Hey Mom, What's on Your Facebook? Comparing Facebook Disclosure and Privacy in Adolescents and Adults

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Hey Mom, What's on Your Facebook? Comparing Facebook Disclosure and Privacy in Adolescents and Adults

Emily Christofides[1], Amy Muise[1], and Serge Desmarais[1]

Abstract

People of all ages are increasingly exposed to online environments that encourage them to share and connect with others. However, there is a perception that adolescents are particularly susceptible to these cues and share more online than do other age groups. With a group of 288 adolescents and 285 adults, we explored differences and similarities in use of Facebook for information sharing and use of the controls to protect their privacy. Adolescents reported disclosing more information on Facebook and using the privacy settings less than adults. Despite these differences, the results indicated that adolescents and adults were more similar than different in the factors that predicted information disclosure and control. Adolescents spent more time on Facebook, which partially mediated the relationship between group (adolescents vs. adults) and disclosure. Self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between group and information control, with adults having higher self-esteem than adolescents.

Keywords

privacy, self-disclosure, social media, online communication

The news is filled with stories about the dangers of sharing personal information online, the difficulties in protecting personal privacy, and the privacy challenges of websites such as Google and Facebook. Despite wide proclamations that "privacy is dead" (a sentiment attributed to Scott McNealy of Sun Microsystems; Sprenger, 1999), privacy seems to be alive and well, at least as a topic of discussion. However, the psychology of privacy has not kept up with the many societal changes, especially those to communications technology. Since the 1970s, when key theories of privacy were developed (e.g., Altman, 1975; Pedersen, 1979; Westin, 1967), our environment has changed extensively, with technology increasing the opportunities for connection with others as well as the control we have over our personal information. Social network sites such as Facebook, now one of the most used websites worldwide (Nielsen, 2010), are having an important impact on privacy. These sites are designed to encourage disclosure (Rosen, 2010), hence, it is increasingly important to learn about behavior in this medium, especially privacy and disclosure behaviors.

There have been many speculations in the media as to the reasons why people claim to care about privacy and yet behave in ways that are inconsistent with the protection of their personal information (see Fletcher, 2010; Rosen, 2010). These issues are especially prevalent when it comes to discussions about the disclosures of youth, who have been immersed in new technology and are believed to value privacy less than previous generations. The popular perception is that online adolescents naively tell all, only to fall prey to bullies, predators, or regret, when they later realize the folly of their ways. There is evidence that adolescents and adults use new media differently, but no research has established that adolescents disclose more than adults in their online interactions. Research regarding time spent online shows that during their teenage years, baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) spent on average 22 hr per week watching television, while youth in the net generation (born between 1980 and 2001) watch little television and instead spend this time online (Tapscott, 2009). Similarly, while people of all age groups use the Internet and social media, adolescents use social networking sites more frequently than any other age group (Blackshaw, 2009).

Competing Theoretical Explanations of Differences

Assuming that adolescents do disclose more than adults, an assumption that this study aims to test, there are a number of possible explanations for these differences. We will examine

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three possibilities: a developmental explanation, learning, and a combination of development and learning.

Developmental differences. The developmental explanation posits that adolescents have a different perception of privacy than do adults because their own sense of privacy is not fully developed. Studies suggest that children do indeed have different definitions of privacy at different ages (Wolfe & Laufer, 1974), but there is no research that pinpoints when children become mature in their approach to privacy, or even whether such an event occurs. Teenagers value being alone and will withdraw to the privacy of their bedrooms in order to retreat from their families (Larson & Richards, 1991).

Few direct comparisons have been made between the privacy needs of adolescents and those of adults; what data we have pertains to adolescents and young adults. Livingstone (2008) finds that information such as age, religion, politics, and sexual preference are not viewed as private by teenage users of social network sites. University students also disclose this type of information extensively to a wide network of connections (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009). Adults may view this information as private, which could explain why they believe young people are disclosing excessively online. Alternatively, adolescents may view privacy differently than do adults as a result of their developmental stage. The literature on youth and technology supports this idea, with young people reporting that they do care about privacy, especially privacy from their parents (boyd, 2007; Livingstone, 2008). Their behavior may seem contrary to the privacy concerns of adults because youth see no problem in sharing personal information they consider to be superficial.

