



## Research Report

# Surfing on Social Network Sites A comprehensive instrument to evaluate online self-disclosure and related attitudes



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Available online 7 March 2015

## Keywords:

Online self-disclosure  
Facebook  
Online social sites

## ABSTRACT

The widespread diffusion of Facebook use has resulted in a host of psychological studies that measure online self-disclosure and other variables related to online behaviour, including the benefits and risks associated with Fb use and issues of trust and control over information. Recently, a study group headed by Krasnova proposed a comprehensive 54-item instrument to measure 10 different dimensions pertaining to online behaviour. The present study aims to investigate the factorial structure of this instrument and to evaluate its usability. Seven hundred and thirty-six subjects have been enrolled in the study and randomly divided into two samples in order to conduct an Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis. The results suggest a 12 factor structure with a strong goodness of fit. The latent-dimensions underlined in our study allow us to differentiate relationship maintenance, enjoyment, and self-presentation as aims of Facebook use. Moreover, it is possible to examine the perceived likelihood of risk as it is related to harmless or threatening breaches of privacy. The presented instrument, available in multiple languages, allows us to check theoretical models related to online self-disclosure and compare them to models that have been used in other countries and cultures.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last decade the use of Social Network Sites (SNSs) has grown so rapidly that we now think of it as part of our lives (Lampinen, Stutzman, & Bylund, 2011). Despite the presence of several SNSs on the internet, the establishment of Facebook (Fb) represents a unique turning point. Founded in 2004 as a network limited to Harvard students, it was extended to other colleges in the Boston area, and then afterwards to anyone who had a valid e-mail address. It has rapidly become the most popular online social network, counting 1.317 billion Monthly Active Users (MAU). It is used, most of all, by people who are 18–40 years of age, particularly women (Duggan, 2013; Hampton, Goulet, & Purcell, 2011). The reason for its success is unclear, but some authors have emphasised the construction of social capital (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008), which refers to the fact that Fb users can add to their social networks by maintaining old relationships and creating new ones (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). In fact, Fb collects not only personal profiles, but also those of groups, institutions, and companies, and it is a relevant tool for social communication (Ross et al., 2009). According to Papacharissi

(2009, p. 199), Fb, unlike LinkedIn and ASmallWorld, appears to be a “glasshouse” that is open to all, in which the line between private and public communication is unclear. These characteristics have probably influenced Fb’s huge growth and its widespread diffusion, and have captured the attention of researchers who seek to comprehend the online behaviours of Fb users. Even if the number of studies on this topic does not reflect the progressive development of this communication tool, Fb has been studied with respect to the social and psychological features of its use, particularly processes of online self disclosure and self presentation.

## 1.1. Online self-disclosure

The term self-disclosure refers to “any message about the self that a person communicates to others” (Wheeless & Grotz, 1976, p. 47). This is a process characterised by (a) reciprocity—i.e., we disclose information because we want others to disclose in turn (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006); (b) breadth—i.e., the frequency and duration of the disclosing act; and (c) depth—i.e., the degree of intimacy in the act of disclosing information, which is provided by the user’s intent, honesty, and accuracy. Self-disclosure refers to the ease of identifying a user as a real person on the Internet (Gandey, 2000) and represents the amount of information that an Internet user decides to reveal to others (Joinson & Paine,

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2007). All SNSs, including Fb, are based on the sharing of personal information and often invite their members to self-disclose and self-present by fashioning their personal profiles and by posting photos and preferences (Ledbetter et al., 2011). But what are the factors related to self-disclosure, and why do people decide to disclose personal information on Fb? Adopting a socio-psychological perspective, many studies have focused on the characteristics of Fb use that can influence, positively or negatively, online self-disclosure. Krasnova and her colleagues (Krasnova, Kolesnikova, & Guenther, 2009; Krasnova, Spiekermann, Koroleva, & Hildebrand, 2010; Krasnova & Veltri, 2011) have proposed a comprehensive conceptual model of online self-disclosure that considers several aspects of this phenomenon, including:

- perceived benefits,
- privacy costs,
- trust factors,
- perceived control over information and awareness.

### 1.2. Benefits related to SNS use

In terms of benefits, many studies have discussed how Fb allows people to present themselves (Mehdizadeh, 2010; Seidman, 2013) in order to promote events, share personal information and opinions (Lee & Paris, 2013; Pi, Chou, & Liao, 2013), and augment social relationships (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014). Organisations and companies also use Fb to engage stakeholders (Saxton & Waters, 2014; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009) and promote their services and products (Harris & Dennis, 2011; Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Phelan, Chen, & Haney, 2013). Furthermore, Fb is used by institutions, hospitals, and organisations to promote health (Apatu, Alperin, Miner, & Wiljer, 2013; Bradshaw, Hughes, & Day, 2013; Park, Rodgers, & Stemmler, 2011), and by educational services and universities to enhance learning processes (Chan, 2011; Daher, 2014), increase student motivation (Deng & Tavares, 2013; Jenness, 2011; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007), and recruitment (Fagerstrom & Ghinea, 2013; Frandsen & Ferguson, 2014). In summary, the possibilities to present themselves, build or maintain social relationships, and enjoy themselves are considered benefits of self-disclosure among users of Fb, oftentimes acting as positive aspects in motivating users' online behaviour (e.g. Olivero & Lunt, 2004).

