



Expressing the “True Self” on Facebook



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 1 December 2013

Keywords:

“True self”

Facebook

Social networking websites

Self-presentation

ABSTRACT

The present research examined correlates of “true self” expression to offline friends on Facebook. The “true self” (McKenna et al., 2002) consists of qualities an individual currently possesses but does not normally express to others. In Study 1, 184 undergraduates completed an online survey assessing “true self” expression to their friends online and reported the frequency of various Facebook activities. True self expression was positively correlated with using Facebook for communicating with others, general self-disclosure, emotional disclosure, attention-seeking, and acceptance-seeking, but was unrelated to seeking connection with and expressing caring for others. In Study 2, 41 undergraduates completed the “true self” measure and their Facebook profiles were saved and coded. True self expression was positively correlated with frequency of posting on others’ walls, but not posting on one’s own wall or receiving posts from others. Finally, true self expression was positively associated with the level of personal disclosure of participants’ wall posts. These results suggest that those who feel able to express their “true self” online are more active on Facebook, have more self-oriented motivations for posting, and post more personally revealing and emotional content.

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1. Introduction

Since the first appearance of e-mail, listservs, and other forms of online communication, the Internet has changed the way we communicate with each other (see Bargh & McKenna, 2004 for a review). In recent years, Internet users have joined social networking websites (SNS) which allow them to connect with others and post information and daily updates about themselves to a large network of fellow users of their choice. SNS are so popular that in 2010, 61% of American adults used them (Zickuhr, 2010). This represents a major shift in Internet use. As recently as 2000, half of American adults did not even have an Internet connection (Rainie et al., 2000). Worldwide, Facebook is the most popular social networking site (Jain, 2010) with over one billion active users, 699 million of whom log onto the site daily (Facebook, 2013). Facebook has become so popular that in some weeks it has been the number one source of all Internet traffic in the United States (Dougherty, 2010). In recent years, social scientists have taken great interest in understanding Facebook, examining the demographic characteristics of Facebook users, motivations for Facebook use, self-presentation, and social interactions on Facebook (see Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012 for a review). The current research will address the expression of the “true self” (Bargh,

McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002) on Facebook.

2. Background

2.1. The “True Self”

Psychologists have long accepted the notion that the self is multi-faceted. Early scholars focused on the distinction between one’s public persona and private self (Jung, 1953). Higgins (1987) divided the self into the actual self (the way we currently see ourselves) and two self-guides, the ideal and ought self, which serve as standards to which the actual self is compared. Markus and Nurius (1986) posited that each of us has multiple possible selves that we hope to become or fear becoming.

The “true self”, as defined by Bargh et al. (2002), McKenna et al. (2002), consists of qualities that an individual currently possesses but does not normally express to others in everyday life. According to McKenna this notion is similar to the idea of the true self described by Rogers (1951). Rogers posited that the self may contain identity-important qualities that are not validated by one’s significant others. These are not necessarily undesirable traits, but rather these are traits that one would like to be acknowledged, but that one is unable to express or to have validated by others. The true self differs from other “selves” described in the psychological literature, such as Higgins’ (1987) self-guides or Markus and Nurius’ (1986) possible selves because

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unlike these other constructs, the true self contains qualities that the individual currently possesses.

2.2. Expressing the “True Self” on the Internet

Past research has revealed that some individuals feel better able to express their “true self” online (McKenna et al., 2002). McKenna et al. (2002) found that individuals who expressed the true self online were more likely to form close relationships with others that they met via the Internet, and that this was especially true for those high in social anxiety. Experimental evidence suggests that these true self qualities are actually conveyed to online interaction partners. In a lab study, Bargh et al. (2002, Experiment 3), found that online interaction partners evaluated one another as possessing more true self traits than face-to-face partners. Thus it appears that these participants were more able to express true self qualities in online than in face-to-face interactions. This expression of the true self also appears to operate at the unconscious level, with true self qualities being more cognitively accessible following online interactions (Bargh et al., 2002, Experiment 1). In research specifically addressing Facebook use, Tosun (2012) found that those with a tendency to express the true self online are likely to use Facebook as a way to establish new relationships, just as such individuals used other Internet interaction venues ten years earlier. However, those who express the true self online are likely to use the Internet as a “social substitute” for offline interactions, substituting online only relationships with strangers for offline relationships (Tosun & Lajunen, 2009), suggesting an unhealthy consequence of such self expression.

