



Visiting theories that predict college students' self-disclosure on Facebook



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ABSTRACT

This study explores factors that may explain information disclosure behavior on Facebook and provides understanding of each factor's contribution in explaining such behavior. Factors tested in this study are drawn from theories (e.g., social contract theory and uses and gratification theory) and constructs (e.g., trust/self-disclosure relationships, time spent on Facebook, number of Facebook friends, and gender difference). Findings suggest the potential of all the factors examined in this study as frameworks to explain self-disclosure behavior on Facebook. This social media-specific study offers evidence that these theories may have implications that are different from the current e-commerce literature on self-disclosure. Both theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Facebook reported that the number of active monthly social media users reached 1.06 billion globally in December 2012, with 193 million in the U.S. and Canada (Tam, 2013). Research conducted by Pew Research Center (2013) showed that a majority of Facebook users (71%) agree that social media is important in their lives. These facts indicate that Facebook has become an indispensable part of many users' everyday lives, breaking the boundary between their virtual and real worlds. However, there have been continuing concerns about self-disclosure, referring to the process by which a person voluntarily discloses personal information to others (Cozby, 1973; Wheelless & Grotz, 1976), on social media. The concern was raised even higher in 2010 when a major security bug was found in Facebook's security setting (Bilton, 2010). Other factors, such as online stalking, harassment, and stolen personal data, have also stirred deep concerns among users of Facebook, who have consequently become more reluctant to disclose personal information on the social networking site. Recent studies suggest that Facebook users gradually become aware of privacy issues and begin disclosing personal information in more restrictive ways (for more details, see Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012).

While many social media studies have explored the degree to which social media users reveal their personal information, there has been a lack of systematic analysis examining factors that might explain users' self-disclosure on social media. Further, much electronic commerce (hereafter e-commerce) literature has explored reasons influencing consumers' disclosure of personal information

on the Web (e.g., Joinson, Reips, Buchanan, & Paine Schofield, 2010; Metzger, 2004), though little research specifically exploring social media-specific self-disclosure exists. Because of the voluntary nature of self-disclosure on social media, which is different from e-commerce websites requiring self-disclosure for a transaction, it demands alternative approaches to theories.

Accordingly, this study attempted to examine factors that have been frequently used in e-commerce and social media literature: social contract theory (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009; Okazaki, Li, & Hirose, 2009), trust and self-disclosure relationships (Jarvenpaa & Tractinsky, 1999; Metzger, 2004), media usage patterns (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005; Metzger, 2004), gender (Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008; Thelwall, 2008), and uses and gratifications theory. While uses and gratifications theory has not been extensively used to explain self-disclosure online, much literature suggests that media motives affect ways of using media. Therefore, this study explored whether the theory can be used to predict self-disclosure on social media. The main goals of this study were to (1) examine whether the aforementioned theories would contribute to an understanding of self-disclosure in the context of social media, (2) identify factors influencing self-disclosure on social media in a more holistic way, and (3) suggest theoretical as well as practical implications.

2. Literature review

2.1. Facebook as a social media giant and its privacy crisis

Facebook was launched in 2004, and within five years, it had become one of the most popular social networking sites (SNS) in the United States and around the globe (Techtree News staff,

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2008). Facebook was founded by Mark Zuckerberg while he was attending Harvard University. Originally, it was an SNS providing service exclusively to Harvard University students. Over time, Facebook was made available to college students in the greater Boston area, and shortly afterwards, globally. As of 2012, the United States had more than 167 million Facebook users, with a 54% penetration rate. The 25–34 (24.4%) and 18–34 (23.7%) age groups are the two largest groups of the users in the United States (checkfacebook.com, 2012), justifying the use of college students as major subjects for Facebook-related studies in this field.

Facebook claims that they use members' personal information to provide customized services and better user experience (Facebook, 2012). However, this mechanism has drawn endless criticism for its invasion of privacy, in part for the company's use of personal user information for advertising or marketing purposes. Critics also point out that a security glitch found on Facebook in 2010 could result in the accidental release of users' personal information that is supposed to be private (Wortham, 2010). Likewise, Facebook also shares users' personal information with its partners to increase its profits (Pegoraro, 2010). This practice increases the chances of putting private information at risk. As privacy concerns among Facebook users has increased, many users not only have become reluctant to reveal their personal information on the site, but also have closed their Facebook accounts to boycott the way Facebook uses their personal information to operate the site (Smith, 2010). As a result of this controversy, privacy concerns have become more of an interest to social media practitioners as well as researchers.

