

University of Southampton
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Title: Adolescents' online self-disclosure - risky or beneficial?

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Abstract

Online activity is a major feature of adolescents' culture and social interactions. 'Blogs' and 'instant messenger' provide ample means through which they can pursue pertinent adolescent concerns such as self-presentation, relationship formation and identity exploration. Certain features of computer-mediated communications mean that online self-disclosures are psychologically and qualitatively different to those made offline. The anonymity and controllability of the internet mean that it is fertile ground for identity experimentation through self-disclosure and the feedback received can shape and validate adolescents' emergent identity. Online self-disclosure carries with it many benefits, as well as the risks so frequently sensationalised in the media. The benefits can include supportive and healthy relationships formed online and enrichment of existing relationships offline. The potential negative consequences of online self-disclosure will also be explored including abusive messaging and the idealisation of one's communication partner. Research into self-disclosure is not without limitations and these will be outlined. Complete prohibition of adolescents' online self-disclosure is unrealistic and ineffective. It is reasonable to suggest that there are as many risks in offline disclosure as there are online. Online self-disclosure is concluded to be a positive activity. The implications of adolescents' online self-disclosure for educational psychologists are also discussed.

Adolescents' online self-disclosure- risky or beneficial?

Erikson (1968) believed that the crucial challenge facing adolescents is one of self-definition and identity formation. As they proceed through a period of questioning and exploration (identity moratorium) to a phase of making commitments without crisis or exploration (identity achievement) their self-perceptions and social interactions help to define their sense of 'identity' (Erikson, 1968; Grotevant, 1997; Dignan, 1965; Giddens, 1991). Both experimentation and feedback are extremely valuable in adolescent identity exploration and online identity experimentation may be particularly tempting as Internet communication is often separate from offline social circles (Turkle, 1995). Relationships are therefore crucial as social interactions with family, peers and others play a critical role in shaping identity through their responses (Erikson, 1968). The ability to self-disclose is also an important developmental task for adolescents (Harter, 1999). Those that are unable to self-disclose tend to be lonelier and have lower self-esteem than those that self-disclose more readily (Collins and Miller, 1994).

Self-disclosure refers to the communication of personal information, feelings and thoughts to other people (Archer, 1980; Derlega, Metts, Petronio and Margulis, 1993) and is an essential process in forming and maintaining relationships (Altman and Taylor, 1973). It is usually measured according to: depth (the degree of intimacy of discussed topics), breadth (range of topics discussed), honesty of disclosure or a combination of these (Derlega and Berg, 1987; Jourard, 1971). It becomes a means of social validation and enhancement of communication, understanding and intimacy between adolescents and their peers (Derlega et al., 1993, Jourard, 1971). The Internet provides adolescents with ample means to explore their identities and exchange intimate disclosures (Wolak, Mitchell and Finklehor, 2003,

Calvert, 2002). Online communication activities engender adolescents' reflection on values, thoughts, and on who they are and who they would like to become. This begets greater clarity on their thoughts and feelings and increased self-awareness (Tynes, 2007; Derlega and Chaikin, 1975).

Adolescents spend a considerable amount of time online (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005) and given the role that social interactions and relationships play in identity formation, it is necessary to examine the psychological influence that online interactions have on adolescents. Blogs and 'IM' are especially popular with adolescents. Blogs are personal websites that serve as traditional diaries and are usually intended for public viewing by repeat visitors (Kumar, Novak, Raghavan and Tomkins, 2004). They provide an arena for on-going identity exploration in which adolescents can self-disclose, communicate and obtain feedback from others and gain a sense of community with other bloggers (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield and Tynes, 2004; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005). Instant messaging ('IM') involves the exchange of typed messages in real-time, via computer. Consideration of self-disclosures in these forums is especially pertinent as the risks of personal disclosures are often disproportionately highlighted in the media, raising parental concerns. Computer mediated communication or 'CMC' refers to any human text-based interaction conducted or facilitated through digitally based technologies (Spitzberg, 2006). CMC is contrasted with face-to-face or 'FtF' interactions; any interaction conducted in person, offline.

