Self-Disclosure Patterns among Chinese Users in SNS and Face-to-Face Communication

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study focused on Chinese social network sites (SNS) users to determine whether their online self-disclosure differed from offline and whether culture had an impact on the patterns of their self-disclosure. Sixteen active users of Chinese online social networks were interviewed about their self-disclosing experiences. Results of a qualitative analysis suggest that culture was likely to impact the behavior of study participants by modifying the patterns of self-disclosure. Participants tended to disclose themselves indirectly on SNS, strived to make positive impressions, and revealed few intimate issues. In face-to-face communication, the relationships between disclosers and target persons as well as the target persons’ status and background influenced the contents of self-disclosure.

Keywords: Computer-Mediated Communication, Face-to-Face Communication (FtF), Intercultural New Media Studies (INMS), Self-Disclosure, Social Network Sites (SNS)

INTRODUCTION

Social network sites (SNS) are web-based tools that allow users to maintain and update individual profiles and interact with others based on a network of connections (Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). The large number of SNS users around the world is a reflection of the enormous popularity of these sites (Ledbetter, Mazer, DeGroot, Meyer, Mao, & Swafford, 2011). In April 2012, China had more than 300 million SNS users (Chiu, Ip, & Silverman, 2012). Although Chinese SNS users are unable to access Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter in Mainland China, they can use a variety of local SNS (e.g., Sina Weibo, WeChat, and QQ) for information exchange, political participation, and other purposes (Lai & Yang, 2014).

By facilitating interaction and social connection among users, it indirectly contributes to their online self-disclosure (Kim & Dindia, 2008). For instance, on WeChat, a Chinese instant messaging and calling app similar to WhatsApp Messenger, users can share photographs or short videos. To interact with other users, individuals can leave comments, click the “Like” button,

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or send private messages. According to Nielsen Buzzmetrics (2012), a global information and media monitoring company, satisfying social needs by communicating with friends or sharing photos and videos are the key motivators for Chinese visitors to social network sites.

Researchers have focused on “motivation for using SNS, structures of various SNS, identity of SNS users, self-disclosure patterns among SNS users,” and related areas (Tang & Wang, 2012, p. 245). Scholars who examine self-disclosure in online environments argue that self-disclosure could be fostered by SNS (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). However, little attention has been paid to cultural differences in self-disclosure on SNS. The present study aimed to (a) examine differences between self-disclosure among Chinese users on SNS and in offline communication, and (b) understand the impact of culture on self-disclosure of Chinese users of SNS.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has shown that culture, gender, motives, personality traits, specific contexts and topics, and other factors can influence the patterns of self-disclosure (Kim & Dindia, 2008). Self-disclosure has been defined as disclosure of individuals’ personal information to others in the form of written word (Lai & Yang, 2014). As early as 1979, Chelune argued that self-disclosure involves revealing personal and private information (e.g., thoughts, feelings, or experiences). Nakanishi (1986) posited that mutual relationships between culture and communication could result in multiple self-disclosure patterns. Culture has been viewed as “a constellation of loosely organized values, practices and norms shared by an interconnected group of people in a given nation,” which “conditions language patterns” as well as “regulates what, where, and how we communicate” (Chen, 1995, p. 85; Jackson & Wang, 2013, p. 910).

Several theoretical conceptualizations can help understand the nature of self-disclosure among Chinese social network site users. According to social penetration theory (Tang & Wang, 2012), during the initial interaction stage of relational development, individuals might not disclose important information about themselves because of personal safety. However, individuals may disclose more information as their relationships with the target person progress. From a uses and gratifications perspective, self-disclosing behavior of microblog users (Lai and Yang, 2014) can be affected by popularity (e.g., being attractive) and interpersonal needs (e.g., building intimate relationships).

The disclosure decision-making model (Derlega, Winstead, Mathews, & Braitman, 2008) suggests that both “rewards” (e.g., social support, catharsis) and “costs” (e.g., embarrassment, shame) determine whether individuals disclose themselves to others or not. Similarly, Derlega, Metts, Petronio, and Margulis (1993) believe that when communicating with friends or families, individuals disclose information about themselves to achieve personal information exchange. Generally, individuals who seek approval from others tend to disclose themselves, while those who attempt to avoid rejection are unlikely to disclose themselves (Petronio, 2002). Finally, individual self-disclosure has been viewed as the foundation of close interpersonal relationships (Lai & Yang, 2014).

Cultural Influences in Self-Disclosure

Culture is a critical factor affecting amount, levels, depth, and breadth of self-disclosure (Jackson & Wang, 2013). It has been argued that Americans disclose themselves more than Germans (Chen, 1995). Barnlund (1989) found that Americans disclosed much more information than Japanese on specific topics (e.g., physical appearance, sexual adequacy) and to a specific target person, such as parents and friends. Wheeless, Erickson, and Behrens (1986) claimed that depth and
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