Who am I? Representing the self offline and in different online contexts

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The present paper examines the extent to which self-presentation may be affected by the context in which is it undertaken. Individuals were asked to complete the Twenty Statements Test both privately and publicly, but were given an opportunity to withhold any of their personal information before it was made public. Four contexts were examined: an offline context (face-to-face), an un-contextualized general online context, or two specific online contexts (dating or job-seeking). The results suggested that participants were willing to disclose substantially less personal information online than offline. Moreover, disclosure decreased as the online context became more specific, and those in the job-seeking context disclosed the least amount of information. Surprisingly, individual differences in personality did not predict disclosure behavior. Instead, the results are set in the context of audience visibility and social norms, and implications for self-presentation in digital contexts are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Technological developments have advanced at such a pace that large parts of our community now engage with what has become known as 'digital living'. Individuals can now build social and professional networks, engage in hobbies and education, conduct business and banking transactions, and much more, within the online environment. As a result, they have to manage many different identities or 'selves' while interacting with more varied audiences than ever before (Marwick & boyd, 2011), often blurring private and public identities as a result (Beer, 2008; Foresight Future Identities, 2013). The strands of work examining offline, general 'homogenous' online and specific contextual online environments have yet to directly compare how self-disclosure may differ between these spaces. The current literature reports varied findings with regards to how individuals choose to represent themselves in face-to-face and online exchanges. Possibilities for these discrepancies include differences in the context in which 'online' is framed, how one perceives their audience, the social function and website architectural constraints within each space. The purpose of the present paper is to explore these influential factors and provide a better understanding of the rules that may govern

the considerable task of impression management across such diverse contexts. More explicitly, we test the notion that online self-presentation is sufficiently nuanced for us to maintain multiple discrete identities, and will thus be sensitive to the demands of each online space.

1.1. Online social identities

Early work in the area of online social identities suggested a simple and testable prediction: anonymity provided by the lack of physical contact online may encourage a greater level of self-disclosure than in the offline world. McKenna and Bargh (2000) suggested that this may arise through the perception of fewer social constraints, whilst Newman et al. (2002) suggested that it may arise through the perception of fewer negative judgments from others. Such an increase in self-disclosure may bring benefits through the formation and maintenance of closer social bonds, as disclosure tends to be reciprocated (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). However, increased self-disclosure may also bring risks. These emerge through targeting for unwanted advertising or phishing attacks; through geo-tagged information being used by criminals (e.g., www.pleaserobme.com) or through unbalanced levels of trust in relationships (e.g., Whitty, 2013).

Tests of this prediction have in fact revealed remarkably inconsistent results. Nguyen, Sun Bin, and Campbell (2012) provide a review of 24 recent studies, each of which has examined the level

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of self-disclosure in online compared to offline contexts. Aside from the inherent weakness of a retrospective self-report methodology used in many of these reviewed studies (see Schwarz, 2007), Nguyen et al. highlight the danger of assuming the internet to be a single homogenous space. Consequently, studies that compare generic online to generic offline behavior may be flawed in their basic conception. Indeed, Barkhuus (2012) critically notes the importance of audience, purpose, and context in which information is disclosed. Furthermore, the social identity model of de-individuation (SIDE; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2002) suggests that individuals become more sensitive to such social cues when interacting online as they may have less information about who they are interacting with. With this in mind, the mixed results noted by Nguyen et al. are perhaps not surprising, and may highlight nothing more than the differences in demands within a highly heterogeneous set of online spaces.

1.2. Tailored online self-presentation

Rather than continue to compare online with offline levels of self-disclosure and impression management, more recent work has taken the approach of exploring self-disclosure within discrete online contexts (see for example, Boyle & Johnson, 2010; Caine, Kisselburgh, & Lareau, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010; Van Dijck, 2013). As a body of work, this literature emphasizes the importance of three factors: the function of each online space; the social norms governing interaction within that space; and the perceived audience that one may encounter. Van Dijck (2013) encapsulate this very eloquently in noting that self-presentation in a more personal online space such as Facebook is all about *self-expression*, whereas self-presentation in a more professional context such as LinkedIn is all about *self-promotion*.

