

3-2016

Is Social Media like an Onion?: Exploring the Social Penetration Theory as an Explanation for Viral Responses to Intimate Self-Disclosures

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Recommended Citation

Kays, Kristina M.; Miles, Rebekah E.; and Koch, Christopher J., "Is Social Media like an Onion?: Exploring the Social Penetration Theory as an Explanation for Viral Responses to Intimate Self-Disclosures" (2016). *Faculty Publications - Psychology Department*. Paper 49.

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Is Social Media like an Onion?

Exploring the Social Penetration Theory as an explanation for viral responses to intimate self-disclosures.

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Figure 1: Image from viral Facebook post



A recent public FB post about a personal experience with depression went viral within a week. Within a week this post was reposted on numerous media outlets, and shared by others nearly 500,000 times. This post skipped to the third, affective stage, of the Social Penetration Theory.

Introduction

According to recent Pew research, roughly 2/3 of adults are currently active users of social media (Perrin, 2015). Level of perceived loneliness influence levels of self-disclosure on social networking sites (SNS) (Al-Saggaf & Nielsen, 2014). Increased amount and perception of negative versus positive self-disclosure influence the sense of intimacy and connectedness in Facebook (FB) sharing (Park, Jin, & Jin, 2011). News feed features in social media such as FB allow participants to be alerted to current activity of those they know (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011). This possible exposure plays an active role in the potential for a post to gather increasing attention.

Altman and Taylor (1973) introduced the Social Penetration Theory (SPT) in 1973 as a model for understanding how information sharing and relationship intimacy interact as disclosure increases in interpersonal relationships. The SPT can be used to evaluate levels of self-disclosure. SPT (Griffin, 2011) suggests that communication transitions from a more surface level to levels of increasing intimacy. There are five stages outlined in the SPT including, 1) orientation, 2) exploratory affective, 3) affective, 4) stable, to an optional 4) depenetration stage (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981). Most casual relationships will remain in the first two stages. In the deconstruction of a relationship there can be either a long or abbreviated time spent in the depenetration stage. Stage three, the affective stage, is exemplified by sharing private and personal matters.

In recent research (Chang & Heo, 2014; Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2012.) more teens and young adults respond to mental health FB posts than middle-aged adults. However, adolescents and adults are more similar than distinct in what they do share on FB (Christofides et al., 2012). Users who more frequently like and post on others' pages are more likely to self-disclose in response to the initial FB post (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2015). Individuals with low self-esteem consider FB an appealing place for self-disclosure (Forest & Wood, 2012). However, due to the low positivity and high negativity of their disclosures, frequently these posts elicit unwanted responses from others. Greater self-disclosure on social media such as FB has been found to enhance confidence in interactions (Palmeria, Prestano, Gandley, Overton, & Zhang, 2012). This higher level of self-disclosure appears to compensate for the non-verbal cues normally appearing in face-to-face interactions. If this enhanced confidence increases interactions that allow for greater affective expression, there is potential for physical and psychological benefits (MacReady, Cheung, Kelly, & Wang, 2011).

One example of a high level of self-disclosure on FB is seen in Figure 1. In this example the post included a narrative of mental health concern (depression) and an image that demonstrated the individual's intent to take positive action about the mental health concern. While unintended, this FB post received over 452,000 likes, over 358,000 shares, and over 42,500 comments. The majority of these were garnered within the first two weeks of the original post, however, there are still likes, comments, and shares each week. Because greater levels of self-disclosure are associated with improvement in mental health recovery (Lear, 1990; Rabinor & Nye, 2003), one question worth exploring is whether social media may be a viable option in supporting mental health improvements.

Methods

This research used a follow up survey in response to viewing a recent Facebook post about a personal experience with depression which went viral.

Table 1 Subjects

Table 1: Facebook follow up survey	N=95 73.68% female 20 Countries represented US=48 UK=14
Mean age	32.58
SD	12.09

Results

The follow up survey results indicate a general increase in openness to interacting with others about mental health issues.

