"It's Not Who You Know, but Who You Add:" An investigation into the differential impact of friend adding and self-disclosure on interpersonal perceptions on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

This research seeks to understand how people perceive and respond to structural factors and different types of disclosure on Facebook when evaluating the profile of someone they have never met offline. Using a 2 × 3 × 2 between-subjects experimental design, this research explored the relationship between friend adding (add; no add), levels of self-disclosure (low, medium, high), and sex of the Facebook profile owner (male; female) on feelings of interpersonal liking, future behavioral intentions to interact, and homophily. Results indicated that friend adding and higher levels of self-disclosure led to greater feelings of interpersonal liking and homophily amongst both male and female participants. In addition, males tended to view other male profiles with moderate amounts of disclosure and female profiles with the highest amount of disclosure most favorably. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, social networking sites (SNS) have enjoyed great success and rapid growth. Facebook was first introduced to college students in 2004 and was later opened up to people of all demographics (Chitnis, 2006; Creamer, 2007). Current estimates show that Facebook has approximately 1.19 billion active users worldwide, making it the most popular SNS in the world (Facebook, 2014). Recently, more than 70% of young adults (under the age of 30) indicated that they had some type of social networking profile, signifying that they are a key demographic of responsible for the growth of Facebook (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). The staggering growth as well as unlimited potential of SNS to connect people with one another has led to many research questions and subsequent studies that have focused on the effect of SNS on interpersonal dynamics and the relationship formation process.

Facebook provides users with capabilities to build extensive online social networks of friends in ways that may transcend the limits of traditional face-to-face (FTF) interaction. Even though people have been able to communicate electronically through the

Internet for quite some time, SNS sites like Facebook streamline the process by organizing information and networks in a way that allows people to easily access and communicate with others both within and outside of their network. People no longer have to wonder if they can connect with acquaintances or strangers that they may see in passing or that they might interact with (face-to-face) at a social event. Instead, people can use Facebook to search for others that they have not met previously or to catch up with people that they may have lost touch with or come across in a brief social encounter.

The process of "friending" on Facebook involves reciprocal agreement between the person requesting the friendship and the target of that request. When one adds a friend, a message is sent to the potential target of the friendship and that person can either confirm or ignore the request. The intended friend target has the ability to view the profile of the person that "added" them. As a result of the access and widely shared information within this online social network, it is not uncommon to see people who are complete strangers or acquaintances "friending" one another on Facebook and building networks where they have hundreds and thousands of friends. Stefanone, Lackaff, and Rosen (2008) reported that 15% of a profile owner's Facebook friends are people that they have never met FTF. Recent research has illuminated the idea of

"promiscuous friending" which speaks to the fact that people are often willing to friend others that they do not know well in order to increase their network and social capital (Stefanone et al., 2008). While research has looked at factors which predict casual or promiscuous friends (Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2011), little is known about the role that "friending" itself plays in the formation of interpersonal perceptions that people form when they decide to include someone in their network. Since Facebook allows people to provide more information than any other form of SNS, it seems that connections between people are happening far more that they would in an offline context. The may be due to the fact that "friending" is a relatively easy thing to do, but it could also be due to the information that is widely available in personal profiles. Indeed, research has shown that the social context cues available on Facebook (e.g., pieces of information available in personal profiles) does impact how we perceive and evaluate those who are both in and outside of our networks (Kleck, Reese, Behnkin, & Sundar, 2007; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tom Tong, 2008).

Facebook and similar SNS also have the potential to change the nature of existing or new interpersonal relationship maintenance and growth. In regular face-to-face interactions, people get to know one another through the process of self-disclosure. In the online world, self-disclosure is often moderated by the availability of social context cues (Tanis & Postmes, 2003; Walther, 1992). The amount of information and social context cues that one can present on Facebook are far greater than the capabilities and affordances of other SNS (Stutzman, 2005). In addition, Facebook provides individuals with the ability to passively troll through others' profile information in an instantaneous and unobtrusive manner. Therefore, people who communicate and search for information on Facebook do not need to be physically present in order for communication to take place and for relationships to develop. The advent of Facebook has enhanced peoples' abilities to contact known and unknown others by increasing access to one another and accelerating the processes of information exchange, which is crucial to the relationship formation process.