This developmental explanation implies that adults would have disclosed as much at the same age as adolescents do now. However, this is not the argument that adults are making when they exclaim about adolescents' disclosures online. Instead, adults believe that adolescents are sharing more online than adults do now or would have at their age. Unfortunately, this explanation is quite difficult to test because of the rapid rate at which technology is changing.

Learning. This explanation suggests that people learn their social behavior from their environments, a process that could affect adolescents as well as adults. Previous research shows that social network sites, and specifically Facebook, may provide a different environment for disclosure than other online environments. Facebook enhances the importance of popularity because people are exposed to the disclosures of others, because the environment itself encourages disclosure, and because identities are jointly constructed on sites such as these (Christofides et al., 2009). If adolescents use Facebook more often, then perhaps this difference contributes to the disparity in level of disclosure. Facebook users perceive that they disclose more on Facebook than they do in general (Christofides et al., 2009), and research using Facebook server log data shows that new users disclose more if they see their friends disclosing (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2009). Social cognitive theory posits that people both influence and are influenced by those environments (Bandura, 2001). As a result people may come to value privacy less as they use communication technology more often and experience the social benefits associated with disclosing in this environment, in turn shaping the norms of the environment.

Development and learning. The final explanation involves a combination of development and learning by exposure to particular environments. We have presented evidence of potential age differences in privacy orientation and have noted research that shows differences in the use of technology between adolescents and adults, though it remains uncertain whether adolescents disclose more online. If adolescents are more often exposed to a particular environment, they may gradually change their behavior as a result of this exposure. In addition, there may be something different about growing up in a particular environment rather than coming to it in maturity.

Research has shown that the net generation tends to be more actively engaged in the media they consume than are adults. Although adults watched television when they were children and teenagers, adolescents today watch very little television and instead use interactive social media (Tapscott, 2009). Watching television is a relatively passive process, whereas much of the media used by adolescents is interactive in nature and involves the creation of the content. Differential usage of these technologies at key developmental times may change the way adolescents approach other technology or even other situations that are not technologically mediated.

Testing the Competing Explanations

In the current study, we aimed to examine whether there are in fact differences between adolescents and adults in terms of their online disclosure and privacy-protecting behavior and what factors are responsible for these differences. This question has received little attention in scholarly research, though some clues lead us to believe that there would be differences in levels of disclosure and approaches to privacy, as there appear to be differences between adolescents' and adults' use of online media (Blackshaw, 2009; Tapscott, 2009). In this context, we operationalize use of online media as the length of time that someone has used Facebook as well as the number of minutes per day they spend on the site. Previous research shows that a number of additional factors explain the differences between people in terms of their level of disclosure. Women tend to be more concerned about privacy than men (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009). Personal factors such as trust and self-esteem predict the likelihood of using the Facebook privacy settings (Christofides et al., 2009) and those who disclose more online are perceived as more trustworthy and are more likely to elicit disclosure from others (Henderson & Gilding, 2004). Those with a higher need to belong are more willing to join social network sites (Gangadharbatla, 2008) and the need for popularity predicts likelihood of controlling one's personal information on Facebook (Christofides et al., 2009).

We expected that these same factors would predict disclosure and control in adolescents and in adults. In addition, we expected that greater awareness of the consequences of

disclosing online would predict less disclosure and more information control on Facebook. Past research has demonstrated that adolescents are less likely to engage in risks when they are able to identify the negative outcomes of their behavior, but often underestimate the likelihood of negative consequences (Moore & Gullone, 1996). Therefore, in the current study, we also explored whether adolescents and adults differed in their awareness of the consequences of disclosing on Facebook and if this influenced their disclosure and privacy behavior. We also hoped to determine, albeit to a limited degree, whether the Facebook environment appears to be changing the way users view privacy, and whether these factors work differently in adolescents and adults, or whether the important factor is amount of time spent online.

Method

Procedure

The online survey was conducted at a Canadian Science Center. Those who met the inclusion criteria (high school aged youth and nonuniversity student adults who used Facebook) were invited to participate by a research assistant. Adolescents and adults who participated completed similar surveys, with some minor modifications to account for differences in life circumstances and reading comprehension. Prior to completing the survey, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Parents of participants who were under 18 years of age provided consent for their children to participate.

