

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Public Intimacy: Disclosure Interpretation and Social Judgments on Facebook

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This research examines how sociotechnical affordances shape interpretation of disclosure and social judgments on social networking sites. Drawing on the disclosure personalism framework, Study 1 revealed that information unavailability and relational basis underlay personalistic judgments about Facebook disclosures: Perceivers inferred greater message and relational intimacy from disclosures made privately than from those made publicly. Study 2 revealed that perceivers judged intimate disclosures shared publicly as less appropriate than intimate disclosures shared privately, and that perceived disclosure appropriateness accounted for the effects of public versus private contexts on reduced liking for a discloser. Taken together, the results show how sociotechnical affordances shape perceptions of disclosure and relationships, which has implications for understanding relational development and maintenance on SNS.

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Social networking sites (SNSs) offer novel platforms for users to broadcast personal information and get updates on other people's lives. Such public sharing of private information blurs boundaries between private and public, raising questions about how people make judgments about disclosure and intimacy on SNSs. I argue that one important factor influencing these judgments is *disclosure personalism*, that is, the extent to which receivers believe the information has been disclosed to them exclusively (Jones & Archer, 1976). SNSs provide a useful platform for testing the role of disclosure personalism because they afford contexts in which people can disclose either exclusively to a receiver (e.g., private messaging) or nonexclusively (e.g., public wall posts and status updates). The two studies reported in this article present a test of disclosure personalism by comparing perceptions of disclosure embedded in exclusive versus nonexclusive Facebook contexts.

Disclosure interpretation on social networking sites

The sociotechnical affordances of social networking sites create varied contexts for the communication of personal information. Although SNS users have opportunity

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to create content visible only to a subset of their network, many users share disclosure with an entire network of “friends” with whom they have widely varying feelings of closeness (Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009). Such public sharing defies traditional models of self-disclosure which presume that disclosures are generally restricted to close, trusted associates (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). A combination of a public forum and personal content blends distinctions between mass and interpersonal communication (O’Sullivan, 2005; Walther et al., 2010) and prompts questions about how people make judgments about disclosure and discloser in “masspersonal” media.

Understanding how receivers interpret and react to disclosures can inform broader theories of disclosure and privacy management. According to Petronio’s (2002) communication privacy management (CPM) theory, for example, disclosers and receivers become co-owners of information and jointly negotiate collective rules for privacy and disclosure outside the shared boundary. Receivers’ accurate interpretation of disclosure can encourage disclosers to share more, but misunderstandings, in contrast, can lead to privacy breaches, which cause disclosers to adjust privacy expectations and practices accordingly (Petronio, 2002). Whereas the CPM emphasizes the receiver’s role in disclosers’ privacy decisions, it does not address how receivers perceive disclosures and assess privacy rules, a process which is likely to be complicated by sociotechnical affordances of masspersonal media.

Sociotechnical affordances provide cues that shape how audiences are constructed and how messages become available to others in addition to the original receivers (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010). These affordances are likely to affect receivers’ interpretations because disclosure is not simply a “single piece of verbal behavior, but a social action . . . brought off in the circumstances of a given interaction” (Antaki, Barnes, & Leudar, 2005, p. 196). Thus, it is not simply the content of a disclosure that shapes interpretation, but also the context in which it occurs. In this sense, social media affordances create new and as yet unexplored bases for making judgments about disclosure.

Better understanding of how sociotechnical affordances shape disclosure interpretation can also provide insights into relational processes on SNSs because disclosure interpretation to a large extent defines relational closeness and intimacy between senders and receivers (Reis & Shaver, 1988). It is therefore important to determine if and how sociotechnical affordances affect disclosure interpretation, that is, can publicly shared disclosure facilitate intimacy, or is intimacy something that can only be attained in private interactions?

Disclosure personalism

Disclosure personalism can help us understand how the same disclosure behavior can be interpreted differently depending on the context in which it occurs. Jones and Davis (1965) introduced the concept of personalism “to distinguish between choices which are conceivably affected by the presence of the perceiver and choices which are not conceivably so affected” (p. 247). Not all actions performed in another’s presence

are personalistic, but only those that are perceived as uniquely conditioned on the presence of a targeted individual and deliberately produced for his/her consumption. This means that people's interpretation of the action depends on whether they see it as personalized, and specifically directed at the target, which reflects "the selection of that particular perceiver as a worthy beneficiary in the face of opportunities to select other targets or other actions" (Jones & Davis, 1965, p. 247).

The idea of personalism was taken up by disclosure research to study perceptions and reactions to disclosure. Jones and Archer (1976) coined the term of "personalistic disclosure" to capture a perceiver's assumption that "the recipient has been singled out because he is trustworthy and a good candidate for an intimate relationship" (p. 181). According to Jones and Archer, the exclusive act of disclosing intimate information creates inferences about relationship specialness between a discloser and a receiver, which, in turn, increases the value of disclosure and liking for a discloser. Thus, a belief about relationship specialness serves as a basis for judgments about personalistic disclosure and social effects of these judgments.

