



Voices that cannot be heard: Can shyness explain how we communicate on Facebook versus face-to-face?



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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites have gained popularity among all populations, especially young adults. Personality traits were found to be predictive of how individuals use social media. Therefore, this study sought to examine the association between shyness and self-disclosure to a Facebook friend as well as self-disclosure to a face-to-face friend. Two studies were conducted. The first study tested how shyness and social loneliness are related to self-disclosure to a Facebook friend to whom an individual talks most often. The second, follow-up study tested how shyness is related to self-disclosure to a Facebook friend to whom a person speaks to only through Facebook, and also to a face-to-face friend to whom the participants talk only face-to-face and never through Facebook. Participants were college students from a large research university in the United States. Study 1 found a negative association between shyness and self-disclosure to a Facebook friend. Study 2 found a negative association between shyness and self-disclosure to a face-to-face friend. The theoretical implications and limitations are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In the last few years, social networking sites have become a popular and free way for people of all ages to socialize with each other and entertain when nothing else is going on. Sites like Facebook and MySpace allow users to connect and re-connect with old friends, create new relationships, organize events, and play games. Although open for users of all ages, social networking sites (SNSs) have mostly been used by young people – Digital Natives or Millennials, whose lives focus around new technologies. A recent study released by the [Pew Internet Project \(2012\)](#) shows that the Millennial generation (ages 18–33) is still in the lead in using social networking sites. In January 2013, Facebook, the most popular social networking site, had 1.02 billion users, of which more than half were using it from a mobile device.

While previous studies (e.g., [Hargittai, 2008](#); [Sheldon, 2008](#); [Tufekci, 2008](#)) have examined the types of people who use Facebook, none has focused on how personality traits might influence how technology users maintain their relationships both online and offline. [Ryan and Xenos \(2011\)](#) warned that this kind of research is crucial as “personality is a leading factor in understanding why people behave the way they do on the Internet” ([Amichai-Hamburger, 2002, p. 1290](#)). Several studies so far have examined the relationship between personality and usage of Facebook. For example, [Ross, Orr, Sisic, Arseneault, Simmering, and Orr \(2009\)](#) have found that extraverted individuals belong to

more Facebook groups, and those who score higher on narcissism are more likely than emotionally stable individuals to prefer using the wall. Extraverted individuals also have more Facebook friends ([Amichai-Hamburger, 2002](#)), although introverts place more personal information on their Facebook profiles as compared with extroverts ([Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010](#)).

However, no study has explored if self-disclosure to a Facebook friend is mediated or influenced by any of the personality characteristics of the individuals who form relationships. Self-disclosure is an important aspect of friendship and measures the intensity of a relationship ([Levinger & Rands, 1985](#)). Self-disclosure is viewed as a major factor in the development, maintenance, and deterioration of a relationship. The present study, therefore, investigates the association between shyness and self-disclosure, and loneliness and self-disclosure, between two Facebook friends and two face-to-face friends. Two studies have been conducted. The first study tested how shyness and social loneliness are related to self-disclosure to a Facebook friend to whom an individual talks most often. The second, follow-up study tested how shyness is related to self-disclosure to a Facebook friend to whom a person speaks to only through Facebook, and also to a face-to-face friend to whom the participants talk only face-to-face and never through Facebook.

1.1. Shyness, loneliness, and self-disclosure

Shyness has been defined as “discomfort or inhibition in interpersonal situations that interferes with pursuing one’s interpersonal or professional goals” ([Henderson, Zimbardo, & Carducci,](#)

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2001, p. 1522). Heiser, Turner, and Beidel (2003) stated that the prevalence rate for shyness ranges from 20% to 48%. However, because of the missing nonverbal cues in most forms of the computer-mediated communication, some studies (e.g., Mesch, 2001; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000; 2003) have suggested that shyness might be associated with increased Internet use.

Social loneliness has been defined as a deficit of the perceived belongingness to a general social network or community (e.g., a kid feeling excluded by other children in the neighborhood, a housewife just moving into a new place with her husband). It was also suggested that lonely users might prefer CMC. For example Morahan-Martin and Schumacher (2003), have suggested that lonely individuals were more likely to use the Internet for emotional support than others and also reported making online friends more than non-lonely individuals.