Participants

The youth sample consisted of 288 Facebook users (aged 9–18, $M = 14.4$, $SD = 2.15$), with a mix of boys and girls (boys, $N = 112$; girls, $N = 171$; five participants did not report their gender). While we will describe members of the youth sample as adolescents, some were younger than 13 years of age. We intended to include only those participants who met Facebook's minimum age criterion (13 years), but found that many younger people reported lying about their age in order to use Facebook. We felt that it was important to include these users in our sample. The adult sample consisted of 285 Facebook users (men, $N = 118$; women, $N = 165$; two participants did not specify their gender) who were not students (aged 19–71, $M = 31.6$, $SD = 10.28$).

Measures

Facebook use. We asked participants a series of questions about their use of Facebook including the number of months they have had a Facebook account, average number of minutes they spend on Facebook per day, and the number of Facebook "friends" they currently have.

Information disclosure on Facebook. We assessed participants' level of information disclosure on Facebook using one-item: "How likely are you to disclose personal information on Facebook?" This item was rated on a 7-point scale from very unlikely to very likely. Using a similar scale, we also asked 15 questions about how likely they are to share certain types of photos ($\alpha = .88$). Finally, we asked 13 yes/no questions about the various pieces of information people have shared on Facebook (e.g., their relationship status, religion, interests, and other profile elements; KR[Kuder-Richardson]= .70).

Information control on Facebook. We assessed the extent to which participants limited the information they posted on Facebook and used the privacy setting using a 7-item scale that has been used previously for this purpose (Christofides et al., 2009). The items include, "How likely are you to change who can see your profile (e.g., only your friends)?" and were rated on a 7-point scale from very unlikely to very likely. The scale was found to be reliable for adolescents ($\alpha = .81$) and adults ($\alpha = .82$).

Self-esteem. We measured self-esteem using the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (as used by Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007). Participants rated the extent to which they agree or disagree with a series of statements such as, "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." This was deemed to be a reliable measure in both samples ($\alpha = .80$ for adolescents, $\alpha = .87$ for adults).

Trust. Trust was assessed using the trust scale (Couch & Jones, 1997), which includes statements about trust in other people such as "It is better to be safe than sorry when it comes to the people in one's life." The measure was found to be reliable for both adolescents ($\alpha = .89$) and adults ($\alpha = .92$).

Need for popularity. Participants were also asked about the importance of popularity (Santor, Messervey, & Kusumakar, 2000) using a scale that includes questions such as, "I often do things just to get approval from people in my life." The scale was found to be a reliable measure for both adolescents ($\alpha = .92$) and adults ($\alpha = .93$).

Awareness of consequences. To assess the degree to which participants consider how the information they post on Facebook will be used in the future, we created a measure of awareness of the consequences of Facebook disclosure. The 8-item measure includes: "I think it is important to think about how the information I put on Facebook will be used in the future" and "There are certain things I do not post on Facebook because I am worried about how they will be used in the future," rated on a 7-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The scale was reliable for adolescents ($\alpha = .71$) and adults ($\alpha = .83$).

Results

Facebook Use

The results revealed some differences in how adolescents and adults used Facebook. The adults had used Facebook for significantly longer ($M = 27.84$ months, $SD = 14.48$) than the adolescents ($M = 19.25$ months, $SD = 14.84$ months), $F(1, 389) = 40.74$, $p < .001$. Adolescents spent significantly longer on Facebook per day ($M = 55.9$ min, $SD = 62.25$ min) than adults ($M = 38.2$ min, $SD = 57.25$ min), $F(1, 389) = 4.21$,

