

## SELF-DISCLOSURE IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT: FACEBOOK

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### Abstract

Facebook is still the most popular social media tool among all types of social networks. Besides having an influence on managing online relationships, Facebook may also be determinative of people's relationships and interactions in their daily lives. Self-disclosure underpins the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal communication. Social networks, especially Facebook, allow people to comfortably self-disclose. The Uses and Gratifications Theory, which focuses on motives and gains related to the use of media, suggests that the use of social networks also motivates people in terms of meeting some of their social and psychological needs. In this sense, the most important motive may be described as self-disclosure. With its various spaces, Facebook allows people to share their emotions and thoughts about themselves and other people, and this gives them a sense of gratification by creating a real relationship perception in everyday life. As a result of self-disclosure behaviour, various needs, such as information sharing, entertainment, relaxation and social interactions, are satisfied through virtual environment. According to Social Information Theory, the rate of sharing personal information on social networks may be similar to/more than their everyday face-to-face interactions. This study analyzes different methods and ways of self-disclosure through Facebook. With this purpose in mind, the researchers aim to reveal the self-disclosure behaviours through the profiles of their Facebook friends based on pre-designated codes by utilizing qualitative content analysis method.

**Keywords:** Facebook, self-disclosure, virtual environment.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Together with the development of web 2.0 technology, web 1.0 gained interactivity in addition to its web site design feature, when other features, such as adding comments, contents, rearrangement and reproduction became available for anyone (Lincoln, 2009). In web 2.0, which is described as the second generation web, the users can better express themselves, and create and consume all sorts of contents. In a sense, web 2.0 technology offers a new social interaction environment.

The reason for increasing usage of social network websites is that they allow people to create their own profiles and to establish relationships with other people. Facebook, in particular, provides opportunities to people to share their personal information, i.e., to disclose themselves (Xie and Kang, 2015). According to Bumgarner (2007), using social network websites is triggered by people's desire to establish connections with other people, to learn more about their lives, and to share information about themselves.

## 2 SELF-DISCLOSURE BEHAVIOR

Self-disclosure is explained as a person's verbal and non-verbal self-disclosure to others. Jourard (1971) defines self-disclosure as an intentional way of expressing a person's personal information, emotions, thoughts and feelings to other people. This disclosure may be observed in axes as descriptive information (e.g. political affirmation) and evaluative information (e.g. feels about college). However, a person may also fulfil this act of self-disclosure in two dimensions as depth and breadth based on intimacy (Collins and Miller, 1994, p. 458).

Self-disclosure aims to make a positive impression through gradual sharing from basic information about a person to extremely private information (Day, 2013). An appropriate self-disclosure behaviour improves positive feelings, such as fancying and trust, increases the opportunities for interaction, and reinforces interpersonal connection for people to comprehend themselves and identify the others (Hooi and Cho, 2013, p. 884).

It is observed in a functional approach to self-disclosure that people strategically disclose themselves, and that they display selective expressions and behaviours with different motives and purposes to each person with different levels of affinity. According to this theory, people disclose themselves by deciding in line with their purposes and subjective desires and by determining the context accordingly. In exchange for self-disclosure, people usually demand an improvement in their relationships, social acknowledgement, social approval, being favoured, appreciation, etc. (Bazarova and Choi, 2014).

Although self-disclosure is of essence for achieving satisfaction in developing particular intimacy in interpersonal relationships, it also affects the quality of relationships. The frequency and contents of self-disclosure behaviour may influence the enhancement of relationships (Christensen, 2011).

Self-disclosure of people has its own risks, thus, people usually disclose themselves cautiously to the people they trust. Self-disclosure is a mutual behaviour. Mutual sharing is very motivating and intentional. However, many emotional self-disclosure behaviours, such as updating status, uploading photos, commenting, etc., on social media is performed to receive social support from others and to feel affinity (Qiu et. al., 2012).

