



## Full length article

## Self-disclosure on SNS: Do disclosure intimacy and narrativity influence interpersonal closeness and social attraction?

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## ABSTRACT

On social media, users can easily share their feelings, thoughts, and experiences with the public, including people who they have no previous interaction with. Such information, though often embedded in a stream of others' news, may influence recipients' perception toward the discloser. We used a special design that enables a quasi-experience of SNS browsing, and examined if browsing other's posts in a news stream can create a feeling of familiarity and (even) closeness toward the discloser. In addition, disclosure messages can vary in the degree of intimacy (from superficial to intimate) and narrativity (from a random blather to a story-like narrative). The roles of disclosure intimacy and narrativity on perceived closeness and social attraction were examined by a  $2 \times 2$  experimental design. By conducting one lab study and another online replication, we consistently found that disclosure frequency, when perceived as appropriate, predicted familiarity and closeness. The effects of disclosure intimacy and narrativity were not stable. Further exploratory analyses showed that the roles of disclosure intimacy on closeness and social attraction were constrained by the perceived appropriateness, and the effects of narrativity on closeness and social attraction were mediated by perceived entertainment value.

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## 1. Introduction

"Merely looking at a stranger's Twitter or Facebook feed isn't interesting, because it seems like blather. Follow it for a day, though, and it begins to feel like a short story; follow it for a month, and it's a novel."

Thompson (2008)

Although many social media platforms are mainly used for maintaining existing relationships, it is also common to stumble across the messages of strangers. On Twitter for example, it is relatively common to follow people one knows only online (Utz, 2016). A survey among Twitter users has shown that people develop ambient intimacy, i.e. a feeling of closeness to others followed on social media, for some of the people they follow on Twitter (Lin, Levordasha, & Utz, 2016). Classical studies on relationship formation focus on the role of intimacy in self-disclosure

(Altman & Taylor, 1973), although studies on (semi-) public social media have shown that entertaining posts can also create a feeling of closeness (Lin et al., 2016; Utz, 2015). However, as these studies have been correlational and relied on self-reported judgments/recall of the content of posts, it is not clear which factors drive the development of a feeling of closeness. To answer this question, we conducted two experiments in which we varied the number of posts and manipulated for the target person not only the intimacy but also the narrativity of self-disclosure. The latter factor has hitherto been neglected, although the quote at the beginning of this paper indicates that narrativity and story value of posts might matter. Additionally, we look at potential influence factors such as perceived appropriateness and entertainment value of posts. By experimentally disentangling the role of intimacy and narrativity, we contribute to a better understanding of the processes underlying relationship formation on social media.

In the following paragraphs, we will introduce the concepts of self-disclosure frequency, intimacy, and narrativity on social media, and its difference to self-disclosure in traditional one-to-one communication. Relevant previous research on the effects of self-disclosure on familiarity, closeness, and social attraction will be discussed.

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## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Self-disclosure on social media and its difference to self-disclosure offline

Conceptually speaking, broadcasting status updates/posts on social media that contain any form of self-information can be treated as self-disclosure (Lin et al., 2016). The posts could contain descriptive information such as what one has done today, and/or evaluative information such as how one feels about an event. In previous research, the degree of self-disclosure was often assessed along two dimensions: disclosure breadth (e.g., the amount of self-relevant statements made during an interaction) and disclosure depth (i.e., the level of disclosure intimacy) (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

Public self-disclosures on social media have some unique properties compared to self-disclosure in traditional one-to-one communication. First, when the disclosing self-information is highly intimate, it is more likely to be perceived as inappropriate when one broadcasts it online than discloses it privately (Bazarova, 2012); therefore, intimate self-disclosure on social media often decreases interpersonal attraction (Baruh & Cemalcilar, 2015). Second, public self-disclosure is often not directed to a single person, but simultaneously to several people. Disclosure recipients might not feel addressed in this case; and self-disclosure might have smaller effects on relationships (Burke & Kraut, 2014). Third, public self-disclosure from a specific person is often embedded in a stream of others' information; hence disclosure recipients may not pay enough attention to it.

