



Another brick in the Facebook wall – How personality traits relate to the content of status updates



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ABSTRACT

Status updates represent a new form of one-to-many communication which is widely used among members of social networking sites (SNS). The present study investigated the question of who in particular uses the self-presentational opportunities of this feature and which users engage in riskier self-disclosures than others. Combining questionnaire and content analysis, we related self-reports on users' personality traits (extraversion, narcissism, self-efficacy, need to belong, need for popularity) to the actual use of Facebook status updates. Results showed that higher degrees of narcissism led to deeper self-disclosures and more self-promotional content within these messages. Users with higher need to belong disclosed more intimate information in status updates, while perceived efficacy of self-presentation was negatively related to the mass suitability of postings. Findings extend prior research on personality and SNS usage with regard to dynamic features and content differences in online self-presentation.

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1. Introduction

Facebook, the world's largest social networking site, constantly asks its users one question: "What is on your mind?" And they answer with a multitude of short messages in which they share thoughts, experiences, or emotions with their friends – varying from rather trivial information on the weather or their breakfast to intimate disclosures on love affairs, break-ups or personal crises. These messages offer a novel form of "effortless and fast one-to-many communication" (Deters & Mehl, 2013, p. 580) which has become very popular among users of social networking sites (SNS): 44% of Facebook users update their status at least once a week (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). According to estimations, around 400 million Facebook status messages are written every day (Fitzgerald, 2012).

This immense popularity and the fact that many people have integrated Facebook into their daily communicative routine may indicate that the usage of SNS in general and status updates in particular is helpful in fulfilling basic social needs such as staying in contact with acquaintances and for identity construction (e.g., Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). However, especially status updates

as (semi-)public messages might also complicate patterns of interpersonal communication or lead to undesired or negative impressions if a member of the audience perceives a specific message as inappropriate (Bazarova, Taft, Choi, & Cosley, 2013). Therefore, decisions about what to disclose in such messages can be regarded as complex processes of impression management, i.e., attempts to shape the perceptions others form about oneself (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), which are influenced by self-presentational goals, perceived audience expectations as well as stable personality traits. In this paper, we focus on the latter aspect and utilize the approach of personality psychology and individual differences in Internet usage (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Ryan & Xenos, 2011) in order to explore the question of who in particular embraces this new form of online self-presentation and which users engage in deeper or riskier self-disclosures than others. By relating users' personality traits and their actual Facebook status updates, we aim to explain the usage of this novel manifestation of one-to-many communication (which differs from the creation of static profiles in early SNS usage) and contribute to the understanding of individual differences in online self-presentation.

While a considerable body of research examined the effects of personality on general SNS usage (e.g., Ross et al., 2009; Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Utz, Tanis, & Vermeulen, 2012), these studies mainly focused on static profile features (e.g., profile text or picture) or the number of friends but not on more recent dynamic features such as status updates. Furthermore, most studies assessed self-presentational behavior via self-reports instead of analyzing the

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original content which has been produced in SNS settings (for exceptions see [Mehdizadeh, 2010](#) or [Moore & McElroy, 2012](#)). Against this background, the present study investigated the relationship between personality traits which are theoretically linked to online self-presentation (extraversion, narcissism, self-efficacy, need to belong, and need for popularity) and the number, content, and style of status updates. In order to overcome shortcomings of previous questionnaire studies and gain deeper insights into the texts SNS users write to their network, we collected participants' original status updates for a detailed content analysis. These data were combined with participants' self-reports on personality traits.

2. Status updates in SNS

[Carr, Schrock, and Dauterman \(2012\)](#) describe status updates as a unique form of communication since they "afford an asynchronous, publically viewable message, and yet are directed at a specific audience: the user's network" (p. 180). They are usually short texts but can also include pictures or links to videos or online articles. When a user posts an update, it appears on the profile (wall) of the sender and is shown in the news feeds of her/his Facebook friends (unless the sender restricted visibility). Other users can "like" and share the posting or write a comment below. A linguistic analysis showed that the majority of status updates involves expressive speech acts and rich socio-emotional information ([Carr et al., 2012](#)).

