



# Stranger on the internet: Online self-disclosure and the role of visual anonymity



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 27 February 2015

### Keywords:

Self-disclosure  
Anonymity  
Computer-mediated communication  
YouTube  
Qualitative study

## ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the phenomenon of online self-disclosure. Two qualitative data analyses of YouTube videos were conducted. The studies revealed emerging forms of self-disclosure online, which are not necessarily bound to conditions of visual anonymity. This finding puts previous research results into question, which stress the strong correlation between self-disclosure and visual anonymity. The results of both qualitative studies showed that people also tend to disclose information in (visually) non-anonymous settings.

The paper concludes by presenting a revised model of online self-disclosure and describing enhancing factors for self-disclosing behaviour on the internet based on the latest research results.

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## 1. Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure, which has been intensively studied since the 1970s, pertains to the process of exposing personal and intimate information. Defined by Archer (1980, p. 183) it can be described as the act of revealing personal information to others, and, in the proper sense, when it concerns a person's own information. Parameters of self-disclosure include the breadth (or amount), the intimacy (or depth) and duration of self-revelation (Cozby, 1973). Breadth means the number of details revealed, intimacy describes the level of privacy, and duration refers to the time spent on revealing the information.

Self-disclosure is a relevant factor in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Based on the social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) it is a crucial part of relationship development, which ranges from non-intimate to increasingly more intimate information exchange. There is a good number of research concerning the relationship between self-disclosure and liking (Berg & Archer, 1983; Chalkin & Derlega, 1974). Furthermore, self-disclosure seems to be a symmetrical process within dyads (e.g., Jourard & Landsman, 1960; Jourard & Resnick, 1970). Often, it is a process that occurs incrementally and takes time to develop (e.g., summary Pearce & Sharp, 1973). The process itself of revealing information is normally characterised by reciprocity (Jourard, 1959; Jourard & Landsman, 1960; Jourard & Richman, 1963). Both factors, reciprocity and time

(incremental development), tend to become less important when the social actors are strangers and the possibility of future interactions is unlikely (see the experiment by Murdoch, Chenowith, & Rissman, 1969). This phenomenon is known as the 'stranger-on-the-train' effect, which describes the fact that people disclose significantly more and faster to strangers when future interaction does not seem to be probable (e.g., John, Acquisti, & Loewenstein, 2011).

While psychologists analyse self-disclosure in the context of personality traits and focus on its emotional components and effects, this paper draws the attention to the media characteristics (channel characteristics of internet services) and to their influence on the willingness of users to disclose information on the internet. This paper deals with the initial and insofar proactive forms of self-disclosing behaviour in YouTube videos. The aim is to show that self-disclosure occurs online, even when the disclosing person is visually not anonymous – a finding, which puts previous research into question which claimed a strong relationship between visual anonymity and self-disclosure (e.g., Joinson, 2001).

## 2. Self-disclosure online: Current state of research

Empirical studies have shown that the willingness to disclose information is significantly higher in the context of computer-mediated communication than in face-to-face-settings. In addition, it seems as if anonymity plays a decisive role within this process (e.g., Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Chiou, 2006; Joinson, 2001; Suler, 2004; Taddei, Contena, & Grana, 2010; Weisband & Kiesler, 1996).

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Most studies about self-disclosure online investigated the self-disclosing behaviour of children, adolescents, or students in the context of social network sites (e.g., Chen & Marcus, 2012; De Souza & Dick, 2009; DeGroot, 2008; Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010; Palmieri, Prestano, Gandley, Overton, & Qin, 2012; Park, Jin, & Annie Jin, 2011) or personal weblogs (Chen, 2012; Hollenbaugh, 2010; Lee, Im, & Taylor, 2008; Qian & Scott, 2007). They discovered that online self-disclosure did not foster the use of social network sites (Ledbetter et al., 2011) but weblogs only (e.g., Lee et al., 2008). Research on gender aspects offered inconsistent data. Some studies showed gender differences in online self-disclosing behaviour, which revealed that females divulge significantly lesser information on their social network sites compared to male users (Special & Li-Barber, 2012; Wu & Lu, 2013). Other studies found no difference at all (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007). Further studies revealed differences of self-disclosing behaviour in relation to age and compared the disclosing behaviour of pre-adolescents and adolescents offline and online (e.g., Valkenburg, Sumter, & Peter, 2011). Several research studies analysed the process within online discussion groups (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007) and proved the effect of contextual (group) norms as already indicated by the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). Experimental studies revealed a greater depth of disclosure among strangers when communicating online (Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). However, this is not the case for friends using cmc (computer mediated communication) (Chan & Cheng, 2004). Overall, it seems as if different norms on disclosing information might be salient when communicating online (Mesch & Beker, 2010).