Table 1. Predictors of Information Disclosure

	Overall					Youth					Adults				
Predictors	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	Sig.	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	Sig.	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	Sig.
Block 1															
Minutes on FB	.006	.001	.210	4.832	.000	.007	.002	.284	4.627	.000	.003	.002	.107	1.736	.084
Account length	.010	.005	.093	2.140	.033	.021	.006	.196	3.190	.002	.007	.007	.068	1.103	.271
Block 2															
Minutes on FB	.005	.001	.190	4.338	.000	.007	.002	.284	4.645	.000	.003	.002	.110	1.794	.074
Account length	.014	.005	.135	2.996	.003	.012	.007	.110	1.608	.109	.002	.007	.021	.304	.761
Group	−.483	.147	−.149	−3.287	.001										
Age						.138	.051	.189	2.702	.007	−.016	.011	−.105	−1.554	.121
Gender (women)	−.032	.143	−.010	−.222	.825	.176	.205	.054	.861	.390	−.389	.202	−.118	−1.930	.055
Block 3															
Minutes on FB	.004	.001	.152	3.624	.000	.005	.002	.187	3.202	.002	.003	.002	.112	1.865	.063
Account length	.007	.005	.069	1.579	.115	.003	.007	.028	.438	.662	−.002	.007	−.020	−.924	.770
Group	−.524	.145	−.162	−3.620	.000										
Age						.138	.048	.189	2.877	.004	−.014	.011	−.090	−1.341	.181
Gender (women)	.079	.138	.024	.570	.569	.282	.190	.086	1.479	.140	−.287	.202	−.087	−1.423	.156
Trust	.111	.097	.055	1.140	.255	.044	.130	.021	.336	.737	.167	.143	.082	1.165	.245
Self-esteem	.034	.107	.015	.322	.747	.107	.149	.044	.717	.474	.019	.151	.008	.125	.900
Popularity	.360	.088	.184	4.082	.000	.422	.120	.214	3.527	.001	.304	.131	.158	2.314	.021
AOC	−.347	.067	−.228	−5.178	.000	−.445	.095	−.286	−4.686	.000	−.227	.094	−.154	−2.427	.016

FB = Facebook; AOC = awareness of consequences.

$p < .05$. They had a similar number of friends on Facebook ($M = 220$, $SD = 219.87$ for adolescents; $M = 237$, $SD = 271.32$ for adults), $F(1, 389) = .36$, $p =$ n.s., but for adolescents it was significantly more important to have as many friends as possible ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 1.73$ for adolescents; $M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.50$ for adults), $F(1) = 64.52$, $p < .001$. Adolescents were also significantly more likely to engage in friend collecting behavior such as adding someone as a friend that they do not know personally or would not choose to talk to in person ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.10$ for adolescents; $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.10$ for adults), $t(567) = 3.17$, $p < .01$.

Information Disclosure

For adolescents the likelihood of disclosure was unrelated to the importance of information control ($r = -.07$, $p =$ n.s.). However, these variables were modestly but significantly negatively correlated in the adult sample ($r = -.16$, $p < .01$). Adolescents also reported being more likely to disclose personal information on Facebook than adults, with 35.4% of adolescents and 29% of adults reporting that they were at least somewhat likely to disclose personal information on Facebook, $F(1, 389) = 8.75$, $p < .01$. Many of the other variables showed modest intercorrelations, but none were large enough to pose a danger of multicolinearity (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to explore the predictors of disclosure on Facebook. Facebook usage factors were entered in block one. Because number of minutes on Facebook was highly skewed, we used a square root function to transform the data and used the transformed variable in subsequent analyses. Group (adolescent or adult) and gender were entered in block two and the personality factors (trust, self-esteem, need for popularity, and awareness of consequences) were entered in the final block. Minutes on Facebook, group, popularity, and awareness of consequences were significant predictors of disclosure (see Table 1, panel 1). Because youth reported significantly more disclosure than adults, we tested whether the same factors predicted disclosure in both groups by conducting separate regression analyses for youth and adults using the same predictors as in the overall model. Age was also entered as a predictor since participants' age varied in the two subsamples. Both adolescents and adults with greater need for popularity and less awareness of the consequences of disclosure were more likely to disclose personal information and age and time spent on Facebook predicted disclosure in adolescents but not adults (Table 1, panels 2 and 3). The model accounted for significantly more variance for adolescents than for adults (adolescents, 27%; adults, 6%; $z = 6.59$, $p < .001$).

To better understand the nature of these differences, we explored time spent on Facebook and awareness of consequences as potential mediators of the relationship between group and disclosure, since these variables were predictors of disclosure and differed by group. Time spent on Facebook was the only significant mediator (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In addition to predicting disclosure, group also significantly predicted time spent on Facebook, $\beta = -.147$, $t(564) = -3.52$, $p = .00$, with adolescents spending more time. Although adding time spent on Facebook to the model did not decrease the relationship between group and disclosure to nonsignificance, $\beta = -.090$, $t(564) = -2.17$, $p = .03$, Sobel's test for mediation was significant ($z = 2.28$, $p < .05$; MacKinnon, Warsi, & Dwyer, 1995), indicating that time spent on Facebook partially mediated the relationship between group and disclosure.

