



A study of negative emotional disclosure behavior in social network media: Will an unexpected negative event and personality matter?



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ABSTRACT

Why would people feel the need to disclose their negative emotions? Using the theory of conservation of resources, we hypothesize disclosure intention and behavior would be influenced by duration and severity of the negative emotional state. Moreover, we predict the effect of unexpected events and “the Big Five” personality traits on disclosure intention. Besides disclosure intention, we also tapped if the respondents have disclosed their negative emotions on their Facebook profile. In this study, we surveyed 255 Facebook users on their experiences from negative life events under four categories – social relationship, work, health and monetary issues. The results support all of our hypotheses. In particular, our post-hoc analyses show differences between females and males on the influence mechanism behind their disclosure intention. Females are more likely to disclose their problems relating to social relationship, work and health problems on Facebook than males.

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1. Introduction

Today a lot of people utilize social media platforms for sharing information and social networking. Most of the time people like to share their happiness via their Facebook page. This behavior is intended to show the positive and beautiful side of oneself to others (Qiu, Lin, Leung, & Tov, 2012). However, people have ups and downs in their life. Especially when faced with stress, people tend to be anxious and depressed, but may not voice out their negative emotions unless they need to seek help or support. With the rise of social networking websites, a lot of information is provided for different investigations. In 2013, Ya'an in China's Sichuan province suffered a disastrous earthquake. A team of PhD students, referred to as the “Voice of Xa'an”, came together for data mining. This team tries to retrieve tweets posted by Xa'an residents for analysis in order to investigate public panic mood. It shows that the information retrieved from social networking sites is useful to study people's mood states such as depression and emotional distress.

Disclosure behavior is an emerging issue in the literature. Chen and Sharma (2015) applied the Theory of Reasoned Actions (TRA), to study the disclosure behavior in terms of disclosure of identity, state and disposition on social networking sites. They found that attitude towards a social networking site is a main driver for the

extent of self-disclosure on the social networking site. Similarly, Sun, Wang, Shen, and Zhang (2015) utilized the privacy calculus model (Dinev and Hart, 2006) and justice theory (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter and Ng, 2001) to elaborate the trade-off between privacy risks and benefits associated with the intention to disclose the location of a person to a social network service. They found that perceived benefits have stronger impacts on location disclosure intention for males than for females. In contrast, privacy risks have stronger impacts on location disclosure intention for females than for males. These findings suggest that people rationally determine a trade-off between risks and benefits of self-disclosure. In the present research, we argue that people act more irrational when it comes to self-disclosure of negative life events. Specifically, we believe that when faced with a negative life event, people wish to seek help and release stress, while considering other potential consequences of self-disclosure less rationally.

People's interpretation and thoughts regarding a specific situation influence their emotions and behaviors (Beck, 1967). Hence, influences of negative life events vary depending on the individual. The same negative life event may be perceived as more severe by and the suffering may take longer for one person as for another. If an event is perceived as particularly severe with a long duration by an individual, there might be a higher likelihood that the person will disclose his/her feelings to others.

Apart from perceived severity and duration of a negative life event, another important factor is whether the negative life event

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came unexpected. If one is unprepared for a negative event, the natural fight-or-flight response is activated, causing anxiety and stress (Burg, 1992, pp. 94–104). Sharing the unexpected negative event with others might provide social support and might help gain advice from others how to deal with the circumstances. For this reason, we examine whether the expectancy of a negative life event influences the likelihood for self-disclosure.

Though past studies of negative emotional disclosure have mostly focused on clinical patients, they indicate that personality is an important factor in intention to disclose oneself. For example, Zakowski, Herzer, Barrett, Milligan, and Beckman (2011) found that neurotic patients will have higher distress than extraverted ones due to the effects of written emotional disclosure. Fang et al. (2015) conducted a meta-analysis and identified personality characteristics, including “the Big Five”, related to the centrality of a person in a social network. Along this vein, Loiacono (2015) included “the Big Five” personality traits to investigate the intention to disclose personal information on a social networking site. She revealed that perceived risk and perceived benefits, as well as extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism have a strong impact on a person’s intention to self-disclose.

Thus, previous literature provides an indication that personality might be an important factor regarding self-disclosure. We aim to take those previous studies one step further by not only including intention for self-disclosure, but also actual behavior. Research suggests that intention is closely related to actual behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1980). In the present research, we intend to investigate whether people with a high intention for self-disclosure are more likely to publicly share their thoughts and feelings on the social media platform Facebook.