Personalistic disclosures have received mixed empirical support, however. For example, an initial test of personalistic disclosure (Jones & Archer, 1976), which involved comparisons between disclosure to a subject and to others, failed to find support for personalistic effects of disclosure. On the other hand, studies that fed information about relationship specialness as the basis for intimate disclosure directly to a perceiver showed increased liking for the discloser as a result of personalistic disclosures (e.g., Taylor, Gould, & Brounstein, 1981).

Whereas the original concept of personalistic disclosure was grounded in the idea of relationship specialness, it was later reinterpreted in terms of Brock's (1968) commodity theory, which suggests that the subjective value of a scarce resource increases. According to Petty and Mirels (1981), singling out a perceiver implies information unavailability to others, which leads a perceiver to redefine the value of disclosure. In other words, what is rare is valuable, and information unavailability directly affects interpretation of disclosure and discloser. In support of this perspective, information unavailability was found to increase perception of disclosure intimacy and liking for a discloser, despite the absence of any indication of a special relationship between the discloser and receiver (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; Petty & Mirels, 1981).

In an effort to disentangle the relational basis and information availability accounts of personalistic disclosures, Archer and Cook (1986) conducted a test that manipulated disclosure availability separately from the relational basis to avoid the confound between the two variables. Archer and Cook had naïve participants interact with a confederate who allegedly filled out a questionnaire prior to interacting with them. The answers from that questionnaire were either made available or unavailable to naïve participants. During the second part of the study a naïve participant and a confederate took turns disclosing information, with a confederate revealing intimate or nonintimate information, which overlapped with the questionnaire answers. Finally, in the personalistic disclosure condition participants were given a short form

allegedly filled out by their partner that suggested a relational basis for the partner's disclosure.

The results of the above study showed a complex relationship between information unavailability and relational basis in producing personalistic effects of disclosure that led the authors to propose that personalistic disclosure should be regarded as “*both* a scarce resource and a basis for relationship” (Archer & Cook, 1986, p. 272). Although participants used information unavailability to infer disclosure intimacy supporting the commodity theory predictions, they also inferred the partner's liking for them based on whether information was available elsewhere. Furthermore, people reacted positively to intimate and personalistic disclosure only when it was not obtainable from other sources. The authors interpreted these findings as suggesting that people use information unavailability to make judgments about both disclosure message and relationship between the discloser and receiver. In other words, people judge intimacy of both disclosure and relationships higher when information is unique and unavailable to others, a hypothesis suggested by these findings but which has not been tested directly.

Study 1

Facebook offers a platform to test the above prediction because it allows nondirected (status updates) and directed (targeted and one-on-one) communication. Directed or targeted communication, which includes private messages and public wall posts, “single(s) out another friend, signaling that their relationship is meaningful enough to merit an action” (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011, p. 572). At the same time, directed communication on Facebook can be shared either privately (i.e., exclusively with a receiver) or publicly, through a wall post (i.e., available to others, including a profile owner's and a poster's friends). In Study 1, the personalistic disclosure framework was applied to Facebook in order to test two predictions. First, Facebook disclosures shared privately will be perceived as more intimate than Facebook disclosures shared through wall posts and status updates (*H1*). Second, Facebook disclosures shared privately suggest greater relational intimacy between discloser and receiver than Facebook disclosures shared through wall posts and status updates (*H2*).

Method

Participants

Two hundred and ninety-five participants (81% female) from a mixture of majors at a U.S. research university were recruited to participate in an experiment, in exchange for course extra credit. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 32 ($M = 20$). Caucasians (63%) and Asians (24.2%) were the two largest racial/ethnic groups represented in the sample. Nearly all participants (90.9%) had a Facebook profile for 2 or more years, while only 1.7% of the participants did not have a profile.

Experimental design and procedure

A total of six different fictitious Facebook profiles were created for this study. All profiles featured unique pictures of a female profile owner and her friend, a comparable number of Facebook friends, and minimal biographical information typical for a Facebook profile. Each profile also featured a unique disclosure message; the manipulations of disclosure intimacy and context were embedded in the profiles resulting in six different variations for each of the profiles (low-high-intimacy disclosure presented as a wall post, a status update, or a private message).

In addition to the disclosure context, disclosure intimacy (low vs. high) was manipulated to determine whether the effects of contexts would be generalizable across low- and high-intimacy disclosure. Thus, the study design was 3 (private disclosure, wall post, and status update) \times 2 (low/high intimacy), with both the disclosure context and intimacy level as within-participant factors. Each profile was presented in all of the intimacy \times context conditions, with the orderings controlled through the use of the Latin square design. The Latin square design also ensured that participants viewed each of the six profiles, each of the six disclosures, and each intimacy–context combination exactly once.

