

"You Can't Block People Offline": Examining How Facebook's Affordances Shape the Disclosure Process

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ABSTRACT

Guided by the underlying question of how—if at all—the self-disclosure process varies online, the present study explores the self-disclosure practices of 26 American graduate students on Facebook through in-depth interviews. Building on work by Derlega and Grzelak [12] on self-disclosure goals and focusing on the affordances of the site, findings reveal both commonalities with and extensions to existing communication research on self-disclosure, as users saw both benefits and drawbacks to the high visibility and persistence of content shared through the site. Furthermore, users employed a wide spectrum of strategies to help them achieve their disclosure goals while decreasing perceived risks associated with making disclosures in a public forum. Importantly, these strategies generally sought to recreate the offline boundaries blurred or removed by the technical structure of the site and allow users to engage in a more strategic disclosure process with their network.

Author Keywords

Privacy; self-disclosure; impression management; social network sites; Facebook; context collapse

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3. Group and Organization Interfaces – Web-based Interaction

General Terms

Human Factors; Theory

INTRODUCTION

Social network sites (SNSs) continue to become an increasingly embedded part of daily life for the average Internet user, with recent Pew Internet data showing that 72% of all online American adults maintain a profile on a site like Facebook [7]. These sites are distinguished from other communication technologies in that users can (1) create profiles containing user-, other-, and system-provided data; (2) articulate a list of connections (e.g., Facebook “Friends”); and (3) consume, produce, and

interact with user-generated content [13]. Furthermore, SNSs are distinguished from other forms of media by containing a number of unique affordances, including the visibility and persistence of content, the association of connections, and the editability of content [33], which researchers have argued lower the costs to interacting with and maintaining a large network of connections.

Self-disclosure—the process through which we share information about ourselves with others—is central to many people’s use of SNSs. For example, among American adult Facebook users, 44% update their status at least weekly (15% daily), while 53% of users comment on a Friend’s status (21% daily), and 48% comment on a Friend’s photo at least weekly (20% daily) [17]. As with their disclosures and interactions in other settings, SNS users must balance disclosure-based goals (e.g., increasing intimacy, relieving distress) with a variety of potential risks (e.g., hurt feelings, reduced integrity). On Facebook, the most popular SNS, users’ disclosures are typically visible to most—if not all—of their Friend network. To mitigate the tensions between disclosure goals and risks, users may employ a variety of system-based and behavioral strategies that both take into consideration SNSs’ affordances and take advantage of the various features available on the site.

The following paper presents results from a qualitative study of Facebook users to gain a deeper understanding of technology’s impact on the disclosure process by focusing on users’ self-identified goals and risks, a traditional approach to studying disclosures [12, 23]. However, the present study extends this research to SNSs to consider the role that the sites’ affordances may play in shaping the disclosure process and creating a different interaction experience as communication moves from a dyadic to group or *masspersonal* setting. In addition, the study presents a set of strategies participants reported engaging in as part of their disclosure process on Facebook, many of which emerged as a direct result of the site’s affordances and most of which were employed to enable them to achieve specific self-disclosure goals while minimizing the risks associated with those disclosures. Overall, the participants’ narratives highlight an often-complex thought process behind disclosing personal information on SNSs, involving many of the same goals and risks that people

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associate with traditional communication practices, but with both more and less control of distribution of information. These findings offer important insights into communication theory as it continues to expand into the realm of computer-mediated communication.

SELF-DISCLOSURES, ON- AND OFFLINE

Historically, self-disclosure has been defined as a process of dyadic communication in which an individual shares personal information with another [11, 38]. This process is essential to the relationship formation and maintenance process, as increased disclosures between relational partners leads to increased relational closeness [2]. Self-disclosure via verbal communication has been examined by numerous researchers over the last half century (e.g., [2, 23, 38]), focusing on both the characteristics of disclosures as well as the process through which individuals make decisions regarding what and with whom they should share.

With the rise and increasing popularity of social media, disclosure practices have shifted in several important ways, most notably that users of these sites, by default, make disclosures to a wide audience rather than in a dyadic or small group setting. Furthermore, these sites contain a number of affordances—including visibility, editability, and persistence of content and association of connections [33]—that shape interactions and disclosure behaviors. These factors have significant implications for communication theories related to self-disclosure and relationship maintenance.

A critical piece in the self-disclosure research is the role of privacy. Some notable researchers have described privacy as a boundary regulation process by which a person manages others' access to personal information [1, 11]. An individual controls the boundary of information by manipulating the depth, breadth, and frequency of disclosures. That said, individuals might freely forgo privacy when they have a specific goal associated with their self-disclosure, such as increasing the level of intimacy with their partner or creating a desired impression [11, 16].

In the following sections, we review literature related to self-disclosure, specifically focusing on the area of goals and risks identified in more traditional, dyadic, offline settings. We also provide an overview of research on SNS disclosures, focusing on the role of affordances. Finally, we look at the role privacy plays in self-disclosure. These sections provide a background for our two research questions, which examine how Facebook users' self-disclosure practices compare with those employed in more private, dyadic communication (RQ1), as well as seek to identify the strategies users employ to help mitigate any risks they identify as barriers to making disclosures through the site (RQ2).

Disclosure Goals and Risks

Building on Derlega and Grzelak's [12] functional theory of disclosures, the disclosure decision model [23] identifies

the cognitive process behind individuals' self-disclosure decisions and argues that self-disclosures fulfill specific roles within interpersonal relationships. Like its predecessor, the model identifies five primary disclosure goals, the first three of which are interpersonal in nature, while the latter two are associated with intrinsic rewards. Social approval involves garnering support and affection from others [3]. Intimacy relates to building a closer relationship with the recipient. Social control is a form of selective self-presentation [15] where individuals convey "packaged information" [12] to manage the impressions of others—often those in positions of power. Identity clarification helps individuals formulate their own ideas more clearly and sometimes elicit reactions from others, but does not necessarily involve others as recipients in the process [8]. Finally, self-disclosure may relieve distress through the process of catharsis, whereby individuals are able to release emotions by sharing bad experiences [29].

