Self-disclosure on Facebook: How much do we really reveal?

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of the social networking site Facebook to self-disclose and analyses the responses of a small group of Facebook users surveyed about their own willingness to self-disclose. An online survey was used to ask Facebook users about their level of Facebook use, what types of personal information they are willing to reveal and the frequency of these personal revelations. The survey also asked the participants to take a look at their publicly viewable profile and the types of information revealed there. Results indicated that overall, most people tended to be cautious about the types of information they revealed, posted mainly positive statements about themselves and were aware of personal privacy issues.

Keywords

Facebook, self-disclosure, privacy, social media, computer-mediated communication

1. Introduction

Recent advances in computer-mediated communication technology mean that interpersonal communication has moved beyond the immediacy of face-to-face interactions. These technological advances have allowed rapid growth in online social networking sites that have significantly changed the way in which we can meet new people, interact, form and maintain relationships.

Facebook has over 1 billion users active each month (Facebook, 2013) and is one of the fastest growing social network sites aimed at connecting family and friends. Not only does Facebook allow interactions between people known to each other in 'real life', but also allows interactions with those who have become 'friends' online. The ability to Facebook 'friend' those personally known as well as those met online means that personal information shared on Facebook is available to a diverse audience. The process of revealing personal information is a way for people to establish trust and build relationships (Trenholm & Jensen, 2011), but it may also pose a risk when close family and online acquaintances merge into a common stream of conversation where the ability to filter self-disclosures by audience is removed.

The research question that this paper addresses is "What types of personal information do Facebook users feel comfortable self-disclosing on their Facebook wall and profile page, and how often do these disclosures occur?"

This paper analyses the responses of a small group of Facebook users surveyed about their own willingness to self-disclose. The paper discusses the types of personal information these users deemed appropriate to share given the potentially diverse audience and levels of prior intimacy, and how often such information was shared.
2. Literature Review

2.1. Communication and Social Networking

The ability to use the Internet and social networking websites has provided additional communication options. Traditional communication occurred either in person, by telephone or by mail. Now, messages can be sent electronically, via email or social networking websites and using online video conferencing tools. The use of electronic communication tools and social networking sites in particular, has added a new dimension to the relationship development process (Barnes, 2006). Not only is social networking used to maintain existing relationships, it is also being used to make new friends (Lenhert & Madden, 2007).

The largest social networking site is Facebook. Founded in 2004, Facebook is a structured social media website that allows users to connect with or "friend" other users, create a community, and exchange messages either individually and privately, or openly by posting on a wall. Wall messages can have different levels of visibility attached to them depending on the users security settings, however a study by Lipford, Besmer and Watson (2008) found Facebook users generally underused these settings, trusted the permissive default settings and left all wall messages visible to all "friends". This study also revealed that while Facebook users were aware of the mix in their audience, they struggled with privacy and often revealed personal information not tailored to a diverse audience.

2.2 Self Disclosure

Self-disclosure is the process of revealing information about yourself during the development of relationships. Traditionally this has been face-to-face during verbal exchange and includes information that helps people understand those things about you that they would be unlikely to discover elsewhere (Trenholm & Jensen, 2013). Self-disclosure is usually a gradual process that starts with revealing enough basic information to reduce anxiety, create a positive impression and to decide whether an ongoing relationship is worth pursuing.

Self-disclosures using text based electronic communication methods follow a similar pattern although a previous study (Tidwell & Walther, 2002) revealed users were prevented from gaining full impressions of the discloser due to the lack of non-verbal cues. This study also revealed that in some instances this lack of full impression led to some sheltering of facts and self-disclosures did not further develop relationships to any great depth or intimacy. This type of communication also allows users to present a unique self-view by engaging in strategic self-disclosure (Utz, Taniz & Vermeulen, 2012), revealing only positive information about themselves motivated by the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

2.3 Narcissism, Exhibitionism and Voyeurism on Facebook

Facebook encourages its users to post textual messages on their walls and share thoughts and information about their lives by answering the question "what's on your mind?" This feature of Facebook provides easy opportunity for people with narcissistic tendencies to engage in "exhibitionism and attention seeking behaviours that partly define this personality trait" (Bergman, Fearrington, Davenport & Bergman, 2010, p. 707). Narcissism occurs when an individual has an inflated self-concept and pursues excessive admiration, power, status or control in some form. Facebook, with its ease of use and ability to reach a wide audience, provides a platform for narcissists to receive instant glory and attention. A study by Buffardi and Campbell (2008), found that narcissism related to higher levels of online social activity and self-promotion, with Facebook providing opportunity for narcissists to connect (albeit superficially) to many 'friends', share self-promoting photographs and generally fulfill their desire for attention.

