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Self-disclosure and liking in computer-mediated communication

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ABSTRACT

This research investigated the process by which self-disclosure leads to liking in computer-mediated communication (CMC). Research has shown that CMC influences the attributions that individuals make regarding self-disclosure as well as the affection that they feel towards disclosers as a result of these attributions. However, little is known about the impact that attributions have on one's own reciprocal self-disclosure. In an original experiment, dyads of friends or strangers disclosed to one another in text-based CMC. After their discussion, a questionnaire assessed participants' liking toward their partners as well as their attributions regarding their partners' behavior. Results show that self-disclosure prompted receivers' interpersonal attributions, which led receivers to like their partners. But, receivers' interpersonal attributions did not lead to reciprocal disclosure. The results corroborate Jiang, Bazarova, and Hancock's (2011) model that links self-disclosure and liking by way of interpersonal attributions, and demonstrate one disclosure-liking effect in CMC: People like those who self-disclose to them. This study provides further evidence for CMC's unique impact on the relationship between self-disclosure and liking, and contributes to our understanding of the interpersonal processes that lead to liking in CMC.

1. Introduction

Friends and strangers use the Internet to affiliate with others (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Ramirez & Broneck, 2009). Of the 88% of American adults that are online, 79% use social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram (32%), 22% interact in chat rooms, 24% share updates about themselves or view updates about others using Twitter, 16% belong to online discussion groups, and 15% date online (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016; Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2016; Smith, 2016). An integral part of affiliating with others is self-disclosure, or revealing personal information about the self (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) promotes self-disclosure. People disclose their feelings, fears, and thoughts in Facebook posts and private messages (Bazarova, 2012). Adolescents reveal intimate information about themselves instant messaging with their friends (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Potential suitors disclose as they get acquainted online dating (Whitty, 2008). Individuals reveal their true selves in online discussion groups (McKenna et al., 2002). Bloggers publish their personal experiences online (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). And individuals display relatively personal information on dating and Facebook profiles like political and religious views, work history, hobbies, and their age (Baker, 2008; Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010).

Different types of communication media influence self-disclosure in different ways. Dyads who get acquainted online generate a greater proportion (Tidwell & Walther, 2002) and frequency (Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2009) of questions and self-disclosure than do dyads who use face-to-face communication (FtF). Strangers reduce uncertainty about partners by using interactive (asking questions), active (inquiring about the other person), and passive information-seeking strategies (unobtrusive observation of targets), according to uncertainty reduction theory (Berger, 1979). For several reasons, CMC users use more interactive strategies—self-disclosure and question-asking—to reduce uncertainty about others than do FtF communicators (Schouten et al., 2009). Moreover, people perceive the same self-disclosure to be more

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intimate when it is received online than when it is received FtF (Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2013). Jiang, Bazarova, and Hancock's model (2011) argues that this is because individuals make interpersonal attributions ("My partner acted the way s/he did because of how much s/he liked me") for online disclosure, but not for FtF disclosure. Interpersonal attributions enhance affection towards disclosers because the disclosure is interpreted as an act of affection, rather than a manifestation of disclosers' personality or the situation.

To date, little research has examined an alternative model to explain the enhanced disclosure-liking effect in CMC. One potential problem with Jiang et al.'s (2011) model is that it does not distinguish between the different sources for the relationship between self-disclosure and liking. In their model, the receiver is both receiving self-disclosure and reciprocating self-disclosure. It is unclear where the liking towards partners originates as one receives someone else's disclosure, as their model dictates, or because both people are receiving disclosure and reciprocating disclosure. Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that these two processes, receiving self-disclosure and reciprocating self-disclosure, can each lead to partner liking independently (Collins & Miller, 1994). It is therefore possible that receivers may like the discloser due to their own reciprocal self-disclosure, and as a result, we cannot be confident where receivers' affection towards their partner originates. Because disclosure is a fundamental component of relationships, and quality relationships are essential for health and well-being (Heidrich & Ryff, 1993; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001), it is important to study the mechanisms for the disclosure-liking effect in CMC.

