Exploring the Blocking Behavior Between Young Adults and Parents on WeChat Moments

Wenting Han[1], Yuxiang (Chris) Zhao[2(✉)], and Qinghua Zhu[1(✉)]

[1] Nanjing University, Nanjing 210023, Jiangsu, China
njuhanwt@smail.nju.edu.cn, qhzhu@nju.edu.cn
[2] Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nanjing 210094,
Jiangsu, China
yxzhao@vip.l63.com

Abstract. With the technology affordance of "blocking" function provided by the WeChat platform, users can have some autonomy to choose which updates can be seen by others. In everyday life information practices of social media, young adults often block their parents on WeChat Moments due to various reasons. However, the blocking behavior hinders intergenerational communication between parents and children, and may cause more misunderstandings and alienation. In this paper, semi-structured interviews are conducted with thirteen young adults between 20 to 30 years of age, exploring factors that impact blocking behaviors in young adults. According to the findings, three kinds of blocking behaviors by young people on WeChat moments are identified, and four reasons that cause blocking behaviors are also presented.

Keywords: Blocking behavior · Parent-child interaction ·
Intergenerational communication · WeChat moments ·
Semi-structured interview

1 Introduction

With the popularity of smartphones and wireless internet, there has been an increasing proportion of mobile netizens in China. The official report from CNNIC reported that the number of Chinese mobile netizens had reached 817 million by the end of 2018, increasing by 64 million and 330 thousand compared with 2017. Besides, netizens aged 20 to 29 have the highest proportion which account for 26.8% of the total Chinese netizens [1]. It is also reported that the proportion of using Instant Messaging (IM) applications (WeChat, QQ, etc.) went up to 95.6%, and the proportion of WeChat moments users reached 85.8% of the total Chinese netizens in 2016 [2]. It is not surprising to find that, Chinese netizens are accustomed to communicating with others instantly and share their daily activities through all kinds of social media, especially through WeChat application—the most representative social media application in China.

WeChat provides mixed functions with technology and social affordances. For example, users can adopt WeChat as a mobile instant messenger as well as a social

network tool. For the self-recording and social purpose, many users employ the WeChat moment as an important information space to record their daily lives, track their trajectory changes, and share their updates with friends. However, it is important to note that, different from Facebook, Twitter and Weibo, WeChat is designed for the interaction with acquaintances. It is reported that more than 95% of users claim that their WeChat friends are filled with relatives, colleagues, and schoolmates from the real life [2]. Simonpietri [3] found that many parents were increasingly using social media to communicate with their children, while children said that they would want more face-to-face communication than connecting with social media. Some young adults even felt that communicating with parents through social media would hurt their parent-child communication. Cao et al. [4] found that the undergraduates would avoid posting moments that they were unwilling to show because of the acquaintances in their WeChat friends. In order to deal with these obstacles, WeChat has provided a series of functions with sharing affordance. For example, WeChat users can selectively make their sharing visible to some friends by identifying some tags or labels, and those who are outside the clustering tags cannot see the updates sharing. In this regard, it is of great interest for researchers and practitioners to understand user's blocking behavior in mobile social media.

Recently, many young adults reported that they often use blocking functions for their parents. Tencent News claimed that there are almost 52% of young adults who choose to block their parents [5]. Previous studies also found that there are limited interactions between young and old generations in social media because of the generation gap [6, 7]. On WeChat platform, the Chinese older people prefer to share didactic passages or articles with exaggerated titles, such as 'no share no Chinese', on their WeChat Moments, while young adults strongly resist these moments. What's more, because of the generation gap, the updates shared by young adults' WeChat Moments, are usually not understood by their parents. The differences on cognitive and values may enlarge the gap between generations, which will further lead to the blocking behavior of the young adults. In such cases, it's common for young adults to block their parents on WeChat Moments.

We believe that these blocking behaviors above are considered as obstacles for the intergenerational communication and interaction. Thus, it is of great necessity to investigate the blocking behaviors and the related antecedents and outcomes in inter-generational communication. However, prior literature on WeChat sharing behavior can offer limited insight to explain blocking behaviors on WeChat moments [8, 9]. This study aims to address the research gap by conducting an exploratory semi-structured interview to explain why and how blocking behaviors between generations on WeChat moments occur.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Selective Self-presentation on Social Media

As mentioned above, social media is an increasingly ubiquitous part of Chinese daily lives. Meanwhile, several problems have been raised regarding privacy and

self-presentation on social media. The concept of self-presentation is firstly proposed by Goffman in 1959 [10], focusing on the interactions between individuals and their audiences. Individuals consciously decide to present themselves in certain manners to general or specific groups of audiences at a given circumstances.

