



Self-disclosure on Facebook among female users and its relationship to feelings of loneliness



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to determine if there is a relationship between loneliness and self-disclosure in social networking sites (i.e., Facebook). The study collected data from six hundred and sixteen (616) female Facebook users whose profiles were publicly available online. Out of these 616 Facebook users, half (308) were categorised as 'connected' and the remaining 308 users were categorised as 'lonely'; based on clearly stating this feeling in their latest wall posting. Data for each attribute in the user's Facebook profile was recorded as a binomial outcome (Present (1)/Absent (0)). Attributes were grouped together and the binomial responses totalled. The results of this study have shown that more 'lonely' people disclosed their Personal Information, Relationship Information, and Address than 'connected' people and more 'connected' people disclosed their Views and their Wall than 'lonely' people. The study has found no other significant associations between loneliness and the other variables. In addition, in the discussion section the article also highlights the implications of self-disclosure on SNSs users' wellbeing.

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1. Introduction

To say that Social Networking Sites (SNSs), such as Keek, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn are a mainstream phenomena is to state the obvious. The latest global rankings of the top 500 sites by Alexa (2014) ranks Facebook as second from the top (in terms of the total number of page views), followed by YouTube in third place, LinkedIn in eighth and Twitter in eleventh place. Of the two billion (2,405,518,376) world internet citizens (Internet World Stats., 2014), more than a billion monthly active users are on Facebook alone (Facebook, 2014). This makes Facebook by far the most popular site. The huge popularity that Facebook enjoys is also indicative of the popularity of social networking as an internet activity.

One of the attractive features of social networking is users' ability to share with friends and strangers up to the minute updates of the status of their feelings, thoughts and activities (Jones, Millermaier, Goya-Marthinez, & Schuler, 2008; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). However, revealing too much personal information in SNSs due to a desire to engage in self-disclosure can be problematic for SNSs users because of the risks associated with this revelation of personal information, such as identity theft, cyber-stalking, and cyber-bullying to name a few (Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Nosko,

Wood, & Molema, 2010). The literature suggests that, on one hand, participants are more than ever concerned about their privacy (Al-Saggaf, 2011; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Jones et al., 2008; Young, 2009), on the other hand, self-disclosure is widespread on SNSs (Jones et al., 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009) and users are finding it difficult to stop themselves from disclosing their personal information (Edwards & Brown, 2009).

There are several reasons for engaging in self-disclosure in SNSs. Self-disclosure could be due to lack of oral and non-verbal cues or lack of public self-awareness online or the presence of trust between online communicators (see Section 2.1 below for more details on these). It could also be due to reduced interpersonal cues or self monitoring. A question, however, arises: could feelings of loneliness be another reason for self-disclosure in SNSs? With the exception of Bonetti, Campbell, and Gilmore (2010) study that suggested that the anonymity of the internet may motivate 'lonely' people to disclose intimate information online, research on the relationship between loneliness and self-disclosure online is scarce. There is also a paucity of research on loneliness in the context of SNSs. This is not to say that loneliness and self-disclosure have not been studied before; they have been studied extensively in the literature, albeit separately. This article seeks to address this imbalance in the literature by focusing on the relationship between these two in the context of SNSs.

The purpose of this study is to determine if there is a relationship between loneliness and self-disclosure in the context of SNSs.

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The article is organised as follows. First, relevant work to self-disclosure and loneliness in the context of SNSs is reviewed. Second, the methodological aspects of the empirical study are explained in detail, while the results are dealt with next. Third, a brief summary of the results and a discussion about the implications of self-disclosure on SNSs users' wellbeing are offered. Finally, the article discusses the limitations and future research directions.

2. Relevant work to self-disclosure and loneliness in the context of SNSs

2.1. What are the reasons for self-disclosure on SNSs?

SNSs provide enormous opportunity for users to disclose all manner of personal data. The computer-mediated nature of interaction in SNSs facilitates higher levels of sociability and willingness to self-disclose compared to non-computer-mediated social interaction (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Studies have even revealed that, because of the unthreatening nature of computed-mediated social networking, SNSs enable self-disclosure from individuals who would not normally disclose personal information in face-to-face interactions (Forest & Wood, 2012).