Therefore, this study provides a seminal work addressing the following questions: What is the influence of duration and severity of negative emotional state on emotional disclosure? Do unexpected events bring out bigger echoes than expected events? Are people with certain personality characteristics more likely to disclose their negative emotions than others? How is disclosure intention related to online disclosure behavior?

2. Literature review

Besides voluntary self-disclosure of personal information on social networking sites, Shibchurn and Yan (2015) built a hypothetical model using the concept of privacy calculus and the incentive theory to study reward-based disclosure. They found a positive correlation between reward-level and disclosure intention but an insignificant effort of extrinsic motivations on disclosure intentions.

Public self-disclosure can have various consequences, e.g. it may impact one’s chances of being hired for a certain position. Chiang and Suen (2015) used person-environment fit and elaboration likelihood model to investigate how argument quality and source credibility of self-presentation in LinkedIn would affect the recruiter hiring recommendation. They found that recruiters make inferences about job seekers’ person-job fit and person-organization fit on the basis of argument quality of the self-presentation, which in turn predict recruiters’ intentions to recommend job seekers for hiring.

Furthermore, negative emotional disclosure behavior was related to improvements in health-efficacy, emotional well-being and functional well-being among women suffering from breast cancer (Shim, Cappella, & Han, 2011). Yet, emotional disclosure of negative life events is seen as riskier than disclosure of positive life events (McCarthy, 2015).

In this regard, social skills might be important (Anderson, Carson, & Darchuk, 2004). The authors (2004) conducted a study

on the influence of social skills on interpersonal emotional disclosure of negative events. They indicated that an interactive transfer of positive affect between individuals of high social skills can provide an interpersonal interaction benefit to negative emotional disclosure. Yang (2014) proposed that social sharing of negative emotions within a group depends on the interpersonal trust and will have influence on the group climate and group cohesion. In sum, past literature is lacking a clear understanding of how personalities such as “the Big Five” of an individual affect his or her negative emotional disclosure via social media.

3. Theoretical framework development

Negative emotional disclosure is an indication of help seeking behavior due to stress from negative events. According to the Conservation of Resources (COR) Model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Hobfoll, 1989), individuals seek to acquire and maintain resources, including psychological well-being, personal characteristics (e.g., “the Big Five”), conditions (e.g., duration and severity of a negative emotional state), and energies (e.g., time, and energy). Stress occurs when there is a loss of resources, or a threat of loss. Hence, the COR helps to elaborate that negative life events lead to stress because resources (e.g., time and energy) are lost in the process of facing a negative life event. Individual difference variables, such as “the Big Five” personality traits, are treated as resources that may influence the negative emotional disclosure intention, which is a help-seeking intention. In sum, we attempt to investigate the problem from the perspective of the theory of conservation of resources and the personality trait to study negative emotional disclosure in a social networking site. Fig. 1 depicts our theoretical framework as follows.

4. Hypotheses development

4.1. Duration and severity of a negative emotional state

Beck (1967) argued that people’s emotions and behaviors are influenced by their interpretation and thoughts about a situation. Negative emotions are mainly due to negative life events (Garnefski, Kraaij, & Spinhoven, 2001; Schacter, Guerin, & Jacques, 2011). With different natures of negative life events, the duration and severity of the negative emotional state may vary. While duration refers to the time period of a person being affected by his or her negative emotions, severity is on the seriousness of the negative emotional state over the period. For instance, a person may have experienced a mosquito bite, which is not a serious issue, but the itchiness lasts for a few hours. The case is different for severe negative emotional states, such as depression. According to the theory of conservation of resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), people tend to retain their energy, e.g. if faced with a severe negative life event, by pulling various resources from the environment. In this regard, a depressed individual may disclose his/her feeling in order to gain sympathy and acceptance from others.

Accordingly, a long and serious disturbance will strengthen a person’s desire to disclose his/her feelings in an attempt to gain acceptance from others or to release stress (Gerber et al., 2013). Hence, we hypothesize the following:

H1. Duration and severity of a negative emotional state both have a positive impact on negative emotion disclosure.

4.2. Unexpected negative life event

An unexpected event is an event that deviates from what is expected with costly and unfavorable outcomes (Schützwohl &

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