



# Misery rarely gets company: The influence of emotional bandwidth on supportive communication on Facebook



Andrew C. High<sup>a,\*</sup>, Anne Oeldorf-Hirsch<sup>b,1</sup>, Saraswathi Bellur<sup>b,2</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Communication Studies, The University of Iowa, 105 Becker Communication Studies Building, Iowa City, IA 52242, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Communication, University of Connecticut, 337 Mansfield Road, Unit 1259, Storrs, CT 06269, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 22 February 2014

### Keywords:

Emotional bandwidth  
Self-disclosure  
Social support  
Facebook

## ABSTRACT

This study introduces the concept of *emotional bandwidth* to describe a communicator's ability to use technological features to disclose personal affect online. Strategic use of emotional bandwidth was expected to correspond with interpersonal rewards, specifically the willingness of others to provide social support. Participants ( $N = 84$ ) viewed hypothetical Facebook profiles that contained manipulated levels of emotional bandwidth and were asked how much support they would provide to the person in the profile. Participants who viewed profiles portraying high emotional bandwidth were less willing to provide social support; however, this finding was qualified by personal qualities. Females, people who perceived a sense of community, and people who had a preference for online social interaction indicated a greater willingness to provide support in the high emotional bandwidth condition. Implications for designing affective affordances in technologies and their psychological effects are discussed.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

People commonly disclose personal information and affect when faced with a problem, and disclosure may be a necessary first step to receiving social rewards, such as social support (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). People enact different strategies of self-disclosure based on different contextual factors, and the chosen strategy of disclosure influences the outcomes they experience (Tichon & Shapiro, 2003). One particular contextual feature that influences how people disclose personal information is the channel of communication. Although traditional theorizing contended that channels of computer-mediated communication (CMC) were socially restrictive and relatively ineffective for accomplishing social goals (see Culnan & Marcus, 1987), a growing body of research contends that CMC contexts provide fertile ground for self-disclosure (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009; Day, 2013; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). In fact, the affordances of technology may make some self-disclosure more easily accomplished online than FtF (see Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1996), and effective self-disclosure in CMC elicits favorable outcomes for users (Ledbetter, Mazer, DeGroot, Meyer, & Swafford, 2010).

Online social networking sites (SNS) in particular are increasingly common venues for self-disclosure. According to the Pew

Internet and American Life Project, 67% of adult Internet users and 83% of users age 18–29 interact in SNS (Brenner, 2013). Facebook reached one billion active users in October of 2012 (Facebook.com), and evidence suggests that users are satisfied with the interpersonal communication that takes place therein, frequently evoking the words, “fun,” “great,” “interesting,” and “convenient” to describe their experiences (Madden, 2011). Beyond sharing information about their likes, experiences, and desires (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009), users of Facebook strategically craft profile pages with the goal of revealing information about themselves (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011), and strategically disclosing information and affect on Facebook corresponds with social outcomes.

Tichon and Shapiro (2003) stated that, “The social outcome of self-disclosure is conceptualized as the derivation of supportive reactions from others” (p. 162). Although scholars have questioned CMC's efficacy as a medium for comfort, Walther and Parks (2002) contended that CMC, “must be judged as a fabulously successful medium for social support” (p. 545). Several studies have documented effective supportive communication online, including the provision of advice, emotions, and expanded social connections (Rains & Young, 2009; Robinson & Turner, 2003; Wright & Bell, 2003). Facebook may facilitate these outcomes by opening channels of communication with potential support providers (Ellison et al., 2007). Facebook users monitor the disclosures displayed in their friends' profiles, perceiving some disclosures as a request for support, and this attention to others' disclosure makes Facebook an active venue for supportive communication (Bender,

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 319 353 2262.

E-mail addresses: [Andrew-high@uiowa.edu](mailto:Andrew-high@uiowa.edu) (A.C. High), [anneo@uconn.edu](mailto:anneo@uconn.edu) (A. Oeldorf-Hirsch), [saras.bellur@uconn.edu](mailto:saras.bellur@uconn.edu) (S. Bellur).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 (860) 486 3968.

<sup>2</sup> Tel.: +1 (860) 486 1007.

Jimenez-Marroquin, & Jadad, 2011; Joinson, 2008). Although the majority of research on online supportive communication has examined mediated support groups and electronic bulletin boards, informal channels of comfort, such as online SNS merit consideration (Lewandowski, Rosenberg, Parks, & Siegel, 2011).

This study synthesizes research on self-disclosure in CMC, Facebook, and social support to examine the links between self-disclosure and willingness to provide support in Facebook. Generally, we suggest that CMC provides users with unprecedented ways to indirectly disclose their need for support. This line of inquiry has theoretical importance by synthesizing research on CMC and supportive communication and practical importance by describing effective (or ineffective) ways to disclose personal information online. To provide a background for these associations, this paper begins by reviewing research on self-disclosure online, highlighting Facebook as a context for strategic self-disclosure. Social support is then discussed as a potential reward that may result from self-disclosure on Facebook, and the remainder of the paper reports an experiment designed to test this thinking.

