

Overexposure in Social Networking Sites

AUTHORS:

Weng Marc Lim, School of Business, Monash University
Ding Hooi Ting, School of Business, Monash University
Melani Puspitasari, School of Business, Monash University
Iwan Prasetya, School of Business, Monash University
Sutanto Gunadi, School of Business, Monash University

ABSTRACT:

The rise of the Internet and the advancement in technology have given rise to various new modes of communication, in which the most recent being social networking sites. Since the inception of social networking sites, countless communication gains have been received by consumers, including the ability to remain in contact with peers, friends and families over time differences and distances. However, this new platform of communication has raised a concern of overexposure of personal information among its users in the society. National newspapers have reported dangers of such actions but many consumers remain impassive and continue to provide ongoing personal information on social networking sites. This study attempts to provide an understanding as to why consumers remain overexposing themselves over social networking sites despite being aware of potential undesirable consequences. The study is exploratory in nature and is investigated from a consumer socialization perspective. A qualitative approach is employed using in-depth interviews to obtain consumer responses on the investigated phenomenon. Findings from the study suggest that consumers' view exposure of personal information in social networking sites as a way to express themselves. They have a need for attention and have desires to gain and improve their popularity using social networking sites. Implications and recommendations from research findings are presented.

KEYWORDS: Social networking sites, overexposure, consumer socialization, exploratory, consumer behavior.

The area of communication has been a much studied area in the consumer behavior scholarship. Consumers today are interacting with one another using various modes of communication. Some consumers interact with one another directly (i.e. face to face) while others prefer to interact indirectly (i.e. over the internet, over the telephone and on mobile phone chat applications). The Internet has become a popular mode of communication to consumers as a means to socialize. More specifically, the rise of the Internet has made communication easier as consumers can now communicate with their peers, friends and families easily and can keep in touch with each other at places which are located far away in an amazingly shorter amount of time. With technology advancement, indirect modes of communication have grown to include a wide range of communication mediums, with the latest being social networking sites.

In the study of Boyd and Ellison (2007), social networking sites are defined 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. A social networking site is, therefore, an online service platform which builds and reflects social relations among its users, who many share similar interests and activities, are from the same work or education institutions, or simply those who have an interest in an opposite participant. The use of social networking sites as a medium for communication has provided consumers with many benefits, including the ability to easily and rapidly connect with peers, friends and families. What makes social networking sites unique, however, is not about its possibilities for networking (e.g. allow individuals to meet strangers), but rather, they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). This, in turn, leads to several concerning issues, which may be better understood through a microscopic focus into the area of consumer socialization.

The use of social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, has given rise to various societal issues, notably consumers' overexposure in social networking sites. Many consumers of social networking sites are observed to provide much personal information over the Internet using this platform of communication, such as photos and location updates, without much consideration about the effects of providing such information. Boyd and Ellison (2007) added that while social networking sites have implemented a wide variety of technical features, their back-bone consists of visible profiles that display an articulated list of friends

who are also users of the system. Consequently, many consumers of social networking sites have fallen victims to irresponsible users of these sites, who may have taken some photos and misuse the photos for other purposes, such as creating a fake account with the same name and profile picture with purposes of deceiving others in the social networking site. While many news bulletins have reported many of such cases to raise public awareness of overexposure in social networking sites, many consumers remain in similar states and are still overexposing themselves on social networking sites despite being aware of the dangers posed by such actions. Rationales behind such a phenomenon remain in the dark. Accordingly, this study attempts to shed some light in this area by exploring for the reasons on why consumers are exposing personal information on social networking sites despite being aware of the potential undesirable consequences that such actions may result in. The study is exploratory in nature and will seek to uncover insights in this area from a consumer socialization perspective. A qualitative research approach is employed using in-depth interviews to obtain information on the explored phenomenon. The outcomes of this study will contribute towards an understanding on why consumers remain overexposing personal information on social networking sites even though they are aware of potential undesirable consequences. Further, insights into this exploration will provide some practical guidelines to remedy and better this societal concern.

