



## Students' self-presentation on Facebook: An examination of personality and self-construal factors

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### ABSTRACT

The present research seeks to extend existing theory on self-disclosure to the online arena in higher educational institutions and contribute to the knowledge base and understanding about the use of a popular social networking site (SNS), Facebook, by college students. We conducted a non-experimental study to investigate how university students ( $N = 463$ ) use Facebook, and examined the roles that personality and culture play in disclosure of information in online SNS-based environments. Results showed that individuals do disclose differently online vs. in-person, and that both culture and personality matter. Specifically, it was found that collectivistic individuals low on extraversion and interacting in an online environment disclosed the least honest and the most audience-relevant information, as compared to others. Exploratory analyses also indicate that students use sites such as Facebook primarily to maintain existing personal relationships and selectively used privacy settings to control their self-presentation on SNSs. The findings of this study offer insight into understanding college students' self-disclosure on SNS, add to the literature on personality and self-disclosure, and shape future directions for research and practice on online self-presentation.

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### 1. Introduction

The large and burgeoning influence of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter has brought significant changes to information distribution and the cultural norms of social relationship. These technologies provide new means for individuals to present themselves, access and broadcast information, articulate their social networks, and establish and maintain connections with others. In higher educational institutions, on one side, the explosion of social media provides students with unprecedented learning and networking opportunities (Chen & Bryer, 2012). On the other side, educators expressed concerns about the openness over negative consequences of students' self-disclosure on SNSs (Bryer & Chen, 2010). According to recent media reports, individuals' posts on SNSs were used by potential employers in assessing their employment qualifications and individuals were penalized or criminally charged on the basis of their text or photo posts (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009; Peluchette & Karl, 2008). Understanding the way individuals behave and disclose information on such sites is a potentially valuable source of information for practitioners and researchers.

Our goal in this paper is to investigate how young adults use SNSs, and factors that might impact their self-presentation on

those sites, such as general disclosiveness, cultural heritage and personality. We examine these factors using a non-experimental survey-based method. We hope to provide insights to help educators understand students' online behaviors and potentially facilitate these behaviors to best utilize such networked learning opportunities. From a broader psychological perspective, we hope to shed light on the individual difference variables that determine how individuals disclose information about and present themselves in online SNS environments such as Facebook.

### 2. Self-presentation and social networking sites

Self-disclosure is defined as any message about oneself that an individual communicates to another (Wheeless, 1978; Wheelless & Grotz, 1976, 1977). It is the factual communication that an individual uses to present oneself, i.e. self-presentation (Johnson, 1980). Self-disclosure and self-presentation processes are important aspects of relational development in in-person communications (Derlega, Winstead, Wong, & Greenspan, 1987). Earlier research has shown that individuals tend to respond to self-disclosures from others by revealing aspects of their own identity (Derlega et al., 1987) and individuals tend to highlight one's positive attributes for self-enhancement (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000). Self-disclosure progresses in both depth and breadth across time (Levinger & Snoek, 1972). As personal relationship develops, individuals tend to present one's true or authentic self to others, ranging from

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superficial factual to personal, private or intimate details about oneself (Chelune, 1979; Greene, Derlega, & Matthews, 2006).

In recent years, the use of social networking sites (SNSs) has surged globally. Based on the individual companies' recent statistics, Facebook reached a total of 901 million users (Facebook, 2012); LinkedIn had over 150 million members (LinkedIn, 2012); Twitter hit over 177 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2011); and YouTube reached four billion views per day (YouTube, 2012). Research shows that individuals use SNSs for a variety of activities, including maintaining existing relationships, making new friends, passing time, for self-expression, for student and political activism, as a task management tool, and for learning purposes (Hew, 2011; Special & Li-Barber, 2012; Tosun, 2012). A typical college student spends between 10 and 60 min on Facebook every day (Hew, 2011) and is constantly involved in self-disclosure and presentation activities to a large audience on the Internet (Hum et al., 2011). The increasing popularity of SNSs has brought a different perspective on the issue of self-presentation.

There is a growing body of literature examining online self-presentation (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Hew, 2011; Rettberg, 2009; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Prior research has suggested that the online environment can alter personal identities, such that individuals tend to disclose more information about themselves compared to other means of communication (Christofides et al., 2009; Gibbs et al., 2006). A recent literature review indicated that identities produced online were found to be realistic and honest on SNSs such as Facebook (Hew, 2011) because students realized false information would be questioned by their friends. On the other hand, however, it has also been found that individuals tend to stretch the truth a little in their online self-presentations (e.g., selectively displaying only flattering photos of themselves; Gibbs et al., 2006). Thus, it is not completely clear from the extant literature whether online self-disclosures may be more or less veracious than the concomitant form of in-person self-disclosure.

