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Shielding SNS content from parents: a survey investigating perspectives of emerging adults who have recently left the parental home

Martin Tanis  and Moniek Buijzen

ABSTRACT

Emerging adults are increasingly “unfriending” their parents on Social Networking Sites (SNS). A survey among 300 emerging adults who recently moved out of the parental home investigated whether family communication patterns were related to shielding of SNS content from parents and whether perceived undesirability of privacy invasion mediated this relation. Structural equation modeling analyses showed that emerging adults from high conformity-oriented families reported higher perceived undesirability of privacy invasion, which related to higher shielding of SNS content. In contrast, emerging adults from high conversation-oriented families reported lower perceived undesirability of privacy invasion, which related to lower shielding of SNS content.

KEYWORDS

Social media; privacy; emerging adults; parent-child relations; family communication

There are many anecdotes of young people regretting the fact that they are “friends” with their parents on Social Networking Sites (SNS), not only because they feel embarrassed by their parents’ posts, but also because they do not feel comfortable with the idea that parents can see what they themselves are posting, sharing, or liking. Feelings like these can result in young people shielding SNS content from parents, such as “unfriending” or blocking parents, or being more careful about what their parents can see of their SNS activities (Madden et al., 2013; Moser, Chen, & Schoenebeck, 2017; Yang, 2018). In the present study, we zoom in on SNS shielding behavior of a specific group of young people: those who have recently left the parental home and have started living on their own.

For many young people, moving out of the parental home is an important step. Leaving home marks the period of *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2004), in which young people gradually adjust to adulthood, independence, and a “mature” sense of control with increased autonomy and privacy (Deutscher, 1964; Gierveld, Liefbroer, & Beekink, 1991; Jones, 1995; Kins, Beyers, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2009; Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009; Rudi, Dworkin, Walker, & Doty, 2015; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). According to Arnett, “having left the

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dependency of . . . adolescence, and having not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood, emerging adults often explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work, and worldviews” (Arnett, 2000, p. 469). For parents too, this period is characterized by a transition to a less prominent parenting role. Initially, parents may attempt to maintain familiar parenting patterns (see also Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004) and keep a close eye on what their child is doing and with whom. Thus, emerging adults may desire more privacy and control over what they share with their parents, whereas parents may feel it necessary to stay informed about their children’s lives and maintain a sense of connection and control (Kennedy-Lightsey & Frisby, 2016).

One way for parents to keep an eye on what their child is doing is by using social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Instagram, Google+, and Twitter. Research by Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe, and Ellison (2015) revealed that 75% of parents use SNS at least some of the time to retrieve information about children’s whereabouts and activities. This does not stop when the child flees the family nest: Tanis, van der Louw, and Buijzen (2017) showed that parents are even more active on their child’s SNS right around the time children leave the parental home. This behavior was at least partly predicted by the wish of parents to keep track of their children.

As yet, there remains the question of how emerging adult children perceive and respond to such parental SNS activities. Anecdotes indicate that some perceive these activities as undesirable privacy invasions, leading them to shield SNS content from their parents. However, research on privacy invasions within families (i.e., spatial, verbal, mediated invasion; Ledbetter & Vik, 2012) suggests that such attitudes (perceived undesirability of privacy invasion) and behaviors (shielding of SNS content) at least partly depend on general family communication patterns (Bridge & Schrod, 2013; Kennedy-Lightsey & Frisby, 2016). Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate whether family communication patterns relate to perceived undesirability of privacy invasion among emerging adults, and, in turn, to shielding SNS content from parents.

