Predictors of honesty, intent, and valence of Facebook self-disclosure

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study applies the uses and gratifications theory (U&G) to examine self-disclosive behavior on Facebook. Using a convenience sample of 301 Facebook users, path analyses were conducted to determine how individual factors, social cohesion, and motives affect the honesty, valence, and intent of self-disclosure. Results showed that U&G provided a useful model for exploring the relationships among study variables. Facebook users motivated by relationship maintenance were generally more honest, intentional, and positive than others. Higher self-esteem was related to more positive self-disclosure, as well. Conversely, participants motivated to use Facebook for virtual community and companionship disclosed the most dishonest, unintentional, and negative information. These and other direct and indirect predictors of self-disclosure are discussed in light of the existing literature on Facebook self-disclosure.

1. Introduction

Since its formation in 2004, Facebook has established itself as the most popular social network on the web. Currently, Facebook boasts over one billion monthly active users worldwide (Facebook.com, 2014). In the United States, 71% of online adults use Facebook, which far exceeds any other social networking site (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Perhaps Facebook's popularity can be attributed to the ease and effectiveness with which it promotes self-disclosure in a multitude of ways. Self-disclosure is defined as the communication of personal information to others (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). This information can be conveyed both verbally and nonverbally through a multitude of Facebook functions in both one's profile and their user behavior (e.g., status updates, posting pictures, etc.).

As our social lives are increasingly displayed online, it is important to consider how users communicate in this environment. Research has shown that the majority of Facebook connections, or "friends," do actually represent real-life connections rather than complete strangers (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007, 2011). Therefore, the disclosures made on Facebook could have important personal and professional consequences within one's face-to-face networks. Research has shown that social media posts can affect

employability (On Device Research, 2013), as well as personal relationship quality (Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013; Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009).

Existing research on Facebook self-disclosure has largely focused on amount, depth, and breadth measures (e.g., Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Ledbetter et al., 2011; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009; Special & Li-Barber, 2012). While these variables are important when understanding self-disclosure on social networks like Facebook, very little research has explored the other facets of disclosure: honesty, intent, and valence. Honest disclosures are those which are perceived as being accurate and truthful. The intent dimension of self-disclosure relates to the level of awareness one has when communicating personal information. Lastly, valence encompasses the degree to which one's self-disclosures are positive or negative (Wheeless, 1978). The purpose of this study is to explore these three dimensions of Facebook self-disclosure and determine the predictors of this type of disclosive behavior. Toward that end, the relevant scholarly literature is reviewed and a test of the predictors of self-disclosure honesty, intent, and valence is presented.

2. Literature review

2.1. Self-disclosure on Facebook

Part of the lure of Facebook is its ability to allow people to maintain existing relationships and reconnect with old friends (Smith, 2011). Self-disclosure is a stable part of Facebook profiles,

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status updates, and comments, which is not surprising given the importance of self-disclosure for relationship development (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973) and maintenance (e.g., Stafford & Canary, 1991). The following section reviews research regarding Facebook and computer-mediated communication (CMC) with regards to valence, intent, and honesty.

Honesty, valence, and intent of online self-disclosures have been explored in some research, but rarely have researchers examined these dimensions on Facebook specifically. In Park, Jin, and Jin's (2011) study, people who used Facebook for relationship maintenance disclosed larger amounts of positive information, and this was connected to perceived intimacy of the relationship. Although Park et al.'s (2011) study showed no connection between relationship maintenance and honesty or intent of self-disclosure, Tosun's (2012) research found otherwise. These results show the complex nature of these variables, and demonstrate a need for further exploration into the variables that help to explain how Facebook users make decisions about their disclosure behaviors.

Research in other online contexts can aid in shedding light on the potential importance of examining these dimensions of self-disclosure via Facebook. For example, people using online dating sites were more honest and disclosive when they wished to establish face-to-face relationships (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). However, they were not necessarily more positive, perhaps because they wanted to present a more realistic impression of themselves.