As a result, it should not surprise us to note differences in how individuals present themselves in different online spaces. This accords with the wealth of theoretical literature on impression management in the physical world (see Higgins, 1987; Rogers, 1959), and with the careful management discussed by Leary and Kowalski (1990) in terms of the disclosure of particular aspects of our selves, at particular times, and within particular contexts.

1.3. The present study

Where the conclusions of online self-presentation research are currently weak is in their susceptibility to the confounding influence of the *structural constraints* that various online fora impose on their users. This is a point noted by Papacharissi (2009), and it assumes importance here because differences in self-disclosure across different online spaces may reflect differences in *capacity* to self-disclose rather than differences in *intention* to self-disclose. The present study addresses this concern by exploring self-disclosure across different spaces in a manner that it not tied to the design of that space.

Within the present study, participants were asked to self-disclose through using the Twenty Statements Test (TST; Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). The TST asks participants to provide twenty different statements in response to the question 'Who am I?'. With free rein as to the sort of information that they provide, patterns of disclosure can be explored both in terms of quantity and type of information revealed (Kuhn, 1960). This has several benefits over existing methods. First, it is a quick, simple and established task for participants to undertake. Second, it is context-free meaning the TST can be placed within different offline and online contexts allowing participants to engage in self-disclosure without being constrained by the design features of each space. Third, the TST has shown itself to be sensitive enough to reveal aspects of our multiple selves (see Carpenter & Meade-Pruitt, 2008), and to

capture the effects of context on self-presentation (Bettencourt & Hume, 1999; Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Somech, 2000). As such, the TST lends itself well to an exploration of self-disclosure across different contexts.

The context in which we present ourselves is arguably not the only driving factor in self-disclosure. Several personality characteristics and individual differences have been suggested to influence online interaction patterns and behavior (e.g., Orchard & Fullwood, 2010). For instance, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that individual differences on the Big Five personality inventory are associated with differences in online usage and contribution to social networks (e.g., Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010). Similarly, self-awareness, an individual's situational self-focus, is sensitive to situation or context (Carver & Glass, 1976) and has also been associated, under certain circumstances, with greater disclosure behavior online (Joinson, 2001). Two further characteristics may also be important. Specifically, an individual's tendency to self-monitor their behavior has been linked to the degree to which they use privacy management strategies (Child & Agyeman-Budu, 2010). Finally, tendencies to provide information that is considered socially desirable (social desirability bias) has been suggested to be reduced when providing sensitive information in an online interaction relative to face-to-face interactions (Newman et al., 2002). Considering the influence that these individual differences may have on self-disclosure across online and offline contexts, measures of personality traits, self-awareness, self-monitoring, and social desirability are included here, and may help explain variations in self-disclosure patterns.

Participants in the present study engaged in the TST on two occasions. Initially, their twenty statements were completed in private, and this enabled scrutiny of the amount and type of information provided under baseline conditions. Subsequently, participants were asked to reveal their statements in one of the following contexts: an offline (face to face) context, a generic online context, or specific online contexts (a dating website or a job-seekers website). Importantly however, participants were given the opportunity to report or withhold their original answers before revealing them in a public context. It was this withholding behavior that was used as a measure of self-disclosure to explore the effect of context on impression management. In this way, the influence of each disclosure context could be explored, relative to the private, baseline, data. These different offline, generic online and specific online contexts were selected because they provided a means to compare offline and online disclosure taking into account the three key factors (identified previously – Section 1.2): the *function* of each online space; the *social norms* governing interaction within that space; and the *perceived audience* that one may encounter. The specific online contexts (e.g., dating and job-seeking) provided a tangible target audience, to compare against a more nebulous 'online' audience. Further, these two specific online spaces represent familiar concepts to SNS users, yet have very different purposes, end goals and motivational aspects for being a user on these types of networks. Two hypotheses emerged. First, if McKenna and Bargh (2000), Newman et al. (2002) are correct, the three online contexts (e.g. generic, dating and job-seeking) should elicit greater overall levels of disclosure compared to the offline context in a test in which homogeneity of the online space is not assumed. Thus, in the present paradigm those in the offline context should exhibit the highest withholding behavior when moving from the private to public context, relative to all other online contexts. Notwithstanding this, if Van Dijck (2013) is correct, the function of each space should tailor the type of information that participants choose to self-disclose in a test in which disclosure in online contexts is not constrained by design features. Specifically, we would expect to see differences between the generic and specific online spaces regarding the amount of statements