Contents and Contexts:

Disclosure Perceptions on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Social network sites (SNSs) provide new forms of communication, in which people routinely share personal information with a large audience. The goal of this research is to examine how a public context in which disclosures are revealed influences receivers' impressions of disclosure and a discloser on SNSs. The results of the original study reported in this paper indicate that publicly shared disclosures were perceived as less intimate and less appropriate than privately shared disclosures on Facebook, and perceptions of disclosure appropriateness mediated the effects of public/private contexts on social attraction for a discloser. The results inform research on social outcomes associated with SNS's use, as well as design considerations for privacy- and disclosure-related behaviors in social media.

Author Keywords

Social networking sites, Facebook, disclosure, privacy.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.3 [Information Interfaces]: Group and Organization Interfaces; Web-based interaction; Computer-supported cooperative work.

INTRODUCTION

Social network sites have become increasingly popular for establishing and maintaining personal connections. Millions of SNS users share details about their private lives and get updates on their friends' lives on a regular basis. Personal information can be easily broadcasted to a whole network allowing users to share personal information (self-disclosure) with multiple people at once. This type of public sharing of private information can blur the boundaries

between private and public, raising questions about how people make judgments about disclosure and construct intimacy on SNSs.

Understanding how social affordances affect disclosure interpretation on SNSs is important for several reasons. First, disclosure interpretation forms the basis for relational closeness and bonding [11]. Self-disclosure does not automatically lead to relational closeness and liking for a discloser, as assumed by early models of self-disclosure [5]. Instead, the effects of self-disclosure are contingent on how a receiver interprets self-disclosure, especially its intimacy and appropriateness. Whereas intimate messages generally facilitate relational closeness, their effects can backfire if these messages are considered inappropriate [4]. As people share personal information in order to develop and maintain relationships on SNSs [6], receivers' perceptions are important for understanding relational processes and outcomes. Although sharing a disclosure with the entire network reduces transaction costs for a sender [13], it may negatively impact how receivers view disclosure intimacy or appropriateness. This, in turn, can affect relational processes, such as social attraction for a sender. Indeed, recent research shows that different communication forms contained within a single SNS platform may be associated with different social capital and relational closeness processes [3], although the mechanisms underlying these differences have not yet been explored.

Second, understanding how people interpret disclosure interpretation may inform research on privacy and disclosure production on SNSs. According to communication privacy management theory (CPM), receivers become co-owners of information [8]. Whether receivers keep this information to themselves or pass it to third parties depends to a large extent on their perceptions of privacy rules around disclosure, including perceived disclosure intimacy. Although the CPM theory does not directly address how receivers assess disclosure intimacy, psychological research shows that compared to a discloser, receivers underestimate disclosure intimacy [10]. Social media contexts may further complicate disclosure intimacy interpretation because receivers' interpretation of disclosure intimacy may be affected by socio-technical affordances of

media. Misreading disclosure intimacy may, in turn, lead to its inappropriate use, such as sharing private information outside of the network, which violates contextual integrity of private information [7].

Therefore, the goal of the present study is to examine how people interpret disclosure on SNSs. In particular, this study compares the effects of private messaging versus public wallposting on perceptions of disclosure intimacy and appropriateness, as well as social attraction for a discloser on Facebook.

DISCLOSURE PERCEPTION IN CONTEXT

Because people derive message meaning partly based on a disclosure context, disclosure interpretation cannot be reduced to only contents of disclosure, without regard to a conversational context of disclosure [1]. Furthermore, to understand contextual effects on disclosure perceptions, a context of disclosure has to be examined separately from the disclosure contents.

According to Prager (1995, p. 174), contextual factors can be classified according to a "continuum of immediacy or distance relative to the space-and-time of the interaction" [9]. The most basic contextual level is a disclosure situation, which includes the nature of occasion, the number of people involved in the interaction, and the degree of privacy. The next level is a relational context, which characterizes personal characteristics and relationships between individuals involved in the interaction; followed by a larger social group level, and an even broader socio-cultural system in which an interaction is embedded.

The current paper is concerned with the situational context, which most closely maps onto the distinctions associated with different interactional contexts on Facebook, such as private messaging and wallposts, because they differ in the number of people involved in the interaction and the degree of privacy. Specifically, whereas wallposts are public and visible to uninvolved third parities, private messaging is limited to only discloser and receiver.

