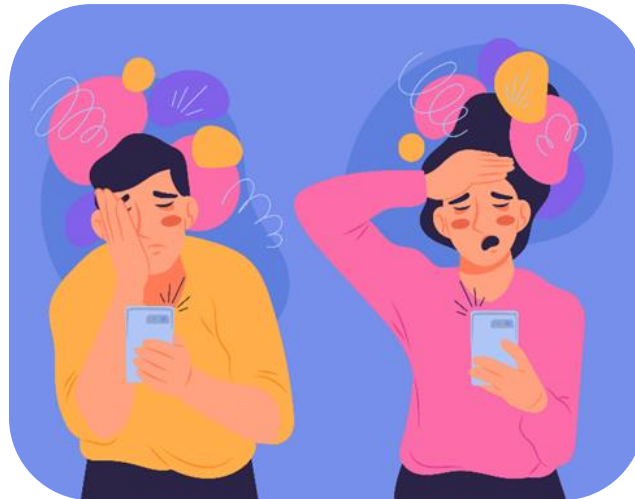




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SORROW AND SCREENS: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AND GENDER IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS AND ONLINE SELF-DISCLOSURE



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Disclaimer: This thesis has been written as a study assignment under the supervision of a Utrecht University teacher. Ethical permission has been granted for this thesis project by the ethics board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Utrecht University, and the thesis has been assessed by two university teachers. However, the thesis has not undergone a thorough peer-review process so conclusions and findings should be read as such.

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Abstract

This study attempts to answer the question whether emotional problems are predicting online self-disclosure, and whether there is a moderating role of social support (parents, teachers, and classmates) and gender in this relationship among Dutch youth. Previous studies found relationships between emotional problems (e.g. depressed moods, anxiety) and online self-disclosure. However, the role of offline support and gender has not been studied before, which is a scientific gap. To answer these questions, I used the 2017 data from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, which has a sample of Dutch youth ($N = 8980$) aged between 10 and 20 years old ($M = 13.62$, $SD = 1.92$). As expected, emotional problems predict a preference for online self-disclosure, and this relationship is moderated by teacher support and gender. Contradicting the hypotheses, parental support and classroom environment do not moderate the relationship between emotional problems and (preference for) online self-disclosure. Concludingly, Dutch youth experiencing emotional problems are more likely to talk about their experiences online. Receiving more support from teachers makes people experiencing emotional problems less likely to disclose themselves online, and girls with emotional problems are more likely to disclose themselves online compared to boys. Therefore, interventions for youth with emotional problems could focus on improving teacher-student relationships or online types of therapy. Furthermore, there should be more attention for interventions for girls.

Introduction

Since 2017, there has been an increase in the mental health problems of children and adolescents in the Netherlands (Boer et al., 2022). For example, in 2021, children and adolescents reported significantly more emotional problems, than the years before. The term emotional problems refers to internalizing problems and disorders, such as anxiety- and mood disorders (Stevens et al., 2018). In 2017, 10.9% of children in primary school and 18.7% of children in secondary school had a high level of emotional problems, whereas in 2021, these numbers are 23.4% for children in primary school and 28.2% for children in secondary school (Stevens et al., 2018; Boer et al., 2022).

These numbers show that emotional problems among adolescents are becoming more prevalent, but the study by Boer et al. (2022) does not provide an explanation nor is there a report about the consequences of this increase. Therefore, there is a need for more knowledge about adolescents experiencing emotional problems. Additionally, the question rises what the possible outcomes are of children and adolescents experiencing these problems, and what would be protective and/or risk factors of these outcomes.

Societal relevance

In adolescents, emotional problems have been associated with lower levels of well-being, and lower levels of, amongst other things, happiness and life-satisfaction (Luijten et al., 2021). Besides the obvious emotional costs for the adolescents, and the people around them, there are also material costs, for both the adolescents and their system, but also for society. Care costs for depression are high, as in 2019, the Dutch state spent over one billion dollars on depression care, including mental health care, medicine, and other resources (VZinfo, 2022a). A measurement from 2003 found that depression costs the Dutch state 660 million euros per year, of which, 20 million euros were spent on children and adolescents until 18 years old, and 16 million euros were spent on adolescents in the ages 15 until 18 (Nederlands

Jeugdinstituut, n.d., a). As the number of young people with depression or mood-related problems has increased since 2003, the costs will also be higher now than measured in 2003. Looking at anxiety- and related disorders, the total costs for the Dutch state were 647.6 million euros in 2019 (VZinfo, 2022b), however it is not specified how much is spent on youth. Again, since more young people experience anxiety or related symptoms, and these numbers are increasing, the costs for youth anxiety care will also be high and increasing. As more and more young people are facing emotional problems, and these problems are costly, it is relevant for society to look at the effects of these problems for youth, and what affects these.

Parallel to the increase of emotional problems, screen use is also very prevalent in the lives of young people. According to Nederlands Jeugdinstituut (the Netherlands Youth Institute; NJI), children aged 13 to 16 use screens for almost 6 hours per day, of which four hours are spent on, amongst other things, watching videos or gaming. Next to that, around 1.5 hours are spent on communicating via social media. The effects of screen use are both positive and negative, according to researchers and youth professionals (NJI, n.d., b). Both problematic gaming and problematic social media use, have been associated with lower life-satisfaction, lower school grades or negative learning outcomes, and low self-esteem (Van den Eijnden et al., 2018). Furthermore, social media can also be a place of social isolation, exclusion, and disconnection, and this is mainly experienced in adolescents (Allen et al., 2014).