## 2. Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure can be described as the communication of information about oneself that is previously unknown to targets of the disclosure (Cozby, 1973; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969). Sharing information is perceived as a social reward for the target of disclosure and can result in increased liking, reciprocation, and intimacy for both partners (Collins & Miller, 1994; Worthy et al., 1969). In a support-seeking situation, self-disclosure can lead to key supportive feedback from a partner through clarification of distress or feelings (Leaper, Carson, Baker, Holliday, & Myers, 1995).

The shift to CMC has had noticeable impacts on self-disclosure. Online SNS remove many temporal constraints from an interaction, thereby facilitating the construction of selectively disclosed messages. For example, Facebook requires people to type their responses before sending them; therefore, communicators are able to revise or abandon unfavorable messages to elicit desired outcomes. People use the affordances of CMC to construct more favorable identities and achieve more positive outcomes than they are able to accomplish FtF (High & Caplan, 2009; Walther, 1996). Specifically, Walther, Loh, and Granka (2005) reported that CMC partners manipulate their self-disclosure to achieve more immediacy and affection than dyads who interact FtF. Because of the greater anonymity, some people are more inclined to disclose personal information in CMC than FtF (Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

Self-disclosure is commonplace in SNS, such as Facebook. In fact, individuals generally disclose more information on Facebook than they feel they would otherwise (Christofides et al., 2009); however, the benefits of self-disclosure on Facebook hinge on the strength and valence of the information disclosed. Information disclosed on Facebook tends to be positive (Day, 2013), potentially because anticipated social rewards are stymied when information is negative (Forest & Wood, 2012). Although Facebook permits a variety of means for self-disclosure, certain normative behaviors have developed to regulate appropriate self-disclosure. Users can manipulate the features of Facebook to strategically disclose information, and this disclosure has a direct effect on interpersonal or social outcomes (Kim & Lee, 2011).

## 3. Emotional bandwidth

The bandwidth metaphor is widely used to describe the mediation of information through a communication channel that acts as a conduit for signal transmission between users. For example, Reeves and Nass (2000) propose the notion of “perceptual bandwidth” to explain how perceptual interfaces “transform the world of com-

puters” into sensory experiences for users (p. 65). Expanding upon this foundation, the current study investigates how the manipulation of technological affordances on Facebook enables people to control the transmission or disclosure of information about their affective states, a capacity henceforth referred to as “emotional bandwidth.” We distinguish the term emotional bandwidth from self-disclosure more broadly by focusing specifically on the emotional salience of the disclosure and the number of technological features used to disclose this information. In addition, whereas traditional notions of disclosure involve verbally revealing personal information, emotional bandwidth is conceptualized as both a direct and indirect means of information revelation that is communicated through technological affordances (Gibson, 1977; Norman, 1999). Emotional bandwidth can be likened to a volume knob that varies emotional expressivity, and manipulating the features of CMC controls this volume knob (Reeves & Nass, 2000).

Online SNS present users with an array of features to control their emotional bandwidth. Higher emotional bandwidth is enacted by the use of numerous technological features and the conveyance of more personal, affective content; lower emotional bandwidth corresponds with using fewer features to transmit affective information. For instance, users can vary their profile pictures to display a quick self-portrait, a photo with their new spouse on their wedding day, a photo of a loved one who has passed away, or another strategically chosen image to convey humor, make a political statement, or disclose other sentiments. Likewise, they can share links to content that is light-hearted and humorous or content that is serious and distressing, they can share status updates with words that are emotionally-laden or stoic, and they can add apps and other media to their profiles to communicate information or their emotions. By combining any number of the technological features available on Facebook, users can vary the amount of emotional bandwidth displayed in their profiles. In this way, emotional bandwidth is determined by *how* something is disclosed (i.e., what features are employed) as much as by the content of the disclosure. An advantage of this affordance-based approach is that it allows researchers to examine the design elements of social media interfaces with greater specificity and how, by actively manipulating design elements, users can consciously manage their emotional bandwidth to influence perceptions and relational outcomes.

We propose that high emotional bandwidth corresponds with increased use of technological features to represent a user's affect and, therefore, a more accurate understanding of a person's emotional state. Conversely, low emotional bandwidth constitutes less use of technological features and is predicted to result in a reduced or more ambiguous impression of a user's emotional profile. Research documents that people manipulate linguistic, chronemic, and typographic cues to achieve certain goals online (Walther et al., 2005). In the same way, emotional bandwidth is a strategic behavior that users can vary to directly or indirectly disclose affective information online.

## 4. Social support in CMC

Although scholars have examined how people disclose information about themselves online (Tidwell & Walther, 2002) and people's perceptions of self-disclosure (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011), less research has examined the social rewards achieved by self-disclosure via manipulated emotional bandwidth. One particular reward that is the subject of increasing scholarly attention in CMC is social support. Bursleson and MacGeorge (2002) conceptualized social support as “verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid” (p. 374). Although most studies of supportive communication report outcomes of FtF interactions, more and more people are embracing the Internet to seek and provide social

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/350570>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/350570>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)