



Effects of self-disclosure on relational intimacy in Facebook

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the association between self-disclosure and intimacy in the context of Facebook. As the antecedents of self-disclosure, the study included the need for affiliation and the motivations for relationship maintenance and initiation. Using data from an online survey ($N = 249$), structural equation modeling analyses revealed that self-disclosure amount and positivity were positively associated with intimacy, while self-disclosure honesty and intent were not associated with intimacy. The study also found no direct association between the need for affiliation and self-disclosure. Rather, the need for affiliation was associated with the motivations for relationship maintenance and initiation, which in turn affected self-disclosure and intimacy. The theoretical implications of the study were discussed.

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1. Introduction

The last few years have seen an exponential growth in the use of social network sites (SNSs). SNSs, online places where a user can create a profile and build a personal network that connects him or her to other users (Lenhart, 2007), have developed from a small number of online groups with a social need to identify people in adjacent areas to huge networks that connect tens of millions of Internet users. For instance, Facebook, originally started for university students, faculty, and staff, has expanded to include high schools, corporations, and geographic communities. As of January 2011, Facebook was the second most visited website both in the United States and worldwide (Alexa Web Search-Top 100, 2011), and the number of active users surpassed 500 million (Facebook.com, 2010).

This unprecedented popularity of SNSs such as Facebook has consequently fueled a variety of academic studies with respect to the uses and consequences of SNSs from several domains, but most particularly from computer-mediated communication (CMC) scholars. For example, Hargittai (2007) compared users and non-users of four different SNSs, while Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008) investigated identity construction on Facebook. Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007) examined the relationship between the use of Facebook and bonding, bridging, and maintained social capital. In addition, Walthers, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, and Tong (2008) explored the effect of cues deposited by social part-

ners onto one's Facebook profile on observers' impressions of the profile owner.

Despite the academic endeavors to understand the rapidly growing use of SNSs, there have been few studies that investigated the motivations for, and consequences from, the uses of SNSs from the perspective of interpersonal relationships. Although there are a variety of different purposes and types in SNSs (e.g., Facebook or MySpace for maintaining existing social networks, LinkedIn for professional networking, etc.), we are particularly interested in self-disclosure in Facebook and its impact on the feeling of intimacy toward other users including Facebook "friends". Traditional interpersonal communication theories such as social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) or incremental exchange theory (Levinger & Snoek, 1972) posit that there is a linear increase over time of the breadth and depth of self-disclosure, and the increased self-disclosure in turn leads to intimacy or relationship satisfaction. In this regard, SNS users present their personal information (e.g., profile, photos, stories, etc.) acknowledging that their Facebook friends and even other people who do not know the users can see their postings. This active self-disclosing behavior can be associated with relational outcomes of Facebook uses such as intimacy among users. One of the purposes of the present study is therefore to examine the association between Facebook users' self-disclosure and intimacy.

Further, we investigate the effect of the need for affiliation or the need to belong¹ as an antecedent of self-disclosure in Facebook. As a number of studies have indicated, establishing and maintaining attachments and connections with others are an essential human

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¹ Baumeister and Leary (1995) indicate that the need to belong is a more fundamental human desire than the need for affiliation.

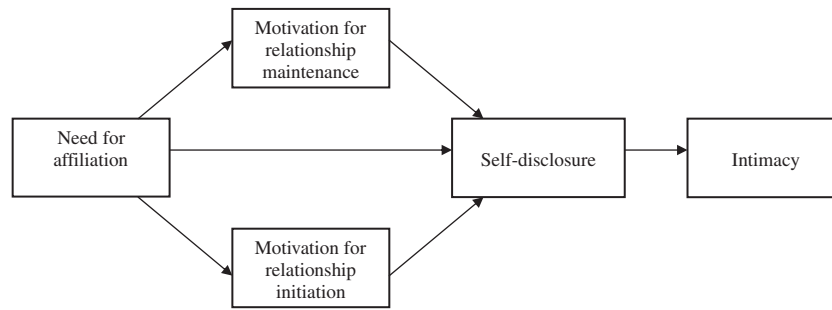


Fig. 1. Hypothesized research model.

desire (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1968; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, we expect that Facebook users' need for affiliation is positively associated with self-disclosure and consequently leads to intimacy. In addition, previous studies on SNSs (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008) have continuously found that the key motivations for using SNSs with respect to interpersonal relationships are maintaining existing relationships and initiating new relationships. Given that the need for affiliation or the need to belong is a central facilitator to form and maintain significant and meaningful interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), it is expected that the need for affiliation has positive associations with the motivations for relationship maintenance and relationship initiation, which may jointly accelerate self-disclosure in Facebook. Taken together, we suggest a model (see Fig. 1) in which self-disclosure is influenced by two types of relational motivations (i.e., maintaining and initiating); the need for affiliation affects the three variables; and intimacy is influenced by self-disclosure in the Facebook context. The current study tests this research model.