Family communication patterns

The family communication literature uses two dimensions to characterize how families communicate (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). The dimension of *conformity-orientation* involves “the degree to which family communication stresses a climate of homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs” (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002, p. 37). Personal interests are subordinate to family interests, and children are expected to behave in line with their parent(s)’ wishes. *Conversation-orientation* is defined as “the degree to which families create a climate in which all family members are encouraged to participate in unrestrained interactions about a wide array of topics” (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002,

p. 37). Families with a high conversation-orientation interact spontaneously and encourage each other to share ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

Conformity-orientation and conversation-orientation are conceptually distinct dimensions (see Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002), variations on each of which could be reflected in how open emerging adults want to be in their online social life. For emerging adults living outside the parental home and away from direct “offline” supervision, the SNS environment may provide an opportunity to regulate what their parents can see of what they are doing and with whom. For example, emerging adults can decide to shield their online behavior by not becoming “friends” with their parents, “unfriending” or “blocking” them, or blocking specific content. Especially in the period after leaving the parental home, emerging adults may use this regulating mechanism to gain privacy.

Perceived undesirability of privacy invasion and shielding behavior

For emerging adults, the transition after leaving the home may include a longing for more privacy (Arnett, 2004, 2007). The fact that parents can see their online activities may lead to feelings of undesired privacy invasion (Kanter, Afifi, & Robbins, 2012; Yang, 2018). At the same time, parents may feel they have the right, or even the obligation, to monitor the emerging adult’s activities (Petronio, 2010). According to the Communication Privacy Management Theory, in this situation, emerging adults and parents have differing ideas about privacy boundaries, ownership, and control (see Petronio, 2002, 2010).

Kennedy-Lightsey and Frisby (2016) have linked ideas about ownership of private information to family communication patterns. Their research showed that parents with a stronger conformity-orientation were more likely to invade the privacy of the emerging adult. One reason is that parents might feel they have the right to know what is happening in their child’s life (Petronio, 2010). At the same time, research has shown that emerging adults in families with a stronger conformity-orientation had more restricted privacy boundaries (Bridge & Schrodts, 2013), were more careful about what they posted on social media, and were more likely to adjust their privacy settings on Facebook (Ball, Wanzer, & Servoss, 2013).

Based on these findings, we argue that the perception of shared privacy ownership by parents with a strong conformity-orientation (Kennedy-Lightsey & Frisby, 2016; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002) may be related to children’s longing for more privacy that accompanies emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004, 2007), associated with shielding behaviors designed to protect against parental privacy invasions (Ledbetter & Vik, 2012). This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: Emerging adults who experience a more conformity-oriented family communication pattern perceive higher undesirability of parental privacy

invasions on SNS, and are therefore more likely to shield SNS content from their parents.

For families with a conversation-oriented communication pattern, we expect the opposite. Emerging adults from families with a conversation-oriented communication pattern typically exhibit more permeable privacy boundaries (Bridge & Schrod, 2013, p. 4) and therefore develop fewer defensive behaviors to protect themselves against parental privacy invasions (Ledbetter & Vik, 2012). This is in line with findings by Avtgis (1999) which show that people from families with a high conversation-orientation had a higher tendency to communicate with others and view conversation as a rewarding process, whereas people from low conversation-oriented families were more likely to avoid communicating. Research by Booth-Butterfield and Sidelinger (1998) revealed that children and parents in families with an open communication style talked more about sensitive topics such as alcohol use and sex, supporting the assumption that a conversation-oriented communication pattern is associated with less shielding behavior, because sharing potentially sensitive information will not be perceived as an undesirable invasion of privacy. This results in our second hypothesis:

H2: Emerging adults who experience a more conversation-oriented family communication pattern perceive lower undesirability of parental privacy invasions on SNS, and are therefore less likely to shield SNS content from their parents.

Methods

Procedure and sample

We tested our hypotheses using a sample of people living in the US, between 18 and 30 years old, who had moved out of the parental home less than 2 years ago (cf. Tanis et al., 2017), who had an account on at least one of the most popular SNS in the US at that moment (Facebook, Instagram, Google+, Twitter; PEW, 2017), and had one or more parents who had an account on the same SNS. Respondents, recruited in May 2017 through *MTurk*, were told that their responses would be used for scientific research only and that the data would be analyzed anonymously. Respondents were asked to provide active consent and, upon doing so, received 1.80 USD for their participation. The study received IRB approval.