At the time, data were collected in the spring of 2011, Facebook offered a private messaging feature similar to webmail. By default, wall posts were accessible to “friends” of both the profile owner and the wall-post message poster, whereas status updates were accessible to “friends” of the profile owner. Participants signed up to participate in the study via an online experiment management system and followed a link to an online survey. After providing consent, they viewed six different profiles and answered questions after viewing each profile spending about 3 minutes on average on each of the profiles.

Independent variables

Disclosure intimacy was manipulated through the creation of a six different disclosures with each of them modified to fit the low- and high-intimacy conditions. To pretest for intimacy, each message was rated by a different group of subjects ($N = 42$) on a) how intimate, and b) how personal it was on a 7-point scale, with 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very* ($\alpha = .67$ for the scale reliability). High-intimacy disclosures were perceived as significantly more intimate than low-intimacy disclosures across all six disclosures, $F(1, 41) = 296.00$, $p < .001$, as well as for each message pair separately, $p < .001$. An example of a low-intimacy disclosure is “I just noticed that it’s snowing out. Maybe it’s time to put snow tires on my car” ($M = 1.94$, $SD = .94$), and an example of a high-intimacy disclosure is “I just noticed that it’s snowing out. The first snow of the year always makes me think of my childhood, when I didn’t have so many problems to deal with” ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.28$). Another example of a low-intimacy disclosure is “I feel like I shouldn’t go out tonight. I have to study for my prelim” ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.19$), and its high-intimacy counterpart was “I feel like I shouldn’t go out tonight . . . last time,

my poor impulse control and low alcohol tolerance got the better of me” ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.18$).

The study included three Facebook *disclosure context* conditions, with disclosures embedded in (a) a private message, (b) wall post directed at the same receiver as in the private message condition, or (c) status update where the same receiver was featured as one of friends on the profile owner’s friends’ panel, but the disclosure was not directed specifically at her. Status updates and wall posts showed the overall number of the profile owner’s friends in the range of 350–360. For questions evaluating perceived relational intimacy between the sender and receiver in the status update condition, an arrow pointed to the receiver’s photo in the friends’ panel.

Dependent variables

The *message intimacy* scale consisted of four bipolar items measured on a 7-point scale: nonintimate–intimate, impersonal–personal, public–private, and superficial-in-depth, $\alpha = .81$, adapted from scales measuring information intimacy (Caughlin, Scott, Miller, & Hefner, 2009). The *relational closeness* scale (seven items) was adapted from Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997), and was also measured on a 7-point scale, with 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very much*, $\alpha = .97$. For example, “How much do you think they confide in each other?” or “How important is their relationship?”

Results

The analyses were carried out with multilevel modeling which included disclosure intimacy, Facebook context, and their interaction as fixed effects. Participants and profiles nested within participant were used as random factors to control for a potential nonindependence of residuals resulting from multiple observations on each participant and to parcel out the random effect of profiles.

Manipulation check

To ensure that public disclosure (i.e., wall post and status update) was indeed perceived as shared publicly, participants were asked to report on the intended Facebook audience for each disclosure message: (a) all of the profile owner’s Facebook friends or (b) only two “target” individuals (with the corresponding names inserted for each profile). The private/public condition was identified correctly in 95.9% of cases across all the responses. Misidentified cases were excluded.

Disclosure message intimacy

The first question posed for this study had to do with the effects of public versus private Facebook disclosure context on perceived message intimacy. Consistent with *H1*, disclosures were perceived as more intimate and personal in private than public contexts,

Table 1 Least Squares Means and Standard Errors for Dependent Variables in Study 1

Message Intimacy	Context	Perceived Disclosure Intimacy	Perceived Relational Intimacy
High	Private	$M = 5.38$ $SE = .07$	$M = 5.66$ $SE = .07$
	Status update	$M = 4.57$ $SE = .07$	$M = 3.29$ $SE = .07$
	Wall post	$M = 4.68$ $SE = .07$	$M = 5.21$ $SE = .07$
	Private	$M = 3.70$ $SE = .07$	$M = 4.58$ $SE = .07$
Low	Status update	$M = 2.91$ $SE = .07$	$M = 3.09$ $SE = .07$
	Wall post	$M = 2.99$ $SE = .07$	$M = 4.24$ $SE = .07$

$F(2, 1420) = 84.70, p < .001, \eta^2 = .24$; $M_{\text{private}} = 4.54, SE = .05$; $M_{\text{status update}} = 3.74, SE = .05$; $M_{\text{wall post}} = 3.83, SE = .05$. Pairwise comparisons revealed that perceived intimacy of private disclosures was significantly higher than either of status updates, $p < .001$, or wall posts, $p < .001$. On the other hand, perceived disclosure intimacy was not significantly different between status updates and wall posts, $p = .16$. In addition, there was a significant effect of disclosure intimacy condition, $F(1, 1410) = 932.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .69$, but no interaction between the context and disclosure intimacy, $F(2, 1409) = .03, p = .97$, indicating that the effect of public versus private contexts on perceived disclosure intimacy held across both high- and low-intimacy disclosures (see Table 1). Thus, these results support that disclosures intended for private consumption are judged as more private than the same disclosures shared publicly on Facebook.

