

Online Disclosure

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Abstract

Online disclosure refers to revealing personal information to others in an online context. While it is common to share online disclosure in dyadic interactions, social media technologies have facilitated online disclosure to social networks consisting of large and diverse audiences. To advance understanding of online disclosure, it is important to account for the dynamic interplay of people's individual characteristics, media affordances, and social network characteristics, as well as the interpersonal dynamics that governs social interactions. Understanding the interplay among these forces will help address key questions about online disclosure production, online disclosure perceptions, and its effects on personal relationships and well-being, as these questions re-emerge with each new technology offering novel ways to share self with the world.

Keywords: information and communication technology; interpersonal communication; self

Online Disclosure

Disclosure of personal information is central to social life and personal well-being. It helps to fulfill fundamental human needs of creating and sustaining social bonds, learning about the world and the self, and providing coping tools essential for well-being and health (Jourard, 1971). Advances in information and communication technologies have brought unprecedented opportunities for online disclosure, which is the process of revealing personal information to others in an online context. Every day millions of people self-disclose online, through text, photos, and videos, using different technological platforms, such as chats, e-mails, social network sites, microblogs, personal Web pages, and dating sites. As personal information proliferates online, the boundaries between what is public and what is private become increasingly blurred, raising questions about how disclosures are produced and perceived, as well as how they affect personal relationships and well-being.

In recent years, new social media technologies (e.g., social network sites and microblogging) have introduced a shift in disclosure practices from dyadic exchanges to sharing disclosure to large online networks, for example, on Facebook or Twitter. This type of network-visible or public disclosure amplifies potential rewards and risks. While network-visible online disclosure creates new opportunities for self-expression and social networking, it also increases privacy risks and liabilities as personal information shared in social media can be easily searched and redistributed outside its original context and intended audiences.

These shifting practices around online disclosure pose new questions about disclosure decisions and motivations, perceptions of disclosure, and its consequences in people's lives and relationships. Understanding these processes requires a multitheoretical perspective combining research on individual differences (e.g., gender, age, personality traits, social media literacy),

media affordances (e.g., availability of social cues and visibility), and social network characteristics (e.g., network size and diversity). Whereas media affordances and individual differences are important to online disclosure in dyadic contexts (see for review, Kim & Dindia, 2011), network characteristics are specific to a network-visible disclosure shared with large online networks. Finally, network characteristics need to be integrated with media affordances and individual differences to account for their interplay across different networks, different media, and different people. This entry will discuss the importance of interpersonal dynamics, as well as media affordances, individual differences, and social network characteristics, for understanding online disclosure. It will address, in turn, online disclosure production and online disclosure perceptions and outcomes, separating between dyadic exchanges and social media interactions.

Online Disclosure Production

People make deliberate decisions about disclosure, including what to disclose, with whom, where, and when. These decisions involve complex dialectics of public and private persona management because of people's conflicting needs and desires—they wish to stay open and socially connected while still retaining autonomy and control over their identities and information (Petronio, 2002). Disclosure entails some loss of privacy, and the way people regulate the disclosure–privacy balance depends on their perception of the situation, perceived risks and rewards of disclosure, individual goals, a communication context, and audience, as well as disclosers' individual characteristics, including cultural background, gender, and personality factors. Communication and information technologies create new and different circumstances that can affect motivations and perceptions of self, partner, and interaction. The social, perceptual, and motivational changes prompted by these new circumstances can reshape the

disclosure–privacy balance and lead to a different set of disclosure behaviors. Accordingly, online disclosure research has been concerned with (a) identifying and linking media affordances to changes in disclosure behaviors, and (b) determining sociopsychological and communication mechanisms responsible for those changes.

Online disclosure production in dyadic interactions. Much of online disclosure research has focused on the effects of media affordances on disclosure production, often comparing dyadic interactions in text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) to face-to-face (FtF) communication. Drawing from hyperpersonal theory (Walther, 1996) predicting that people can develop more intimate relationships in text-based CMC than in FtF communication, studies examined effects of reduced social cues and anonymity on changes in intimacy and amount of disclosure that may account for hyperpersonal dynamics. Although there is some evidence that people self-disclose more in text-based CMC than FtF, there are inconsistencies in findings on disclosure amount across studies, with some studies showing no differences or even greater amount of disclosure in FtF than text-based CMC (see for review, Kim & Dindia, 2011).

