



# The function of self-disclosure on social network sites: Not only intimate, but also positive and entertaining self-disclosures increase the feeling of connection



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## ABSTRACT

How can social network sites (SNS) foster relationships when most status updates on SNS are mainly entertaining and not very intimate? This finding cannot be explained by classical social psychological theories such as social penetration theory which regard disclosure intimacy as the main driver of relational outcomes. By building on literature on the role of capitalization and humor in relationship formation and maintenance, this paper suggests two alternative paths from public self-disclosure to relational outcomes. Respondents judged the content and relational effects of own and friends' status updates as well as private conversations. In general, all types of messages were mainly positive and entertaining. The more intimate communication took place in private conversations; here, the classical link between disclosure intimacy and feeling connected still held. However, positive and entertaining self-disclosures also increased the feeling of connection, especially when reading friends' updates. Interestingly, interaction partners' responsiveness did not play a significant role, indicating that results from dyadic face-to-face interactions do not hold for public communication on social media. The study contributes to the development of a more differentiated model on the role of self-disclosure on SNS.

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## 1. Introduction

When you log into Facebook, what type of posts do you usually encounter? Probably updates from friends enjoying meals or drinks, having fun at parties, being on holiday, being proud of their sporty achievements (runners) or sharing funny cartoons and YouTube clips. Several studies showed that users post mainly entertaining and positive status updates (Barash, Duchonaut, Isaacs, & Bellotti, 2010; Utz, 2011). On the other hand, numerous studies found that relationship maintenance is the main motivation for using social network sites (SNS) and that SNS use results in stronger bonds with friends and especially acquaintances (e.g., Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Traditionally, disclosure intimacy has been considered as the main driver of relational outcomes (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Collins & Miller, 1994). However, most status updates on SNS are not very intimate (Barash et al., 2010; Utz, 2011). This leaves us with the question of whether social penetration theory also holds for (semi-)public communication on social media and which other theories can help to explain the relational effects of self-disclosure on social media.

The present paper aims to answer these questions by examining not only public self-disclosures, but also self-disclosure in private conversations. Prior SNS research focused almost exclusively on public disclosures (see Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Bazarova, Taft, Choi & Cosley, 2013, for an exception). The present paper provides a comprehensive framework of how private and public messages on SNS can result in positive relational outcomes and simultaneously tests three alternative explanations derived from classic social psychological theories and recent work on the role of humor in relationship maintenance. The first explanation is based on social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), but it is argued that this theory mainly holds for private communication, thereby introducing a boundary condition for the effect of intimate self-disclosure. Two additional processes are proposed that can also explain the relational consequences of (semi-)public status updates. Based on research on capitalization effects (Gable & Reis, 2010), it is hypothesized that sharing positive events also increases the feeling of connection. Third, based on recent literature on role of humor in relationship formation and maintenance (Hall, 2013; Treger, Sprecher, & Erber, 2013), it is assumed that entertaining messages also increase the feeling of connection. Additionally, the role of interaction partner's responsiveness is examined. Prior studies have focused on only one of the three

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proposed mechanisms and the latter two have not received attention by social media researchers yet; a major contribution of this paper is that it brings these lines of research together and compares the different mechanisms across different types of messages.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Self-disclosure: definition and traditional theories

Self-disclosure is defined as the revealing of personal information to another person (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). Although some researchers treat every form of verbal or nonverbal disclosure as self-disclosure, most scholars consider only the intentional revealing of personal information as self-disclosure (Dindia, 2000; Fisher, 1984). Self-disclosure can vary in breadth and depth. Breadth describes the number of areas that are disclosed (e.g. work, family, political orientation) whereas depth refers to the superficial-personal dimension.

Although self-disclosure is related to well-being, identity and self-worth (Pennebaker & Chung, 2007; Tanis, 2008), its function in relationship building has been the main focus of studies over the past 40 years. According to social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), self-disclosure plays an important role in building and maintaining intimate relationships. At the beginning of a relationship, people usually only talk about one or two areas of their life and the conversation remains rather superficial. As a relationship develops further, the breadth and depth of self-disclosure grows. When a relationship deteriorates, levels of self-disclosure usually decrease again. Because self-disclosure signals intimacy and a special bond between two people, it is also highest in dyads and drops rapidly with increasing group size (Solano & Dunnam, 1985).