2. Self-disclosure and intimacy in Facebook

In Facebook, users can present themselves via an online profile, invite friends who can post comments on their personal pages, and search for others' profiles and visit their personal pages. In addition, it is possible to join online groups sharing common interests and learn about other group members' hobbies, activities, romantic relationships, or even sexual orientations. What makes Facebook unique compared to other SNSs is that users who are in the same network or group, by default, can view each other's profiles as long as a profile owner does not deny approval to those in their network, even if they are completely strangers to the owner (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Facebook users therefore are consciously or unconsciously aware that they are disclosing their personal information including comments and photos in this new online venue for social networking.

Self-disclosure has been defined by many scholars (e.g., Cozby, 1973; Wheelless, 1978; Wheelless & Grotz, 1976), yet in a simple term, it refers to "an interaction between at least two individuals where one intends to deliberately divulge something personal to another" (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006, p. 411). Also, intimacy can be defined as a feeling of closeness developed from personal disclosures between communication partners (Perlman & Fehr, 1987). Further, intimacy is regarded as a personal and subjective sense of connectedness resulted from an interpersonal, reciprocal process of self-disclosure between relational partners (Greene et al., 2006; Laurenceau, Rivera, Schaffer, & Pietromonaco, 2004; Prager, 1995; Reis & Shaver, 1988) and as a defining characteristic of close relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Thus, self-disclosure is an important component for relationship development and feelings of intimacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega, Winstead, Wong, & Greenspan, 1987; Laurenceau, Feldman Barrett,

& Pietromonaco, 1998; Laurenceau & Kleinman, 2006; Patterson, 1984). For instance, Rubin, Hill, Peplau, and Dunkel-Schetter (1980) showed that self-disclosure to one's dating partner was positively associated with self-reports of love such as feelings of attachment, caring, and intimacy. In the context of CMC, previous research found a significant role of self-disclosure in online dating (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006), virtual work teams (Walther, Slovacek, & Tidwell, 2001), and learning in classrooms (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). These studies commonly showed that self-disclosure plays an essential role in developing relationships by promoting trust, commitment, and intimacy between relational partners.

It should be noted, however, that people rarely disclose themselves to the same extent with everyone. Social exchange theories assume that people develop and maintain relationships based upon reciprocity in the exchange of costs and rewards in their relationships (Buunk & Schaufeli, 1999; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). In other words, individuals tend to reveal themselves to people who self-disclose to them (Collins & Miller, 1994), and they are inclined to respond to received disclosure with their own disclosure in return (Jourard & Jaffe, 1970; Rubin, 1970; Savicki, 1972). In Facebook, one person's self-disclosure input, such as postings, messages, or photos on his/her profile, can encourage another's disclosure in response to the first person's postings and photos, which in turn encourages the first person to disclose more, and so on. This reciprocal process of self-disclosure is expected to increase intimacy between Facebook users.

It is also notable that self-disclosure is not a one-dimensional construct. Rather, it can be assessed by both quantity and quality. In the current study, we evaluate four dimensions of self-disclosure: amount, honesty, intent, and positivity. The amount dimension represents the quantity aspect of self-disclosure, while the other three dimensions (i.e., how much honest, how much intended, and how much positive personal information are presented) reflect the quality aspect. We expect a positive relationship between the amount of self-disclosure and the degree of intimacy between Facebook users, because this is the basic premise of theories on self-disclosure (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973). In the case of self-disclosure honesty, intent, and positivity, in contrast, it is somewhat hard to anticipate positive associations between these qualitative self-disclosure dimensions and intimacy. For instance, Facebook users may provide incorrect information in order to achieve certain relational goals such as making good impressions. Also, users may unintentionally divulge their personal information without much deliberated control, which may enhance intimacy. Further, with respect to positivity, it may be possible that when Facebook users disclose negatively valenced episodes of their lives, intimacy may be even more increased due to the dramatized effect of the negative stories. Thus, these negative associations between the quality aspects of self-disclosure and intimacy are also plausible. However, given that Facebook has been primarily used for the purpose of keeping users' existing

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