



## Full length article

# Adolescents' response to parental Facebook friend requests: The comparative influence of privacy management, parent-child relational quality, attitude and peer influence



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## ABSTRACT

Smartphones greatly reduce parents' ability to monitor their children's online activities. A recommended surveillance technique is to 'friend' adolescents on social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook. However, adolescents use these sites to experiment with adjusting their self-image based on friends' feedback, so is it possible for them to simultaneously satisfy the very different expectations of both peers and parents? This study explores adolescents' attitudes to parental presence on Facebook using Communications Privacy Management theory (Petronio, 2002) as the theoretical framework to investigate the relative influence of privacy management, relational quality and peer pressure. The study was conducted among 262 secondary school children living at home and recruited via their schools. Results showed that while privacy management and peer influence were significantly related to adolescent attitudes to parental presence on Facebook, only attitude to parental presence on Facebook and parental-adolescent relational quality predicted friendship status. A picture emerged of adolescents very much in control of their SNS privacy who were largely indifferent to parents on Facebook. There was however, a sizable, peer-influenced minority, opposed to parental presence, for whom friendship may be counter-productive. While this study uncovered many unique associations relating to adolescent-parental Facebook friendship, further qualitative research is recommended to provide a deeper understanding of this complex subject.

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## 1. Introduction

It is well documented that teenagers exert considerable effort to keep their Internet activities hidden from parents (Livingstone & Bober, 2005; The Digital Divide, 2012). Although parents attempt to monitor these activities (O'Neill, Grehan, & Ólafsson, 2011; Sasson & Mesch, 2014), Law, Shapka, and Olson (2010) report the inefficacy of such attempts, concluding that the most effective way for parents to gain insight into their children's online activity is for their children to tell them (Sorbring & Lundin, 2012). The increasing penetration of personal devices, such as smartphones and tablets, has altered the dynamic of this interaction in favour of the adolescent. As the access landscape changes, a critical question for

parents is how to provide guidance on safe Internet use whilst avoiding conflict that might reduce the adolescent's willingness to self-disclose. This research will address this issue by investigating adolescents' response to parental Facebook friend requests from the perspective of their online privacy management practices, parental-adolescent relational quality, adolescent attitudes to parental presence on Facebook and peer influence.

A popular, and oft recommended tactic is for parents to 'friend' their children on social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, enabling them to unobtrusively monitor their children's activities, friends and online self-disclosure. But adolescents need space to be adolescents and to experiment with developing and adjusting their self-image based on the feedback they receive from network friends. Parental presence on Facebook therefore poses a dilemma for teenagers of how to be simultaneously socially impressive to peers yet acceptable to parents (boyd, 2007). This is evidenced in adolescents' conflicted feelings on the matter (Madden, Cortesi, Gasser, Lenhart, & Duggan, 2012). Research shows that while

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adolescents continue to retain Facebook profiles, they are increasingly using alternative social networking sites (Madden, 2013). Wiederhold (2012), suggests that parental presence may be partially responsible but there appears to be little research clarifying the impact of parental presence on Facebook from the adolescent's perspective. This study aims to address this gap in the literature, using Communications Privacy Management theory (Petronio, 2002) as the theoretical framework to investigate the relative influence of online privacy management, relational quality, adolescent attitudes to parents on Facebook and parental versus peer influence.

### 1.1. Adolescence and individuation

Adolescence represents the years of individuation in which a child pushes the boundaries of parental control, demanding an increasing right to privacy as part of the process of finding and establishing one's own sense of identity. Keijsers and Poulin (2013) note that through early adolescence, communication with parents diminishes as the adolescent selectively decides what to reveal in their efforts to realign the relationship to increase their autonomy and independence. Youniss and Smollar (1987) suggest that adolescents gain independence when empowered to act without parents unnecessarily intervening and that individuation is facilitated by "the licence that parents grant adolescents to have private lives" (pg. 77). Noller and Callan (1991) state that the quality of relationship children have with their parents is dependent on the extent to which children feel in control of their lives, yet Child and Westermann (2013) identified that young adult children may feel powerless to refuse a Facebook parental friend request. So could a parental friend request constitute an invasion of an adolescent's privacy with a potentially detrimental impact on the parent-child relationship? Current evidence suggests that for younger adolescents living at home, where the primary aim of parental friendship is surveillance, the relational impact is negative (Padilla-Walker, Coyne, & Fraser, 2012), whereas with older adolescents where the aim is communication, the relational impact is positive (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Day, Harper, & Stockdale, 2014).

