# Late adolescent identity definition and intimate disclosure on Facebook

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

During the last decade, online social networks such as Facebook™ (Facebook) grew rapidly in popularity and this was due in no small measure to use of these media by adolescents. For many teenagers and young adults, Facebook represents a social institution that can be used by adolescents not only for sharing basic information and for connecting with others, but also as a platform for exploring and divulging information about their identities. To examine issues related to questions about the formation and disclosure of identity-related information by late adolescents, this study investigates the relationship between disclosures of *intimate information* by late adolescents through Facebook and their stage of psychosocial development. To examine disclosure behaviors of young college students on Facebook, we conducted focus groups in conjunction with a content analysis of Facebook profiles. Findings point to an extended adolescence period resting on the identity construction dilemma posed by digital social networks.

## 1. Introduction

Online social networks such as Facebook™ (Facebook) became mainstream in a relatively short amount of time due in large part to their popularity among adolescents. As a result of its popularity Facebook became more than merely a medium of communication; it achieved a level of recognition and influence as a new sort of social institution for sharing information and for finding and connecting with others. Yet, this medium has not been without controversy and risks. In fact, much of the early attention by the news media on social networks focused on the amount and depth of intimate information adolescents posted on their profiles. For instance, in 2007, a number of media outlets reported on a case involving a 14-year old girl who had sued MySpace™ alleging that the company was instrumental in the sexual assault she had suffered at the hands of an adult user (MSNBC, 2006). Controversy related to public disclosures of personal information continues and brings to the fore the fact that social networks are public portals containing "vaults" of information about individuals who willingly divulge personal information for others to consume and disseminate. This raises the question of why one of the prominent groups of users of social network sites, late adolescents, divulge the information that they do in these public forums, and how this process of divulgence is aligned with their evolving identity formation.

Late adolescents represent a particularly important group to study in the context of identity formation and representation not only to understand why and how they use (or misuse) applications like Facebook, but also because their identities change as they undergo the transition from childhood to adulthood. Furthermore, it is important to understand late adolescent behaviors and motivations because many in this age range do not have a fully-developed awareness and understanding of the "public and persistent" (Lenhart & Madden, 2007, p. 3) nature of the information they publish online, which often seems to clash with their perception of social network sites as private spaces. This is confounded by the fact that many late adolescents are challenged to establish and maintain their popularity during a period of self-definition and, as a result, many actively negotiate the boundaries of their intimacy amid the constant interactions they engage in with their Facebook "friends." Moreover, even with the availability of features that allow users to manage the privacy of their profiles (i.e., the settings that determine who can gain access to their information), many late adolescent Facebook users keep their information open to the general public or to large numbers of peers (De Souzaa & Dick, 2009; Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Raynes-Goldie, 2010).

According to Erikson (1959), adolescence is a period when young people begin to establish their sense of self identity. For example, some adolescents, those who have not committed to their identities, can be said to be at "moratorium" (relative to their identity formation) while others who have made commitments to a fixed identity are said to be in "achievement." Shaping personal identities and resolving identity crises are processes that are played out, Erickson states, in many types of social interactions

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and at many different times during adolescence. In the case of today's young people, a substantial part of these interactions is increasingly computer-mediated.

The purported abandonment of the privacy norm with regard to their on-line representation by late adolescents may be related to the identity formation stage they are in. For them, the portrayal of a distant and disconnected self could represent the ideal context for resolving the identity crisis characteristic of this developmental stage. The virtual presence offered by a Facebook profile, persistent but undemanding, may stand as a convenient outlet for young people to use and discard aspects of their representation as they come to terms with the commitments they must make in order to move onto their lives as adults. Lessig (2000) argues that software code is a form of social architecture, and undoubtedly, the most important architectural feature that social networks possess is the sociality they enable. In their meta-analysis of the literature on online social networks, boyd and Ellison (2007) argue that "available research suggests that most social networks primarily support pre-existing social relations" (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 12). These social interactions offer a new virtual context where late adolescents resolve the identity crises that for centuries have played out in face to face interactions.