In addition to disclosure-based goals, researchers have identified four relational risks associated with disclosing information: social rejection, hurt feelings, reduction of integrity, and loss of control [4, 25]. The first two risks may impact one's interpersonal relationship with message recipients, while the latter two risks threaten one's self-concept and impression management. First, when a disclosure contains negative information, it may lead to social rejection by the recipient; this could take the form of formal or informal exclusion from events or social circles. Likewise, the discloser may hurt the recipient's feelings by revealing negatively valenced information, or if the discloser lacks prudence in making the disclosure [4, 27]. Next, disclosing information may alter existing impressions of the discloser when that information is inconsistent with previously disclosed information or projects an image other than what the recipient desires, leading to a reduction in integrity [27]. Finally, self-disclosure may jeopardize the discloser's power to regulate situations and outcomes [27]. For example, a teacher's professional image can be harmed when non-professional information becomes visible to her students, which could in turn affect power dynamics and decrease her ability to control students in the classroom.

Affordances and Disclosures on Social Network Sites

Self-disclosure is at the core of SNS use, and users disclose a variety of information through both static profile fields (e.g., birth date, location, employment) and through more interactive features such as status updates, Wall posts, and comments. Gross and Acquisti [16] argued SNS' affordances—i.e., the unique set of characteristics that enable action on the sites—create a new context for self-disclosure and influence users' behaviors related to revealing and concealing personal information.

In general, SNSs affordances enable users to engage in content distribution, sharing, and consumption at a lower cost and in less time than would be otherwise possible without the technology. For example, Treem and Leonardi

[33] have identified four primary affordances of SNSs: visibility, persistence, editability, and association. SNSs both increase the visibility of disclosures and lower the search costs to locating disclosures (e.g., via the organization of information in the profile page); disclosures are archived and remain searchable long after they are first posted; users can carefully craft disclosures by drafting and editing messages both before and after posting them to the site; and disclosed information is associated with both the discloser and, if directed at another person, the recipient of that content (as in the case of a Wall post, tagged post, or comment).

These affordances create a significantly different interaction environment than that described in traditional models of disclosure processes [12, 23]. On sites like Facebook, users are encouraged to engage in public, one-to-many forms of self-disclosure rather than more private, dyadic communication. An important question to consider, then, is how these affordances impact users' self-disclosures on the site, especially in light of research linking SNS use to various positive relational outcomes (e.g., [34, 35]). Therefore, our first research question looks at Facebook users' self-reported disclosure goals, as well as the risks they identify as potential barriers to making disclosures through the site.

RQ1: What self-disclosure (a) goals and (b) risks do Facebook users identify when using the site?

Managing Privacy and Self-Disclosure on SNSs

Broadly speaking, discussions of privacy on SNSs have described users' attitudes toward privacy (e.g., risks/concerns), their privacy behaviors (i.e., settings), or the relationship between these variables and users' disclosure habits [16, 31, 35]. Research has also pointed to the blurred boundary between public and private information on SNSs, where privacy settings and audience visibility may vary for individual pieces of content, and users may fail to recognize the full audience for a given disclosure [5]. Users identify a variety of privacy concerns that may serve as barriers to their engagement in self-disclosure on the site, many of which align with the previously identified disclosure risks [35], as well as more general privacy concerns such as identity theft or cyberstalking [31].

That said, the average SNS user discloses a significant amount of information through the site; therefore, many users likely develop one of more strategies to manage the blurry boundaries and overcome any privacy concerns they may harbor. Understanding the strategies individuals employ to manage and curate their online identity is becoming an especially important area of research as more people join these sites and share personal information [7, 17], and this area of research is still in its nascent stages.

Facebook offers a number of ways to manipulate privacy settings to help users engage in boundary regulation

regarding their disclosures. For example, users can limit access to each piece of content they share on the site by setting it to be visible to a set of Friends or, conversely, to be hidden from a subset of their Friend network. Use of these features may allow for more nuanced self-disclosures; for example, Vitak [35] found that those who used Friend Lists to allow for more targeted message dissemination reported disclosures to those Lists were more honest, sincere, intimate, and detailed than posts made to their full network. Lampinen and colleagues [19] labeled this type of behavior as a *preventive* strategy and found that users employ them to recreate offline boundaries.

An additional preventive strategy users engage in that is indirectly discussed by Lampinen and colleagues [19] is self-censorship; this strategy involves controlling the content of disclosed information in various ways. For example, users' disclosure decisions (i.e., whether they post a piece of content, as well as the content of the message) may be guided by the "lowest common denominator" in their network, i.e., the Friend(s) for whom a given disclosure might be problematic, such as a family member or authority figure [18]. Operationalizing self-censorship as starting to make a disclosure (i.e., entering text into a status update or comment box) but not publishing it, researchers at Facebook recently found that 71% of Facebook users engage in "last minute" self-censorship, which the authors argue is driven by audience considerations [10]. Finally, moving beyond individual people or groups, specific topics (e.g., politics, personal opinions, logistics) are generally the subject of self-censorship on Facebook, as users seek to avoid interpersonal conflict [28].

Self-censorship also involves behaviors related to the editability affordance of SNSs, whereby individuals review and manage content that has already been disclosed. A recent report by the Pew Internet Project and the Berkman Center reveals that teens engage in a wide variety of privacy management strategies [21]. The report found that 59% of SNS-using teens have edited or deleted something they posted in the past, while 53% have deleted comments others posted to their account, and 74% have deleted a Friend from their network.

Another strategy for managing content involves cloaking or otherwise hiding the true meaning of a message of content behind content that only a portion of one's network understands. Danah boyd [6] refers to this practice as "social steganography" and has found it to be a common practice in her ethnographic work with teenagers. This is reinforced through recent empirical work by Pew Internet, which found that 58% of teens report using inside jokes or coded messages on SNSs to ensure that only some friends understand a given message [21].

Even more extreme management strategies involve controlling access at the account level, either by deactivating/reactivating one's account or creating multiple

accounts. This is not likely to be a common practice due to the high management costs, but research has identified some evidence of both behaviors. For example, in a broad-based survey question, Pew Internet found that 31% of teens reported deactivating or deleting a social media profile [21]. Other studies using non-teen samples have identified users creating multiple profiles on social network sites, for reasons ranging from privacy purposes to identity management (e.g., [32, 37]).

We expect that Facebook users will identify a variety of potential risks to sharing personal information through the site, especially related to privacy. Therefore, our second research question seeks to understand the various strategies users employ to help mitigate these risks or, alternatively, if there are situations in which users perceive the risks to be too high to make disclosures through the site.

RQ2: What strategies do Facebook users employ to mitigate self-disclosure risks and privacy concerns?

