

# Adolescent egocentrism and social media—does the psychology align?

## A Collaborative Paper by



**Executive Summary.** Psychologists espouse a developmental stage, adolescent egocentrism, that seems to align with and explain popular opinion about teens' use of social media. Current research, however, shows misalignment with the process in at least two areas:

- Teens are likely to continue their pattern of frequently posting personal information into adulthood, far surpassing the expected age of declining egocentrism;
- Teens actively manage their online personal information, while adolescent egocentrism would predict a high level of risk blindness.

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### **Attribution.**

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**References listed at the end of this paper.**

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**The psychology: Adolescent egocentrism.** Yes, teenagers are the center of the universe—at least in their own minds. In 1967, psychologist David Elkind introduced the theory of adolescent egocentrism, a developmental stage that many parents easily recognize in their own teens. At around 11 or 12 years of age, adolescents first become aware of their own thought processes, and soon they begin conceptualizing the thoughts of others. Taken together, they perceive others' thoughts only in relation to themselves; and since teens spend a considerable amount of time thinking about themselves, they assume others must be doing the same thing—thinking about them. "It is this belief that others are preoccupied with his appearance and behavior that constitutes the egocentrism of the adolescent" (Elkind, 1967, p. 1030).

Adolescence egocentrism leads teens to a self-absorbed and distorted view of their personal uniqueness and importance in the world. As such, they develop three defined thought processes:

- **Personal fable:** Teens develop a personal fable, in which they over-differentiate their feelings and believe they are the only ones capable of experiencing their unique emotions; this is why teens often express sentiments such as *"Nobody understands me!"* and *"Things aren't the same as when you were young!"*
- **Imaginary audience:** Teens develop an imaginary audience, in which they believe they are living life on a stage with everyone looking and noticing everything they do. "It is an audience because the young person believes that he or she will be the focus of attention; and it is imaginary because, in actual social situations, this is not usually the case (unless he or she contrives to make it so)" (Elkind, 1967, p. 1031).
- **Risk taking:** Teens develop "an exaggerated sense of invulnerability" that leads to risk taking (Green et al, 2000, p. 439) because they do not consider any risks previously encountered by others to be applicable to their personal situation (why should they when, according to the personal fable, nobody has ever encountered their unique situation?).

Elkind and his associates discovered that such egocentrism is most prevalent in early adolescence, peaks at about the age of 14 to 16, and declines in young adulthood (Elkind & Bowen, 1979). This is the point when maturing brains should take the next step to conceptualize others' thoughts without projecting their own thoughts onto them. After progressively testing his "personal fable" and "imaginary audience" against peoples' reactions in reality, the young adult discovers that his thoughts are subjective and that others are not obsessively thinking about him.

**Application: Adolescent egocentrism and social media.** It certainly appears that adult popular opinion considers teenage social-media use to be an amplification tool for adolescent egocentrism—and with good reason. This outlet is exceptionally suited to support the personal fable, imaginary audience, and risk taking. The numbers speak to the appeal: As a group, about 93 percent of U.S. teens ages 12 to 17 are online; of those, 77 percent have a profile on a social networking site, 50 percent visit a social network site daily, 39 percent user Twitter or status updating, and 24 percent have a blog (Madden, 2010).

First, teens are drawn to social media to express the personal fable. As a typical representation of many adults' sentiments about one particular social medium—Twitter—one business blogger stated:

I just don't see why everyone's so darn fascinated by the ceaseless stream of mundane ultra-trivia produced by the fans of Twitter. A quick glimpse of their home page is all you need to see just how uninteresting the reality of people's lives are, and yet they think they are, sending one-line status

updates to the world at large about their having ... 'met Jax for fish dinner. Yum!' and 'going to bed. l8r.' (Taylor, 2007).

So what is the fascination? According to Elkind, these types of posts are not "ultra-trivial" to a teenager. Caught in full-blown egocentrism, each feeling, experience, and action is totally unique. Nobody before has ever ate such a fish dinner! And nobody before has ever gone to bed under such circumstances! This is a teenager's motivation for sharing even the minutest of personal details online. Consider the Web site DoesThisLookStupid.com, which is popular among adolescents. For these users, it is not satisfying to glean fashion tips from pictures of others modeling outfits similar to theirs—the user considers his sense of style to be so original that he must post actual pictures of what he is personally wearing that day to get feedback (and, furthermore, the user has the assumption that everyone *cares* about what he is wearing). While teens in past generations have spent hours on the telephone discussing similar subjects (*themselves*), social media has made it easier, cheaper, and faster than ever to broadcast all of the tiny details of their personal fable.