## 3 SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SELF-DISCLOSURE

Social media is a communication environment that allows people to simultaneously and mutually communicate/interact with each other. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as a personal web page or a means of communication, which emerged as a combination of web 2.0 and User Generated Content feature, and which allows its users to share the contents and applications created by the users, and also allows them to make changes on those contents. In general, social media covers blogs, which allows people to present (self- presentation) and disclose (self-disclosure) themselves, collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), content communities (e.g. YouTube) network sites (e.g. Facebook), virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life), and virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft) (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 62-64). Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social network site as "web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system". Facebook has over 1.044.000.000 active users throughout the world (Tornøe, 2015, p. 27). Facebook's (2014) mission, which states that it aims to make the world more open and connected, is in fact encouraging people to explain or disclose themselves by continuously asking "what's on your mind?" to its users. The people express themselves to others through their own contents and photographs (Xie and Kang, 2015).

Facebook, which is one of the social network sites that offers an opportunity for interaction, provides a chance to its users to update their profiles and status, to maintain their existing friendships and establish new friendships. It is also defined as peripheral platform, which enables its users to establish life-long social networks / connections with its features, such as walls, discussion boards, photo tagging and various

applications (Liu, 2010). Social networks enable people to establish relations through the communication channels, other than traditional channels, and to maintain and consolidate their existing relations. Self-disclosure behaviour in social networks also has its own risks. In this sense, Facebook offers the power of control by adding features, such as limiting the visibility of their profile information and other shared contents, or allowing certain people to view that information (Waters and Ackerman, 2011).

The usage and features of Facebook, which was initially developed for college students, and then made available for public use, has developed from 2004 to 2014. The root cause of Facebook's vast popularity is that it allows people to disclose themselves and to gain a social self, and to participate in communities that they have always wanted to be a part of. In this sense, this social network site asks people "what you say about yourself, who you choose to publicly associate with, what your connections say about you" (Stutzman et.al. 2012,p. 10-11).

Social media technologies allow people to disclose their personal information on online networks, thus, millions of people disclose themselves everyday as a part of their daily lives and share their personal information. It is also observed that the people share many different subjects, such as their public/common opinions / general opinions (restaurants, food, etc.), their sexual preferences, relationship status and their moods (Bazarova and Choi, 2014).

Qui et.al (2012) suggests that Facebook users prefer to give positive impressions through their self-disclosure behaviour and try to avoid negative expressions and images to create a self-image. Thus, they are able to create a better image than their real life and their emotional health would become way better. In this context, they publish their friend lists, which include more attractive people on Facebook, and thus they believe that they can create a better and more social image. In a sense, they can create an image that is idealized on Facebook.

According to Walther's hyperpersonal interaction model, online media provides more opportunities for people to manage their relationships, to share and reveal the things that they cannot share in face-to-face communication or to create a desirable image and to gain social acceptance. In online media, the people use more verbal expressions and even a language of their own, and make their own presentations over selected topics (Walther, 2007).

Carnegie Mellon University's data set on Facebook usage indicates that the people share their addresses, telephone numbers, appearances, political views, instant messenger names, birth dates, interests, favourite books/music/movies, their hometowns and schools (Stutzman, 2012). Siibak et al. (2009) suggests that while disclosing themselves on Facebook, people prefer to show their favourable attributes, and do this by using their best-looking and most attractive photographs and profile pictures.

Self-disclosure behaviour focuses on self-disclosure based on trust and on ensuring people's self-expression. Self-disclosure behaviour through Facebook allows people to achieve satisfactions, such as relaxing, entertainment, partnership, expression of feelings and opinions, meeting with others and establishing social interactions, etc. (Chang and Heo, 2014).

#### **4 AN ANALYSIS ABOUT SELF- DISCLOSURE ON FACEBOOK**

The purpose of this study is to reveal the ways people disclose themselves on social network websites (Facebook), and on which dimension/dimensions of self-disclosure behaviour the people begin to share. In this context, the study focuses on the following two main questions:

- On which dimension/dimensions of self-disclosure behaviour do the people begin to share on Facebook?
- Which situation/topic does the self-disclosure behaviour of people on Facebook focus on?