Chart 1: Survey question #1

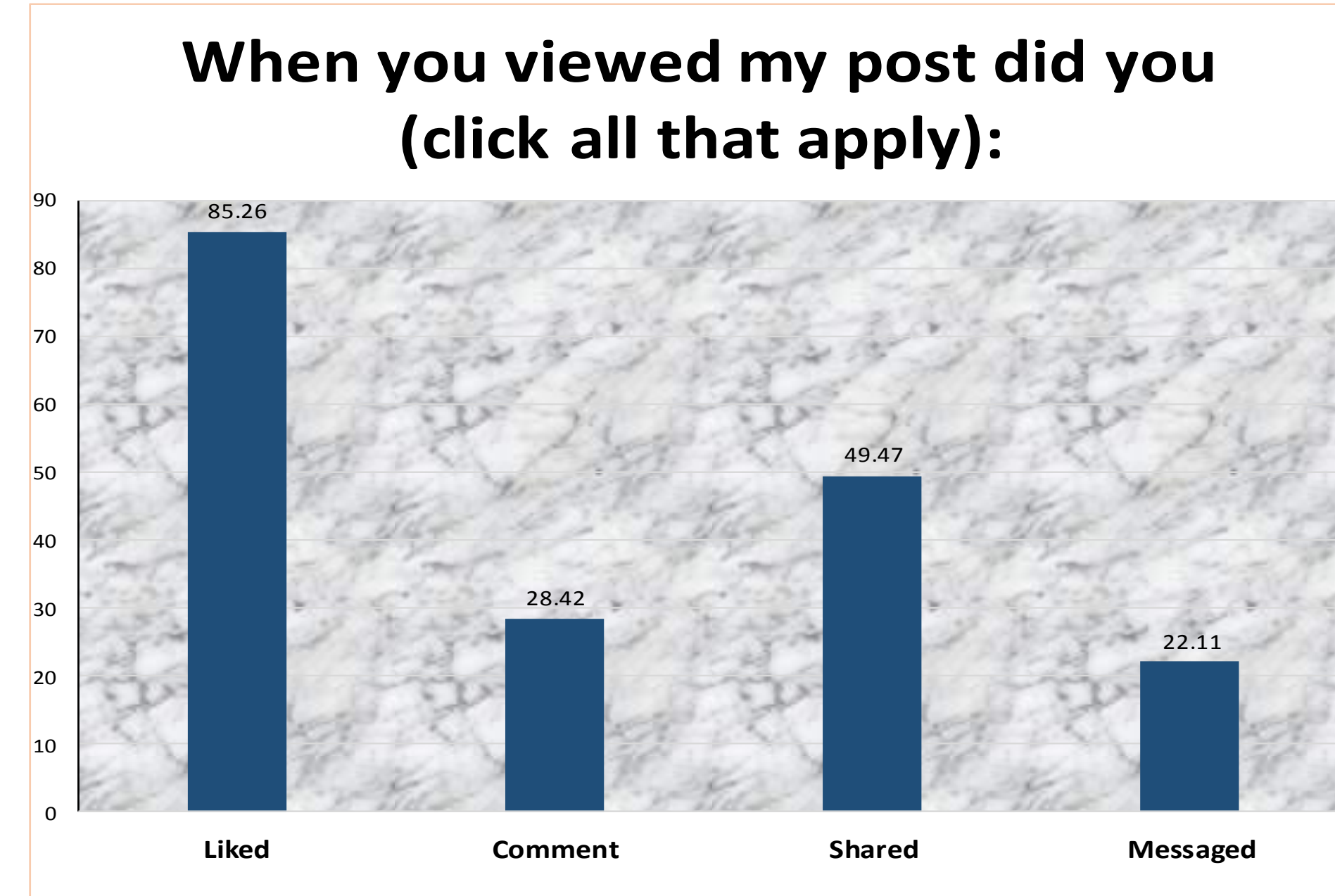


Chart 2: Survey question #2

