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Shall I Call, Text, Post It Online or Just Tell It Face-to-Face? How and Why Flemish Adolescents Choose to Share Their Emotions On- or Offline

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Shall I Call, Text, Post It Online or Just Tell It Face-to-Face? How and Why Flemish Adolescents Choose to Share Their Emotions On- or Offline

Social sharing of emotions is a frequently used emotion regulation strategy. This study adds to the emotion regulation literature and the affordances of technologies perspective by providing a better understanding of with whom adolescents share emotions on- and offline, how they do this and why they use certain modes. In-depth interviews with 22 Flemish adolescents (aged 14-18) show that these youngsters share almost all experienced emotions, often with multiple recipients and using multiple communication modes. Although they mostly prefer sharing emotions face-to-face, they also share by texting, calling or posting something on Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, or Instagram. Our respondents generally make a more or less conscious decision about what and how to share. The valence, type, and intensity of the emotion, the affordances of the mode, social norms, and impression management concerns influence this decision.

Keywords: adolescent; emotion regulation; social sharing of emotion; affordances; face-to-face; mobile phone; social media; online

Word count: 8212

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Introduction

This paper looks at an often-used emotion regulation strategy: the social sharing of emotions (SSE), i.e. giving “a description of the emotional event in a socially-shared language by the person who experienced it to another” (Rimé, 2009, p. 65). In its full form, SSE entails telling someone what happened and about one’s emotional reactions (Rimé, 2009). Partial SSE entails sharing only one of these elements (Rodríguez Hidalgo, Tan, & Verlegh, 2015). The effectiveness of an emotion regulation strategy depends on the specific context (Gross & Thompson, 2007), such as the type of emotion, the way it is expressed, the sharing recipient(s) and the received feedback in case of SSE. In some situations, it might be useful to tell someone (such as one’s partner) about feelings of anger, in other situations it might be wiser to keep feelings to oneself to avoid negative consequences, such as receiving negative feedback.

This study focusses specifically on SSE by adolescents, because adolescence differs from other life stages and can be a very stressful period. Adolescents must deal with physical, social, cognitive, and emotional changes (Wilson & Wilson, 2014) and experience more negative life events in the domains of family, friends, and school than children do (Larson & Ham, 1993, as cited in Goossens, 2006). On average, adolescents report experiencing less extreme positive emotions and more mildly negative emotions than children (Larson, Moneta, Richards, & Wilson, 2002). Regulating these emotions successfully is important, as adolescents who have difficulties with this, have higher risks of internalizing problems (e.g., depression) and behavioral problems (Silk, Steinberg, & Morris, 2003). In addition, adolescents are very conscious of what others think about them (Wilson & Wilson, 2014), yet still lack full cognitive control (Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008) and fully developed social skills (Ishii, 2006), which might make them act more impulsively.

Secondly, the study focusses on both online and offline SSE, as today's adolescents can share not only face-to-face (FTF) and by phone, but also via other communication technologies they use frequently, such as texts and social media (Van Waeg, Van Hoecke, Demeulenaere, & D'hanens, 2014). The latter offer other possibilities regarding choice of recipient and message type. This enhances adolescents' opportunities for emotion regulation, but it might also increase the risk of negative consequences. As some modes provide less contextual cues, the receivers might for instance more easily misunderstand emotion sharing messages. According to Choi and Toma (2014), who looked at the short-term effects of students' SSE, sharing emotions FTF might be more successful than sharing them by phone or online. They found FTF communication had the largest positive effect on affect when sharing positive emotions and the weakest negative effect on affect when sharing negative emotions. Hence, some sharing modes might be more successful for SSE than other modes, and might thus be better for adolescents' wellbeing.

To date, there is little insight in adolescents' emotion sharing via online channels. Previous studies on online SSE (e.g., Bazarova, Choi, Sosik, Cosley, & Whitlock, 2015; Choi & Toma, 2014; Rodríguez Hidalgo et al., 2015) often study student/adult samples. Research that focusses specifically on adolescents, is often more generally interested in their ICT use, of which emotional talk can be a part (e.g., boyd, 2014; Davis, 2012; Mazur & Kozarian, 2010). These studies mostly look at only one (type of) platform, even though youngsters have access to different communication modes with different affordances, which might make them less or more suitable for emotion sharing. Little is known about what adolescents experience as the benefits and drawbacks of these modes and why they use certain modes in specific situations, even if it might not seem the most optimal choice. Hence, in this study we are interested in adolescents' perspectives and to learn which communication modes they use to share specific emotions and especially why they share in that way.