Consumer Socialization

To better comprehend consumer socialization, it is important to first understand its definition. Existing literature in the scholarship offers several definitions to consumer socialization. In a pioneer conceptualization of consumer socialization, Ward (1974) referred consumer socialization as the process by which individuals acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace. Moscardellie and Liston-Heyes (2004), on the other hand, argued that consumer socialization is an ongoing process since cognitions and behaviors can change over time as consumers acquire more experiences. This is supported by Engel et al. (1986), Assael (1987) and McGregor (2001) as consumer socialization includes a process whereby consumers learn about the value system, norms and required behavior patterns of a given society in which he or she belongs to. From these definitions, this study offers a summarized, comprehensive definition of

consumer socialization: consumer socialization refers to how consumers interact with others in the society, in which consumers gain socialization knowledge and experience through cognitive and affective learning about the value system, norms and behaviors required and acceptable in a particular society. Consumer socialization is, therefore, an imperative consideration and reflection of an individual's social life as it can affect his or her membership in a community and in the society at large.

Consumers and Social Networking Sites

Most consumers who have access to the Internet are aware about social networking sites. This new communication platform has gained much popularity among consumers. In particular, many consumers who have Internet access now have social networking accounts, such as Facebook and MySpace, which has become a contemporary global phenomenon.

Since their introduction, social networking sites, such as MySpace, Facebook, Cyworld, and Bebo, have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Users of social networking sites leverage on these sites for a wide array of everyday social practices – gossiping, flirting, joking around, sharing information, and simply hanging out (Boyd, 2008). A typical user of social networking sites spends about twenty minutes a day on the site, in which two-thirds of users log in at least once a day (Cassidy, 2006). From this given fact, it is suggested that social networking sites have become an integrated-activity and lifestyle for many modern-day consumers. The rationale behind such a situation may be attributed to the values that modern-day consumers are looking for which can be found through social networking sites. More specifically, the values that are offered by social networking sites were mainly found to be communication and entertainment. Boyd (2008), however, argued that the appeal is not the technology itself, nor any particular technology, but rather, the presence of friends and peers. These values, in turn, become a source of motivation for consumers to continuously use social networking sites (e.g. consumers are willing to spend more times just to open their account). For consumers who have become addicted to social networking sites, they can spend more than ten hours in a day on these sites to communicate with other consumers, update their status, and browse the profiles and postings of other users.

Upon closer inquiry, an element of secrecy was found between consumers and social networking sites. Through the secrecy of its mediated environment, social networking sites present consumers with a platform that has unhindered ability to search out for information and spend extended periods of time learning about others' lives, in which Veer's (2011b) work pointed that these segment of consumers see their behavior as acceptable and even pleasurable in the online world, although a consensus exist that much of such behavior are not acceptable in brick-and-mortar. A lack of personal information, on the other hand, was found to cause a feeling of separation between users of social networking sites, which became a deterrent and almost left users with a sense of cynicism towards the other party's motives. This, in turn, brings about a situation where consumers are seen broadcasting personal information onto social networking sites. The reality is that the exposure of such information on the Internet, unabated, can be dangerous, as it makes consumers vulnerable to unforeseen circumstances (Veer, 2011a).

The issue of consumers overexposing personal information on social networking sites despite knowing about its potential dangers that such an action poses will be explored in the current study. More specifically, the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes that influence consumer behavioral actions and decisions to overexpose themselves on social networking sites will be explored. An understanding on these issues in the area of consumer socialization may provide relevant rationales for understanding concerns on the use of social networking sites.

Research Design

The current study is exploratory in nature as it seeks to find out the reasons as to why consumers remain overexposing themselves through the positing of personal information on social networking sites. To obtain the required information on the explored phenomenon, a qualitative approach is employed using in-depth interviews. The sample is collected from simple randomly selected shopping malls in Klang Valley, Malaysia, using mall-intercept systematic sampling to select research participants. No demographic criteria was imposed, but consumers have to be using a social networking site at least once a day and engage in ongoing postings of personal information on their daily lives on social networking sites and be willing to verify transcribe responses to qualify as research participants for the current

study. Participation was voluntary and no incentives were given. Twelve consumers participated in the current study. Each interview lasted for approximately thirty to forty-five minutes and responses were recorded using a tape recorder. Consumer responses were subsequently transcribed in a verbatim manner and sent back to them for verification. Initial findings and analyses were discussed with scholars in the field of consumer behavior and the final findings are presented in the following section.

