Facebook as a means to make new peers among early maturing girls

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ABSTRACT

We explored, for the first time, links between female pubertal timing and adolescent Internet use, Facebook use, and the size of peer networks on Facebook in a Swedish early adolescent sample ($N = 166$). Although pubertal timing was not linked to Internet use or Facebook use, it was linked to being more open about oneself and having more Facebook friends in grade 7. These associations had disappeared one year later. Consonant with previous studies of offline contexts, this study provides preliminary evidence to suggest that Facebook is a means to make new peers among early maturing girls in early adolescence.

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1. Introduction

People use online social networking sites to share and connect with others (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013). Teenagers expand their peer networks significantly when entering adolescence (Eccles et al., 1993). Accordingly, sharing and connecting with others online is particularly common among adolescents, who are more frequent users of online social networking sites than adults and are also more willing to open up to others in these contexts (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2012; Walrave, Vanwesenbeeck, & Heirman, 2012). Self-disclosure is a central part of relationship and identity formation in adolescence. It has been suggested that self-disclosure patterns start earlier online than offline, making online settings a practice arena for offline settings (Brown & Larson, 2009). Although online social networking among adolescents may play a positive role in development, it could also have negative effects. Recent findings show that some of the activities associated with peer networking on Facebook and other online social networking sites can be risky (see Guitton, 2014; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). In this study, we investigate whether girls who enter puberty earlier than their same-age same-sex peers are particularly likely to use online networking sites (in this case Facebook) as a means to make new friends. This information is important, given that previous research has established that early maturing girls tend to have unconventional peer networks in adolescence and are more likely to be victimized in their peer group (e.g., Petersen & Hyde, 2009; Stattin, Kerr, & Skoog, 2011).

1.1. Pubertal maturation and social behaviors

Puberty, or the process of sexual and reproductive maturation, is a developmental milestone that represents the beginning of adolescence. It entails significant psychological and social changes which, through processes such as individuation, ultimately lead to independence and autonomy.

During the time of puberty, horizontal social relationships (i.e., peer relationships) become increasingly important, and being able to form relationships with peers and friends is considered a central developmental task for adolescents (Havighurst, 1948). Peer networks are constructed in different settings when teenagers enter puberty. Peers are sources of activities, support, and influence (Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). They are usually similar to each other (Dishion, Patterson, & Griesler, 1994; Kandel, 1978), partly because adolescents tend to choose their peers on the basis of interpersonal dynamics and compatibility (Bukowski, Buhrmester, & Underwood, 2011).

The timing of pubertal changes in girls is linked to the formation of peer relationships. For girls who experience puberty relatively early, the changes in social relationships take place earlier than for their peers. It is assumed that because of their earlier maturation, early maturing girls move their orientation from parents to peers at an earlier age than later maturing girls (Stattin & Magnusson, 1990). Accordingly, research suggests that the peer networks of early maturing girls differ from those of later maturers. In early adolescence, the time during which early maturing girls differ the most from later maturing girls, early maturing girls

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have more socially advanced peer networks which include more older, male, and deviant peers (Costello, Sung, Worthman, & Angold, 2007; Haynie, 2003; Lynne, Graber, Nichols, Brooks-Gunn, & Botvin, 2007; Negriff, Ji, & Trickett, 2011; Skoog, 2013; Skoog & Stattin, 2014; Stattin & Magnusson, 1990). Thus, the change in importance of peer relationships seems to occur earlier for early maturing girls than for their later maturing, same-age peers.

Researchers have put forward a number of theoretical explanations for the link between early puberty and peer relations. The peer socialization hypothesis states that girls who experience puberty relatively early feel different from and more mature than their same-age peers; they therefore seek out and establish unconventional peer networks comprising chronologically older peers and boyfriends (Skoog & Stattin, 2014; Skoog, Stattin, Ruiselova, & Özdemir, 2013; Stattin et al., 2011). This is assumed to be due to the fact that early maturing girls feel more similar to those peers than to their same-age peers.

Interestingly, the early maturing girls seem to find these unconventional peers in unconventional contexts; not typically in school, but rather outside of school, in leisure settings characterized by people of different ages and genders. These settings provide greater access to different types of peers (Stattin et al., 2011). Thus, early maturing girls seem to seek out new peers and peer networks in settings outside of school. This is important information given that the vast majority of studies on adolescent peer relationships are based on the assumption that school is where adolescents meet with their peers, and therefore only peers in school are studied.