Because of the features of computer-mediated communication (CMC), users could carefully edit and organize their self-presentation on social media [11]. Among them, public communication channels (i.e., status updates) are regarded as the most visible form of self-presentation, and users' disclosure is visible to their entire social network [12]. Consequently, a number of questions, such as invisible audience, context collapse, blurring of public & private etc., would raise some concerns for self-presentation and lead to selective self-presentation on social media [13]. Previous research has found that the concerns towards privacy exposure would reduce the profile-based disclosures on SNSs [14]. Individuals with strong concern of protecting privacy tend to adopt the 'lowest common denominator strategy' on social media, which means that users would be reluctant to post the information if they perceived that the content is not appropriate to be visible to everyone [15].

As noted above, WeChat is designed for the interaction with acquaintances. Researchers have found that users' self-presentation strategies vary from audience to audience [12]. Therefore, it is of interest to explore why users may choose to block their friends on WeChat platform.

2.2   Intergenerational Communication on Social Media

Based on the official report of CNNIC, there are increasingly social media users aged 40 and above [2]. Li and Feng reported that increasingly Chinese parents began to use social media to communicate with their young adults [8]. Based on the survey of Chinese undergraduates, Zhuang found that the dominant role of parent-child relationship was replaced by other new social relationship through social media platforms [9]. Previous study suggested that the health and well-being of the elderly is more dependent on emotionally close relatives, family and good friends [16]. Therefore, the reduction of intergenerational communication on social media will negatively affect the emotional support and social inclusion of the elderly.

According to reports, 52% of the Chinese young adults blocked their parents on WeChat moments [5]. The frequent use of blocking function will affect the intergenerational communication and mutual understanding to some extent [8]. Some studies have begun to discuss the impact of relationship building in social media context (i.e. Facebook) [17, 18]. However, there are still few studies on the blocking behavior on the WeChat platform, especially the inter-generational blocking behavior via WeChat platform [8, 9]. Therefore, this paper focuses on the blocking behavior between young adults and parents on WeChat Moments.

3   Methodology

3.1   Research Method

Since the absence of solid theoretical basis in terms of blocking behavior in social media context, we adopted a semi-structured interview as a research method in our study, which could provide deep insights on the blocking behavior between generations on WeChat platform. The semi-structured interview method is widely used in qualitative research as an explorative approach.

3.2   Procedure and Participants

Previous studies found that more and more Chinese parents aged 50 and above were willing to use social media to interact with young adults, while young adults chose to block their sharing to their parents [8]. Therefore, in order to understand the blocking behavior between young and old generations, our study selected young adults aged 20 to 30 who used WeChat for at least 3 years. We recruited 13 participants in February 2018. All of the participants were familiar with the various blocking functions provided by WeChat. The interview duration was 40 to 60 min, focusing on the interview questions listed in Sect. 3.3. Participants were allowed to talk freely with every questions and interviewee could ask relevant questions on the result of their responses. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Each participants could receive a present valued 30 RMB after interview. The demographic information of participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of participants' demographic information.

No.	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation	Experience of using WeChat (Years)
1	24	Female	Master	Student	5
2	25	Female	Master	Student	4
3	23	Female	Master	Student	6
4	24	Female	Master	Student	5
5	25	Female	Bachelor	Employer	4
6	22	Female	Bachelor	Student	3
7	23	Male	Bachelor	Employer	4
8	24	Male	Master	Student	5
9	25	Male	Master	Student	5
10	25	Female	Bachelor	Employer	6
11	22	Female	Bachelor	Employer	4
12	29	Male	Doctor	Student	7
13	25	Female	Master	Student	5

3.3   Interview Questions

In the qualitative interview research, researchers need to extract the intricate details of phenomena such as feelings, thoughts, and emotions [19]. Our study explored how young adults thought about, felt, and experienced when they selected to block their WeChat Moments from someone else. The interview questions included the moments they chose to block, the reason for blocking and the most impressive experience about blocking behavior. The relevant questions are as follows:

(1) What kinds of WeChat Moments would you most likely choose to block? (*What kind of moments you would like to block from your parents? What kind of your parents' moments you would like to block from yourself?*)
(2) What are the main reasons for you to use blocking functions? (*Like blocking your own moments from parents/blocking parents' moments from yourself/setting up groups for your parents/displaying moments only shared within 3 days/6 months?*)
(3) Please tell me the most impressive experience that you block your moments from your parents. (*What is the moment's content? Why do you choose to block it from your parents? Did your parents know that you had blocked your moments from them? How do you feel about that?*)

4   Results

4.1   Moments Blocked by Young Adults

The interviews showed that all of the participants had blocking experiences and the blocked moments could be divided into three aspects: moments blocked by young adults from their parents, moments shared by parents' that they choose to block from themselves and moments displayed only for parents.