On the other hand, adolescents' social media use can have positive aspects. A review presented that online social communication with peers or friends, which is possible at any location or time of day, can foster young people's sense of belonging, as well as social integration and bonding. In addition, the authors found that especially adolescents that are lonely and/or socially anxious may engage in online communication and benefit from online

communication. For those adolescents, social media can create opportunities to establish relationships and reduce loneliness, which, in turn, enhances their wellbeing (Allen et al., 2014). More examples of positive aspects mentioned by the NJI are language development, i.e., children practice with speaking English, and social-emotional development, i.e., children can experiment with their identity and present themselves to the outside world (NJI, n.d., b). These findings show that social media use and screen use are relevant topics in the lives of young people, and more elaborate research needs to be done.

Additionally, studies show a correlation between online social interaction and problems such as loneliness and social anxiety. Therefore, it would be relevant to investigate the relationship between the two, to improve the lives of those experiencing these kinds of problems. For instance, it would be significant to examine what can be done to prevent adolescent emotional problems or what interventions can be done for young people who experience emotional problems. These prevention and/or intervention plans could, in turn, focus on social media, as social media is a major component in the lives of adolescents.

Scientific relevance

Research by Mýlek et al. (2023) that focussed on the role social anxiety and depressed moods play on online social interaction found that both are related to online communication, both directly and indirectly through higher preference for online social interaction (POSI). In their study, POSI refers to the idea that online social interaction is safer and more comfortable than offline social interaction.

Looking specifically at social anxiety, Mýlek and colleagues (2023) found that social anxiety inhibits communication in general, but is associated with preferring online social interaction over offline social interaction. So, those who have higher preference of online social interaction because they think it is safer and more comfortable than offline social

contact, also have more online communication and online self-disclosure than those who do not think that way.

For depressed moods, a direct, positive association was found between depressed moods and online self-disclosure. It is suggested that adolescents who experience depressed moods use online communication to share their emotional experience, i.e., online self-disclosure, and likely use it to cope with their emotions. Adolescents with depressed moods also show higher levels of POSI, which also mediates the relationship between depressed moods and online communication (Mýlek et al., 2023).

Furthermore, another study found that adolescents who have more symptoms of depression and anxiety, who are more attention-seeking, and who have lower perceived support from family and friends, are more likely to share their experiences online. According to the researchers, online self-disclosure could be seen as a response to low levels of perceived social (offline) support, which makes that the researchers argue that online self-disclosure is used for receiving social support (Shabahang et al., 2023).

Based on the mentioned studies, there is a relationship between (social) anxiety and depression, which is likely linked to a lack of offline social support. However, the link between emotional problems in general and online self-disclosure is less studied, as well as the role of offline social support in this link. Thus, there is a gap in research for the relationship between emotional problems and online self-disclosure, as first of all, most research focusses on general social media use, instead of self-disclosure in online situations. Additionally, in previous research, there was no or little attention on the role of offline support on online self-disclosure. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the link between emotional problems and online self-disclosure and examine whether this relationship is moderated by parental/family support, relationship with teacher/teacher support, and

classroom environment. With this aim, this research tries to fill the gap, which makes this research scientifically relevant.

Thus, the research question this study is attempting to answer is: *“To what extent are emotional problems predicting online self-disclosure? And is this relationship moderated by parental support, teacher support/relationship with teacher¹, classroom environment, and gender?”*

Theoretical framework

Emotional problems

Emotional problems is a broad term, that describes problems such as depression and loneliness. Acar et al. (2022) define emotional problems in adolescence as “a set of internalizing symptoms such as rapid and unexpected changes in emotional outbursts and mood, which are also reflected in depressive symptoms aligned with emotional problems” (p. 6839). In research, it is often found that girls experience higher levels of emotional problems than boys (Acar et al., 2022; Boer et al., 2022). Additionally, emotional problems are an example of internalizing problems, which are problems that focus on the self, as opposed to externalizing problems, which occur while interacting with the (social) outside world. Thus, emotional problems are mostly experienced by the person themselves, and include symptoms such as not feeling happy, feeling anxious, feeling nervous, experiencing headaches and/or stomach-aches, and being worried. Notably, emotional problems are not only dependent on challenges and stressors adolescents experience, but also on the subjective evaluations of the situations the adolescents can make (Røsand & Johansen, 2024).

¹ Note, in this thesis I use relationship with teacher and teacher support to refer to the supportive or unsupportive relationship with teachers

Social media use and online self-disclosure

Young people often use social media platforms to communicate with others. This communication includes friends and family, but also people adolescents do not know face to face (Mýlek et al., 2023). According to previous research, emotional problems and social media use/internet use are related. For example, a review by McCrae and colleagues found that adolescent depression or depressive symptoms are related to social media use. Possible explanations could be that online relationships are easier to access and to maintain when feeling depressed (2017) or that adolescents use social media to regulate their low moods. It was also found that adolescents who are anxious are more likely to use social media, which is similar to the fact that people who have higher levels of neuroticism, a personality trait to experience more negative emotions (Widiger & Oltmanns, 2017), prefer online social interaction (Woods & Scott, 2016). In the case of social anxiety, online communication is often perceived as “more controllable, reciprocal, and deep, with reduced risks of negative evaluation online, as compared with that in face-to-face settings” (Scott et al., 2023, p. 356). More generally, the online world has been associated with factors such as “anonymity, invisibility, conversation or message control, editability, and accessibility” (Scott et al., 2023, p. 355). Perceiving the Internet as a safe space that can be controlled and has few (negative) consequences for behaviour may boost feelings of control and comfort over presenting or disclosing oneself online (Scott et al., 2023).

Online self-disclosure refers to sharing personal information, that is generally unknown and unavailable for others, online, rather than face-to-face and in offline contexts. It is different from offline self-disclosure, because when posting on social media platforms, it is not always known who will see the information (Mohamed Ahmed, 2015). Research by Schouten and colleagues found that before online self-disclosure comes (online) disinhibition, which refers to losing constraints one experiences when worries about presenting oneself or

being judged by others do not control behaviour anymore (Schouten et al., 2007).

Furthermore, it was found that online self-disclosure can foster good friendships and therefore improve the well-being of youngsters (Mýlek et al., 2023).

