



## Adult attachment and self-disclosure on social networking site: A content analysis of Sina Weibo



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### ABSTRACT

The popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) provides a new tool for self-disclosure. Previous studies have applied the attachment theory to illuminate individual differences in self-disclosure on SNS. However, several limitations and inconsistent results still need further research. First, previous studies neglect the potential difference between attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (two dimensions of attachment insecurity) in predicting SNS self-disclosure. Besides, related studies have been limited to the disclosure of certain information, college samples and self-report data, which may lead to untrustworthy sample representativeness and measured deviation. Current research develops an evaluation model of self-disclosure based on observable information on Sina Weibo, a large SNS in mainland China. The model includes textual information, personal profile, and profile image on SNS as index and can well reflect users' self-disclosure amount and depth on SNS. Based on the model, current research finds that individuals with high attachment anxiety disclose less personal information on their SNS profile page, while those with high attachment avoidance show a decreased disclosure of profile image on SNS. Finally, explanations of adult attachment as a predictor, limitations of the current research, implications and areas for future research are discussed.

### 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of internet, a variety of internet services have a significant impact on interpersonal communication and social interaction. At the center of online information transfer are the popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008) which provide a new tool for information sharing (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) and become an environment in which individuals can publicly disclose one's identity and personal information (Varnali & Toker, 2015). As a core behavior on SNS (Caplan, 2007), users disclose various self-related information on SNS including images, profile information, feelings, thoughts, and etc. Examining others' SNS pages, one may find that some people tend to disseminate these self-related information, whereas others do not. Recent research suggested this individual difference in self-disclosure on SNS (Al-Saggaf & Nielsen, 2014; Chen, Pan, & Guo, 2016; Thompson, 2012). In interpersonal relationship, self-disclosure can reinforce the closeness among individuals (Derlega, Winstead, Wong, & Greenspan, 1987) and thus plays a central role in the development and maintenance of relationships (Collins &

Miller, 1994; Derlega et al., 1987). Considering attachment theory is a particularly powerful framework for explaining individual differences in thoughts, emotions and behaviors in offline and online social interaction (Collins & Allard, 2007; Hart, Nailling, Bizer, & Collins, 2015; Rom & Alfasi, 2014), current research focus on the role of adult attachment in self-disclosure on SNS.

Previous studies have examined the applicability of attachment theory to explain self-disclosure on SNS (Aharony, 2016; Shang, Chen, & Chang, 2015; Yaakobi & Goldenberg, 2014). One research find that insecurely-attached individuals tend to disclose more self-related information on Facebook (Aharony, 2016). While another research suggest the greater information dissemination of securely-attached individuals (Yaakobi & Goldenberg, 2014). It is thus clear that several limitations and inconsistent results still need further research. Specifically, previous study (Aharony, 2016) lack of attention to the difference between anxious and avoidant individuals (they are both insecurely-attached individuals) in SNS self-disclosure, which needs further evidence. In addition, related research draw conflict conclusions. The probable reasons may be that previous studies have been limited to the

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disclosure of certain information (Chang & Heo, 2014; Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009; Kolek & Saunders, 2008; Yaakobi & Goldenberg, 2014) and thus fail to fully reflect the concept of self-disclosure on SNS. Besides, some research limit to college sample (Aharony, 2016; Yaakobi & Goldenberg, 2014) and heavily depend on participants' self-report data (Aharony, 2016; Shang et al., 2015; Yaakobi & Goldenberg, 2014) which may lead to untrustworthy sample representativeness and measured deviation. Therefore, it remains to be developed a more comprehensive, objective and effective measurement of self-disclosure on SNS.

Current research contain two studies to resolve limitations and conflicts mentioned above. These studies attempt to expand the applicability of attachment theory as a framework for understanding self-disclosure on SNS and creatively develop an objective evaluation model of SNS self-disclosure providing a new method for measuring self-disclosure.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Self-disclosure on SNS

Self-disclosure is the act of revealing self-related information to others (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958) which can reinforce the closeness among individuals (Derlega et al., 1987) and thus plays a central role to establish interpersonal relationships (Collins & Miller, 1994; Derlega et al., 1987). Compare to face to face contexts, online social interaction are highly anonymous, asynchronous, and lack of visual and nonverbal cues which cause an individual to disclose greater intimate information on SNS (Joinson, 2001; Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2014; Suler, 2004; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1996). Since SNS functions as an outlet for modern self-disclosure (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014), we simply define SNS self-disclosure as the act of revealing self-related information to others on SNS. Therefore, the research that only focus on the information disclosed in personal profile (Chang & Heo, 2014; Christofides et al., 2009; Kolek & Saunders, 2008) or information related to certain topic such as job security (Yaakobi & Goldenberg, 2014) seems cannot fully reflect the concept of self-disclosure on SNS which may lead to inconsistent results.