This discussion shall explore the salient aspects of online self-disclosure, analyse the associated risks and benefits, address some of the limitations in the literature and outline the implications for educational psychologists. For the purpose of this discussion, online self-disclosure refers to that in typed CMC e.g. blogs or 'IM', using a laptop or PC and blogs are assumed to be publicly accessible and anonymous, unless otherwise stated. 'Vlogs' and CMC involving audio or imagery are excluded.

What makes CMC different?

The quality of the interaction online is due to the removal of certain aspects of FtF communication. Uncertainty reduction theory (Berger and Calabrese, 1975) assumes that humans have a basic need to reduce uncertainty about others in social interactions. In FtF settings, uncertainty reduction is achieved through observable aspects such as physical appearance, accent or body language (Byrne et al., 1968). Because of the lack of alternative uncertainty reduction strategies, direct questions of a more intimate, personal nature may be more acceptable in CMC (Tidwell and Walther, 2002), resulting in more intimate self-disclosures.

Perceived future interaction is also thought to influence self-disclosure (Shaffer, Ogden and Wu, 1987). Self-disclosure usually increases when there is no anticipated future interaction (e.g. 'stranger on the train', Thibaut and Kelly, 1959). Estimating future interactions to be unlikely lowers inhibitions as the real-life repercussions are considered to be negligible (McKenna and Bargh, 2000).

The way in which disclosures are made and their content is largely determined by the target audience (Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht, 2004). Self-disclosure to peers is sometimes daunting and adolescents feel more secure and protected by anonymity (Valkenburg and Peter, 2009). Indeed it is often considered a key attractor of CMC as it allows adolescents the freedom to express aspects of themselves without fear of any disapproval or negative consequences on their offline daily lives (Bargh, McKenna and Fitzimmons, 2002; Schau and Gilly, 2003). When one composes a blog for people known offline, the goal may be to gain validation from those whose opinions matter to the adolescent (Qian and Scott, 2007) and increased self-disclosure has been found to occur in non-anonymous online communication technologies also (Schouten, Valkenburg and Peter, 2007). Also, adolescents that feel more anonymous do not necessarily engage in more self-disclosure.

Walther's hyper-personal communication theory (1996) suggests that the reduced nonverbal cues and the controllability of CMC are central to explaining the increased intimacy and occurrence of self-disclosures online. The audio and visual cues that reveal gender, status, ethnicity play a major role in FtF communication (Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire, 1984; Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006) are absent in CMC, resulting in increased emphasis on verbal and linguistic cues. This grants users significant control over the impression they form on others, CMC is more 'controllable': "The user and recipient can control how to present themselves with ample time, self-monitor their reactions and expound on their positive traits" (Skarderud, 2003, p.162). The reduction in nonverbal cues may also focus adolescents' awareness on themselves, thereby reducing their concerns about what others think of them (Matheson and Zanna, 1988).

As a result of the greater control over their self-presentation in CMC (McKenna and Bargh, 2000; O'Sullivan, 2000; Walther, 1996) and less concern about others' perceptions, adolescents may feel more comfortable discussing intimate, potentially embarrassing topics (e.g. sexual health issues) that are too threatening in real life situations (Bargh et al., 2002). However, adolescents are not a homogenous group and hyper-personal communication theory does not account for individual differences. There is a high degree of variation between adolescents and their attitudes and willingness to participate in CMC (Peter and Valkenburg, 2006; Tsai, 2004). Individual variations in attitudes and willingness to participate in CMC may intervene with its effects (Valkenburg and Peter, 2007; Rubin, 2002), resulting in different patterns and effects of online self-disclosure (Tyler, 2002; Bargh, 2002).