Thus, adolescents who are depressed and/or (socially) anxious are more likely to use social media, and to disclose themselves online. Depression and (social) anxiety fall under emotional problems, but do not cover the complete definition of emotional problems. Yet, these findings lead to the first hypothesis, which is:

H1: Experiencing emotional problems predicts online self-disclosure among Dutch youth.

This hypothesis is visualised in figure 1.

Offline social support

Children and adolescents can obtain social support from different sources (Lyell et al., 2020). Social support refers to “an individual's perceptions of general support or specific supportive behaviours (available or enacted on) from people in their social network, which enhances their functioning or may buffer them from adverse outcomes” (Demaray & Malecki, 2002, p. 215). In the lives of children and adolescents, social support can be obtained from, amongst others, parents and other family members, teachers, classmates, and friends. These sources of social support are beneficial, because young people who experience higher levels of social support often report fewer internalizing problems. Besides that, social support also provides youth opportunities for social interaction, an increase in self-worth, purpose in life, and access to resources. So, social support is crucial for the well-being of young people (Lyell et al., 2020).

Regarding social support, there are two models that link social support to overall functioning. The first one is the “General Benefits” model, by Rueger et al. (2016, as cited in Lyell et al., 2020), which states that everyone who has access to social networks that are

supportive experiences advantageous effects of social support. The second model is the Stress-Buffering model by Cohen and Wills (1985, as cited in Lyell et al., 2020), which argues that only under stress, the beneficial effects of social support become apparent.

Parental/Family support

One important source of social support during childhood and adolescence is the parents of the child. Many studies have found that young people who experience higher levels of social support from their parents report fewer internalizing problems (Lyell et al., 2020). Furthermore, a systematic review by Gariépy et al. (2016) found that parental and family support can be a protective factor for youth's depression, more than other sources of social support.

Peer support and classroom environment

Another important source of social support during childhood and adolescence is peers. Social support from peers is, similarly, related to fewer internalizing problems and a more positive self-esteem (Lyell et al., 2020). This is linked to positive development, inclusion, belonging, and positive emotions. Therefore, encountering peer relationships who are of low-quality are linked to experiencing mental health difficulties (Røsand & Johansen, 2024). However, peer support is a less strong protective factor for depression than parental support (Gariépy et al., 2016). Additionally, a positive classroom environment, which includes teacher and peer support, leads to fewer emotional problems (Røsand & Johansen, 2024).

Teacher support

Lastly, as most children and adolescents go to school, teachers are also an important social contact in the lives of young people. Teachers, therefore, are important for identifying mental health problems amongst their students, but also can facilitate positive mental health through both instrumental and emotional support (Røsand & Johansen, 2024).

In the first hypothesis, I hypothesize that there is a positive association between emotional problems and online self-disclosure. Since social support is a protective factor for well-being and internalizing problems, and is the basis of (strong) offline relationships, and thus creates offline opportunities for self-disclosure, the next hypotheses are:

H2: Parental/family support weakens the relationship between emotional problems and online self-disclosure.

H3: Teacher support/A positive relationship with teacher weakens the relationship between emotional problems and online self-disclosure.

H4: A positive classroom environment weakens the relationship between emotional problems and online self-disclosure.

Forms of social support would thus be moderators. These hypotheses are also visualized in figure 1.

Gender

It is a widely known fact that gender is affecting the experience of emotional problems. For example, research by Boer et al. (2022) found a significant difference in girls and boys regarding emotional problems, as 44% of the girls report emotional problems, compared to 13% of the boys. Another example can be found in Røsand and Johansen (2024), who found that 24% of the girls reported abnormal scores on emotional problems, compared to 4% of the boys.

Besides girls reporting more emotional problems than boys, previous research has also found that girls are more likely than boys to use and/or have a profile on social media platforms, send online messages, and post pictures on social media platforms (Pujazon-Zazik

& Park, 2010). Furthermore, girls are also more likely to perform online self-disclosure than boys (Schouten et al., 2007).

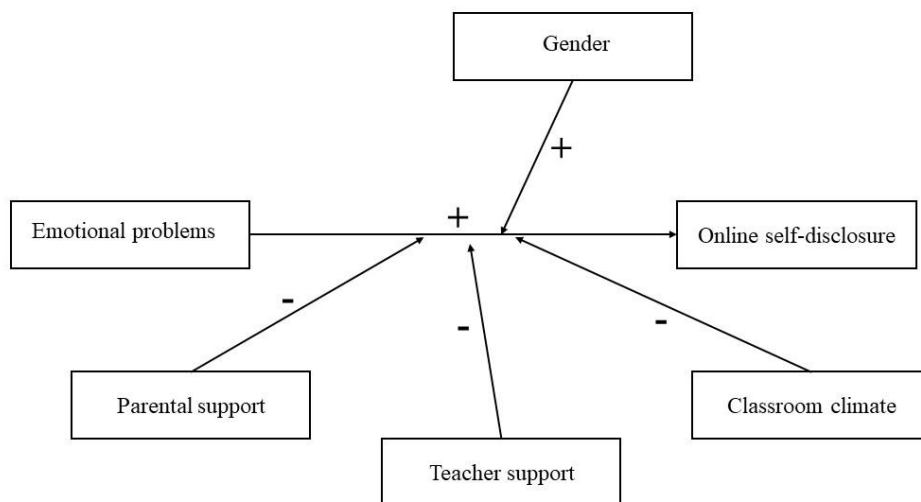
Since girls are reporting more emotional problems and are more likely to disclose themselves online, the next hypothesis is:

H5: The relationship between emotional problems and online self-disclosure is stronger for girls than for boys.

This means that gender would be a moderator. This hypothesis is visualized in figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model



Note. This figure demonstrates the expected relationships.