Moments Blocked by Young Adults from Their Parents
Firstly, almost all of the participants reported that they would like to keep their privacy from their parents, especially the moments about the love affairs. Some participants said that they wanted to record and share their affection publicly on WeChat Moment, but they were unwilling to talk about their boyfriend/girlfriend with parents. So they chose to block moments from their parents.

When I was in love, I'd like to share something on my WeChat Moment. But I don't want my parents to know, because this is a relationship only between me and my boyfriend. And I don't want our parents to interfere us. You know, they certainly would ask many things about my boyfriend if they know that I am in love. So I choose to block my parents.

I don't want my parents to know that I'm in love because I think this relationship has not been determined yet, and there is no need to let my parents know.

It was understandable that young adults would not like to show their privacy to their parents. However, some participants reported a kind of moment that they shared with their parents at the beginning. And they found that their parents always

misunderstood the meanings. It was really difficult to explain to them because of the generation gap. Hence, they chose to block these moments from parents afterwards.

When I travel or dating with my friends, I always like to post some beautiful photos on my WeChat moments. But if I posted these moments, my parents would mistakenly believe that I have taken too much time on the entertainment, leading to less time spent on studying or working. Then my parents would take long-winded communication to persuade me to study or work hard. That annoys me too much.

There are many things that we have different views, especially in some sensitive topics. I cannot understand my parents and my parents always think that I was too naive. These debates make me too tired, so I choose to block this kind of moments from them to avoid conflict.

I will use Internet buzzwords when I post some moments, which my parents can't understand. Then they will ask me about these Internet buzzwords, and the key point is that it's really hard to let them understand the buzzwords clearly. So, I choose to block them.

The last kind of moments that blocked by young adults is the moments that could lead to worry from their parents or make their parents unhappy. Some participants reported that they would block moments about unhealthy lifestyle (staying up, drinking excessively, staying outside late, etc.) from their parents. Besides, a few participants explained that moments that their grumble about parents would be blocked from their parents.

I will block the moments shared in midnight from my parents, you know, they will be worried because they believe that staying up late is unhealthy.

I must come back home before 10 pm before I go to college. Because my parents believe that it is not safe for a girl to come home too late. But after I attend college, sometimes I need to stay outside late because of the campus activities. So I blocked these activities from my parents.

Once my parents bought me a pink earmuff which is really unsuitable for me, so I shared a moment to ridicule them. But I knew that they would be unhappy if they browsed this moment, so I blocked them.

Moments Shared by Parents That They Choose to Block from Themselves

Some participants reported that they chose to block their parents' moments from themselves sometimes. They admitted that they have different content preferences and attitudes with their parents because of the generation gap. The moments shared by parents which were blocked most frequently by young adults were as follows: (1) moments consist of didactic articles, (2) articles with exaggerated title like 'no share no Chinese', (3) articles about health rumors, and (4) articles named 'you will get good luck if you share this article' or 'you will get misfortune if you don't share this article'.

My parents always share health rumors on their moments, like 'it has been sci-entifically prove that eating genetically modified food could cause cancer' or 'doctors of traditional Chinese medicine said that people must go to bed before 11 pm'. I think it is obvious that these articles have no scientific proof. So I choose to block these moments from myself.

The moments that I cannot stand mostly are the articles with exaggerated title like 'no share no Chinese'. In my opinion, these articles force audiences to repost them by

abusing people's patriotism. But my parents always repost these kind of articles and my relatives will repost it too. I think that I have no choice but to block them from myself.

Moments Displayed Only for Parents

A few participants mentioned that they had shared moments that displayed only for their parents. Although there are some privacy young adults would not like to share with parents, there still some privacy that they could not share with friends or strangers but parents. Interestingly, one participants said that the moments displayed only for parents were hints which could only be understood by themselves.