METHODS

During April 2011, a random sample of 2000 American graduate students at a large Midwestern university was invited, via email, to participate in a study regarding their use of online communication tools. Participants completed a survey that assessed their use of social media and, at the conclusion of the survey, those who used Facebook were invited to enter their email address if they were interested in participating in a 45-minute follow-up interview. Participants were also invited to enter their email into a drawing for one of ten \$25 Amazon gift cards. This paper only presents results from the interview data; to view results from the survey data, see Vitak [35].

The survey remained open for two weeks and drew a response rate of approximately 25% (N=486); of these, 386 participants reported having an active Facebook account and 169 provided an email address as a possible interview participant. For this research project, the primary goal of conducting interviews was to gain deeper insight into users' privacy management and self-presentation practices on SNSs; therefore, a form of purposive sampling known as criterion sampling [24] was employed. Criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet a pre-determined set of criteria to identify "information rich" cases (p. 238) and help identify weaknesses in a system that may help lead to overall system improvements. In the case of Facebook, studying users who are highly engaged in self-monitoring and self-presentational practices may help us understand gaps in privacy or other behavioral practices that a survey of general users would not reveal.

Therefore, for this sample, the primary criteria employed for interview selection were use of the "Friend Lists" feature or advanced privacy settings on Facebook (which indicated engagement in privacy and audience management beyond use of basic privacy settings) and, in the case of Twitter users, maintaining more than one profile on the site

(which indicated an effort to segment audiences or engage in selective self-presentation).¹

From these criteria, 38 participants were emailed requesting an in-person interview; 26 attended one over the following three weeks (see Table 1 for detailed descriptives for each interview participant). All participants received a \$15 Amazon gift card. Among interview participants, 16 (62%) were female, with an average age of 29 (range: 22-53, *SD*=6). The sample included 22 White, two African American, one Latino, and one multiracial participant. Participants had an average of 500 Facebook Friends (median=433, *SD*=360) and spent 55 minutes a day on the site (*SD*=37.82).

The first author conducted each of the interviews in an on-campus lab during April and May 2011. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 30 and 95 minutes. During the interviews, participants were asked a variety of questions about their use of the site, their disclosure and interaction behaviors with their networks, their privacy attitudes and behaviors, and their impression management strategies.² Following completion of the interviews, they were transcribed by two undergraduate research assistants and checked by the first author to ensure accuracy. Prior to analysis, both authors read the interviews and created a codebook based on the guiding theories (i.e., disclosure goals and risks, affordances, privacy) as well as various characteristics of disclosures (e.g., inappropriate, self-presentation), and expected risk management strategies based on existing literature (e.g., targeted disclosures, lowest common denominator).

Analysis was conducted by the authors in Dedoose, an online qualitative and mixed-methods software program, whereby individual participants' data were used to refine themes related to the research questions as they emerged [20]. Line-by-line coding of each transcript was employed using complete thoughts as the unit of analysis to establish themes across the corpus [30]. The second author coded each of the interviews in this manner and then met with the first author to review codes, discuss instances of where application of a code was unclear, and to review the codebook to ensure the necessary excerpts were being captured. Following this discussion, the first author completed a second round of coding on the entire corpus. At the completion of the second round of coding, the

¹ While 16 interview participants maintained one or more Twitter accounts, in the present analyses we focus only on their discussion of their Facebook use.

² Questions about disclosure goals and risks were not directly probed; rather, the themes discussed in the findings emerged from more general discussions of users' disclosure practices on the site and their concerns about communicating information over a semi-public channel.

Name	Sex	Age	Race	Total FB Friends	Facebook Friend Diversity ¹	Privacy Concerns ²	Advanced Privacy Settings? ³	Use Friend Lists? ⁴	Use Twitter? (Multiple Accounts?)
Brandon	M	27	White	525	8	2.33	Yes	Yes	No (n/a)
Christina	F	33	White	280	12	3.33	Yes	Yes	Yes (Yes)
Dana	F	25	Black	750	11	2	Yes	Yes	Yes (No)
Evelyn	F	28	White	477	7	3	Yes	Yes	Yes (No)
Fiona	F	28	White	700	10	3	Yes	Yes	Yes (Yes)
Gabriel	M	33	White	400	12	3.33	Yes	Yes	No (n/a)
Hilary	F	22	White	1400	8	2.67	Yes	Yes	Yes (No)
Irene	F	31	White	165	7	4	Yes	Yes	Yes (No)
Jennifer	F	22	Latino	1600	5	3.67	Yes	Yes	Yes (Yes)
Katie	F	28	White	315	11	2	Yes	Yes	Yes (Yes)
Laura	F	23	White	500	8	4	Yes	Yes	No (n/a)
Marshall	M	27	White	251	10	2.67	No	No	Yes (Yes)
Nick	M	29	White	700	13	2.67	No	No	Yes (Yes)
Owen	M	35	White	830	6	4	No	Yes	Yes (Yes)
Peter	M	35	White	337	10	1.33	Yes	Yes	Yes (Yes)
Kim	F	26	White	368	7	3.67	Yes	Yes	No (n/a)
Rachelle	F	25	White	548	8	4	Yes	Yes	No (n/a)
Stephanie	F	25	White	302	8	3	Yes	Yes	No (n/a)
Cindy	F	28	White	82	11	4.67	Unsure	Yes	No (n/a)
Tania	F	28	White	120	8	4.67	Yes	Yes	No (n/a)
Zara	F	27	Black	370	8	2	No	Yes	No (n/a)
Will	M	28	White	465	10	3.33	Yes	Yes	No (n/a)
Thomas	M	29	Multi	120	5	1.67	Yes	Yes	No (n/a)
Ryan	M	28	White	500	10	3	Yes	Yes	No (n/a)
Victoria	F	53	White	200	7	2	No	No	Yes (Yes)
Aaron	M	31	White	701	11	2.67	Yes	No	No (No)
Sum/Avg	62%F	29	85%W	500	8.88	3.03	92%Y	85%Y	54%Y (35%Y)

¹ Participants were asked to indicate whether they had Facebook Friends in 12 relational categories, plus an “other” option. The score was then computed by adding up each category they indicated being present in their network (range: 5-13).

² Three-item scale measuring individuals’ concerns related to sharing information through the site, measured on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1=Strongly disagree to 5=Strongly agree.

³ Question: “Have you ever used the advanced privacy settings so that only some of your friends can see an update or photo?”

⁴ Question: “Have you created ‘Friend Lists’ so you can post updates just to a subset of your Facebook Friends?”

excerpts were exported into Excel spreadsheets, and the second author created a meta-matrix [22] to help identify patterns across participants, establish representativeness of findings, and detect negative cases.