From our initial sample ($N = 425$), 331 respondents indicated that they themselves as well as at least one of their parents had an account on one or more of the aforementioned SNS. An attention check item, “It is important that you pay attention to this study. Please tick ‘Strongly disagree’ to indicate your attention” (Chandler, Mueller, & Paolacci, 2014) flagged 31 respondents

who were removed from the main analysis. This resulted in a total sample of $N = 300$ (female: $n = 136$; 45%), average age = 25.70 years, $SD = 3.28$, average number of months living away from the parental home = 13.51, $SD = 6.58$.

Measures

Family Communication Patterns

Family communication patterns were measured with the scale developed by Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990) consisting of 26 items (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Items were averaged to create separate measures for a conformity-oriented communication pattern (11 items, e.g., “My parent(s) often say something like: ‘There are some things that just shouldn’t be talked about,’” $M = 2.89$, $SD = 0.81$, $\alpha = .87$) and a conversation-oriented communication pattern (15 items, e.g., “My parent(s) encourage me to challenge their ideas and beliefs,” $M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.80$, $\alpha = .93$).

Perceived Undesirability of Privacy Invasion

Five items measured the extent to which respondents perceived it as an undesirable invasion of their privacy that their parents could oversee their SNS content: “My parent(s) do not have to see everything I do on Social Network Sites,” “What I do on Social Network Sites is none of my parent(s)’ business,” “I find it annoying that my parent(s) can see me on Social Network Sites,” “I don’t mind that my parent(s) can see me on Social Network Sites” (reversed), “The fact that my parents can view my online content feels to me like an invasion of my privacy” (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*, $M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.80$, $\alpha = .77$).

Shielding SNS Content from Parents

For each of the aforementioned SNS, we asked respondents to indicate whether they and their parents were active on the site. If they were, we asked whether they had taken any action to shield (part of) their SNS content from their parent(s). For instance, for Facebook, we asked respondents “Have you adjusted any settings to limit what your parent(s) can see? This may include not being Facebook friends with your parent(s) at all.” We used the combined count (i.e., at least one sort of shielding, on at least one SNS) as a dichotomous measure for shielding SNS content (0 = *no shielding*, 1 = *shielding*). In other words, a score of 1 indicated that the respondent had taken some kind of action to shield SNS content from parents. This resulted in 187 respondents (62%) indicating that they had never adjusted any settings or had not refrained from being connected with their parent(s) on any of the platforms they and their parents were both active on, and 123 respondents (38%) indicating that they had taken action to shield their SNS content.

Table 1. Pearson correlation matrix among studied variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1: shielding social media content	-					
2: conformity-oriented communication	.27*	-				
3: conversation-oriented communication	-.23*	-.43*	-			
4: resistance to privacy invasion	.46*	.45*	-.38*	-		
5: sex child ^a	-.05	.00	-.04	-.19*	-	
6: age child	.02	-.03	.06	.02	.01	-

* $p < .01$.^a1 = male, 2 = female.

Results

We computed correlations between all variables. Table 1 demonstrates that shielding SNS content correlated positively with conformity-oriented communication ($r = .27, p < .01$), and negatively with conversation-oriented communication ($r = -.23, p < .01$). Furthermore, there was a relatively strong correlation between perceived undesirability of privacy invasion and shielding SNS content ($r = .46, p < .01$), providing tentative support for our hypotheses.

