



# Does low self-control explain voluntary disclosure of personal information on the Internet?



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## ABSTRACT

In this study we explore the relationship between self-control and self-disclosure of personal information. As proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi in self-control theory, low self-control is believed to lead to a variety of criminal behaviors as well as other risk-taking behaviors. Research suggests revealing personal information on the Internet to the public entails many risks. Our study found such self-disclosure can be adequately accounted for by low self-control. Although the dimensionality of self-control has been debated in the literature, our study found that self-control, either as a unidimensional or as a multidimensional measure, has a strong relationship with self-disclosure, even after controlling for age, gender, race, and education.

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## 1. Introduction

The present study is aimed to explore whether low self-control leads to voluntary disclosure of personal information on the Internet. Low self-control is a personality trait that is believed to be linked to a propensity for deviant acts and risk-taking behaviors (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Longshore, Turner, & Stein, 1996; Piquero & Bouffard, 2007). Although self-disclosure on the Internet may not be defined as a deviant act, it can be seen as a risk-taking behavior. Research found people are willing to put privacy at risk in exchange for expected benefits, such as interpersonal relationships (Ibrahim, 2008; Tufekci, 2008; Tyma, 2007). By doing so, they often knowingly face risks that include inadvertent disclosure of personal information, unwanted contact, harassment or stalking, surveillance, use of personal data by third parties, hacking, and identity theft (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009; Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Viseu, Clement, & Aspinall, 2004). Besides an increased chance of victimization, some criminals also reveal their law violation openly on the Internet. In 2011, a 17 years old teenager was arrested because on Facebook he posted photos of a robbery he committed (The Root, 2011). Undoubtedly this is risk-taking. Accordingly, low self-control seems to be a promising explanation for such self-disclosure, but the evidence is absent in the literature for the lack of research attempts in this regard.

To better understand some people's voluntary disclosure of private information, the present study adopts self-control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 2000) to examine self-disclosure on one of the most prominent social media, Facebook. The theory is discussed in detail in the following section. Based on this theory, the relationship between self-control and self-disclosure is thus tested. We hypothesize that low self-control predicts a higher level of self-disclosure.

## 2. Theory

In 1990, Gottfredson and Hirschi proposed General Theory of Crime, also known as self-control theory. In the theory essentially the authors argue the lack of strong self-control is the reason why people engage in criminal acts (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Through many subsequent publications about this theory, Gottfredson and Hirschi argue self-control should be seen as a latent trait that remains stable after an individual turns 8 years old (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 2000). Low self-control entails certain characteristics, including risk-taking, impulsivity, lacking empathy, preferring simple and easy tasks, and preferring physical tasks. These are the same characteristics of criminality, according to Hirschi and Gottfredson (1994). Hence, low self-control represents the propensity to engage in criminal acts. Moreover, self-control theory argues individuals with low self-control would tend to engage in not only criminal acts but also other acts that share similar characteristics, such as risk-taking behaviors that do not necessarily violate the law (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1994).

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Self-control theory has been extensively tested. According to the theory, self-control is comprised of six elements, including impulsivity, simple tasks, risk seeking, physical activities, self-centeredness, and temper (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Accordingly, Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, and Arneklev (1993) developed a six-factor, 24-item scale to operationalize the self-control construct, and they found self-control, despite the six elements, is more unidimensional than multidimensional. This follows self-control can be measured as a single construct, instead of a compound of multiple constructs. A number of studies have tested the scale developed by Grasmick et al. Piquero and Tibbetts (1996) tested this scale on a sample of adult drug offenders and juvenile offenders. They found support for Grasmick et al.'s original findings. Low self-control in this study significantly predicted drunk driving and shoplifting. Other studies conducted by Longshore et al. (1996), Longshore (1998), and Longshore and Turner (1998) also found support for using Grasmick's scale to measure self-control and for using self-control to predict various crimes. However, in these studies evidence emerged to support multidimensionality in the construct of self-control. Based on the same scale, Arneklev, Harold, Tittle, and Bursik (1993) tested self-control theory on noncriminal deviant behaviors, such as smoking, drinking, and gambling, and they found some support for low self-control's ability in explaining drinking and gambling. They also found the element of risk seeking, rather than the entire scale, to be the most promising element in the construct of low self-control. Wood, Pfefferbaum, and Arneklev (1993) tested the relationship between self-control and adolescent risk-taking behaviors (e.g., vandalism, substance abuse, theft, and drinking), using Grasmick et al.'s scale. They found the predictive potency of self-control is contingent on the type of risk-taking behavior. Further, they believed self-control should be treated as a multidimensional construct, which contradicts Grasmick et al.'s findings. They concluded different elements of low self-control may be related to different types of delinquent acts. Vazsonyi, Pickering, Junger, and Hessing (2001) conducted rigorous confirmatory factor analysis and also concluded the existence of multidimensionality of self-control. Delisi, Hochstetler, and Murphy (2003) asserted similar conclusions in their findings after testing Grasmick et al.'s scale. On the other hand, Piquero and Rosay (1998) advocated for unidimensionality. In their study, they found the unidimensional scale outperformed individual subscales in predicting crimes.