FINDINGS

Below we present findings related to our two research questions, first highlighting trends in the data related to participants’ self-identified disclosure goals and risks associated with making disclosures on Facebook (RQ1), and second by evaluating the various strategies participants identified using to help mitigate those risks (RQ2).

Self-disclosure Goals on Facebook

The first part of RQ1 focused on identifying the self-disclosure goals SNS users may have while sharing information through the site. Though participants were not directly prompted about each of the five goals identified in Derlega and Grzelak’s [12] research, we found evidence of each goal in participants’ comments about their motivations for using the site. Furthermore, we saw evidence of a sixth self-disclosure goal among participants, which we have labeled “personal record”; this goal reflects how SNS users are able to merge dyadic communication goals with the site’s affordances (e.g., persistence) to create a new form of self-expression that mixes a traditionally private activity

(journaling) with the increased visibility of status updates. Below, we discuss how these goals manifested in further detail.

Social approval goal

Many participants reflected on having a goal of social acceptance when they made self-disclosures, describing instances in which they would share information specifically because they thought their friends would be interested in it. For example, Christina said, “I’ll share news stories or things I find interesting because I know largely it’s teachers who are my friends, so I know who my audience is and I think about what they would want to see.” Fiona, Nick, and Peter shared similar comments about posting status updates that because they believe they’d appeal to their Friends. At other times, participants made self-disclosures through the site because they expected their Facebook Friends to find enjoyment or humor in the content, which would also meet the social approval goal. For example, Laura said, “I’m friends with a lot of my co-workers on Facebook, so if something funny or stupid happens at work, I’ll post it because I know people will appreciate it.”

Social control goal

As this sample was comprised of graduate students—many of whom had friended faculty members (54%) or previous (46%) or current (27%) students, while others were on the job market or working professionals—participants were highly cognizant of their self-presentation online and nearly all made references to engaging in some degree of social control in their self-disclosures. A recurring theme among the participants was the struggle between wanting to engage and share content with some portions of their network while maintaining a certain restraint with other portions, or trying to keep up a “clean” image for specific audiences. Ryan, who was getting ready to go on the job market, captured this struggle:

“...you have to kind of negotiate a lot of interactions at times. Because like, for instance, I’m on the job market next year. I’ll be finishing up my degree, putting myself up on the academic job market and the colleagues on there I have are people that could potentially be on hiring committees next year. So I’m trying to navigate that space of the personal where you’re trying to have fun, have status updates, write back to people on your Wall, but also do it in a way that’s rhetorically effective... but it is kind of a fine line because you want also the people on these hiring committees and potential colleagues and such to see you as human too.”

Ryan’s comment represents a prudent self-disclosure process of participants navigating their self-presentation to find the proper balance to appeal to all relevant audiences—in this case social and professional—in order to reap multiple benefits (interpersonal relationships with friends and potential employment opportunities). It also highlights how the affordances of the site may impact various user

goals. In Ryan’s case, the goal of social control is influenced largely by his network composition, or the association affordance, which makes connections visible to one another and links content to connections. Furthermore, the visibility of content, especially through the News Feed but also through the user’s profile, may make users think twice before sharing certain types of information, especially if they have a goal related to curating a specific image, such as that of the ideal new faculty hire. For example, Stephanie said, “I just wanted to be on the safe side and I also have classmates who I just feel like I should keep some professionalism with, so I just try to, still show my personality, but not everything.”

Intimacy goal

Self-disclosures may serve a goal of increasing or maintaining relational closeness with members of one’s network, especially if specific friends are geographically dispersed. Most participants referenced sharing various types of content (e.g., greetings, wishes), writing supportive comments, and “liking” Friends’ posts. In some instances, these forms of interaction may have served a maintenance purpose; for others, they helped bring Friends closer together. For example, Brandon said he had a group of about 20 close friends on Facebook who “constantly keep in touch” through the site. Likewise, Laura said she maintains a private message thread with 10 close friends from college where they keep each other updated on what’s going on in their lives. Notably, some participants said that for more intimate interactions, they chose to use channels other than Facebook. For example, Evelyn said: “If you’re a really close friend, I probably won’t post on your Wall either because I’m going to call you. I’m not going to post on you Wall. That seems tacky.”

Identity clarification goal

Self-disclosure on Facebook also functions to clarify users’ opinions or beliefs on various issues by providing a platform for them through which they can engage in self-reflection (via self-disclosure) or interaction with others. A common practice many participants referenced was sharing links to news stories on issues that mattered to them—whether it was abortion (Fiona), politics (Aaron), or their field of research (Brandon)—and participants presented these updates when they thought the issue should be addressed, even though the content of the messages sometimes threatened other goals such as social approval. Another aspect of identity clarification is that individuals can use Facebook to focus on a specific aspect of their identity; for example, Dana, a mom and wife, purposefully does not share those aspects of herself on the site:

“I have an 8-year-old so my life is SpongeBob most of time, and that is **not** reflected [in my profile]...I’m not a wife, I’m not a mom, I’m just Dana on Facebook and these are Dana’s interests and this is Dana’s space. And if you meet me, it’s going to be different. I’m going to have mayonnaise on my shirt from fixing that sandwich

or something like that. So I think that's the primary difference. It's not a different me, but it's just me undiluted if that makes sense."

For Dana, Facebook serves an important role by allowing her to express herself and interact in ways she feels otherwise constrained in her day-to-day life as a wife and mother.

Relief of distress goal

The final of the five goals identified in Omarzu's [23] research was reflected in just a few participants' comments. Marshall described a cathartic role of self-disclosure, saying if he was "frustrated or angry," the site provided an outlet for channeling those emotions. However, most participants who referenced these types of posts only mentioned them when talking about Friends' posting habits and generally expressed annoyance with using Facebook for this kind of disclosure, at least those who did so publicly. Overall, participants viewed Facebook as a place for sharing positive news and information more so than a place to disclose negative emotions or experiences. If people did use Facebook to achieve this goal, it was seen as more acceptable when they used a private over a public channel, as Gabriel described doing.

