Chapter 71
Self–Disclosure Online

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ABSTRACT

Self-disclosure (SD) refers to revealing personal information about the self to others (Cozby, 1973). SD occurs in cyberspace via synchronous Internet arenas such as instant messaging and asynchronous communication such as email. It has mainly been considered to be a reciprocal tit-for-tat type exchange of personal facts, thoughts, and emotions (Altman & Taylor, 1973) to develop and maintain relationships. Most research has focused on differences between online and offline SD, often demonstrating an accelerated disclosure of personal and intimate information online than offline (e.g., Wallace, 1999) due to a sense of anonymity (Baker, 2005) and reduced fear of social rejection (Pennebaker, 1989) in cyberspace. Recent research considers the many available Internet arenas that possibly promote differences in quality and quantity of online disclosures (Attrill & Jalil, 2011), and the need to consider voluntary and involuntary SD online along with associated privacy and security risks within a theoretical framework.

INTRODUCTION

The rapidity with which technological advances have made the Internet accessible for the masses could not have been predicted. Moreover, the rate at which more and more individuals are creating, maintaining and dissolving all types of relationship online (Yum & Hara, 2006) could have been even less predicted. Since the incep-

tion of the Internet, the mass media has warned of the dangers that lurk behind monitors, of the risks of sharing too much personal information online, and of extreme examples of crime, fraud and heartache that can result from the revelation of self-information to virtual strangers. Given the recency of these technological advances, and the rapidity with which people of all ages, creed and socioeconomic background are using the Internet, research is playing a game of catch up to try to assess just how much information people share

online and what the consequences thereof are. Much of the currently ongoing work in this area focuses on assessing the quantity and quality of both voluntarily and involuntarily shared information, how this contributes to the formation and maintenance of relationships, and what privacy and security risks sharing information online poses to the individual.

Self-Disclosure Defined

Human beings have often been referred to as social animals (Aronson, 1984). They like to interact and share personal information and experiences with one another. In doing so, a basic human need of feeling like we belong to both smaller social groups such as our intimate relationships, and to larger societal and social groups such as our families, work, cultural groups and sports teams is fulfilled. How both small and large scale relationships develop and are maintained has been the focus of much theoretical consideration and research, with one seminal theory suggesting that the foundation to lasting relationships is that they provide more rewards than costs to the individual (Altman & Taylor, 1973). This *Social Penetration Theory* further suggests that one of the elemental foundations of any relationship is that it is built upon the progressive sharing of personal information. What makes one relationship more intimate and close than another is the enhanced sharing of more in-depth and detailed self-information. As more and more intimate information is revealed, people become closer and develop deeper relationships. This reciprocal tit-for-tat exchange of personal information is the process of *self-disclosure* that has laid the foundations for understanding many aspects of human relationships over the last four decades. The term *self-disclosure* was introduced by Jourard (1971) and is defined as the revelation of details about the self to others, ranging from broad identifying information such as one's age to more personal private information (Chelune, 1979). Both breadth (sharing a wide range of self-information) and depth (sharing deeply personal self-information) of disclosures have been the focus of much offline research, but with the advent of the Internet, and increasing numbers of individuals forming, maintaining and even ending relationships online (Yum & Hara, 2006), this offline work is now being extended to explore SD online.

The Internet has rapidly become an extended playing ground for people from around the world, with individuals from westernised cultures spending increasingly more time interacting online with both known and unknown others. Friendships, romances, one off sexual liaisons, gaming interactions, advice and even counselling are but a few of the human encounters that are now being brokered online, sometimes without individuals ever meeting in their comparative offline worlds (Yum & Hara, 2006). It is these online social interactions that have led to recent increased interest in how much information individuals reveal and share about themselves online and what the goals of these self-revelations might be. Over half a century ago, Goffman (1959) described social interaction as nothing other than a drama or performance, an exercise in impression management to gain liking and acceptance. If this is the case, and if humans are increasingly creating their social lives online, consideration needs to be given as to how the revelation of self-information online contributes to this performance.

Self-Disclosure Online

Online SD occurs when self-information is divulged to a single or multiple others via any Internet arena. Ranging from factual to personal, intimate or private details about the self (Chelune, 1979; Derlega & Berg, 1987), both the voluntary and involuntary sharing of self-information online are of theoretical and empirical interest. Most work has thus far revolved around comparing the amount of personal information shared in a general, non-descript Internet arena with similar

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