Relational intimacy

The next analysis tested the effects of private/public context on perceptions of relational intimacy between a disclosure sender and receiver. Results supported $H2$ showing that the perceived level of relational intimacy was higher for private than for public disclosures, $F(2, 1404) = 500.80, p < .001, \eta^2 = .70, M_{\text{private}} = 5.12, SE = .06, M_{\text{wall post}} = 4.72, SE = .06$, and $M_{\text{status update}} = 3.19, SE = .06$. The pairwise comparisons showed that perceived relational intimacy was significantly higher in private disclosure condition than either in the wall post ($p < .001$) or status update condition ($p < .001$). In addition, there was a significant difference in perceived relational intimacy between wall posts (public and target-directed disclosures) and status updates (public and nondirected disclosures), $p < .001$. The main effect of disclosure intimacy condition was also significant, $F(1, 1401) = 204.33, p < .001, \eta^2 = .34$, with

high-intimacy disclosure ($M = 4.72$, $SE = .05$) signaling greater relational intimacy compared to low-intimacy disclosure ($M = 3.97$, $SE = .05$) across all the context conditions (see Table 1).

Discussion

Early experimental studies of self-disclosure were often criticized because they failed to provide information regarding whether the information disclosed to the subject had also been disclosed to others (Jones & Archer, 1976). Because Facebook offers communicators choices about how widely information will be shared, and because those choices are built into the platform and thus known to receivers, Facebook presents an opportunity to test the influence of personalism on judgments of disclosure in a direct fashion.

Study 1 examined information and criteria for judging disclosure personalism. The results demonstrate that information unavailability affects judgments about *both* disclosure and relational intimacy. Personalized disclosure was judged as more intimate when it was unavailable to others, confirming the prediction of commodity theory that information unavailability increased perceptions of disclosure intimacy. Additionally, a private disclosure prompted greater inferences of relational intimacy than a public disclosure in wall posts and status updates, confirming the effect of information unavailability on relational judgments.

The joint nature of personalistic disclosure is made evident by the result patterns in wall post disclosures, which are target-directed but which are not shared exclusively with a target. Although, perceptions of relational intimacy were higher for target-directed wall posts than nondirected status updates, there was no difference in perceived message intimacy between these two conditions, suggesting that directness alone was not sufficient to influence judgments of message intimacy. Private target-directed disclosures, on the other hand, were judged as higher in both message and relational intimacy than public target-directed disclosures in wall posts. These findings lend support to Archer and Cook's (1986) contention about personalistic disclosure being "both a scarce resource and a basis for relationship" (p. 272). In other words, people redefine the value of both disclosure and relationship based on information availability: Whereas a private context heightens perceived disclosure and relational intimacy, a public Facebook context, which makes information available to others, dampens them.

The fact that people judge disclosure and relational intimacy differently depending on where a Facebook disclosure is shared has implications for research concerned with relational functionality of SNSs. Because perceptions of disclosure underlie relational processes and outcomes (Reis & Shaver, 1988), these results highlight the importance of differentiating between SNS disclosures and their social effects based on both target directedness and information availability. This extends previous research, which recognized that SNSs should not be treated as a monolithic communication activity (Burke et al., 2011; Yoder & Stutzman, 2011), but thus far

considered distinctions between different SNS forms based on only either direct-ness (i.e., directed vs. nondirected) or information availability (i.e., private vs. public).

Study 2

A second study was undertaken to determine how broadly the effects identified in Study 1 could be applied. Specifically, the goal of Study 2 was to examine perceived disclosure appropriateness while also controlling for disclosure valence. In addition, Study 2 explored whether variations in how Facebook's affordances are used are important enough to produce personalistic effects of disclosure, that is, to influence an observer's level of attraction to the individual making the disclosure.

The theoretic approach taken in Study 1 suggests that relationship specialness and information unavailability should prompt greater liking for a discloser. However, in considering the effects of information availability on liking, another aspect of disclosure perception becomes critical, namely, whether disclosure is considered appropriate for a given time and situation. The question of disclosure appropriateness comes to the forefront as we consider the masspersonal nature of SNSs. In light of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's claim that public disclosure of personal information has now become the norm (O'Brien, 2010), it is essential to ask how far one can extend private relationships and disclosures into the realm of public conduct before intimate disclosures begin to be evaluated differently.

