



## Full Length Article

## Designing and validating the friendship quality on social network sites questionnaire

Karen Verswijvel<sup>a,\*</sup>, Wannas Heirman<sup>b</sup>, Kris Hardies<sup>a</sup>, Michel Walrave<sup>a</sup><sup>a</sup> University of Antwerp, Belgium<sup>b</sup> University of Antwerp, Belgium & Artesis Plantijn University College, Belgium

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## ABSTRACT

Social network sites (SNSs) provide adolescents with the opportunity to expand their social circle, which is associated with increased social capital. However, the social capital adolescents built depends on the quality of their friendships on SNSs. As no instruments are available to capture the quality of friendships on SNSs, this study designed and validated the Friendship Quality on Social Network Sites questionnaire (*FQSNS-questionnaire*). The questionnaire consists of five dimensions: satisfaction, companionship, help, intimacy, and self-validation. Explorative and confirmative factor analyses were applied on data of 1.695 friendships (i.e., offline-to-online, online-to-offline, and online friendships) gathered from 1.087 adolescents. Results pointed to a five-factor solution, applicable to any kind of friendship on SNSs and reflecting the proposed five dimensions of friendship quality. Multiple group confirmatory factor analyses supported measurement invariance across younger and older adolescents, and across boys and girls, at the levels of equal factor structure and loadings. Cronbach's alphas indicated a good internal consistency of each dimension. Correlation analysis indicated that the dimensions were strongly correlated to each other, which is unsurprising because they reflect the overall friendship quality. Based upon these results, we can conclude that dimensions of friendship quality can validly and reliably be assessed using the *FQSNS-questionnaire*.

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## 1. Introduction

Most studies on young people's internet use unanimously conclude that social network sites (SNSs) play an increasingly important role in the daily lives of adolescents (e.g., Lenhart et al., 2015; Staksrud, Ólafsson, & Livingstone, 2013; Tsitsika et al., 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). The popularity of SNSs among adolescents should not entirely come as a surprise because, compared to other age groups, adolescents typically attach more importance to their friends (Brown & Larson, 2009; Mesch & Talmud, 2006; Mikami, Szewedo, Allen, Evans, & Hare, 2010). SNSs respond to this by offering adolescents opportunities not only to stay connected with friends they know from the offline world, but also to expand their social circle by meeting new people online. In addition, adolescence is a life phase in which individuals are greatly

concerned about the impressions they make on their peers and the extent to which they feel accepted by others (Steinberg, 1996).

The increased SNS use by adolescents is also reflected in (inter) national descriptive studies. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center indicated that, in the United States, Facebook is the most popular SNS. Among adults (18 years or older) 68% use Facebook (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016), and among adolescents (13–17 years old) it is 71% (Lenhart et al., 2015). In Flanders, 87% of adolescents (12–18 years old) have Facebook accounts (Apestaartjaren, 2016).

The ability for adolescents to expand their contact opportunities on SNSs is associated with increased social capital, which is the benefit individuals derive from their social interactions (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011). Putnam (2000) distinguishes two forms of social capital, namely bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital is the benefit individuals derive from close personal friendships (i.e., strong ties), such as companionship. Bridging social capital is the benefit derived from loose connections (i.e., weak ties), such as receiving useful information about job opportunities. This distinction between bonding and bridging shows that the

\* Corresponding author. Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Communication Sciences, Research Group MIOS. Kipdorp 61, 2000, Antwerpen, Belgium.

E-mail address: [karen.verswijvel@uantwerpen.be](mailto:karen.verswijvel@uantwerpen.be) (K. Verswijvel).

social capital adolescents built is associated with the quality of their social interactions or friendships on SNSs (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011; Putnam, 2000). As explained by Baker (2012), the access to social capital is determined by who you know (i.e., the quality, size, and diversity of your network). Consequently, research gives more and more attention to the quality of adolescents' friendships on SNSs (e.g., Antheunis, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2012; Baker & Oswald, 2010; Mesch & Talmud, 2006). However, compared to instruments in the context of offline friendships (e.g., the Friendship Quality Questionnaire (FQQ; Parker & Asher, 1993), the Friendship Qualities Scale (FQS; Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994), the Friendship Features Interview for Young Children (FFIYC; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996), and the McGill Friendship questionnaires (MFQ-RA and MFQFF; Mendelson & Aboud, 1999, 2012)), no research instruments are available that can validly and reliably capture friendship qualities on SNSs. Previous research assessing the quality of friendships on SNSs (e.g., Baker & Oswald, 2010; Marsden & Campbell, 1984; Mesch & Talmud, 2006) often used a limited number of items which do not capture the broad dimensions examined within offline friendships (e.g., companionship and help).

