



Full Length Article

Adolescents' comments in social media: Why do adolescents receive negative feedback and who is most at risk?



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ABSTRACT

Receiving negative peer feedback in social media may have negative consequences for adolescents' psychosocial development and well-being. Therefore, the first aim of this study was to investigate online behavior (i.e., online social exploration, risky online self-presentation) that predicts receiving negative online peer feedback. The second aim was to examine three types of precursors that may predict this online behavior and, indirectly, negative feedback: (a) developmental (i.e., sex, age), (b) dispositional (i.e., sensation seeking, inhibitory control), and (c) social precursors (i.e., peer problems, family conflict). We collected survey data among 785 Dutch adolescents (10–15 years old). Our results showed that adolescents who engaged in online social exploration and risky online self-presentation more often, were more likely to receive negative peer feedback. Online social exploration was more prevalent among the older adolescents and adolescents characterized by higher sensation seeking and more family conflict. In addition, risky online self-presentation was more prevalent among adolescents high in sensation seeking. Consequently, these adolescents' online behavior, indirectly, made them more at risk of receiving negative peer feedback in social media.

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1. Introduction

Social acceptance in the peer group and approval by peers and close friends are crucial to the development of adolescents' self-concept (i.e., their ideas of who they are) and self-esteem (i.e., the evaluations of their self-concept). Especially early and middle adolescence are characterized by an increased focus on the self (Elkind & Bowen, 1979). In this period, adolescents can be extremely preoccupied with how their peers perceive them. As a consequence, they are highly sensitive to feedback from their peers, and especially to negative peer feedback (Thomaes et al., 2010).

A large part of adolescents' communication with friends and peers takes place through the Internet and, specifically, social media (Madden et al., 2013). Social media give adolescents ample opportunity to learn how to present themselves by adjusting and optimizing their online profiles in a way that elicits positive feedback from their peers (Donoso & Ribbens, 2010; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2004; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). In addition, social media are typically designed to stimulate positive feedback on one another's selves, in particular through comments and likes on

messages and photos. It is, therefore, not surprising that most adolescents receive mainly positive feedback on their online profiles (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006), and that this positive feedback stimulates their self-concept and self-esteem (Thomaes et al., 2010; Valkenburg et al., 2006).

Although in social media positive reactions from peers are far more common than negative ones, earlier research has shown that a small number of adolescents, about seven percent, mainly receive negative feedback on their online profiles (e.g., Valkenburg et al., 2006), and that their self-esteem can suffer from receiving negative online peer feedback (Thomaes et al., 2010; Valkenburg et al., 2006). There are several explanations why online feedback may be more harmful than face-to-face feedback. First, the reduced audiovisual cues in online communication may make people feel less inhibited (Walther, 1996) and, therefore, negative feedback can be harsher than in face-to-face communication (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Suler, 2004). Second, online feedback is more public than face-to-face feedback (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Although adolescents can adjust the privacy settings of their profiles (boyd, 2008), they often have a large group of contacts who can see their profiles (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011), and who can distribute content of these profiles to others who do not have access to the profile (boyd, 2008). This means that online feedback can be seen by more – and possibly more unknown – people than face-to-face feedback. Third, compared to face-to-face feedback,

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online feedback is more persistent and visible to others long after it has been communicated (Boyd, 2008), which may also increase its impact.

Earlier studies give reason to assume that negative online peer feedback in pre- and early adolescence can be at least as detrimental for psychosocial development as offline negative peer feedback (Kiriakidis & Kavoura, 2010; Tokunaga, 2010; Valkenburg et al., 2006). It is, therefore, important to know whether certain online behaviors evoke negative reactions and, if so, who engages in these online behaviors. After all, if we are able to identify these particular adolescents, we will be better able to design prevention and intervention strategies. Therefore, the present study focuses on identifying online behavior related to receiving negative online peer feedback, as well as several characteristics (i.e., demographic, dispositional, and social characteristics) of adolescents who engage in online behavior that may result in negative feedback.

1.1. Online behavior and negative feedback

Although previous studies have shown that negative online feedback can have a negative effect on adolescents' self-concept and self-esteem, to our knowledge, none of these studies have examined the specific processes or causes that may lead to receiving negative feedback. An important first step, therefore, is to investigate how adolescents who frequently receive peer negative feedback from their peers differ in their online behavior from other adolescents. Do adolescents who get negative feedback behave in a less inhibited way? Do they take more risks in their online communication and self-presentation? To answer these questions, the first aim of this study is to investigate which online behaviors predict the frequency of receiving negative feedback in social media (i.e., social network sites).