Those with higher private self-awareness tend to have heightened attention to inner feelings, making them better able and more motivated to self-disclose (Franzoi and Davis, 1985; Joinson, 2001). They may benefit from the controllability of CMC as it gives them

more time to reflect upon and communicate their inner feelings. Those with greater public self-awareness are more concerned with how others perceive and judge them and are more inhibited in offline self-disclosures (Fenigstein, Scheier and Buss, 1975; Joinson, 2001).

Reduced visual cues may lessen the feeling of being observed and reduce concern about evaluation of others (Matheson and Zanna, 1988; Schouten, et al., 2007).

Cultural differences in values placed on self-restraint affect self-disclosure patterns (Gudykunst and Nishida, 1994). In certain cultures there may be relatively little initial self-disclosure, with cross-cultural rates of self-disclosure becoming more similar as friendships get closer (Gudykunst, 1985).

Jourard (1971) considers self-disclosure to be a reciprocal process. “Intimate disclosure indicates that the discloser trusts his listener” (Derlega and Chaikin, 1975, p. 3) leading to trust towards the discloser (Wheless and Grotz, 1977) and reciprocation of disclosure. This process serves to strengthen the social ties that bind people in relationships, both online and offline (Jourard, 1971).

Self-disclosures are difficult to measure. Altman and Taylor (1973) suggest that self-disclosures be categorised according to: core (personal beliefs, fears and needs), intermediate (attitudes, values and opinions) or peripheral (e.g. location). Self-disclosures comprise different layers, dimensions and levels of intimacy. For example, disclosing one’s star sign is not the same as disclosing one’s age or one’s insecurities.

What difference does online self-disclosure make to adolescents?

A common argument against engaging in online self-disclosure is that it increases social isolation. Kraut et al. (1998) found that heavy Internet usage lead to loneliness, a restriction and narrowness of participant’s social circle and increased feelings of depression. This was attributed to the internet’s displacement of time spent with family and friends, substituting strong social ties for weaker online ones (Kraut et al., 1998). A four year follow-

up yielded interesting results. The negative effects had been replaced with a positive impact on social involvement and well-being (Kraut et al., 2002). When the initial study was conducted, fewer people had internet access meaning that interactions were largely, if not solely, with strangers (Denissen, Neumann and van Zalk, 2010). By 2002, online interactions included more offline acquaintances and using CMC to interact with offline contacts has a positive influence on well-being and relationship quality through the intimacy fostered by self-disclosure (Denissen et al., 2010; Valkenburg and Peter, 2009). Kraut et al., 2002 suggest that it is the qualities of relationships formed online and total time spent on-line that determine whether the Internet has positive or negative social effect. Confusing correlation with causation also misleads conclusions. Amichai-Hamburger and Ben-Artzi (2003) assert that the internet use does not directly cause loneliness; people that are lonely spend more time online.

The social compensation hypothesis posits that the Internet is used more by introvert and socially anxious adolescents, who have difficulty developing offline friendships. The controllability of CMC appeals, as it allows them to prepare their interactions ahead of time (Arkin and Grove, 1990). The reduced visual cues may also assist in overcoming shyness and inhibition typical of their offline experiences (McKenna and Bargh, 2000). These social compensation effects may be particularly relevant in early adolescence when fear of rejection and interpersonal identity concerns tend to peak (Schaffer, 1996).

A number of studies suggest that the online environment enables adolescents to gain acceptance in anonymous, non-threatening ways thereby decreasing loneliness and social anxiety (Gross, Juvonen and Gable, 2002; Maczewski 2002; McKenna and Bargh 2000). They may choose to experiment with more outgoing identities online which offer them a means of self-exploration, overcoming shyness and meeting new people (Denissen et al.,

2010; Valkenburg, Schouten and Peter, 2005). These online interactions can compensate for the relative lack in positive social experiences offline thereby increasing their social competence (Valkenburg and Peter, 2009). In fact, McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) found that socially anxious and lonely individuals formed close online relationships which they could integrate into their offline lives, simultaneously widening their social circles and decreasing their social anxiety.