Method

Participants and Research Design

In this study, the Dutch data of the 2017 edition of Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) was used. HBSC is a cross-national (Europe, North America, and Israel) study, that focusses on youth's health and wellbeing. The HBSC is a questionnaire study that is conducted every four years among a (nationally) representative sample of children. By conducting the HBSC study every four years, trend data is gained which makes it possible to view what changed in the lives of youth. Furthermore, it is possible to make comparisons between youngsters from different countries (Stevens et al., 2018). To gain a nationally representative sample, Dutch primary and secondary schools are randomly selected and invited to take part in the study. Doing this also prevents selection bias. On each secondary school, three to five classes are selected, and one 'groep 8' (last year of primary school) of each selected primary school (HBSC Nederland, n.d.).

The sample used for the present study consisted of 8980 Dutch young people, which can be considered a good sample size (Israel, 1992) for representing all Dutch youngsters (1.17 million between 12 and 18 years old) (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2024). Of this sample, 51.15% are girls ($N = 4593$) within the ages of 10 to 20 years old ($M = 13.62$, $SD = 1.92$), who are in the last year of primary school, or in secondary school. The adolescents who are in secondary school are also asked for their educational level, which can be found in Table 1.

Table 1*Frequencies of Demographics*

Type demographic		Frequency	Percent
Age	10	116	1.29
	11	1307	14.56
	12	1552	17.28
	13	1514	16.86
	14	1432	15.95
	15	1347	15.00
	16	1038	11.56
	17	520	5.79
	18	133	1.48
	19	18	.20
Gender	20	3	.03
	Boy	4387	48.85
	Girl	4593	51.15
Educational level	Groep 8	1588	17.68
	VMBO-b/k	1136	12.65
	VMBO-g/t	2035	22.66
	HAVO	1929	21.48
	VWO	2292	25.52

Note. Total $N = 8980$. Data retrieved from the 2017 variant of the Dutch HBSC study.

Procedure

The data was collected by research-assistants visiting schools and handing out the questionnaires on paper. The respondents could answer the questions they wanted to answer and leave open the questions they did not want to answer. All respondents received a code on a piece of paper, that was unknown to the research-assistants, to ensure the data is anonymous (Stevens et al., 2018).

Ethics statement: Original approval

The 2017 HBSC-study was submitted to the Faculty Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Utrecht University. The theoretical background and most

important research questions, the research design, the questionnaires, information letters for schools and parents, and ‘how data will be handled’ were included. Ethical approval was granted after a few changes in the research design and the way of providing information to parents (Stevens et al., 2018).

The study was anonymous, as there was no registration of who received which codes, and the filled-in questionnaires were put in a sealed envelope. Furthermore, parents were informed a week before the study took place and could object. Besides parents, the youth could also decide to not join the study and were told that taking part was voluntary and could leave questions open if they did not want to answer them (Stevens et al., 2018).

Approval of present study

Ethical approval of the present study is sought and provided through the Students Ethics Review & Registration Site of Utrecht University.

Positionality

My background is in (developmental) psychology, gender studies, and youth studies. Therefore, I approach the world, including this study, from a basis of inequality vs. equality, and how this affects children and adolescents. This also makes that my way of viewing this study is interdisciplinary, and contains knowledge from social sciences (mostly psychology, sociology, and pedagogy), as well as from theories about (in)equality, minority groups, and systems in society.

Measures

Emotional problems. The independent variable ‘emotional problems’ aims to measure the level of emotional problems respondents experience. It is measured with the subscale ‘Emotional Problems’ of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) by Goodman et al. (1998). The subscale consists of five questions answered on a 3-point scale

ranging from 1 (*not true*), 2 (*a little bit true*), and 3 (*definitely true*) ($\alpha = .70$). Example questions are “I worry a lot” and “I often have headaches, stomach aches, or I am nauseous”. So, the subscale ‘Emotional Problems’ measures both (psycho)somatic problems, and psychosocial problems (Stevens et al., 2018).

Online self-disclosure. The dependent variable ‘online self-disclosure’ aims to measure the level of preference for disclosing oneself online. The scale consists of three questions that will be answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*) ($\alpha = .92$). An example question is “On the internet, I find it easier to talk about my worries than face-to-face” (Stevens et al., 2018).

Family support. Family support aims to measure the level of support that is experienced at home. The scale consists of four questions that will be answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) ($\alpha = .91$). An example of a question regarding family support is “At home, I can talk about problems” (Stevens et al., 2018).

Teacher support. Teacher support aims to measure the level of experienced support of teachers. The scale consists of three questions that will be answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*completely agree*) to 5 (*completely disagree*) ($\alpha = .86$). An example question is “I feel that my teacher cares about me” (Stevens et al., 2018).

Classroom climate/environment. Classroom climate aims to measure the level of experienced atmosphere in the classroom. The scale consists of three questions that will be answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*completely agree*) to 5 (*completely disagree*) ($\alpha = .81$). An example question is “My classmates accept me as I am” (Stevens et al., 2018).

The complete questionnaires can be found in Appendix 1.

Analysis

All analyses were carried out in JASP, version 0.18.3.0. Since I have acquired the data from the HBSC researchers, the data I received was not raw data. Therefore, data clean-up was not necessary.

First, I performed descriptive statistics and correlations for the variables of interest (emotional problems, preference for online self-disclosure, parental support, teacher support, classroom support, gender, and age). This way, I was able to see trends in and get familiar with the data on Emotional Problems, Online Self-Disclosure, Family Support, Teacher Support, and Classroom Environment. I also performed an independent samples t-test split by gender for all variables, to see if there are gender differences.

Data-preparation

After this, I checked whether all respondents qualified for participation and if there are any inconsistencies. Furthermore, I checked for yes- or no-saying patterns, and middle-of-the-road patterns (when someone always fills in the answer-option in the middle). Next, I checked for missing data, and handled accordingly. I deleted participants who have not answered the questions on all my topics of interest. When only some data is missing, the participant was still included in the analysis. Lastly, I recoded items, so they all go into the same direction.

