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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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**Is Social Media like an Onion?**

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

Kristina M. Kays, Rebekah E. Miles, Christopher J. Koch

George Fox University

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**Introduction**

According to recent Pew research, roughly 2/3 of adults are currently active users of social media platforms, and a growing number of individuals report high levels of self-disclosure on social networking sites (Brown, 1981). Facebook (FB) appears to be the most popular social media site for self-disclosure among adults (Perrin, 2015). Level of perceived loneliness influence levels of self-disclosure on social networking sites (SNS) (McReady, Cheung, Kelly, & Wang, 2011). However, due to the low penetration and relatively low social media usage, individuals who do participate in SNS may be more likely than non-participants to benefit from using the platform. This is especially true for those who may have not experienced the same level of exposure to the platform.

Forest and Wood (2012) introduced the Social Penetration Theory (SPT) as a model for understanding how information sharing and relationship intimacy interact as people become more intimate. According to the SPT, individuals will engage in more open communication as the relationship becomes more intimate, and this increase in openness will be the result of the partner’s increasing willingness to disclose private information.

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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 sap the typical hierarchy of self-disclosure and, in some situations, provide a venue for disclosure to more intimate affective disclosures (SPT affective stage 3).

The findings in this current study suggest that talking about mental health issues prompt others to disclose their own personal information. This is consistent with approaches to group therapy, where the shy 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 (see, e.g., Brown, 1981). Thus, there is potential for certain engaging conversations to occur on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook) to provide a form of group therapy. The challenge for mental health providers and educators is to awaken to these possibilities.

**Limitations**

Limitations of this study include the convenience of the survey and self-report bias from the participants. There are ways to accurately conclude why participants choose 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, He, & Chang, 2016; Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2012). This could be due to the respondents of the survey and not the actual users of the platform, 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 perceptions of the platform. This 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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**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.

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**Methods**

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

**Table 1 Subjects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facebook follow up survey</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>20 Countries represented</th>
<th>Mean ± SD</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45.26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>52.86</td>
<td>32.58</td>
<td>73.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results**

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

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**Chart 1: Survey question #1**

When you viewed my post did you (click all that apply):

- Liked
- Commented
- Shared
- Managed

Note: Based on responses to Q1: ‘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 2015 survey, US=48, UK=14.

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**Chart 2: Survey question #2**

How has seeing the post affected your conversations about mental health issues (click all that apply):

- 68.42% respondents
- 31.58% respondents
- 31.74% respondents

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**Table 2: Pew Research**

The average number of stressful events (out of a total of 12 possible) that people know someone who has experienced in the last 12 months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLOSE FRIENDS</th>
<th>MORE DISTANT ACQUAINTANCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>11.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**References**


—. (2013). 68.42% responses