



# Living a private life in public social networks: An exploration of member self-disclosure

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, the author examines voluntary self-disclosure phenomenon among social networking sites. Self-disclosure enables member interactions, service customizations, targeted marketing, and digital content generation; hence the level of self-disclosure is imperative to the success of social networking sites. Yet, members are often reluctant to reveal themselves despite their desire for socialization in the ever-increasingly popular cyber community. Drawing upon relevant literature, we developed a succinct research model that identifies key stimuli and inhibitors of member self-disclosure. These influences stem from personality traits (e.g., extroversion and privacy value), networking service attributes (e.g., perceived critical mass), and computing environments (e.g., perceived Internet risk). The research model was validated through survey data collected from 222 social networking site users and the analysis results provided support to the hypothesized relationships. The current study generates new knowledge concerning the roles that varying factors play in shaping members' self-disclosure; it also informs networking service providers about how to better encourage members to reveal themselves online.

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## 1. Introduction

Until recently, social networking sites have grown rapidly on the Internet. These sites allow members to create personal profiles, manage personal connections, and interact with other members with similar interests [9]. Due to the support in the management of personal networks, these websites have attracted millions of online users. As of February 2012, Pew Internet found that 66% of online adults use social networking sites [10]. Facebook alone, for example, attracted 995 million monthly active users in June 2012, with about 80% of users residing outside of the United States and Canada [26]. Social networking sites are considered by many as the “greatest invention of the past decade” [5] and the “best invention of the 21st century” [31]. These websites have made significant impacts on general society because they create brand new frontiers for interpersonal communications and interactions [36,79,101]. Academia recognizes this impact; several research streams exist within the realm of social networking studies, including self-presentation [8,60], network topology [33,44], and adoption [80,84]. However, less is known about member self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure refers to any personal information one shares with others [20]. This may include “any information exchange that refers to the self, including personal states, dispositions, events in the past, and plans for the future” [24]. New knowledge in this regard is imperative to the long-term sustainability of social networking sites for four reasons: First, member information that is released through self-disclosure

lays the foundation for social interactions among site members. Without self-disclosure, members of a networking site may not be able to learn about each other; hence, the growth and expansion of personal networks will halt [39]. Second, self-disclosure enables social networking providers to collect and analyze member information and provide personalized services for improved user satisfaction. Third, social networking sites rely on advertising as their primary revenue source and advertisers need member information in order to offer customized ads for targeted marketing. Fourth, site members who engage in self-disclosure are likely to create user-generated contents such as photos, videos, and blogs; these contents contribute to the wealth of an online community and subsequently attract new members, therefore allowing networking service providers to propagate their business models for greater success.

Recent studies have confirmed that networking site members have become increasingly reluctant to reveal themselves [71]. Many users shy away from public attention and would rather keep their lives private when engaging in the “best known” public sphere in recent history. These members reveal little on their public profiles and resort to private channels or access-controlled interaction modes for information sharing with trusted friends only. Surprisingly, their pursuit of privacy does not necessarily result in an abandonment of social networks; members may still feel a strong sense of belonging and remain loyal to the networking sites. McKnight et al. put: “the level of information disclosure does not necessarily prohibit social network use” [63]. Due to this behavioral tendency, online business services and models that rely on member disclosure are in jeopardy. To date, prior literature has generated little empirical findings to uncover members' self-disclosure behavior and it remains largely unknown

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as to why one will expose or withhold his or her identity, likes, and dislikes on a public network [53,54,91,100]. Our study attempts to fill this research gap.

This study answers the research question of “*What are the key determinants of members’ self-disclosure among social networking sites?*” Drawing upon the theoretical model of Information Disclosure Behavior (IDB) [92] and the literature on social networking sites, we developed and validated a succinct research model that provided preliminary answers to our question. This research model separates an individual’s perception of a social networking site from his or her behavioral preference of privacy disclosure; it makes a two-fold contribution. First, it validates the importance of member attitude in cultivating voluntary self-disclosure behavior on networking sites. In this study, attitude refers to an individual’s positive evaluative effect about using a given social networking site. Existing literature about social networking has largely ignored the role of attitude; by surveying 222 users of social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, and Friendster, we found evidence that member attitude strongly promotes the extent of member self-disclosure. Our study also confirms that personality traits such as extroversion, service attributes such as perceived critical mass, and external environments such as perceived Internet risk jointly cultivate members’ overall attitude. These aforementioned factors have been understudied within the context of social networking. Second, the current study probes the role that privacy values play in deterring site members from revealing themselves. Analyses of the survey data find that privacy value attenuates the relationship between attitude and self-disclosure. Privacy value has not been well studied within the context of social networking sites and our findings suggest that it accounts for the apparent paradox where Internet users strongly attach themselves to a networking site yet remain highly conservative in terms of self-disclosure.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the subsequent section reviews the literature on social networking sites as well as the theoretical underpinning of the current study. Secondly, we present our research model along with the foundational research hypotheses. This section is followed by an elaboration upon research methodology and data analysis. We conclude the paper by discussing its theoretical contributions, managerial implications, limitations, and venues for future research.