Table 2. Predictors of Information Control

	Overall					Youth					Adults				
Predictors	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	Sig.	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	Sig.	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	Sig.
Block 1															
Minutes on FB	.001	.001	.047	1.054	.292	.002	.001	.083	1.272	.205	.002	.002	.094	1.535	.126
Account length	.010	.004	.108	2.431	.015	.007	.006	.082	1.255	.211	−.002	.006	−.019	.317	.752
Block 2															
Minutes on FB	.001	.001	.058	1.370	.171	.001	.001	.050	.790	.430	.002	.001	.071	1.181	.239
Account length	.003	.004	.035	.812	.417	.003	.006	.037	.524	.601	−.005	.006	−.053	−.799	.425
Group	.705	.122	.254	5.801	.000										
Age						.055	.044	.091	1.259	.209	−.011	.009	−.086	−1.289	.199
Gender (women)	.694	.119	.245	5.852	.000	.726	.174	.270	4.160	.000	.611	.167	.219	3.645	.000
Block 3															
Minutes on FB	.002	.001	.081	1.984	.048	.003	.001	.126	2.112	.036	.001	.001	.061	1.044	.298
Account length	.008	.004	.084	1.993	.047	.007	.006	.081	1.234	.219	−.002	.006	−.023	−.344	.731
Group	.771	.120	.278	6.435	.000										
Age						.081	.040	.134	1.999	.047	−.013	.009	−.096	−1.468	.143
Gender (women)	.632	.114	.223	5.533	.000	.671	.160	.250	4.193	.000	.513	.166	.184	3.096	.002
Trust	−.222	.080	−.129	−2.764	.006	−.399	.110	−.233	−3.640	.000	−.044	.118	−.026	−.375	.708
Self-esteem	.239	.088	.120	2.704	.007	.330	.126	.164	2.626	.009	.223	.125	.117	1.788	.075
Popularity	−.034	.073	−.021	−.471	.638	−.036	.101	−.022	−.353	.724	.009	.108	.006	.085	.933
AOC	.314	.055	.242	5.702	.000	.403	.080	.315	5.044	.000	.263	.077	.212	3.428	.001

FB = Facebook; AOC = awareness of consequences.

Because our information disclosure question measured perceived disclosure, we explored to what extent these perceptions are consistent with reality. We examined the correlation between perceptions of disclosure and participant reports of the specific pieces of information they shared, and with the likelihood of posting various types of pictures. For both groups, perceptions of disclosure were significantly correlated with the amount of information shared on Facebook ($r = .438$, $p < .001$ for youth; $r = .257$, $p < .001$ for adults) and with likelihood of posting various types of pictures ($r = .547$, $p < .001$ for youth; $r = .332$, $p < .001$ for adults). This indicates that in both groups, overall perceptions of disclosure are consistent with amount and type of information participants report sharing.

Information Control

To explore the predictors of information control on Facebook (use of privacy settings) a second set of regression analyses were conducted with the same predictor variables, but with information control as the criterion variable. Minutes on Facebook, account length, group, gender, trust, self-esteem, and awareness of consequences were all significant (Table 2, panel 1). As with predictors of disclosure, the results yielded a similar pattern for adolescents and adults (Table 1, panels 2 and 3). For both groups, awareness of consequences of disclosure was the most significant predictor of information control. Interestingly, adults were significantly less aware of the consequences ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.10$) than adolescents ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(554) = -12.04$, $p < .05$. Time spent on Facebook was not a significant predictor of information control for adults and account length was not significant for either group. Women were more likely to control their information than were men. Age, higher self-esteem, and lower levels of trust predicted greater likelihood of using the privacy settings for adolescents but not for adults. The model accounted for 10% of the variance in information control for adults and 24% for adolescents ($z = 4.05$, $p < .001$).

Mediational analyses were also explored to further understand the nature of the relationship between group and control. Time spent on Facebook, account length, trust, self-esteem, and awareness of consequences were considered as potential mediators, but only self-esteem significantly mediated this relationship (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In addition to predicting control, group also significantly predicted self-esteem, $\beta = .205$, $t(564) = 4.90$, $p < .001$, with adults having higher self-esteem. While adding self-esteem to the model did not decrease the relationship between group and control to nonsignificance, $\beta = .235$, $t(564) = 5.63$, $p < .001$, Sobel's test for mediation was significant ($z = 2.85$, $p < .01$). Therefore self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between group and control.