This study has two goals. The first is to examine alternative models that explain the relationship between self-disclosure and liking in CMC. This study replicates Jiang et al.'s (2011) disclosure-intimacy model, and proposes an additional explanation for the relationship between self-disclosure and liking in CMC. Meta-analytic evidence shows that there are three relationships between self-disclosure and liking (Collins & Miller, 1994). These include (1) people like those who self-disclose to them, (2) people self-disclose to those they like, and (3) people like those to whom they self-disclose. Without distinguishing among these three self-disclosure-liking effects, the relationships depicted by Jiang et al., (2011) may be caused by other disclosure-related processes and factors that Jiang et al. did not consider. The second goal of this study is to examine these three distinct disclosure-liking effects that have been verified in offline research. Though there is strong meta-analytic evidence for these effects in the FtF literature, there is little research demonstrating whether these effects also occur in CMC. These effects are important to understand the role of disclosure in CMC. These fundamental building blocks of relationships pertain whether two colleagues are getting acquainted, two best friends are catching up, or two people are planning their first date online. This study begins by reviewing relevant self-disclosure and attribution literature to understand the processes that lead to liking in CMC. It presents four hypotheses, followed by the details and the results of an experiment that tested them.

2. The importance of attributions on the disclosure-liking effect in CMC

"The effect of a disclosure on relationship intimacy depends on how the receiver makes sense of the disclosure, interprets it, and responds to it by making attributions about the sender's reasons for self-disclosure" (Jiang et al., 2011, p. 59). The attributions individuals assign to self-disclosure have a strong effect on liking towards the discloser. Strangers who reveal personal information too soon in a conversation tend to incur attributions of being

maladjusted whereas strangers who reveal personal information later in a conversation are attributed to be likable and trusting (Wortman, Adesman, Herman, & Greenberg, 1976). Individuals who infer that they have been deliberately chosen for a self-disclosure tend to like the discloser because they think that they are liked and trusted by the discloser (Jones & Archer, 1976). Attributions, or the causal inferences individuals make regarding other's behavior, tend to impact our liking of others.

Three different types of attributions—interpersonal, dispositional, and situational—can influence the impact of self-disclosure on liking (Newman, 1981). Interpersonal attributions refer to inferring the discloser's behavior is due to his/her attitude toward the receiver ("my partner acted that way due to the chemistry between us"). Dispositional attributions occur when receivers attribute the self-disclosure to a stable personality trait ("my partner's behavior reflects who s/he is"). And situational attributions occur when receivers' attribute their partners' behavior to contextual factors ("my partner's behavior was mostly shaped by the environment").

Jiang et al. (2011) used the first of these attributions to explain how intimate self-disclosure in CMC enhances liking. They discovered that CMC users tend to make interpersonal attributions for their partners' intimate self-disclosure, rather than dispositional and situational attributions, in comparison to FtF counterparts. These interpersonal attributions led receivers of intimate self-disclosure to like their partners. This unique effect of CMC on interpersonal attributions and liking helps explain the development of hyperpersonal CMC, a state in which online partners like each other more than offline partners do (Walther, 1996). Before investigating alternative models to explain the relationship between self-disclosure and liking in CMC, a replication of Jiang et al.'s (2011) disclosure-intimacy model appears in the following hypothesis:

H1. Individuals who make interpersonal attributions for their partners' disclosures like their partners more than those who make dispositional or situational attributions in CMC.

There are aspects of disclosure processes that differ from Jiang et al. (2011) that offer different predictions for the way that disclosure in CMC may affect receivers' liking towards disclosers. The effect of reciprocal self-disclosure may be one such aspect. Jiang et al.'s model does not take into account how attributions may lead receivers to reciprocate disclosure, even though both receiving and sending self-disclosure contribute to liking. An alternative model emerges based on different relations among receiving disclosures from, and generating disclosures to, other persons online. In their meta-analysis that investigated the relationship between self-disclosure and liking in FtF interactions, Collins and Miller (1994) verified three disclosure-liking effects across 130 studies. The first effect is that people like others who self-disclose to them. The second effect is that people self-disclose to people they like. The third effect is that people like those to whom they self-disclose.

2.1. Effect one: People like others who disclose to them

Two general models have been used to explain the first proposition that Collins and Miller (1994) verified: People like others who self-disclose to them. The first is based on social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). According to this theory, the more individuals reveal themselves, the more their partners tend to like them, because self-disclosure tends to be rewarding and individuals like those who provide them with rewards. The second explanation offers an information processing approach: People like people who disclose to them because of the positive impressions that they form about the disclosers (e.g., Ajzen, 1977; Dalto, Ajzen,