From a self-presentational point of view, the individual user can carefully select what to write in an asynchronous computer-mediated message ([Walther, 2007](#)). Furthermore, the sender reaches a potentially large and relevant audience, which renders status updates as a very promising means of impression management ([Leary & Kowalski, 1990](#)), for instance, by stressing positive aspects of the self (in order to maximize social outcomes or to maintain or enhance self-esteem). Most of these messages are likely to involve forms of self-disclosure, e.g., on personal preferences, attitudes, experiences or emotions, which can primarily be classified with regard to the depth of self-revelation ([Cozby, 1973](#)). Depth as one dimension of self-disclosure refers to how intimate personal information is and has been posited as a prerequisite for developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships ([Altman & Taylor, 1973](#)). [Deters and Mehl \(2013\)](#) showed that the mere act of disclosing information to online friends increases the feeling of connectedness with others and reduces loneliness.

However, in spite of these advantages, status updates are not without pitfalls: other users might comment negatively on them and specific disclosures may appear inappropriate to some readers. The latter problem becomes more likely due to the diversity of SNS contacts: Even if users manage their profile with different access levels for specific groups, there is still a rather broad audience, which limits the possibility of adapting self-presentation to the specific interaction partner ("packaging", see [Leary, 1995](#)), as would be possible in face-to-face settings or private messages ([Krämer & Haferkamp, 2011](#)). One strategy in this context could be to present uncontroversial status updates which are understandable and acceptable for most people (in terms of "mass suitability"), on the other hand, superficial or cautious statements may not be helpful in arousing interest or creating positive impressions. In line with considerations about broad audiences, [Bazarova et al. \(2013\)](#) showed that status updates contain fewer negative emotions than private messages.

The way in which status updates are used as an instrument for communicating self-related aspects can be explained with the impression management model by [Leary and Kowalski \(1990\)](#). For face-to-face situations, the authors describe the values and expectations of the interaction partner, role constraints as well as

the person's self-concept and his/her desired identity images as elements which influence the style and content of self-presentation. Given the difficulties in tailoring messages to specific interaction partners in the Facebook context, it can be assumed that the importance of the target's values when communicating via status updates decreases (compared to communicating with only one person), while the self-concept of the sender and his/her desired identity ([Leary & Kowalski, 1990](#)) emerge as more decisive factors. Therefore, it seems promising to investigate the question of whether the enormous differences in quantity and quality of status updates can be explained by differences in personality traits and which personalities are particularly likely to disclose personal information to their network.

Drawing on the approach of individual differences in Internet behavior ([Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010](#)), the following chapter discusses the potential influence of personality traits which are theoretically linked to self-presentation and self-disclosure and have been shown to be relevant for SNS usage.

3. Individual differences in online self-presentation

3.1. Extraversion

A remarkable amount of early SNS studies has focused on extraversion as a predictor of users' behavior in SNS. In personality research, extraversion has been included as one dimension of the five factor model of personality ([Costa & McCrae, 1992](#)), conceptualized as the individual's tendency to be outgoing and engage in social activities. Following this line, previous works investigating the explanatory value of extraversion for SNS behavior have discussed two arguments: extraverts benefit the most from using SNS since they are able to extend their networks and pursue their communication needs with these technologies (rich-get-richer hypothesis; [Kraut et al., 2002](#)). In contrast, introverts using SNS have been assumed to benefit more since these platforms allow for a compensation of their communicative deficits in the management of interpersonal contacts in a comfortable way (social compensation hypothesis; [Valkenburg & Peter, 2007](#)). Empirically, evidence predominantly was in line with the rich-get-richer assumptions, showing extraversion to be positively associated with the number of SNS friends and frequency of SNS usage ([Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuniga, 2010](#); [Ong et al., 2011](#); [Utz et al., 2012](#); [Wilson, Fornasier, & White, 2010](#)). Even though these results reveal to what extent extraversion influences behavior on SNS, they do not offer insights into how this personality trait is reflected in the specific content and style of users' contributions on SNS. With regard to status updates as a communication feature addressing a larger group of people, it first seems justified to presume that extraverts post more status updates than introverts since the one-to-many communication via status updates offers an ideal venue for establishing and maintaining social contacts. We further assume that their outgoing nature leads them to divulge more intimate information in status updates in the sense of depth of self-disclosure than introverts (as has been shown in a recent study with self-reported assessments of Facebook behavior ([Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014](#))). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1. Extraversion is positively related to (a) the number of posted status updates and (b) to the depth of self-disclosure in status updates.

3.2. Narcissism

Narcissism (in the sense of social and personality psychology, not as a clinic disorder) is characterized by an inflated self-concept

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