The Appeal of Social Sharing Emotions

Sharing emotions is a human need, especially when these emotions are intense (Derks, Fisher, & Bos, 2008). A review study (Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Philippot, 1998) found that about nine out of ten positive and negative emotional experiences are shared, often multiple times and with multiple people, and about 60% on the day of the event (Rimé, 2009). Sharing stimulates bonding and strengthens social ties. In addition, people re-experience an event and the accompanying emotions when sharing them. When these are positive, the person sharing can savor and capitalize on these emotions (Rimé, 2009). Other important reasons to share positive emotions include informing and/or warning (such as “inform him/her about what occurred”), receiving attention/empathy, venting (formulated as “letting off steam”, “externalizing emotions”, ...) (Duprez, Christophe, Rimé, Congard, & Antoine, 2015), and impression management, as sharing positive emotions can create a positive image (Bazarova, Taft, Choi, & Cosley, 2013; Leary, 1995). Important motives for sharing negative emotions include venting, bonding, informing and/or warning others, and seeking assistance, support, comfort; advice and solutions; clarification and meaning (Duprez et al., 2015). Depending on the feedback (socio-affective and/or stimulating cognitive processing) the recipient gives, sharing might lead to contemporary relief or even to long-term emotional recovery (Rimé, 2009).

How Affordances Influence Communication Choices

Adolescents share their emotional experiences most often with family (mostly parents) and friends (Rimé, 2009). Adolescents’ choices for a certain offline or online mode for SSE will partly depend on the mode’s affordances. The affordances perspective takes the middle ground between the technological deterministic perspective and social constructivism (Baym, 2010; Hutchby, 2001a, 2001b; Schrock, 2015). “The affordances of a digital medium refer to

the subjective perceptions of the digital object's utility that arise out of its objective qualities" (Vanden Abeele, Schouten, & Antheunis, 2016, p. 2). According to this perspective all communication technologies have their own functional characteristics, which enable and constrain the possibilities of use (Hutchby, 2001a, 2014; Treem et al., 2016). However, these functional properties can be perceived, valued and used variously by different users (amongst others due to different psychological predispositions, intentions and earlier experiences) and in different (social) contexts (boyd, 2014; Hutchby, 2001a, 2001b, 2014; Schrock, 2015; Treem et al., 2016; Van Cleemput, 2012; Vanden Abeele et al., 2016). For example, adolescents that score higher regarding the personality characteristics private self-consciousness, public self-consciousness and social anxiety, value the higher level of controllability and lower level of non-verbal cues in Instant Messaging as more relevant (Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007).

Van Cleemput (2012) argues that there are three dimensions on which the affordances of communication technologies can differ, that are relevant for social relationship maintenance by adolescents, and thus probably also for emotion sharing. Unlike affordances specific to social media (e.g., boyd, 2011; Treem & Leonardi, 2012) these dimensions can be applied to a wide range of communication modes.

The first dimension is "*time and place controllability*" (Van Cleemput, 2012). Not all modes make sharing anytime and/or anywhere one wants possible to the same extent. To share FTF, one needs to be in the same room at the same time. Communication technologies enable communication when physically separated. One can for example text whenever and where-ever one wants, as long one has mobile network and/or internet access (e.g., anytime-anyplace connectivity affordance of mobile phones (Mascheroni & Vincent, 2016; Vanden Abeele et al., 2016).

The second dimension is “*message controllability*” (Van Cleemput, 2012). The timing (synchronicity versus asynchronicity) of the message and the number of (audio-, visual -, and contextual) cues that accompany it differ between modes. Synchronicity (e.g., while calling) enables receiving direct feedback. However, it is therefore also more intrusive, and might thus be seen as an appropriate sharing mode only for more intense emotions (Choi & Toma, 2014). Asynchronicity (such as with texts) can delay the feedback, but affords a higher level of controllability: people have time to reread and edit their message, which can make them feel more at ease (Schouten et al., 2007; Vanden Abeele et al., 2016; Walther, 1996). Some modes are richer in audio-, visual -, and contextual cues than others (Choi & Toma, 2014; Van Cleemput, 2012). A text is mostly text-based, whereas FTF feedback can also be a hug. Some people see richness in cues as an advantage; the risk of miscommunication is smaller, one can see how others react (Derks et al., 2008) and bodily contact is possible (when talking FTF). Others might see it as a disadvantage, because impression management is more difficult in environments rich in cues.

The last dimension is “*audience controllability*” (Van Cleemput, 2012). Modes differ in what type of audience can be reached. Texting or calling via a mobile phone affords the sharer a private, intimate, conversation (e.g., private connectivity affordance of mobile phones; Vanden Abeele et al., 2016), without eavesdroppers. This might be preferable when sharing intense, negative emotions. Conversely, Twitter can have a big audience that might generate lots of feedback, which is a surplus when sharing positive experiences that makes one look good. On (most) social media, the person sharing also needs to remember that these messages are persistent, replicable, scalable and searchable (boyd, 2011). Which mode one chooses also depends on the tie strength between sharer and recipient. Studies showed for example that Snapchat (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2016), texting and calling (Agosto, Abbas, & Naughton, 2012; Bertel & Ling, 2016) were

used more with strong ties (e.g., (close) friends) than with weak ties (e.g., acquaintances), which is not true for Facebook (Bertel & Ling, 2016). According to Media Multiplexity theory (Haythornthwaite, 2005), people with strong ties also use a more diverse array of modes to communicate with each other than weak-tied people (Haythornthwaite, 2005; Van Cleemput, 2010).