From a normative perspective, disclosure appropriateness is interpreted in terms of whether a disclosure complies with social norms of a particular situation. If a disclosure violates social norms because it is shared in the wrong place or at the wrong time, it leads to unfavorable perceptions of a discloser (Altman & Taylor, 1973), including situations when personal information is shared with a stranger in a public place (Archer & Berg, 1978), or when someone makes disclosure at the start of a conversation with a new acquaintance (Wortman, Adesman, Herman, & Greenberg, 1976).

Another line of disclosure research examined intimate disclosures to a large audience in mass media. Priest (1995), for example, used the term "*public intimacies*" to refer to televised disclosures, in which talk show guests willingly disclosed intimate information normally reserved only for close friends, to millions of viewers. This type of public intimacy usually elicits negative reactions, which researchers primarily attribute to the sensational nature of the talk shows, which often feature marginalized groups and disclosures of inappropriate behavior (Orrego et al., 2000). Although content obviously affects judgments of inappropriateness, the mismatch between a public context of disclosure and its intimate content can further intensify perceptions of disclosure inappropriateness. Hence, whereas low-intimacy disclosures are perceived equally appropriate in public and private Facebook contexts, high-intimacy disclosures will be perceived as less appropriate in public than private Facebook contexts (H3).

Consistent with the personalism rationale described in Study 1, it is expected that private disclosures should lead to greater liking for a discloser. On the other hand, liking for a discloser also depends on the perceived disclosure appropriateness as inappropriate disclosures create negative attitudes toward a discloser, as discussed above. Therefore, extending the personalism disclosure and disclosure appropriateness framework, two additional hypotheses are proposed. First, public self-disclosures lead to less social attraction for the sender than private self-disclosures on Facebook (*H4*). Second, the relationship between public versus private contexts and social attraction for the sender is mediated by perceptions of disclosure appropriateness (*H5*).

Method

Participants

Study 2 was also conducted in spring of 2011, with none of the participants from Study 1 taking part in Study 2. Two hundred and twenty participants (68.6% female) from a mix of different majors at a U.S. research university were recruited to participate in an experiment, in exchange for course extra credit. The Study 2 sample was similar to the Study 1 sample in terms of age ($M = 20$, $SD = 1.19$) and ethnicity (60% Caucasians, 24% Asian, 6.5% African Americans, 4.5% Hispanics). Only 1.8% of the participants did not have a Facebook profile; 90% of the participants had a Facebook profile for 2 years and more.

Experimental design

Whereas Study 1 manipulated Facebook context and disclosure intimacy, the manipulations for Study 2 included three factors: Facebook context (public vs. private), disclosure valence (positive vs. negative), and disclosure intimacy level (low vs. high). Study 2 excluded the status update condition because there was no difference in perceived message intimacy between status updates and wall posts in Study 1. Thus, Study 2 had a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design, with disclosure context and disclosure valence as within-subjects factors, and disclosure intimacy as a between-subject factor. Each participant saw four different profiles, which varied in the level of disclosure context and valence according to the Latin square experimental design, but were presented at the same level of disclosure intimacy, according to the random assignment of disclosure intimacy (low vs. high) between the participants. The Latin square design ensured that participants saw each profile/text of a disclosure message only once, and randomized the order in which the disclosure manipulations appeared across the participants.

Four different fictitious Facebook profiles were created for this study. Similar to the first study, each profile featured a unique disclosure message, with manipulations of disclosure intimacy, valence, and context embedded in the profiles, and each profile was presented in all of the intimacy \times context \times valence combinations. The contents of each disclosure were modified to fit the disclosure intimacy and valence conditions (See Table 2).

Table 2 Message Texts With Means and Standard Deviations for Perceived Intimacy Based on the Pretest Results