For the main analyses, we conducted structural equation modeling in *Mplus* version 8.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017), testing the two mediated hypotheses in one model, allowing covariation between the two communication patterns (see Figure 1). Because the analytical model was just-identified (saturated), model fit indices were not calculated. Standardized estimates (between -1 and 1) were reported rather than raw estimates, facilitating interpretation. As illustrated in Figure 1, conformity-oriented communication-related positively to resistance to privacy invasion; $\beta = .34, SE = .05, p < .001, 95\% CI [.25, .43]$, while conversation-oriented communication-related negatively to perceived undesirability of privacy invasion; $\beta = -.23, SE = .05, p < .001, 95\% CI$

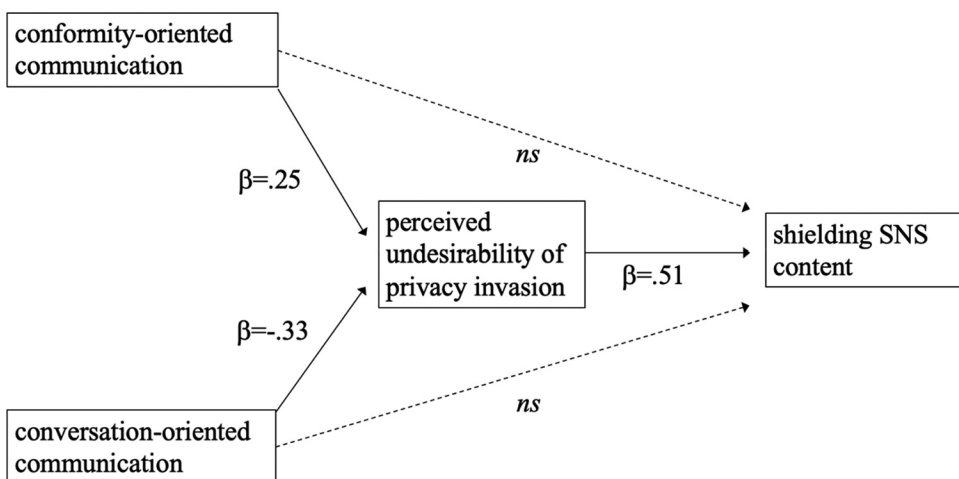


Figure 1. Coefficients of relations between a communication patterns, perceived privacy invasion and shielding SNS content. * $p < .001$.

[-.31, -.14]. Perceived undesirability of privacy invasion related positively to shielding SNS content; $\beta = .34$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.21, .47]. The direct effect of conformity-oriented communication on shielding SNS content was nonsignificant, as was the direct effect of conversation-oriented communication, suggesting full mediation of perceived undesirability of privacy invasion. The total variance explained by the model was $R^2 = .33$. These results support both H1 and H2.

Discussion

This study showed that the degree to which emerging adults who have recently left the parental home shield SNS content from their parents depended on the family's communication patterns, which was explained by the emerging adults' perception of the undesirability of privacy invasion. These results shed new light on the debate regarding parents and children coexisting on SNS, which seems to be dominated by the perspective that parents use SNS to check on their children and that children resist this. By distinguishing between two family communication patterns, our results showed that there is also another story to be told. The perspective described above resonates in our findings, but primarily for emerging adults from high conformity-oriented and/or low conversation-oriented families. A different picture emerged for people from families with more conversation-oriented and/or less conformity-oriented communication patterns. Children from these families reported lower perceived undesirability of privacy invasion and less shielding behavior. Earlier work investigating SNS parenting suggested that child-related SNS use by parents may have a social-emotional function, with SNS filling the void of the absent child (Tanis et al., 2017).

Therefore, for both children and parents, SNS may impact the transition between adolescence and adulthood. In this period of emerging adulthood young people progressively adjust to independence, autonomy, and increased privacy (Arnett, 2004). Without SNS, leaving the parental home almost automatically means less parent-child interaction and reduced opportunities for parents to monitor their children. The emergence of SNS clearly has blurred this line, resulting in a more gradual transitional phase for the parent-child relationship. For parents, this may enable prolonged parenting, and for children the opportunity to be guided in their steps toward adulthood. During this phase, SNS provide a setting in which the child and parent may negotiate about and experiment with the shifting privacy boundaries of the child (Petronio, 2002, 2010). As before, the emerging adult is in the lead, as the very nature of SNS still provides them with control over what is shared and, in turn, over their privacy boundaries and ownership.