Contrary to the social technologies enabled by early computers, the most controversial characteristics of the current versions of social software are the visibility of information about the adolescent and the *friendship* paradigm, both of which have proven conflictive as they disrupt the balance of real life social performances. boyd (2006) argues that "friendship helps people write community into being in social network sites" (p. 1). Most, if not all, of the social networks analyzed by boyd (2006) have resorted to a "culture of friending" as the resolution of a conflict between social tensions that resulted from technological limitations (p. 2). That is, in order to be technically viable, the software negated the nuances related to the various levels of intimacy and commitment that human relationships entail. Language was dichotomized as developers obviated the nuanced conventions that regulate the boundaries of privacy in social interaction. boyd (2006) points out that, in these sites, "friending is deeply affected by both social processes and technological affordances" (p. 1). As a result of the limitations imposed by code, users see a need to cope with the system by confirming others as "friends" when they have not come to share the time and commitment this type of relationship calls for in real life (boyd, 2006, p. 4). boyd and Ellison (2007) claim that "by acting as a tool for 'saving face,' the friending function can operate as a catalyst for social drama" (p. 11).

In this light, this study asks an important set of research questions about the formation and disclosure of identity-related information by late adolescents; that is, what are the factors that influence late adolescents in their disclosure of intimate information on Facebook and how are disclosure behaviors manifest in this venue? We suggest that disclosure of intimacy on Facebook is influenced by identity status, where late adolescents undergoing an identity crisis known as *moratorium* are expected to disclose more intimate information than those who have settled identity commitments for adult life. This study also provides an account of the understanding late adolescents (college students 18–21) have of Facebook as a tool for social interaction, and reports on their attitudes and perceptions about the privacy issues related to its use. Facebook profiles are examined to expose the relationship between the psychosocial stage of development and willingness to disclose intimate information online. The findings illustrate online communication practices by late adolescents on Facebook. The study therefore also aims to determine the kinds of intimate information adolescents disclose on Facebook and the reasoning and decision-making associated with these behaviors.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. Young people and computers

In the last 20 years, individuals and society have been greatly affected by the phenomenal developments of technology, particularly communication technology. The so-called "net generation" (Tapscott, 1998) has become what anthropologist Mead (1973) would have called a "prefigurative society" where the young teach the old the competencies to function properly in society; in this case, how to use and deal with computer-supported social interactions. One of the first researchers to address people's relationships with computers was Sherry Turkle. By the 1980s, Turkle (1984) was already documenting children's fascination with computers and their relation to them. As technology became more ubiquitous and applied to daily life, Turkle (1995) noted that the traditional notion people held about the "division" between humans and machine was receding. She found that understandings of the real and the virtual were being restructured to accommodate "computers' representations of the world as the world" (p. 63). In effect, computers have come to be considered by younger people who are accustomed to them as a sort of intelligent object or "objects to think with" (p. 47).

This phenomenon played out in the early part of the last decade as social networks proliferated and were often adopted first by adolescents. In 2005, a study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press on teenage use of technology confirmed that most young people had at that time made the internet an important venue for social interactions (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005) and that a majority of teens had profiles online in social networks like MySpace and Facebook (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). The Pew studies' reported how adolescents' online communication practices demonstrated incipient tendencies that influenced the behaviors of late adolescents. An implication of these uses of social networks by members of the net generation means that adolescents could extend their social networks beyond the limits of physical proximity. Clearly, how they disclose information about themselves and the way they do so often exceeds the traditional social norms for the regulation of privacy. Processes that used to take place privately or among a very limited set of friends are now enacted before a much wider online audience.

Why do late adolescents disclose intimate information through Facebook? To answer this question, some theories have proposed that young people go through a period of transformation characterized by tensions that accompany the development of personal identities (Erikson, 1959; Vadeboncoeur, 2005). Young people, these theories suggest, negotiate meanings that help establish personal identity through social networks, whether these are online or offline. In the next section we review several of the important theoretical frameworks that examine factors influencing psychosocial development through the period of adolescence.

### 2.2. Adolescent development and identity formation

The era following the industrial revolution has been characterized by an increasing physical separation of adults from their children. As a consequence, young people today spend less time with adults and family members and more time with peers. Furthermore, unlike other societies where rites of passage clearly mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, most western cultures do not have formal rituals marking the individual's coming of age, which makes demarcating the boundaries between childhood and adulthood a challenge for children and adults. Stanley Hall, the "father of adolescence," proposed that this developmental stage is part of a cumulative process leading to adulthood