Researchers have examined predictors for self-disclosure dimensions in online self-disclosure in online chatting, as well, which informs the present study. Leung (2002) found that participants' loneliness impacted disclosure; those who were more lonely were more likely to disclose negative, dishonest information about themselves. Additionally, frequency of instant messenger (ICQ) use was related to more intentional self-disclosure (Leung, 2002). Also in the context of online chat, Cho (2007) examined the impact of motivation to use chat with respect to self-disclosure. The researcher found that adolescents who used chat for relational purposes disclosed more to create a positive impression than those who used the technology for informational purposes. Those who used chat for informational purposes were more intentional and valenced (both negative and positive) in their disclosures than those who were motivated by relational purposes. However, there was no significant difference in honesty of disclosures between these two groups (Cho, 2007). This research shows that self-disclosure via technology may have differing results based on the reasons, or motives for engaging in this medium.

Despite the fact that few studies have directly examined Facebook technology with respect to honesty, valence, and intention of self-disclosure, the current research in this area does point to the potential for important differences that may emerge. As shown from this research, personal characteristics and motivations may result in differing types of self-disclosure. Additionally, when users self-disclose information on Facebook, they are actively engaging in the Facebook world. Therefore, an appropriate theoretical framework to apply to Facebook self-disclosure is the uses and gratifications theory.

2.2. Uses and gratifications theory

The uses and gratifications theory (U&G) is a functional approach that emphasizes the role of an individual's psychological and sociological characteristics, as well as the motivations they have for using a medium when assessing media effects (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Rubin, 2002). As a limited effects model, U&G assumes that the individual is an active user of media who consciously makes decisions regarding media use (Rubin, 2002). This theory is particularly relevant to Facebook research

on self-disclosure. Unlike face-to-face disclosures that have the possibility of being more passive, self-disclosure on social networks requires activity. One has to post a picture or status update in order to self-disclose via Facebook.

In addition to the assumption of audience activity, U&G assumes that users are goal-driven in their media use. Therefore, scholars have often focused their efforts toward discovering what motivates people to use a particular medium (Ruggiero, 2000). According to Katz et al. (1974), a medium may provide multiple types of content that may lead to the fulfillment of various goals. For example, Facebook can be viewed as source of entertainment, information, and/or connection to others. Therefore, a user could be motivated to seek out one or many of these uses when spending time on Facebook.

Ultimately, U&G is a user-centered approach. One's individual characteristics impact the types of motivations that users have for engaging with a medium, which then lead to various media effects (Rubin, 2002). Demographic differences as well as social and psychological differences have often been analyzed with respect to this theoretical approach (e.g., Haridakis & Rubin, 2003; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). One's individual make-up is crucial in how they seek out and experience any medium, including social networks. The following discussion outlines the previous research regarding Facebook motives as well as important individual characteristics that have been shown to impact Facebook use and online self-disclosure.

2.2.1. Motives for using Facebook

According to Papacharissi and Rubin (2000), motives are important when researching content on the internet. Because aspects of the internet include both interpersonal and mass media motives, Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) combined these motives to determine CMC motives. They discovered five main motives for using the internet in general: interpersonal utility, pass time, information seeking, convenience, and entertainment. This foundational study of CMC motives has been very informative to research on social media (e.g., Haridakis & Hanson, 2009; Sheldon, 2008a; Sundar & Limperos, 2014).

Many researchers have focused their efforts in developing motive typologies for Facebook use in order to explore various outcomes. These motives both support and extend Papacharissi and Rubin's (2000) work. For example, the pass time and entertainment motives are still relevant to Facebook research (Sheldon, 2008a, 2008b; Special & Li-Barber, 2012). While elements of interpersonal utility are evident, Facebook scholars specify the motives related to this medium to include relationship maintenance, companionship, and virtual community (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Park et al., 2011; Sheldon, 2008a, 2008b; Special & Li-Barber, 2012).

Several Facebook motives have been found to be related to self-disclosive Facebook posts. Relational maintenance has been tied to several self-disclosure outcomes, including valence, intent, honesty, amount, and breadth. For example, Facebook users motivated by relational maintenance tend to discuss more positive and intentional self-disclosures on that medium (Park et al., 2011). These disclosures are likely to be more honest than for those motivated by other Facebook motives (Tosun, 2012). Finally, people motivated to use Facebook to maintain offline relationships disclosure more information over a wider variety of topics (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014). Clearly, there is an established connection between disclosive behaviors and relationship maintenance motive specifically, but that is not the only reason people use Facebook.

In addition to those motivated to maintain existing relationships, people who use Facebook for exhibitionism, or to get attention, may be more likely to disclose larger amounts of private