The sample of the research has been determined as 77 people among 1350 people on Facebook friend lists of the researchers, who had updated their "what's on your mind?" or "status" sections of their Facebook profiles in two days between November 30 and December 1, 2015. In other words, 77 posts/status updates constitute the sample of the research. Qualitative content analysis has been determined as the research method. Qualitative content analysis examines "the relationship between the text and its likely audience

meaning, recognizing that media texts. Also, analysts can record notations during coding in relation to contextual factors (Macnamara, 2005)". In this context, the dimensions, which Knight (2012) has defined regarding self-disclosure of people in his work "Social Workers' Attitudes Towards and Engagement in Self-Disclosure", have been determined as the codes of the research. These dimensions could be indicated as: "Disclose personal relationships, Disclose personal feelings, Disclose professional background, Disclose personal and professional successes and failures, Disclose personal beliefs, Disclose personal background, Disclose sexual feelings/ behaviours, Disclose current issues in personal life, Allow friends to see feelings and reactions, Discuss thoughts about what friends shares, Discuss feelings about what friends shares".

Based on the dimensions used in the analysis, two researchers have analysed 77 posts/status updates in two different Facebook profiles and created a code chart, and then they cross-checked the charts created on the basis of these codes. Another researcher has also checked the classification made on the basis of the code chart.

#### **4.1. Research Findings**

After the analysis of the statements in posts/status updates on Facebook profiles of 77 people within the context of the dimensions of self-disclosure, it is observed that the updates are focused on four dimensions. Although there are updates in the dimensions other than these four dimensions, they are few in number. It is observed that the 70% of the contents published by Facebook users have disclosed personal feelings, i.e. self-disclosure, 59.5% of the contents were published to allow friends to see feelings and reactions, 56% of the contents were published to disclose current issues in personal life, and 52.5% of the contents were published to disclose personal beliefs. In this context, the statements/sentences used by those people to disclose themselves in all dimensions are shown below:

##### *4.1.1 Disclose personal feelings*

Indicates expression of personal feelings and sharing them with others. In the shared content analysed in this research, it is observed that people expressed their personal feelings and used symbols and emoticons to express non-verbal communication elements (smiley face, crying face, winking face, etc.). While many of those posts were about expressing the person's feelings, it is also observed that the person seeks attention/awareness by expressing his/her emotional state to others. In addition, it is also observed that the emotional posts also aim to keep others informed and to receive replies. It is observed that people use sayings and poetic quotes, which express their emotions while disclosing their feelings. The following are the expressions determined for disclose personal feelings:

"Have a good week don't try to be good, just try not to be bad, that's all!"

"There are some people in every city that I fondly and longingly hug... The space, time and the roads are not enough. It's time to hit the road... Hope to be in Izmir tonight... Farewell Bursa..."

"Everybody hurts like me, everyone's mother gets sad like mine!"

"The soul always knows how to heal itself, the real trouble is to silence the mind."

"You understand why I ruminate

I live in an unliveable world... S. Ali"

"My dear grandpa, who passed away 49 years ago when he was 40 years old... Atty. ... I would really love to know you."

##### *4.1.2 Allow friends to see feelings and reactions*

Another dimension of self-disclosure, "allow friends to see feelings and reactions" is used in situations, where they want their thoughts/feelings/reactions to be known by their friends. Thus, people expect support, interest, opinions, guidance, accompaniment, affinity, etc., by posting about a topic/status. They also want to draw attention of other people in some aspects and post status updates. However, the people also want to see other people care about what he cares about and post status updates in this context. The following are the expressions determined for "allow friends to see feelings and reactions":

Thank God I have a home and I can sleep in peace... The winter is around the corner. Let's just don't pass by the homeless... Some water and a piece of bread..."

"My little bunny, my cutie pie... He is growing bigger!!!"

"Love it: the father who prepares fruits for his family every evening"

"I wish we had never grown up to remain this innocent",

"Please check your tires before you take the road; this is not only for your own safety, but also for our little friends... Rescue status: Successful".

