Facebook self-disclosure: Examining the role of traits, social cohesion, and motives

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ABSTRACT

Facebook has been shown to be the most popular social network in the United States. Facebook not only has implications in the online world, but face-to-face connections are also affected by this medium. This study explores the uses of Facebook for self-disclosure behavior utilizing the uses and gratifications perspective. Using a convenience sample of Facebook users, this study examines individual and sociological factors as well as Facebook motives to discover the impact on depth, breadth, and amount of user self-disclosure. Path analyses showed that the Big Five personality factors, self-esteem, social cohesion, and motives contribute to self-disclosure dimensions. However, demographic variables did not impact disclosiveness. Limitations are discussed and directions for future research are proposed.

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1. Introduction

Since its founding in February, 2004, Facebook has become one of the leading social networking websites (Facebook.com, 2013a). Facebook.com (2013b) reports that at the time of this writing, the site has more than one billion total active users, with over 600 million users accessing the site daily all over the world. In the United States, Facebook is a staple for social networking. In a survey of over 2000 American adults, Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, and Purcell (2011) found that 92% of all social network users are on Facebook, and slightly more than half of those users access Facebook on a daily basis. The results showed that more than just teenagers are using this medium. Hampton et al. (2011) found that the average Facebook users are 38 years old, female (58%), have at least some education beyond high school (69%), and are primarily white (78%). With so many people accessing and using this technology each day, it is important to examine how the medium is used and the possible implications of this use.

One reason Facebook is important to examine is the high amounts of self-disclosure that are often displayed within this medium. Self-disclosure, the revelation of personal information (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993), can have immediate implications due to the fact that users are linked into both virtual and face-to-face friends. The average Facebook user has 229

friends, and nearly half of the user's social network is a part of their Facebook world (Hampton et al., 2011). This means that many people in networks offline are also present in Facebook, including friends, neighbors, classmates, coworkers, and family. Therefore, the real-world ramifications of Facebook disclosures are important. Although Facebook can bring us together and give us a sense of belonging, there may also be harmful effects of self-disclosure.

The purpose of this study is to determine the predictors of self-disclosive behavior on Facebook. Doing so would not only reveal a clearer picture of the social environment of Facebook, but would also allow scholars to predict the population most at-risk for highly disclosive and potentially damaging Facebook self-disclosure. Additionally, understanding predictors of self-disclosive behavior may reveal those users who are most likely to benefit from increasingly intimate relationships online. Toward that end, a review of uses and gratifications theory will be provided as it applies to disclosiveness on Facebook, followed by a study testing the predictors of disclosive behavior on Facebook.

1.1. Self-disclosure on Facebook

According to research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Smith, 2011), American adults say they are drawn to social media sites such as Facebook to maintain contact with friends and family, as well as to re-establish connections with old friends. It is not surprising, then, that Facebook is characterized by high amounts of self-disclosure because it is well-established that self-disclosure is a crucial element in relationship development (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973). Facebook's mission statement is "to

make the world more open and connected" (Facebook.com, 2013b, para. 1), which rests on its users' willingness to present their inner thoughts and emotional states on Facebook. The characteristics of Facebook encourage such self-disclosure (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Facebook's status update box asks "what's on your mind," prompting users to disclose information. The social networking site has a user-friendly platform that allows for easy access to picture posting, status updates, and other web content to be shared with one's network in both web and mobile formats.

While Facebook functions as an outlet for disclosure, aspects of the internet as a medium encourage increasing amounts of personal self-disclosure. For example, social information processing theory explains that users can adapt their verbal cues to accommodate the largely text-based environment of computer-mediated communication (Walther, 1992). Additionally, the increased amount, depth, and breadth of self-disclosure is one way that Facebook users can express affinity to compensate for the largely textual nature of the online environment (Walther, 1992). Schumaker and Van Der Heide (2011) argued that self-disclosure is one vehicle that Facebook users may employ to express emotions when richer nonverbal communication channels are not present. Along with the lack of nonverbal cues, the asynchronous nature of most Facebook activity can cause a person to self-disclose intimate information (Suler, 2004; Walther, 1996).

Not only does the internet as a medium lend itself to self-disclosure, but interpersonal aspects of disclosure are relevant to Facebook. There are several dimensions of self-disclosure, such as amount, depth, breadth, intent, valence, and honesty/accuracy (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Wheeless, 1978). General disclosiveness is represented by amount, depth, and breadth of self-disclosure in the present study. Amount of self-disclosure is conceptualized as the number of disclosures made on Facebook. Depth is characterized by more personal or intimate disclosures. People disclose with more breadth when they discuss a wide variety of topics.