Discussion

Our findings show many similarities between adolescents and adults in their privacy and disclosure behavior on Facebook. Although adolescents in our sample disclosed more information on Facebook than adults and used the privacy settings less, separate analyses revealed that the predictors of disclosure and control are quite similar. In both groups, increased time spent on Facebook predicted increased likelihood of disclosure. However, adolescents spent more time on Facebook, which is consistent with research showing that they use interactive online media more than adults do (Blackshaw, 2009; Tapscott, 2009). Spending more time on Facebook partially accounted

for adolescents' higher level of disclosure, as it mediated the relationship between group and disclosure. However, after controlling for Facebook use, higher need for popularity and lesser awareness of the consequences of disclosure predicted increased information sharing for both groups. Interestingly, need for popularity, which was expected to expose differences between the two groups, did not show any significant differences.

While awareness of the consequences of sharing on Facebook led both groups to be more protective of their privacy, adults were significantly less aware of the consequences of disclosure on Facebook than adolescents. In addition, as age increased in the adolescent sample, teens became more likely to disclose on Facebook. The explanation for this may be partially developmental. Adolescents are developing their identities and may be concerned about keeping certain aspects of themselves from parents and other authority figures, while still sharing with friends (boyd, 2007; Livingstone, 2008). Indeed, late childhood and adolescence are key periods for personality development (Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011). Although there are consequences of disclosure for adults, the future may not hold as many changes to their identity as it would for adolescents—their environment and identities are already established whereas adolescents have an unknown future to take into account when considering how their disclosures may affect them.

Consistent with previous research with emerging adults (Christofides et al., 2009), trust and self-esteem predicted adolescents' information control, but these personality factors were not significant for adults. However, self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between group and control, suggesting that in part, adults are more likely to protect their information because of higher self-esteem. This finding is consistent with research showing that self-esteem generally increases with age (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). Even within the adolescent sample, both age and self-esteem were positively related to information control.

Another interesting difference between the two age groups relates to behavior in relation to Facebook friendships. While we found no differences in the number of friends or the importance of popularity between adolescents and adults, teens were more likely to engage in behaviors that we have termed *friend collecting*—behaviors such as adding people they do not like or do not know personally. This suggests that they are influenced by the Facebook environment in ways that are not measured by the need for popularity scale. What these factors are remains unclear, but they may relate to the discomfort associated with turning down a friend request or the fear of rejecting someone, which may be reflected by differences in self-esteem between the two groups.

It is also possible that these effects can be explained by factors not measured in our study. For example, research shows that higher levels of narcissism (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008) and extraversion (Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011) predict greater use of social networking sites. The regression models account for a fair proportion of the variance in information disclosure and control for adolescents (27% and 24%, respectively), but significantly less for adults (6% and 10%, respectively). This is perhaps the most striking difference between adolescents and adults in our sample, and suggests that protecting one's privacy online may be more complicated for adults than for adolescents. Adults often have more responsibilities and identities to manage than youth, and the quality of these social roles is highly relevant to adults' self-esteem (MacDermid, Franz, & De Reus, 1998). Perhaps this complexity contributes to the difficulty in predicting adult privacy behavior online. It also provides an interesting point of caution. While all age groups may benefit from encouragement to protect their privacy, changing adult privacy behavior is likely to be more difficult to accomplish because of the multiple factors that predict this behavior.

Conclusion

Although there seems to be a popular perception that adolescents care less about their privacy than adults, it seems that there are more similarities than differences across age groups in the factors that predict information sharing on Facebook. It has been argued that Facebook is an environment that encourages people to share regardless of their privacy views (see Christofides et al., 2009), and an environment that encourages disclosure as a necessary feature of identity construction (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). These findings indicate that both developmental and learning factors may be at play in the way that people make decisions as to whether to share their private information and when to use the privacy mechanisms that are available.

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Bios

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Amy Muise is a doctoral candidate in psychology at the University of Guelph. The focus of Amy's research has been on interpersonal relationships, especially as mediated by new technology such as Facebook. Amy's research has contributed to the understanding of relational consequences of disclosing information on Facebook.

Serge Desmarais is professor of psychology and the Associate Vice-President (Academic) at the University of Guelph. Over the last few years, he has been involved in a program of research that explores the social and relational consequences of online disclosure. He also studies close relationships, social justice, gender issues, pay entitlement, and sexuality.