescents' online privacy or security practices were influenced by a number of factors that characterized by their developmental phase, including age, gender, personality, attachment styles among others. These identified constructs and their relevance to online behaviors are briefly cited as follows.

#### 1.1.1. Adolescent development and online behaviors

It is generally believed during the stage of adolescence, individuals gradually gained their social identity and placed themselves in social order (Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994). They passed through a sequence of four developmental phases as proposed by Brown (1999), where in sequence they acquired (1) personal identity, (2) peer approval, (3) social relations, and (4) long-term commitment in transition to adulthood. Intimacy and self-disclosure played an important role in psychological development during adolescents identified by empirical studies (Collins & Madsen, 2006; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Choosing friends who are like-minded and confide with one other was one of the main concerns for adolescents (Hamm, 2000).

Previous studies on adolescent SNS behaviors in a similar vein illustrated the unique characteristics of their developmental phases. An UK case analysis illustrated that younger adolescents loved to display personal identity that involved "busy" online profiles; while older adolescents favor "plain" personal pages to establish their personal identity for more selected friendship building (Livingstone, 2008). Quantitative studies, on the other hand, showed online self disclosure rehearsed those skills learned offline, and earlier developments of these skills among female than male

adolescents (Valkenburg, Sumter, & Peter, 2011). Older teens moreover share more personal information as compared with younger teens (Lenhart, 2007; Walrave & Heirman, 2011). Both qualitative and quantitative findings supported Brown's (1999) stage theory in terms of adolescents' development in intimacy and self-disclosure.

#### 1.1.2. Gender differences and online behaviors

In developing interpersonal skills during adolescence, a range of gender differences were revealed from previous literature. A review showed adolescent girls were more willing to disclose self-relevant information in offline settings compared with boys; and such gender differences were not yet emerged during pre-adolescence (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Furthermore, developmental increases in self-disclosure skills of girls around age 10–11 also precede those of boys' around age 13–14 (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995).

Gender differences for self-disclosure in online contexts seemed to be consistent with adolescents' offline self-disclosure (Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007). Similar to developments in offline disclosure skills, Valkenburg et al. (2011) pinpointed that online self-disclosure rocketed between 10 and 13 years and then stabilize for girls, the same trajectory was followed by boys yet their developments were delays up to two years later.

#### 1.1.3. Personality and online behaviors

Additional to age and gender differences, personality also plays crucial roles in human motivations and behaviors. To backup this claim, Amichai-Hamburger (2002) compiled a number of associations between personality and behaviors, for instance, individuals with high needs for disclosure are likely to reach conclusions without thorough contemplation; facing changing environment, innovators and conformists respond respectively in an engaged or a withdrawal way; people with external or internal locus of control may act out varied levels of self-control in different contexts; and individual with unique personality profiles makes and acts out their decisions differently.

Amichai-Hamburger and colleagues further related these constructs to Internet uses (Amichai-Hamburger, 2002, 2005). Earlier empirical studies highlighted the mediation roles of the "real me" representations in building close and meaningful relationships on the Internet as compared with the "real world" representations (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). One following study in finer detail revealed that introverted/neurotic and extroverts/non-neurotic individuals respectively located their "real me" on online and offline interactions (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002). Recent studies suggested that factors in the big five model, including extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience, were relevant to SNS uses (Ross et al., 2009; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008), though such associations were found to be negligible among Chinese adults (e.g., China and US; Jackson & Wang, 2013).

To our knowledge, no empirical study among adolescents has addressed the role of personality (e.g., big five model) in SNS online behaviors. Indirect evidence showed that openness to experiences emerged as a personality predictor for SNS uses for more matured adult respondents, suggesting the involvement of developmental factors in online behaviors (e.g., Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuniga, 2010). It is thus of interest to apply such an angle to adolescence as their personality types become stabilized gradually over time.

#### 1.1.4. Attachment and online behaviors

Lastly, the fundamental human motivation of interpersonal attachment was reviewed (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). During adolescence, teenagers' closeness with parents decreases and, in turn, is replaced by increased closeness with peers (Erikson, 1950). Their attachment development may follow different patterns according

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