Linear regression

Before commencing with the regression analysis, descriptives and correlations were analysed, and I checked whether age is a possible confounder. I performed a linear regression for Age and Preference for Online Self-Disclosure, and when this appeared significant, age would be added to the null model. Then, I performed a linear regression for the main effect with Emotional Problems as independent variable and Preference for Online Self-Disclosure as dependent variable.

Next, I performed a linear regression for the possible moderators separately. First with the interaction between Emotional Problems and Parental Support, then Emotional Problems and Teacher Support, after that Emotional Problems and Classroom Environment, and lastly Emotional Problems and Gender.

Results

The descriptive statistics for the variables of interest are presented in Table 2. It can be seen that scores on Emotional Problems and Preference for Online Self-Disclosure differ for boys and girls. In this study, there was no interest in checking gender differences for the other variables.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	<i>M</i>		<i>SD</i>		<i>N</i>	<i>Range</i>
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls		
Age	13.63 ^a	13.64 ^a	1.93	1.90	8980	10 - 20
Emotional Problems	1.76 ^b	3.15 ^b	1.83	2.41	8929	0 - 10
Preference for online self-disclosure	1.97 ^b	2.04 ^b	1.08	1.12	8762	1 - 5
Parental support	6.08 ^a	6.07 ^a	1.26	1.32	8942	1 - 7
Relationship with teacher	3.82 ^a	3.80 ^a	.88	.84	8805	1 - 5
Classroom environment	4.05 ^a	4.04 ^a	.71	.69	8805	1 - 5

Note. ^a means no significant difference between boys and girls, ^b means there is a significant difference between boys and girls. Total *N* = 8980. Data retrieved from the 2017 variant of the Dutch HBSC study.

The correlations for the variables of interest can be viewed in Table 3. Significant correlations were found between most variables. For example, Emotional Problems positively correlates with Preference for Online Self-Disclosure, Gender, and Age, and negatively with the three forms of social support. As well as Preference for Online Self-Disclosure positively correlates with Gender and Age, and negatively with the three forms of social support. The correlations between gender and all three forms of social support are not significant, as well as the correlation between age and gender.

Table 3

Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	—						
2. Age	-.01	—					
3. Emotional Problems	.31*	.11*	—				
4. Online Self-Disclosure	.03**	.20*	.24*	—			
5. Parental Support	-.01	-.14*	-.24*	-.18*	—		
6. Teacher Support	-.01	-.26*	-.18*	-.16*	.24*	—	
7. Classroom Environment	-.01	-.12*	-.22*	-.11*	.18*	.45*	—

Note. $N = 8980$, * $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$. Data retrieved from the 2017 variant of the Dutch HBSC study.

Linear Regression: Confounder and direct effect

Table 4 presents the results of the regression analyses. In this table, Model 0 represents the regression with age as a predictor for Preference for Online Self-Disclosure. This model is significant, and therefore age is a confounding factor and will be added to the null model.

After establishing age as a confounding factor, I performed a linear regression for the independent variable: emotional problems. Here, age was added to the null model. This is represented by Model 1 in Table 4, in which can be seen that Emotional Problems is a significant predictor for Preference for Online Self-Disclosure ($p < .001$).

Moderators

Before starting the moderation analyses, I centered the variables ‘Emotional Problems’, ‘Preference for Online Self-Disclosure’, ‘Parental Support’, ‘Teacher Support’, and ‘Classroom Environment’. By doing this, I ensured the assumption of normality was met. While doing the regression, I also checked for the assumptions of normality of residuals, homoscedasticity, linearity, no multicollinearity, and no outliers. These assumptions were all met.

Model 2 shows the results of the linear regression model for the interaction between Emotional Problems and Parental Support. This interaction is not significant ($p = .77$). Model 3 shows the results of the linear regression model for the interaction between Emotional Problems and Teacher Support, this interaction is significant for $p < .05$. Next, Model 4 shows the results of the linear regression model for the interaction between Emotional Problems and Classroom Environment. This interaction is not significant ($p = .09$). Lastly, Model 5 shows the results of the linear regression model for the interaction between Emotional Problems and Gender. This interaction is significant for $p < .05$.

Table 4*Results of Linear Regressions*

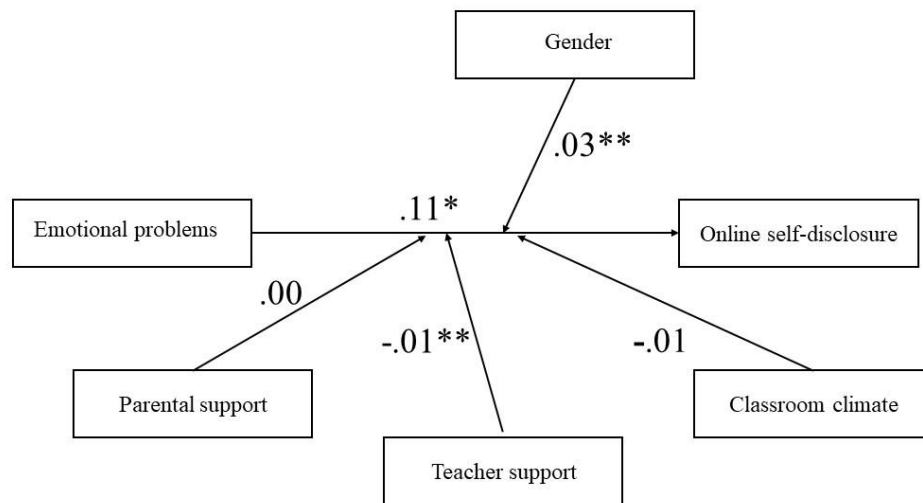
Variables	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	95% CI	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	95% CI	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	95% CI	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	95% CI	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	95% CI	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	95% CI
Emotional Problems			.11* (.01)	[.10, .12]	.09* (.01)	[.08, .11]	.10* (.01)	[.09, .11]	.10* (.01)	[.09, .11]	.09* (.01)	[.08, .11]
Confounder: Age	.44* (.01)	[.10, .13]	.10* (.01)	[.09, .11]	.09* (.01)	[.08, .11]	.09* (.01)	[.08, .10]	.10* (.01)	[.09, .11]	.10* (.01)	[.09, .11]
Em. Prob. *					.00 (.00)	[-.01, .01]						
Par. Sup.												
Em. Prob. *												
Teach. Sup.												
Em. Prob. *												
Class. Env.												
Em. Prob. *												
Gender											.03** (.01)	[.01, .05]
R ² (ΔR^2)	.04 (.04)		.09 (.05)		.10 (.01)		.09 (.00)		.09 (.00)		.09 (.00)	
<i>N</i>	8762		8712		8681		8583		8582		8712	