As no instruments are available for measuring the quality of friendships on SNSs, this study aimed to design and validate the *Friendship Quality on Social Network Sites questionnaire (FQSNS-questionnaire)*. Thereby, we mainly focused on the content and construct validity and the reliability of the questionnaire by conducting explorative and (multiple group) confirmative factor analyses, a correlation analysis, and a multilevel analysis. When designing the questionnaire, we kept in mind that adolescents have various types of friends on SNSs and that our questionnaire has to be suitable to all these friendships. More specifically, the connection someone has on a SNS can have different origins – online and offline (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Previous studies usually made a limited differentiation between online and offline friendships. Antheunis et al. (2012) compared in their study the quality of mixed-mode friendships with that of online and offline friendships. Nevertheless, it is recommended to split up mixed-mode friendships by asking people whether they first met online or offline. This distinction will better reflect the reality of friendship formation and maintenance. In this way, three types of friendships can be distinguished on SNSs: (1) friendships that originated offline but extend on SNSs (i.e., offline-to-online friendships); (2) friendships that originated on SNSs but do not extend offline (i.e., exclusively online friendships); and (3) friendships that originated on SNSs and extend offline (i.e., online-to-offline friendships).

The added value of the *FQSNS-questionnaire* is that it provides a research instrument for further research in the field of adolescents' friendships on SNSs. This is important because research has demonstrated that friendship quality experienced by young people during adolescence sets the stage for their relation quality in later life. Moreover, good friendships enhance many aspects of adolescents' well-being and mental health (e.g., self-esteem) (Berndt, 2002; Ellison et al., 2007; Johnston, Tanner, Lalla, & Kawalski, 2013; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). The questionnaire also provides more insight into online friendships. Friending strangers on SNSs (i.e., online friends) is often perceived as a dangerous act (e.g., Bossler, Holt, & May 2012; Lenhart et al., 2011). However, forming friendships on SNSs may also have positive consequences. For instance, when adolescents do not receive sufficient support (e.g., companionship, help, intimacy, and self-validation) in their friendship network, they might search for friends online to compensate for this lack of support (Smahel, Brown, & Blinka, 2012).

## 2. Friendship quality

When defining friendship quality, it is important to make a distinction between friendship features and friendship quality itself. Throughout the literature, these terms are often used interchangeable (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2013). According to Berndt (1996, p. 346), friendship features refer to “the attributes or characteristics” of a friendship, including various dimensions such as “intimacy, companionship, and conflict”. A friendship may thus consist of multiple positive and negative features (Berndt, 1996, 2002). All such features taken together, define the quality of a friendship (Berndt, 1996). Contrary to friendship features, friendship quality is evaluative in nature (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2013; Berndt, 1996) indicating that “friendships are higher in quality when they have more positive features and lower in quality when they have more negative features” (Berndt, 1996, p. 347). When measuring quality, research in various contexts increasingly focuses on perceived features (or dimensions) (e.g., Kao & Lin, 2016; Prochazka, Weber, & Schweiger, 2018; Shin, 2017; Shin, 2018). This focus on perceived features (or dimensions) is also reflected in several research instruments available for measuring offline friendship qualities (see Table 1 for an overview). Commonly used and cited instruments include the Friendship Quality Questionnaire (FQQ; Parker & Asher, 1993), the Friendship Qualities Scale (FQS; Bukowski et al., 1994), the Friendship Features Interview for Young Children (FFIYC; Ladd et al., 1996), and the McGill Friendship questionnaires (MFQ-RA and MFQFF; Mendelson & Aboud, 1999, 2012). We purposely do not describe instruments measuring the quality of other types of relationships, such as relationships with family members, because they constitute different types of close relationships compared to the quality of friendships (on SNSs) (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1998).

First, we discuss the FQQ, a questionnaire exclusively for measuring older children's quality perceptions of their friendships

**Table 1**  
Overview instruments measuring offline friendship quality.

	Appropriate for	Dimensions
<b>FQQ</b> (40 items)	Children (elementary school)	Validation and caring Conflict and betrayal Companionship and recreation Help and guidance Intimate exchange Conflict resolution
<b>FQS</b> (23 items)	Children and early adolescents	Companionship Conflict Help (aid and protection from victimization) Security (reliable alliance and transcending problems) Closeness (affective bond and reflective appraisal)
<b>FFIYC</b> (24 items)	Children (kindergarten)	Validation Aid Disclosing negative affect Conflict Exclusivity Satisfaction Affective climate
<b>MFQ-RA</b> (16 items)	Adolescents and young adults	Positive feelings Satisfaction
<b>MFQ-FF</b> (30 items)	Adolescents and young adults	Companionship Help Intimacy Reliable alliance Self-validation Emotional security

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