#### *4.1.3 Disclose current issues in personal life*

People want to inform others about where they live, what they are up to, and whom they are with. In this context, when "disclose current issues in personal life" dimension of self-disclosure behavior is analyzed, it is observed that the people update their status by adding a photograph related to their current status. It is also observed in these posts that people want to inform others and draw their attention. The following are the expressions determined for "disclose current issues in personal life":

"It was a rainy day."

"I'll have breakfast, have a cup of coffee and hit the road for Izmir..."

"And Izmir... Would Izmir welcome me?"

"Enjoying the concert with my son", "It's true that I'm a little shopaholic"

#### *4.1.4 Disclose personal beliefs*

Disclose personal beliefs are a dimension, where a person expresses his beliefs and opinions in many different topics, such as life, other people, behaviours, etc. When the posts about this dimension are analysed, it is observed that the people try to impose their own beliefs or try to show others the right way. However, the people maintain a stance by expressing the things they personally believe and advocate and give an impression about themselves in this sense. The following are the expressions determined for "disclose personal beliefs":

"There are still good people in this world!" "If 2000 people from 3-4 generations are nodding each other "willy-nilly/compulsorily", something fishy is going around here"

"Never stop believing and praying... everything will be better"

"You can travel the world, but in the end, you have to get back to yourself." Krishnamurti.

It is observed in the analysis of the Facebook posts of these people that "disclose personal relationships" and "disclose personal and professional successes and failures" self-disclosure dimensions were also present among four main dimensions "disclose personal feelings, allow friends to see feelings and reactions, disclose current issues in personal life, disclose personal beliefs". Even if just a little, these posts also help people to express themselves. A person posts "The pavements smell like rain, I am compelled to you but you are not here" by Atilla İlhan as a status update, means he/she shows a self-disclosure behaviour in "disclose personal relationships" dimension, and in this sense, he/she expresses the current status by explaining his/her relationship. The posts in "Disclose personal and professional successes and failures" self-disclosure dimension are observed to be about the personal success stories or business of a person, and in this sense, it may be suggested that he/she tries to give the message that he/she is all interested in his/her achievements or business. A user, who posts a status update with the following statement "My 7th Personal Photograph Exhibition 'REFLECTIONS FROM TRADITION'", both invites others to this event by informing them, and also shares his/her achievement with others.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As a result of the analysis that has been performed to determine on which dimension/dimensions of self-disclosure behaviour the people share and on which situation/topic do the self-disclosure behaviour of people on Facebook focus on, it has been determined that self-disclosure is fulfilled through four dimensions, namely “disclose personal feelings, allow friends to see feelings and reactions, disclose current issues in personal life, disclose personal beliefs”. It has also determined that the posts analysed generally focused on the emotions/feelings of people. At this point, as it was stated in functional approach to self-disclosure, the people disclose themselves strategically by using selective statements. However, as explained in hyperpersonal interaction model of Walther (2007), when the posts are evaluated in general, it has also been observed that the people express their opinions, which they could not share in face-to-face communication, through Facebook. It may be concluded that the people try to explain themselves and to be better perceived by sharing information about very private topics. It is also observed as a result of the analysis of the posts that the statements in their posts focus on explanations creating or maintaining positive feelings about themselves. In this sense, the research supports Qui et.al's (2012) suggestion stating that “Facebook users prefer to give positive impressions through their self-disclosure behaviour and try to avoid negative expressions”. When a considerable part of the posts are taken into account, it may also be stated that the desire to receive approval and support from others when posting a notice or a statement is closely related to self-disclosure behaviour.

The fact that the researchers only focused on post/status update information and ignored non-verbal or visual elements in this research should be evaluated as a limiting factor. In addition, the fact that the research period was limited to two days may also be considered as an obstacle to reach more comprehensive conclusions. It is believed that this research analysing self-disclosure behaviour in virtual environment, where self-disclosure dimensions on Facebook have been analyzed, draws attention to the need of adding visuals and non-verbal factors. The need for analyzing visual and non-verbal factors in determining self-disclosure behaviour in virtual environment may be stated in future studies.

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