It seems when using Grasmick et al.'s scale, there is inconsistency suggested in the literature regarding the dimensionality of self-control. Nonetheless, research generally found support for the theory, regardless of the issue with dimensionality. Even without using Grasmick et al.'s scale, studies still largely found support for self-control theory's ability to explain or predict criminal behaviors as well as other noncriminal deviant acts, although the theory may not be superior to other theories (Brownfield & Sorenson, 1993; Gibbs, Giever, & Martin, 1998; Gibbs & Giever, 1995; Keane, Maxim, & Teevan, 1993; Paternoster & Brame, 1998; Polakowski, 1994; Sorenson & Brownfield, 1995).

All in all, the self-control theory provides a solid theoretical framework for understanding crimes or deviant acts. Nevertheless, the relationship between self-control and self-disclosure on the Internet has not been validated in the literature. As discussed in the introduction, self-disclosure on the Internet is associated with a number of risks, and hence fits the characteristics of low self-control. We hypothesize low self-control can predict self-disclosure. We also hypothesize that multidimensionality will manifest in the relationship between self-disclosure and self-control. Among the six elements of self-control as described in Grasmick et al.'s scale, "risk seeking" is hypothesized to have the strongest relationship with self-disclosure.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Sampling

Participants were recruited on Facebook. A nonprobabilistic sampling procedure was used due to practical limitations on selecting a random sample among all Facebook users. Facebook users were reached via the messaging function provided by Facebook. After contacting 407 Facebook users, totally 100 users decided to participate. Participants were selected based on availability, as long as they were 18 or older. No criteria regarding race and gender were set forth in the selection. All participants used English as the primary language on their Facebook page, and users who shared substantial content to the public were prioritized in recruiting since self-disclosure is the subject.

#### 3.2. Self-control measurement

The Grasmick et al. scale was used to measure self-control. Although there are other measurements for self-control, the Grasmick et al. scale remains the most tested and validated (as discussed in Section 2). In contrast to the 4-point Likert scale used by Grasmick et al., however, in the present study a 7-point Likert scale was used for each item, where 0 means strongly disagree and 6 means strongly agree). This modification serves as an attempt to increase variation. Totally the scale consists of 24 items.

As mentioned, six elements are proposed in the construct of self-control. The following four scale items are used to operationalize "impulsivity" by Grasmick et al.

- Item 1, "I often act on the spur of the moment without stopping to think";
- Item 2, "I don't devote much thought and effort to preparing for the future";
- Item 3, "I often do whatever brings me pleasure here and now, even at the cost of some distant goal";
- Item 4, "I'm more concerned with what happens to me in the short run than in the long run."

"Simple tasks" is operationalized with:

- Item 5, "I frequently try to avoid projects that I know will be difficult";
- Item 6, "When things get complicated, I tend to quit or withdraw";
- Item 7, "The things in life that are easiest to do bring me the most pleasure";
- Item 8, "I dislike really hard tasks that stretch my abilities to the limit."

"Risk seeking" is operationalized with:

- Item 9, "I like to test myself every now and then by doing something a little risky";
- Item 10, "Sometimes I will take a risk just for the fun of it";
- Item 11, "I sometimes find it exciting to do things for which I might get in trouble";
- Item 12, "Excitement and adventure are more important to me than security."

"Physical activities" is operationalized with:

- Item 13, "If I had a choice, I would almost always rather do something physical than something mental";

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