1.2. Uses and gratifications theory

Uses and gratifications theory (U&G) has proven to be a useful and popular theory to frame the study of computer-mediated communication, including Facebook use. U&G proposes that media uses and effects are best understood within the context of the individual's psychological and sociological characteristics, as well as his/her motives for using a medium (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). People approach media with goals in mind that they wish to fulfill, making this a functional perspective (Rubin, 2002). This limited effects model requires researchers to consider each of these variables when examining the whole picture of media effects. Extant Facebook research using U&G has largely explored the motives for Facebook use and significant predictors of Facebook use.

1.2.1. Motives for Facebook use

Modern U&G studies often focus on understanding the motives, or reasons people use media, which in turn helps predict the gratifications they will gain from media use (Rubin, 2002; Ruggiero, 2000). Researchers have been very interested in discovering the motives for Facebook use, most often under the U&G framework (e.g., Hunt, Atkin, & Krishnan, 2012; Joinson, 2008; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Sheldon, 2008a, 2008b; Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011; Tosun, 2012; Yang & Brown, 2013). This body of research focuses on developing motive typologies as well as the effects of these motives on Facebook use.

Many researchers have developed motives typologies for social network use. Often combined with interpersonal motives, social networking research has shown several major motives for use. These include relationship maintenance, to pass the time, virtual community (i.e., develop new relationships), entertainment, cool-

ness, and companionship (Sheldon, 2008a, 2008b; Special & Li-Barber, 2012). Other researchers have found additional motives including control (i.e., telling someone to do something; Baek, Holton, Harp, & Yaschur, 2011), promoting work/professional advancement (Baek et al., 2011; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011), photo-related activities (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Tosun, 2012), and learning/academic purposes (Hew, 2011; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008).

Motives for using Facebook are linked to one's real-world communication experiences, as the research reviewed above has shown. Research has also shown that motives are linked to self-disclosure. In a study on Facebook and self-disclosure, Special and Li-Barber (2012) found that those who were motivated to use the medium for entertainment tended to disclose more information on the site. Additionally, those that were highly disclosive were more likely to use Facebook to pass the time (Special & Li-Barber, 2012). Tosun (2012) found that those people who felt they could disclose their "true self" online were more likely to use Facebook to establish new relationships and manage romantic relationships. Additionally, research conducted by Smock et al. (2011) showed that people who use Facebook for expressive information sharing motivations were more likely to post status updates.

Existing research has shown that individual variables should be taken into consideration when examining the use of new media (e.g., Hills & Argyle, 2003; Miura & Yamashita, 2007). Predictor variables such as personality traits, sociological variables, and demographics have an impact on the dynamics of self-disclosure on Facebook. These variables often play a role in the motives people have for using Facebook as well as their self-disclosive behaviors online.

1.3. Predictors of Facebook use

1.3.1. Individual variables

Two main individual factors are examined in this research: personality traits and self-esteem. Personality factors have often been used as variables in U&G research (Ruggiero, 2000). The "Big Five" personality traits are neuroticism, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991). In a study on Facebook use and personality traits, Ross et al. (2009) found that personality traits were linked to several functions and motivations. For example, participants who were highly extroverted were more likely to join Facebook groups. With regards to openness, those that were highly open were more likely to indicate a need to be sociable on Facebook. People low in neuroticism were more likely to use photos on Facebook, whereas people highly neurotic enjoyed the Wall function (Ross et al., 2009). Additionally, in a study of Australian Facebook users, Ryan and Xenos (2011) found that Facebook users are more likely to be extraverted and narcissistic. People who scored high on exhibitionism were more likely to prefer photos and status updates. As found in Ross et al. (2009), people who were more neurotic preferred using the wall function on Facebook.

In addition to personality characteristics, self-esteem, or the belief that one has self-worth (Crocker & Park, 2004), is another individual variable that should be considered when examining online self-disclosure. The social compensation hypothesis posits that people use media to fulfill social needs that are unmet in everyday life (Davis & Kraus, 1989). Specifically, the internet may be a forum for those who are inhibited in everyday life to branch out and form social relationships (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). According to this perspective, people with low self-esteem who may otherwise be withdrawn in social situations have the opportunity to flourish on Facebook.

There is some Facebook research that supports the social compensation hypothesis. Facebook users with lower self-esteem tend