Regardless, many studies have shown that a direct positive relationship between benefits and self-disclosure does not exist, and that this relationship is often mediated by some of the more problematic consequences of Fb use, many of which move well beyond clinical definitions of addiction and abuse (Griffiths, 2013; Hormes, Kearns, & Timko, 2014; Ryan, Chester, Reece, & Xenos, 2014). Some authors, in particular, have given their attention to the problems associated with privacy management (Litt, 2013; Stutzman, Gross, & Acquisti, 2013; Young & Quan-Haase, 2013) and the control of information (Brandimarte, Acquisti, & Loewenstein, 2013) on Fb, focusing on the online self-disclosure process (Taddei & Contena, 2013; Yu, 2014).

### 1.3. Privacy costs in SNS

Recent research has explored the relationship between the online disclosure of personal information and privacy concerns (Brandimarte et al., 2013) and the high risk related to online breaches of privacy (Schofield & Joinson, 2008; Whitty & Joinson, 2008). Joinson and Paine (2007) suggest that privacy is a term that is difficult to define; legally, it refers to the right to be let alone (Posner, 1977), but it can also include the right to decide the extent to which personal information is disclosed, the right to determine when, how, and what information can be communicated to others (Westin, 1970). In SNSs privacy refers to the freedom from

unauthorized intrusion on personal data (Vaidya, Clifton, & Zhu, 2006). Discovering that one's own private information has been disseminated online, including embarrassing photos or videos that are retrieved through phishing scams or inadequate privacy restrictions, represents a serious psychological threat (Margulis, 2003; Williams, 2010). Raynes-Goldie (2010) claims that the use of SNSs has modified our understanding of privacy. Privacy norms are, in fact, related to the context of interaction (Nissenbaum, 2004). On Fb, however, the context is fluid and unstable, which has important implications regarding the management of privacy on Fb (Hull, Lipford, & Latulipe, 2011). Users' perceptions of their audience are often underestimated in terms of both size and scope (Bernstein, Bakshy, Burke, & Karrer, 2013), and the privacy management settings are often complicated, useless, and request specific evaluations (Johnson, Egelman, & Bellovin, 2012). Privacy risks are often underestimated, while the social benefits arising from the disclosure of personal information are often overestimated (Brandimarte et al., 2013). Moreover, online breaches of privacy are frequently considered to be part of the functioning of Fb, and requests for personal information do not worry users (Hoadley, Xu, Lee, & Rosson, 2010). All of these characteristics of privacy management influence online disclosing behaviour and users' perceptions of their own self-disclosure.

### 1.4. Trust and control

Privacy is a precondition for online self-disclosure, but self-disclosure also reduces privacy by increasing the amount of online information available to other users (Ben-Ze'ev, 2003); the relationships between these constructs seem to be influenced by important variables, such as trust (e.g. Joinson, Reips, Buchanan, & Schofield, 2010; Mesch, 2012) and control (e.g. Brandimarte et al., 2013). Trust is defined as the belief that individuals, groups, or institutions can be trusted (Smith, 2010). It often has an antagonistic relationship with privacy, if only because people have to know information about others in order to trust them, which in turn has a positive effect on online self-disclosure (Mesch, 2012). However, the development of trust in an online environment is complex because the online world is defined as insecure (Friedman, Kahn, & Howe, 2000). This is why some studies have focused on the propensity of people to disclose information on the basis of both trust and privacy (Joinson et al., 2010; Krasnova et al., 2010). An important construct that can influence this complex relationship is the perceived control over information. For instance, Attrill and Jalil (2011) argue that an important feature in understanding online self-disclosure is the recognition of personal control over the information that is being disclosed.

The theoretical complexity of this issue makes it difficult to measure variables, many of which are collected through a wide variety of instruments. For example, word count (e.g. Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007), items built specifically (e.g. Buchanan, Joinson, & Ali, 2002), and trained raters (e.g. Joinson, 2001) are often used to measure online self-disclosure, and adaptations of instruments built for face-to-face communication are used to evaluate online trust (e.g. Posey, Lowry, Roberts, & Ellis, 2010). Different variables can influence online self-disclosure, and different measures are often used to evaluate these relationships, which means that the interpretation of the results and their comparison can be extremely difficult to carry out.

In summary, the most closely studied variables associated with online self-disclosure are benefits, trust and control over personal information, and the risks of having one's privacy breached and the associated damages that might come about in its wake. Krasnova and her colleagues (Krasnova & Veltri, 2011; Krasnova et al., 2009, 2010) have proposed a comprehensive conceptual model of online self-disclosure. Using this model as a starting

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