

Fourteen Is Fourteen and a Girl Is a Girl: Validating the Identity of Adolescent Bloggers

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Abstract

This study focuses on the phenomenon of lying on adolescents' weblogs. The sample consisted of 113 completed surveys out of 120 in total. The age of participants ranged between 13 and 17 years old. Interviews were conducted with 10 randomly selected participants whose answers were then verified. The results suggest not only that adolescents present personal information such as their age, gender, and place of residence but that these pieces of information are presented truthfully. Generally, the level of dishonesty was low, with young adolescents tending to lie more often about their interests. Public topics (school and life) had the most truthful answers, whereas the least truthful answers concerned intimate topics (family life, partnership). These results suggest that adolescents' blogs serve as a place where the writers can both present themselves and communicate with their peers in a way that goes beyond a traditional diary.

Introduction

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE SPENDING increasingly more time online. In 2007, 93% of adolescents ages 12 to 18 years used the Internet in the Czech Republic.¹ This study focuses on the use of one specific Internet application: blogs written by adolescents. It examines the connection of the blogger's real-life and virtual identities and whether adolescents use their blogs for experimenting with their identity, in the sense of creating an online persona that facilitates aspects of the psyche other than those that are part of the real-life identity. What are the areas in which adolescents tend to provide false data on their blogs? Are these areas related to the author's age or sex? On what topics do adolescents tend to present more false information? How significantly are the online and offline blogger personas connected? An important part of this study includes the methodological aspect of verifying the bloggers' offline identity.

Weblogs

Weblogs (or blogs) are personal Internet pages that are frequently updated; the links are organized in reverse chronological order, from the oldest to the newest.² Weblogs ("web logs") are comparable to traditional written diaries.

According to the data gathered in the Pew Internet and American Life Project,³ maintaining a blog is a form of entertainment particularly popular among adolescents: 19% of them have created their own blog (compared to 7% of adult Internet users), and 39% have read others' blogs (compared to

27% of adults). Blogs are by far most popular among 15 to 17 year olds—a quarter of them have created a blog. Blogging has had similar success with Czech adolescents, as half of all adolescent Internet users regularly read others' blogs.⁴

Adolescence, blogs, and identity

Adolescence may be labeled⁵ as the period of life when questions of identity, identity formation, and self-definition come to the fore: in short, forming one's identity is a key developmental task. More important than in any other earlier or later developmental stage, the aim is to develop a coherent sense of the self. The question "Who am I?" becomes crucial. Identity formation thus includes self-definition (Who am I? What do I believe in?) as well as experimentation with identity (i.e., testing different aspects of social roles).

According to Sherry Turkle,⁶ the Internet provides space for self-exploration and redefinition of identity. Similarly,⁷ the Internet may facilitate accepting facets of one's identity that were suppressed or that only manifest online, thanks in particular to anonymity. An adolescent's identity, as well as the identity he or she presents on the Internet, may have an aspect of fluidity, diversity of possible "selves," or multiplicity.^{6,8} This freedom to experiment with self-expression is attractive particularly to adolescents with respect to their developmental task: the Internet allows them to grasp their identity more easily and intensively.

As has been pointed out,⁹ the blogger's self-representation is the blog's key feature (i.e., responding systematically to the essential identity question "Who am I?"). Blogs seem to be an

ideal tool for working with identity¹⁰: they allow for the archiving of an adolescent's memories, feelings, and reactions to various impetuses. At the same time, they allow other people to read the individual's blog and provide the writer with feedback—these peer relationships represent one of the essential sides of the adolescent's identity. This is enhanced thanks to the simple user interface, which allows the vast majority of adolescents, rather than a limited group of adolescents with technical skills, to use them.

Also, adolescents generally perceive their time online as an extension of their offline identity rather than as an anonymous person pretending or experimenting with identity.^{11,12} Fifty percent of adolescents show their photograph on their blogs¹¹; 54% present personal data, such as age, name, or domicile²; and 61% present contact information, such as e-mail address, instant messaging username, and phone number.

