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Celebrity's self-disclosure on Twitter and parasocial relationships: A mediating role of social presence

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how celebrities' self-disclosure on personal social media accounts, particularly Twitter, affects fans' perceptions. An online survey was utilized among a sample of 429 celebrity followers on Twitter. Results demonstrated that celebrities' professional self-disclosure (e.g., sharing their work-related life), personal self-disclosure (e.g., sharing their personal life such as friends and family), and fans' retweeting behavior, enhanced fans' feeling of social presence, thereby positively affecting parasocial interaction with celebrities. Further, the study found that the effects of self-disclosure and retweeting on parasocial interaction were mediated by social presence. Implications and future research directions are provided.

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1. Introduction

In September of 2013, Ms. Sarah Silverman's (best known as a comedian) tweet gained much attention from fans when she shared sad news about passing of her dog, Duck. Ms. Silverman later posted a long and emotional tribute to Duck, an obituary type story on her blog. By referring Duck as "my best friend", she shared her personal life story with millions of fans via her personal social media. When Ms. Silverman posted this tweet, she has received countless responses such as "… *I don't know you personally, of course, but I send you a virtual {{hug}}*." Ms. Silverman might not have a real, personal relationship with most of those people who responded to her tweet. However, her disclosure of aspects of her personal life on her social media influenced her fans to relate their emotions to Ms. Silverman.

As Ms. Silverman's story indicates, celebrities share a variety of information about themselves on personal social media. For example, celebrities share personal life stories about friends and family as well as professional life to advertise upcoming events (e.g., see Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Stever & Lawson, 2013). With easy access to direct and interactive communication methods with celebrities, fans following celebrities through social media may feel like they "know" the celebrity and experience increased intimacy and a strong parasocial relationship.

There has been some research exploring the use of social media between celebrities and fans. Thus far, the focus has been mostly on either the content of celebrities' social media (e.g., Frederick, Lim, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Stever & Lawson, 2013) or fans' motivations and reasons for following celebrities' social media from uses and gratification perspectives (e.g., Hargittai & Litt, 2011; Sanderson, 2011). However, almost little is known about how celebrities' various self-disclosure styles on social media affect fans' perceptions about those celebrities. Thus, this study begins to fill this research gap.

Specifically, the current study examines how celebrities' self-disclosure, particularly professional self-disclosure (revealing information about their professional life) and personal self-disclosure (revealing information about their personal life), on personal social media, particularly Twitter, influence fans' parasocial relationship

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with celebrities. Further, given that one of the unique features of Twitter is the function of 'retweeting', the study also explores how fans' act of retweeting celebrities' tweets would affect fans' perceptions of parasocial relationship with celebrities. Lastly, a considerable amount of research has revealed that social presence is one of the key underlying mechanisms that facilitate people's experiences in a mediated-communication environment (e.g., Jin, 2009, 2011; Jin & Park, 2009; Lee & Nass, 2005; Lee, Park, & Song, 2005; Lee, Peng, Yan, & Jin, 2006; Song, Kim, & Lee, 2014). Therefore, the study examines the role of social presence, particularly as a mediator that links celebrities' self-disclosure and fans' act of retweeting celebrities' tweets to fans' perceptions of parasocial relationship.

2. Literature review

2.1. Celebrities' use of personal social media and self-disclosure

2.1.1. Celebrities' social media use

"Social media are inherently designed to facilitate human connection" (Sanderson, 2011, p. 494). Because communicating with fans on social media does not necessarily require a special permission to access, social media have become an increasingly popular option for celebrities who want to communicate directly with their fans (Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2013; Stever & Lawson, 2013).

Traditionally, celebrities delivered their message to fans through traditional media outlets (e.g., television, news paper) indirectly via reporters that might have filtered the original messages. However, social media platforms provide a personalized and unfiltered method of communication. Consequently, these platforms have significantly influenced communication patterns between celebrities and fans. Many celebrities are establishing their own news channel through their personal social media such as Twitter (Brau, 2013). A good number of celebrities use such platforms for expression of dissent (Sanderson, 2009) and self-presentation (Sanderson, 2008).

Similarly, Twitter has been used to provide athletes and their fans with an opportunity to communicate more interpersonally and to enhance the overall sport experiences (Frederick et al., 2012; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Kassing and Sanderson found that athletes used Twitter to share opinions and comments about the sport event, to foster interactive communication with fans, and to cultivate perspectives about the event among fans.

