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Social anxiety, attributes of online communication and self-disclosure across private and public Facebook communication



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ABSTRACT

This study expands on the ‘internet-attribute-perception’ model that explains how online attributes (i.e. reduced cues and controllability) and the disinhibition effect mediate the relationship between personal characteristics and online self-disclosure. The current study tested this model for two distinct modes of Facebook communication: private and public, focussing on the personal characteristic of social anxiety. Using path analysis on a sample of 306 participants (Mean age = 20.52 years, SD = 1.45, 65.69% female), the model was partially replicated showing support in private but not public modes of Facebook communication. Although there was a positive relationship between social anxiety and the perceived value of the online attributes in public Facebook communication, this did not lead to the disinhibition effect. The study discusses potential differences between these two ways of communication but highlights that more private ways of online communication may be vital for socially anxious individuals in terms of relational development.

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1. Introduction

Online communication is becoming an increasingly popular method of staying connected with friends. Social networking sites (SNSs) and use of online chats have become important for maintaining relationships (Special & Li-Barber, 2012) and for people's feelings of belonging to their social group (Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2013). These online platforms may open a new social world to people who may be inhibited in real life social situations, such as socially anxious individuals (Shouten, Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) and shy individuals (Brunet & Schmidt, 2008), enabling them to be less inhibited online. Investigating online social interaction is therefore important as it adds another dimension to social experiences for these people. However, there are platforms which offer varying levels of privacy when communicating with others and thus it is important to explore whether the processes involved in relationship maintenance on these different platforms are the same. This study will begin to address this by investigating two modes of Facebook communication (private and public) and examine the processes involved in the relationship between social

anxiety and online self-disclosure in these two different ways of communicating.

1.1. Social anxiety

Social anxiety is defined as anxiety resulting from the prospect of interpersonal evaluation in real or imagined social settings, when individuals are motivated to make a particular impression on the person to whom they are speaking (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Hence, contrasting to individuals low in social anxiety, those experiencing high levels of social anxiety often struggle more in social settings as their desire to make a good first impression often enhances their anxiety, resulting in a lack of self-presentational confidence (High & Caplan, 2009). As a result, people suffering from social anxiety not only have difficulties creating and maintaining satisfying interpersonal relationships (Leary & Kowalski, 1995) but may also avoid social situations which they perceive might lead to negative evaluations of the self.

One reason why people high in social anxiety have difficulties in maintaining healthy and beneficial social relationships is due to their reluctance to self-disclose. Self-disclosure is defined as the revealing of personal and intimate information about oneself to a targeted individual (Nguyen, Bin, & Campbell, 2012) and is an important part of friendship building and maintenance (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987). By revealing personal and intimate

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information about oneself, one can contribute to feelings of closeness and intimacy to friends (Park, Jin & Jin, 2011), and the amount of self-disclosure has been found to be a predictor of increased likability of a person from first impression to subsequent meetings (Voncken & Dijk, 2013). People high in social anxiety desire to avoid negative social outcomes and may adopt self-protective behaviours to prevent disapproval, possibly leading to decreased self-disclosure (Meleshko & Alden, 1993). Support for this comes from findings suggesting that social anxiety hinders self-disclosure (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). Specifically, compared to non-socially anxious individuals, people suffering from social anxiety disclose significantly less, and when they do, the information shared is often superficial or highly negative (McCroskey & Richmond, 1976). Similarly, Meleshko and Alden (1993) reported that socially anxious individuals were more conservative in their levels of intimacy, and did not meet disclosure levels of their conversational partners.

While socially anxious people may avoid certain social situations, it is not the case that socially anxious individuals have less desire for social contact than less socially anxious individuals, in spite of their inhibitions (Cheek & Buss, 1981). It is therefore clear to see why other forms of communication with others (e.g. the Internet) would be explored as a potential tool for individuals high in social anxiety to fulfil their social needs without causing distress and avoidance behaviours. These alternative forms of communication may be sought out specifically to engage in practices which enhance relationships, such as self-disclosure.

1.2. Online communication and self-disclosure

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been a mode of communication for several decades. CMC is distinct from face-to-face communication (FtF) for several reasons, most relevantly that it has been consistently shown to stimulate self-disclosure (Joinson, 2001, Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Walther's Hyperpersonal Communication theory (1996) aims to explain enhanced self-disclosure in online communication arguing that CMC provides users with the opportunity to selectively self-present. It posits that two attributes of online communication encourage individuals to engage in more intimate self-disclosure.