Method

One hundred twenty blogs from the three biggest Czech blog servers were chosen to participate in the survey. These blogs were selected from a list of the latest updated blogs from each blog server over a 3-day period, especially afternoons and evenings when the majority of blogs were updated. The selection criteria included participants' age being between 13 and 17 years old (high school-aged children) with at least 3 months of active blogging. The survey thus focused on more experienced bloggers rather than on those who had used a blog for a short time only. The writers of these selected blogs were invited to participate in the survey via e-mail, instant messages, or blogs.

The data was collected in two steps. The first step included filling in an online questionnaire about lying on blogs among adolescents; the questionnaire asked about real-life identity (age and sex) and included seven questions about the frequency of lying about important aspects and also the usual topics adolescents blog about.¹¹ Specifically, participants were asked whether they have lied about partnership, family situation, appearance, sexual experiences, skills, interests, and school. Answers were measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale: 1, *never lied*; 2, *rarely lied*; 3, *sometimes lied*; and 4, *frequently lied*. The questions were "How often do you lie on your blog about [specific topic, e.g., partnership]?" The understanding of what defines a lie was up to the respondents themselves. Therefore, we use a subjective definition of the term lie.

The second step included verifying the participants' real-life identity. When first contacted, the adolescents were notified that 12 of them would be selected and would receive small gifts when interviewed (the gifts, such as MP3 players, were chosen for their appeal to adolescents). Participants' real identity was checked for the gift and to discover whether or not they had lied on the questionnaire. The questionnaire stipulated that if they lied, they would not be given the reward.

The second step was chosen for several reasons. The high chance of winning (1 out of 10 people who filled out a questionnaire received a gift), as well as attractive prizes, were intended to maximize the questionnaire response. The aim of the notice about verifying the truth of the questionnaire was to minimize "lying about lying" in the question-

naire, while the face-to-face meeting was supposed to verify the blog writers' real-life as opposed to virtual identity. Therefore, adolescents knew that if they wanted to win a prize, they had to fill in the questionnaire truthfully, regardless of whether or not they lie on their blog.

Results

The questionnaires had a 93% return: out of 120 contacted bloggers, 112 questionnaires were completed. Of the participants, 90.2% ($n = 101$) were female and 9.8% ($n = 9$) were male. The bloggers' average age was 14.7 years ($SD = 1.13$). Most of the bloggers were in the 13- to 14-year-old age group (26.8%); the lowest percentage were 17 year olds (12.5%). It therefore seems that blogs reach the peak of popularity in middle adolescence. At the same time, they are significantly more attractive to girls than to boys.

Study 1: survey results

Adolescents reported minimal lying on their blogs: 57.1% claimed to have "never lied" on their blogs, and 19.6% said they had "rarely lied" about one of the seven categories (partnership, family situation, appearance, sexual experiences, skills, interests and school). Figure 1 shows the distribution of frequencies of admitted lying according to age. It implies that younger adolescents (13–14 years old) have a higher tendency to lie. This tendency is lowest in the oldest age group (17 years old). However, due to the low number of respondents in individual groups (14–30 respondents per each age group), the differences are not significant.

However, if the age groups are merged to form two categories, younger adolescents (13–14 years) and older adolescents (15–17 years), significant differences (Fisher's exact test 1-sided, $p = 0.048$) are revealed in the level of lying admitted in the case of younger adolescents. Compared to 34.5% of older adolescents, 51.9% of younger adolescents have sometimes provided false information on their blogs. The differences in lying between the sexes were minimal and insignificant; no relevant conclusions can be drawn from the 9 male bloggers.

As for the individually examined seven areas, the results were as follows: most often, participants lied on their blogs about relationships and skills (19.6% lied in both), family situation (16.1%), appearance (10.7%), sexual experience (9.8%), and interests (8.9%). The area with the least amount of lying was school (1.8%).

Figure 2 shows the distribution of lying in the individual categories according to age (divided again into younger and older adolescents). The values are presented from the highest frequency of lying to the lowest ("lying about school" was excluded due to the very low, almost negligible amount). The only category in which respondents admitted to frequently lying was about sexual experience.

