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Self-disclosure and student satisfaction with Facebook

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study was to extend existing research examining the specific motives for creating and maintaining Facebook, and to connect these motives to users' levels of self-disclosure and satisfaction with Facebook. Undergraduate students identified their reasons for using Facebook, privacy and self-disclosure settings, and satisfaction with Facebook's ability to meet these motivational needs. Results indicated that the most common motives for using Facebook were relationship maintenance, passing time, and entertainment, although gender differences in motives for creating a Facebook page were observed. Males and females also differed in the overall level of self-disclosure as well as the type of information presented on their Facebook pages. Levels of self-disclosure, but not privacy levels, were associated with greater levels of satisfaction with Facebook to meet certain motivational goals.

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1. Introduction

The first recognizable online social network site (SNS), SixDegrees.com, was introduced in 1997 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), creating a new method of online communication. Since that time, online SNSs have experienced enormous growth in both popularity and membership (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). In 2006, the Federal Bureau of Intelligence announced they had a list of at least 200 SNSs (Magid & Collier, 2007) and by 2008 that number had grown to 850 such sites (Swartz, 2008). These online SNSs have been established based on careers (i.e., LinkedIn), blogging (i.e., LiveJournal), photo-sharing (i.e., Flickr), or maintaining contact with friends and family (i.e., Twitter, MySpace, or Facebook).

Online SNSs allow users to create and maintain a public profile within the SNS and to contact other SNS users (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Other features of online SNSs may include the ability to join groups based on shared interests or associations, participate in discussion forums with other users, upload and share media (videos and photos), and organize events. Such features are important for communication between people because they provide an avenue by which individuals can maintain social interactions across long distances.

Among the existing SNSs, Facebook remains the most widely used and recognized. Facebook is the second most trafficked website on the internet (Alexa, 2011), the most visited social media site in the world, and has more than 800 million active users (Facebook, 2011)—many of whom are college students. Originally created by Mark Zuckerberg in early 2004 just for Harvard University students (Facebook, 2011), Facebook is a SNS that helps individuals stay connected with friends and family online. As Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) have discussed, Facebook is very much a part of the daily media routine of users in which 50% of active users log onto their account each day. The amount of time spent using Facebook varies—earlier studies documented an average use of 10–30 min per day (Cassidy, 2006; Ellison et al., 2007) whereas more current statistics indicate users access Facebook an average of 55 min per day (Facebook, 2011).

For many, Facebook is a part of daily life, and its pervasiveness raises the question of what users are doing on the site. Facebook offers the traditional social networking elements that enable users to network with other Facebook users, and offers additional features such as games and applications. Essentially, Facebook members can use the site in a variety of ways. Bumgarner (2007) determined that Facebook's uses include (from most to least important) friend functions (accepting/adding friends, browsing friend's profiles, seeing how friends are connected); personal information (reading personal information, looking through photos, reading walls, etc.); practical information (being able to find contact information); regulatory functions (having editorial control over the content associated with their profile, ability to update info or photos, manage privacy settings); groups (view, create, and join groups); events (finding or creating events.); and miscellaneous features (liking, poking, etc.).

2. Research on Facebook

Research on social networking systems such as Facebook have provided researchers with valuable information about SNSs

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because of its widespread use and its ability to organize relationships both off and online (Ellison et al., 2007). Facebook has experienced astronomical growth and is highly integrated with daily, real world activities. Its popularity may lie in its features, the ease of understanding and using the site, or its ability to permit social contact with a wide variety of individuals within any given moment. Early research examining online SNSs have focused predominately on the characteristics of these networking sites, their history, how they are impacting the internet (see Boyd, 2007; Boyd & Ellison, 2007), and whether online SNSs diminish face-to-face communication (Sheldon, 2008a).

Recently, however, research on Facebook and related SNSs have shifted to explore the possible psychological and social gains associated with the development and maintenance of a SNS. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (Ellison et al., 2007) proposed that SNSs such as Facebook may offer the user a method of accruing social capital in the form of multiple social relationships developed both off and online and maintained through interaction on a Facebook page. Indeed the establishment of a moderately large and stable social network via Facebook has been associated with a sense of well-being (Kim & Lee, 2011). On the other hand, having a very large list of Facebook friends has not been consistently associated with perceived social support (Kim & Lee, 2011) or with perceived popularity and social desirability (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008).