2.1.2. Celebrities' self-disclosure

Social Penetration Theory (SPT) explains that human relationships develop through revealing the self, and this process primarily occurs through self-disclosure; the voluntary sharing of personally relevant information such as feelings, thoughts, values, and beliefs with another (Altman & Taylor, 1973). SPT holds a perspective that the self consists of several layers from peripheral layers (i.e., demographic information) to central layers (i.e., personal values, self-concept). And, revealing each layer of the self to others, the act of self-disclosure, is an important step in building a relationship (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Given that self-disclosure is a complex multidimensional concept explained by a variety of features and characteristics of individuals, researchers have suggested and investigated various types of self-disclosure. A majority of the SPT scholars highlight two dimensions of self-disclosure, breadth and depth (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Jourard, 1971). Breadth refers to the variety of topics of self-disclosure, thus a wide range of topics or a narrow range may be disclosed. For example, topics related to profession or work might be seen as professional self-disclosure, and topics

concerning family-, friends-related issues, or personal beliefs might be viewed as personal self-disclosure. Depth refers to the degree of disclosure in a specific area of an individual's life. That is, depending on how deep an individual discloses him/herself about a certain topic, depth of self-disclosure could vary from a superficial to intimate level (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega et al., 1993; Jourard, 1971).

Through social media, many contemporary celebrities share their life with their fans (Marshall, 2010), and topics of stories that celebrities share with fans might appear in various forms. Given that celebrities need fans' support for their career success, some celebrities might disclose their professional life more than other parts of their life to promote their work (e.g., new album, new movie). Stever and Lawson (2013) investigated a number of famous celebrities' on Twitter. One of the main themes found in the study was professional self-disclosure. Specifically, the study found that Katy Perry, an American singer and songwriter, was mostly focused on sharing her work-related information on her Twitter. In a similar vein, another study (Hambrick et al., 2010) also reported that one of the main themes found on sport celebrities' tweets was concerned with their work (e.g., information sharing or providing insights about their team or game).

Some celebrities might mainly reveal personal life stories on social media (e.g., Click et al., 2013; Hambrick et al., 2010; Marshall, 2010; Stever & Lawson, 2013). Stever and Lawson noted that Kristen Chenoweth, an American actress and singer, was found to share a significant portion of her personal life on Twitter. Similarly, some sport celebrities also disclose non-sport-related life stories such as dinner menu, favorite restaurants, and movies they want to see (Hambrick et al., 2010). Politicians have also been found to disclose personal life events on social media (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Park, 2010; Small, 2010).

2.2. Social presence

With its capacity of direct and interactive communication, social media may provide fans with a strong feeling of 'being together' or 'being connected' with the celebrity (Stever & Lawson, 2013). That is, through mediated communication, fans 'meet' celebrities and learn about their daily life, whether it is one-way or two-way communication. Through this interaction, fans might feel as if those celebrities are socially present in their life.

Described as 'being aware of the other person in online environments' (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), social presence is one of the important concepts to the understanding of mediated-communication experiences (e.g., Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003; Short et al., 1976). Numerous scholars have explored this notion since Short et al.'s research (e.g., Biocca et al., 2003; Biocca & Nowak, 2001; Caspi & Blau, 2008; Edwards, Edwards, Spence, & Westerman, 2015; Lee, 2013; Lee et al., 2005; Song et al., 2014; Spence, Westerman, Edwards, & Edwards, 2014; Tu, 2000). Although a definition of social presence has not been agreed upon yet, social presence is generally understood as perceptual experience of being psychologically involved in the interaction with another in a mediated environment (Biocca et al., 2003; Durlach & Slater, 2000; Schroeder, 2006).

2.2.1. Self-disclosure and social presence

Several studies have examined what makes people to feel social presence or related concepts such as presence (a broader category of social presence; see Lee, 2004) (e.g., IJsselsteijn, Ridder, Freeman, & Avons, 2000; Lee & Nass, 2005). Research identifies a few categories of causal factors for social presence: *media/technology-related factor*, *user factors* (Lombard & Ditton, 1997), and *social factors* (Lee & Nass, 2005). Media/Technology-related factors are