Social network sites typically encourage adolescents to form a network of friends, for instance by initiating conversations and new social contacts, as well as by showing pictures of themselves in their online profiles. On the one hand, such online activities have been suggested to support crucial goals in adolescence related to social competence and identity development (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). On the other, the more adolescents reveal about themselves, the more feedback this can generate. Although social initiation and posting of personal pictures can elicit positive reactions from others, the likelihood of receiving negative feedback is higher compared to other "safer" online behavior. Adolescents who engage in these behaviors may, consequently, be more vulnerable to negative consequences (e.g., Berson, Berson, & Ferron, 2002; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007), such as receiving negative online peer feedback, or being victimized online (Mesch, 2009). In the present study, we, therefore, hypothesize two behaviors as potential predictors of receiving negative feedback: (a) online social exploration and, (b) risky online self-presentation.

Online social exploration refers to exploring new social contacts and initiating conversations through social media. This includes communication with known peers (e.g., asking whether someone wants to do something fun with you) as well as less known or even unknown peers (e.g., commenting on messages of people you do not know very well). Risky online self-presentation can be defined as posting pictures of oneself with a strong focus on sexuality and physical attractiveness. It concerns pictures in which adolescents appear good-looking or sexy (e.g., by posing in a provocative or sexy way, or by being scantily dressed in the picture). Both online social exploration and risky online self-presentation typically involve more risk than activities that can be expected to have more certain – and usually also more positive – outcomes, such as talking to friends or posting relatively neutral pictures of oneself. The current study, therefore, investigates whether adolescents' online social exploration and risky online self-presentation predict

negative feedback from peers. We expect that online social exploration (H1a) and risky online self-presentation (H2b) predict a higher risk of receiving negative online peer feedback.

1.2. Potential precursors of risky online behavior

Previous literature stresses the importance of investigating the role of individual differences when investigating media use and possible media effects (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Aside from gender and age, which are frequently investigated as individual difference factors, the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (DSMM) also points to dispositional factors (e.g., personality) and social factors (e.g., family and peer influence) that make individuals more susceptible to media effects. Based on this theoretical model and previous research, we examine the role of three types of precursors of risky online behavior: (a) demographic (i.e., sex, age), (b) dispositional (i.e., sensation seeking, inhibitory control), and (c) social (i.e., peer problems, family conflict). These precursors are expected to directly influence online social exploration and risky online self-presentation, which, in turn, increase the likelihood of receiving negative peer feedback. The second aim, therefore, is to examine the indirect effects of these three types of precursors on negative online peer feedback.

1.2.1. Demographic factors

With respect to demographic precursors of risky online behavior, this study investigates two variables: sex and age.

1.2.1.1. Sex. Boys generally display more risky behavior in everyday life compared to girls (Gullone, Moore, Moss, & Boyd, 2000). They also seem to engage in more online risks than girls, for example through sharing personal information online (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007), engaging in sexual online risk behavior (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011), and visiting chat rooms and forums, which typically involve interactions with strangers (Sasson & Mesch, 2014). In addition, boys and men may be more inclined to experiment with the information they post in their online profiles compared to girls and women (Orchard, Fullwood, Galbraith, & Morris, 2014). Experimentation in itself implies trying out new options, of which the outcome (i.e., the positivity or negativity of other's reactions) is less certain. Such behavior may, in turn, increase the likelihood of receiving negative feedback.

On the other hand, girls may take more risks than boys in their online physical self-presentation, which can also, subsequently, provoke negative reactions from peers. For example, they more often post sexual pictures of themselves than boys (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008). This relatively risky way of presenting themselves can prompt negative comments from peers. However, because the empirical evidence on the relationship between sex and risky online behavior is not consistent enough to formulate a hypothesis, we explore the following research question: Do boys or girls have a higher tendency to engage in online social exploration or (RQ1a) and risky online self-presentation (RQ1b), which, in turn, increases the risk of receiving negative online peer feedback?

1.2.1.2. Age. Early and middle adolescents (12–15 years old) may be more likely to receive negative online feedback than pre- (10–11 years old) and late adolescents (16–18 years old). In early to middle adolescence, there is an increase in risk behavior, which peaks in middle adolescence and decreases in late adolescence (e.g., Steinberg, 2005). Adolescents' online risk behavior also seems to follow this typical curvilinear risk behavior trajectory (Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2012). This suggests that early and, especially, middle adolescents may take more risks in how they communicate and present themselves in social media

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