Revealing only the superficial me: Exploring categorical self-disclosure online

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ABSTRACT

Despite previous research demonstrating that online self-disclosure occurs in an accelerated manner compared to offline interactions, little is known about the content of online disclosures. This study highlights a number of issues that arise when exploring the self-disclosure of different types of personal information in initial general online communications. Forty-eight students and 48 non-students completed a purpose-developed attitude towards online relationship formation questionnaire and Magno's (2009) self-disclosure for beliefs, relationships, personal matters, interests and intimate feelings questionnaire. Findings suggest that people are more likely to self-disclose information online the more positive is their attitude towards forming relationships online. Moreover, this self-disclosure initially occurs only for superficial self-information relating to personal matters and interests, implying that it is the quantity of online exchanges that is enhanced rather than the quality thereof. These findings raise a number of issues relating to type of self-information disclosed online, as well as intent, Internet arena, social identity, privacy, trust, and general methodological issues that would benefit from further experimental exploration. Implications of the findings for future research to explore categorical self-disclosure online within an existing theoretical framework of self-categorisation and self-identity theory as well as the self-memory-system model of autobiographical memory are discussed.

1. Introduction

The Internet has fast become a communications tool for everyday life for many the world over. In the UK alone, 82.5% of the population now use the globally connected computer network that is the Internet (Internetworldstats, 2010). From those who rely on communicating via the Internet for work, teenagers for whom computer-mediated-communication (CMC) is a daily activity, to ageing grandparents who stay in touch with distant relatives via Internet-based webcam services, it is becoming increasingly difficult to locate people in western cultures who do not engage in some form of CMC. It is not only pre-existing social connections with acquaintances, friends and family that are maintained via the Internet. The Internet has opened up a wide variety of new arenas for the development of both platonic and romantic relationships online with previously unknown others. Indeed, it is not uncommon nowadays for people to seek a new romantic partner online. According to the Forrester Research Group, by 2012 six million people in the UK will use Internet dating websites to seek a new life partner (Smale, 2010). In addition to dating websites, social networking sites such as Facebook, Bebo and MySpace are now used by many individuals to maintain existing offline connections as well as to develop and progress both romantic and platonic relationships online. Facebook has, for example, recently counted its 500 millionth member worldwide (Zuckerberg, 2010). It is not surprising then that Yum and Hara (2006) argue that the Internet is rapidly becoming an alternative modern social context in which people can form, develop, maintain and even end relationships, sometimes without ever having met a communications partner in a face-to-face (FTF) offline setting. Indeed, online romantic and platonic relationships have been suggested to be equally as 'deep' and 'stable' as those formed offline (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Piazza & Bering, 2009), and to follow similar processes and patterns to offline relationships.

1.1. Self-disclosure

One of those processes is the disclosure of personal information to a potential online friend or partner. In this digital age, it remains surprising just how much self-information individuals are purportedly willing to disclose to unknown others online. Concerns about social humiliation or the risk of crimes such as identity fraud do not appear to hinder the revelation of personal information in many different Internet arenas. Divulging self-information to a single or multiple others is referred to as self-disclosure (Cozby, 1973; Wheeless, 1978; Wheeless & Grotz, 1976), with the type of information shared ranging from factual to personal, private or intimate

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details about the self (Chelune, 1979; Derlega & Berg, 1987). Self-disclosure has been shown to be a reciprocal process, with both platonic and romantic partners gradually revealing more information about themselves in a tit-for-tat type exchange (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Collins & Miller, 1994). This reciprocal process influences the route and can transform the meaning of a relationship, thereby forming a key influence in relationship development (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Keyes, 1998). If self-disclosure is an important process for the formation of relationships, and relationships are increasingly being formed online, it makes sense that research has begun to explore the role of self-disclosure in the formation and maintenance of online relationships (e.g., McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Leung, 2002).