First, let us consider the effects of a public versus private context on perceived disclosure intimacy. According to Schoeman's subjective intimacy framework [12], people decide whether information is intimate or private partly based on their assessment of what information holds for a discloser himself/herself. One way through which receivers decode the subjective value of information for a discloser is through a context in which it is revealed. "The information is to be regarded as special and thus only revealed in certain contexts – contexts in which the very giving of the information is valued as a special act" [12, p. 406]. In this way, a private context serves to "envalue personal experiences", regardless of their objective value [12, p. 406]. Consequently, a message received in a private context is likely to be interpreted as having a special meaning to a discloser. In contrast, indiscriminate sharing of a disclosure with a broad audience conceivably devalues its specialness and intimacy in the receiver's eyes because a discloser has chosen to share it with many others. Based on this rationale,

H1: Facebook disclosure shared publicly is perceived as less intimate than Facebook disclosure shared privately.

In addition to perceived intimacy, a context can also shape perceptions of disclosure appropriateness. Whereas revealing personal disclosures publicly on SNSs is becoming a more common social norm, studies of intimate disclosures in face-to-face interactions suggest that people tend to judge intimate disclosures as more appropriate in private than in public interactions because of the potential mismatch between a private content and a public context [4]. Based on this rationale, an interaction effect between public/private context and low/high message intimacy is proposed:

H2: Whereas low intimacy disclosures are perceived as equally appropriate in public and private Facebook contexts, high intimacy disclosures are perceived as less appropriate in public than private contexts.

Finally, how do perceptions of disclosure situated in public/private contexts affect impressions about a disclosure sender? According to information-processing theories of attraction, self-disclosure predicts social attraction for the sender if the receiver has positive beliefs about the sender as a result of his/her self-disclosure [5]. Although self-disclosure can increase liking for a sender directly, this relationship depends on the perceived disclosure appropriateness [4]. Thus, whereas public self-disclosure prompts less social attraction for the sender than private self-disclosure, this relationship should be mediated by perceived disclosure appropriateness.

H3: The relationship between Facebook public versus private contexts and social attraction for the sender is mediated by perceptions of perceived disclosure appropriateness.

METHOD

Participants
Two hundred and twenty participants (68.6% female) were recruited to participate in an experiment, in exchange for course extra credit. The mean participant age was 20 (*SD*=1.19). 60% of the participants were Caucasians, 24% were Asian, 6.5% were African Americans, 4.5% were Hispanics, and 5% identified themselves as others. 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
The hypotheses were tested with a 2x2x2 factorial design, with message intimacy (high, low), private-public disclosure context (Facebook private messaging vs. wallpost), and disclosure valence (positive vs. negative) to control for potential valence effects. A total of 4 different fictitious Facebook profiles were created for this study, with minimal bio information featured on the profiles (e.g., a place of residence, birth date, current occupation, and the number of friends). Each profile featured a unique disclosure message, with manipulations of message

intimacy, valence, and context embedded in the profiles. The contents of each disclosure were modified to fit the disclosure intimacy and valence conditions. The messages were generated based on the analysis of disclosures that people commonly share on Facebook while controlling for their intimacy and valence levels. For example, "Just got back from spring break – it rained most of the time so I didn't have a chance to do any swimming" (low intimacy and negative valence); "Just got back from spring break – I had the chance to catch up on my favorite TV shows" (low intimacy and positive valence); "Just got back from spring break with an empty bank account. I'll have to work forever to make up for my mistakes" (high intimacy and negative valence); "Just got back from spring break – I'll always love the friends I spent the week with" (high intimacy and positive valence).

All the disclosures were pretested by a different group of judges (N=36) for how intimate and how personal the message was ($alpha$= .71) and for message valence, which yielded a significant difference between low and high intimacy messages, $F(1, 67)$=101.90, $p<.001$, and between positive and negative messages, $F(1, 67)$=263.44, $p<.001$.

The manipulation of the disclosure context included 2 conditions: a private Facebook message exchanged between two parties only and a Facebook wallpost exchanged between the same two parties, but visible to the entire network. Both the owner of the profiles and their "friend" were female. The experiment took place entirely online; participants viewed the profiles with the embedded disclosure intimacy/context/valence manipulations and answered questions about message intimacy and appropriateness after each of the profiles. Each profile was presented in all of the intimacy x context x valence conditions. The Latin Square experimental design was employed to randomly assign participants to the experimental conditions, with each participant viewing each of the disclosure message and profile exactly once.

Dependent Variables and Manipulation Check
The message intimacy scale consisted of four bipolar items measured on a 7-point scale: non-intimate/intimate, impersonal/personal, public/private, and superficial/in-depth, $alpha$=. 81, which were adapted from the message intimacy scale [2]. Message appropriateness was measured with four items: 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, $alpha$=. 85.

For each of the profile participants were asked a manipulation question to check whether they were able to distinguish private (i.e., seen only by the profile owner and her friend) from public disclosure conditions (i.e., seen by all of the profile owner's Facebook friends). Across all the responses, the private/public condition was misidentified in 8.1% of cases, which were excluded from the reported analyses.

