Beyond the Surface:
Reddit's Anonymity Facilitates Deeper Disclosures Than Facebook

Jessica A. Kahlow, University of Texas at Arlington, USA*

iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6174-5351

ABSTRACT

This study uses the online disinhibition effect as a theoretical framework for understanding disclosures of ADHD on non-anonymous (Facebook) and anonymous (Reddit) channels. Specifically, a quantitative content analysis compares public Facebook and Reddit posts in terms of disclosure depth. Posts were coded as either peripheral, intermediate, or core disclosures. In this context, the results aligned with the online disinhibition effect; Reddit had greater disclosure and depth of dis-closure compared to those on Facebook. The implications of this study demonstrate how self-disclosure depth varies within understudied groups (i.e., individuals posting on ADHD threads) in online contexts. This study also adds to prior research by examining anonymity on multiple channels.

KEYWORDS

ADHD, Disinhibition Effect, Facebook, Online, Reddit, Self-Disclosure

INTRODUCTION

Attention-Deficit Disorder or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a cognitive disability that impedes individuals' self-regulation, which results in hyperactivity, inattention, impulsivity, and distractibility (Ben-Naim et al., 2017). These symptoms impede communication because individuals with ADHD may be prone to impatience, missing parts of conversations, and misinterpreting social cues (Ben-Naim et al., 2017), which are important components of interpersonal communication. Because online platforms often serve as places for social support and information about health-related topics (Choudhury & De, 2014), it is important to understand how different online channels affect how individuals with ADHD disclose online. Because self-disclosure is the means through which relationships are developed, it is important to understand how different communication channels impact self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure refers to the process of revealing personal information to another person (Choi & Bazarova, 2014) and is the means through which relationships develop. Recent research has explored how people disclose personal information online (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Chen & Sharma, 2013; Choi & Bazarova, 2014) and the factors that influence these disclosures (Hollenbaugh & Everett, 2013; Joinson et al., 2010; Misoch, 2015), including the role self-disclosure plays in the development

*Corresponding Author

of interpersonal relationships (Ledbetter et al., 2011). Existing research focuses on general self-disclosures in various online channels, including disclosure via blogs (Child et al., 2009; Hollenbaugh & Everett, 2013; Webb & Lee, 2011), Facebook (Bazarova, 2012; Ledbetter et al., 2011), and YouTube (Misoch, 2015). In general, the findings highlight that people often disclose on social media, but how much they disclose about a certain topic varies.

Research has also begun to examine mental health disclosures in online contexts. For instance, Choudhury and De (2014) examined mental health disclosures on Reddit, and they "established that any psychological consequence depends on the activities a technology enables, attributes of the users, and how the two interact" (p. 72). While such research highlights the importance of understanding the influence of technology on its specific users, research has yet to explore how online channels affect how non-neurotypical individuals disclose online. This study uses the online disinhibition effect as a theoretical framework for understanding disclosures of ADHD on non-anonymous (Facebook) and anonymous (Reddit) channels.

Online Disinhibition Effect

The online disinhibition effect occurs when people communicate online in ways that they would not normally in face-to-face contexts (Suler, 2004). Online disinhibition can be benign, toxic, or both. Benign disinhibition often occurs in anonymous settings and makes people more likely to express emotions, disclose personal information, or act in more kind and generous ways. Conversely, toxic disinhibition occurs when people take advantage of online environments by being more threatening or rude online than they would be offline (McEwan, 2017; Suler, 2004). In general, online disinhibition refers to a lack of self-control online that may come across as impulsive or unprofessional, which may be more frequent among individuals with ADHD.

Several factors contribute to both kinds of disinhibition, including dissociative and visual anonymity. Dissociative anonymity enhances the disinhibition effect because it occurs when people are able to separate their online actions from their offline actions since whatever they say or do does not have any bearing on their physical life (Suler, 2004). In other words, the messages posted online cannot be linked to the person who posted it. Conversely, visual anonymity refers to whether people can see or hear the people they are disclosing to (Suler, 2004). Thus, invisibility also contributes to the disinhibition effect because the idea of being invisible in online contexts provides the opportunity to interact without being able to see or hear one another (Suler, 2004).

ADHD Disclosures and Online Disinhibition

Individuals with ADHD must carefully choose whether they will disclose on a certain platform. For instance, on Facebook, a person's name, profile information (schools they attended, where they work/ed, friends, family, age, and location depending on their privacy settings), and picture(s) are shared with other users (Ellison et al., 2014). The disclosure of these identity management cues reduces a person's dissociative and visual anonymity. However, on Reddit, the only information available to other users is the username of the person who posted the message (Choudhury & De, 2014). So, people who post on Reddit have more dissociative and visual anonymity than people who post on Facebook. The online disinhibition effect assumes a link between anonymity and online disclosures, such that when more anonymous conditions exist, people will be more likely to disclose personal information (Suler, 2004). Prior research has generally indicated that individuals' willingness to disclose is often higher in online contexts and that the decision to disclose is associated with the anonymity of the channel (Joinson, 2001; Ma et al., 2016; Misoch, 2015).

For instance, Hollenbaugh and Everett (2013) explored dissociative and visual anonymity on self-disclosure in blogs. They used a quantitative content analysis of 770 blog entries and found that bloggers who disclosed visual aspects of themselves in their profiles disclosed more private information; they did not find any significant effects for dissociative anonymity. However, in their study, all participants used the same channel (i.e., blogs), so their findings cannot be generalized to

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