Voices that cannot be heard: Can shyness explain how we communicate on Facebook versus face-to-face?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 5 March 2013

Keywords:
Facebook
Shyness
Loneliness
Young adults
Self-disclosure
Social media

ABSTRACT

Social networking sites have gained popularity among all populations, especially young adults. Personality traits were found to be predictive of how individuals use social media. Therefore, this study sought to examine the association between shyness and self-disclosure to a Facebook friend as well as self-disclosure to a face-to-face friend. Two studies were conducted. The first study tested how shyness and social loneliness are related to self-disclosure to a Facebook friend to whom an individual talks most often. The second, follow-up study tested how shyness is related to self-disclosure to a Facebook friend to whom a person speaks to only though Facebook, and also to a face-to-face friend to whom the participants talk only face-to-face and never through Facebook. Participants were college students from a large research university in the United States. Study 1 found a negative association between shyness and self-disclosure to a Facebook friend. Study 2 found a negative association between shyness and self-disclosure to a face-to-face friend. The theoretical implications and limitations are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In the last few years, social networking sites have become a popular and free way for people of all ages to socialize with each other and entertain when nothing else is going on. Sites like Facebook and MySpace allow users to connect and re-connect with old friends, create new relationships, organize events, and play games. Although open for users of all ages, social networking sites (SNSs) have mostly been used by young people – Digital Natives or Millennials (ages 18–33) is still in the lead in using social networking sites. In January 2013, Facebook, the most popular social networking site, had 1.02 billion users, of which more than half were using it from a mobile device.

While previous studies (e.g., Hargittai, 2008; Sheldon, 2008; Tufekci, 2008) have examined the types of people who use Facebook, none has focused on how personality traits might influence how technology users maintain their relationships both online and offline. Ryan and Xenos (2011) warned that this kind of research is crucial as “personality is a leading factor in understanding why people behave the way they do on the Internet” (Amichai-Hamburger, 2002, p. 1290). Several studies so far have examined the relationship between personality and usage of Facebook. For example, Ross, Orr, Sisic, Arseneault, Simmering, and Orr (2009) have found that extraverted individuals belong to more Facebook groups, and those who score higher on narcissism are more likely than emotionally stable individuals to prefer using the wall. Extraverted individuals also have more Facebook friends (Amichai-Hamburger, 2002), although introverts place more personal information on their Facebook profiles as compared with extroverts (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010).

However, no study has explored if self-disclosure to a Facebook friend is mediated or influenced by any of the personality characteristics of the individuals who form relationships. Self-disclosure is an important aspect of friendship and measures the intensity of a relationship (Levinger & Rands, 1985). Self-disclosure is viewed as a major factor in the development, maintenance, and deterioration of a relationship. The present study, therefore, investigates the association between shyness and self-disclosure, and loneliness and self-disclosure, between two Facebook friends and two face-to-face friends. Two studies have been conducted. The first study tested how shyness and social loneliness are related to self-disclosure to a Facebook friend to whom an individual talks most often. The second, follow-up study tested how shyness is related to self-disclosure to a Facebook friend to whom a person speaks to only though Facebook, and also to a face-to-face friend to whom the participants talk only face-to-face and never through Facebook.

1.1. Shyness, loneliness, and self-disclosure

Shyness has been defined as “discomfort or inhibition in interpersonal situations that interferes with pursuing one’s interpersonal or professional goals” (Henderson, Zimbardo, & Carducci,
H1. There will be a negative relationship between social loneliness and self-disclosure (breadth and depth) to a Facebook friend.

H2. There will be a negative relationship between shyness and the overall number of Facebook friends.

H3. There will be a negative relationship between shyness and self-disclosure (breadth and depth) on Facebook.

H4. There will be a negative relationship between shyness and the number of Facebook friends.

We have also tested if the number of close face-to-face friends is related to the overall self-disclosure and number of Facebook friends.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

The participants (N = 150; 51% women) were recruited from introductory communication courses at a large research university in the southern part of the United States. Their average age was 20 (M = 19.33, SD = .89). The majority of participants identified themselves as white (93%).

2.1.2. Measures

Participants reported how many Facebook friends they had and how many hours they spent on Facebook on an average day. They were also asked how many close face-to-face friends they had. The study asked them about their age and sex. They were instructed to think about the one Facebook friend that they talked to most often through Facebook. Self-disclosure to that friend was measured, as well as the degree of closeness. In addition, students’ scores on shyness and social loneliness were obtained. The following are measures used in the questionnaire.

2.1.2.1. Self-disclosure. Two dimensions of self-disclosure, breadth and depth, were measured using items developed by Parks and Floyd (1996). The Parks and Floyd (1996) breadth and depth scale
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