Understanding adolescents’ unfriending on Facebook by applying an extended theory of planned behaviour

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## Sample

1.117 adolescents (47.5% girls and 48.1% boys) with an average age of 15.40 from 14 Flemish schools randomly chosen from the different Flemish provinces all having Facebook profiles

# Abstract

Becoming friends on Facebook does not always guarantee long-term friendships as users have
the possibility to unfriend people. This unfriending behaviour is frequently occurring and might
have negative consequences for both parties. To gain insight into the factors influencing
adolescents’ unfriending, the current study made use of an extended version of the theory of
planned behaviour. To enrich the theoretical framework, we included antecedents related to
adolescents’ friendship management on Facebook, namely their number of friends, their
friendship acceptance threshold, and their degree of public communication. A cross-sectional
survey was conducted among 1.117 adolescents. SEM analyses indicated that both subjective
norm and attitude were related to behavioural intention, which in turn was related to adolescents’
unfriending behaviour. Perceived behavioural control was only associated with adolescents’
unfriending behaviour. Regarding the additional factors, the size of adolescents’ friend networks
was positively related to their confidence in the ability to unfriend people. Adolescents’
friendship acceptance threshold was negatively related to their attitude, whereas adolescents’
degree of public communication was positively associated with their perceived behavioural
control and the experienced social pressure to unfriend.

# Outcome

"The more social pressure adolescents experienced to unfriend others on Facebook, the more they were willing to unfriend since they are strongly concerned about the impressions they make on peers. The subjective norm is the strongest TPB factor among adolescents when they conduct several other online behaviours, such as accepting friend requests from strangers, sexting and the disclosure of personal information or pictures. Girls experienced higher levels of social pressure to unfriend people on Facebook, which will eventually lead to more unfriending on Facebook.
When adolescents themselves support the unfriending decision, it is important that they have confidence in their ability to pursue the unfriending behavior and do it in responsible way or think about the alternatives for unfriending such as the ‘Unfollowing’ feature and ‘Snooze’ feature (i.e., allows someone to hide a friend’s status updates on Facebook for a duration of 30 days). An increased number of friends did not elicit more positive attitudes towards unfriending yet, when adolescents had larger networks, they had more confidence in their ability to unfriend people or ending a friendship unnoticed. When adolescents applied higher friendship acceptance thresholds, they were less positive toward unfriending people. As they were already selective at the source - deciding whether to accept friendship requests - they may have been less inclined to reconsider this decision.
As unfriending is part of privacy management, social referents may view unfriending as advantageous when they do not want people to see particular posts. No significant relationship was found between adolescents’ degree of public communication and their attitude toward unfriending. It might be that Facebook users who often communicate in public were not necessarily more worried about their privacy. These Facebook users possibly want to elicit many reactions or feedback from their friends and therefore prefer large lists of friends. Another explanation might be that they use other mechanisms to protect their privacy." (Verswijvel et al., 2019, pp. 18-21)