Thus, it depends not only on the characteristics of a mode if someone perceives a certain communication mode as suitable for SSE. Individual factors, such as personality characteristics and earlier experiences, the emotion at hand, social norms and other context factors at hand influence this perception.

This Study

Little is known about how adolescents experience affordances in case of SSE, what they perceive as the benefits and drawbacks of different communication modes and what other factors influence why they use a certain mode in a specific SSE situation. Therefore, this study aims to get a better understanding of adolescents' SSE, guided by three research questions:

- (1) With whom do adolescents share their emotions?
- (2) Which offline and online communication modes do adolescents use to share their emotions?
- (3) What factors influence adolescents' decisions to share their emotions via a certain offline or online communication mode?

The choice for a specific mode is not made in a vacuum, since people use multiple modes which might have their own affordances and uses, but might also influence each other and can be used in combination. Therefore, we focus on a variety of modes: FTF communication,

calling (by phone, Skype, ...), SMS/WhatsApp, Snapchat, e-mail, chat, blogs, social network sites, micro-blogging sites, photo-sharing sites, and video-sharing sites.

Method

To obtain a good understanding of the SSE process by adolescents, we conducted in-depth interviews, as these allow investigating adolescents' motivations for SSE via certain communication modes. The Ethics Committee for the Social and Human Sciences of the University of Antwerp approved the study.

Sample and Procedures

To reach a variety of youngsters, we searched for respondents by handing out flyers at schools, youth organizations, and the shopping street, and by placing a call on Facebook and on the study's webpage. We interviewed a sample of 22 Flemish adolescents, that was diverse regarding sex (59.1% females), age (14 to 18), and type of education (general:12, technical:3, arts:4, vocational:3). All respondents were secondary school students, although one did not attend classes. We obtained consent from all respondents and their parent(s). The first author conducted FTF in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45-75 minutes at a place chosen by the respondent: the university, the respondents' home or school. All respondents received a ten-euro gift voucher.

Interview Protocol

The interview consisted of two parts. After an introduction and the completion of a drop-off questionnaire on background characteristics, we explained to the respondents the SSE trajectory after an event, using a visual aid. Each "step" was illustrated: a list and pictures of life domains in which the event could happen, a list of possible positive and negative emotions, a list of potential sharing partners, and a list and pictures of sharing modes. We

first asked the respondents to describe an event they had experienced in the last months in one of the illustrated life domains: interests & hobbies, school, friendship, family, love, looks (appearance), health, financial matters, and other. These domains were inspired by “the inventory of communication patterns of adolescents” from West and Altmann (1987). Next, they had to tell which positive and/or negative emotions they experienced and whether they had shared these with someone. If so, they were invited to tell us with whom and via which communication mode. We probed our respondents to motivate each aspect of their sharing behavior. This first part took approximately half an hour, during which most respondents talked about four to five (eight respondents each) events. Three respondents talked about six events, and also three respondents talked about only two or three events, but more elaborately. Because our aspiration was to learn about a wide range of emotions, and some respondents had difficulties with spontaneously remembering events, we helped them when necessary by asking to tell us about positive or negative events that happened to them lately, for example, that made them proud or ashamed. During this first part, the visual aid helped them reconstruct the social sharing process. Letting them decide what to talk about, taught us what happens in their lives and how they deal with it.

During the second part, we presented the names and icons/logos of the various communication modes. For the ones our respondents used, we asked how they feel when using this mode. To this end, we used the Self-Assessment Manikin, a visual scale that measures three dimensions of emotion: pleasure, arousal and dominance (Bradley & Lang, 1994), as a trigger. We asked our respondents to think and talk about each dimension. This gave us a more detailed and structured understanding than if we just asked the question “How do you feel when using mode X?”. Next, we focused on SSE via these modes: do our respondents share emotions via these modes? What do they share and what not? How do they share? Why do they use the mode or not? Etcetera.

Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcribers received a transcription protocol to increase consistency (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis in NVivo (QSR international — version 10.0). The first author created a codebook combining etic and emic codes (Mortelmans, 2007). First, she created a list of codes based on the literature and interview topics. She created for example the code “affordance”, which consisted of sub-codes such as “physical cues – be able to touch each other”, “visual cues – to be able to see each other” and “synchronicity”. After completing the list of deductive codes, she read the first half of the interviews in detail and inductively created additional codes. She noticed for example that the respondents also talked about the financial costs of a certain mode and how this influenced their choice. She then inductively added codes such as “costs money”. This hierarchical codebook was then used to code all interviews, by coding each sentence or paragraph(s) on one or more codes. During the coding process, she added codes when needed. To increase consistency, only one researcher coded all texts. If there was a time gap between coding two interviews, the coder first reread the codebook and a coded interview.

