

Chapter 4

Understanding Students with Special Needs Self-Disclosure in Internet Chat Rooms: Applying the Communication Privacy Management Theory to Internet Communications

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ABSTRACT

This book chapter proposes a research agenda for determining, describing, and depicting special needs students' self-disclosure behaviors via the Internet in regards to the Communication Privacy Management Theory (formerly known as the Communication Boundary Management Theory). Internet, computer-mediated communication, chat rooms, self-disclosure, and the Privacy Management Theory are all identified and summarized. The theory is presented for its usefulness and its significance to studying self-disclosure in Internet chat rooms among individuals with disabilities. In addition, future research directions using each theory to study individuals with special needs' self-disclosure in Internet chat rooms are presented. Research presented in this chapter should be able to assist parents, teachers, and others who interact with individuals with disabilities, with an overview of the impact of self-disclosure on the Internet.

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INTRODUCTION

Research concerning self-disclosure is abundant (Valerian, Winstead, Mathews, & Braitman, 2008). However, Chelune (1979) argued that there is a deficiency of self-disclosure research based on theoretical models. Moreover, there is a lack of studies dealing with self-disclosure via the Internet. Specifically, there is a deficiency of studies concerning self-disclosure in Internet chat rooms (Wrench & Punyanunt-Carter, 2007). One cannot assume that self-disclosure behaviors, such as amount and content, in Internet chat rooms is similar to face to face interactions. Moreover, one cannot assume that self-disclosure demographics, such as sex and age, via the Internet is similar to face-to-face interactions. Equally important, the Internet provides a unique channel for interpersonal relationships, because it offers so many ways to disclose. Individuals diagnosed with disabilities such as autism, attention deficit disorders, emotional disorders often have difficulties with developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. This unique communication medium provided by the Internet may be especially important for enhancing the communication activities of individuals with disabilities and allow for opportunities to build interpersonal relationships. Unlike other mediated channels such as telephone fax machines, the Internet is seen as more convenient and more expedient which may allow for relationships to develop more quickly (Cozik, 1997). Walther (1992) maintained that there are differences between the communication patterns on the telephone and via the Internet. Understanding self-disclosure via the Internet will provide awareness, such as safety and comprehension, for individuals with disabilities at all levels.

This chapter describes a theoretical framework for studying self-disclosure on the Internet. Furthermore, self-disclosure and The Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio, 2007; 2004; 1991) is presented for its potential application and importance in studying self-disclosure

via the Internet. Moreover, potential research questions regarding the theory are proposed for studying self-disclosure among individuals with disabilities via the Internet. The goal of this chapter is to offer an exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive foundation for expanding research on self-disclosure via Internet chat rooms.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Pappacharissi and Rubin (2000) noted that individuals use the Internet for a variety of reasons. Similar to television viewers, Internet users decide how much time and what time they will use the communication medium. Unlike television viewers, Internet users can self-disclose information to another individual or to many individuals at once. The freedom to utilize the Internet in a way that is beneficial and pleasing to the user offers an alternative to conventional and traditional forms of communication, such as telephones and postal mail. Yet, Internet communication patterns need further investigation especially among individuals with disabilities, because there is little research on the topic. Hence, this chapter conceptualizes a research agenda regarding self-disclosure in Internet chat rooms for individuals with disabilities. To better understand the research agenda proposed in this chapter, it is important to highlight previous research studies that have looked at: (a.) the Internet, (b.) computer-mediated communication, (c.) chat rooms and Internet relay chat, (d.) self-disclosure, and (e.) the Communication Privacy Management Theory.

Internet

According to Flaherty, Pearce, & R. Rubin (1998), the Internet is “the fastest growing new communication technology” (p. 251). The Internet has been used quite frequently for various communication purposes and research on these purposes and functions is increasing rapidly (Punyanunt-

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