The counterpart to the self-promoting exhibitionist behaviour of the narcissist is voyeurism. Voyeur literally means ‘observer’ and has traditionally been considered a type of deviant behaviour where people get a thrill from watching others. In the social networking world, a person who observes rather than participates is generally known as a lurker. Facebook provides opportunity for users to lurk and view the lives of others through information shared on wall posts. Although the lurker rarely shares information in return, this behaviour is not seen as deviant, but is deemed harmless and a normal part of adding meaning and value to the social community (Munar, 2010).

2.4 Facebook Privacy
Although lurking is seen as a harmless activity, knowing that this behaviour exists is important when considering personal privacy. Facebook has privacy settings that are permissive by default. This means that without making any alterations to the privacy settings, all status updates, photos and posts are available to everyone. These settings can be customized, however, many people remain unaware that these default settings allow personal information to become public (Comer, Mckelvey & Curran, 2012). Stutzman, Gross and Acquisti (2012), reporting on a 5 year longitudinal study, found that Facebook users became more aware of privacy settings over time and this resulted in the level of public disclosures decreasing. However during a time when Facebook had again changed the default privacy policy and interface settings, the level of public disclosures increased. It was concluded that these continual changes made it more difficult for users to remain up-to-date when managing their own privacy settings.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

One hundred and sixty nine Facebook 'friends' were invited to take part in a survey (shown in Appendix 1) to gauge the level and types of disclosures this group felt comfortable revealing on their Facebook walls. Some 'friends' shared the invitation with their 'friends', and in total, twenty-seven 'friends' and 'friends of friends' completed the survey.

3.2 Instrumentation

A survey was designed and implemented online using an online survey website, freeonlinesurveys.com. The survey consisted of four multi-choice questions, seventeen Likert item statements and three free answer questions. The Likert items asked the participant to rate statements of personal self-disclosure using five levels: Never, a few times, sometimes, almost always and always. The multi-choice questions asked the participants to indicate their gender, level of Facebook use, how public their Facebook wall is and what information is publicly available through their profile.

3.3 Procedure

The link to the survey was provided on the author's Facebook wall and volunteers were invited to participate. Clicking the provided link opened the online survey (see Appendix 1). The survey explained the meaning of self-disclosure, how the responses would be used, how long the survey was expected to take and assured the anonymity and confidentiality of the responses. No personal identifying information was collected. The survey was open for seven days.

4. Results

A total of twenty-seven (n=27) 'friends' and 'friends of friends' completed the survey. Survey analytics revealed the responses came from USA (3), Canada (1), India (1), Portugal (1), Australia (2) and New Zealand (19). Seven participants were male and twenty female.

A frequency distribution (shown in Figure 1) indicated two-thirds (66.7%) of participants posted on their Facebook wall about once a week or more frequently. The other 33.3% indicated they only occasionally or rarely made postings.
One participant had a Facebook wall that was publicly viewable, 21 had their wall viewable by friends and five had an unspecified customized setting. No one had a private wall.

One participant indicated they always talk about themselves. Twenty-two indicated the talk about themselves a few times or almost always. Four indicated they never talk about themselves. 81.5% of participants indicated their self-disclosures are almost always or always honest.

Personal relationship problems (Figure 2) are never shared by 26 (96.3%) of the participants and personal health problems (Figure 3) are never shared by 17 (63.0%) of the participants. Those remaining indicating they share these types of problems either a few times or sometimes.
Work related problems are not readily shared, with 70.4% indicating they never share these. Religious beliefs and family problems are shared the least out of the options available. Three participants indicated they are always likely to share personal likes, whereas more than half of those surveyed indicated personal dislikes are shared only sometimes (59.3%). Photographs of self and family are shared sometimes by most participants (see Figure 4), as are family milestones such as birthdays.

![Figure 4. Sharing of personal and family photos](image)

Personal achievements are more likely to be shared than personal failings (Figure 5).

![Figure 5. Sharing of personal failings and achievements](image)

Asked if there was anything they would share that was not listed in question 4, the participants indicated they are willing to share:

- Progress on major projects
- Their personal brand of humour
- Hobbies and things of professional interest.

In response to a question asking participants to list anything they would never share on Facebook, the answers included:

- Intimate life with spouse
- Criticism of others
- Family mental health issues
- Some pictures of children
- Ex-relationship history
- Feelings about work and friends
- Personal issues including disagreements, arguments
- Naked pictures.