Examples of the popular-media treatment of the teenage personal fable:

- "Today young people were 'born digital' and have grown up using technology to create their personal brands on social networking sites as well as broadcasting whatever micro rituals might be happening." (Goodstein, 2009)
- "Teenagers used mass-produced commodities to imitate adults, but they also used them to create fads and to define themselves. Before instant messaging and YouTube, teenagers craved outlets for communication about their lives with other young people beyond their high school walls." (Schrum, 2009)

Furthermore, teens are motivated to *frequently* share personal information because of their imaginary audience. If a teenager feels as if everyone in the world is obsessed with his life, he will be compelled to use social media to not only meet the demand for personal information but to project the "right" image of himself (identity management). In fact, social media takes the "imaginary audience" one step further by removing some of the imaginativeness. While nobody can predict how far a Tweet or blog post may ultimately spread online, a teenager is able to amass a guaranteed audience through "friends," "followers," or "subscribers." While the average Facebook user has 130 friends ("Statistics," 2010), studies have shown that the average teenager has between 200 and 500 friends (Fodeman & Monroe, 2009). This amassing of friends—or audience—helps validate teens' perception that their life is a stage with everyone watching and judging them. ChatRoulette.com, for instance, heightens the user's sense of visibility because with every click of the mouse, the imagined audience becomes personified—there are untold numbers of participants in this forum interested in looking at and interacting with the teenage user.

Examples of popular-media treatment of the teenage imaginary audience:

- Teens "are the most narcissistic age ever. Using Twitter suggests a level of insecurity whereby, unless people recognize you, you cease to exist." (Pemberton, 2009)
- "My nephews have thousands of Facebook friends. I've clicked on their friends and they all have more than 1000 friends. I'm talking about teenagers. Is that real? How can people really have that many friends...?" (Ghadimi, 2007)

Finally, social media seems rife with teenage risk-taking, aligning with egocentrism. Parental and educational Web sites are saturated with colloquial wisdom: "Since teens often don't realize their words can be broadcast instantly to thousands of people when they hit 'send,' teens confess intimate

secrets, post photos of themselves in precarious positions and divulge personal information to a wide, yet anonymous, audience online” (McNamara, 2006). Just as psychologists predict, teens appear to have a sense of invincibility when using social media. They regularly post personal details such as their school of attendance or e-mail address without considering that there are strangers online who may use that information to find and harm them. Unfortunately, according to adolescent egocentrism, warnings and education about dangerous online social activity may be ineffective because teens will not be able to see how general advice applies to their unique situation.

Examples of popular-media treatment of teenage risk-taking:

- “While today’s tweens and teens may be more digitally savvy than their parents, their lack of maturity and life experience can quickly get them into trouble with these new social venues.” (“Talking to kids and teens,” 2009)
- “What teens are doing with this networked public is akin to what they have done in every other type of public they have access to: they hang out, jockey for social status, work through how to present themselves, and take risks that will help them to assess the boundaries of the social world. They do so because they seek access to adult society.” (Boyd, 2007)

**The research: Teens and social media.** Adolescent egocentrism seems to align with popular adult perception about teenage social-media use. Current research, however, offers evidence that it may be shortsighted to assume that such behavior will fade with maturation, and teenagers are more aware of social-media risks and take greater action to manage their online identity than most adults. Because adults may not be as quick to adopt or understand social media as adolescents, they frequently attribute the difference to a developmental stage. For instance, one technology expert predicted that “teenagers will outgrow [digital media habits] as they mature, transform, partake of greater burden and responsibilities on their life like providing groceries and housing for a husband or a newborn” (Taylor, 2010). Adolescent egocentrism aligns here, predicting that such behavior should decline in teenagers at the age of 16 or so. However, surveying and data indicate that younger generations are *not* likely to outgrow their tendencies toward abundantly and frequently sharing personal information via social media:

In a survey about the future impact of the internet, a solid majority of technology experts and stakeholders said the Millennial generation will lead society into a new world of personal disclosure and information-sharing using new media. These experts said the communications patterns ‘digital natives’ have already embraced through their use of social networking technology and other social technology tools will carry forward even as Millennials age, form families, and move up the economic ladder. (Anderson & Rainie, 2010).