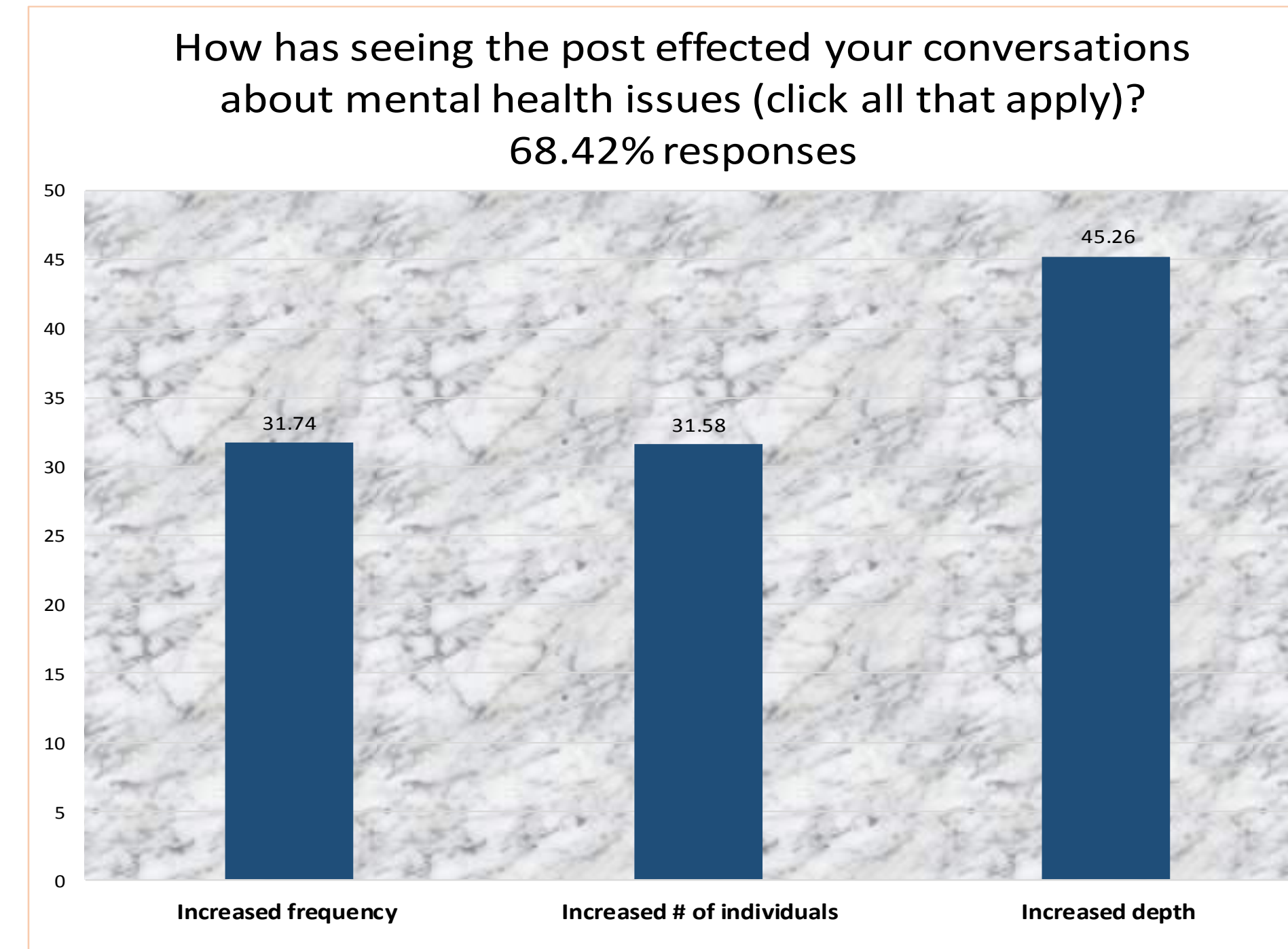
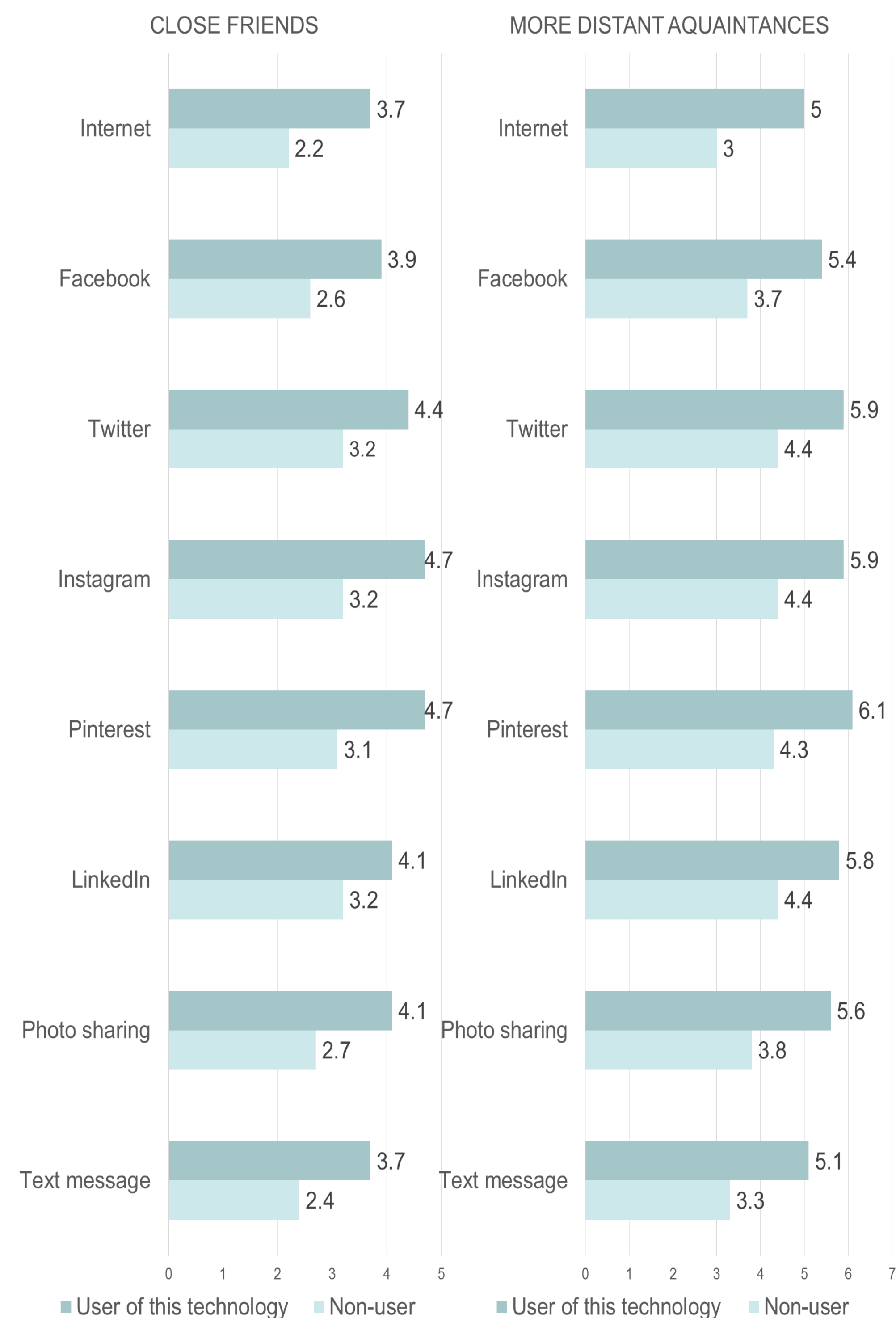