One limitation of this study is its cross-sectional nature. It is conceivable that how parents communicate with their child at least partly depends on what the emerging adult shares with or shields from their parent(s). If for

instance, parents get the impression that important information is shielded from them, they may feel the need to resort to more conformity-oriented communication. Longitudinal research could shed light on the directions of the relations observed. Another limitation that should be taken into account is that data were collected through Amazon's online service Mechanical Turk (*MTurk*). Overall, literature that addresses the representativeness of *MTurk* samples (Berinsky, Margolis, & Sances, 2014; Huff & Tingley, 2015; Paolacci & Chandler, 2014, p. 168; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010) agrees that these are more representative than convenience samples—particularly in the case of student samples—and are not very different from other survey platforms, making *MTurk* a suitable platform for conducting social science research (Holden, Dennie, & Hicks, 2013). However, research has shown that *MTurk* “workers” tend to be younger, higher educated, more liberal, and less religious than the general US population (Paolacci et al., 2010), so we should be cautious about extrapolating the findings of the present study to the general population.

Considering these limitations, our results point to several directions for further research. First, future research could further explore the role of SNS in different family types. It should be noted that conformity-orientation and conversation-orientation are conceptually distinct, but not per definition independent dimensions (see Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). As in previous research, our findings showed a medium-sized negative association between the two patterns. In other words, families more prone to engage in conversation-oriented communication patterns engage less in conformity-oriented patterns, yet the two patterns can also co-occur, or both be absent. Koerner and Fitzpatrick distinguished four types of families (consensual, pluralistic, protective, laissez-faire), classified by relatively low and high scores on the two dimensions. Given the opposite results for the two family patterns observed in our study, it would be fascinating to compare our model across these four family types.

Second, we do not know what type of SNS content it is that emerging adults shield from their parents. Is it the content of which emerging adults are afraid parents will react to with anger, frustration, or disappointment, such as pictures of parties, vacations, or other leisure activities that might lead parents to think that the child is not working or studying hard enough? Or is it content that parents might be offended by, such as violent, erotic, antinormative, political, or (anti-) religious content? It would be very informative to obtain more insight into the specific types of content that emerging adults want to keep away from their parents, and how that predicts shielding behavior.

Third, it would be interesting to take the quality of the parent–child relationship into account. Research by Kanter, Afifi, & Robbins, (2012) revealed that when a parent and child had a conflicted relationship, perceptions of greater parental privacy invasions negatively impacted the child's perception of satisfaction with the relationship. Strength and quality of the relationship between

parent and child, therefore, seem to be promising constructs to consider in future research. The first results from the present study warrant further research to provide answers to these and other questions.

In conclusion, family communication patterns relate in varying ways to emerging adults' perception of the undesirability of privacy invasion and, in turn, to shielding (part of) the SNS content from parents. Our study provided a more nuanced view on parent's child-related SNS activities and their emerging adult children's responses to these activities, warranting further research in this domain.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Martin Tanis (PhD, 2004, University of Amsterdam) is an Associate Professor in Communication at the Department of Communication Science at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. His primary research interest focuses on online social behavior and information processing, with a special interest in wellbeing. In addition to his work on online social behavior, he has a special interest in group-based phenomena that he studies from a Social Identity perspective. In this research he focuses on topics such as cyberchondria, misbeliefs in health claims, hostile media effect, attitude polarization, etc.

Prof. Moniek Buijzen (PhD, 2003, University of Amsterdam) is Professor of Communication and Behavioural Change at Erasmus University Rotterdam and Radboud University. Her research focuses on how digital communication technology affects young people's wellbeing. Specifically, Buijzen and her team study how the benefits of digital technology can be optimally used for a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, while keeping potential risks at a minimum. She received a prestigious Vici grant in 2019 from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) for a five-year research project studying the implementation of health campaigns through online social networks used by young people. Previously, she received grants from NWO and the European Research Council (ERC) for talented researchers. Buijzen is a frequent media expert and is the founder of Bitescience.com, an international platform for the dissemination of research to non-academic audiences.

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