Note. * $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .05$. Emotional Problems was shortened to Em. Prob., Parental Support to Par. Sup., Teacher Support to Teach. Sup., and Classroom Environment to Class. Env. for the readability of this table. In all models, except model 0, age was added to the null-model. In models 2 – 5 emotional problems was also added to the null-model, as well as par. sup. in model 2, teach. sup. in model 3, class. env. in model 4, and gender in model 5. ΔR^2 is based on subtracting the R^2 of model 1 from the R^2 of model 2, model 3, model 4, and model 5. Data retrieved from the 2017 variant of the Dutch HBSC study.

For the reader's convenience I also present the results in a graphic way, as can be seen in figure 2. This figure presents the conceptual model including the results.

Figure 2

Conceptual Model Including Results



Note. This figure demonstrates the results of the performed regressions. * $p < .001$, ** $p < .05$

Discussion

The present study is one of the first ones to investigate whether social support from parents, teachers, and classmates, as well as gender, moderate the relationship between emotional problems and the preference for online self-disclosure in Dutch youth, to the best of my knowledge. This investigation was done through the analysis of data from the HBSC-study. The results of this study showed that having emotional problems predicts preferring online self-disclosure, and that this relationship is moderated by teacher support and gender. However, the relationship between having emotional problems and preferring online self-disclosure is not moderated by parental support and classroom environment.

In line with previous research (McCrae et al., 2017; Woods & Scott, 2016), having emotional problems seemed to be a predictor of preferring to disclose oneself online in Dutch youth. Thus, hypothesis 1 is accepted. As people who experience depression and anxiety (or symptoms) perceive social media as safer than the offline world, for example based on anonymity, controllability, and accessibility, they are more likely to use the online world to communicate (Scott et al., 2023). This was, again, also seen in the current study.

Besides the direct effect, I also studied four possible moderators. Three hypothesized moderators are related to social support, namely parental support, relationship with teacher, and classroom environment. Social support is beneficial for the well-being of youth, and youth who receive more social support are more likely to experience fewer internalizing problems (Lyell et al., 2020). In the second hypothesis I hypothesized that someone who experiences emotional problems and simultaneously receives higher levels of parental support is less likely to prefer to disclose themselves online. The current study, however, did not find this. A possible explanation for this finding could be that adolescents value parental support less, as they focus more on getting support from peers. Adolescents become more autonomous and individual, and parental support declines (De Goede et al., 2009). Even though youth in this study reported relatively high levels of parental support, they might not value this support in the same way as they value support from peers or friends.

The third hypothesis was that receiving more support from teachers and having a positive relationship with teachers weakens the relationship between emotional problems and online self-disclosure. This hypothesis can be accepted, which means that Dutch youth with emotional problems who receive higher levels of support from teachers are less likely to prefer to disclose themselves online. Students who have teachers that are supportive, might have enough opportunities to share their experiences with their teachers, and prefer doing that over disclosing themselves online. Previous studies show that teachers who are supportive can

improve their students' self-esteem, quality of life, and social skills (Coyle & Clark, 2022).

Yet, students do not always search help from teachers when they experience difficulties.

When teachers have a more counselling role, students are more likely to ask for help and disclose themselves to them (Yablon, 2020).

In the fourth hypothesis I expected that a positive classroom climate would provide enough possibilities for offline self-disclosure and therefore decrease the preference for online self-disclosure. As, for example, implied in Hoferichter et al. (2022), who stated that a positive classroom climate can help with coping with stressors and be a protective factor against internalizing problems in general. However, not in line with previous studies, I did not find this, and, therefore, the hypothesis cannot be accepted. A possible explanation could be that the operationalization of 'classroom environment' may indicate how the respondents perceive the individual relationships between their classmates, without necessarily feeling part of the class. An example item is 'My classmates like being together'. It can be the case that the classmates indeed like being together, but the youngster does not feel included in this. Therefore, questions about feeling included in the classroom might present different results.

Lastly, I studied whether gender might be a moderator in the relationship between emotional problems and preference for online self-disclosure. In previous research, it was found that girls report higher levels of emotional problems than boys (Boer et al., 2022; Røsand & Johansen, 2024), and are more likely to be active on social media and disclose themselves online compared to boys (Pujazon-Zazik & Park, 2010; Schouten et al., 2007). Therefore, the fifth and last hypothesis was that gender influences the relationship between emotional problems and online self-disclosure. More specifically, for the gender 'girl', the relationship between emotional problems and online self-disclosure becomes stronger, compared to the gender 'boy'. In line with previous research, I found this effect and the hypothesis can be accepted. This means that girls who experience emotional problems are

more likely to talk about their experiences online, than, for example, with friends or their family in offline situations.

Implications

The results of this study could be the basis of interventions for Dutch youth who experience emotional problems. Since youngsters who report high levels of emotional problems also report they prefer to talk about their worries and experiences online, interventions and therapies could be centred around online self-disclosure. Especially important could be taking principles of being online, “anonymity, invisibility, conversation or message control, editability, and accessibility” (Scott et al., 2023, p. 355), into account. Future research could also focus on these principles in combination with (online) therapy, to see if it differs from offline therapy.

