



When is trust not enough? The role of perceived privacy of communication tools in comfort with self-disclosure

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ABSTRACT

In what circumstances might privacy concerns about new communication tools like instant messaging help predict the degree to which people feel comfortable communicating via these new communication tools? The current study examined whether topic intimacy and perceived privacy predict levels of comfort with disclosure, and whether these associations are moderated by overall levels of trust and frequency of technology use. Participants reported on the degree to which they would feel comfortable discussing each of 32 topics (e.g., “times when I felt that I was in love”) using 10 different communication tools. Topic and tool interacted, such that the privacy of the communication tool was related to disclosure comfort only for intimate topics. Privacy concerns were more important to less frequent technology users, and topic intimacy mattered most to participants with low levels of trust. Results are discussed in terms of implications for extending models of disclosure to the selection of new communication tools.

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1. Introduction

It is virtually a truism that self-disclosure is crucial for personal and relationship well-being. With respect to personal well-being, self-disclosure has been found to be related to lower levels of loneliness (Chelune, Sultan, & Williams, 1980). With respect to relationship well-being, logically, it is difficult for people to develop relationships when they know little about each other. Empirical findings support this logic. In particular, disclosure has been consistently found to be related to interpersonal liking (Collins & Miller, 1994), a finding which extends to friendships (Miller, 1990), the parent–child relationship (Papini & Farmer, 1990), as well as marital and other romantic relationships (Hendrick, 1981; Laurenceau, Feldman Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). This is the case both at the between-subjects level as well as at the within-subjects level, with people who disclose more reporting more satisfaction and partners reporting greater feelings of intimacy at times when they engage in higher levels of disclosure (Laurenceau et al., 1998).

Traditionally, the study of self-disclosure has focused on the variables of audience and topic. Research in this tradition has suggested that each of these contextual factors play a role in disclosure. With respect to audience, for instance, research suggests that people are more likely to disclose to audiences for whom they have greater liking (Collins & Miller, 1994) and to whom they feel closer (Dindia, Fitzpatrick, & Kenny, 1997). With respect to topic, research suggests that people are more likely to disclose when they

are discussing less intimate topics (Sollie & Fischer, 1985). Such research suggests that disclosure is by no means constant; context plays an important role in helping to shape disclosures.

With the advent of new technologies (e.g., Internet, text messaging, blogs), there is an additional contextual factor that may help shape disclosures. *How* people disclose information may play just as large of a role as what they disclose and to whom they disclose in predicting the degree to which people are willing to reveal information. Although people have always had a choice, to some degree, in how they disclose information (e.g., via letter, in-person, or over the phone), in the past few decades the number of options of communication media has skyrocketed, as people are more and more likely to turn to cell phones, email, and other new media to keep in touch with friends and family, with university students reporting nearly daily use of email (Imhof, Vollmeyer, & Beierlein, 2007). Although there is a wide body of research concerning people's disclosure patterns to strangers via computer-mediated communication versus face-to-face interaction (e.g., Joinson, 2001; Joinson, Woodley, & Ulf-Dietrich, 2004; Tidwell & Walther, 2002) and comparing patterns of exclusively online versus exclusively offline friendships (e.g., Chan & Cheng, 2004), there is less research concerning people's use of various new communication tools to disclose to friends and family (see Kim, Kim, Park, & Rice, 2007, article 2). The goal of the current study is to help fill this gap by examining what difference, if any, communication tool makes in people's comfort with disclosure. In light of this goal, the remainder of this introduction is divided into four sections. The first reviews research concerning disclosure via different communication media. The second and third review two possible moderators of disclosure patterns: familiarity

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with technology and the trait of trust. The fourth section provides an overview of the current study, designed to investigate people's comfort with disclosing different types of information using different communication tools.

1.1. Communication media

Although there is some evidence to the contrary (e.g., Jourard & Friedman, 1970), the bulk of research suggests that, when communication takes place via a medium that allows potential disclosers to feel somewhat separated from their audience, they are more likely to disclose. For instance, when interacting with a stranger, people tend to disclose more when using computer-mediated communication tools (CMC) than when interacting face-to-face (Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Furthermore, when people feel less identifiable (e.g., being greeted for an online study with an impersonal versus personal salutation), they tend to reveal more information about themselves (Joinson et al., 2004). Together, such results suggest that feelings of greater distance and anonymity foster greater disclosure.

When thinking about these findings, however, two important caveats must be kept in mind. First, the audiences in these studies were generally strangers. Since people's patterns of disclosure tend to differ with audience (e.g., Dindia et al., 1997), it is not clear whether people would continue to reveal more information to people they know when using communication tools that foster a greater sense of distance. Second, since the communication took place in a research context, there was little reason for participants to be concerned about the privacy of what they disclosed.