The 'rich-get-richer' hypothesis contradicts this social compensation effect. It suggests that the Internet is used most by extravert and outgoing adolescents to increase their already sizeable social network (Walther, 1996). It is possible that both hypotheses are true. However, some adolescents may not benefit from either and may experience online, as well as, offline rejection as a result of their inability to optimise their self-presentation. Unless they adapt their behaviour, or know how to adapt their behaviour, they face a continuous cycle of rejection.

Bargh et al. (2002) labelled the Internet as an anonymous 'social laboratory' wherein adolescents can explore different aspects of his or her identity (Turkle, 1995) and can practice the disclosure of their thoughts, opinions or 'stigmatised identity' (e.g. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) before disclosing to their offline friends and family (Erdost, 2004). Accessing online communities where they feel more accepted, supported, valued and understood (Derlega et al., 1993) is particularly important for minority groups. Hiding their identities offline, due to fear or embarrassment can result in isolation, loneliness and alienation (Erdost, 2004). The anonymity of CMC means that adolescents can seek validating relationships with similar others online (McKenna and Bargh, 1998) without fearing offline repercussions.

For some adolescents struggling with personal problems, the internet and online self-disclosure may be their only means of support (Tynes, 2007). Their peers often understand exactly what they are experiencing and adolescents can seek information, advice and emotional support online. However, the identity validation and support sought online is not without limitations. One such example is 'pro-anorexia' online communities that proclaim their eating disorder to be a 'lifestyle choice' and 'way of life'. Even those that are actively seeking online help, by disclosing their disordered eating behaviour may be advised to escalate their eating habits and discouraged from attempting recovery. Self-disclosure in such sites may validate the feelings of those that are in denial about their problems, obstructing recovery and potentially triggering relapse.

Some may contend that the increased opportunity for deception online negates the genuineness of online relationships and benefits of self-disclosure. Yet research suggests that most people do not change or conceal their identities on the internet (Merchant, 2001) and that deception and lying is just as common offline (Ellison et al., 2006). Even in cases where identities are 'fictitious' or misrepresented it serves to fulfil the need for identity exploration as outlined in Erikson's (1968) identity theory (Schmitt, Dayanim, Matthias, 2008).

Media stories abound regarding the 'risky' online behaviour of adolescents. The reality is a lot more mundane. A content analysis of adolescent blogs showed that authors mostly wrote about school, peers and daily life. Many used their blogs in a positive and constructive manner and as a means of analysing situations and disclosing personal and difficult feelings (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2010). Blogging may facilitate the reflection upon events in a non-ruminative way. The reported incidence of online risk-taking is almost negligible. The majority of young people "just want to connect to others and feel like part of an accepting community" (Gray, 2011, p.118).

The absence of nonverbal cues in CMC can lead to idealized perceptions of the individual with whom we are communicating (Walther, 1997). Such idealisation can occur through generalising the positive cues on other unknown information and the absence of information to the contrary (Bargh et al., 2002). This is further intensified by the behavioural confirmation that occurs through the selective presentation of one's positive aspects. Idealisation is especially dangerous in the case of those that are deceiving the discloser with the intent of exploiting their intimacies e.g. bullies or sexual predators. When aspects of one's sexuality is being explored, online self-disclosures may become sexually provocative or inappropriate, attracting the attention of predators or resulting in derogatory remarks from other internet users. Online predatory activity is relatively rare however and adolescent's online interactions usually consist of communication with individuals from existing offline relationships (Denissen et al., 2010; Boyd, 2008). The rare occurrences may not be entirely preventable but the effects may be circumvented through equipping adolescents with self-protective and vigilance skills, as well as encouraging protection of privacy.

What about when anonymity is taken out of the equation?

Users normally have the control over making their page either 'private' or 'public'. A public blog means that other internet users can view the blog and leave comments. Self-disclosure can be a means of identity construction for adolescents and those whose identity construction is most actively participated in by others are considered more 'popular' (Gross and Acquisti, 2005). Limiting access by making one's page private thereby limits the potential for popularity and for some the benefits of a public profile may outweigh the risks (Christofides, Muise and Desmarais, 2009).