Findings and Discussion

Self-expression

The first reason found was self-expression. Many consumers, especially teenagers, have a strong desire to express themselves. Thanks to the Internet and its growing popularity, many consumers are choosing social networking sites as an outlet for self-expression. According to BBC news (2011), Facebook has become the most visited social networking site with at least 137,644,000 unique visitors per month. Consumers are able to access social networking sites anywhere, anytime, provided there is access to the Internet. Many of these social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, was suggested by consumers in the current study as a place where they can create and showcase who they are and also being able to keep tabs on all their friends. Such reasons suggest that social networking sites create a value for its users by providing a space to satisfy consumer needs for self-expression. This is in line with the work of Benezes (2010) as engagement with social networking sites was found to be a great way to let consumers express themselves and show the world the real self.

“Social networking site gives me a room to create and showcase who I am to others. It’s basically a place where I can express myself. Besides that, I’m able to keep tabs on all my friends.”

Further, this study had a criterion when selecting its participants – consumers selected should be using a social networking site at least once a day and engage in ongoing postings of personal information in their daily lives on social networking sites. From the study, it was found that eleven out of twelve consumers who had participated in the current

study log in their Facebook for at least fifteen minutes in the morning and at least thirty minutes at night. A large majority admits to spend at least an hour a day for games on Facebook during the day and constantly post updates about themselves and refreshes social networking sites to check for updates from their friends throughout the day. Indeed, these consumers may be categorized as active users of social networking sites and are observed to have expressed themselves much on these sites. To some consumers, social networking sites become a place for them to express their identity (i.e. who they are) to others. It allows them to better express their feelings and the self, in which comments from their friends provides them with some acknowledgement and makes them feel better about the self. This is supported by Buchner et al. (1995) and Giddens (1991) as online realms are enthusiastically adopted by consumers because it represents their space where they can express anything they want. This, in turn, leads them to a situation where there is too much exposure about themselves in social networking sites (e.g. posting of status about their real-time feelings and location whereabouts).

“I’ll log on to Facebook for at least fifteen minutes in the morning before I take my bath and when I come back from work, I’ll log onto Facebook again through my computer to just browse around and maybe give some updates on my day.”

“At least one hour of my day will go to games on Facebook.”

“I guess I’ve got to admit that my friends and I are constantly on our smart phones checking on new updates from each other. We’ll update how we feel through status updates. And because we usually go out as friends, we will tag each other along in check-in locations.”

“The more I update my status, the more comments I will receive from my friends, the better I can express myself further by replying to those comments. It somehow makes me feel better too.”

“Posting information about myself allows me to express my identity to others.”

Need for Attention

The second reason found was the need for attention. Social networking sites have created a revolution in communication. These sites have changed the way consumers communicate with each other, the way consumers organize their social lives, and most exciting of all, they have provide an avenue for attention-seeking consumers to gain attention. To consumers, updating their status allows them to request for attention and initiate a conversation with others. Some consumers have also begun to notice that more and more users of social networking sites are using these sites as a way of sharing their attention needs to the world. It can be further observed that the exposure of some information, such as consumer feelings and emotions on status updates, cannot be categorized as self-expression but attention-seeking because there is a difference between self-expression and attention-seeking. In particular, some consumers provide personal information for the purpose of letting it go somewhere (i.e. self-expression) while others may do so to get a response (i.e. need for attention). Such findings are in line with many past researchers who suggest that human beings are social creatures who need social interaction, feedback, and validation of their worth. Goleman (1998) suggests that attention seekers usually have low levels of self-esteem and self-confidence, and in order to counter these feelings, they seek to become the center of attention.

“I just have to post a sad face on my status update to show that I’m feeling down and there will be someone who will ask me why and cheer me up.”