After coding all the transcripts, she re-evaluated the codes, merged them when needed, and then analyzed the relevant codes in detail, looking for recurring patterns and differences within and between them. The importance of themes was based on their repetition within and across interviews (Guest et al., 2012). Coding matrices helped in this analyzing process. She also regularly went back to the transcripts to make sure the bigger context in which it was said, was understood correctly. To increase validity, her interpretations were supported with quotes (Guest et al., 2012). The results were then presented to the co-authors, who critically assessed them and asked for clarifications when results were unclear or

surprising. Because interviews and analysis took place in Dutch, the quotes in this article are translations.

Results

Daily Hassles, Uplifts and Bigger Life Events

Our respondents talked about a variety of positive and negative emotional events. They talked most often about events related to school, family, friendship, and interests and hobbies. They mentioned daily hassles (such as receiving a bad test result) and uplifts (such as winning a sporting contest), but also bigger life events (such as losing a parent or being bullied).

Our respondents had shared almost all events they told us about with at least one other person, but often more. When sharing, they often said what happened but did not always explain how they felt, assuming that others would know their feelings. They felt they did not have to make it explicit as it was obvious or, in the case of positive emotions, because it could come across as boasting:

A: Because I had said [to my friends] like “yeah, he thought it was a beautiful poem and that was kind of cool.” (...)

Q: And you said: “that was cool.” Did you also say you were proud?

A: No, I did not say that because then it looks like, as if I think that I can write the best poems or something (laughing). (Respondent 19, female, 17)

Recipients of Emotion Sharing

Our respondents most often mentioned their (best) friends as recipients. They found them trustworthy and had the feeling their friends understood them and could help them. There was often also reciprocity (“We tell each other everything”). The second most important recipients were family members, such as parents (mothers more than fathers), siblings and cousins. Although some respondents told their parents everything, others shared only the

more important and/or necessary things (such as exam results that parents must sign). These respondents had the feeling their parents understood them less well, because so much had changed since they were young, and found some topics embarrassing to talk about (such as their love life). Also, talking about certain events could possibly have negative consequences for them, such as having to work harder on a school subject or having to hear “funny” comments about their love life. Thirteen respondents also mentioned their teachers, of which four also talked about events that happened outside the school context. One girl even said she called and texted her teacher when she felt bad. Five respondents also talked about positive and/or negative emotions to strangers, mostly on Twitter, Tumblr or via a professional helpline. Only one girl received professional help from a therapist.

Modes of Sharing

All respondents used multiple modes to communicate with others. Next to talking FTF, they all texted and apart from one, all used Facebook, mostly to watch others’ messages and for messaging. In addition, 13 respondents used Snapchat, 12 Twitter, 6 Tumblr, 6 Instagram and 6 9gag.

Looking at emotion sharing via these modes, we see that, in general, all respondents preferred FTF communication. After FTF, they most often preferred sending a text (such as SMS, WhatsApp, Facebook Message) or calling. Ten respondents also tweeted about their emotions, making Twitter more popular than posting a status on Facebook (6), a photo-sharing site (8), and sending a Snapchat (5). Our respondents often found it difficult to explain why they used a certain mode, even if the sharing was not impulsive. This study describes several factors that influenced their choices.

Message controllability

First, we see that the affordances dimension “message controllability” is an important factor

for our respondents. Our respondents really liked the rich non-verbal cues in FTF communication and found them important for sharing such personal things as their emotions.

I say... personal things I always say FTF. Because that is important to have interaction with someone and via Facebook or so, yeah you don't know what he is doing and is he there for 100%? And in reality you can read each other's feelings in each other's eyes and you can, yes, you can better attune to each other. (Respondent 19, female, 17)

Although they thought sharing emotions FTF was not always the easiest way, especially when sharing negative emotions, they thought it was the best way: "For example, when you have done something wrong and you have to confess it, then you'd rather share it in another way, but it is still better that you tell it honestly, FTF instead of more sneakily via a site." (Respondent 8, male, 15) They felt they could express their emotions more clearly FTF, as the recipient could see their body language and hear the intonation. They could also give more details. All this reduced the likelihood of misinterpretation and when it happened, it was easy to remedy:

It is quite nice to text, but I always have kind of the feeling when I text that the message does not come through completely. If I would talk FTF, because if you talk FTF you also see like ... yeah you can also see their facial expressions. And yeah, the person can see my facial expressions. Maybe the... and perhaps can hear directly the sound of my voice and directly what I feel ... against when I something yeah... Um... Um... If I say something, that he would interpret it as sarcastic or something although it actually is dead serious or something. (Respondent 2, male, 16)

Furthermore, they found the feedback and support of a higher quality: they got someone's undivided attention, they could see and hear how the other reacted and if he or she was sincere, and bodily contact was possible when desired.