In addition to the two dimensions of self-disclosure breadth and depth, we assume that self-disclosure narrativity is also important in the context of social media. We will discuss the role of disclosure intimacy and narrativity later, and first introduce the literature on the effects of self-disclosure frequency on familiarity, closeness, and social attraction. We chose these three dependent variables because they were often discussed in previous literature (Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2013; Sprecher, Treger, & Wondra, 2012), but conceptually they are slightly different from each other. In this paper, familiarity refers to the state of being accustomed to something or someone. It is knowledge of something or someone, which mainly depends on disclosure frequency (Finkel et al., 2015, pp. 1–39), regardless of the valence. Closeness and social attraction are more likely to be influenced by the content of self-disclosure. Closeness covers the emotional facet, whereas social attraction refers to the behavioral component, e.g. wanting to have a coffee with the target.

### 2.2. Effects of self-disclosure frequency on perceived familiarity, closeness, and social attraction

Even though there are some differences in private and public self-disclosure, recent studies indicated that browsing social media helps to enhance familiarity, creates awareness/knowledge of on-line contacts (Levordashka & Utz, 2016), and generates a feeling of closeness (Lin et al., 2016). Familiarity is generated when an individual has a certain level of exposure to the target person (Finkel et al., 2015, pp. 1–39). The amount of self-disclosure can be considered as operationalization of exposure. Therefore, a greater amount of public self-disclosure on social media should also generate a higher level of familiarity.

When it comes to closeness and attraction, findings are less consistent. In private conversations, when perceived as appropriate, greater amounts of disclosure information were often associated with more liking of the discloser (for review, see Collins & Miller, 1994). For unacquainted strangers, self-disclosure often leads to more closeness (A. Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator,

1997), which creates familiarity-based liking (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Zajonc, 1968), and positive interpersonal impressions such as social attraction (Sprecher et al., 2012). This is due to “mere exposure effect” and “uncertainty reduction theory”. The former asserted that the more frequently one is exposed to a certain thing or person, the more likable that thing or person appears to be (Moreland & Zajonc, 1982; Zajonc, 1968). The latter theory indicated that the more one is exposed to other's self-disclosure, the more uncertainty is reduced, therefore liking is increased (Sunnafank, 1986).

However, other researchers have found that more information about a person may decrease liking due to a higher level of perceived dissimilarity. This is also referred to as “less is more” hypothesis (Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2007). The mixed findings can be explained by the information-processing approach of attraction (Ajzen, 1977; Daltos, Ajzen, & Kaplan, 1979). It suggests that liking is determined by having positive beliefs about an individual: the more positive the beliefs, the greater the attraction; however, if the content of self-disclosure leads to negative beliefs (e.g., due to perceived dissimilarity or inappropriateness), the attraction should be decreased (Ajzen, 1977).

Similar to the familiarity and attraction link, we assume that, after reading other's public self-disclosure on social media, a feeling of closeness can be generated only under certain conditions (i.e., when positive beliefs are generated). In this case, in addition to disclosure frequency, the content of self-disclosure is more important in predicting social attraction.

### 2.3. Self-disclosure intimacy and interpersonal attraction

In offline relationship building, disclosure intimacy plays a central role (Collins & Miller, 1994). But it is still a debatable question whether disclosing intimate information promotes or undermines interpersonal attraction and closeness on SNS. For existing interpersonal relationships, researchers have found that receiving a larger proportion of superficial disclosures decreases relationship satisfaction (Rains, Brunner, & Oman, 2014). Self-disclosure on SNS, when perceived as more intimate, increases the feeling of connection toward existing online friends (Lin et al., 2016; Utz, 2015). However, such a positive effect of disclosure intimacy on building interpersonal relationships is stronger for messages on private channels than for public status updates (Bazarova, 2012). In the context of public status updates, the entertainment value of updates also matters (Utz, 2015).

We focus on situations in which an individual had no previous interactions with a target, using a so-called zero-acquaintance paradigm in which perceivers make judgments about strangers without having the opportunity to interact (Albright, Kenny, & Malloy, 1988). Baruh and Cemalcilar (2015) have found that broadcasting intimate disclosure messages may attract more attention but not necessarily increase attraction.

However, it is important to take the role of appropriateness into account, as intimate disclosure in public is often perceived as inappropriate (Bazarova, 2012). In Baruh and Cemalcilar's (2015) study, the level of disclosure appropriateness was altered essentially when the level of disclosure intimacy was manipulated. It was difficult to conclude whether the decreased attraction is because of the high-intimacy or high-inappropriateness.

The current study aims to examine the role of disclosure intimacy by minimizing the difference in the perceived appropriateness of high- and low-intimacy disclosure messages. We used stimulus material that was judged as appropriate in a pretest, and expected that under these circumstances intimate self-disclosure should have a positive role in increasing closeness and social attraction.

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