**Overexposure in Social Networking Sites**

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**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, through in-depth interviews with twelve social networking site users, attempts to provide an understanding as to why consumers overexpose themselves over social networking sites despite being aware of potential undesirable consequences and offer some possible recommendations to remedy the situation.

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

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. 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刷新social networking sites to check for updates from their friends throughout the day. Indeed, these consumers may be categorize 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 turns, 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).
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. 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).

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 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, 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. 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.
Further Readings


