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Offline time is quality time. Comparing within-group self-disclosure in mobile messaging applications and face-to-face interactions



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ABSTRACT

In contrast to the prominent individualistic view on self-disclosure, this study focuses on self-disclosure in groups of prior acquaintances that both meet offline and communicate online. It compares within-group self-disclosure between offline face-to-face (FtF) interactions and online communication via mobile messaging applications (MMAs). An online-survey ($N = 357$) was conducted to test for differences between within-group self-disclosure online and offline across four dimensions (amount, depth, breadth, valence). The results show that there is more amount, more breadth and more depth for offline within-group self-disclosure, but it is less positively valenced than online within-group self-disclosure. Interestingly, the mere frequency of communication is higher in an MMA environment. In spite of the permanent availability of the online communication sphere, group members do not permanently disclose personal information to each other online. Thus, for within-group self-disclosure, offline time seems quality time.

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Social groups no longer meet exclusively in physical settings, where members encounter each other face-to-face (FtF). They also exchange messages online.¹ For online group communication, mobile messaging applications (MMAs) provide a promising communication environment. These highly popular applications help to overcome the difficulties of coordinating and organizing FtF meetings which increase with the size of a social group. Group functionality is even perceived as one of the greatest advantages of MMAs over traditional text messaging (Church & Oliveira, 2013). WhatsApp alone, one of the largest MMAs, reported to have more than 700 million users worldwide (Statista, 2015). MMAs have become one of the most frequently used applications in mobile communication devices with, for example, 36 percent of smartphone users in the US using MMAs (Duggan, 2015) and German smartphone users spending 92 min daily communicating via MMAs (Trepte & Masur, 2015). These applications allow their users to be “permanently online [and] permanently connected” (Vorderer, 2015, p. 259) to their peers. With MMAs, people can satisfy their

inherent need to belong to other people in dyadic, intimate relationships or social groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) at any time and any situation, by exchanging both personal and non-personal information.

Sharing personal information, that is, the process of self-disclosure, is an important mechanism for building and maintaining relationships (e.g., Petronio, 2008). It is equally important in building trust between members of a social group and strengthening group identity (Joinson & Paine, 2007). For social groups, MMAs provide the ample opportunity to permanently communicate and thus to permanently self-disclose within the group. This raises the question whether group members seize their opportunity to self-disclose via these relatively new applications and consequently how self-disclosure differs in online settings (more specifically in MMAs) in contrast to FtF encounters.

Revealing personal information via the internet has been a concern of both scientific research and public discourse (e.g., Chang & Heo, 2014; Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2012; Daily Mail Reporter, 2012; Ellison, Vitak, Steinfield, Gray, & Lampe, 2011; Joinson, Houghton, Vasalou, & Marder, 2011). Numerous comparative studies have examined dyadic self-disclosure in online versus offline settings. Findings as to which communication situation elicits more self-disclosure are mixed, however, there is a tendency to assume that personal information is more frequently shared in online compared to offline communication (Nguyen, Bin, & Campbell, 2012).

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¹ Note: ‘Online’ refers to communication that is mediated by a computer and the Internet (i.e., CMC), whereas ‘offline’ represents interactions where interaction partners are physically present (i.e., FtF).

In addition, these studies mostly compared self-disclosure in initial interaction among strangers. This is different for communication via MMAs. Interaction partners often know each other before the online interaction since they usually have to exchange contact data (e.g., phone numbers) prior to contacting each other.

This study extends research on self-disclosure in two important ways: First, it compares FtF interaction with mobile computer-mediated communication via MMAs in communication among prior acquaintances. In doing so, we seek to further our understanding of the implications of new communication technologies for self-disclosure, which is “a valuable avenue to help continue refining our understanding of this important communication construct and, more generally, personal relationships in the contemporary media environment” (Rains & Brunner, 2014, p. 32). Second, it examines self-disclosure in the context of a particular audience, that is, a social group, which differs both from self-disclosure in a dyad and on a social networking site (SNS). To our knowledge, no study has explored self-disclosure within a group of prior acquaintances, thus tapping into their natural setting.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Self-disclosure in a group context

In the context of this article, self-disclosure is understood as the process of verbally sharing personal information (Cozby, 1973; Omarzu, 2000) and defined as “any message about the self that a person communicates to another” (Wheless & Grotz, 1976, p. 338). Personal information refers to descriptive, evaluative, as well as affective content (Omarzu, 2000): People can disclose personal facts such as age or music preference, their opinions and attitudes, their moods and their emotions. In addition, self-disclosure requires at least one other person the discloser can reveal information to. Self-disclosure can thus occur in a dyad, but also *within* a social group.