Guided by multiple theoretical perspectives involving cognition and self-disclosure, the primary purpose of this study was to investigate students' perceptions of a potential Facebook friend that they have not previously met online or offline. Considering three potential influences that are integral parts of Facebook interactions – friend adding, level of information in profile, and profile model sex – this research seeks to shed some light on possible mechanisms that influence how people form interpersonal perceptions of a potential Facebook friend that they have not met previously offline.

1.1. Cognitive theory and the process of friend adding

Research has shown that people have a wide variety of reasons or motives for using Facebook, but two of the more common reasons why people use this SNS platform are to engage in social interaction and to keep in contact with the people that they already know (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Sheldon, 2008; Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011). This should not come as a surprise given the fact that the entire premise of Facebook is to "give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (Facebook, 2014). However, research has also shown that people are using Facebook to search for people that are both known and unknown to them in an offline context (Joinson, 2008; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2007). So while the strongest motivations for using Facebook appear to be tied to enhancing, building, and interacting with others that individuals already know, the mere fact that people are often searching for unknown or little known others signals a need to better understand how people perceive those who are relatively unknown in the SNS context.

The extant research on Facebook has shown that people are mostly connected to people they know or are acquainted with outside of the online SNS environment (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007). However, because people keep such large friend networks on Facebook, it is plausible that these networks might also include people that they have not actually met or have no previous relationship with offline. Recently, Stefanone et al. (2008) explored why people might include unknowns into their networks and posited the term "promiscuous friending" (p. 108). According to Stefanone et al. (2008), people who accept friend requests without intimately knowing someone else (e.g., in a promiscuous manner) may be driven by a need for attention. Another possibility is that individuals might be accepting people that they have never met in an offline context because they want to build social capital as previous research has shown that people with larger networks often perceive this as being positive (Ellison et al., 2007). While a clearer picture is starting to emerge as to why people feel compelled to accept acquaintances or unknowns into their networks, relatively little is known about the effect of adding an unknown person as a friend on interpersonal perceptions.

The theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) hypothesizes that individuals base their voluntary decisions on two factors. The first is the individual's attitude toward the particular behavior, which must be balanced against how others will perceive the individual if the behavior is carried out. When individuals are faced with the option of adding a friend on Facebook, they must take into account their attitude toward the person requesting the friendship, as well as the social norms regarding friend adding, and what the potential friend will think of the individual should the friend request be denied. Depending on how much the individual values not being thought ill of, the choice may be made to accept the friend request despite a potentially unfavorable attitude toward the person making the request.

This puts individuals in a potentially awkward situation: social norms may dictate that they now label this unknown individual as a friend without actually agreeing with the label. The theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) explains that when a set of cognitions conflict, as would be the case when an individual labels someone they do not know or do not like as a friend, those conflicting cognitions elicit an unpleasant and motivating psychological discomfort. This discomfort motivates individuals to resolve the conflicting cognitions (Elliot & Devine, 1994). As a result, people tend to change their attitudes to alleviate or lessen the dissonance associated with their decision. If a person adds someone they do not know very well to their list of friends on Facebook, they may experience dissonance and feel discomfort as a result of their decision. Because they have already made a behavioral decision, it is plausible to assume they would change their attitudes toward the new friend in order to alleviate the dissonance, leading to the following hypotheses:

H1. Adding a friend will lead to greater feelings of interpersonal liking.

H2. Adding a friend will lead to greater feelings of future behavioral intentions to interact with that person.

H3. Adding a friend will lead to greater feelings of homophily.

Although we hypothesize that the friend acquisition process may have profound influence on how people perceive and evaluate an unknown friend on Facebook, interpersonal and computer-mediated communication literature suggests that the processes of self-disclosure and self-presentation are central for determining how people form relationships and perceive one another across different communication contexts.