Another important result of this study is that people experiencing emotional problems who also experience more teacher support are predicted to be less likely to disclose themselves online. Despite disclosing oneself online can also improve young people’s well-being and is not always problematic behaviour (Mýlek et al., 2023), teachers can still provide offline opportunities for adolescents to disclose themselves by providing (social) support and thereby facilitate better mental health (Røsand & Johansen, 2024). Therefore, it would be recommended to foster positive teacher-student relationships, which provides more opportunities for people to talk about their problems offline.

Lastly, since it was found that gender affects the relationship between emotional problems and online self-disclosure, interventions and future research should be gender-based. Therefore, interventions especially for girls who experience emotional problems could focus on being executed on online platforms. Future research should focus on why girls are more likely to experience emotional problems than boys, as well as why girls are more avid

users of social media than boys and why girls specially prefer online self-disclosure. Doing this could result into more understanding in the experiences of youth.

Since the present study did not find significant effects for parental support and classroom environment, I would recommend future researchers to focus on why this is the case. I would also suggest looking at the operationalization of both types of support, and possibly include parent reports as well. Another suggestion for future research is replicating this study in a clinical sample², to see if this presents different results. Moreover, I would suggest including friend support as a variable, but divided into offline³ and online friends⁴.

Concludingly, Dutch youth who experience emotional problems, especially girls and those who do not feel supported by their teacher(s), prefer to disclose themselves and their problems online, instead of face-to-face and in offline situations. This knowledge can help us understand youngsters better, help us communicate more effectively with them, and, lastly, provide them with the type of support they may want and need.

Strengths and limitations

One of the strongest aspects of this research is the sample size. By using data from the HBSC study, I had access to a large sample that was reached by randomly selecting schools to participate. This way, the sample most likely represents the population of Dutch youth well and results could be generalized to this population. Another strong aspect of this study is the originality, as a study like this has never been done before. I have combined aspects and findings of previous studies (e.g., McCrae et al., 2017; Lyell et al., 2010; Røsand & Johansen, 2024) to create a new research question. Furthermore, the reliability and construct validity of the SDQ are assessed as satisfactory by the Dutch Test Affairs Committee (COTAN, 2007).

² Youth who are all experiencing high levels of emotional problems.

³ Friends one sees and speaks to face-to-face, and possibly online too (e.g., on Whatsapp or Snapchat).

⁴ Friends one only speaks to online (e.g., on Whatsapp, X (Twitter), or TikTok).

Looking at limitations, the data that was used is cross-sectional and therefore it is impossible to determine causal relationships. Besides that, the ‘emotional problems’ section of the SDQ also measures psychosomatic symptoms that have not been considered in this study. Furthermore, the HBSC is solely based on self-report, and therefore the answers given by the youth could be influenced by social desirability. Moreover, this study does not include friend support, as friendship could be both offline and online. If one has online friends, they are also more likely to disclose themselves online because online is where they receive social support (Godard & Holtzman, 2024; Zhou & Cheng, 2022). Therefore, online self-disclosure might also measure online friendships and/or online social support. Lastly, this study only measures online self-disclosure and does not measure offline self-disclosure. Therefore, the results cannot state that one who prefers to disclose oneself online never talks about their struggles offline.

Conclusion

The current study provides more insight into the relationship between emotional problems and (preference for) online self-disclosure among Dutch youth, and whether this relationship is affected by social support and gender. This study teaches us that reporting a higher level of emotional problems predicts a higher level of preference for online self-disclosure, and that this relationship is affected by teacher support and gender. More specifically, when someone with emotional problems reports higher levels of support from their teacher, they report lower levels of preference for online self-disclosure. For gender it was found that girls who report emotional problems are more likely to also report higher levels of preference for online self-disclosure, compared to boys.

Since Dutch adolescents’ levels of emotional problems and online presence keep rising, we need to focus on these digital natives. I would recommend to especially take care of and pay attention to Dutch girls experiencing emotional problems who also receive low

support from their teacher(s). These girls are more likely to disclose themselves online, and we therefore may not know what goes on behind their screens.

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Reflection on interdisciplinarity

In this thesis, I looked at a problem that takes place at individual level, namely emotional problems and whether experiencing those predicts whether one prefers to disclose themselves online. However, the life of a youngster is not only their life, but parents, teachers, friends, classmates, and more people are involved too. Therefore, this study needs theoretical insights from multiple (sub)disciplines to understand the problem.

To build a theoretical framework, I have mostly used theories that stem from psychology, pedagogy, and sociology. Psychology mostly focusses on an individual and their experiences, behaviour and (mental) problems. In my case, emotional problems are mostly a psychological problem and therefore theories from psychology were most beneficial to explain emotional problems. Furthermore, I have used pedagogy as a discipline to take theories from, because this discipline mostly focusses on the child and their (social) environment. As I was interested in the role of parents, teachers, and classmates in the experience of Dutch youth, theories from pedagogy were helpful for this. However, often psychology, more specifically developmental psychology, and pedagogy are overlapping, which I also noticed in my thesis. Lastly, I also took theoretical insights from sociology, as this focusses more on social behaviour and relationships of humans as a group. In my case, I was interested in behaviour of the group 'youth', for example regarding online self-disclosure, as well as the behaviour and experiences of different genders. It was meaningful to draw on theoretical insights from these different disciplines, because together they could form a holistic theory about Dutch youth.