“I see many of my friends who I feel are attention seekers. They will be posting photos of themselves and wait for people to “like” their photos and give them complements, which actually makes them very happy.”

*“I think I’m an attention seeker and Facebook really gives me a place to gain the attention I need. *Laughs out loud*. For example, I just have to post “I am not in a good mood” and when my friends see this post, they will ask me “why?” or “what happen?”. I somehow feel being cared this way and getting the attention I deserve when I’m down.”*

Further, findings from the current study reveal that some consumers who are looking for attention in social networking sites do not have a good social life in reality. Thus, social networking sites become a place for them to run away from the reality, in which they are able to seek for a source of attention that they desire, which exist in social networking sites (Joinson, 2003).

“People in the real world often do not care much about me. I’m not in the spotlight. And I don’t think I can go around and telling others about my feelings freely. But it’s different online. When I’m online and I post my feelings, many people will start to comment. I like the attention I get online.”

Several other interesting situations were found to support the need for attention which subsides within consumers who are exposing their personal information on social networking sites. For example, some female respondents said that they have posted status updates such as “I’m starving like crazy now!” and “Why am I so freaking hungry this late at night?”, when in fact they may not be that hungry or even not being hungry at all. When probed further, it is understood that all they need was something simple – a friend’s feedback. Upon seeing such status updates, some of their friends will naturally provide replies such as “Do you want to eat, dear?” or “Want to have dinner together?”. These replies from their friends, in turn, make them happy as they have received the attention they seek through the care shown by their friends. Another example provided was when one partner is quarreling with the other and posts an update like “I’m tired of this situation” and they expect their partner to see this update, realize and feel sorry. Through the obtained responses, it is clear that consumers may expose personal information of themselves on social networking sites due to attention needs.

Popularity

The third reason found was for popularity. While student popularity in high school has been a topic of investigation for decades (Babad, 2001; Bukowski and Hoza, 1989; Gordon, 1957), individual’s online popularity is a relatively new phenomenon. More recently, social networking sites have become a place whereby consumers are starting to see as an avenue to gain popularity. Most consumers are aware that many contemporary artists have become

popular due to social media. For example, Justin Bieber gained his popularity through uploads of his performances on YouTube. To consumers, YouTube can be considered as one of the social networking sites because by using YouTube, consumers are able to communicate and give feedback in user profiles or in the uploaded video. Similarly, Facebook and MySpace enables a person to gain popularity through the number of friends that they have, or more recently, by turning their social networking profile page into a fan page. Most consumers in the current study think that gaining popularity through social networking sites is easier than gaining popularity in real life. From the interviews conducted, it was found that some respondents had friends who have almost 5,000 friends on their friend list and they are proud of it. To these consumers, they seem to have a perception that the more friends that they have in their friend list, the more popular they are in a network society. In order for them to increase their popularity, some consumers take steps to provide more information about themselves to market themselves in the public eye, including putting their “very best” picture as their profile picture in order to attract other social networking users to view their social networking profiles and add them as friends.

“I have some friends who have about 5,000 friends on their friend list and they’re very proud of it. They say it is a measure to show how popular they are on social networks.”

“Many artists have gain popularity through YouTube and I guess many consumers are trying to replicate that as well.”

“It is definitely easier to gain popularity online as compared to offline.”

“To gain popularity on Facebook, one will need to market his or her self. And to do so, it will mean providing more information about the self. Putting on the very best picture actually helps to attract the attention of other users and persuade them to add you to their friend list.”

“I think I have about 2,000 over friends and Facebook doesn’t allow me to add anymore friends. So I converted my profile page into a fan page. I will always update stuff about myself to keep my fans updated.”

Such a phenomenon is said to be predominant among young social networking users, such as adolescents and young adults (Valkenburg et al., 2005), and this is further verified in the current study as respondents who were younger mentioned that they will make their profile pages as nice as possible to attract more friends. In Valkenburg et al. (2005)'s 900 participants survey, consumers from the ages nine to eighteen who complete the survey about online identity suggest that the purpose many of them engage in social networking sites is to gain popularity, and in doing so, they provide more information about themselves to express their identity. Hence, popularity is a reason that may explain why consumers decide to expose information about themselves on social networking sites.

