

Doctor of Media and Communication Studies

Under the Radar.

Preadolescents' moral conceptions about online self-disclosure.

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Summary

Self-disclosure, commonly referring to the act of revealing information about oneself, is an important aspect of children's online activities and experiences. A wide range of studies has shown how self-disclosure plays a role in processes of identity and peer culture in children's lives. The moral dimension of online self-disclosure has not been systematically examined. The majority of existing research has focused on the different *sorts of information* children reveal about themselves online, the related *risks, influences and contextual factors* (including parents and the domestic context, legislation) and *literacy* (skills, competences) that mediate children's online selfdisclosure.

Notwithstanding, there are various indications that a study of the moral dimension of online self-disclosure is particularly relevant. That is, there have been recent studies about morally charged online experiences, including cyberbullying, 'sexting' (sending sexually imbued instant messages) and transgressive behaviour in virtual worlds and online games. Such instances are often studied from a media effects framework, which focuses on the effects of (internet) media on children's psychological development and wellbeing. While this certainly is a legitimate concern, psychologicaldevelopmental research can stimulate the image of children as an (cognitive, moral) 'immature, incompetent, dependent group of (internet) media users (Krcmar, 2015).

Considering children as *a*-moral media agents risks bypassing important needs and opportunities in terms of participation, guidance, education and literacy.

This thesis contributes to research into children as moral media agents by means of a qualitative study into children's moral conceptions about the online act of selfdisclosure.

Three research questions guided this thesis: (1) What are children's moral sensitivities about online self-disclosure? (2) How are children's moral conceptions about online self-disclosure part of the domestic family context(s)? (3) How do children's moral conceptions about online self-disclosure relate to the technological context(s)? The first two research questions are rooted within two specific theoretical fields: an (intra-) individual-psychological analysis on the one hand, and a relationalsociological analysis on the other hand. The third research question is answered by means of literature and studies about the internet's recent technological and political-economic developments.

Preadolescents, that are 9-14-year-old children, are central in this thesis. Important biological, psychological and social changes occur during preadolescence. It is a period when children not only experience personal and moral transformations, also their

relationships with parents and peers change. At the same time children's internet use increases and parental control decreases. Preadolescents are navigating and discovering growingly complex ethical environments on the internet (Jenkins, 2006), increasingly on their own. In this regard, it is surprising that relatively little research has been conducted into the internet experiences of this age group (as opposed older children, youth).

The first two chapters form the theoretical backdrop of the thesis. In these chapters, the main themes and concepts of the study into preadolescents' moral conceptions about online self-disclosure are discussed. The emphasis is on the role of psychological, sociological and technological forces that co-shape preadolescents' moral conceptions about online self-disclosure. Specifically, important concepts such as identity, peer culture, senses of belonging, internet mediation and technological affordances are explained. The question of how preadolescents deal with these forces (how they identify, interpret, respond to) becomes particularly important and leads, in Chapter 3, to a qualitative research design, a common approach within social scientific research that is particularly helpful for examining processes of subjective meaning-making, often involving interviews and ethnographic methods. In the context of this thesis, I conducted focus group interviews with 66 preadolescent boys and girls, and I devised a 'focused' ethnographic study in 10 families in Flanders, the Northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, in which I visited the participating families 5 to 6 times in a 3-4-month time period. The focus group interviews with 66 preadolescents took place in summer day camps in Flanders, in a secondary school in Flanders and a community centre in Brussels. The groups were mixed in age and gender. The families that were part of the ethnographic study were diverse in terms of family form (including nuclear families, single parent households, joint stepfamilies). The families and their children are briefly described in Chapter 4. A focused ethnography is characterised by high data intensity.

The data in this thesis are interview recordings and transcripts, field notes, pictures and other visual materials, which were analysed based on narrative analysis that identifies and interprets important themes in the transcripts and visual material through codes and annotative notes.

Research ethics were a constant point of attention throughout the work in this thesis. Existing ethical codes and principles do not always capture the complexity, dilemma's and 'messiness' (Law, 2004) that researchers are facing, not in the least in research with (younger) children. Therefore, in Chapter 6, I argue for a complementary ethical approach, a relational ethical approach, that has the relationship between the researcher and the participant at its core. 'Good' research relationships are evaluated and negotiated constantly, and are characterized by 'ethical symmetry' (Christensen & Prout, 2002) between the (adult) researcher and the (child) participant. The researcher recognized, respects and addresses the differences and commonalities (such as age and gender) with the participant in a reflexive manner.

