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Reconceptualizing Online Self-Disclosure: Measure Development and Validation

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Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

The measurement of online self-disclosure faces three key problems: inconsistent conceptualization, varied dimensionality – which raises issues of incomplete contextualization to the online environment – and the breadth of instrumentation. Our study aims to address the first two issues by presenting a new instrument, including a short-form version to promote adoption in future research – thus addressing the third issue. We consider the contextualization of self-disclosure to online environments and find most of the traditional dimensions of self-disclosure (i.e. amount, depth, honesty, polarity, intent) are easily adapted except for intent. Because of key differences between online and in-person communications (i.e. reduced nonverbal cues, asynchronicity, editability, and varied audiences), our proposed instrument focuses on reconceptualizing how intent operates online; we do so by testing four context-specific dimensions influenced by the literature.

Our proposed dimensions include: willingness to participate, conscientious use, audience control, and reciprocity. Willingness to participate represents the varying degree to which individuals are active in online communities. Conscientious use captures the degree to which individuals use the affordances of asynchronicity and editability when generating content and messages to share. Audience control accounts for context collapse – the convergence of various social groups into a single audience – in various online platforms and represents the degree to which individuals limit who sees the content they share online. Lastly, reciprocity has been used previously as a component of self-disclosure in qualitative studies and so we include it as the propensity to share personal information in response to another's disclosure.

Through the process of identifying new dimensions to replace intent, we determined there was potentially a new, underlying structure of the self-disclosure construct. The self-disclosure literature employs multiple structural definitions, from a unidimensional to a second-order – often formative – construct. Among the dimensions of self-disclosure, we identified two distinct groups of dimensions: message-specific (e.g. how long, frequent, intimate, positive or negative, and honest) and behavior-specific (e.g. actions to protect the information from unwanted audiences, the presence in certain communities, etc.). As part of our measure development process, we examine a new, third-order structural definition of online self-disclosure.

The proposed instrument underwent two rounds of card sorting and a student pilot sample before we collected data from a sample on MTurk. That data collection included items from two existing, relatively popular measures from the information systems literature in addition to antecedents and consequents from self-disclosure's nomological net. The analysis resulted in further changes to the instrument and will require another round of data collection for finalization.

Keywords: Self-disclosure, instrument development, contextualization, online communication, intent