Personal record goal

In addition to identifying goals consistent with previous research, we also identified an additional self-disclosure goal. Like identity clarification and social control, the personal record goal is associated with intrinsic rewards and is related to the desire to keep an online diary of events in one's life. This goal is facilitated by the affordances of the site, especially the persistence of content, which allows users to maintain a virtual archive of content for as long as they maintain an account, as well as editability, which gives users control over both the content of posts as well as their visibility (i.e., which Friends can view individual posts). Katie described one way in which this goal is achieved:

"I status update a lot, mainly because we [academics] have a job where you don't get to see a lot of your products, so as soon as I'm done with something, I'm like, 'Ooh, I just finished X.' So I feel like something has happened."

By announcing the event on Facebook, Katie felt a certain sense of fulfillment. Other participants mentioned posting about life events and achievements such as marriage, pregnancy, or graduation. For example, Laura mostly used Facebook to share her big events such as her acceptance to medical school, and Dana posted whenever a major life transition happened (e.g., marriage, pregnancy). It is important to note that these types of postings are often driven by other goals (e.g., social approval, intimacy), but at the same time, users can avail themselves of the Wall on Facebook to log lifetime stories, and they are not only able to keep track of what they disclose, but the interactions associated with that disclosure, such as how many "likes"

Dana got when she announced her marriage. For some people, these notes, like a collection of letters and diary entries in a box, appears to carry significant emotional meaning; during her interview, Victoria vividly remembered her last birthday, saying, "I had 150 happy birthday messages on Facebook. I was like, that was pretty cool, I wouldn't have ever gotten 150 people saying happy birthday to me ever before in my life."

Finally, as with other social media, Facebook allows users to upload and share content originally created through another application. In this way, Facebook may become a central repository that houses all-important "digital disclosures" people make online. While not explicitly referenced by many participants, we expect that this behavior was more common than we found in the interviews because it was not directly addressed through any questions. For example, Cindy noted that she used Facebook to keep track of the books she reads through the Goodreads application, which automatically pushed the content to Facebook. In addition to fulfilling a personal record goal, these behaviors may also support goals of identity clarification and social control.

Self-disclosure Risks on Facebook

As with the disclosure goals, we found that Facebook users' self-identified disclosure risks generally corresponded to those identified in previous research. In general, the two interpersonal risks—social rejection and hurt feelings—tended to be discussed together, as did the two impression management-based risks, reduction of integrity and loss of control. In addition to these risks, our participants also described a variety of risks they faced when using Facebook that reflected the role that the site's affordances play in creating and/or increasing users' concerns about sharing information.

Interpersonal-based risks

A primary concern for Facebook users in this sample was that their behaviors on the site could result in stigma and/or avoidance on or off the site. This concern was most often manifested in comments related to the social rejection risk, which a majority of our participants mentioned when describing their disclosure habits on the site. Over-sharing, complaints, and "boring" content were mentioned as potential causes of social rejection. For example, Laura worried that her Friends might not be interested in what she shared, Will felt that talking about divisive issues might alienate some people he wanted to stay in touch with, and Gabriel consciously tried to not be one of the complainers he disliked. These examples highlight how social rejection could interfere with the self-disclosure goals, especially those related to interpersonal relationships (i.e., social approval, intimacy, and social control). Avoidance of certain topics seen as taboo or "inappropriate" also reflected these perceptions.

In addition to fears of social rejection, participants described concerns related to hurting Friends' feelings

through their self-disclosures. This risk was especially complicated by the fact that Facebook does little to distinguish between offline boundaries and relational contexts, making selective self-presentation more difficult than in offline environments. Christina described a situation where she perceived making a positive disclosure could hurt some Friends' feelings:

“When I got accepted here into the PhD program, I knew some of my Facebook Friends had applied and been rejected and so I kind of kept it to myself. ...I guess kind of always worried about sounding braggadocio, you know, I just don't want to put myself out there in that way. I think I try to think about how people's feelings are impacted because it is a social space.”

Even though being accepted to a PhD program was a major achievement for Christina—and one that most people would be excited to share with their networks—she was more concerned about those network members who had not been accepted and did not want to hurt their feelings by sharing her good news. In this case, the conflict between her disclosure goal and perceived risks negatively affected her decision to disclose the information.

Participants described a variety of anecdotes highlighting the role that Facebook's affordances played in increasing interpersonal risks associated with making disclosures on Facebook. Katie talked about an incident when a Friend posted a video on her Wall; while she thought it was funny, she said she quickly realized it might be offensive to other people in her network. Likewise, Zara talked about problems derived from multiple and cross-cutting associations; she described an incident where she really wanted to comment about something happening in a class, but decided not to because she was Friends with one of the people in the class, and the comment may have hurt his feelings. In this way, our participants generally tried to avoid negatively affecting others' feelings, especially when they were likely to have future interactions with that person.

Impression management-based risks

The majority of participants expressed concerns with presenting information consistent with their self-perception, and they expressed concerns over the reduction of integrity and loss of control that errant disclosures could cause. Inappropriately tagged photos, a wayward comment from a Friend, or poor judgment in their own disclosure decisions could damage their public image, which was especially of concern to participants in this sample, as many were actively on the job market. Several described being very careful not to disclose unnecessary information that contradicted their public images; for example, Brandon and Laura referenced concerns about potential employers accessing old pictures from when they were younger. Jennifer echoed this, saying, “I have an image to upkeep, and I don't want people to think less of me because of some particular incident.”

The social roles of our participants (e.g., student, teacher, employee) made them reconsider their postings due to the inherent power structure of relationships within their networks. Comments often reflected both impression management-based risks (i.e., loss of control and reduction of integrity) concurrently; for example, some participants noted that content that could be perceived as negative—such as photos from an event at a bar—could lower perceived integrity in the eyes of a potential employer and could impact their ability to maintain control over students in the classroom. In both of these situations, participants were describing situations in which they were in a position of power (in the case of students) or were subject to the decisions of others (in the case of prospective employers). Other instances of these risks included when a disclosure initiated unwanted interactions and the participant lost control of content posted on their Facebook Wall.

Affordance-based risks

An overarching theme that emerged from participants' comments about risks associated with making disclosures through Facebook related to how the site's affordances shaped how and by whom disclosures could be viewed. For example, the high visibility and persistence of content on Facebook makes it easier for users to locate posts through both the News Feed and users' profiles; compared with the more ephemeral—and less public—alternative forms of communication, these affordances led many participants to “think twice” before sharing content. For example, Aaron compared Facebook to a public square: “I consider Facebook the most public space. I consider if I went out into the middle of a crowded space and yelled something; it's the equivalent.” Irene said she tends to be much more careful making disclosures on Facebook than she does in face-to-face conversations because Facebook disclosures remain long after the conversation: “My interactions with people, especially the public interactions on Facebook, are pretty...reserved...it's always with this idea in the back of my head that this is going out in public and it will be there forever.”

