Too little power, too much information! Power, narcissism, and adolescents' disclosures on social networking sites

Skyler T. Hawk [a,*], Tom F.M. ter Bogt [b], Regina J.J.M. van den Eijnden [b], Stefanie A. Nelemans [b]

[a] The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
[b] Utrecht University, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

From a self-image failure perspective, narcissistic adolescents who feel socially disempowered might engage in exhibitionistic disclosures on Social Networking Sites (SNSs). Two studies investigated this hypothesis regarding normative (day-to-day) and problematic (sexuality, drinking) disclosures. In Study 1, cluster analysis revealed four adolescent classes ($N = 471$) with relatively higher/lower narcissism and power. Higher-Narcissism adolescents reported more normative SNS disclosures, but only Higher-Narcissism/Lower-Power youths reported more problematic disclosures. Study 2 adolescents ($N = 56$) received a low- or high-power experimental prime and reported risk perceptions surrounding both disclosure types. Higher-Narcissism youths primed with low power perceived less risk for problematic (but not normative) disclosures. For high-narcissism youths, too little power promotes tendencies to share "too much information" on SNSs.

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1. Introduction

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have dramatically changed the ways that adolescents share details of their personal lives. Youths use SNSs to routinely upload photos, videos, and text-based updates on their whereabouts and behaviors. Besides these relatively normative disclosures, a sizeable percentage of late-adolescents also disclose drinking, substance use, and/or sexual behaviors on SNSs (e.g., Egan & Moreno, 2011; Karl, Peluchette, & Schlaegel, 2010; Morgan, Snelson, & Elison-Bowers, 2010). These 'problematic' disclosures hold risks for both youth's well-being and educational/career advancement (Swzedo, Mikami, & Allen, 2012; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). Beyond understanding the prevalence of such risk behavior, examining psychosocial predictors of adolescents' SNS disclosures can provide guidance for education and intervention efforts.

Youths regard SNSs disclosures to be important for self-expression and relationship maintenance (Baker & White, 2010; Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009; Medizadeh, 2010). However, adolescents must consider the potential risks of sharing 'too much information'. Among early adults, for example, disclosing deviant activities online predicts later social withdrawal and problematic drinking (Swzedo et al., 2012). School administrators and potential employers also increasingly use SNS profiles as a source of information (Karl et al., 2010), and incriminating content can result in disciplinary actions at school or work (Bohnert & Ross, 2010; Karl & Peluchette, 2011). It is therefore useful to investigate whether youths with certain personality and/or social profiles are more susceptible to problematic SNS disclosures.

Adolescent narcissism appears to be linked with SNS behavior. Narcissism is a dispositional tendency toward grandiose self-views, combined with a high need for external validation (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Narcissistic individuals hold fragile self-perceptions that they maintain through attention-seeking and self-centered behavior (Buss & Chiodo, 1991; Pauletti, Menon, Menon, Tobin, & Perry, 2012), and are more concerned with appearing exciting and popular than they are with interpersonal intimacy (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, Olthof, & Denissen, 2008). The ease with which personal information can be shared on SNSs might provide an attractive platform for showcasing narcissistic tendencies (Bergman, Fearrington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011; Panek, Nardis, & Konrath, 2013).

Individuals higher in narcissism have a greater number of connections on SNSs (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; McKinney, Kelly, & Duran, 2012), spend more time on SNSs (Bibby, 2008; Medizadeh, 2010), and post more status updates and pictures of themselves (McKinney et al., 2012; Ong et al., 2011). It is still

unclear, however, whether this increased self-promotional behavior extends to problematic disclosures. While narcissistic youths' attention-seeking tendencies might promote greater exhibitionism (e.g., sharing a sexually suggestive profile photo), they might also strictly control their online image to avoid damaging their reputation. Understanding when narcissistic youths might share problematic content can help to mitigate negative outcomes among a group already at risk for social problems.

Narcissistic individuals desire influence over others, and are highly sensitive to fluctuations in their social standing. From a self-image failure perspective (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), they might intentionally amplify attention-seeking behaviors in absence of external validation (Carlson, Vazire, & Oltmanns, 2011). Perceptions of social power, broadly defined as "the capacity to influence others" (Anderson & Galinksy, 2006, p. 512), might thus affect narcissists' SNS disclosures. Several prior studies have investigated the link between power and risky behavior. While attaining power might lead to more optimistic risk perceptions and more high-risk behavior (Anderson & Galinksy, 2006; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003), additional studies have clarified that this depends on whether individuals are motivated to acquire social power. Maner, Galliot, Butz, and Peruche (2007) showed that having power indeed promoted more risky decision-making, but only among individuals with lower power motivation. Participants with *high* power motivation who were *not* given social power actually engaged in riskier behavior than those afforded power. Powerlessness also increases risk behavior when that lack of power is seen as illegitimate (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). Thus, powerless individuals who desire more influence might have 'nothing to lose' from reckless behavior, while those motivated to hold onto existing power might avoid risk (see Anderson & Galinksy, 2006, and Maner et al., 2007 for similar considerations).

