

Chapter 7.4

Disclosure Decisions in Existing Relationships Online: Exploring Motivations for CMC Channel Choice

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ABSTRACT

Use of mediated channels of communication, such as email and instant messenger, is rapidly increasing, especially with adolescents and college-aged populations. This increase may alter interpersonal relationship maintenance strategies and communication patterns. The role of mediated channels of communication in some types of relationship initiation is well documented however, research investigating use within existing relationships is more limited. Self-disclosure is an important part of relationship maintenance, both in the initial stages of development as well as in existing relationships. This chapter explores motivations for disclosure through computer mediated communication (CMC) in pre-existing relationships and describes theoretical perspectives to advance

examination of this area. Examples presented indicate four primary motivations for disclosure through computer mediated communication: self, other, relationship, and situational/environmental. Further, we propose several codes within each primary reason, many of which diverged from traditional motivations for FtF disclosure. Implications and future directions for interpersonal CMC research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Non face-to-face (FtF) channels of communication are rapidly increasing in use and popularity (Pew Internet.org). This increase in the use of technology requires changes in the way interpersonal discourse is realized in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and also requires shifts in conceptualizations of interpersonal communication.

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tion more broadly (cf. Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Much initial interpersonal CMC research focused on the development of relationships through CMC (e.g., Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Hian, Chuan, Trevor, & Detenber, 2004; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Whitty & Gavin, 2001) or use of CMC in organizations/business relationships (e.g., Baltes, Dickson, Sherman, Bauer, & LaGanke, 2002; Soukup, 2000) rather than use of CMC in maintenance of existing personal relationships. Given the extent of changes in CMC, we need to analyze how people are utilizing CMC to manage personal relationships. This chapter adapts models and frameworks of interpersonal communication to a CMC context to investigate how people report using CMC to disclose in existing relationships. The chapter will explore why participants report choosing CMC to share private information. By scrutinizing how individuals manage personal and private information, the chapter provides insight into interpersonal communication practices online. We begin with the increase in CMC use before turning to definitions of disclosure and reasons for using CMC disclosure.

BACKGROUND

Even 20 years ago, CMC use was not widespread outside of industry, yet today CMC is an integral part of how many people maintain personal relationships. Pew Internet (2007) reported that 62% of US adults communicated with family and friends using the Internet everyday or multiple times a week, compared to 38% who communicated via Internet several times a month or less. Many people use their home internet connection predominantly for interpersonal communication (Kraut, Mukhopadhyay, Szczypula, Kiesler, & Scherlis, 2000). People are also using mediated communication channels to seek information about others, which may be related to relationship

maintenance (Westerman, Der Heide, Klein, & Walther, 2008). Finally, people are using email to maintain relationships in ways similar to FtF communication (Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig, & Wigley, 2008). One crucial feature of this relational maintenance is disclosing information online, and we turn next to definitions and description of self-disclosure literature.

There are several conceptualizations of self-disclosure, but self-disclosure is most commonly defined and studied as a voluntary, deliberate, intentional, and honest process (see Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). We define self-disclosure as an interpersonal interaction where one person deliberately shares private information (including thoughts, feelings, and experiences) of a personal nature with another person (Derlega et al., 1993). This definition not equivalent to some researchers who equate disclosure with "openness." Self-disclosure is often, but not always, related to positive outcomes such as health and social support. For example, researchers have found that verbally discussing or writing about traumatic or upsetting life experiences (compared to trivial events) is associated with lower illness rates (Pennebaker & O'Heeron, 1984), fewer physician visits (Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988), less immune dysfunction (Pennebaker et al., 1988), and decreased severity of physical symptoms (Kelley, Lumley, & Leisen, 1997). These findings have been supported in aggregate by meta-analyses (Smyth, 1999), although the effect sizes are small and there are many moderators (Frattaroli, 2006). Self-disclosure of distressing information is often linked to catharsis (Kelly, Klusas, von Weiss, & Kenny, 2001; Pennebaker, 1983). Self-disclosure may also provide an opportunity for the discloser to receive social support from others.

Many studies investigate the function of self-disclosure in relationship development, maintenance, and deterioration (see Derlega et al., 1993; Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006;

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