Self-disclosures on Facebook are associated with network members in multiple ways (e.g., tagging, mentions, comments), and these connections sometimes led to increased concerns related to self-presentation and privacy. For these reasons, self-disclosures are carefully thought out. Zara's remark reflects the mental processes in making self-disclosures.

“If you post this, are you okay with people, everyone seeing this? Is that okay with you? I think twice about it. And if I think it's not a big deal, then I'll go ahead and do it. But if I'm thinking about the repercussions of it; if I can think of a few, then I won't do it.”

Some of the “repercussions” of self-disclosure are related to the inherent tensions created by the technical structure of networks on Facebook, a concept known as context collapse. In offline environments, individuals have a much

greater degree of control over their self-presentation because their audience is generally predictable; on sites like Facebook, however, contacts from various contexts are flattened into a single, homogenous group, which makes it more difficult to engage in varied self-presentation. Users must instead disclose information to various audiences simultaneously, and this increases the likelihood of other types of risks occurring. For example, Dana said:

“If I post ‘I’m bored right now’ at 4:30 and a colleague sees it, they know I was in class at 4:30. And you don’t know whose advisor is who, and they’re like, ‘oh yeah, she posted she was bored while she was in your class.’ And that would be bad, so I worry about things like that getting around.”

This example reflects the complexities of making disclosures to a diverse and sometimes unknown audience and hints at potential risks—in this case, risks associated with Dana managing a certain impression as a grad student.

Finally, several users expressed doubts about the privacy of content on the site, even when using private channels or employing Facebook’s many privacy features. For example, Kim and others noted that Facebook is a public site and privacy settings do not guarantee that information will remain private. Likewise, Ryan’s comments pointed to Facebook’s frequent changes to privacy settings, which may even increase concerns of the savviest users:

“Even if it was one of those things where I added those seven or eight people that are like my closest friends and family, and it was just a Facebook group, I’d still be kind of wary about putting certain things online I think. Just because you just never know if one day your settings...Facebook makes some updates and your settings change and suddenly something is open that wasn’t open.”

Risk Management Strategies Employed by Users

Facebook contains several features users can manipulate for boundary regulation. Once the technical connection is established vis-à-vis “Facebook Friends,” users can control access to content at a high level—through blocking and unfriending—as well as at a more granular level through advanced privacy settings such as Friend Lists and Private Groups. While our participants noted various risks to making self-disclosures on Facebook, they also engaged in various strategies to help mitigate those risks. These strategies fell into four broad categories, which we have labeled network regulation, targeted disclosure, self-censorship, and content regulation.

Network regulation strategy

Network regulation is a type of preventive strategy that limits the *official* recipient of disclosures. Our participants sometimes rejected or left a friend request unanswered in order to regulate information boundaries. A common example mentioned by participants who were also teachers was friend requests from their students. Gabriel explained

why he decided not to accept friend requests from students.

“I worked with undergraduate students for seven years and five of those were Facebook years... So they’d friend me...and it was a power dynamic, like I was in charge of where they lived, so I didn’t want to create unnecessary power dynamics that were inappropriate.”

Gabriel described the additional regulation work that would have been required of him if he were to allow students into his network, coming to the conclusion that it was not a good idea. Sometimes, decisions are made to avoid efforts to maintain the boundary that is often perceived much more complex than preventive strategies. Offline relationships that involve power dynamics can disrupt their self-disclosure practices and because, in this case, having students as Facebook Friends creates risks such as reducing integrity as a teacher and losing control over in the classroom. Thus, Gabriel could simply avoid these risks with network regulation (i.e., rejecting the friend requests). However, in some situations, users described feeling social pressure to accept friend requests, even if they’d rather not have that person in their network. Evelyn, who had a public relations job in a small town, felt pressured to accept a friend request from the town’s mayor because ignoring it could create tension in their offline relationship. Dana echoed this sentiment when referencing friend requests from coworkers, saying, “You can’t reject colleagues. So if you’re in class with them, you can’t say no.” Other participants also mentioned similar cases where they could not manage the boundary to their liking due to offline pressures.

Social pressures affected use of other network regulation strategies as well, including the Chat visibility features, “hiding” Friends from their News Feed, and defriending. Becoming “invisible” on Facebook’s Chat client was mentioned by most participants who used Chat—which was a minority of participants—as one way they avoided unwanted interaction with specific individuals or groups of Friends. Several participants also said they preferred hiding an “annoying” friend or someone with whom they shared different ideological beliefs rather than defriend them; this was often because of the underlying relationship with the person. When asked why they chose to “hide” a Facebook friend rather than defriend the person, many people expressed hesitancy to sever that tie, even virtually. For example, following a high school reunion, Irene opted to hide several high school friends: “We were good friends 10 or 15 years ago, but we’re not really that close now. So I feel bad to defriend them, but I don’t really want to get frequent updates on what’s going on in their lives.” It is important to note that hiding does nothing to mitigate risks, as it only makes Friends invisible to the user and does nothing to prevent that person from viewing content.

Targeted disclosure strategy

While the above strategy provides a more broad-based level of coverage, friend lists manage disclosure boundaries at a

much more granular level. It is no surprise that the vast majority of participants (85%) in this sample used Friend Lists to recreate some of their offline contexts and segment content distribution to specific subsets of their network³; however, exploring this as a strategy is still useful because the participants describe a wide range of Friend List uses, thus providing the “rich information” sought through this sampling technique.

As mentioned above, participants used targeted disclosures in a variety of ways; sometimes the purpose was to single out the people in their network for whom their messages were most relevant. For example, Irene disclosed her school union-related updates selectively to just those Friends for whom she felt the content was relevant:

“It’s kind of a courtesy not to bother people with things they don’t need to know about. But also, just focusing like, you guys need to know about so I’m going to focus it just to you guys.”

By using targeted disclosures, she could effectively communicate with people who might want to know the information, while avoiding risks such as social rejection. More often, targeted disclosures were used to hide content from a group of people. Stephanie described a group of Friends (i.e., some family and faculty) for whom she limited access to her sexual orientation because she had not yet disclosed that information. This strategy was also widely used to exclude a small subset of Friends from viewing status updates and photos. For example, Tania placed a group of acquaintances on a List to limit their access to her Facebook updates, which she called her “don’t see” group. Her default settings for status updates were set to all friends other than this group. Fiona accepted Friend requests from current students or faculty members without hesitation, but placed them in a “Limited List” that did not have access to the majority of the content she shared. Private messages were also used to target specific recipients; both Brandon and Laura referenced using private messages to keep in touch with groups of close friends; this may have been done as much for an organizational purpose as for keeping the information private, but by using private messages, the groups may feel more open in what they share with each other.