In terms of disclosure intimacy, CMC partners tend to use fewer peripheral self-disclosures compared to FtF conversants, suggesting adaptation of disclosure production to the reduced social cues of online environments (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Different mechanisms have been offered for changes in the amount and intimacy of online disclosure, including enhanced control over self-presentation, feelings of increased similarity between conversational partners, increased self-awareness, disinhibition and lower public self-awareness due to decreased concerns with social judgments, and reliance on more direct and intimate questioning to compensate for reduced nonverbal cues in text-based CMC. These empirical tests provide

support for disinhibition and direct questioning as factors encouraging more self-disclosure in CMC and point out the moderating effects of demographics, personality characteristics, and individual perceptions of media attributes on online disclosure production (Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007). Overall, more research using content analysis of disclosure is needed to examine differences in disclosure amount and intimacy between FtF and CMC and mechanisms underlying these differences; to investigate moderating variables, which could account for the different findings across studies; and to evaluate a link between disclosure adaptation and interpersonal dynamics, as predicted by hyperpersonal theory.

Online disclosure production in social media. The expansion of social media and the rise of network-visible online disclosure have challenged traditional understanding of disclosure production, which emphasizes selective disclosure with a trusted target within a dyadic boundary (Pearce & Sharp, 1973). Such selective disclosure minimizes personal vulnerability and risks, while still satisfying the desired disclosure goals and needs of social connectedness and learning, self-reflection, and self-expression. This approach, however, does not explain a disclosure deliberately broadcast to an entire network composed of multiple and often ill-defined audiences (e.g., Facebook status updates or Twitter tweets) or disclosure directed at another person but purposely made visible to others in a network (e.g., posted on someone else's Facebook timeline). Communal visibility of an online disclosure produces a context collapse of audiences, in which people from different social circles are collapsed into one network (Marwick & boyd, 2011). This also confounds traditional models of disclosure that link amount and intimacy of disclosure to the strength of the relationship between a discloser and a receiver (Altman & Taylor, 1973). For example, a simple visit to a person's Facebook page may reveal more about him or her than years of previous acquaintance. Such public sharing of private information in large and diverse

social networks raises important questions about how network-visible disclosure is different from dyadic disclosure, and what drives people to disclose publicly in social media.

Recent research has approached the discrepancy between disclosure practices in social media and conventional notions about disclosure from a functional perspective. According to the functional model of self-disclosure in social media, the differences in network-visible disclosures and traditionally understood dyadic disclosures can be comprehended through the analysis of goals that people seek and rewards that they attain through disclosure (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). These goals and rewards are linked to a discloser's construal of social situations that are, in turn, shaped by social media affordances. For example, being able to address everyone in a network is likely to prompt a different set of strategic motivations and concerns than addressing a single person in a network or a closed dyadic exchange. Goals matter because they account for differences in self-disclosure characteristics. An empirical test of the functional approach has shown that, indeed, people pursue different disclosure goals in Facebook communication forms with different visibility and interaction directedness. The most common goal for disclosures broadcast to a whole network is social validation (seeking attention, social approval, and support from others). Disclosures directed at a specific person are primarily motivated by a relational development goal, but those of them that were made visible to a network were higher in social validation goals than those restricted to private and closed exchanges. Importantly, disclosure goals accounted for disclosure intimacy, with network visible disclosures being less intimate than private ones. In addition to network visibility and directedness, other media affordances can influence perceived rewards and risks of disclosure; among them are data permanence, editability (a discloser's ability to edit and revise a message), anonymity, a medium's social cues, and a medium's temporal structure, which characterizes communication as synchronous versus

asynchronous. Future research needs to compare disclosure in different social media platforms to further understand the role of media affordances in disclosure amount, intimacy, and valence, as well as perceived disclosure risks and rewards.

In addition to social media affordances, disclosers' individual characteristics play a key role in network-visible disclosure production. As social media users are becoming increasingly diverse, factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, physical and mental health, cultural differences, Internet skills and attitudes, and digital privacy literacy are essential to understanding online disclosure. For example, older social media users are likely to pursue disclosure goals different from those of younger adults, as motivational priorities and social preferences shift with age. Demographics, marital status, education level, and socioeconomic factors influence uses of and gratifications sought from online activities, which can further impact online disclosure behaviors. Internet users also vary widely with respect to Internet skills and digital privacy literacy. These differences influence the amount of online disclosure, the use of privacy settings, and willingness to self-disclose to strangers in social media. Additionally, personality traits (e.g., openness, shyness, narcissism, and agreeableness) can affect online disclosure production. For example, although people with low self-esteem see Facebook as a uniquely safe and appealing place for disclosure, their disclosures are more negative than those of people with high self-esteem, leading their networks to have more negative opinions of them (Forest & Wood, 2012).