Self-disclosure is defined as the process of revealing personal information about oneself (e.g., Berg & Derlega, 1987) to another or others. Altman and Taylor (1973) developed social penetration theory to describe how people disclose face-to-face in order to develop relationships. They believed that in the initial stages, relationships have narrow breadth and shallow depth. As relationships move toward intimacy, a wide range of topics is discussed (breadth), with several of the topics to be intimately discussed (depth) (Altman & Taylor, 1987). In the last two decades, researchers have successfully applied social penetration theory to understand computer-mediated communication. Due to limited nonverbal and contextual cues in a computer-mediated environment, they argued that self-disclosure is important for the formation of online relationships (Cho, 2006; Walther, 1992; 1996). However, not many studies have been done to explore if self-disclosure is mediated or influenced by any of the personality traits of the individuals who form relationships. Previous studies have found that online communication benefits shy individuals since they can communicate with others anonymously (Curtis, 1997; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Scharlott & Christ, 1995). Ebeling-White, Frank, and Lester (2007) also suggested that shyness was positively related to a preference for conversing online. In their study, shy individuals used the Internet to decrease a perceived deficit in their real-life social network by establishing virtual friendships online and relieving feelings of loneliness and depression.

Recent research on Facebook usage has found that shy Facebook users have fewer friends than non-shy individuals, although they do spend more time on Facebook (Orr, Sisic, Ross, Simmering, Arsenaault, & Orr, 2009). Those results are similar to offline trends. Shy individuals have fewer offline friendships as well (Jones & Carpenter, 1986). A Baker and Oswald (2010) study of shy users' Facebook use found that individuals high in shyness reported stronger associations between Facebook use and friendship quality. The authors argued that information gained through Facebook might be especially important to shy people, as they know less about peers from face-to-face encounters. Facebook likely facilitates intimacy because users feel more comfortable with online communication (Roberts, Smith, & Pollock, 2000, as cited in Baker & Oswald, 2010). However, as acknowledged in their article, Baker and Oswald did not differentiate friendships that are exclusively online from those that are offline.

Previous research also focused on the "Facebook use", rather than the amount and intimacy of self-disclosure to a Facebook friend. However, spending many hours on Facebook does not guarantee that the person will disclose on Facebook more. What might influence disclosure on Facebook is the intimacy level between two people who converse through Facebook. Hence, it is important to examine variables that may serve as moderators (e.g., closeness between friends, length of friendship, frequency of communication) of the relationship between shyness and Facebook use. Parks and Floyd (1996) generated a list of items for measuring interpersonal

relationships and found that the variety of topics and communication channels increase when a relationship develops over time. People tend to reveal more important and personal information when their relationship progresses (Chan & Cheng, 2004). Peter, Valkenburg, and Schouten (2005) found evidence that the effect of introversion on online friendship formation was mediated by the frequency of online communication. More frequent online communication resulted in adolescents' greater willingness and ability to self-disclose. Sztompka (1999) also stated that the better and longer we are acquainted with somebody, the greater our readiness to self-disclose and form personal relationships.

2. Study 1

A survey with undergraduate students was conducted to test how shyness and social loneliness are related to self-disclosure to a Facebook friend to whom the participant speaks with most often.

Although the Internet seems to be a great place for shy and lonely individuals, this study predicts that Facebook relationships resemble face-to-face relationships (Sheldon, 2008). This study therefore predicts that there will be a negative relationship between social loneliness and self-disclosure. The same hypotheses were made for shyness. The study also hypothesizes that lonely and shy individuals will have fewer Facebook friends, since Facebook relationships are based on existing interpersonal relationships.

H₁. There will be a negative relationship between social loneliness and self-disclosure (breadth and depth) to a Facebook friend.

H₂. There will be a negative relationship between social loneliness and the overall number of Facebook friends.

H₃. There will be a negative relationship between shyness and self-disclosure (breadth and depth) on Facebook.

H₄. There will be a negative relationship between shyness and the number of Facebook friends.

We have also tested if the number of close face-to-face friends is related to the overall self-disclosure and number of Facebook friends.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

The participants ($N = 150$; 51% women) were recruited from introductory communication courses at a large research university in the southern part of the United States. Their average age was 20 ($M = 19.33$, $SD = .89$). The majority of participants identified themselves as white (93%).

2.1.2. Measures

Participants reported how many Facebook friends they had and how many hours they spent on Facebook on an average day. They were also asked how many close face-to-face friends they had. The study asked them about their age and sex. They were instructed to think about the one Facebook friend that they talked to most often through Facebook. Self-disclosure to that friend was measured, as well as the degree of closeness. In addition, students' scores on shyness and social loneliness were obtained. The following are measures used in the questionnaire.

2.1.2.1. Self-disclosure. Two dimensions of self-disclosure, breadth and depth, were measured using items developed by Parks and Floyd (1996). The Parks and Floyd (1996) breadth and depth scale

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