However, targeted disclosures are sometimes laborious and require self-efficacy on the part of users. Stephanie explained some reasons why she did not use advanced privacy settings other than for Chat and her relationship status.

“I guess it’s kind of hard to do on there. You have to really know what you’re doing with the privacy settings,

and I don’t want to bother with it. It’s not that important to me to post [things I wouldn’t want my mom to see] anyways, so I just let it be.”

Self-censorship strategy

Participants also managed their disclosures by engaging in various forms of self-censorship, ranging from strategies resembling Hogan’s [18] lowest common denominator (LCD) to consciously deciding to not engage in self-disclosure. Applying a LCD strategy, one might choose to engage in some form of self-censorship—either by not posting content or altering the message itself—if it is determined that that original message will offend the lowest common denominator. This strategy was reflected in several participants’ comments about engaging in a sometimes-prolonged thought process before sharing content on the site to evaluate the potential risks of making that disclosure. For example, Jennifer said: “I definitely consider who is going to see it, if I want them to see it. Obviously if I don’t want one person to see it, I’m not going to put it up there. Period.” In addition to technical features such as Friend Lists and advanced privacy settings, Jennifer thought about whether posting is acceptable to anyone in her network. Likewise, Victoria pointed to the diversity of her Friend network and the role that played in how she made decisions about what to post on the site:

“I’m communicating to people from all walks of my life, and I want to make sure that what I’m putting out there is appropriate for everybody that’s going to see it. And so I do have that moment of censoring everything before I put it to make sure, ‘Oh yeah, there’s these people seeing it.’”

Participants sacrificed self-disclosure goals if they thought potential risks overrode the goal. Rachelle tried to keep her profile generic due to the presence of her professional connections in her Friend Lists. Sometimes, participants imposed self-censorship to maintain self-presentation on Facebook. For example, Gabriel kept certain postings to himself because he did not “want to put that kind of persona out.”

Content regulation strategy

A final strategy for mitigating risks of disclosing personal information through Facebook, content regulation, involves moving communication to other channels or communicating through the site, but in code. Brandon used email to share interesting information because of potential social rejection risks of posting it publicly on Facebook. Alternatively, participants controlled the depth of information shared by intentionally cloaking the details in a form of social steganography. While not mentioned by many participants, in Katie’s case, this strategy was related to the goal of relieving distress.

“So there was some...assignment, somebody had named a fictional character Dr. [X]. And we just thought that name was really funny. And so eventually, it had

³ The percentage was so high because it was one of the selection criteria for interviews. Among the survey of Facebook users (N=486), 17% reported using Friend Lists.

nothing to do with that original project, but anytime we were complaining about a class we were in, we were like, ‘Oh my gosh, Dr. X is going on and on and on.’ ‘I can’t believe these X assignments.’”

Katie used a pseudonym to conceal the real identity of the professor she and her friends were talking about, as their conversations were happening in pseudo public spaces (i.e., Facebook and Twitter), but only the circle of friends understood the true identity of the person. In this case, through use of coded information, the group of students was able to use Facebook to relieve stress during what was otherwise a very stressful semester. Conversely, ambiguous content can also hurt the person who is the focus of the post, if s/he is able to interpret the message. Will gave an example, saying, “maybe your ex posts something that you know is about you, but nobody else does, and so it pisses you off.”

DISCUSSION

This study examines Facebook users’ self-disclosure practices through an evaluation of their self-identified disclosure goals and risks, as well as a discussion of the various strategies users employ to mitigate those risks and remain engaged users of the site. Facebook is driven by social interaction, and research shows that in order for users to reap the full benefits of the site, they need to be engaged through both self-disclosure [35] and interaction with other users [9, 14]. Furthermore, Facebook’s affordances, including the visibility, persistence, and editability of content as well as the association of connections [33], impact users’ goals, perceived risks, and impression management strategies when making disclosures through the site.

Implications for research and theory

The disclosure process is at the core of many communication theories, yet little work has been done to connect more traditional models of communication, such as Derlega and Grzelak’s [12] and Omarzu’s [23] work to new forms of mediated communication, which, as boyd [5] has noted, create invisible audiences, blur lines between public and private, and collapse contexts. In combination with the affordances described by Treem and Leonardi [33] that are unique to these sites, users’ behaviors on SNSs should be evaluated to determine how they deviate from what we have already established in existing theories of communication and relationship maintenance.

The present study offers a preliminary step at evaluating how two important disclosure attitudes—goals and risks—are reflected in a very non-traditional disclosure space. Unlike the dyadic disclosure environment described in theory, Facebook disclosures and interactions are generally broadcast to one’s entire network via status update (or a subset thereof). Perhaps unsurprisingly, while each of Derlega and Grzelak’s [12] original five disclosure goals was referenced across the corpus, the high visibility of many forms of disclosure in Facebook and diffuse

association between contacts (both within their immediate and extended network) affected some users’ goals, especially social control, which is often employed in situations when the discloser is in a subservient position to the recipient of the disclosure [12]. Among our sample, participants repeatedly referenced instances in which their disclosure goal was to portray a specific image—typically a professional one—because they were concerned about an existing or potential audience viewing the content and wanted to ensure the generated impressions were consistent with those desires.

Remarks related to the social control goal, as well as to related risks (e.g., loss of control, reduction of integrity) can be examined in terms of Goffman’s front stage and backstage performances [15]. Offline, the boundaries between the front stage, where individuals engage in more formal performances for an audience (e.g., at a job interview) and the backstage, where individuals can “step out of character” (e.g., at home with friends) are relatively clearly delineated. On Facebook, however, these boundaries become blurred due to the flattening of different groups into a single group (i.e., Facebook Friends) in a process known as context collapse [5, 35]. While not unique to SNSs, context collapse is exacerbated by these sites’ affordances, and participants often struggled to balance front stage performances—in this case, that of a reputable graduate student, instructor, and/or employee—and backstage performances, which typically took the form of more intimate, off-the-cuff interactions with friends that were facilitated by the site’s many quick and convenient communication features.

