Chapter 72
Online Self–Disclosure Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Self-disclosure, the sharing of personal information between communication partners, has long been a topic of interest due to the large impact it plays in the development of interpersonal relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973). As the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has increased, so has the interest in the impact it may have on self-disclosure and relationship development. Several theories have been posited to explain the impact that the medium of communication has on self-disclosure. Although some theories have predicted a negative impact of CMC on self-disclosure (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Kock, 2005), several researchers have found that CMC increases self-disclosure (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Valkenberg & Peter, 2009a; Walther, 1996). This article discusses the main theories that explain the nature of online self-disclosure, the possible mechanisms by which CMC serves to increase self-disclosure, and impact that online self-disclosure has on interpersonal relationships and well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Self-disclosure occurs when a person provides (i.e., discloses) information about him/herself to another person. The basic parameters of self-disclosure include: (1) amount of information disclosed; (2) intimacy of information disclosed;

and (3) duration of disclosure (Cozby, 1973). Examples include revealing minor personal details such as preferences, opinions, or marital status, to more intimate disclosures such as discussing health status, personal secrets, or embarrassing behaviors. According to social penetration theory, self-disclosure is a form of interpersonal communication that is central in the development and maintenance of relationships, which promote

personal well-being (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Therefore, as society increases the use of electronic media for interpersonal communication (e.g., e-mail, instant messaging, and social networking sites), it is important to examine the impact this shift has had on self-disclosure behaviors as well as the implications for interpersonal relationships and well-being.

OVERVIEW

Self-disclosure has a long history of investigation by interpersonal communication researchers because of its importance for relationship formation and personal well-being. Social penetration theory suggests that relationships develop through a process of reciprocal self-disclosure resulting in intimacy and a close interpersonal bond (Altman & Taylor, 1973). There is a reciprocal nature to self-disclosure; the more people disclose about themselves, the more their communication partners will disclose as well. High levels of self-disclosure in dyads has been associated with higher levels of reported liking by communication partners. Similarly, people disclose more information to friends than strangers and people who disclose more information about themselves have more friends than those who disclose less. Therefore, it is not surprising that higher self-disclosure is associated with better mental health. Although the relationship is likely curvilinear, with levels of disclosure that are too high associated with poor mental health (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

Traditionally, there have been two primary methods for examining the amount, content, and duration of self-disclosure (Cozby, 1973). First, researchers have had participants complete self-reports describing their self-disclosure in specific situations. Second, researchers have enlisted behavioral measures such as recording conversations between two participants in a study or having participants complete written self-descriptions. Self-report measures have been criticized for their lack of predictive validity for actual self-disclosure when using behavioral measures. One reason for the lack of correlation between self-report and behavioral measures may be a response bias on self-report measures (e.g,. a recall bias or a social desirability bias). Another reason for the discrepancy may be the communication recipient. Self-report measures typically ask participants about disclosure to their "best same-sex friend," whereas studies using behavioral measures of self-disclosure often have participants disclosing information to a stranger (e.g., the experimenter or another participant). The research attempting to assess self-disclosure online is also plagued by these measurement issues first encountered in offline studies.

Interpersonal communication research has identified several factors that affect the amount, content, and duration of self-disclosure in in-person settings (Cozby, 1973). First, women tend to be both the initiator and recipient of more self-disclosure than men. This difference is relevant to online studies of self-disclosure because women are more likely to be communicating online (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005) and more likely to participate in research studies in general (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1992). A second characteristic that affects self-disclosure is the socio-economic status (SES) of the conversants. People from a low-SES background tend to disclose less information about themselves than people from middle- or upper-SES backgrounds (Cozby, 1973). The income differential is important given the "digital divide" in access to computer-mediated forms of communication in society. A third characteristic that has been widely examined in terms of its relationship to self-disclosure is level of extraversion. People who are extraverts both initiate and receive more self-disclosure than people who are introverted (Cozby, 1973). Therefore, studies of online self-disclosure behaviors should examine the personal characteristics of participants in the communication exchange.

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