Recent research indicates that self-disclosure not only occurs online (e.g., Rollman, Krug, & Parente, 2000), but that it sometimes follows a different pattern to the self-disclosure explored in FTF interactions. It has been shown, for example, that people willingly disclose information online that they would not share in analogous FTF interactions (e.g., Bonebrake, 2002; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). As Rosen, Cheever, Felt, and Cummings (2008) point out, in initial FTF interactions people tend to begin with an exchange of superficial information, gradually revealing more intimate and personal details over time. Research has hitherto suggested that this process of self-disclosure is accelerated in CMC, with intimate details often being exchanged after only a few emails in cyberspace (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Wallace, 1999). Baker (2005) has also demonstrated that anonymity in online interactions can enhance self-disclosure compared to similar offline interactions, speeding up the process of developing online relationships and suggesting that self-disclosure occurs at a faster pace online than offline. This is not to say, however, that self-disclosure follows a uniform pattern across all Internet arenas. In a study which assessed the occurrence and reciprocity of self-disclosure in Internet discussion and support groups, Barack and Gluck-Ofri (2007) analysed 240 first messages and the first 240 responses to those messages in terms of the amount of personal information, thoughts and feelings that were disclosed. They found that self-disclosure was higher in support than discussion forums, thus suggesting that type of virtual space influences both amount and reciprocity of online self-disclosure. A further difference in online and offline self-disclosure was observed by Leung (2002), who found that using an instant messaging service for online communication increased the level of self-disclosure, compared to a similar offline interaction. This heightened self-disclosure online is similar to the 'stranger on the train' phenomenon (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977; Rubin, 1975), whereby individuals on public transport disclose information to a fellow passenger whom they have never before met that they would not usually reveal to friends, colleagues or close relatives. This type of self-disclosure is akin to an unburdening of one's innermost thoughts and feelings to a person who is unlikely to have a real impact on the day to day life of the discloser. The stranger in cyberspace may not be physically present as is the stranger on public transport, but they can be easily switched off at the click of a button, and are therefore also less likely to impact upon a person's meaningful offline relationships, unless invited to become part of that offline world. The fear of social rejection (Pennebaker, 1989) or non-acceptance from one's nearest and dearest may thus not be prevalent when communicating with potential friends or lovers online (McKenna & Bargh, 1998, 2000). It appears then that the online world offers individuals a place where they can self-disclose at their own pace without feeling forced to reciprocate information, and to remain as anonymous as they like. This type of anonymous arena would be rarely, if ever, experienced in an offline world. Moreover, the asynchronous nature of many forms of online communication affords individuals the time to contemplate, edit and even manipulate their online self-presentation at a level of impres-

sion management and maintenance unlikely available in FTF interactions, where a whole host of non-verbal cues play a role in inter-personal communications (Walther, 1992; Walther, 1996, Burgoon, 1992). Given the outlined differences between online and offline self-disclosure, it cannot be assumed that online disclosure follows exactly the same patterns and/or processes as those explored in research for offline self-disclosure. The limited available research on this relatively new area of online self-disclosure tends to focus on exploring the speed at which self-disclosure occurs differently online to offline. Little, if any, research has considered how enhanced online self-disclosure might ensue from a social cognitive processing perspective. If online self-disclosure can be placed within a theoretical framework of processing, a basis for understanding the differences between online and offline behaviour could be laid and would offer a model from which to further our understanding not only of the processes involved in online self-disclosure, but also of the differences between online and offline self-disclosure. These considerations become especially pertinent when online disclosures subsequently carry over to offline interactions. In such an instance, CMC could be perceived to aid the development and/or maintenance of offline relationships (e.g., Baym, 2002; Walther & Parks, 2002). Regardless of the differences between online and offline self-disclosure, the commonality of the two is that the process of self-disclosure serves some benefit to the individual (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). The exploration of a likely list of these benefits is beyond the scope of this paper, but almost certainly includes the fulfilment of an individual's need for social belongingness. Humans are, after all, social beings whose sense of self is based amongst other factors on the integration of their social communications and interactions into one of the most complex memory structures that humans possess – self-memory (Baumeister, 1999).

1.2. Theoretical considerations

According to self-categorisation theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), we encode and integrate information about ourselves into categories within memory. These self-categories range from an individual to a social level, and enable us to both distinguish ourselves from others and allow us to think of ourselves in terms of social groups to which we do and do not belong (e.g., Hogg & Turner, 1987). The self-categorisation process can be influenced by a number of factors, including the salient activation of one self-category over other categories. The category or categories that most suit a person's current processing goal(s) will likely achieve activation saliency. Moreover, situational contingencies and processing goals can cause an individual to shift processing activities between simultaneously activated self-categories (e.g., Turner, 1991; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Which particular self-category is activated at any given time can have important consequences for social interactions. For example, by comparing the self to others, a process of self-stereotyping and depersonalisation may take place (Hogg & Turner, 1987). A social category might thus become salient that focuses on attributes that an individual shares with a current communications partner, causing a shift in their self-perception to take on a self-identity based on group rather than individual norms (e.g., Biernat, Vescio, & Green, 1996; Simon, Glaessner-Bayerl, & Stratenwerth, 1991; Simon & Hamilton, 1994). This process is akin to that of choosing which self-information to disclose at any given stage of an ongoing communication with an Internet partner, with individuals selectively activating and sharing the material from one category of self-information over another less salient category.

One model that explains how these categories of self-referent information might be organised in memory is the *self-memory-system model* (SMS) (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). Within