Participants revealed a range of information about themselves on their publicly viewable profile (Figure 6). Three participants do not reveal their real name. Most indicate they reveal their hometown. Less than half the participants reveal their full date of birth, where they work, where they attended university, their family members, email addresses and phone numbers. Two participants did not know what they revealed in their public profile.
One participant indicated they have closed groups, one for family and one for girlfriends and information pertinent to those groups are only available there. One indicated that: "It’s a two edged sword. I want to share info because it’s an easy way to let friends know what’s going on. But, if you don’t keep up with FB privacy changes, you have more shared than you expected or wanted."

5. Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to gauge the level and types of information Facebook users felt comfortable self-disclosing on their Facebook walls. Previous research has revealed a range of results regarding self-disclosure using social media and other computer-mediated communication channels ranging from reduced self-disclosure resulting in less intimate relationships (Tidwell & Walther, 2002) through to over-disclosure resulting in concerns about perceived safety and privacy (Joinson, Reips, Buchanan & Schofield, 2010; Lipford et al., 2008).

5.1 Your Life is Better Than Mine

This study has revealed that the Facebook users surveyed are generally cautious with their disclosures, very rarely moving beyond disclosing non-risky information suitable for all audiences. These Facebook users did not generally disclose information aimed at further developing intimate relationships, but rather used the disclosures to "broadcast" achievement and share information of a non-intimate nature, with more personal information relating to relationship, health, family and work-related problems generally remaining unshared. However, positive general disclosures relating to successes, milestones and achievements are more likely to be shared overall. This confirms previous studies that show users reveal positive aspects of personal information to enhance their profile, fulfill a need to belong (Baumeister & McKenna, 2004) and to project a socially desirable self (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). This tendency to positively self-disclosure also leads to a skewed or unbalanced view by the audience of how well other people are doing in their lives, as the discloser is perceived, by the nature of their posts, to have a happier and better life than their audience (Chou & Edge 2012; Qui, Lin, Leung & Tov, 2012).

The one Facebook 'friend' who has a publicly available wall also indicated they rarely talk about themselves, never share photos and rarely make other disclosures. There are many reasons why someone may have a publicly viewable profile, from being a "known personality" to having narcissistic or exhibitionist tendencies to simply being unaware of the dangers of being publicly viewable when disclosing personal information. In this case, due to the lack of personal disclosures of any kind, it could be concluded that this person may be maintaining a presence only or possibly engaging in lurking or social voyeurism; taking a look at the lives of others with deliberate non-reciprocation, and is perhaps not interested in the relational and social sharing aspect of Facebook.

5.2 Public and Private

One user made use of a Facebook feature called groups and created a private group for family and girlfriends, indicating disclosures of a more personal nature occurred there. Groups allow sharing with selective audiences. The groups can be open and public, closed with posts only visible to members but the group is visible and members profiles available,
or secret where the group is only available to members. Using groups is a way of leveraging existing features to manage privacy and sharing concerns.

Five friends indicated they have a customized wall setting. This means they are aware of Facebook privacy settings and are able to customize and tailor posts to specific audiences. Further research would need to be undertaken with these users to ascertain whether or not using customized settings altered the types or frequency of personal information disclosed.

The survey participants were also well aware of the information provided on their publicly viewable profiles and did not reveal more intimate personal information. Three participants went as far as not revealing their real names, thereby making themselves unsearchable and indicating an awareness of personal privacy issues in the online environment. Third party applications also have access to user information but this was not investigated in this study.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to investigate the types of information a small group of Facebook users felt comfortable disclosing on their Facebook walls and how often these disclosures occur. The research revealed that this group of Facebook users played it safe when revealing personal information on their walls by disclosing only that information they deemed appropriate for viewing by a diverse audience. These users also indicated awareness of personal privacy issues by being selective about the types of information available on their public profiles.

This group of Facebook users rarely or never disclosed more personal or intimate types of information such as relationship and work problems or religious beliefs. Instead, the self-disclosures were more often of a positive nature and included sharing personal likes, family milestones and photographs of self and family. The disclosures of this group can be seen as a way of maintaining connections within existing relationships rather than a means to establish new relationships.

As one user indicated, the use of the Facebook group feature is a way of selectively self-disclosing amongst subsets of 'friends'. Further research would be needed to investigate more fully the use of groups as a way of managing personal information flow while maintaining appropriate levels of self-disclosure within subsets of Facebook 'friends'.

7. References


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