Understanding the Predictors of Negative Personal Relationship Experiences on Facebook

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Abstract

Although online social networking sites are designed to facilitate social interaction and connection, there is evidence that exposing one's social activities in a public domain may have negative implications for personal relationships. The purpose of this study is to explore the predictors of negative relationship experiences on Facebook. Three hundred and seventeen current Facebook users completed a survey that assessed demographic and psychosocial factors and explored respondents' Facebook use. The Disinhibition-scale of Zuckerman's (1971) Sensation Seeking Scale was used to measure cognitive disinhibition. A hierarchical regression model revealed that disinhibition significantly predicts negative relationship experiences on Facebook. Our study provides evidence that disinhibited individuals may practice risky online activities, resulting in information disclosure that damages personal relationships.

Keywords: Facebook, disinhibition, personal relationships

1. Introduction

Online social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, are having a profound impact on the way people communicate and connect with each other. These online social networking sites give users a place to share their opinions, experiences, and photographs with their friends. They also connect people with friends and others who work, study, and live around the world. They help people learn more about events, parties and other social functions. Ultimately, the purpose of online social networking sites is to facilitate social interaction and connection. While developing and maintaining relationships are important reasons for using online social network sites, there is evidence that exposing one's social activities in a public domain may have some negative implications for personal relationships. A recent MSNBC article suggests that Facebook may be responsible for creating suspicion and jealousy in romantic relationships (Persch, 2007). Furthermore, Muise, Christophides, & Desmarais (2009) found that increased Facebook use significantly contributed to jealousy-related feelings and behaviors experienced on Facebook. The authors argue that Facebook exposes people to information about their partner that they may not otherwise have, which, in turn, creates a feedback loop whereby heightened jealousy leads to increased surveillance of a partner's Facebook page.

One factor that makes online social networking sites potentially harmful to personal relationships is the heightened sense of disinhibition they may foster. Cognitive disinhibition is a personality or temperamental trait in which people are insensitive to future consequences of their decisions (Zuckerman, 1979). Studies have shown disinhibition is positively associated with alcohol usage, substance abuse, gambling addiction, and risky sexual behavior (Reed et al, 2003; Bechera et al, 2001; Baker & Yardley, 2002; Grant, Contoreggi, & London, 2000; McDaniel, 2002; Arnold, Fletcher, & Farrow, 2002). For the users of social networking sites, disinhibition may lead to risky usage behaviors and privacy practices that compromise personal relationships. Joinson (2007) has argued that the Internet may exacerbate an already disinhibited personality. Online users appear to open up more quickly and reveal themselves emotionally much faster than in the offline world. Walther (1996) referred to this phenomenon as Hyperpersonal Communication. Walther argued that this occurs because of four features of online communication:

- The communicators usually share social categories, and so will perceive each other as similar.
- The message senders can present themselves in a positive light, and so may be more confident.
- The format of online interaction (e.g. there are not other distractions, users can spend time composing messages, mix social and task messages, users don't waste cognitive resources by answering immediately).
- The communication medium provides a feedback loop whereby initial impressions are built upon and strengthened.

In light of past research, the current study was designed to explore the sociodemographic and psychosocial factors influencing negative personal relationship experiences on Facebook. Specifically, we investigate the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the sociodemographic variables of age, gender, ethnicity, and education relate to the occurrence of negative personal relationship experiences on Facebook?

RQ2: How does Facebook activity (frequency of use and number of Facebook friends) relate to the occurrence of negative personal relationship experiences on Facebook?

RQ3: How does cognitive disinhibition relate to the occurrence of negative personal   relationship experiences on Facebook?

2. Materials and Methods

The study method involved an online survey of adults who were recruited with a social network approach using Facebook. To solicit adult survey participants who had a Facebook profile, we posted an invitation message with the URL to the online questionnaire to a number of online social groups of Facebook. During the data collection period (March 24, 2010 - April 24, 2010), a total of 317 useful questionnaires were collected.   Among the 317 respondents, 32.8% were male and 67.2% were female. A majority of the respondents (63.7%) were under the age of 34, with 44.5% between the ages of 18 and 25. The sample was overwhelmingly Caucasian (95%) and heterosexual (98.1%). In terms of Facebook use, 63.9% of the respondents reported visiting the site several times per day. Over half (56.3%) of the respondents had more than 300 "friends," and 30.1% reported having between 100 and 300 "friends."

Participants were asked to respond to twelve statements dealing with negative personal, relational, and professional experiences on Facebook. One statement was considered especially relevant to our study: "I have had a personal relationship severely damaged by some Facebook activity." We assessed the negative experiences on a five-point scale (1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree). In addition to the experiential questions, participants were asked to respond to six statements adapted from Zuckerman's (1971) Disinhibition Subscale. An example statement is: "I frequently become intoxicated." Again, a five-point scale was used. The internal consistency of this scale as measured by the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was found to be 0.77.

3. Results

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to allow control over the order in which the theoretically-relevant variables were entered into the regression equations (see Table1). To investigate Research Question 1, the sociodemographic variables of age, gender, ethnicity, and education were entered as the first step in the model. The Facebook activity variables of frequency of use and number of friends were entered at the second step as an investigation of Research Question 2, and disinhibition was entered at step three to investigate Research Question 3. Of the variables entered in step one, only age emerged as a significant predictor. This revealed that age is negatively and significantly associated with relational difficulties using Facebook. All other demographic variables, however, were found to be statistically insignificant. In step two, frequency of Facebook visits emerged as a significant predictor of negative relational Facebook experiences. When the disinhibition variable was added to the model in step three, it significantly added to the prediction of negative relationship experiences on Facebook. Even after controlling for demographics and frequency of use, the respondents' level of cognitive disinhibition determines whether they experience negative relationship outcomes using Facebook.