Multiple studies have been conducted examining the possible motives users of SNSs may have for creating such websites. For example, Bumgarner's (Bumgarner, 2007) study identified *social utility*, *directory* (keep track of people), *voyeurism*, *herd instincts* (using Facebook because other people are), *collection and connection* (organizing friends in one place), *personal expression*, and *initiating friendships* as motives. Similarly, in Joinson's (2008) study such motives as *social connection*, *shared identities*, *photographs, content*, *social investigation*, *social network surfing*, and *status updates* were identified. These studies indicate that the majority of motives described by SNS users for creating and maintaining a SNS are social in nature, that the focus is on providing seeking out off-line contacts using an online platform, to disclose information about oneself to other SNS users, and to ideally strengthen offline contacts using online self-disclosure and communication.

The identification of the major motives associated with the development of a SNS in general and Facebook in particular, is an important step in understanding why Facebook has become, practically overnight, an internet based phenomenon. On the other hand, the extent to which Facebook is capable of meeting the social goals of its users is a second, equally important dimension to consider. According to Aronson and Mill's (1959) "justification of effort hypothesis," users' satisfaction with Facebook may be derived from the sheer amount of effort put into personalizing one's Facebook page. More likely however, satisfaction with Facebook is derived from its ability to provide some form of social gain.

Relationships, whether on- or offline, require time, effort, as well as the decision to disclose personal information to others. Facebook offers its users the ability to create an online identity including the disclosure of personal information to other Facebook users, such as daily thoughts, opinions, and feelings (Qian & Scott, 2007). Facebook users also have the option of deciding what type of personal information they would be willing to disclose to others, effectively constructing an online identity that may or may not be similar to their "real" self (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Disclosure of personal information may be done explicitly (i.e., written statements of users' thoughts and feelings) or implicitly (pictures uploaded to their Facebook page). Previous research has identified that Facebook users tend to construct their online identity implicitly, using a "show rather than tell" approach in which people post pictures or video clips of themselves, as opposed to more explicit methods, such as writing self-descriptions (Zhao et al., 2008). Further, the types of information presented in personal pages, posted on user's walls, or photos included in albums may be done to construct an idealized image of the self that users wish to present to other people (Kim & Lee, 2011). A SNS users' motivation for establishing an SNS may therefore be related to their self-disclosure levels. In turn, levels of self-disclosure may be related to users' satisfaction with the SNSs' ability to meet their goals. More recent studies by Sheldon (2008a, 2008b), explored possible motives for creating and maintaining a Facebook page in relation to individual differences. The results indicated that Facebook is generally used to pass the time, maintain relationships, and for entertainment (other less important motives include sense of virtual community, coolness, and companionship). In considering that the internet is believed to potentially provide an avenue for normally shy individuals to communicate (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000), Sheldon believed personality may be the reason that introverted SNS users feel more comfortable communicating online than in real life. However, Sheldon's research indicated that people who are actively involved online are those who actively communicate in real life as well (Sheldon, 2008b). As SNSs are believed to provide a means for establishing social capital (Ellison et al., 2007), the combination of this and Sheldon's findings lead the current study to consider self-disclosure (opposed to personality) as a mediator of satisfaction.

3. Study goals

The overarching goal of the current study was to examine the motivations of undergraduate students for using Facebook, their levels of self-disclosure on Facebook, and the extent to which levels of self-disclosure were linked with satisfaction in Facebook's ability to meet the users' goals.

Sheldon (2008a) identified six major goals of undergraduate Facebook users, and part of this study's goal was to replicate her findings using a new undergraduate sample. As Facebook undergoes periodic changes to its structure and functions, the current study did evaluate perceptions of Facebook using a more up-to-date sample of Facebook users. However it was hypothesized that the underlying motives for using Facebook would remain the same, despite modifications to some of the features of Facebook. As part of our analyses, we similarly examined whether male and female users differed in which goals they assigned as most important just as Sheldon's study (2008b) did.

The second goal of the current study was to examine the factors that contribute to satisfaction with Facebook. As stated above, two possible explanations for satisfaction with a SNS may be derived by either the sheer amount of time devoted to updating and maintaining their network page, but also possibly the level of personal information users choose to disclose to others. The degree to which a Facebook user chooses to disclose personal information on their Facebook page may be related to the social goals and motivations they have associated with the Facebook page. Facebook users have the ability to disclose an array of basic information, personal information, contact information, and education and work information. In the current study, levels of self-disclosure were examined across each of these categories, and gender differences in self-disclosure was also examined. In a meta-analysis of 205 studies, Dindia and Allen (1992) examined gender differences in self-disclosure. Their study was not about SNS specifically but rather gender differences in self-disclosure in general. Results from their meta-analysis indicated that females disclosed more than males. Additional research (see Consedine, Sabag-Cohen, & Krivoshekova, 2007; Hinson & Swanson, 1993; Littlefield, 1974; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004) has also shown that females do tend to disclose more information than males. In the current study, we examined the relationship between

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