There is ample evidence for the link between disclosure intimacy and various relational outcomes. According to the meta-analysis by Collins and Miller (1994), (1) we like people more who disclose more, (2) we disclose more to the ones we like and (3) when we disclose more, we like the others to whom we have disclosed more afterwards. Self-disclosure also correlates with trust, intimacy, and interpersonal solidarity (Cozby, 1972; Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Wheelless, 1976).

The effect of disclosure intimacy on relational outcomes has been repeatedly shown in computer-mediated communication (CMC; e.g., Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011; Joinson, 2001; Matheson & Zanna, 1988). However, these studies have examined dyadic conversations between strangers in a laboratory setting, focusing on anonymous or at best pseudonymous text-based communication. Nowadays, SNS are the predominant communication form for many adolescents and young adults. In the next section, the specific characteristics of SNS and the literature on content and function of self-disclosure on SNS will be reviewed.

### 2.2. Self-disclosure on SNS

Communication on SNS is different from dyadic interactions between strangers in a laboratory experiment; thus, motivations for and functions of self-disclosure might be different as well. First, communication on SNS is not anonymous but rather “nonyymous” (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Users have profiles that typically include their profile picture and other pictures, in addition to identifying information such as birth date, place of living, education, occupation and relationship status. Second, SNS are mainly used to stay in touch with friends and family rather than to get in contact with strangers (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011). “Friends” however are broadly defined on SNS and include acquaintances, (former) classmates, colleagues, teachers,

celebrities and even strangers (Utz & Schmidt, 2012). Consequently, social contexts that used to be separate are collapsed on social media (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Third, the default communication on SNS is one-to-many, or, as (O’Sullivan, 2005) calls it, masspersonal communication. When SNS were first introduced, messages were by default visible to every member of the SNS or sometimes even non-members. Meanwhile, status updates by default are shared with all SNS-friends, and even if more fine-grained privacy settings are utilized, updates are still usually shared with a group of people. Next to these public and persistent ways of communicating with larger groups of people, SNS also offer the possibility to engage in private conversations (mail or chat) with other users. This paper compares the content and effects of public and private messages on SNS and examines whether feeling connected is explained by different processes for public vs. private messages.

The first studies on self-disclosure on SNS reported that individuals often disclosed a high amount of public information in their profile fields (e.g., Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Thelwall, 2008; Utz, 2008). However, other research showed that a majority of users had restricted their privacy settings such that profiles were only visible to friends (Utz & Krämer, 2009). Meanwhile, the attention of researchers has shifted from the rather static profile information to the more dynamic self-disclosure in status updates.

Utz (2011) found that Dutch students reported posting almost exclusively about positive experiences (e.g. holidays, accomplishments), less often about products and political opinions and least often about intimate topics such as feelings. Barash et al. (2010) developed a Facebook app that allowed participants to judge their own and friends’ status updates on various dimensions. Entertaining-boring was the dimension most relevant for the evaluation of friends’ updates, followed by uncool-cool. In general, people perceived the updates by others as positive, i.e. rather entertaining than boring, rather cool than uncool. Bazarova et al. (2013) used automatic content analysis to analyze the linguistic style of status updates, wall posts and private messages and found that the undirected status updates contained less negative emotions than directed messages (private messages and wall-posts). Thus, there is converging evidence from self-reports (Utz, 2011), judgments of others’ status updates (Barash et al., 2010) as well as automated linguistic analyses (Bazarova et al., 2013) that support the notion that users post mainly positive and entertaining, but not very intimate status updates.

On the other hand, virtually every study on the motives for SNS use revealed that maintaining social relationships is the main motivation for SNS use (e.g., Barker, 2009; Ellison et al., 2011; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Ross et al., 2009). If self-disclosure plays a central role in relationship maintenance (Collins & Miller, 1994), one should expect a higher level of intimate updates. The predictions of social penetration theory seem not to hold in these masspersonal communication environments (O’Sullivan, 2005), thus other mechanisms must play a role. In the next sections, three possible answers to the question of how private and public self-disclosure on SNS can foster relational outcomes are provided. The focus of this paper is on the feeling of connection as a relational outcome because several studies have shown that a more general feeling of connection is a relational outcome reported by many SNS users (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Anne Tolan, & Marrington, 2013; Köbler, Riedl, Vetter, Leimeister, & Krcmar, 2010). Such a general measure is also more appropriate for social media because it applies equally to individuals as well as groups, depending on the audience of the message. The first explanation builds on social penetration theory and assumes that the classic link between disclosure intimacy and relational outcomes still holds on SNS, but has moved to private communication channels, whereas the other two explanations propose different

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