1.2. Pubertal timing and the use of online social networking sites

One limitation pertaining to all known previous studies on the link between pubertal timing and girls' peer relationships is that only peers in offline contexts have been considered. Today, most Western adolescents use online social networking sites to maintain and establish new peer contacts (Shapiro & Margolin, 2013). In this study, we argue that online social networking sites, specifically Facebook, form a context in which early maturing girls have even better chances to seek out new peer networks than they do in offline settings. We define an online social networking sites as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Ellison & Boyd, 2013, p. 151).

In this study, we focus on Facebook, which has been a dominant social networking site among young people for some years (Livingstone, Ólafsson, & Staksrud, 2011). Facebook provides opportunities for both maintaining established friendships (Special & Li-Barber, 2012; Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008) and making new friends (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009). The size of the online peer network is a particularly strong motivational factor to use Facebook among women (Lin & Lu, 2011). Young people's Facebook friends are of different ages and outnumber, but include, offline friends (Madge et al., 2009; West, Lewis, & Currie, 2009). Moreover, a recent review concluded that "there is evidence for an overall positive association between using social networking sites and adolescents' sense of social connectivity" (Shapiro & Margolin, 2013, p. 9).

Information sharing, including self-disclosure, is a central feature of Facebook. It has been argued that self-presentation and self-disclosure on Facebook are parts of adolescents' identity construction, and that adolescents use Facebook to pursue personal and social goals which they cannot achieve through offline means (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Reaching out to and establishing contacts with new, desirable peers might be one such goal.

Adolescents who are more oriented toward peers in terms of perceiving being liked by peers as important, who are more susceptible to peer influence, and who wish to connect with distant and new peers disclose more private information on Facebook (Christofides et al., 2012; Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Walrave et al., 2012). Thus, adolescents who are peer oriented seem to self-disclose more on sites such as Facebook.

Taken as a whole, the literature provides both theoretical and empirical reasons to think that early maturing girls are particularly likely to use Facebook as a means to maintain and establish new peer relationships. First, given that early maturing girls are more oriented toward socially advanced/unconventional peers in offline contexts in general (e.g., Stattin & Magnusson, 1990) and out-of-school contexts in particular (Stattin et al., 2011), they should use common online social networking sites (i.e., Facebook) as a means to seek out new peers and be more peer oriented, for instance have more Facebook friends, than later maturing girls. Second, given that adolescents who are peer oriented seem to self-disclose more on sites such as Facebook (Christofides et al., 2012; Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Walrave et al., 2012), we should also expect early maturing girls to reveal more personal and private information on Facebook. These predictions have, to our knowledge, never been tested in previous research.

1.3. Aim of this study

Against this backdrop, the aim of this study was to explore, for the first time, whether early maturing girls use Facebook as a means to maintain and establish peer relationships in early adolescence. Specifically, we investigated links between pubertal timing and adolescent girls' Facebook use, the size of girls' peer networks on Facebook, and sharing personal and private information on Facebook in a sample of 13-year-old Swedish adolescent girls. This is an age when the differences in pubertal maturation are large (Tanner, 1978), and therefore the effects of pubertal timing should be the greatest. We hypothesized that in comparison to later maturing girls, early maturing girls (1) use Facebook more, (2) have more Facebook friends, and (3) disclose more personal and private information on Facebook.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The participating girls ($N = 166$) are part of a larger three-year longitudinal research project in Sweden concerning young people's sexual development in new and traditional contexts (Skoog, Sorbring, Hallberg, & Bohlin, 2013; Sorbring, Skoog, & Bohlin, 2014; Sorbring, Hallberg, Bohlin, & Skoog, 2015). The research program is funded by the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research. The analyses in this study were based on wave 1 data, when the girls were in grade 7 (M age 13), and wave 2 data, when the girls were in grade 8 ($N = 145$; M age 14). Attrition analyses using independent samples t-tests revealed no differences ($p > .10$) between girls who stayed in and who dropped out of the study in terms of the main study measures (Internet use, Facebook use, and pubertal timing).

The participants filled in computerized questionnaires during normal school hours, in the presence of a researcher but with no teachers around. Participants were given instructions on how to fill in the questionnaires, and were physically positioned in the classroom in such a way that they were unable to see each other's responses. We obtained active informed consent to take part in the study from both the participants and their parents, and the girls were informed that they could withdraw from the study at