Despite the large number of studies dealing with the phenomenon of online self-disclosure, there are hardly any studies that try to model self-disclosure theoretically. Nguyen, Bin, and Campbell (2012) came to the conclusion that the entire preliminary research on self-disclosure does not support any of the common theories concerning the effects of cmc (e.g., the cues filtered out approach, the SIDE model, or the model of hyperpersonal communication).

This paper aims to fill this gap by submitting a draft theoretical model of factors that shape the process of voluntary and not reciprocal self-disclosing behaviour on the internet.

### 3. Empirical investigation

As anonymity seems to be crucial for the increased willingness to disclose information online, we conducted two studies, using a qualitative approach, to analyse the role of anonymity in the context of self-disclosing behaviour online.

We understand the term anonymity as a condition where the sender or source of information is absent or not identifiable (e.g., Scott, 2004). This state of anonymity can be either visual or discursive. Visual anonymity means that the source of information cannot be detected physically. Discursive anonymity means that the messages of a person cannot be attributed to the sender (Scott, 2004). Both kinds of anonymity can easily be realised on the internet through the use of pseudonyms, or by using services that have reduced communication channels (e.g., text only). Channel variety and richness are bound to anonymity. Having more channels can lead to a greater amount of social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986) which is therefore aggravating the condition of anonymity by supporting different levels of identifiability. These different levels show that anonymity is a condition that must be described in degrees. The more channels there are and the more data the medium can transfer, the richer the mediated communication gets (in terms of channel variety; see media richness approach; Daft & Lengel, 1984) and the lower the degree of anonymity served by this

medium becomes. Due to this fact, it has been concluded that the grade of visual anonymity or identifiability is central to the processes of online self-disclosure.

To analyse the correlation between anonymity, in particular visual anonymity and online self-disclosure, we analysed videos on YouTube, an internet service that provides textual, audio and visual channels. YouTube can be described as a rich medium in the above-mentioned sense. YouTube is a social-network oriented video platform, which allows its users to watch or upload videos, share content, subscribe to channels and comment or rate videos. It is the largest user-generated content video system worldwide (Cha, Kwak, Rodriguez, Ahn, & Moon, 2007) and is still one of the fastest growing websites.

There are different categories of videos on YouTube. These include sports, music, entertainment, film, comedy, gaming and vlogs. Vlogs are videoblogs. They are defined as 'sites where authors post stories and/or information about themselves in the form of video, rather than text, as traditional blogs include. They are public spaces for self-expression where authors control the content published' (Griffith & Papacharissi, 2010).

To detect whether (visual) anonymity is a crucial condition for self-disclosing behaviour online, we analysed self-disclosing videos (vlogs) on YouTube: (1) videos about self-injurious behaviours and (2) the so called '(note) card stories' (see Section 3.1.2).

#### 3.1. Selected videos

##### 3.1.1. Videos about self-injury

Self-injurious behaviour refers to a broad class of different symptoms (often associated with Borderline Personality Disorder and with juvenile behaviours) and is defined as a behaviour where individuals deliberately and cause (great) injury to themselves. It is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that has to be isolated from behavioural manners that indirectly damage the body (e.g., chronic drug or medication abuse) (Petermann & Winkel, 2009, p. 17; for the communicational purposes of self-injury see Misoch, 2010).

The most important feature of self-injury is that it is conducted in secrecy and is normally hidden from others (e.g., Conterio & Lader, 1998). The act of deliberately injuring oneself, as well as the consequential wounds and scars, are hidden and connected with emotions dominated by shame and guilt. This behaviour can be described as stigma management (Goffman, 1963) and can be explained as a strategy of the individual to hide discreditable information in social interactions (in this case, self-mutilation itself and the resulting wounds and scars) from others. The process of communicating its symptoms can be described as a process of self-disclosure (Misoch, 2010, 2012).

##### 3.1.2. Note card stories

So-called (note) card stories are a new frame of self-disclosing behaviour that makes use of online audio-visual channels. This new phenomenon uses the strategies of traditional offline communication – sheets of paper or cards with handwritten messages on it – and combines these messages with the new forms of communication, where the user holds up a camera with multimedia features, use the video medium and upload this video online. This new strategy for self-disclosure shows, instead of tells, a person's personal story. This method seems to occur more and more frequently and is used for deep self-disclosures on the internet. The term 'story' (instead of history) implies the subjectivity of the presented content. One of the first and most famous videos of this genre is the video uploaded by Jonah Mowry: 'Whats Goin On...' uploaded on 10.08.2011 (so far, the video has been watched by more than 10,846,000 users). The producer of this video talks respectively writes about his experience and suffering from

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