Self-disclosure within a group is a relatively unexplored area of research. We consider a constellation of at least three individuals interacting with each other as a group (Howard, 2014). In addition, these individuals have to “share a common social identification of themselves ... or perceive themselves to be members of the same social category” (Turner, 1982, p. 15). The group needs to have a collective perception of its social unity. For this study, we conceptualize within-group self-disclosure as follows: within-group self-disclosure describes the process of verbally sharing personal information (Cozby, 1973; Omarzu, 2000) and defined as “any message about the self” (Wheless & Grotz, 1976, p. 338) *that a group member communicates to the group as a whole*. With this definition, we specify the discloser and the respective audience. The discloser is more or less acquainted with his or her audience and shares a common social categorization with it, that is, belonging to the same social group.

A human being's effort to maintain social group memberships is rooted in an inherent need to belong that originates in the evolution of mankind (Baumeister & Leary, 1995): People “seem to need frequent, affectively pleasant or positive interactions with the same individuals, and they need these interactions to occur in a framework of long-term, stable caring and concern” (p. 520). This applies to both dyadic, intimate relationships and social groups. Being part of a social group has positive effects on physical and mental health, whereas threats to social bonds quickly lead to negative emotional states (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Williams, 2007). Self-disclosure is important for social groups because on the one hand, individuals can use self-disclosure “to receive emotional support” (Treppe, Dienlin, & Reinecke, 2015, p. 79). In addition, Joinson and Paine (2007) argue that disclosure “within groups can serve to enhance the bonds of trust between group members, but it can also serve

to legitimize group membership and strengthen group identity” (p. 235).

When an individual decides to disclose personal information, he or she has to take benefits and possible risks into account (Altman, 1975; Derlega & Chaikin, 1977; Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006; Petronio, 2012). In comparison to self-disclosure in dyads, a discloser within a group has to consider a greater number of people that might misuse this information. Rules, that is, group-specific norms, are negotiated between co-owners of shared information, since groups or individuals might forward the given information (Joinson et al., 2011). These norms are “an abstract idea of a behaviour held in the mind of the group members that sets certain limits for acceptable behaviour” (Burnett & Bonnici, 2003, p. 334) and thus determine the appropriateness of self-disclosure within a group. These “privacy norms ... are communicated when individuals enter pre-existing boundaries (e.g., the family) or are negotiated when new boundaries are formed” (Joinson et al., 2011, pp. 37–38).

Some studies investigated the influence of group size on disclosure (Solano & Dunnam, 1985; Taylor, DeSoto, & Lieb, 1979). Even though these studies looked beyond dyadic interaction, participants in the studies would most likely not have categorized themselves as being part of a social group. However, these studies found that group size has an impact on self-disclosure in that the presence of more than one person decreases actual self-disclosure, the willingness to self-disclose and the level of intimacy. This lends support to our notion that self-disclosure within a group cannot be treated the same way as in a dyadic interaction and should be examined as relevant communication phenomenon.

As stated above, people “seem to need frequent ... interactions with the same individuals” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 520). Self-disclosure within a group is a relevant tool for social groups. MMAs offer social groups a permanently available communication sphere which can provide these much-needed frequent interactions. The question arises whether social groups make use of this communication sphere to disclose personal information and whether they do so to a different extent than in FtF encounters.

Many scholars have compared self-disclosure in online and offline settings and identified individual dispositions as influencing factors (e.g., Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Krasnova, Spiekermann, Koroleva, & Hildebrand, 2010; Krasnova, Veltri, & Günther, 2012; Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010; Tufekci, 2008; Walrave & Heirman, 2011). However, individual dispositions cannot fully explain why people reveal personal information. In order to understand self-disclosing behavior, it is equally important to consider “situational knowledge of context” (Stutzman, Capra, & Thompson, 2011, p. 591). According to Altman (1975), a social individual needs to disclose, however, when disclosing, he or she must adjust the disclosure to their privacy attitudes, their goals and their knowledge about the context. This knowledge can, among others, refer to “the boundary of a room [or] the trustworthiness of communication partners” (Stutzman et al., 2011, p. 591). These factors are important to take into account since self-disclosure is always connected with a certain risk of revealing information to someone who might misuse this information (Altman, 1975; Greene et al., 2006; Petronio, 2012).

The current study considers two particular context factors, the discloser's audience, in our case a particular (pre-existing) social group, and the communication channel used for self-disclosure. To whom we reveal personal information shapes how and what we disclose. For example, the level of intimacy of a disclosure is influenced by whether a person reveals personal information to their spouse or a new acquaintance, that is, knowing the audience versus not knowing the audience impacts self-disclosure (Taylor et al., 1979). The communication channel used to reveal personal information has also an impact on self-disclosure: self-disclosure via

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