With regard to a network-visible disclosure, network characteristics, including size and composition, can also influence likelihood, motivations, and intimacy of disclosure. However, perceptions of network characteristics may deviate from actual network characteristics because social media users often deal with ill-defined audiences, also referred to as "imagined" and

“invisible” (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Mental representations of audiences rely on heuristics, such as readers’ feedback to disclosure, but this heuristics is often unreliable. For example, Facebook users tend to underestimate their actual audience size by about 70 percent (Bernstein, Bakshy, Burke, & Karrer, 2013). The challenge of navigating diverse and invisible audiences in social media can create tensions and misalignments in online disclosure, which may result in a more intimate disclosure than what the discloser intended. These misalignments may explain recent findings about social network characteristics affecting online disclosure in the opposite of the predicted directions. Although dense and cohesive networks are typically more conducive to disclosure, people share more disclosures in larger and more diverse networks on Facebook and Twitter, as opposed to smaller and less diverse networks (e.g., Kivran-Swaine & Naaman, 2011). These findings suggest the importance of measuring perceptions of audiences in addition to actual network characteristics in order to untangle the role of perceived and actual audiences in shaping disclosure.

Future research should build toward the integration of media affordances, individual characteristics, and social network characteristics to examine their interplay on disclosure production. Another prominent direction will be to examine novel types of disclosure such as visual disclosure (mobile and online photo sharing) and disclosure of location-related data. These types of disclosures extend the traditional conceptualization of disclosure as a primarily verbal behavior by revealing nonverbal and contextual information. Sharing real-time location data and images increase risks (e.g., cyberstalking) and rewards (social connections with friends based on location data), and more research is needed on how disclosers balance these risks and rewards. Finally, whereas network characteristics capture static audience qualities, disclosure production is a dynamic process situated in a communication context created by exchanges between network

members. These exchanges influence disclosure both directly, by providing an immediate interactive sequence to which a discloser responds, and indirectly, through subjective norms inferred from network members' behaviors of what is appropriate and normative to disclose in a particular media environment. Future research will need to integrate social influence processes and a dynamically unfolding communication context in order to gain a deeper understanding of online disclosure dynamics.

Online Disclosure Perceptions and Outcomes

Although most online disclosure research has focused on disclosure production, receivers' perceptions and responses largely determine disclosure outcomes, and more research is needed to understand how media affordances affect these responses. According to communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002), once disclosure has been made it moves from an individual to collective ownership, and receivers become co-owners of disclosure. The important question then is how receivers perceive disclosure and interpret collective privacy rules. Little attention has been paid to factors that affect receivers' interpretations, although their interpretations and responses are key to many disclosure outcomes, including relational intimacy, disclosers' goal satisfaction, and subsequent changes in disclosers' behaviors and collective privacy rules. Communication and information technologies create new and little understood bases for making judgments about online disclosure and disclosers. It is important, therefore, to understand how changes in disclosure interpretations due to medium influences affect receivers' actions, disclosers' experiences, relational dynamics, and other disclosure outcomes.

Online disclosure perception and outcomes in dyadic interactions. Hyperpersonal theory (Walther, 1996) predicts both a sender's and a receiver's effect contributing to intimacy online: a sender's effect through increased control and selectivity of online disclosure, and a

receiver's effect through overinterpretation of limited social cues, which leads to intensified impressions of partners and relationships with them. While both effects are important, most empirical studies either focus on senders' behaviors or do not separate the sender's effect from the receiver's effect, making it unclear whether media could affect receivers' interpretations of disclosure independent of changes in senders' disclosure behaviors.

Recent research, however, has attempted to isolate disclosure perceptions from disclosure production by using confederates who disclosed identical information in text-based CMC and FtF dyadic interactions in order to examine the effect of medium on disclosure perceptions and intimacy (Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2010). The study demonstrated the intensification of the disclosure–intimacy link in CMC, as intimate disclosures led to more relational intimacy in CMC than FtF. The confederate's control over the disclosure message ruled out the self-selectivity effect on the part of disclosers, which meant that receivers' perceptions were responsible for the intensification. Indeed, there were several differences in receivers' perceptions between CMC and FtF interactions. First, CMC receivers perceived the confederate's disclosures as more intimate than those in FtF interactions. Second, there were differences in causal attributions for disclosers' messages between the two channels, with receivers making more intense causal attributions for intimate disclosure in CMC than FtF. Only one type of attribution—interpersonal attribution—mediated the intensification of the disclosure–intimacy link: when receivers attributed disclosure to their relationship with the sender, but not to the sender's disposition or situational factors, intimate disclosure led to a greater relational intimacy. Thus, equivalently intimate disclosures can produce greater relational intimacy in CMC than FtF via intensified interpersonal attributions for disclosers' behaviors.