Low-intimacy Negative	Low-intimacy Positive	High-intimacy Negative	High-intimacy Positive
Just finished reading that new bestseller everyone's been talking about. I didn't like it very much. <i>M</i> = 3.60, <i>SD</i> = 1.11	I'm looking forward to reading that new bestseller everyone's been talking about. I like mystery novels. <i>M</i> = 3.97, <i>SD</i> = 1.05	That new bestseller reminded me how awful some people are. I'm starting to lose my faith in humanity and I can't trust most people. <i>M</i> = 5.07, <i>SD</i> = 1.01	That new bestseller really inspired me and touched my heart. I feel I can accomplish so much now and change the lives of many. <i>M</i> = 5.45, <i>SD</i> = .88
I just noticed that it's snowing out – shoveling out my car is going to be a pain. <i>M</i> = 3.35, <i>SD</i> = 1.20	I just noticed that it's snowing out – I can't wait to go sledding. <i>M</i> = 3.29, <i>SD</i> = 1.30	I just noticed that it's snowing out. Snow reminds me of my childhood, when I wasn't so miserable. <i>M</i> = 5.89, <i>SD</i> = .81	I just noticed that it's snowing out – I can't wait to go on a romantic walk in the snow with my special someone. <i>M</i> = 5.83, <i>SD</i> = .77
Just got back from spring break – it rained most of the time so I didn't have a chance to do any swimming. <i>M</i> = 3.21, <i>SD</i> = 1.07	Just got back from spring break – I had the chance to catch up on my favorite TV shows. <i>M</i> = 3.48, <i>SD</i> = 1.33	Just got back from spring break with an empty bank account. I'll have to work forever to make up for my mistakes. <i>M</i> = 5.26, <i>SD</i> = 1.07	Just got back from spring break – I'll always love the friends I spent the week with. <i>M</i> = 5.02, <i>SD</i> = .92
I'm not going to tonight's concert. I'm too busy to take time out of my schedule for a band I don't like. <i>M</i> = 4.17, <i>SD</i> = 1.00	I'm excited to go to tonight's concert. It's great that one of the bands I kind of like is playing so close to my house. <i>M</i> = 4.22, <i>SD</i> = .87	I decided I'm not going to tonight's concert. The last time I saw this band was with my ex, and it would bring back too many painful memories. <i>M</i> = 6.02, <i>SD</i> = .82	I can't wait to go to the concert tonight! This is my favorite band and I saw them on a date with my boyfriend, where I realized I love him. <i>M</i> = 6.23, <i>SD</i> = .82

Note: There was no statistically significant difference in perceived message intimacy based on disclosure valence for any of the low-intimacy ($p > .05$) or high-intimacy ($p > .05$) pairs.

The disclosures were pretested by a different group of subjects ($N = 36$) for intimacy and valence. For intimacy, the same two questions were used as in Study 1, $\alpha = .71$. To pretest for valence, the judges were asked to evaluate disclosure valence using a 7-point scale, with the end points of 1 = *negative* and 7 = *positive*. The difference in intimacy between high- and low-intimacy disclosures was significant, $F(1, 67) = 101.90, p < .001$; the difference in valence between positive and negative disclosures was also significant, $F(1, 67) = 263.44, p < .001$.

Dependent variables

The message intimacy scale was the same as in Study 1, with $\alpha = .83$. The message appropriateness scale was adapted from the conversational appropriateness scale (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987): appropriate–inappropriate, suitable to the situation/unsuitable to the situation, out of place for this context/normal to share in this context, and improper/proper, measured on a 7-point scale, $\alpha = .85$. Finally, social attraction was measured on a Likert-type scale of six items, $\alpha = .85$, adapted from the social dimension of the interpersonal attraction scale (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). For example, “I would like to have a friendly chat with this person” and “I would like her to be my Facebook friend”, measured on a 7-point scale, with the end points of 1 = *completely disagree* and 7 = *completely agree*.

Results

Disclosure context manipulation check

The same manipulation check as in Study 1 was used to determine whether participants were able to accurately recognize disclosures intended for public versus private consumption. Across all of the responses, the private/public condition was correctly identified in 91.9% of cases. Misidentified cases were excluded from the analyses.

Disclosure intimacy

The analyses were carried out with multilevel modeling which included disclosure intimacy, valence, and context as fixed effects; participants and profiles nested within participant were modeled as random factors. As in Study 1, disclosures in private context were evaluated as more intimate than those appearing in public wall posts, $F(1, 619) = 219.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .59$; $M_{\text{private}} = 4.82, SE = .06$, and $M_{\text{wall post}} = 3.79, SE = .06$. This effect held across disclosure valence and intimacy levels, as none of the interactions emerged as significant: for valence and context, $F(1, 592) = .72, p = .40$, and for disclosure intimacy and context, $F(1, 619) = 2.03, p = .16$. In addition, there was a main effect of disclosure valence, $F(1, 593) = 6.24, p = .01, \eta^2 = .02$, with negative disclosures perceived as more intimate than positive disclosures. There was also a main effect of disclosure intimacy, $F(1, 215) = 117.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .29$, with high-intimacy disclosures perceived as more intimate than low-intimacy disclosures. Thus, the findings about disclosure intimacy in public versus private Facebook contexts are consistent with the results of Study 1, but extend this effect across positively and negatively valenced disclosures (Table 3).