In all of the categories, younger adolescents tend to present false information more than older adolescents. The greatest differences between the two groups were in the categories "lying about interests" (15% difference), "lying about partnership" (8% difference), and "lying about sexual experiences" (6% difference). Nevertheless, the differences are insignificant with the exception of "lying about interests," where a slight correlation with respect to age was found: Spearman's rank correlation coefficient ($112 = 0.298$, $p < 0.01$ level).

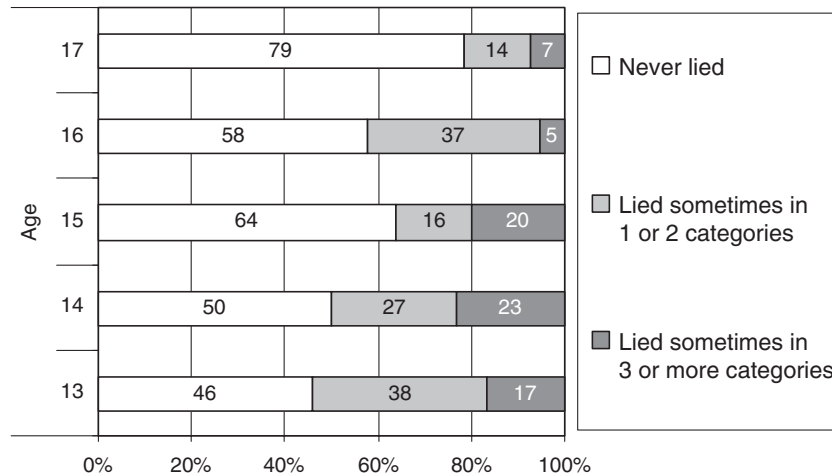


FIG. 1. Percentage of adolescents, according to age, who lied on their blogs.

Study 2: true identity verification

Out of the 12 randomly selected and contacted bloggers, interviews were conducted with 10 of them in a public place to ensure the adolescents felt safe. It was necessary to contact half of them a number of times with the help of various sources (instant message, e-mail, or phone). At the meeting, the prizes were given, and basic data was checked and then verified if it corresponded to the answers in the questionnaire (not on the blog). The information verified was limited to sex, age, and domicile. All the verified data corresponded to the information presented in the questionnaires. Only 2 female bloggers came to the meeting alone; 5 were accompanied by their mothers and 3 by their friends. Given the random selection and relative ease of organizing the meeting, the verification can be considered successful—the authors were able to verify the bloggers’ true identity. Although they were contacted by phone, 2 female bloggers did not come to the meeting, so it was not possible to verify their identity.

Discussion

By using the random-stratified method when selecting participants to verify their true identity, we aimed to avoid several potential distortions that threaten a number of online

surveys.¹³ Our sample was not self-selected: the blogs and their writers were chosen randomly, age and length of time blogging being the only criteria. On the other hand, bloggers whose age could not be determined (i.e., direct or indirect information on their blogs, in the links, or in their profiles was not provided) were excluded.

According to Kraut et al.,¹³ the anonymous aspect of an online survey induces some respondents to provide superficial or maliciously false answers. There was a risk of the phenomenon of “lying about lying.” The fact that respondents were not anonymous in our study (their basic information was verified in face-to-face meetings) could have led to the tendency not to lie about other aspects we asked about (and which were otherwise impossible to verify).

The demographic characteristics of our sample comply with other authors’ findings. The trend of an increasing difference in the share of female and male bloggers was confirmed: from a slight predominance of girls’ blogs over boys’ blogs discovered earlier² to a mere 5% of boys’ blogs, 87% of girls’ blogs (in 8% of the blogs, the sex was unknown).¹² Similarly, our sample consisted of 90% girls’ blogs and 10% boys’ blogs. The data seem consistent, and it may be claimed that in the case of adolescents, girls are far more interested in blogs than boys.