Implications and Recommendations

The current study provides insights on the reasons behind consumer decisions to expose personal information on social networking sites despite being aware of the potential undesirable consequences. Several implications can be made and several recommendations are provided.

Firstly, many consumers were found to expose personal information on social networking sites as a form of self-expression. Through actions such as real-time feelings and location whereabouts through status updates, consumers are able to express themselves to others. While it is clear that social networking sites provide them with a space for them to express themselves, the exposure of such information to the public poses much danger to its user. More specifically, such actions allow the public to better understand the user and may subsequently plan actions to sabotage the life of the stalked user. Functions such as status updates and wall postings on social networking sites are essential components to its operations (e.g. to inform friends about some event) and calls to remove such functions may defeat the whole purpose of social networking sites. Therefore, an alternative is suggested to the operators of social networking sites – provide privacy functions. Instead of making status updates and wall postings visible to the public, consumers should be provided with a function that allows them to adjust privacy settings to only make it visible to friends or to certain group of people, or better still, to only the self. This allows personal information to be circulated among people whom the user personally knows. On the other hand, social

marketers have a responsibility to inform and educate consumers about privacy considerations and suggest alternatives for consumers who use social networking sites as a space for self-expression, typically the benefits and options of privacy settings.

Secondly, many consumers who provide information about themselves online may be doing so due to their need for attention. To consumers, updating their status allows them to request for attention and initiate a conversation with others. While their need of attention can be satisfied through the responses and attention provided by genuine friends, these consumers may be putting themselves at risk to poachers who are looking for people who are having a lack of attention with bad intentions, such as to cheat their feelings or belongings. It is, therefore, time for consumers to be educated on how to deal with attention needs. Consumer psychological campaigns can be conducted to educated consumers on the importance of attention needs and ways in dealing with these needs. In particular, consumers can be encouraged to start giving attention for good behaviors by noticing the little things that family members and friends do and let them know that such behaviors are appreciated while cutting down on attention offered on negative behaviors as a sign of disapproval. Little actions like eating together with family and friends, talking about what they want to talk about without interruptions, or even just saying “thanks” can go a long way. In addition, social networking sites should introduce more games that allow friends to play together on site simultaneously. This allows consumers to channel their attention needs through the playing of games with other users on social networking sites, thereby reducing the chances of consumers to expose personal information, particularly about their thoughts and feelings, online.

Lastly, many consumers suggest that popularity may be a reason why some consumers are exposing information about themselves on social networking sites. To them, it is easier to gain the fame they desire in the online world (i.e. through social networking sites) as compared to the offline world. In defining popularity in social networking sites, consumers argue that the more friends or fans they have in their friends list or “fans like”, the more popular they are in a network society. To achieve this aim, many consumers will go to the extent to provide continuous updated information about themselves, including latest status updates and personal photos, to attract more friends or fans. While real popularity and gaining actual stardom can be achieve through social networking sites, the actual success is clearly minimal as compared to those who are trying to do so. For those who were

unsuccessful, much of their personal information has gone viral and there is no way that information can be erased as it could have been saved and distributed on other online sites. It is, therefore, important for consumers to understand the drawbacks of providing too much information of themselves in their attempt to become more popular. Educational messages that inform consumers about being responsible for the self on social networking sites can be transmitted by operators of social networking sites, such as by providing warning messages during photo uploads and in sections of biographical statements, to inform and educate consumers about the potential consequences of such actions.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have, hopefully, provide an understanding as to why consumers remain overexposing themselves over social networking sites despite being aware of potential undesirable consequences. Using in-depth interviews, research participants were probed on their opinions, perceptions and experiences on the continuing exposure of personal information on social networking sites. Findings from the study suggest that consumers' view exposure of personal information in social networking sites as a way to express themselves. They have a need for attention and have desires to gain and improve their popularity using social networking sites. From these findings, several recommendations were afforded to better the situation, including the provision of privacy functions and education on privacy considerations, ways to handle attention needs and about being responsible for the self on social networking sites.