According to online community researchers (see for example: Dyson, 1998; Horn, 1998; Kollock & Smith, 1999; Markham, 1998; Rheingold, 2000), the main reasons for the prevalence of self-disclosure on the internet are the lack of oral and non-verbal cues and the lack of public self-awareness. Lack of oral and non-verbal cues and the lack of public self-awareness cause abandonment of social inhibitions and detachments from social conventions. These factors, in turn, lead online communicators to disclose private information about themselves (Barnes, 2001; Joinson, 1998; Mar, 2000; Preece, 2000; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997; Wallace, 1999). Self-disclosure is also associated with the level of trust between communicators (Valenzuela et al., 2009). If communicators trust each other, and perceive their friendships to be strong they will reveal more about themselves. This suggests that self-disclosure is important for personal relationships (Preece, 2000; Rheingold, 2000; Rifkin, 2000; Wallace, 1999) which is consistent with what other researchers have found in that the more familiar individuals become with each other on the internet, the more likely they will reveal private information to each other (Barnes, 2001; Horn, 1998; Markham, 1998).

2.2. Who is likely to disclose information on SNSs?

The majority of studies conducted on what kinds of users disclose information in SNSs, like Facebook, have exploited university students and young adults as their primary sample. This demographic bias is not without warrant, as young adults between the ages of 18–24 represent the largest cohort of SNSs users (Hoy & Milne, 2010), thus making this group the most effective in determining disclosure and privacy behaviour of SNSs users.

In one of the first studies of information disclosure patterns in SNSs, Gross and Acquisti (2005), found that within their sample of over 4000 university students who used SNSs many users disclosed accurate personal information on their SNSs profiles with seemingly little concern over the negative ways their information might be accessed or how it might be used. This early study of the disconnection between students' disclosure and privacy behaviours highlighted the need for increased awareness of how information disclosure on SNSs, particularly among younger adult users, can lead to violation of one's privacy.

As SNSs, in particular Facebook, have rapidly grown in popularity, people of all age groups are being encouraged to participate in online social networking, not just teenagers and young adults.

Although younger users report disclosing more information on Facebook than older adult users, a distribution that can be explained by the fact that younger users report greater time spent on Facebook, adolescents and adults share in common many factors that predict information disclosure and control (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2012a).

Having established a comprehensive checklist of all the types of information that can be disclosed on Facebook, Nosko et al. (2010) drew some general conclusions from the 400 Facebook profiles they studied, the first of which was that Facebook users demonstrated a level of discretion in regards to allowing their profile information to be viewable by other users, with, on average, approximately 25% of possible information made publically visible for other users. Users, in general, also showed a level of discretion in regards to what kinds of personal information they were willing to disclose on Facebook. The current study extends this work by utilising the scale. However the current study is unique in that it will look specifically at the relationship between loneliness and self-disclosure, examining the types of information that people who feel lonely reveal on SNSs.

2.3. What is the relationship between privacy awareness and disclosure behaviour among SNSs users?

Despite the ease in which disclosure of information can take place by users of various ages, backgrounds, and personalities in SNSs, it has been recognised that often accompanying the strong desire to self-disclose on SNSs is the competing desire for privacy, i.e. to have control over one's personal information. This conflict between the desire to disclose in SNSs and the fear of privacy violation has been receiving increasing attention in the literature (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009; Krasnova, Spiekermann, Koroleva, & Hildebrand, 2010; Livingstone 2008; Shin, Ko, & Jang, 2011; Stutzman, Capra, & Thompson, 2011).

Some research has attempted to assess the balance that SNSs users maintain between the opposing needs for privacy control and the desire to disclose personal information and how this affects privacy enhancing behaviours (Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Joinson, Reips, Buchanan, & Paine Schofield, 2010; Shin et al., 2011). Other research concluded that greater concern over privacy issues does not always influence users' attitudes towards self-disclosure in online social networking (Joinson et al., 2010). For example, some young people value engaging in self-disclosure because disclosure plays a role in the construction and maintenance of their identities, which is a central element of participation in SNSs (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Control of personal information plays a large role in self-presentation experiments, especially of young adults, conducted online (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). SNSs allow younger users to go through a social process of 'self-actualisation' through the self-disclosure that takes place in SNSs, a place where they can feel relatively safe to present themselves however they choose (Livingstone, 2008).

Yet, other research suggests that concerns over privacy do influence users' motives to disclose personal information on SNSs. The benefits SNSs users derive from disclosure are often cancelled out by concerns over privacy risks which acted as a barrier to information disclosure (Krasnova et al., 2010). Privacy consumption behaviours (such as reading the privacy policy of an SNS) were also found to be a factor influencing disclosure behaviour on SNSs like Facebook (Stutzman et al., 2011). This suggests that SNSs could help alleviate some concern over disclosure of personal information by offering more transparent privacy policies and privacy controls. The amount of violations of informational privacy on SNSs can also be reduced by raising user's awareness of integrated privacy measures in SNSs, like Facebook, as a way to regulate user information revelation (Young & Quan-Hasse, 2009).

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