2.2. Self-disclosure on Facebook

The degree of self-disclosure is often based on trust and can reinforce the closeness among people (Cozby, 1973; Derlega, Winstead, Wong, & Greenspan, 1987) since the information released from self-disclosure is not easily accessed through any other means except the person disclosing the information (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). In recent years, research on self-disclosure has shifted focus from interpersonal communication to online media. Early studies on computer-mediated communication found that people tend to disclose more personal information on the Web when compared to traditional interpersonal communication (Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

Regarding self-disclosure on Facebook, Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais (2009) found that Facebook users tend to disclose personal information, including e-mail address, birthday, relationship, and educational background on their profile pages. Kolek and Saunders' (2008) study on students' self-disclosure on Facebook found that "substantial proportions of students' profiles contained contact information, course schedules, positive references to the University, and pictures of students' consuming alcohol" (p. 1). However, in recent years, Facebook users have gradually become more reluctant to reveal their information due to security concerns (Wilson et al., 2012). Although previous studies have explored people's online self-disclosure, studies investigating the factors influencing Facebook users' self-disclosure are still underdeveloped and somewhat limited. Additionally, much literature suggests that self-disclosure is not only influenced by security concerns, but also by other factors. Therefore, this study sought to explore the factors that influence Facebook users' decisions regarding revealing personal information, based on previously established theories and practices.

2.3. Uses and gratifications on Facebook

Uses and gratifications theory (U&G) explains how media audiences' motives influence their media use and other outcomes, such as attitude and behavioral intentions. According to Katz, Blumler,

and Gurevitch (1973), U&G assumes audiences are "goal-driven" and actively consume media content to fulfill certain gratifications. When compared to other theories based on the notion of powerful media and passive audience, U&G is more concerned with "what people do with media" rather than "what media does to people" (Katz, 1959). Despite its old age, the notion of "active audiences" ensures its appropriateness for studying new media such as the Internet (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996). Further, studies have used U&G to explore Facebook motives (e.g., Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Foregger, 2009; Sheldon, 2008; Smock, 2011). In a Facebook motives study, Smock (2011) identified 9 major motives for using Facebook: relaxing entertainment, expressive information sharing, escapism, companionship, professional advancement, social interaction, habitual passing of time, and meeting new people. In addition, previous studies have found that users' motives for using Facebook predict their Facebook use (Lee & Boyer, 2007; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). For instance, students who are motivated to use Facebook for relationship maintenance tend to also use the site for the same purpose.

Even though U&G has helped researchers better understand Facebook motives and use, there is still an absence of research specifically exploring whether Facebook users' motives and usage patterns account for their self-disclosure on Facebook. Based on the notion of U&G, this study assumes that Facebook users may need to disclose more personal information to fulfill certain gratifications, such as social connections and relationship searches. Accordingly, this study asked whether the degree to which college students reveal their personal information is affected by different motives for using Facebook.

RQ1. Do different motives for using Facebook influence the degree to which college students disclose their personal information on Facebook?

Metzger (2004) found that time spent on the Web positively influences consumers' information disclosure on commercial websites. Ko et al. (2005) suggest that the duration of time spent on a website tends to positively influence consumers' attitudes toward the site, which in turn predicts their purchase intention. Based on the fact that time spent on the Web and commercial websites influences users' online behavior, this study postulated that self-disclosure on Facebook could be influenced by time spent on the site. This study also questioned whether the number of Facebook friends a user has influences his or her self-disclosure, since many of the social connections on Facebook require a certain degree of self-disclosure. Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1. The more college students use Facebook, the more personal information they disclose on Facebook.

H2. The more Facebook friends college students have, the more personal information they disclose on Facebook.

2.4. Self-disclosure as a social contract

The concept of social contract indicates that consumers voluntarily provide personal information in exchange for certain services (Milne & Gordon, 1993). In exchanging personal information with services, consumers perceive benefits as well as risks regarding self-disclosure (Okazaki et al., 2009). Culnan and Armstrong (1999) examined the effects of perceived benefits and perceived risks on the collection and use of consumers' personal information and found that only when consumers perceive benefits to be higher than risks will they practice this "social contract." Contrarily, recent studies suggest that information disclosure on SNSs is influenced by

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