

Chapter 1

Online Self-Disclosure: Opportunities for Enriching Existing Friendships

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ABSTRACT

Due to their audiovisual anonymity and asynchronicity, social media have the potential to enhance self-disclosure, and thereby facilitate closeness among existing friends. In this chapter, the author highlights findings relating to the beneficial social connectedness outcomes that can be linked to online self-disclosure, synthesizes relevant literature that addresses who reaps the most benefits from online self-disclosure, and makes suggestions to direct future research in this area. Theoretical perspectives are identified throughout the chapter that are relevant to understanding the benefits of online self-disclosure, the relation between personal characteristics as predictors of online self-disclosure, and moderating factors of the effect of online self-disclosure on social connectedness. Empirical findings support both social compensation and social enhancement perspectives.

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INTRODUCTION

Learning to maintain close relationships is a central developmental task of adolescence and young adulthood. Intimate friendships have implications for psychosocial adjustment and the quality of adult relationships. A lack of close friends is associated with feelings of loneliness, alienation, depression, and low self-esteem (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Buhrmester, 1990; Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012; Marion, Laursen, Zettergren, & Bergman, 2013). Among adolescents and young adults, a key component of intimate interpersonal relationships is self-disclosure, or the sharing of personally relevant thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Bauminger, Finzi-Dottan, Chaston, & Har-Even, 2008). It is essential then to explore venues that facilitate self-disclosure among friends.

Adolescents and young adults are increasingly turning to social media to connect with others (Davis, 2012; Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012). Social media are online platforms that allow users to create a profile about oneself, as well as connect and exchange information with other members (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Henderson, Snyder, & Beale, 2013). Social media includes, but is not limited to, social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and SnapChat), instant messaging services (e.g., Facebook Messenger), text messaging, blogging sites (e.g., Twitter, and Tumblr), and multiplayer online games (e.g., Minecraft, and Fortnite) (Ryan, Allen, Gray, & McInerney, 2017). According to a Pew Research Center survey of Americans in 2018, approximately 88% of 18- to 29-year-olds indicated they use some form of social networking, and a large proportion of these social media users visit the site daily (74% of Facebook users, 82% of Snapchat users, and 81% of Instagram users) (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Social media has the potential to enhance self-disclosure, and thus facilitate closeness among existing friends and ultimately intimacy development. In an attempt to evaluate the potential of the virtual world for positive psychosocial development, the current chapter: summarizes the findings related to the beneficial social connectedness outcomes that can be linked to social media use in general and specifically to online self-disclosure; synthesizes relevant literature that addresses who reaps the most benefits from online self-disclosure; and provides suggestions to direct future research in this area. Although the focus of the chapter is on the benefits of online self-disclosure, in order to provide an unbiased portrait of online interactions, the author also highlights some of the drawbacks of sharing personal information online in general. Finally, considerations when using social media and posting information online are discussed, which can influence users' behaviours or be included in conversations with youth by parents, educators, and clinicians.

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