The first of these attributes relates to the reduced cues of the online environment. CMC offers users the ability to communicate with others without having to pay attention to auditory, visual and contextual cues (e.g. eye contact, facial expressions). This is in contrast to FtF communication where one needs to manage how one looks and sounds, engaging in appropriate conversational turn-taking, seeming interested in what the other person is saying as well as attending to surrounding input from the environment. Joinson (2001) showed support for this and examined the role of visual anonymity finding that those who were visually anonymous to their conversation partner self-disclosed significantly more than those who were visually non-anonymous. Since CMC offers the reduction of visual, auditory and contextual cues, Walther (1996) also suggested that this CMC 'frees-up' more cognitive resources which a user can then redirect into creating their message.

The second attribute relates to the controllability that CMC affords the user. Controllability refers to the temporal component of CMC, in that the conversation is often more asynchronous which gives the person more time to think about and edit what they want to say and how they want to say it. As such, it is argued that these two attributes of CMC (reduced cues and controllability) reduce people's inhibitions, in turn increasing levels of self-disclosure, resulting in a 'hyperpersonal' form of communication. This disinhibiting effect is an important effect of CMC, as it refers to the notion that an individual loses all sense of constraints normally put on them in FtF communications; their concern for self-presentation

or judgements from others is reduced or non-existent (Joinson, 1998).

Suler (2005) distinguishes between two types of disinhibition: toxic disinhibition and benign disinhibition. The former relates to the effect which results in negative behaviours (e.g. cyberbullying, online criminal behaviour) whereas the latter relates to mostly positive behaviours (e.g. prosocial behaviour, revealing emotions and thoughts). Suler points out that the key difference between these two types of disinhibition is that benign disinhibition tends to give psychological benefits to the user (e.g. exploring identity or developing the self) whereas toxic disinhibition does not. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2015) explored benign disinhibition and report that the anonymity, invisibility and lack of eye-contact in the online environment had a positive effect on the amount of personal information disclosed, and anonymity and invisibility were particularly important when revealing emotions. Since benign disinhibition is related to self-disclosure, the current paper focuses on this type of disinhibition only and is referred to herein as 'disinhibition.'

Considering the online environment can offer a degree of controllability and reduced-cues, leading to feelings of disinhibition, it is unsurprising that previous research has highlighted that CMC may benefit socially anxious individuals (Erwin, Turk, Heimberg, Fresco, & Hantula, 2004) since they are drawn to low-risk contexts (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). In a study examining Instant Messaging (IM) among a sample of Dutch adolescents, Schouten, Valkenburg, and Peter (2007) found that socially anxious individuals value the controllability of online communication more than non-socially anxious individuals. Moreover, among a sample of High School students, Pierce (2009) found that social anxiety was positively correlated with feeling more comfortable talking to someone online, through text messaging and on a cell phone. In a slightly older sample of undergraduate students, Caplan (2007) found that people high in social anxiety reported a preference for online interaction. Further, it has been shown that socially anxious individuals who were able to initially chat with someone briefly online before meeting the same person face-to-face, experienced reduced anxiety and were less likely to want to avoid the face-to-face conversation, compared to those who could not (Markovitzky, Anholt, & Lipsitz, 2012).

Specifically in terms of self-disclosure, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) found that 32 per cent of the socially anxious adolescents studied perceived online communication as more valuable for intimately self-disclosing about a wide variety of topics than doing so offline, compared to only 18 per cent of the non-socially anxious respondents. In turn, this perception led to more online communication. Moreover, Weidman et al. (2012) found that participants higher in social anxiety placed greater value on the reduced social pressure made available on CMC in enhancing their social interactions and importantly, they also reported greater feelings of disinhibition (in comparison to those lower in social anxiety). Furthermore, social anxiety was positively related to online self-disclosure. Taken together, this body of research suggests that socially anxious individuals value the online environment as a place to self-disclose.

The Internet-Attribute-Perception (IAP) model put forward by Schouten et al. (2007), proposes that the actual effects of the controllability and reduced cues on self-disclosure depend on users' perceptions of their relevance. They argue that these attributes are seen as fixed aspects of CMC, but that individuals can differ in their perceptions of the relevance of these attributes. The model, based on Walther's Hyperpersonal theory hypothesises that the relationship between certain personality characteristics (social anxiety, public and private self-consciousness) and self-disclosure would be mediated by the perceived relevance of reduced cues

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