Most past research on true self expression online has focused on interactions with strangers. However, in the past several years, Internet-based communications have become primarily a way to connect with existing offline friends and family members. In order to examine online true self expression to offline friends, McKenna, Buffardi, and Seidman (2005) conducted a survey assessing the extent to which people expressed hidden qualities to their offline friends online via email and instant messaging. The tendency to express the true self to existing “real life” friends when interacting with those friends via the Internet predicted important outcomes for those relationships, including an ease in discussing troublesome topics or conflicts online, and a sense that the Internet had strengthened their relationships. However, this research did not deal with social networking sites, in which information is made public to a large number of friends and acquaintances, but rather with private one-on-one online communications. Some recent research suggests that true self aspects may be expressed on Facebook, revealing that neuroticism is positively correlated with self reports of expressing hidden self-aspects through Facebook posts (Seidman, 2013). The current research will extend this work by examining how the true self is expressed to existing offline friends on Facebook, using both self report and behavioral data.

2.3. True self expression on Facebook

According to Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012), Facebook use is motivated by two primary needs: belonging and self-presentation. The need to belong is the fundamental motive to connect with and be accepted by others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Self-presentation is the attempt to influence how one is perceived by others with the goal of making a particular impression (Schlenker, 2003). Expression of the true self can be a way to fulfill both of these needs.

Self-verification is an important self-presentational goal. Self-verification is the desire to be seen by others as we see ourselves; that is, the desire to present our real and authentic selves to others (Swann, 1983, 1987). Because true self traits are a part of the

existing self, and not idealized or hoped for traits, their expression online is an attempt to express the self as it truly is, and is thus an attempt at self-verification. People have a strong motivation to have identity-important self-aspects acknowledged by others, in order to ensure that they are integrated into the self-concept (Baumeister, 1998; Gollwitzer, 1986). Individuals who have self-aspects that can only be expressed online should have a greater tendency to express themselves on Facebook because it may be the only way to have certain self-aspects verified.

Hypothesis 1. True self expression online will be positively associated with the tendency to use Facebook as a tool to communicate with others, to disclose information, and to express emotions.

In addition, because those who express the true self online are expressing unique self-aspects, they may be especially likely to seek attention via their Facebook posts, since it is their only chance to get attention for these unique self expressions. If these are identity-important self-aspects, then being able to express them and have them validated by others can ultimately increase self-acceptance (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). This provides a strong motivation not only to express these self-aspects, but to deliberately try to get others to notice them.

Hypothesis 2. True self expression online will be positively associated with the use of Facebook as a way to seek attention from others.

Belonging needs can be met by expressing caring for others and by being accepted by others. People seek closeness to others for both altruistic and egoistic reasons (Park, Troisi, & Maner, 2010). Altruistic concerns involve a genuine concern for others’ needs, whereas egoistic concerns involve whether or not one’s own needs will be met by the relationship. Facebook use can satisfy both of these concerns. One can express caring and support for friends via Facebook and one can also have one’s own needs for acceptance and validation fulfilled by others on Facebook. True self expression is one way to satisfy egoistic relational motives. Validation of one’s self-concept is an important goal of close relationships (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). It is important that these hidden self-aspects be validated by others, and the Internet may allow this to occur (Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Thus, true self expression can accomplish belonging needs, namely acceptance by others. However, true self expression does not facilitate altruistic expressions of caring or concern for others, as it reflects self-oriented motives.

Hypothesis 3. True self expression online will be positively associated with using Facebook as a way to gain acceptance from others (egoistic belonging motive), but not as a way to show caring for others (altruistic belonging motive).

As discussed previously, it is likely that those who express the true self online are seeking validation from others of these hidden self aspects and may be more expressive on Facebook. This is similar to the pattern of behaviors exhibited by those with low self-esteem. Research shows that those with low self-esteem are more comfortable expressing negative emotions on Facebook, but these self disclosures make negative impressions on others and thus may not lead to positive outcomes for their relationships (Forest & Wood, 2012). Thus, these individuals may fail to receive the validation they are seeking. A similar fate may befall those who express the true self online by being more personally disclosing. In most cases, self disclosure by one party leads to greater liking by the second party (see Collins & Miller, 1994 for review) and leads the other party to disclose in turn (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Sprecher, Treger, Wondra, Hilaire, & Wallpe,

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