Hello Stranger!
Trust and Self-Disclosure Effects on Online Information Sharing

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the role of personality attributes and online profile characteristics as predictors of self-disclosure. The authors were specifically interested to learn how personality and profile attractiveness influenced the quantity and type of information individuals would be willing to share about themselves with a potential dating partner who they have never met before. The results of the online survey with 149 female participants revealed that the propensity to trust and extraversion were significant positive predictors of self-reported tendency to self-disclose potentially sensitive and identifying information, while greater profile attractiveness further increased the amount of information they were willing to share. These findings suggest that information disclosure is in part driven by personality and context, which has potential implications for how careful individuals are about revealing potentially sensitive information to strangers.

Keywords: Attractiveness, Extraversion, Information Sharing, Online Dating, Privacy, Self-Disclosure, Trust

1. INTRODUCTION

Self-disclosure is a prominent topic for research in the field of psychological investigation. Jourard (1963) defined self-disclosure as the truthful depiction of the self to others. The notion of self-disclosure within interpersonal relationships is explored through Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). According to this theory, intimacy increases through reciprocal disclosure and attraction in the relationship. Self-disclosure also holds a theoretical basis in Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958), which suggests that social interactions in interpersonal relationships involve a combination of subjectively perceived rewards and costs.

In recent work, disclosure behaviors have come into focus in the context of online communication such as social networking (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Indeed, individuals may be more willing to self-disclose a greater amount of information while online, owing to circumstantial aspects such as perceived situational control and anonymity (Taddei & Contena, 2013). According to the Privacy Calculus model (Dinev & Hart, 2006), individuals tend to focus on the benefits of online interactions and disclosure, while thus also risking that their personal information and privacy is compromised in the process. This process may have contributed to the increasing popularity of online dating sites (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a), as more technologies and platforms enable individuals...
to develop relationships through virtual means. At the same time, concerns about online privacy perceptions are on the increase, challenging the model’s applicability (Mesch, 2012).

In response to these developments, recent research has examined how self-disclosure is linked to other personality characteristics as well as the quantity of personal information shared online (Blackhart, Fitzpatrick, & Williamson, 2014). In particular, certain specific personality constructs have been emphasised within previous research as significant predictors of self-disclosure in the online environment (e.g., Liu, Ang, & Lwin, 2013). Some individuals may be more likely to disclose personal - and even intimate - information to people with whom they have never even met in real life. This is important in terms of online security and in response to security issues such as phishing. At the same time, self-disclosure of personal information is an important variable in the case of online dating; members exchange information about each other without necessarily being able to verify the identity, and thus true motives, of the other person.

1.1. Predictors of Self-Disclosure

A number of personality constructs have been researched in relation to self-disclosure. We consider extraversion, self-esteem, willingness to trust and self-consciousness.

Extraverted individuals are more active in terms of online communication (Correa, Hinsley & De Zuniga, 2010) and are generally more willing to share sensitive information about themselves (Krämer & Winter, 2008). These findings are in line with the rich-get-richer hypothesis (see Valkenberg & Peter, 2007b). According to this hypothesis, individuals with a socially adept personality and stronger social skills will be more likely to utilise the internet for communication. The implication is that individuals with higher extraversion may show greater social dominance online as an expression of their personality in online settings (e.g., Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011).

Self-disclosure and expressivity has been linked to self-esteem, the global feeling of self-worth, with those having higher self-esteem adopting less of a cautious and self-protective manner of expressivity online than those with low self-esteem (Gaucher et al., 2012). Expressiveness and disclosure can be manipulated, even amongst those with low self-esteem, when these individuals believed that they were communicating with somebody showing positive regard towards them (Gaucher et al., 2012). This may be relevant to online self-disclosure situations such as online dating. Those with higher self-esteem may be more likely to disclose a greater amount of personal information when describing themselves, compared to those with a lower self-esteem (e.g., Banzczyk, Krämer, & Senokozlieva, 2008). This suggests that individuals with higher self-esteem may feel more comfortable to disclose and express more about themselves in online interactions than individuals with lower self-esteem. The latter, who may also be more guarded is less likely to reveal too much information on which they may be judged, as they may feel they do not have much to offer (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011), and hence face potential rejection by other users. An alternative hypothesis suggests that individuals with lower self-esteem may endeavour to compensate for their behavior in online environments. In other words, they have the option to present themselves in a different way in online communication, disclosing more about themselves to others than they would normally, and acting in a more friendly and open manner (e.g., Zywica & Danowski, 2008). As a result, higher self-esteem may not necessarily be linked higher self-disclosure in all situations.

Willingness to trust others is another personality dimension that influences information disclosure in online settings such as social networking and dating. Mesch (2012) found that the trust individuals held towards institutions and individuals was associated with online trust; yet only online trust was related to the disclosure of personal identifiable information. The study further ascertained that although trust predicted the disclosure of personal identifiable information online, the perception of privacy risks led
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