Due to the limitations imposed by the Chinese authorities, Facebook, Twitter, and other global SNSs are not currently available for most people living in mainland China leading to the emergence of similar SNSs unique to China, such as Sina Weibo, WeChat, QQzone, and etc. As three large SNSs in China (China Internet Network Information Center, 2017), Sina Weibo is a more public SNS than others (Liu, Min, Zhai, & Smyth, 2016). Since Sina Weibo allows users to “follow” anyone they like and access others' information without permission, Sina Weibo can better reflect the anonymity of online social situation. Therefore, current research mainly focuses on the self-related information disclosed on Sina Weibo.

Most researchers tend to use a modified self-disclosure scale or develop a new questionnaire to measure participants' self-disclosure on SNS (Aharony, 2016; Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Shang et al., 2015; Yaakobi & Goldenberg, 2014; Zhang & Ling, 2015). While others suggest that the findings based on self-reports reflect participants' self-views rather than actual behaviors (Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011) and are likely to be influenced by social desirability (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010) and false memory. Therefore, current research uses content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) to collect almost all self-related information that can be disclosed on Sina Weibo. Based on these information, we develop a more comprehensive, objective and effective measure of self-disclosure on SNS.

### 2.2. Category system for SNS self-disclosure

Some previous measures focus on the content of self-disclosure and measure individuals' amount of self-disclosure in different topics

(Aharony, 2016; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Miller, Berg, & Archer, 1983; Varnali & Toker, 2015). While others suggest that self-disclosure is a multi-dimensional structure including frequency, amount, depth, breadth or other dimensions (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Zhang & Ling, 2015). Based on former one's perspective, current research mainly focus on the disclosure of different types of self-related information on Sina Weibo. Previous researches mainly focus on personal profile (Chang & Heo, 2014; Christofides et al., 2009; Kolek & Saunders, 2008), profile image (Rueda-Ortiz & Giraldo, 2016; Saslow, Muise, Impett, & Dubin, 2013; Shu, Hu, Zhang, Ma, & Chen, 2017; Strano, 2008), and textual content (Cheng, Li, Kwok, Zhu, & Yip, 2017; Liu & Zhu, 2016; Qiu, Lin, Leung, & Tov, 2012). These three categories of information almost cover all self-related information on SNS. Therefore, combined with the characteristics of Sina Weibo, current research classifies SNS self-disclosure into three categories (personal profile, profile image, and textual information) to conduct content analysis.

With regard to personal profile, Sina Weibo allow users to edit six sub-categories of information on personal profile page including basic information, contact information, occupational information, educational information, label information, and personal introduction information. Specifically, basic information involve users' personal attributes such as gender, age, birth-day, relationship status, and etc. In addition, users can also add a number of short personalized labels to describe themselves briefly. Related research suggest that Facebook users tend to share their personal information such as birth-day, relationship status, hometown, e-mail address, along with their school program on personal profile (Christofides et al., 2009; Kolek & Saunders, 2008). These information are people's self-portrayals and might reflect one's real personality (Back et al., 2010). Items in previous questionnaire also involve information about one's work, studies, personality, and interests (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958).

With regard to profile image, since SNS users can see each other's profile images without “friending” each other or interacting further, profile image by which users choose to identify themselves (Watson, Smith, & Driver, 2006) is a public representation of the self within SNS. In particular, those who post photos of themselves as their profile image on SNS can make up for the lack of visual cues in cyberspace. Related study show that 98.7% college students posted a photo of themselves on Facebook (Young & Quan-Haase, 2009). Therefore, photo, especially profile image, may be one of the most telling pieces of self-disclosure on SNS (Hum et al., 2011). According to previous studies (Mesch & Beker, 2010; Young & Quan-Haase, 2009), current research mainly focus on the number of photos in the profile album and the content of the main profile image (whether a photo of themselves is used as one's profile image).

With regard to textual information on SNS, similar to Twitter, Sina Weibo users are allowed to post a 140-character-or-less textual update, called a “tweet” or a “status”. The words in “status” could reveal their emotional states, social relationships, thoughts and other self-related topics (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Therefore, six categories of words in simplified Chinese LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count) dictionary (Gao, Hao, Li, Gao, & Zhu, 2013) were included in current research as a measure of the degree of disclosure of textual information. They are “first personal singular pronouns”, “social processes words”, “affective processes words”, “cognitive processes words”, “perceptual processes words”, and “biological processes words”. Since self-disclosure can be broadly defined as act of revealing any statement that starts with “I” to others (Jourard, 1971; Pilkington, Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993), the use of first personal singular pronouns (e.g., “I”, “me”, “mine”) can reflect one's general amount of self-disclosure. In addition, social processes words (e.g., “mate”, “talk”, “friend”) are related to one's social relationships. Affective process words (e.g., “happy”, “cried”, “abandon”) refer to positive and negative emotion words. Cognitive process words (e.g., “think”, “know”, “perhaps”) are related to one's opinion and attitudes. Perceptual process words (e.g., “see”, “hear”, “feels”) are those related to personal feeling.

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