Um... I think something like that is more important that you have social contact

instead of sending a text. Then you also see the emotions etcetera of the other person. And I think that offers you more support than a message that you then receive. (Respondent 8, male, 15)

Although texting is lean in cues, our respondents also often chose to text (for example when talking FTF was not possible), because it was for most respondents the standard mode of mediated communication: it was the thing they used most often, it was inexpensive or free, they found it “easy”, and texting was something almost all recipients did: “Um... Why... I find it easier. Yes, I think it is just easy because she was not around and I find SMS most easy to use.” (Respondent 20, female, 16)

Although calling is richer in cues, quite a few (9) respondents felt less confident doing so, especially non-video calling. They felt less in control: they were afraid of unwanted silences, and had the feeling someone could just “hang up on them”: “Yeah I just find it scary when there are unwanted silences. Then you don’t know what to say. And if you then call with friends you ramble a bit. Yeah so strange.” (Respondent 21, female, 18) However, others did prefer calling above texting, especially when emotions were more intense, because it was synchronous and, although you could not always see each other, you could hear someone’s voice. They saw it as “the next best thing” after talking FTF:

When I want a reaction immediately. Sometimes I also wish to hear others’ reactions. Yeah, when I experienced something that is super cool, I want to hear them say “Wow, that is super cool” and if they just say “uh -huh” or if they type “super cool”, I also know how they really think about it. And I think that helps. (Respondent 16, male, 14)

There is also a reduced risk of misuse of information, because you can easily copy a text message and send it to others.

I do that sometimes if it is in the middle of the night and then it is sometimes a conversation with personal things and then I dare to ask sometimes like “Do you want to delete this conversation?” ... because I find that... so... not so nice. If your words stay

on someone's phone... It would be weird if all the words we speak in a day, if you can hear them again a year later. (Respondent 13, male, 15)

However, calling (unless using free services such as Skype or Facetime) is more expensive than texting, which influences the decision to text or call as well. When we asked respondent 1 (female, 16) why she does not call often though she really enjoys it, she explained:

“Because when I send an SMS or on SNS it is easier and also cheaper actually.” In certain situations (which differed per respondent; such as when they were sad or angry) our respondents preferred texting above talking FTF because they found it easier, liked to think about what and how to say it, and to be able to reread the messages of others on a later time to re-experience the feedback: “That's why I love chatting more, because you can take a moment to think.” (Respondent 9, male, 16) Some also chose calling, precisely because the other could not see them (e.g., when crying) and they could not see the other's reactions.

... because emotions are deep inside a person. And I personally feel that it is easier when you can hear each other but you cannot see each other. Because yes... I do not know why... but I feel like that. You cannot really, you also can misunderstand each other, but less than via texting. But you can hear each other and you do not see each other, so yeah, yeah... I think it is less eh... less confronting. So... I think it is easier. (Respondent 1, female, 16)

Thus, the leanness of cues of texting and calling can also be seen as an advantage.

When they wanted to vent their feelings in a subtler way, by posting a picture or quote, they used social media such as Snapchat, a Facebook status or Facebook group, Twitter, or a photo-sharing site to fulfill their needs:

When things happen in my life that really moved me, then I look it up on Google and sometimes I find beautiful texts and then I post those on Facebook with the intention of, not really to inspire other people but that they can pause over it and just to tell it to them but actually not telling. Do you understand? Because people think “ah that's just a

beautiful text” but actually for me it’s something very personal. (Respondent 19, female, 17)

Time and place controllability

Although often preferred, communicating FTF was not always possible, which shows that “time and place controllability” is also an important affordance. Instead of waiting until it was possible, our respondents often chose to call to talk about it or to send a text with the whole story or with just an abstract or teaser, so they could talk about it when they saw each other. This way, they had shared it already (immediate gratification), and knew the recipient would make time to talk (if wanted) when they would meet:

A: You can say like: “I do not feel well because this and this happened. But we will talk about it on Monday.” So yes, that is what I do then.

Q: But you prefer that they don’t go into the matter? That they [do that] on Monday?

A: Yes, preferably so, already telling it a bit. You already said it, it already takes the weight off your shoulders a bit, but still saying like... we will go more deeply into it on Monday because that is a bit easier. (Respondent 5, female, 17)

Audience controllability

The importance of audience controllability was seen in their need for privacy and the perceived dangers of sharing personal information. When asked why they did not share something publicly, our respondents often answered that they “do not want to bother the other with the news”, “that it is none of their business” or that it was “private”. They seemed aware that online not only their friends were watching, but also acquaintances and sometimes even strangers, and thus one had to be careful: “Yes... because everyone can read that then and I am also friends with people I don’t really like. And I don’t want them to know about how I feel and stuff like that.” (Respondent 15, female, 16) Strikingly, emotions were posted more on Twitter than in a public way on Facebook. Although Twitter is in most cases more

public than Facebook, for some respondents it felt more anonymous and for some it even was anonymous as they used fake account names.