Table 2: Pew Research

Technology users are aware of more stressful events in the lives of their close friends and more distant acquaintances

The average number of stressful events (out of a total of 12 possible) that people knew occurred in the lives of their close friends and more distant acquaintances in the past 12 months



Note: Based on responses to Q4: "... Please tell me if you know someone—other than yourself—who has experienced any of the following in the past 12 months. Do you know someone who has ..." followed by a list of 12 different stressful events.
Source: August 2013 survey. N=1,801 adults.

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Discussion

Social Penetration Theory (SPT) suggests there is a pattern of sharing that allows for increasingly intimate self-disclosures. Social media may alter the typical trajectory of self-disclosure and, in some situations, may provide a potential for acceleration to more intimate affective disclosures (STP affective stage 3).

The findings in this current study suggest that talking about mental health issues prompts others to disclose their own personal information. This is consistent with approaches to group therapy, where the risky sharing of potentially shameful personal information by one group member has the power to prove the environment safe and beneficial for other members to disclose their own stories (Lear, 1990). Thus, there is a potential for certain engagement on social media platforms (e.g. Facebook) to provide a form of group therapy. In the original FB post cited by this current study, this appears to have been the case. The vast majority of comments in the 40,000+ posted within the first two weeks were positive and personal self-disclosures.

Comment examples:

I suffer from depression and other mental illnesses. I recently tried to end my life but GOD was not ready for me to come home. Not sure what I'm trying to say here ...but thank you for sharing your story. I still struggle on a daily basis but you give me hope.
Adult female

You are so brave and courageous to post this. I think your brave declaration is going to help many start to have their own conversations. Helping others is part of my routine to manage depression. Bravo darling. Bravo!
Adult female

As is clear from recent Pew research (see Table 2), greater awareness of stressful events in the lives of those connected through social media is present. This connection can be part of valuable interactions that provide essential support and encouragement. However, limitations of the social media venue relate to access and tendency for usage. Higher income and education status is associated with greater social media usage (Perrin, 2015). Thus, the use of social media as a potential resource for mental health concern awareness is going to have greater impact with a restricted section of society.

There is a growing trend that social media is a venue for starting conversations about intimate affective content. While this study is a preliminary review of a social media post that was not explicitly intended to test these hypotheses, this is an example of the potential for using the growing trends to increase the sharing of high quality interactions. The challenge for mental health providers and educators is to assess how to utilize this potential for positive and effective interactions.

Limitations of this study include the convenience of the survey and self-report bias from the participants. There are no ways to accurately conclude why participants chose to take the survey. Our findings suggest that adults respond to mental health social media posts more than teens and young adults, unlike recent research suggests (Chang & Heo, 2014; Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2012). This could be due to the respondents of the survey and not the respondents of the original viral post, but the data was not available.

Further research is recommended to address the benefits of using social media in increasing global and personal awareness of mental health concerns.

Additionally, educators and mental health providers must take into account that not all social media users have positive connections with their networks. Research into how to improve accessing to beneficial resources for those at greatest risk will improve the use of this trending communication platform.

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