When I have a hard time, the moments shared in my moments are really dark, which I don't want to display to others. But I don't mind displaying these to my parents, and my parents would always comfort me.

I always post the pictures about my family party, and these moments will be visible for my family only.

When I am short of money, I will choose to post a moment like 'I want to buy something' or 'I want to eat something', to hint my parents to give me some money.

In brief, we summarize the three types of moments that young adults may choose to block as illustrated in Fig. 1.
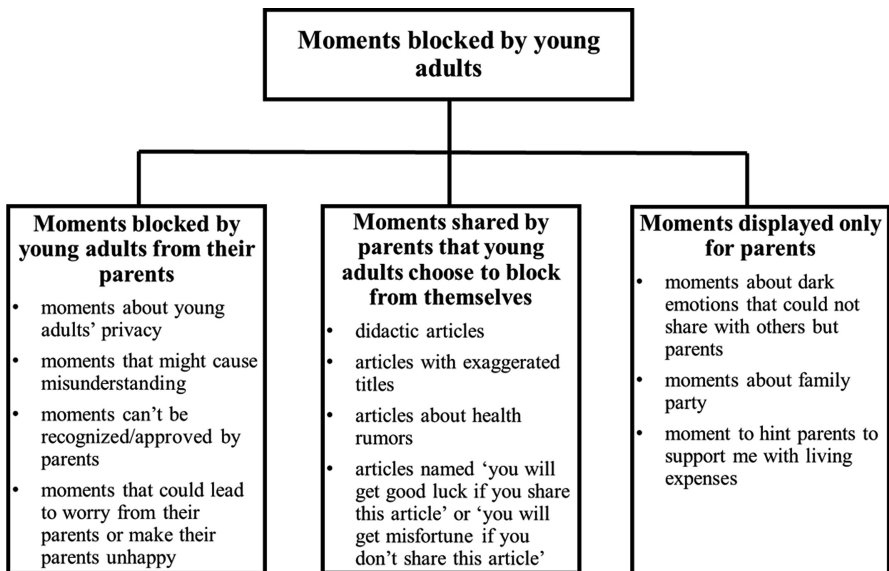

Fig. 1. Three types of moments that young adults choose to block

4.2 Factors that Impact Young Adults' Blocking Behavior

According to interviews, we summarized four factors that might lead to young adults' blocking behavior.

Psychological Factors

Independence
Many participants reported that they were more independent after going to college. On the one hand, they could be free from parents' control. On the other hand, they had to deal with many things without parents' help. Due to geographical distance and psychological independence, many young adults believe that they do not need to report the details of their lives to their parents.

My parents always don't believe in me but actually I could deal with many things by myself. So I begin to block them.

I will show the moments that are suitable for parents, and block moments that I don't want them to browse. And I think that what I have done is common.

Privacy Protection
As mentioned in Sect. 4.1, the moments that most participants chose to block from their parents was about their privacy. In such case, the reason of their blocking behavior is to protect their privacy. In the interviews, we found that some parents treated young adults' privacy as materials for chatting, which cannot be stood by young adults.

When I fall in love, the moments about my love relationship must be blocked from my parents, especially my mom. Because I am sure that my mom would talk about my private affairs with others, which is really uncomfortable for me.

Cognitive Factors

Avoid Conflicts and Unnecessary Troubles
Some participants reported that they and their parents have many different opinions because of the generation gap. As mentioned in Sect. 4.1, sometimes parents would mistakenly believe that children neglect their studies if they post moments about entertainment. Besides, it may also cause unnecessary troubles if young adults post Internet buzzwords on their moments which are different to explain to parents clearly. As a result, young adults choose to block their moments from parents to avoid conflicts and unnecessary troubles.

My parents keep nagging me about studying harder after I post my traveling or shopping experiences on WeChat moments. I have explained for many times but our discussion always end up with a quarrel.

There is an Internet buzzword called 'being drunk', when I post 'I am drunk' in my moments, it describes that I lose the interest to scold or complain anything. But my parents didn't think so, they would believe that I had drunk too much. And it's difficult to explain these Internet buzzwords to my parents.

Peer Pressure
We also found that peer pressure was one of the reasons for young adults' blocking behavior. Young adults are often keep a same tune with their friends [20]. A few participants mentioned that they began to using blocking functions because their friends had also used it.

I hardly post moments in WeChat, so there is no necessary for me to block others. But I would like to try some blocking functions after my friends told me that they had experienced it.