Privacy concerns are likely to have real repercussions for people's willingness to disclose information. It has been noted that when people make the decisions about whether or not to disclose information, they tend to take the potential risks of such disclosure into account (Omarzu, 2000). Although such risks have been traditionally conceptualized in terms of being misunderstood, there is also a risk of lack of privacy, with an unintended audience receiving a disclosure. While this has always been the case, to some degree (e.g., through interception of letters), such concerns are particularly salient with respect to new communication media (e.g., hackers). Indeed, there is a growing body of research looking at people's willingness to disclose information, and how that willingness is related to their expectations of privacy and confidentiality. For instance, in a study examining disclosure using more traditional media (i.e., face-to-face disclosure), participants reported that increased expectations of confidentiality would foster more disclosure (Kobocow, McGuire, & Blau, 1983). A similar relationship between confidentiality and perceived security and disclosure has been found for people using the Internet, with people being more willing to reveal information to a company that presents a complete privacy statement than to a company with a less than complete statement (Andrade, Kaltcheva, & Weitz, 2002). Thus, it appears that circumstances that foster a sense of privacy are also likely to foster disclosure.

Such findings raise several questions with respect to people's everyday disclosures. When people disclose information to their friends and family, they have a choice of which tools to use. When people contemplate disclosing information to their friends and family, are they more likely to disclose that information when using a communication medium that fosters a greater sense of distance (e.g., email) or a greater sense of privacy (e.g., face-to-face)? In order to address this question, it is necessary to examine people's disclosure intentions across a wide variety of communication media, as well as their perceptions of those media. This was one goal of the current study. It was expected that distance would be less important when people were disclosing to known others. Instead, it was expected that privacy would be most important in

disclosure decisions and that people would report more willingness to disclose information when they used communication media that they perceived as being more secure and offering a greater sense of privacy (Hypothesis 1).

In addition to looking at this association between perceived privacy and disclosure, we examined the possible role of *what* people disclosed. Previous research suggests that, with respect to traditional communication media, such as face-to-face communication, topic of disclosure makes a difference in how much people reveal, with people disclosing less when they are discussing a more intimate or personal topic (Sollie & Fischer, 1985). With such findings in mind, we expected privacy concerns to be particularly salient in disclosure decisions when people were contemplating disclosure with respect to more intimate or personal topics. In other words, we expected to find that topic and medium interacted to predict disclosure comfort, with perceptions of privacy having the greatest association with disclosure when people were contemplating discussing more intimate topics (Hypothesis 2).

1.2. Experience

Although various new communication tools are becoming increasingly ubiquitous, there continues to be variability in the amount of experience that people have with various tools. For instance, while some people may occasionally check their email, others may experience discomfort if they are away from it for too long. It seems reasonable to expect that the frequency with which people use various communication tools would be related to their tendency to disclose information using those tools. For instance, a study examining disclosure via ICQ revealed that people who are more frequent users of that tool tend to disclose more information using that tool (Lai-Yee & Leung, 2006).

Beyond such main effects of greater use being related to greater disclosure, it seems likely that people's use of various tools would be related to their perceptions of those tools. In particular, previous investigations of people's use of e-retail have found that people with more familiarity with this method of buying products tend to have greater trust in it (e.g., Walczuch & Lundgren, 2004). Furthermore, people with more computer experience tend to have fewer negative feelings toward computers (see e.g., Moon, 2003), and people with less anxiety regarding computers tend to have more faith in technology (Thatcher, Loughry, Lim, & McKnight, 2007). Such findings suggest that more frequent users of new communication media may have fewer concerns regarding the privacy of those media (Hypothesis 3). At the same time, however, frequent users of various communication media may be more sensitive to the potential privacy concerns of those media (see e.g., VanDyke, 2007), raising the possibility that, while overall levels of privacy concern for this group may be relatively low, there may be a greater association between privacy concern and disclosure among more frequent users of various communication media. In other words, frequent communication media users may have relatively few concerns about the privacy of those media, but, when they do have concerns, they may be particularly apt to alter their disclosure patterns in response to those concerns (Hypothesis 4).

1.3. Personality

In addition to experience factors, personality is likely to be predictive of people's tendency to disclose information. In particular, previous research has found that people with a more trusting personality, in terms of a secure attachment style (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991) and in terms of generalized feelings of trust (Evans & Revelle, 2008; Foubert & Sholley, 1996; Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Mooradian, Renzl, & Matzler, 2006) tend to engage in more disclosure-related types of behaviors. Therefore, it is likely

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