Table 3 Least Squares Means and Standard Errors for Dependent Variables in Study 2

Message Valence	Message Intimacy	Context	Perceived Intimacy	Perceived Appropriateness	Social Attraction	
Negative	High	Private	$M = 5.45$ $SE = .11$	$M = 4.46$ $SE = .12$	$M = 4.30$ $SE = .09$	
		Public	$M = 4.41$ $SE = .11$	$M = 3.42$ $SE = .12$	$M = 4.07$ $SE = .09$	
	Low	Private	$M = 4.43$ $SE = .11$	$M = 4.99$ $SE = .12$	$M = 4.28$ $SE = .09$	
		Public	$M = 3.28$ $SE = .11$	$M = 4.84$ $SE = .12$	$M = 4.10$ $SE = .09$	
	Positive	High	Private	$M = 5.15$ $SE = .11$	$M = 4.86$ $SE = .12$	$M = 4.68$ $SE = .09$
			Public	$M = 4.31$ $SE = .11$	$M = 4.06$ $SE = .12$	$M = 4.45$ $SE = .09$
Low		Private	$M = 4.26$ $SE = .11$	$M = 5.26$ $SE = .12$	$M = 4.62$ $SE = .09$	
		Public	$M = 3.15$ $SE = .11$	$M = 5.26$ $SE = .12$	$M = 4.43$ $SE = .09$	

Disclosure appropriateness

H3 predicted the interaction effect of public versus private contexts and disclosure intimacy levels on perceived disclosure appropriateness. Consistent with the prediction, there was a significant interaction effect of disclosure intimacy and public/private context conditions, $F(1, 617) = 31.98, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$. High-intimacy disclosures were evaluated as less appropriate in public than in private: $M_{\text{public}} = 3.74, SE = .09$, and $M_{\text{private}} = 4.66, SE = .10, p < .001$; but no such difference emerged for low-intimacy disclosures: $M_{\text{public}} = 5.05, SE = .09$, and $M_{\text{private}} = 5.13, SE = .09, p = .44$ (with higher numbers indicating greater appropriateness). In addition, all of the main effects were significant: for message valence, $F(1, 593) = 34.85, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$; for disclosure intimacy, $F(1, 217) = 65.38, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$; and for public/private context, $F(1, 617) = 45.49, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$. None of the other two-term interactions or the three-term interaction was significant. Thus, these results reveal that perceived disclosure appropriateness depends both on Facebook disclosure context and disclosure intimacy level (see Table 3).

Social attraction for the discloser

In support of *H4*, people liked disclosers of information in private ($M = 4.47, SE = .05$) more than in public ($M = 4.26, SE = .05$), $F(1, 616) = 14.97, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$. In addition, negative disclosures ($M = 4.19, SE = .05$) prompted less liking than positive disclosures ($M = 4.54, SE = .05$), $F(1, 592) = 46.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$. There was no effect of disclosure intimacy condition on social attraction for the

discloser, $F(1, 216) = .08, p = .78$, and none of the interactions emerged as significant (see Table 3).

The final analysis tested the mediation effect of perceived disclosure appropriateness ($H5$) on the relationship between public/private context and social attraction for a sender using the SPSS procedure for estimating indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The bootstrapping nonparametric procedure confirmed the mediation effect: The bootstrapped estimate of the indirect effect was equal to .13, $SE = .03$, and the 95% confidence interval for the true indirect effect did not include zero ($LL = .08$, and $UL = .18$), indicating that it was significantly different from 0 at $p < .05$ (two-tailed). Controlling for public/private context, the effect of the mediator (disclosure appropriateness) on social attraction remained significant, $\beta = .25$, $SE = .02, t(808) = 11.55, p < .001$; however, the effect of public/private context ceased to be significant when controlling for the mediator, $\beta = .08, SE = .06, t(808) = 1.29, p = .20$. Thus, judgments of disclosure appropriateness mediated between Facebook disclosure context and social attraction for a sender.

General discussion

This research examined how sociotechnical affordances of technology create new bases for making judgments at how personalized and how appropriate a disclosure is. Study 1 showed that receivers judge others' disclosures based in part on whether the disclosure is also available to others. Whereas private contexts heightened message and relational intimacy, public contexts dampened them. Study 2 extended the effects of sociotechnical affordances to perceived disclosure intimacy across both positively and negatively valenced disclosures, and, relatedly, to judgments about disclosure appropriateness. The results of Study 2 suggest public intimacy may backfire because intimate disclosures in public settings were viewed as less appropriate than those in private contexts. Further, these effects were strong enough to influence an observer's level of attraction to the individual making the disclosure such that perceivers liked disclosers of information in private more than in public, and perceived disclosure appropriateness mediated the effects of disclosure contexts on social attraction for a discloser.

Theoretical contributions to disclosure personalism

Personalistic disclosure is key to how people perceive and react to self-disclosure both in online and offline settings (e.g., Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011; Taylor et al., 1981). Despite the importance of personalistic disclosure framework for disclosure research, there has been limited understanding of the information and criteria that people use to judge personalism.