When posting their emotions online or sending a Snapchat, especially when sharing negative or more private emotions, our respondents also thought there was a greater risk of misuse of their information. They were afraid people could copy their messages, and would then post it elsewhere or use it against them:

Q: And do you know why you would not do that via Snapchat?

A: Um... Pfff... it... it... You only type a certain text and that is holding me back a bit.

Yes. That text. And yes. I don't know why you would do that via Snapchat. If you feel bad, then they can always make a screenshot or something huh... And yeah.

Q: But they can also save a message

A: Yes that's true, but I think via Snapchat is something different.

Q: You are more concerned about your privacy with Snapchat than...

A: Than via SMS. Yes. (Respondent 20, female, 16)

Although this could also happen when texting, they seemed less concerned with this then. In addition, some respondents were aware that (future) employers could potentially see their posts, which could have negative consequences.

However, sometimes, mostly when experiencing something the respondents felt good about or are proud of, they wanted to share it with a whole bunch of people: all their family members and/or friends or even with acquaintances. In this case, they preferred Snapchat, a Facebook status or Facebook group, Twitter, or a photo-sharing site.

And then you get your results and I passed. And then I was just so happy, so I actually directly shared it. And I actually directly called the family and um... and then um... I posted it on Facebook so that friends and family I do not have contact with directly, so they can read it too. And then... yeah, directly got reactions like: "We all knew you could do it" and stuff like that. (Respondent 2, male, 16)

Social norms and impression management.

Because most respondents were concerned about their image and wanted to be liked by others, most of them would not do or post anything that could elicit negative feedback or damage their reputation. Subjective norms were important. They thought about their message before posting it: “Would it be cool to post that on Instagram? Would I like to see this?” (Respondent 5, female, 17). They sometimes even asked others’ advice before posting: “I regularly ask my youngster sister like: ‘Is this a photo for Facebook?’ No? Okay then I won’t post it.” (Respondent 21, female, 18) Of course, there were exceptions:

No, I don’t mind what other people think about that. But just, I just want to keep it for myself and my best friends, because I know they can help me with it. And if others of whom I don’t need to know what they think about it, if they think it is good or not, doesn’t really interest me really. (Respondent 17, male, 14)

These implicit social norms were mostly learned by observing others’ behaviors, reactions on these behaviors and by their own earlier experiences:

For example on Facebook, people that for example share a lot of statuses and stuff... they get a lot of commentary, so I don’t do that at all for example. But also just, simply when a person posts one status then it receives commentary so I post noth... almost never a status. So um... I um... How should I say it? I avoid that commentary. (Respondent 1, female,16)

Social norms differ between communication modes. Calling was by some respondents seen as quite intrusive; something you should only do for expressing more intense emotions:

If I call them, then I don’t think that they would appreciate that I call them to say like “Ahh I’m going to Brussels for the One Direction movie!” If I would be going to a concert, then I would do that, but for a movie, I thought “I won’t exaggerate.” (Respondent 5, female, 17)

Texts, however, could be used for all emotions, as it is a private way of communicating. On

Twitter both positive and negative emotions seemed to be accepted. However, Facebook statuses are for sharing positive emotions and Snapchat for sending “funny things”: “Yes, it is more for funny things and funny faces and stuff” (Respondent 16, male, 14). Most found photo-sharing sites inappropriate for sending negative emotions. These social norms influenced their behavior.

Discussion and Conclusion

SSE is an often-used emotion regulation strategy. To date, most research focused on adolescents’ offline SSE, although sharing online increases the opportunities but also the risks. By conducting in-depth interviews with adolescents, this study strengthens our knowledge on adolescents’ use of this emotion regulation strategy in this digital era, and on the affordances perspective regarding SSE.

SSE by Adolescents: Driven by Impulses or Rational Decision Making?

Consistent with earlier studies (Rimé et al., 1998); our respondents shared most of their emotions and often with multiple people. Our study adds to the literature that although our respondents mostly preferred sharing FTF, they also shared using communication technologies, such as texts, calls and tweets. Their sharing behavior does, however, not always match the description of full SSE (Rimé, 2009), as they sometimes only told what happened and not specifically how they felt or vice versa.

Communication technologies such as texts and social network posts make it easy to share messages impulsively and/or to non-intimates. However, we see that our respondents were not completely driven by their impulses. Although they sometimes shared out of habit or very impulsively, they were mostly rather aware of what they were doing. First, they did not share everything but sometimes opted to keep their emotions to themselves and used another emotion regulation strategy, such as looking for distraction or writing in their diary.