From the current study, we can understand that consumers are not necessarily enticed with the technical aspects of what technology has to offer, but rather, the influence of socialization agents, such as peers and friends, has a major impact towards how consumers behave on social networking sites. As consumers begin to observe the behavior of others on these sites, they realize that others are probably observing them as well. Instead of limiting the amount of information that they provide, consumers tend to overexpose themselves on these sites by providing information to turn the heads of others towards their direction, typically as a way of self-expression, to satisfy their need for attention, and to gain popularity. This suggests that the focus of consumers on social networking sites is very much centered on the self and how the self is projected and seen in the light of others.

Although it is imperative to acknowledge that consumers have a need to satisfy the self, our contention is that it is arguably more important to understand how the self can be presented in a manner that avoids possible negative consequences that we already know and limit the possibilities of any unforeseen circumstances. Through this understanding, we hope to pave way for future researches that involves inter-disciplinary collaborations, particularly between marketing and psychology, to offer solutions that facilitates behavioral change (and not just an increase in awareness) among consumers in an attempt to foster responsible provision of personal information of the self on the Internet, especially on social networking sites.

This study is nonetheless limited in generalizability in its findings to the current research sample. Future research are encouraged to verify and explore for other potential reasons to explain why consumers remain overexposing themselves over social networking sites despite being aware of potential undesirable consequences, which may be similar or different from the findings of the current research due to cultural similarities or differences.

References

- Babad, E. (2001), "On the conception and measurement of popularity: more facts and some straight conclusions", *Social Psychology of Education*, 5, 3–30.
- BBC News. (2011, December 29), *Google and Facebook top 2011's most visited sites in US*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-16356066>
- Benezes, S. (2010). "Expressing yourself via Facebook?!?", *My High School Journalism*. Retrieved from http://my.hsj.org/Schools/Newspaper/tabid/100/view/frontpage/schoolid/2714/articleid/397411/newspaperid/2744/Expressing_yourself_Via_Facebook.aspx
- Boyd, D.M. (2008), "Taken out of context: American teen sociality in networked publics", Doctoral Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Boyd, D.M. and Ellison, N.B. (2007), "Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13 (1), 210-230.
- Buchner, P., M. D. Bois-Reymond & H.-H.Kruger. (1995), "Growing up in three European region". In L. Chisholm (Ed.), *Growing Up in Europe: Contemporary Horizons in Childhood and Youth Studies* (pp. 43-59). Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Bukowski, W.M. & Hoza, B. (1989), "Popularity and friendship: Issues in theory, measurement, and outcome". In T.J. Berndt & G.W. Ladd (Eds.), *Peer relationships in child development* (pp. 15–45). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Cassidy, J. (2006, May 15), "Me media", *The New Yorker*, 50-59.
- Engel, J.F., Blackwell, R.D., & Miniard, P.W. (1986), "*Consumer behavior*", New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Goleman, D. (1998), "*Working with emotional intelligence*", New York: Bantam Books.
- Joinson, A.N. (2003), "*Understanding the psychology of Internet behavior: Virtual worlds, real Lives*", Palgrave Macmillan.

- Moscardellie, D. M. & Liston-Heyes, C. (2004), "Teens surfing the net: How do they learn to protect their privacy?", *Journal of Business and Economic Research*, 2 (9), 43-56.
- Ozmete, E. (2009), "Parent and adolescent interaction in television advertisements as consumer socialization agents", *Business Library*. Retrieved from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3673/is_3_129/ai_n31481897/
- Valkenburg, P.M., Schouten, A.P., & Peter, J. (2005), "Adolescents' identity experiments on the Internet", *New Media & Society*, 7 (3), 383–402.
- Veer, E. (2011a), "Being online: how the Internet is changing research for consumers", *Journal of Research for Consumers*, 20, 1-6.
- Veer, E. (2011b), "Staring: how Facebook facilitates the breaking of social norms", In R.W. Belk, K. Grayson, A.M. Muniz, H.J. Schau (Ed.), *Research in Consumer Behavior*, 13, 185-198, Bradford: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Ward, S. (1974), "Consumer socialization", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 1 (2), 1-14.