Using Facebook affordances, Study 1 offers one of the first direct tests of information unavailability and relational basis as competing explanations for disclosure personalism. The results indicate that both information unavailability and a relational basis are important. Target-directed disclosures unavailable to others led to higher

intimacy ratings for both the message and the relationship. Thus, consistent with the commodity theory approach (Brock, 1968; Petty & Mirels, 1981), informational unavailability serves to redefine the value of disclosure intimacy. At the same time, it also serves as a basis for relational inferences, which is redundant from the standpoint of commodity theory based strictly on the information utility account (Archer & Cook, 1986).

Consistent with the personalistic effects, liking for a discloser was higher in the private disclosure condition, but the effects of disclosure context on liking were mediated by perceived disclosure appropriateness. This result reflects the importance of both disclosure value (i.e., intimacy) and its appropriateness, as argued by Derlega and Grzelak (1979), and that intimate disclosures viewed inappropriately can backfire and reduce social attraction for a discloser. It is possible that the mediating effect of appropriateness could differ when the judge is the target of the disclosure rather than an observer. Additional research is needed to determine how the personalistic effects experienced by observers compare to those of a direct target of disclosure.

Future research also needs to extend the study of personalistic disclosures and their effects from self-related to other-related information. As Petronio (2002) argues, the scope of disclosure has to be expanded to incorporate both self- and other-related information, as captured by her term of “private disclosure” versus “self-disclosure.” It is possible that people would interpret and react to personalistic disclosures differently if they reveal information about them instead of information about the discloser himself/herself. Given that disclosed information on a Facebook wall often implicates receivers, future research needs to examine how self-related versus other-related focus of disclosure influences the effects of context on disclosure judgments.

Theoretical contributions to relational communication on SNSs

As relational functionality of SNSs draws increasing research attention, the finding that disclosure intimacy is contingent on a Facebook context is important. Facebook and other SNSs afford new ways of maintaining relationships that transform relational maintenance costs and rewards for both disclosers and receivers (Tong & Walther, 2011). Public dissemination of a relational message from a single receiver to many partners reduces transaction costs for a discloser, but “whether receivers interpret broadcasted messages as less relationally genuine than dyadic messages is a question for future research” (Tong & Walther, 2011, p. 211). The results of the present research indicate that reductions in transaction costs of public sharing for a discloser indeed come with a price of reduced intimacy interpretation for a receiver. In other words, what is produced without effort is less valued and appreciated. Thus, relational intimacy and bonding may be harder to obtain through Facebook public exchanges because of their reduced intimacy, as judged by a receiver.

In addition to perceived disclosure intimacy, a public context affects perceptions of disclosure appropriateness: High-intimacy public disclosures were perceived as less appropriate than high-intimacy private disclosures; but low-intimacy disclosures

were viewed as equally appropriate in private as in public contexts. These findings fit with previous research on disclosure appropriateness (e.g., Chaikin & Derlega, 1974; Orrego et al., 2000), but they are intriguing in the context of social networking sites. Although disclosure of personal information is a major privacy concern on the Internet (e.g., Humphreys, 2011), research has mainly focused on information disclosed in the preset fields on users' profiles (e.g., phone numbers, e-mail and physical addresses, relationship status) instead of actual communication on SNSs. In contrast to identity-revealing self-descriptors on users' profiles, public posts on SNSs appear to be mundane and common: "One of the chief bewilderments, if not complaints, about Twitter's Tweets and Facebook's status updates is the incredibly mundane quality of many, if not most, such postings" (Tong & Walther, 2011, p. 113). Tong and Walther (2011) further suggest that it is the sharing of mundane personal observations and activities that fulfill a relational maintenance function on SNSs. Assuming that low-intimacy disclosures are similar to mundane communication, the present findings about low intimate public disclosure judged as more appropriate than high intimate public disclosure support the importance of mundane communication on SNSs.

Limitations

This study has focused on the effects of sociotechnical affordances on disclosure and relationship perceptions from the perspective of an observer who was not connected to the people portrayed in the scenario. The separation of a sociotechnical context from a relational context provided a test into the effects of sociotechnical affordances on disclosure interpretation without the influence of relational factors, as both may affect disclosure interpretation (Prager, 1995). However, because people are generally connected on SNS, future research would need to consider how the strength of relational ties might moderate the influence of sociotechnical affordances on judgments about disclosure intimacy and appropriateness.

Conclusion

Social relationships and social networks are inextricably intertwined (Parks, 2007), which is especially evident on SNSs, where users' social networks become a public arena for interpersonal interactions within the network. This study has examined how sociotechnical affordances shape perceptions of disclosure personalism and appropriateness, and their effects on liking for a discloser. Although disclosure is a precursor to relational intimacy, the results suggest that intimacy may be harder to attain through Facebook public communication because intimate disclosures in public interactions are viewed as less intimate and less appropriate than intimate disclosures in private interactions on Facebook.

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