Second, they mostly shared with intimates. When they shared with a wider public or with strangers, they did it mostly anonymously or in a vague way so only those in the know would understand (cfr. social steganography; boyd, 2014). And third, they did not randomly choose a sharing mode. Multiple factors influenced their choice: the type, valence and intensity of the emotion, the affordances of the communication mode, social norms, and impression management concerns.

Face-to-Face or via Facebook?

By distinguishing these factors, this study enriches the affordances literature. Choi and Toma (2014) already looked at which affordances are relevant for SSE, but also mentioned that “the affordances framework may be refined by future research by considering additional factors that shape people’s decision about social sharing” (p. 538) such as who the sharer wants to reach (recipient) and the existence of social norms on public platforms.

First, we see that affordances influence what communication mode our respondents used. “Message controllability” (Van Cleemput, 2012) seems to be the most important affordances dimension for SSE amongst our respondents. According to Walther's (1996) hyperpersonal framework, people are better able to strategically and selectively present themselves when using computer-mediated-communication, because of asynchronicity and reduced visual, auditory and contextual cues. Our results show, however, that in case of SSE, our respondents often prefer modes richer in cues because they believe for example that the benefits of sharing FTF outperform the possible disadvantage of reduced impression management controllability. In addition, consistent with earlier studies such as Schouten et al. (2007), our respondents do not all perceive these attributes similarly. However, “time and place controllability” (Van Cleemput, 2012) determined whether our respondents could act upon their preferences. Although they preferred sharing FTF in many occasions, this was not

always possible. Which mode they then chose, also depended on what modes they themselves and their recipient(s) used. This depends on the connectivity and technological skills of both parties, but also on their individual choices, because different modes can serve the same need. However, “audience controllability” (Van Cleemput, 2012), also had a big influence, which we also see reflected in our respondents’ need for privacy and concerns for online dangers. Respondents who were more concerned about their privacy or online dangers preferred to SSE more privately, for instance FTF or by texting. We also need to keep in mind that different contexts (such as parents, peers, ...) are often intertwined on social media (i.e. context collapse; boyd, 2014). This supports earlier studies that found that adolescents are, contrary to what many people think, not less concerned about their privacy than others (for a literature review, see Marwick, Murgia-Diaz, & Palfrey, 2010).

Which specific affordances our respondents preferred, depended on the type (e.g., sharing something they were proud of to a bigger group), valence (positive versus negative; e.g., sharing only positive emotions on Facebook), and intensity of the emotion (e.g., calling only for the more intense emotions), but also on the respondent (for example, some insisted on sharing sadness FTF, but others did not want others to see them cry). Social norms also dictated their sharing behavior. Because most respondents were concerned with their image and wanted to be liked by others, impression management was common, and most of them would thus not do or post anything that could elicit negative feedback or that could damage their reputation. Thus, as Van Cleemput (2012) already noted, it also depends on the user and the social context how one perceives and acts upon these affordances.

This research showed how important it is to look at multiple modes. We found, for example, that although FTF was usually our respondents’ favorite mode for SSE, this was not always possible. In this situation, they saw texting and calling as the next best thing. They also initiated social sharing by texting, to facilitate sharing FTF in a later moment.

To summarize, we would like to propose the following research framework for offline and online SSE by adolescents. This framework shows that multiple factors influence which mode(s) one will use for socially sharing one's emotion with someone, but that these choices are also influenced by the characteristics and experiences of the sharer, the experienced emotion, and the context.

[FIGURE 1]

Implications

Although our respondents generally preferred to SSE FTF, they sometimes preferred other modes because of the limited cues, which made sharing easier for them, a result also found by Gardner & Davis (2014). Communication technologies also made it possible to take a bit of “distance” from it. Our study also showed that our respondents shared their emotions with friends and family, and sometimes also with strangers, such as on Twitter, Tumblr, or a professional helpline. This suggests that the “passing stranger effect” (Rubin, 1975) also exists online, just like Turkle (2012) found when studying confession websites.

Designers of online tools (such as youth workers or commercial companies), should keep this, together with the factors named above, in mind when designing tools that facilitate SSE or, more broadly, emotion regulation and support in a safe environment. In addition, parents and health care workers should lower the barriers for SSE by also making themselves available via communication technologies.

Limitations and Future Research

First, we explained the SSE process to our respondents using a visual aid. We also asked them to talk about both positive and negative events, as to see how this impacted their communication choices. Although our respondents talked freely and we obtained information about a wide variety of emotional experiences and communication modes, we need to be

aware that by using exemplary lists we might have probed respondents to think mostly about the events pictured.

Secondly, letting our respondents choose which emotional experiences they talked about, gave us insight in what adolescents must deal with and how they do this. However, the retrospective nature means that adolescents might have forgotten certain modes or recipients.