Emotional Factors

Don't Want Parents to Worry

As mentioned above, participants reported that the moments revealing their unhealthy lifestyle and the moments about grumble were often blocked from parents. Because they would not like to let their parents worry or make them unhappy.

My parents believe that it is not safe for a girl to come home too late. So I blocked my moments posted when I stay outside too late.

Sometimes I would post moments to grumble at my parents. But I knew that they would be unhappy if they browsed this moment, so I blocked my moments from them.

Momentary Pique

According to our interviews, young adults' blocking behavior for momentary pique would not last long. Some participants mentioned that they would block their moments from parents after they have argument with parents, and would end this blocking behavior when they reconciled with their parents.

I always block my parents after I quarrel with them, but this situation will not stay unchanged so long, I mean, the blocking will end soon after I reconcile with my parents.

Maintain a Good Impression

A few participants mentioned that they wanted to maintain an obedient impression in parents' mind. Thus, they only displayed the 'right' moments to parents.

'I don't want my father to know that I was in love, because my father always thinks that I am his good little girl, and I want to keep this impression.' Another participant said that: *'I blocked my parents when I was in love because I don't want them to browse these nauseating moments.'*

Technology Affordance

Affordance is "what the environment offers the individual, either for good or ill. It means the complementarity of individual and environment" [21]. In the interviews, some participants mentioned that they began to block others because they would like to try this new identified function on the WeChat. Other participants explained that they had deleted the skeletons from their past before the appearance of blocking functions. In this view, it is the technological factors that provided the feasibility for young adults to block others.

There is no necessary for me to block my moments to anyone, but I choose to display my moments only for 6 months. Because I would like to experience the functions that displaying moments only for 3 days/6 months. There are limited moments on my WeChat so I choose to display moments for 6 months.

In summary, we concluded psychological factors, cognitive factors, emotional factors and technology factors that impact young adults' blocking behavior, as shown in Fig. 2.
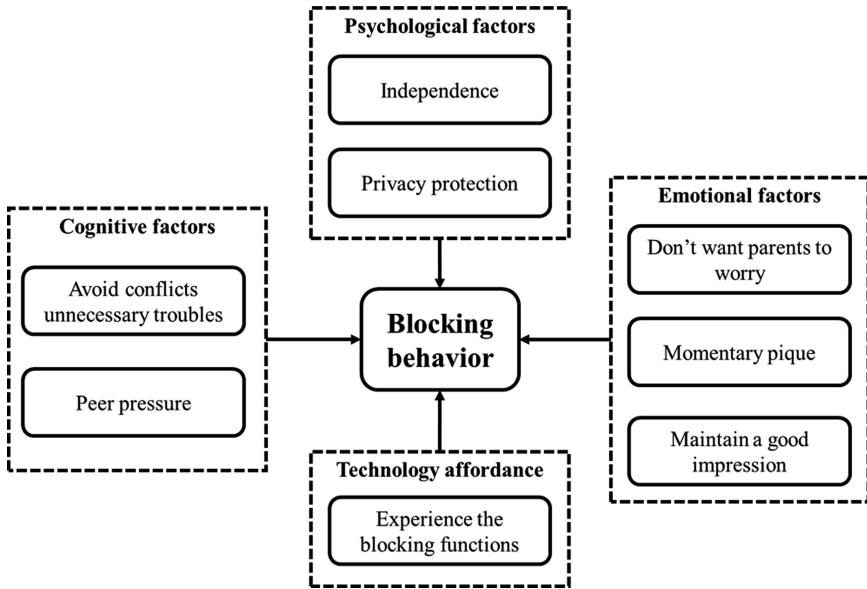
Fig. 2. Factors that impact young adults' blocking behavior.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The study explores the blocking behavior of young adults on WeChat Moments through semi-structured interviews. Our results suggest that most young adults claim that they have the blocking experience toward their parents on WeChat moments. The moments they blocked mostly from parents were about their privacy. Besides, the moments which might cause misunderstanding because of the generation gap were also blocked by young adults from their parents. In addition, there were moments shared by parents that were blocked by young adults from themselves, such as moments consist of didactic articles, moments with exaggerated title, moments about health rumors, etc. Interestingly, some young adults would post moments that were displayed only for parents, such as the privacy issue that could not be shared with others but only with their parents. We further explore the factors that impacted young adults' blocking behaviors. Four reasons are identified, namely psychological factors (independence, protect privacy), cognitive factors (avoiding conflicts and unnecessary troubles, peer pressure), emotional factors (don't want to worry parents, momentary pique, maintain a good impression), and technology affordance (experience the blocking functions provided by WeChat).