Context collapse reduces costs associated with communicating to a large and diverse audience; however, for many participants, it also increased risks to making disclosures due to concerns about various parts of their audience. Therefore, it was unsurprising that participants engaged in a wide variety of strategies to help mitigate the risks associated with making disclosures on a site where the average participant had 500 Friends. Some of these strategies were relatively cost-intensive; for example, the Friend List strategy required users to go through their entire network and manually enter every Friend they wanted on a particular List.⁴ Creating these Lists requires a certain amount of skill, which not all users possess, especially older and less engaged users not captured in this sample (e.g., [36]), but who make up an increasingly larger proportion of the total Facebook population [7]. Furthermore, managing Lists is complicated by the addition of new Friends to one’s network and new privacy features

⁴ When these data were collected, Facebook had not yet rolled out its “Smart Lists” feature (see: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/improved-friend-lists/10150278932602131>).

from Facebook, and some participants expressed frustration with the technology or said they had created some Lists but did not use them.

The relationship between privacy and disclosure has been studied in offline settings for decades, most famously by Irwin Altman [1], who argued that individuals achieve privacy by regulating their social interactions. In offline settings, boundary regulation may be achieved by closing a door or choosing a location to meet. Building on Altman's work, Petronio's [26] Communication Privacy Management Theory offers individuals with a framework through which to use when deciding whether or not to reveal (i.e., disclose) or conceal (i.e., keep private) a piece of information, arguing that once information is disclosed, it is no longer private.

On SNSs, interactions vary in a number of important ways. Boundary regulation is not nearly as simple as closing a door; as seen in the interviews presented in this study, Facebook users come up with a variety of methods to enable them to interact with their network while still maintaining some degree of privacy; yet at times, they still decide that the best decision is to self-censor their posts, which is in line with other research in this area [19]. Furthermore, the invisible audience paired with highly visible content likely plays a significant role in self-presentation, especially when users have goals related to strategic self-presentation, as was the case for many participants in this sample. Even when users are not trying to present a specific image in their disclosures, it may only take one negative experience—whether personal or witnessed—to change a user's privacy and disclosure habits.

Finally, an important component to theory-driven research is to extend theory, and this study offers contributions in this regard as well. In examining users' disclosure goals, some participants specifically referenced the site's utility in keeping track of their day-to-day activities, as well as important life events. In this way, the site served as a form of digital diary, with the persistence of searchability of content making it easily accessible and reviewable over time, both by the individual and by others, and the visibility and editability enabled other users to add to the content, such as when someone posted an engagement notice and Friends wrote congratulatory notes. Facebook's affordances may help move this personal record far beyond any diary by making it interactive and editable. The search function, especially now with newer features like Timeline, Graph Search, and the ability to download one's profile information, enable users to keep track of everything going on in a specific moment of time through notes, pictures, and interactions and then revisit them at a later date. This could be especially useful to people tracking a specific goal, like someone training for a marathon who posted their daily workouts to the site, to be able to go back and see their progress over time.

Perhaps more than any of the other goals, engagement in the personal record goal on Facebook leaves the user most exposed to potential disclosure-based risks, as these disclosures suggest revealing both a high quantity and quality of information. That said, as SNSs become one of the most important platforms that integrate information that was generated outside of Facebook, the personal record goal would become an important function among SNS users in the future.

Implications for site design

The frustrations voiced by some of our participants—and subsequent decisions to either not use the technical solutions provided by Facebook or to not interact through the site because of perceived risks—calls for design solutions that account for the affordances of the site and their impact on self-disclosure and boundary regulation processes. Whereas offline self-disclosure is built on the dyadic boundary that generally avoids information leakage to third parties [11], SNS users have much less control over the boundary regulation process because it is often difficult—if not impossible—to know one's full audience on the site [5]. Even when a discloser has a good sense of her audience, the message recipients may not, which could lead to awkward situations if information is shared with unintended parties. Facebook could look to sites like Google+, which makes disclosure boundary information (i.e., a full list of people with whom a user shares an update) visible to everyone who can see the update. This strategy of transparency lowers the risks associated with making disclosures in these spaces.

A second design feature to consider when discussing self-disclosure goals and risks is Timeline. Facebook's most recent profile overhaul places the persistence and visibility affordances of the site at the forefront by simplifying the process of searching and moving through a user's profile, as well as giving users the ability to highlight or minimize individual pieces of content. For a user with disclosure goals related to identity clarification or creating a personal record, these developments are likely welcome, but they also introduce a number of risks, especially when one considers how users' Friend networks—and disclosure habits—have likely evolved over the course of their membership. Facebook has taken some steps to help users minimize unwanted or embarrassing encounters due to years-old content suddenly becoming much more visible, but as several participants in our interviews noted, Facebook's privacy settings may be viewed as overly complex to some. Creating simpler ways to manage the visibility of older self-disclosures—and clearly articulating these methods to users—should be a goal of the site.

Limitations

This study employed qualitative interviews to gain deeper insights into SNS users' disclosure behaviors and risk management strategies. As it employed purposive, rather than random sampling, caution should be taken in

interpreting findings, as the small, homogenous sample of highly engaged, largely white, American graduate students limits the generalizability of findings. The choice of graduate students over other populations was motivated by the likelihood that they would have more (diverse networks than other populations (e.g., undergraduate students), and that they would potentially experience a variety of situations on Facebook involving power disparities, such as student or faculty connections, and significant impression management concerns, such as those related to seeking a job. To some degree, all Facebook users experience these types of issues, but they were expected to be magnified within this population; therefore, the findings presented here, especially regarding engagement in risk management strategies, may not reflect that of a more heterogeneous population. Additional research should be conducted to confirm the findings using more diverse sampling techniques.

CONCLUSION

Through this qualitative study, we have gained a deeper understanding into how individuals navigate the communication process on social network sites. Once viewed through a more simplistic lens of dyadic communication in which interaction partners exchanged increasingly intimate personal disclosures as a method of relational development, self-disclosure in the more dynamic world of social media involves both dyadic and group communication across public and private channels with known and unknown audiences of various sizes. While many of the goals and risks are similar, they are influenced by the affordances of the sites, which also affects the strategies users employ when making decisions about what—and with whom—to disclose.

We believe this study provides an important contribution to a growing body of research on how new communication technologies affect relationship maintenance practices, as well as how the affordances of social network sites are changing how we interact with a variety of others, especially as individuals face new challenges such as collapsed contexts when disclosing information online.

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