Feedback on adolescents' online self-presentations, including self-disclosures, is often publicly available and this feedback is especially important during adolescence (Harter,

1999). Individuals may exploit the insecurities and concerns within adolescents' online self-disclosures, perhaps even encouraging the young person to harm themselves. The tirades of abuse and derogatory feedback can have far reaching, negative consequences.

'Flaming' is "the practice of expressing oneself more strongly on the computer than one would in other communication settings especially in an aggressive, anti-normative manner" (Kiesler, et al., 1984, p.1130). Anonymity is thought to be a key contributor to 'flaming': "anonymity leads to reduced self-awareness (a state of de-individuation), which results in anti-normative behaviour" (Postmes, Spear, Sakhel and Groot, 2001, p.1244).

The sense of anonymity, reduced monitoring and relatively fewer codes of conduct in CMC (McQuail, 2005) may result in increased severity and frequency of negative comments (Patchin and Hinduja, 2006). Online communicators do not have the same 'moral pressure' or social accountability to behave in a pro-social way. Online behaviour is not affected by concerns about self-presentation or judgments by others and becomes 'disinhibited' (Joinson, 1998), potentially harming relationships.

Adolescents usually feel anonymous when information such as name, location, email is withheld but their writing style and the content of their communications may unintentionally identify them (Qian and Scott, 2007). Privacy settings have also become increasingly complex (Patchin and Hinduja, 2006) and adolescents may inadvertently disclose information to unintended recipients. They may also find that they have revealed offensive or confidential information (Viegas, 2005). Embarrassment is a common feeling reported by adolescents when their anonymity is breached and people they know from school discover their homepages (Chandler and Roberts-Young, 1998). Their disclosures may elicit ridicule or even rejection, placing the adolescent in a vulnerable position (Pennebaker, 1989). Some may sabotage current and future professional and academic opportunities if their self-

disclosures are identifiable and viewed unfavourably by employers or schools (Fitzsimmons and Rubin, 2008). They may experience increased anxiety following disclosure of intimate material as they become concerned about the consequences (Derlega and Chaikin, 1975; Derlega et al., 1993).

Limitations

Much of the research on self-disclosure is on adults, with adolescent studies having relatively small sizes and usually being of quantitative and self-report methodologies. Adolescents from lower SES may not have access to internet outside of school, thereby limiting the time and nature of activity online. This may distort results, giving inaccurate representation of online activity and the self-disclosures therein. Oftentimes, cause and effect are interpreted interchangeably in the literature resulting in inaccurate observations and generalisations.

It is not always clear what constitutes as 'self-disclosure', to do so, one must consider the interactional context (Antaki, Barnes and Leudar, 2005). For instance, the phrase 'I'm hopeless at school' could be disclosure, self-deprecation or a plea for help. Without the context, one cannot ascertain whether it is self-disclosure or not.

Focussing on the main effects of online self-disclosure and CMC only allows for rudimentary generalisations regarding the risks and benefits of CMC to be made and hinders the development of more nuanced perspectives. Explanations for effects of CMC are often provided in hindsight and are rarely empirically tested. It is only by identifying these underlying mechanisms that we may more accurately predict individual outcomes.

Research that examines the online behaviour of adolescents and the self-disclosing practices therein, have largely neglected to consider the adolescents' offline practices thereby

potentially confounding results. Adolescents that freely self-disclose online may behave the very same offline, rendering attributes of the online environment irrelevant. It's unclear whether the 'effects' of CMC are in fact a reflection of personality or individual differences.

Conclusion

The internet is a very unique social environment, giving adolescents access to a very large audience and providing them with a mode of self-expression, support and information-seeking that may be less anxiety-provoking than FtF communications. Online self-disclosure can allow adolescents to gain acceptance, explore identity and develop relationships. These skills can then be transferred to their offline lives, with positive consequences. There are indeed potentially negative consequences and situations resulting from online self-disclosures, but such experiences are inevitable in offline life as well. Online anonymity may circumvent the negative impact of online humiliation and social support, vigilance and self-protective skills ameliorate the chances of positive outcomes following negative online interactions.