Our study has some implications for both theory and practice. Regarding theoretical contribution, this study is among the first to identify three kinds of moments blocked by young adults. Besides, we further explore the psychological, cognitive, emotional, and technology affordance factors which impact blocking behavior of young generation. For practice, there are some suggestions for improving intergenerational communication on social media. For example, Chinese parents should be aware of protecting

children's privacy, and young adults should actively communicate with their parents to reduce misunderstanding caused by the generation gap.

As an exploratory research, our study has several limitations which could be further improved. Firstly, because of the convenient sampling strategy, the sample size in our study is small that could not be general for all young adult groups. In the future research, it is necessary to conduct the empirical research with more participants. What's more, considering the blocking behavior mainly occurs in young generation, our study focuses on young adults and do not include old generation. The future study needs to recruit both young and old generation to further explore the intergenerational blocking behavior.

References

1. The 43rd China Statistical Report on Internet Development. http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201902/P020190228510533388308.pdf. Accessed 16 Feb 2019
2. Research report on user behavior on social application in China (2016). http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/sqbg/201712/P020180103485975797840.pdf. Accessed 16 Feb 2019
3. Simonpietri, S.: Social media: current trends among children and their parents and implications regarding interpersonal communication. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy (2011). http://hdl.handle.net/11299/109501
4. Cao, C., Guo, S., Zhao, Y.: Exploring the characteristics and reasons of WeChat moment usage. China Youth Study **04**, 69–73 (2015)
5. White paper of family affection on WeChat Moments. http://news.qq.com/cross/20180122/3O1P30kB.html. Accessed 2 Feb 2018
6. Turnbull, C.F.: Mom just facebooked me and dad knows how to text: the influences of computer-mediated communication on interpersonal communication and differences through generations. Elon J. Undergrad. Res. Commun. **1**(1), 5–16 (2010)
7. Tang, K., Tang, J.: Analysis of interpersonal interaction on WeChat moment—discussion on the rise and governance of micro-lifestyle. J. Jiangsu Adm. Inst. **01**, 79–87 (2016)
8. Li, W., Feng, R.: Analysis of the phenomenon of blocking WeChat moment from parents by Chinese undergraduates. Today's Massmedia **11**, 34–38 (2016)
9. Zhuang, J.: Parent-child relationship in the environment of new media. Master, Nanjing University, Jiangsu China (2015)
10. Goffman, E.: The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Anchor, New York (1959)
11. Walther, J.B.: Computer-mediated communication: impersonal, interpersonal, and hyper-personal interaction. Commun. Res. **23**, 3–43 (1996)
12. Vitak, J.: The impact of context collapse and privacy on social network site disclosures. J. Broadcast. Electron. Media **56**(4), 451–470 (2012)
13. Boyd, D.: Taken out of context: American teen sociality in networked publics. Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley (2008)
14. Stutzman, F., Capra, R., Thompson, J.: Factors mediating disclosure in social network sites. Comput. Hum. Behav. **27**, 590–598 (2011)
15. Hogan, B.: The presentation of self in the age of social media: distinguishing performances and exhibitions online. Bull. Sci. Technol. Soc. **30**, 377–386 (2010)
16. Gilbert, E., Karahalios, K.: Predicting tie strength with social media. In: Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, pp. 211–220. ACM (2009)

17. Zhao, S., Grasmuck, S., Martin, J.: Identity construction on Facebook: digital empowerment in anchored relationships. Comput. Hum. Behav. **24**, 1816–1836 (2008)
18. Binder, H., Howes, A., Sutcliffe, A.: The problem of conflicting social spheres: effects of network structure on experienced tension in social network sites. In: Proceedings of ACM CHI 2009, pp. 965–974. ACM, New York (2009)
19. Strauss, A., Corbin, J.: Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques, Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory. Sage, Thousand Oaks (1998)
20. Durkin, K.: Peer pressure. In: Manstead, A.S.R., Hewstone, M., Fiske, S.T., Hogg, M.A., Reis, H.T., Semin, G.R. (eds.) The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Psychology. Blackwell Reference/Blackwell, Cambridge (1995)
21. Gibson, J.J.: The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception, p. 127. Houghton Mifflin Harcourtm (HMH), Boston (1979)