### 1.2. Communications Privacy Management Theory

Communications Privacy Management (CPM) Theory (Petronio, 2002), is an evidence-based theory centred on the dialectical tension that exists between one's need to control one's personal information and one's relational need to share it. Its main principles are that people believe they own their private information, as they might own possessions. They believe they have the right to control it and develop privacy rules to help impose this control. These rules are influenced by culture, context and gender and are driven by motivation that often applies a risk-benefit ratio. Once information is disclosed, it moves from individual to collective ownership, metaphorically illustrated by a collective privacy boundary. This entails joint management of the information and there are numerous studies demonstrating how this is achieved in inter-familial (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006; Petronio, 2010), work (Allen, Coopman, Hart, & Walker, 2007) and doctor-patient (Lewis, Matheson, & Brimacombe, 2011) relationships.

More recently, CPM theory has been adapted to explore online personal self-disclosure practices (Child, Pearson, & Petronio, 2009; Child & Agyeman-Budu, 2010), response to Facebook friend requests between co-workers (Frampton & Child, 2013) and, of particular relevance to this study, response to friend requests between young adults and parents (Child & Westermann, 2013). The latter found that parental friend requests did not constitute a privacy dilemma for these young adults but the majority were college

students living away from home, so represent a different cohort to the home-dwelling adolescents in this study.

In Facebook terms, CPM theory suggests that when a person posts updates or photos, they invite Facebook friends to become co-owners of the posted information but they believe they retain the right to control its management through application of permeability, ownership and linkage rules (Petronio, 2002). Permeability refers to privacy settings, number of friends and the depth and breadth of information one discloses including coding, obscurity and interpretation enabled for those in the know (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Ownership refers to maintaining control of one's information, but due to the affordances of SNSs such as *persistence*, *repliability*, *scalability* and *searchability* (boyd & Marwick, 2011) plus *shareability* (Papacharissi & Gibson, 2011), this can be an unrealistic expectation, a factor not adequately addressed in studies to date. The third rule, linkage, translates to acceptance or rejection of 'friend' requests, but Facebook linkage differs to offline linkage. Employment of the risk-benefit ratio is evidenced as the benefit of satisfying one's need for popularity and increasing one's status by accepting non-genuine friends within one's boundary, tends to outweigh the risk of privacy loss (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009). Madden et al. (2012) identify that 12–17 year old American teens have an average of 425.4 Facebook friends, implying that disclosure can now occur on a global stage as any one of those hundreds of friends can take a screen shot of someone's personal information and disseminate it as they see fit.

In such an environment it's understandable that parents want to know what their adolescent children are disclosing online. But if a parental friend request is perceived as an invasion of the teen's privacy boundary, it could impact negatively on the quality of the parent-child relationship (Petronio, 1994; Hawk, Keijsers, Hale & Meeus, 2009), the essential element for keeping lines of communication open. But some adolescents appear to be genuinely happy for their parents to be Facebook friends (Madden et al., 2012), so this research will investigate if the variables considered in this study, namely, privacy management, relational quality, attitudes to parents on Facebook and peer influence, can help to explain adolescents' divergent opinions on the matter.

### 1.3. Applying CPM as a theoretical framework

Experience has led to more judicial use of social networks. Anecdotal evidence abounds of those who have suffered as a result of posting inappropriate content and research suggests that people are taking a more proactive approach to managing their privacy online (Madden & Smith, 2010; Frampton & Child, 2013; Young & Quan-Haase, 2013). Child et al. (2009) developed a Blogging Privacy Management Measure using a series of questions relating to Petronio's permeability, ownership and linkage boundary management rules, to empirically assess the extent of online privacy management. While originally developed for blogging, Frampton and Child (2013) adapted it for Facebook, providing valuable data on young adults' privacy management practices. However, there appears to be a lack of data on how adolescents regulate online disclosure, how they impose collective privacy boundary rules and whether these factors impact their response to parental Facebook friend requests. As such, the first research question will assess the association between adolescents' privacy management orientation and parental Facebook friendship status.

**RQ1.** *In what way, if any, are proactive adolescent privacy management practices associated with adolescent-parental Facebook friendship status?*

As participants were living at home without a communication requirement for parental Facebook friendship and as proactive

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