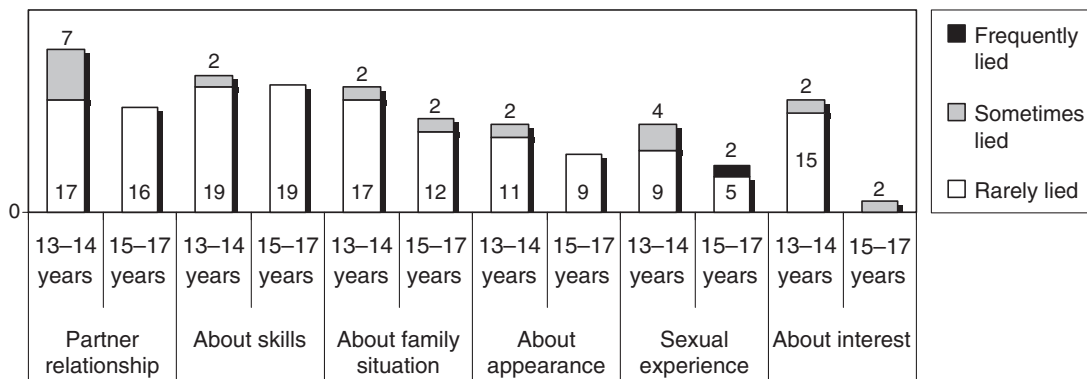


FIG. 2. Topics about which adolescents lied on their blogs, according to age groups.

According to the results, adolescents seldom lied on their blogs: 57% claimed that they never provided false information on their blogs. Nearly 20% lied only very rarely. This supports the conclusions of other authors¹² that the Internet tends to serve as an extension of the real-life identity rather than as a place where special identities are created. Nevertheless, our results may have been distorted by our focus on bloggers who regularly update their blogs and have kept them over a longer period of time (at least 3 months). As implied by other researchers,^{14,15} regular online participants tend to present themselves on the Internet under their real, not hidden, identity. From a psychological viewpoint, it is easier to tell the truth consistently than to lie consistently. Also, what may be taken into account is that if they are exposed for being dishonest, bloggers would potentially lose the friends in their network, which they have built up over a period of time.

A higher tendency of self-disclosure has been found among bloggers who provide the most information about their identity on their blog.¹⁶ This is explained by the fact that approximately 90% of bloggers write for people they know in real life. At the same time, blogs are not perceived as personal diaries but more as an instrument for communication, and thereby an extension of the blogger's real-life identity. This also corresponds to our findings concerning the topics about which adolescents tend to lie. Regarding basic information about themselves, such as their name, age, and school that they attend, adolescents generally do not lie, since it is information that their blog readers know from reality. The topic of "lying about school" displayed the lowest level of lying, which may imply that blog writers and readers are often schoolmates. On the other hand, a higher level of lying was revealed in cases of more personal and intimate information, such as "lying about intimate relationships" and "lying about skills."

In general, younger adolescents show a higher tendency to lie, possibly because younger adolescents experience stronger tension to overcome a child identity and to adopt adult qualities and characteristics. In addition, other research suggests that younger adolescents experiment more with their identities. Mainly as a result of lower self-esteem,¹⁷ they tend to present themselves as older.^{18,19} On the blogs of our participants, younger adolescents pretended to have more interests and more sexual and partnership experience than they actually had. They did this in a more implicit way (e.g., by overstating their experience and interests) rather than by explicitly claiming they were older. These "overstatements" of one's experiences, abilities, and interests need not be perceived as lying. They reflect a conception of the ought self or ideal self,²⁰ which in this case refers to the attributes that the bloggers believe they should possess or would like to possess.

Owing to the properties of the Internet, it is possible for adolescents to reveal information about themselves on their blogs that they might otherwise be ashamed to express.⁹ Blogs allow them to alleviate some of their psychological tension (e.g., low self-esteem). This may carry potential risks: it was shown that most information (in this case, personal identification data, such as domicile, age, name) presented in adolescent blogs is true. And as was revealed in our survey, adolescents are not only traceable on the Internet, they may also be found quite easily. On the other hand, the fact that

only one participant came to the meeting on her own and that she was in the upper age range (17 years old) may imply that adolescents are not necessarily irresponsible as far as the relationship between the online and offline world is concerned.

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