## 2. Literature review and theoretical development

### 2.1. Prior studies on social networking

To date, a number of research streams exist in the domain of social networking sites [9]. Some scholars have studied site user self-presentation and impression management. Using survey methodology, Ong et al. explored the impact of narcissism and extraversion on adolescents’ self-presentation behavior on Facebook. Among the results, they found that narcissism was associated with users’ presentation of self-generated content such as the frequency of status updates [69]. Pearson took a narrative approach to examine the role of visuals on impression management on SNSs [74]. Interview data confirmed images’ importance in identity performance. Others have explored the typology of social networks and their development. Ahn et al. studied the topological characteristics of large online social networking services [1]. They also assessed the extent to which online relationship growth resembles real life social networks. Through comparisons drawn between Cyworld, MySpace, and Orkut, they found that certain online social activities were distinctive from real life activities and that online social networks shared a similar degree of correlation patterns with real life networks [1]. Fu et al. investigated the self-organizing structural characteristics of social networking sites [30]. By analyzing real data from a large networking site, they studied the distribution of topological distance and correlations between degrees, clustering coefficients, and popularity. The results showed that social networking sites demonstrate an assortative mixing pattern. Further research has explored user adoption of social networking sites. Sledgianoski and Kulviwat found that actual site adoption was affected

by use intention which was influenced by factors such as perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness [84]. Rosen and Klumper inspected the impact of the big five personality traits on users’ acceptance of networking websites [80]. They found that conscientiousness affected perceived ease of use; extroversion affected perceived usefulness and ease of use; and agreeableness, openness and neuroticism didn’t have any significant impact on users’ acceptance of the sites.

In terms of self-disclosure, existing literature has examined its subsequent impacts. Ledbetter et al. found that the interaction between self-disclosure and social connection directly predicted member communications on Facebook and indirectly predicted relational closeness [45]. Mazer et al. found that students who accessed a teacher’s Facebook page that was high in self-disclosure anticipated higher levels of motivation and affective learning [61]. Prior studies have also examined the motivations behind self-disclosure; yet, the majority of studies have been limited to descriptive or conceptual discussion and modeling. Tow et al. surveyed Australian Facebook users to find that users were often simply unaware of privacy issues or felt that the risk to them, personally, was very low when sharing private information [92]. Li et al. combined the theory of planned behavior and privacy calculus theory to suggest that perceived benefits and privacy concerns might jointly determine privacy disclosure [49]. Xu et al. studied the case of Facebook news feed controversy to posit that privacy disclosure behavior might be affected by privacy concerns and that this effect could be moderated by perceived benefits [100]. Few empirical studies have been conducted to uncover the stimuli and inhibitors of members’ self-disclosure behavior, thus generating limited findings that suggest boundaries (e.g. ingroup/outgroup) [75], perceived enjoyment [43], and social capitals (e.g., reciprocity and trust) [77] might shape self-disclosure. No study has explicitly attended to the paradox where Internet users strongly attach to a networking site yet remain conservative in revealing themselves. Therefore, more research is warranted in order to foster a comprehensive understanding of member self-disclosure phenomenon. New knowledge gained through this research will help networking service providers develop proper strategies to prompt member disclosure, thus making a noticeable contribution.

### 2.2. Theoretical background

Posey et al. stated “Self-disclosure research in online communities is just starting to emerge” [77]. To date, there is a dearth of prior findings and established theoretical underpinnings that help us examine this phenomenon. In this paper, we follow the theoretical model of users’ Information Disclosure Behavior (IDB) to examine members’ voluntary self-disclosure phenomenon among social networking sites [92]. Developed by Tow et al. through an ethnographic study of networking site users, IDB is instrumental in identifying the pertinent research constructs that jointly explain self-disclosure behavior; it identifies *value* and *context* as the two focal theoretical constructs. In accordance with IDB, value constructs concern a member’s attitude toward site use and personal preferences and comforts such as privacy; whereas contextual constructs regard factors pertaining to one’s objective of site use as well as own previous online experience that is relevant. Furthermore, IDB suggests that self-disclosure is determined by value constructs that, in turn, are affected by contextual constructs.

For value constructs, the recognition of attitude and privacy is congruent with the existing literature that analyzes end-user behavior within privacy involved information systems [3]. In this study, attitude refers to an individual’s positive evaluative effect about using a given social networking site. Attitude has been widely employed in the field of information systems to explain user behavior [7,51,90]. Theoretical frameworks such as Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) link an individual’s attitudes toward objects to his or hers own actions, whereas attitude reflects the extent to which one likes an object and an object refers to any given aspect of the individual’s world [27]. EVT states that attitudes are developed based on subjective assessments about beliefs and values; that attitude leads to behavioral

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