Self-disclosure often involves people from offline lives, resulting in the enhancement of the quality of offline relationships strengthening existing bonds. Kraut et al.'s research (1998, 2002) does draw attention to the fact that solely or mostly interacting with online others would undoubtedly have a detrimental effect on offline relationships. As beneficial as online interactions and relationships may be for intimacy development and identity formation, they should not completely substitute positive offline interactions.

Parents often consider close monitoring, or outright banning, of online activity in order to protect their children (Tynes, 2007). Even if banning adolescents from online activity was feasible it prevents them from reaping the numerous psychosocial and developmental gains that the internet offers. Furthermore, such sanctions are not 'fool proof' and adolescents may

find alternative ways of participating in online activity. Parental energy should instead be invested in advising and supporting them in their online interactions, remaining vigilant to signs of excessive use or negative affect. Drastic prohibition and monitoring breeds mistrust, secrecy and resentment and the expression of these negative feelings may manifest conflict in less healthy ways than online self-disclosure.

Adopting a measured approach to the internet and the myriad of opportunities and possibilities that it presents adolescents with is advisable (Tynes, 2007). Offline self-disclosure carries as much risk, if not more, than online self-disclosure. Seeking to prevent any online self-disclosure is unrealistic and leaves adolescents ill-equipped for what is an ever more technological world. Instead: “Let us celebrate the good, recognise the on-going potential for ill, and commit ourselves to thoughtful and proportionate action to give all adolescents the skills and insight to use the medium effectively” (Gray, 2011, p.118). EPs can assist in developing the key protective factors that mediate the impact and safety of self-disclosures: vigilance, education, skills and support.

EP implications

The internet is a very rich and relatively unexploited means by which EPs can design and deliver interventions, provide information and deliver support services. These services may be crucial in targeting adolescents that avoid offline disclosure due to fear, embarrassment or social anxiety. The enhanced intimacy afforded by online self-disclosures makes it especially ideal for therapeutic interventions. EPs ought to be mindful of the inequalities in accessing the benefits of online self-disclosure. For example, those from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds may only have access to computer at school, thereby limiting their opportunities to benefit from CMC. Through policy development, EPs may

equalise access to online activities whilst continuing to improve on offline services accessed by those who have negative online experiences. EPs should encourage youths to learn about and take advantage of online privacy options if they are not already doing so, advising them of what constitutes 'safe' information to disclose online. Rather than advising that adolescents avoid certain Internet spaces, EPs can advise on what constitutes 'risky' online self-disclosure and help them to develop an 'exit strategy' in threatening situations.

During problem solving and consultation, information gathering ought to include details of online activity in order to form a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. EPs should work towards establishing positive relationships offline for the youth if such unfulfilling relationships are the primary motivation for online self-disclosures.

In the midst of sensational media stories highlighting dangerous activity on sites such as Facebook, EPs have a key role in describing the numerous benefits of online communication so that decisions, opinions and attitudes are more fully informed. EPs are key agents in ensuring that media myths regarding the prevalence and threat of online sexual solicitations do not occlude the fact or awareness that most sexual exploitations are committed by people the youth already know in their offline lives. In the rare cases where online sexual solicitation results in offline encounters, it is useful for EPs to understand the processes and dynamics underlying the self-disclosures and how such processes affect identity, intimacy and trust.

EPs can advise parents, schools and adolescents on self-protective behaviours online, what they can do to address or minimise the risks and how to support peers or family when online experiences are unpleasant. EPs also have a role to play in supporting those adolescents that are adversely affected by negative reactions to their self-disclosures and those who may have inadequate skills to use the medium safely, or to their benefit. Through

providing information, advice and training, EPs can support safe and responsible online behaviour.

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