The research questions in this thesis are answered in Chapter 5 by means of 3 empirical articles. The first research question aimed at identifying preadolescents' main moral sensitivities regarding online self-disclosure. There have been indications that preadolescents have become more careful with sharing personal information about

themselves online. Some preadolescents have developed tactics to maintain a certain degree of privacy online. Starting from this reservation, the first article identified a number of moral sensitivities related to online self-disclosure amongst preadolescents.

Article 1 specifically reports on forms of empathy, perspective-taking and ethics of reciprocity amongst the participating preadolescents. Other, related moral sensitivities are also discussed, including parents who share information about their children ('sharenting'). The findings show how preadolescents hold clear moral sensitivities about online self-disclosure, that they claim their right to privacy, but also that they are not always heard.

The second research question was investigated in the focused ethnography. Generally speaking, it became clear that the participating parents were all involved in their preadolescent children's internet use. They tended to use a combination of active and restrictive internet mediation strategies to minimize risks (cyberbullying, stalking, grooming, privacy) and maximize opportunities (education, communication and social networking) for their children. The preadolescents were generally accepting and positive about the domestic internet 'regime'. Self-disclosure, somewhat surprisingly, was not a dominant theme in the interviews with the families (despite the relatively generous attention for it in public discourse). Moreover, the ethnographic work showed that the children were self-disclosing in online spaces 'under the radar' of many parents, such as online games. Parents were relying on definitions and conceptions of self-disclosure that did not always fully capture the complexity of the contemporary (and probably future) internet landscape. Parents were mainly concerned with factual, identifiable information (name, address, pictures), whereas the preadolescents were concerned with 'deeper', more intimate forms of information, including feelings, opinions, personality traits, hobbies and talents. While parents are expected to make 'reflexive' decisions about their children's internet use and experiences, everyday internet parenting can be difficult. A 'moral media vacuum' manifested itself throughout the focused ethnography, in which children and parents together were experiencing, addressing and negotiating the complexity of the contemporary internet landscape.

The aim of the third research questions was to investigate how preadolescents' moral conceptions about online self-disclosure are responses to the technological forces, specifically in the context of the popular massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) Minecraft and Clash of Clans. Analysis here too was based on the focused ethnographic work. Briefly stated, the preadolescents in my research were developing privacy-related ethical responses that were not always fully desirable. In response to the socio-technical complexity of many online spaces, children are developing creative, but sometimes ethically ambiguous strategies to manage information about themselves. For some of the preadolescents, it meant that they lied about (aspects of) themselves, for others the complexity was so overwhelming that they seemed to have given up: they did not have any coherent privacy-related strategy. This is where the moral media agency of children became especially critical: the preadolescents in this thesis suggested that ethical intervention is becoming increasingly difficult in the online spaces they frequently use. That children are learning to (have to) lie in order to protect themselves cannot be an acceptable, desirable idea for parents, teachers, policymakers, service providers and, ultimately, children themselves.

From this last answer, the wider meaning and relevance of this thesis emerges for researchers and other stakeholders, as formulated in Chapter 6. Based on the findings, it can be argued that the self-disclosure concept becomes problematic in contemporary technological context, where (young) internet users who self-disclose not only need to deal with each other, but also with the technologies themselves (and their affordances) that are gathering, storing and bargaining increasingly more information about them in increasingly unpredictable and intransparent ways. The need for a theoretical update of the self-disclosure concept presents itself (and is discussed). Several recommendations can be formulated. The present thesis suggests a new, underdeveloped path: moral internet literacy. Internet mediation and literacy programs need to foster and nurture preadolescents' emerging moral identities. Parents and educators, but an inventive industry too, can benefit from preadolescents' moral eagerness, and devise case studies, vignettes, discussion topics and websites and applications that confront preadolescents with moral dilemmas and choices related to their current and future online lifeworlds, and thus stimulate their expanding moral minds. Insights from (socio-psychological) literature about preadolescence suggests how (peer) group exercises, debate sessions and certain thematic vignettes can be developed that link up to contemporary, 'lived' online experiences of preadolescents. Policymakers in Europe are currently debating about extending the age limit from 13 years old to 16 years old for using social media.

Such a move contrasts with the (moral) autonomy that many children acquire during preadolescence, and places a disproportionate responsibility with the parents while service providers, like popular social networking services or gaming platforms, are mostly spared. At least one, arguably ambiguous, consequence will be that an even larger group of children will have to lie about themselves (ad minimum about their age) in order to be able to fully uptake their rights stipulated in the international Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), and to be able to participate in the digital, online landscape. This thesis can be read as an encouragement, based on the views of children and parents, for service providers to offer 'good' services to the children that make use of their content and services, as well as their parents.