1.1. Overview and hypotheses

Based on prior studies examining power, power motivation, and risk-taking, we hypothesized that high-narcissism youths who perceive a lack of social power might compensate with increasingly exhibitionistic SNS behavior (Buss & Chiodo, 1991). This could pertain to more frequent, relatively mundane disclosures, but also to 'problematic' references to substance use and/or sexual activity. We tested this main hypothesis across two studies, in which we examined whether perceived social power moderates the link between adolescents' narcissism and disclosures on SNSs. By using narcissism as a specific example of dispositional power motivation that is present from childhood (Thomaes et al., 2008), and examining SNS disclosures as behavior that can foster real-world difficulties, our research elaborates upon power-risk processes that have previously only been demonstrated in artificial laboratory settings. In examining the predictors of youths' more excessive SNS disclosures, we focused on both self-reported SNS disclosure frequency (Study 1) and youths' conscious perceptions of risk regarding such behavior (Study 2). As other studies have found both gender and age differences in SNS disclosures (e.g., Egan & Moreno, 2011; Karl et al., 2010; Medizadeh, 2010; Peluchette & Karl, 2008; Valkenburg, Sumter, & Peter, 2010), we additionally explored or controlled for these variables.

We also aimed to extend general knowledge about adolescents' SNS disclosures in several important ways. First, few studies have explicitly compared disclosures of relatively mundane experiences with the rarer (but potentially more damaging) disclosures about substance use and sexual activity (but see Christofides et al., 2009; Karl et al., 2010; Peluchette & Karl, 2008). Such distinctions are important, as SNS references to substance use or sexuality shape perceptions of related norms (e.g., Moreno, Briner,

Williams, Walker, & Christakis, 2009) that can subsequently affect youths' behavior (Litt & Stock, 2011; Young & Jordan, 2013). We examined both types of SNS disclosure in this research, in order to further compare their relative frequencies and to examine whether the same psychological processes might underlie the two behaviors.

Second, most research on problematic SNS disclosures has been conducted with young adult/college samples (e.g., Christofides et al., 2009; DeWall, Buffardi, Bonser, & Campbell, 2011; Egan & Moreno, 2011; Karl et al., 2010; Peluchette & Karl, 2008). Prior studies disagree as to whether problematic SNS disclosures correlate with age negatively (Karl et al., 2010) or positively (Egan & Moreno, 2011). However, the same disclosures could be riskier for younger adolescents (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2012). We therefore utilized pre-college samples.

Third, studies on SNS disclosures have typically utilized variable-centered, correlational designs that do not consider distinct subgroups of adolescents. Variable-centered research might mask specific classes of youths who differ meaningfully in both psychosocial profiles and SNS behavior (von Eye & Bogat, 2006). For example, although narcissists are generally seen as holding inflated perceptions of their social influence, generalizing this assumption to all individuals would imply that narcissists are ignorant of how their behaviors further their social difficulties. If narcissists notice the fluctuations in their social relationships (Carlson et al., 2011), however, this could indicate that there are actually groups of narcissistic individuals who see themselves as being more or less powerful, respectively. It is also somewhat unclear just what it means for narcissists to hold 'reduced' perceptions of their social influence, and how severe these reductions must be to promote more extreme behavior. Examining theoretical extremes of ordinal scales (e.g., ±1 SD) provides only minimal understanding of these issues. Conversely, investigating natural groupings of adolescents offers novel information regarding heterogeneity in power perceptions among narcissistic youths, as well as the boundary conditions under which reduced perceptions of power might promote problematic behavior. We therefore used person-centered methods in Study 1, which allowed for consideration of how naturally-occurring groups might differ in their SNS disclosures.

Finally, researchers examining both narcissistic SNS exhibitionism (Bergman et al., 2011) and adolescents' online risk behaviors (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010) have pleaded for experiments supporting existing correlational and longitudinal studies. Doing so provides greater confidence when targeting particular factors in education and intervention. We therefore employed an experimental manipulation of power Study 2, to provide causal evidence of how experiences of power(lessness) affect youths with differing levels of narcissism.

2. Study 1

Study 1 utilized a cluster analysis in order to investigate whether youths with specific profiles of narcissism and social power report different frequencies of normative and problematic SNS disclosures. We expected to observe classes of adolescents characterized by different combinations of relatively higher and lower narcissism and social power. By creating such groups, we gained the ability to compare both types of SNS disclosure in a repeated-measures mixed analysis, as opposed to conducting linear regressions on each dependent variable, separately. Our main hypothesis for this study was that adolescents characterized by a High-Narcissism/Low-Power profile would report the most frequent SNS disclosures. As prior literature has also suggested possible differences in disclosure behavior between different SNSs (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009; Panek et al., 2013), we additionally controlled for this factor in the analysis.