Although we talked about positive and negative sharing experiences, we could not fully look at the effects of sharing via these modes. Choi and Toma (2014) already looked at the short-term effects, but more research is needed. What are, for example, the short and long-term effects on sharers and recipients? And what are thus the “best” modes in certain circumstances or for certain persons?

A final limitation is that although we have obtained a diverse sample, the sample size is small. This is not unusual for qualitative research (Mortelmans, 2007), but we do need to be wary of making generalizations. In addition, our respondents live in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, and thus in a wealthy, Western-European country with an individualistic culture. This might affect the results, for example regarding possession of media devices and internet access, but also regarding some SSE patterns, such as the recipient or how factual the sharing is (Singh-Manoux & Finkenauer, 2001), as emotional display rules vary across cultures (Safdar et al., 2009). Future research should test the findings of this study on a bigger sample, using quantitative methods. We would also recommend including socio-demographic factors (such as age and gender), personality characteristics (such as extroversion) and the socio-cultural context.

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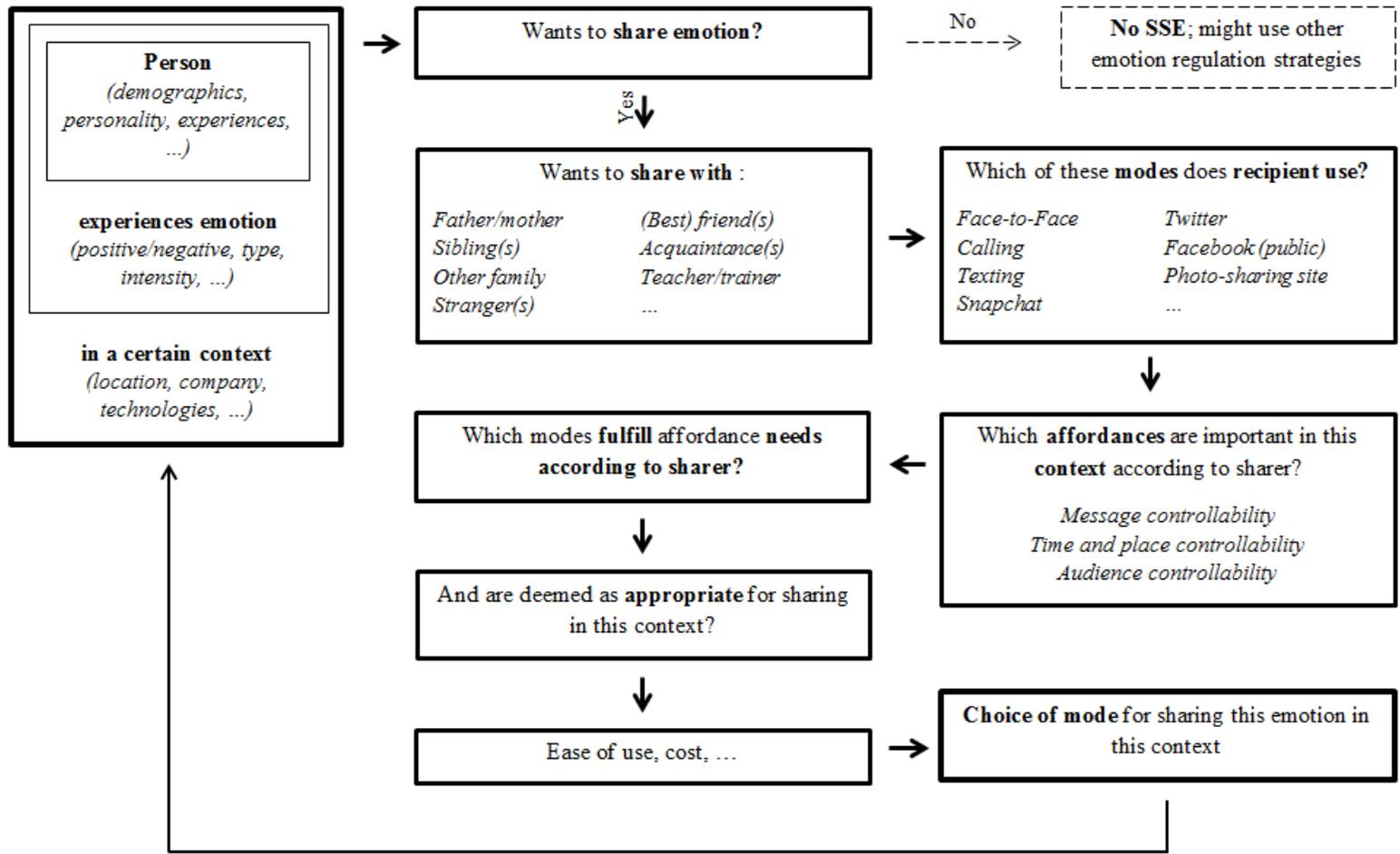


Figure 1. Research framework for the offline and online social sharing of emotions