4. Discussion

Although Facebook may be used to develop and maintain personal relationships, the open nature of online social networks creates a potential for negative relational outcomes. The data shows that younger adults are more likely to experience relational problems using Facebook. Muise, Christophides, & Desmarais (2009) suggest that older adults may be less well equipped to deal with the difficulties that Facebook poses to relationships; furthermore, older adults have a longer past and more old friends and partners, thus exposing them to a greater potential for negative relationship issues. Our results suggest that the opposite is true.

Older Facebook users report less relational difficulties using the online social network. One possible explanation for this finding is that older, more mature adults tend to use Facebook for different purposes than younger adults. We asked the participants in our survey their reasons for using Facebook. Those under the age of 26 placed a significantly greater importance on using Facebook for "friendship" and "dating" purposes. Those who are 26 or older, however, reported using Facebook more to stay in touch with family. As such, older adults are using Facebook for purposes that are less likely to harm relationships. An interesting finding in our study is that frequency of Facebook use is positively associated with negative relationship experiences on Facebook. This result is consistent with the work of Muise, Christophides, & Desmarais (2009) who showed a significant relationship between time spent on Facebook and jealousy-related feelings and behaviors experienced on Facebook. Our work suggests that Facebook may bring an individual into contact with potentially damaging information about friends and partners. This, in turn, creates a cycle whereby relational conflict leads to spying on a partner's Facebook page. Further research is needed to clearly determine the direction of causality. Also, future research may explore the possible effects of confounding variables. For example, it has been found that agreeableness is negatively related to higher levels of Internet use, suggesting that those who do not get along with others spend their time on the Internet (Landers & Lounsbury, 2004).

The major contribution of this study lies in understanding the relationship between disinhibition and the negative relational effects of Facebook. The findings were straightforward in showing that the respondents who scored higher on the Disinhibition-scale of Zuckerman's (1971) Sensation Seeking Scale were more likely to have experienced damaged personal relationships using Facebook. This finding is consistent with the results reported previously in studies which show that sensation seeking preferences (measured by self-reported questionnaires) are related to engagement in a variety of risky behaviors behavior (Reed et al, 2003; Bechera et al, 2001; Baker & Yardley, 2002; Grant, Contoreggi, & London, 2000; McDaniel, 2002; Arnold, Fletcher, & Farrow, 2002). These risks can be physical, legal, financial, or social. Research suggests that cognitively disinhibited individuals are somewhat impaired in real-life decision making (Bechera et al, 2001; Grant, Contoreggi, & London, 2000). More specifically, for some individuals the rewards of the sensation outweigh any possible punishments from engaging in the activity and there is a willingness to take risks for the sake of the experience. Correspondingly, disinhibited individuals may practice high disclosure on Facebook, not realizing (or not caring) that their own information disclosure may damage a personal relationship.

Given the number and types of participants sampled in this study, the generalizability of the findings are limited. Also, the data used in the study were collected via self-report and may have been subject to biases inherent in this technique. However, the anonymous nature of the questionnaire and the lack of consequences from reporting risky sensation-seeking behavior is likely to have minimized these. An additional limitation of this study was derived from the relatively low R-square value. A low R-square value indicates that other variables may be involved in predicting negative relationship experiences on Facebook. This limitation could be improved by including multiple factors and possibly employing a different statistical analysis. Further research is needed to examine whether the observed relationships are direct or indirect and which variables, if any, mediates or confounds these relationships.

Overall, this study is valuable in that it provides evidence of psychosocial factors involved in the outcomes of online social network use. Zuckerman's (1971) Sensation Seeking scale has not previously been applied to Facebook use, and the findings of the current study provide strong support for doing so. It is imperative for researchers to continue to identify the psychosocial factors that influence some individuals to use online social networks in ways that prove harmful to themselves and to others. Research like this can help inform psychologists, counselors, educators, and parents of the types of people who are likely to develop relational problems using Facebook and other online social network sites. Once identified, these individuals could be encouraged to participate in less risky sensation-seeking activities.

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Table 1. Hierarchical Regression of Predictors of Negative Relationship Experiences Using Facebook			
Predictor Variables	Regression 1	Regression 2	Regression 3
Age (1, 18-25; 6, 65 or older)	-0.272^{***}	-0.202^{***}	-0.098^{*}
Gender (0, male; 1, female)	-0.055	-0.065	0.003
Ethnicity (0, white; 1, nonwhite)	-0.058	-0.062	-0.066
Education (1, some high school; 6 post graduate)	-0.028	-0.031	-0.023
Frequency of Visits (1, once a month; 7 hourly)		0.147^{**}	0.131^{**}
Number of Facebook Friends (1, $\leq$ 50; 6, $\geq$ 1000)		0.096	0.064
Disinhibition			0.286^{***}
R^2	0.083^{***}	0.115^{***}	0.172^{***}
R^2 change	0.083^{***}	0.032^{**}	0.057^{***}

$*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001$