The theoretical paradigm offered by traditional theories of interpersonal interactions posits that individuals are likely to be both more forthcoming and honest in the disclosure of information as relationships progress over time (Levinger & Snoek, 1972), as opportunities for reciprocal exchange of information grow (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), and as relationships develop and become more intimate (Taylor & Altman, 1987). Hence, relationships characterized by more frequent and long-term interactions tend to result in more in-depth and more honest disclosure (Gibbs et al., 2006; Pavica, 2010). On the face of it, this train of thought would make it seem likely that the relative anonymity and enhanced personal distance of computer-mediated communication (i.e., online environments) would result in a pattern of self-disclosure both less forthcoming and veracious. However, to the extent that many users of SNSs such as Facebook use them as tools to create and maintain relationships (Hew, 2011), it can be construed that both in-person and online interactions on such sites do not differ in terms of length and depth of interpersonal interactions.

A countervailing argument is provided when one views the SNS environment through a lens of individual privacy. Privacy and cyber-security have been reported as the top concerns for students' information disclosure in the SNS environment (Bryer & Chen, 2010). Recent studies suggest that SNS users, including college students, are concerned with their privacy and conscious of the impression on other people including their teachers, family member, current and potential employers (Christofides et al., 2009). Privacy is a non-trivial concern, as highlighted by recent news reports indicating that sites such as Facebook, Google and other technology companies utilize online tracking tools to monitor and record the behavior of users after they leave the site (Acohidio, 2011; Murphy, 2012).

Hence, the possibility of one's information being used and scrutinized by unknown third parties may dampen the degree to which individuals disclose information online via SNSs. Conversely, no such tracking would occur in face-to-face interactions, whereby individuals do not leave electronic or written records of their activity. Thus, it can be expected that individuals would be likely to disclose more information, be more intentional in their disclosures, exhibit less monitoring of information disclosed, and be more honest in their disclosures in-person rather than online. Alternatively, it is likely that individuals will act in a more socially desirable manner by disclosing more positive information and disclosing information more relevant to the interests of their audience in an SNS environment, where there remain electronic records and traces of one's interactional behaviors.

In light of the above review, our first hypothesis is as follows:

**Hypothesis 1.** Individuals will disclose more information, be more intentional, more honest, exhibit less monitoring of information, disclose less positive information, and disclose less relevant information in-person vs. online.

### 3. Independent and interdependent self-construals

Markus and Kitayama (1991) theorized the existence of independent and interdependent self-construals, whereby the independent self-construal emphasizes separation from the social context and is both internal and private, whereas the interdependent self-construal emphasizes connectedness with the social context, and is external and public. These dual worldviews are conceptually homologous to what Triandis (1995) defined to be *idiocentrism* and *allocentrism*, individual-level manifestations of the cultural constructs known as individualism and collectivism. Individualism is a cultural worldview that manifests itself in the formation of tendencies to separate, isolate, and alienate the self, the urge to master one's environment, and emphasizes the self over the collective; collectivism is manifested in the formation of tendencies toward contact, openness, and union, the urge to cooperate with the environment, and emphasizes the collective over the self (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). Thus, individuals holding independent self-construals (*idiocentrics*) are individualistic, and individuals holding interdependent self-construals (*allocentrics*) are collectivistic.

These two views of the self are not mutually exclusive, and research has found that either conception of the self may become salient depending upon environmental cues that prime one or the other self-concept (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). In other words, an individual may view him/herself in relation to the group if placed in a situation that made group membership salient, and vice versa. Therefore, situations that emphasize group relations and the social context may influence individuals to behave more collectively. Chatman and Barsade (1995) examined this relation between self-construal and situational norms (i.e., individualistic vs. collectivistic situational norms) and found that people with interdependent self-construals (*idiocentrics*) were very cooperative under collectivistic situational norms but behaved uncooperatively when placed in situations where an individualistic culture dominated. Using follow-up qualitative responses, the researchers explained that individuals holding interdependent self-construals (*allocentrics*) were willing to adjust and make decisions based on individualistic expectations regardless of their own preferences. Hence, in a situation that emphasizes collectivistic norms, the difference in behavior between *allocentrics*, who match their behaviors to the environment, and *idiocentrics*, who are unlikely to be affected by the environment (unless doing so would benefit the self), is likely to be larger. Contrarily, in an individualistic

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