Intensified perceptions of disclosure intimacy can transfer to behaviors, as receivers respond to their partner's initial disclosure with disclosure responses of their own. Little attention has been paid to the conversational dynamics of online disclosure, but disclosure is guided by conversational norms with regard to its timing, appropriateness, and intimacy. One such norm is the disclosure reciprocity norm, which states that receivers reciprocate disclosures that match the level of intimacy in the partner's initial disclosure. Receivers' perceptions are essential in this process because their disclosure responses match the perceived, rather than actual, level of intimacy in partners' initial disclosures. This has important implications for understanding disclosure dynamics in CMC because, as discussed above, receivers overinterpret message intimacy in text-based CMC relative to FtF due to overreliance on minimal cues of a text-based environment. The intensified perceptions of disclosure intimacy, in turn, lead them to reciprocate with more intimate disclosures of their own based on the reciprocation norm. This disclosure dynamics has been described as the perception-behavior intensification effect (Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2013), showing a link between intensified perceptions of disclosure intimacy and receivers' own behaviors.

The perception-behavior intensification is likely to operate in a cyclical manner: intensified perceptions escalate disclosure intimacy production, which, in turn, escalates disclosure perceptions (Jiang et al., 2013). This cycle emphasizes the interdependence between disclosure production and perceptions, with their mutual escalations potentially accounting for the hyperpersonal dynamics in CMC. Future research needs to investigate a potential cyclical nature of intensified disclosure perception and production, and their combined effects on relational dynamics in CMC. It should also examine disclosure as part of a dynamic interaction embedded in a larger relational, technological, and sociocultural context in order to understand

how the interplay of contextual factors affects receivers' perceptions of and responses to online disclosure.

Online disclosure perceptions and outcomes in social media. Finally, as social media merge interpersonal and mass communication, enabling people to share disclosure with large and diverse audiences, it is important to examine how these new contexts impact a receiver's experience of online disclosure. Understanding the role of context in disclosure interpretation is especially critical because social media make it easy to search and redistribute disclosures outside their original context and intended audience. Yet, perceptual experience and meaning construction of a message are intertwined with a social context in which it is shared. Contexts vary in terms of norms of information flow, roles, appropriateness, expectations, and behaviors, and the context fluidity poses a threat to contextual integrity of information in social media (Nissenbaum, 2010).

Research on online disclosure interpretation is still nascent in the social media realm, but one study examined the information and criteria that people use for disclosure interpretation and social judgments on Facebook (Bazarova, 2012). Drawing on the disclosure personalism and information scarcity frameworks, this study found differences in disclosure intimacy and appropriateness depending on whether identical disclosure messages were private or visible to a discloser's network of Facebook friends. Whereas private contexts heightened disclosure intimacy, public contexts dampened it, indicating that people inferred message intimacy in part based on whether the disclosure was available to others. Furthermore, intimate disclosures in public settings were viewed as less appropriate than those in private contexts. Judgments of appropriateness affected social attraction for disclosers, with perceivers liking those who disclosed information in public less than those who did so in private.

The above findings indicate that intimate disclosures, when viewed inappropriately, can backfire and reduce social attraction for a discloser, consistent with the notion of contextual integrity of information (Nissenbaum, 2010). However, judgments of disclosure appropriateness and intimacy may be different when the judge is the target of the disclosure rather than an observer. Furthermore, relational closeness between discloser and receiver can interplay with disclosure visibility, with close friends interpreting and responding to disclosure differently than strangers or acquaintances. Other factors, such as network characteristics, communication context (e.g., others' responses to disclosure), and receivers' perceptions of disclosure norms may also affect interpretations of and responses to disclosure.

In addition to understanding factors that predict receivers' interpretation, future research needs to examine links between receivers' perceptions of disclosure and their subsequent actions. For example, if network members discount disclosure intimacy for a network-visible disclosure, they may be less likely to offer social support that the discloser was seeking from the online social network. Finally, a better understanding of how people interpret disclosure in different social media platforms may help explain relational maintenance and social capital building, as self-disclosure is essential to both of these processes.

Given a multitude of existing technological platforms, their continuous adaptations for personal information sharing, and the likely arrival of new ones, the challenge facing interpersonal communication researchers is to theorize about online disclosure in ways that generalize across different media environments (including future ones). This requires accounting for three main forces: individual characteristics, media affordances, and social network characteristics. Understanding the interplay among these forces, as well as disclosure motivations and risks, will help address key questions about online disclosure production,

perceptions, and its effects on well-being and personal relationships, as these questions re-emerge with each new technology that offers people novel ways to share self with the world.

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