As the topic of my thesis is a practical problem, insights/perspectives from stakeholders outside academia could contribute a lot to understand the problem. This thesis only used reports from youngsters themselves. However, this thesis could have gained from including especially parents and teachers reporting how they experience the relationship with

their child/student(s). It is possible that parents and teachers report other experiences regarding the level of support they provide to their child/student(s) and these experiences should also be considered for the full story. Looking at the results/conclusions of the thesis, people who are both knowledgeable on youth problems but who are also actively involved in the lives of youth are particularly important in crossing boundaries between science and practice. In my opinion, it is important to educate youth and the adults in their lives about issues youth may experience, especially from a scientific perspective. These educators can bring the scientific knowledge into practice, but also take problems from practice back to science.

Even though I think interdisciplinary research is always a good idea, in some cases a monodisciplinary approach might be the best way to approach a problem. In the case of my thesis, a monodisciplinary approach could have led to results that are more specific and more on the individual level, for example by taking a psychological approach of analysing each youngster separately. Therefore, a monodisciplinary approach would be more desired if one wants more specific results, and if, for example, the instruments are also only specific to one discipline. However, I think this is almost never the case and I also have not experienced this in my thesis.

By using multiple scientific research methods in investigating a problem can lead to a deeper understanding of the research problem, because it provides more opportunities for participants to share their experiences. A great example is doing interviews with participants about why they gave specific answers in the questionnaire. Especially interviews, next to questionnaires, could provide more insight in what is going on in the lives of youth, or what is going on their minds/internal world. Another research method that could provide more insight into the problem is an experiment. For the topic of my thesis this could be providing one group of youth with extra social support (for example from their teacher(s)) for a week and

one group for whom nothing changes. At the end of the week, it is measured whether someone rather wants to talk about their problems offline, e.g. with their teacher, or online. An experiment gives more insight in causal relationships, something that cannot be done with simple (cross-sectional) questionnaire studies and interviews.

Lastly, the research problem can be understood more deeply when multiple analytical levels are used, for example systems perspective. When combining knowledge on the individual, and all levels (Bronfenbrenner), (almost) all relevant factors in the lives of youth will be covered and analysed. Problems are (often) not the result of unideal situations in one specific system, but often occur because of issues in multiple systems or because different systems influence each other. The joint analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of the problem, as well as interventions can be more specific and effective. So, using multiple analytical levels will be helpful in solving the problem.

Appendix 1: Questionnaires

Emotional Problems: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

44 Jouw gedrag en gevoelens

De volgende vragen gaan over jouw gedrag in de LAATSTE ZES MAANDEN. Geef met een kruisje aan of de uitspraken voor jou 'niet waar zijn' of 'een beetje waar zijn' of 'zeker waar zijn'.

Kruis op iedere regel één vakje aan.

niet waar	beetje waar	zeker waar	De vragen gaan over de LAATSTE ZES MAANDEN
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik ben rusteloos, ik kan niet lang stilzitten
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik heb vaak hoofdpijn, buikpijn of ben misselijk
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik word erg boos en ben vaak driftig
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik ben nogal op mijzelf. Ik speel meestal alleen of bemoei mij niet met anderen
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik doe meestal wat me wordt opgedragen
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik pieker veel
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik zit constant te wiebelen of te friemelen
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik heb minstens één goede vriend of vriendin
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik vecht vaak. Het lukt mij andere mensen te laten doen wat ik wil
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik ben vaak ongelukkig, in de put of in tranen
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Andere jongeren van mijn leeftijd vinden mij over het algemeen aardig
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik ben snel afgeleid, ik vind het moeilijk om mij te concentreren
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik ben zenuwachtig in nieuwe situaties. Ik verlies makkelijk mijn zelfvertrouwen
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik word er vaak van beschuldigd dat ik lieg of bedrieg
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Andere kinderen of jongeren pesten of treiteren mij
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik denk na voor ik iets doe
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik pak dingen weg die niet van mij zijn, thuis, op school of op andere plaatsen
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik kan beter met volwassenen opschieten dan met jongeren van mijn leeftijd
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik ben voor heel veel dingen bang, ik ben snel angstig
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ik maak af waar ik mee bezig ben. Ik kan mijn aandacht er goed bij houden

Online Self-Disclosure

33 Hieronder zie je een aantal stellingen over Internet. Zou je bij elke stelling het antwoord willen aankruisen dat het beste bij je past? *Kruis op iedere regel één vakje aan.*

	helemaal niet mee eens	niet mee eens	niet eens/ niet oneens	mee eens	helemaal mee eens
Op internet praat ik makkelijker over geheimen dan in echte ontmoetingen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Op internet praat ik makkelijker over mijn gevoelens dan in echte ontmoetingen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Op internet praat ik makkelijker over mijn zorgen dan in echte ontmoetingen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Parental support

- 27** Hieronder staan uitspraken over jouw gezin (het gezin waar je het meeste bent). We willen graag weten hoe je hierover denkt. Lees elke zin goed door en kruis op iedere regel één vakje aan.

	1. Heel erg niet mee eens	2	3	4	5	6	7. Heel erg mee eens
De mensen in mijn gezin doen echt hun best om mij te helpen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ik krijg thuis de emotionele steun en hulp die ik nodig heb	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ik kan thuis over mijn problemen praten	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bij ons thuis willen ze me helpen om beslissingen te nemen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Teacher support and classroom environment

- 56** Hieronder staan een paar zinnen over je klasgenoten en je juf of meester. Kruis aan wat je van deze uitspraken vindt (of je het er wel of niet mee eens bent). Kruis op iedere regel één vakje aan.

	helemaal mee eens	mee eens	niet eens/ niet oneens	niet mee eens	helemaal niet mee eens
Mijn klasgenoten vinden het fijn bij elkaar te zijn	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
De meeste klasgenoten zijn vriendelijk en hulpvaardig	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Andere klasgenoten accepteren me zoals ik ben	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ik heb het gevoel dat mijn juf of meester mij accepteert zoals ik ben	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ik heb het gevoel dat mijn juf of meester om mij geeft	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ik heb veel vertrouwen in mijn juf of meester	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>