In other words, maybe it is time to take the “adolescent” out of psychological theory. Social media, it seems, may actually be altering the next generation of adults so that they are more egocentric throughout life. By making the imaginary audience more concrete, social-media validates teens’ sense of identity based on constant scrutiny by others. In the past, teens tested reality to discover the misalignment between their self-obsessed thoughts and others’ subjective thoughts—and that is the point where they moved out of the egocentric mind frame; now, it may be that social-media helps confirm the reality of their self-obsessed viewpoint so that teens continue the behavior into adulthood. Chris Jacobs, Chief Operating Officer of Solutions for Progress, explained the phenomenon: “This way of being is completely ingrained in [teens’] DNA now. The challenge will be for older generations to accept that expectations on sharing have changed, and to modify behavior and employment norms to take this into account” (Anderson & Rainie, 2010).

Granted, another recent study seems to indicate that one certain digital behavior—the frequency of texting with cellular phones—declines as teens grow older (Ling, 2010). Two points are worth noting about this study. First, even as texting decreased relative to teenage behavior when the participants aged into adulthood, each cohort of adults continued to text more than the cohort before, showing that the technology has an expanding and lasting impact upon generations of people. Second, the author notes that texting is distinct from traditional social media:

SMS [texting] is a point-to-point form of mediation where Twitter and SNS [social networks] are a quasi-broadcast form (one message is often sent to many persons). To the degree that the interpersonal nature of SMS is important, then the more quasi-broadcast forms of interaction will not change the picture. However, the interpersonal functionality of SNS (along with the richer forms of interaction that they provide) may play into the mix. In all likelihood, there will be a strong need for texting or at least mobile, asynchronous, point-to-point, text based mediation. SMS has filled this niche for teens. (Ling, 2010, p. 289)

That is to say, texting fulfills a more utilitarian, point-to-point informational function for teens whereas social media fulfill traditional egocentric needs. The researchers acknowledged that their study may not correspond to social media (and vice versa with social-media studies) because of the differences in use.

When it comes to online risk-taking, recent research likewise shows that popular perception and adolescent egocentrism may be out of step. Many adults assume teens are naïve about the far-ranging scope of their audience (“Teens often don’t realize their words can be broadcast instantly to thousands of people ...” [McNamara, 2006]). According to recent surveys, however, teens are likely more aware of online dangers than their adult counterparts. As such, they are actively managing their privacy settings and personal information. A recent Pew survey showed that people ages 18 to 22 vigilantly delete unwanted posts, remove their names from tagged photos, and censor themselves when it comes to sharing personal information (Madden & Smith, 2010). From talking to 2,253 users in this age group, the authors concluded: “Contrary to the popular perception that younger users embrace a laissez-faire attitude about their online reputations, young adults are often more vigilant than older adults when it comes to managing their online identities” (Madden & Smith, 2010). In fact, this age group has consistently managed the amount and types of personal information online since 2006, while older age groups have seen relatively large drops in their efforts to do the same.

Another telephone survey of 1,000 adolescents showed that 88 percent believe there should be laws requiring Web sites to delete all stored information about individuals—a percentage that mirrors the privacy views of older adults (Hoofnagle et al, 2010).

Media reports teem with stories of young people posting salacious photos online, writing about alcohol-fueled misdeeds on social networking sites, and publicizing other ill-considered escapades that may haunt them in the future. These anecdotes are interpreted as representing a generation-wide shift in attitude toward information privacy. Many commentators therefore claim that young people are less concerned with maintaining privacy than older people are. Surprisingly ... We found that expressed attitudes towards privacy by American young adults are not nearly as different from those of older adults as many suggest. (Hoofnagle et al, 2010, p. 3)

Combined, these recent surveys show that adults need to rethink their view on teen social-media use and risky online behavior. In fact, they may want to take a few lessons about responsible identity management from the younger generation!

**Conclusion.** Adolescent egocentrism seems to be an attractive theory for adults to explain teens' use of social media, especially when the older generation does not fully understand the technology. However, studies show that no adolescent theory can fully capture the phenomenon—it may be that social media, in reality, is validating and causing generations of digital natives to become more egocentric as a whole, no matter what their age. Finally, adults who attribute teens' online sharing of personal information to classic adolescent risk-taking are overlooking several studies that show youngsters are, in fact, more prone to online safety measures than their older counterparts.

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