RESULTS
The analyses were carried out with multilevel modeling that included disclosure intimacy, context, valence, and their interaction as fixed factors. Participants and profiles nested within participants were used as random factors to control for potential non-independence of residuals due to repeated observations from each participant and to parcel out the random effect of profile.

First, the analyses were run on the dependent variable of perceived disclosure intimacy. Disclosures in private context were considered more intimate than disclosures in public wallpostings, $F(1, 619)$=219, $p < .001$: $M_{private}$=4.82, SE=.06, and $M_{wallposting}$=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 were significant effects of disclosure valence, $F (1, 593)$=6.24, p= .01, and disclosure intimacy levels, $F(1, 215)$=117, $p<$ .001. The results support H1 by showing that people perceive disclosure intimacy differently in private vs. public disclosure contexts on SNSs. Specifically, the same disclosure contents were evaluated as less intimate in public than private contexts, which was true for both high and low intimacy messages, as well as positive and negative messages.

H2 predicted the interaction between message intimacy and disclosure context such that the disclosure context would affect perceived appropriateness for high intimacy messages only. Consistent with the prediction, there was a significant interaction effect of disclosure intimacy and public/private context conditions, $F (1, 617)$=31.98, $p < .001$. High intimacy disclosures were evaluated as less appropriate in public than in private: M_{public}=3.74, SE=. 09, and $M_{private}$= 4.66, SE= .10, $p < .001$; but no such difference emerged for low intimacy disclosures: M_{public}=5.05, SE=. 09, and $M_{private}$=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, $p<.001$; for disclosure intimacy, $F(1, 217)$=65.38, $p<.001$; and for public/private context, $F(1, 617)$=45.49, $p<.001$. Thus, these results reveal that perceived disclosure appropriateness depends both on Facebook disclosure context and disclosure intimacy level.

The final analysis tested the proposed mediation effect of perceived disclosure appropriateness (H3) on the relationship between public/private context and social attraction for a sender. The results supported a full mediation effect. After regressing social attraction on both perceived appropriateness and public/private context, the effect of context ceased to be significant, $F (1, 631)$= 1.58, p=.21, while the effect of perceived appropriateness remained significant, β= .29, SE= .02, $t (805)$= 13.00, $p < .001$. Thus, judgments of disclosure appropriateness mediated between Facebook disclosure contexts and social attraction for a sender.

DISCUSSION

By giving access to large audiences and ability to easily control the audience of any given message, SNSs create new bases for making judgments about disclosure- and privacy-related behaviors. The results of this study show that people interpret disclosure intimacy and appropriateness differently in private than in public SNS contexts: Whereas private contexts heighten disclosure intimacy, public contexts appear to dampen it. Moreover, people judge high intimacy disclosures as less appropriate in public contexts, and perceived disclosure appropriateness mediated the effects of public/private contexts on social attraction for a discloser.

These findings contribute to understanding of relational processes and social capital building on SNSs. Research on social capital on SNSs is increasingly interested in how different uses of SNSs are associated with increase in social capital, such as social bonding and social bridging. For example, Burke et al. distinguished directed communication (e.g., private messaging, wallposts) from other uses of SNSs [3]. The results of the present study suggest the distinctions may go even further because directed *private* communication is not the same as directed *public* communication in terms of its effects on receivers' perceptions of disclosure, which can lead to different relational closeness and social bonding between partners. Future research needs to examine connections between disclosure perceptions and social capital processes on SNSs.

Future research also needs to examine how differences in disclosure perceptions relate to receivers' management of disclosure (e.g., tagging, sharing outside of the original context, gossiping). For example, are receivers more prone to distribute somebody's disclosure when it was received as a wallpost because they discount its intimacy? What are the effects of social affordances on sender-receiver differences in disclosure intimacy reading? Better understanding of disclosure perceptions on SNSs may suggest design solutions that ensure a more accurate reading of disclosure intimacy and other privacy rules between disclosers and receivers.

Limitations

Because the study has focused on the aspects of a situational context in influencing impressions about disclosure and the discloser, it used a third party reviewer of the messages. However, a relational context may also affect disclosure perceptions, such as knowing somebody on a personal level may influence how one interprets disclosure intimacy and appropriateness. Future research should offer attention to the effects of partners' familiarity and relational closeness on disclosure perceptions on SNSs.

CONCLUSION

The present work has examined the role of public/private contexts on disclosure perceptions on SNSs. Although disclosure is considered a means to intimacy and relational development, the present findings suggest that intimacy may be harder to attain through disclosures in public contexts because these disclosures are viewed as less intimate and less appropriate than disclosures in private contexts, which has implications for relational processes and privacy-related behaviors on SNSs.

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