



Stranger on the internet: Online self-disclosure and the role of visual anonymity



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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the phenomenon of online self-disclosure. Two qualitative data analyses of YouTube videos were conducted. The studies revealed emerging forms of self-disclosure online, which are not necessarily bound to conditions of visual anonymity. This finding puts previous research results into question, which stress the strong correlation between self-disclosure and visual anonymity. The results of both qualitative studies showed that people also tend to disclose information in (visually) non-anonymous settings.

The paper concludes by presenting a revised model of online self-disclosure and describing enhancing factors for self-disclosing behaviour on the internet based on the latest research results.

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1. Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure, which has been intensively studied since the 1970s, pertains to the process of exposing personal and intimate information. Defined by Archer (1980, p. 183) it can be described as the act of revealing personal information to others, and, in the proper sense, when it concerns a person's own information. Parameters of self-disclosure include the breadth (or amount), the intimacy (or depth) and duration of self-revelation (Cozby, 1973). Breadth means the number of details revealed, intimacy describes the level of privacy, and duration refers to the time spent on revealing the information.

Self-disclosure is a relevant factor in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Based on the social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) it is a crucial part of relationship development, which ranges from non-intimate to increasingly more intimate information exchange. There is a good number of research concerning the relationship between self-disclosure and liking (Berg & Archer, 1983; Chalkin & Derlega, 1974). Furthermore, self-disclosure seems to be a symmetrical process within dyads (e.g., Jourard & Landsman, 1960; Jourard & Resnick, 1970). Often, it is a process that occurs incrementally and takes time to develop (e.g., summary Pearce & Sharp, 1973). The process itself of revealing information is normally characterised by reciprocity (Jourard, 1959; Jourard & Landsman, 1960; Jourard & Richman, 1963). Both factors, reciprocity and time

(incremental development), tend to become less important when the social actors are strangers and the possibility of future interactions is unlikely (see the experiment by Murdoch, Chenowith, & Rissman, 1969). This phenomenon is known as the 'stranger-on-the-train' effect, which describes the fact that people disclose significantly more and faster to strangers when future interaction does not seem to be probable (e.g., John, Acquisti, & Loewenstein, 2011).

While psychologists analyse self-disclosure in the context of personality traits and focus on its emotional components and effects, this paper draws the attention to the media characteristics (channel characteristics of internet services) and to their influence on the willingness of users to disclose information on the internet. This paper deals with the initial and insofar proactive forms of self-disclosing behaviour in YouTube videos. The aim is to show that self-disclosure occurs online, even when the disclosing person is visually not anonymous – a finding, which puts previous research into question which claimed a strong relationship between visual anonymity and self-disclosure (e.g., Joinson, 2001).

2. Self-disclosure online: Current state of research

Empirical studies have shown that the willingness to disclose information is significantly higher in the context of computer-mediated communication than in face-to-face-settings. In addition, it seems as if anonymity plays a decisive role within this process (e.g., Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Chiou, 2006; Joinson, 2001; Suler, 2004; Taddei, Contena, & Grana, 2010; Weisband & Kiesler, 1996).

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Most studies about self-disclosure online investigated the self-disclosing behaviour of children, adolescents, or students in the context of social network sites (e.g., Chen & Marcus, 2012; De Souza & Dick, 2009; DeGroot, 2008; Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010; Palmieri, Prestano, Gandley, Overton, & Qin, 2012; Park, Jin, & Annie Jin, 2011) or personal weblogs (Chen, 2012; Hollenbaugh, 2010; Lee, Im, & Taylor, 2008; Qian & Scott, 2007). They discovered that online self-disclosure did not foster the use of social network sites (Ledbetter et al., 2011) but weblogs only (e.g., Lee et al., 2008). Research on gender aspects offered inconsistent data. Some studies showed gender differences in online self-disclosing behaviour, which revealed that females divulge significantly lesser information on their social network sites compared to male users (Special & Li-Barber, 2012; Wu & Lu, 2013). Other studies found no difference at all (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007). Further studies revealed differences of self-disclosing behaviour in relation to age and compared the disclosing behaviour of pre-adolescents and adolescents offline and online (e.g., Valkenburg, Sumter, & Peter, 2011). Several research studies analysed the process within online discussion groups (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007) and proved the effect of contextual (group) norms as already indicated by the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). Experimental studies revealed a greater depth of disclosure among strangers when communicating online (Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). However, this is not the case for friends using cmc (computer mediated communication) (Chan & Cheng, 2004). Overall, it seems as if different norms on disclosing information might be salient when communicating online (Mesch & Beker, 2010).

Despite the large number of studies dealing with the phenomenon of online self-disclosure, there are hardly any studies that try to model self-disclosure theoretically. Nguyen, Bin, and Campbell (2012) came to the conclusion that the entire preliminary research on self-disclosure does not support any of the common theories concerning the effects of cmc (e.g., the cues filtered out approach, the SIDE model, or the model of hyperpersonal communication).

This paper aims to fill this gap by submitting a draft theoretical model of factors that shape the process of voluntary and not reciprocal self-disclosing behaviour on the internet.

3. Empirical investigation

As anonymity seems to be crucial for the increased willingness to disclose information online, we conducted two studies, using a qualitative approach, to analyse the role of anonymity in the context of self-disclosing behaviour online.

We understand the term anonymity as a condition where the sender or source of information is absent or not identifiable (e.g., Scott, 2004). This state of anonymity can be either visual or discursive. Visual anonymity means that the source of information cannot be detected physically. Discursive anonymity means that the messages of a person cannot be attributed to the sender (Scott, 2004). Both kinds of anonymity can easily be realised on the internet through the use of pseudonyms, or by using services that have reduced communication channels (e.g., text only). Channel variety and richness are bound to anonymity. Having more channels can lead to a greater amount of social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986) which is therefore aggravating the condition of anonymity by supporting different levels of identifiability. These different levels show that anonymity is a condition that must be described in degrees. The more channels there are and the more data the medium can transfer, the richer the mediated communication gets (in terms of channel variety; see media richness approach; Daft & Lengel, 1984) and the lower the degree of anonymity served by this

medium becomes. Due to this fact, it has been concluded that the grade of visual anonymity or identifiability is central to the processes of online self-disclosure.

To analyse the correlation between anonymity, in particular visual anonymity and online self-disclosure, we analysed videos on YouTube, an internet service that provides textual, audio and visual channels. YouTube can be described as a rich medium in the above-mentioned sense. YouTube is a social-network oriented video platform, which allows its users to watch or upload videos, share content, subscribe to channels and comment or rate videos. It is the largest user-generated content video system worldwide (Cha, Kwak, Rodriguez, Ahn, & Moon, 2007) and is still one of the fastest growing websites.

There are different categories of videos on YouTube. These include sports, music, entertainment, film, comedy, gaming and vlogs. Vlogs are videoblogs. They are defined as 'sites where authors post stories and/or information about themselves in the form of video, rather than text, as traditional blogs include. They are public spaces for self-expression where authors control the content published' (Griffith & Papacharissi, 2010).

To detect whether (visual) anonymity is a crucial condition for self-disclosing behaviour online, we analysed self-disclosing videos (vlogs) on YouTube: (1) videos about self-injurious behaviours and (2) the so called '(note) card stories' (see Section 3.1.2).

3.1. Selected videos

3.1.1. Videos about self-injury

Self-injurious behaviour refers to a broad class of different symptoms (often associated with Borderline Personality Disorder and with juvenile behaviours) and is defined as a behaviour where individuals deliberately and cause (great) injury to themselves. It is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that has to be isolated from behavioural manners that indirectly damage the body (e.g., chronic drug or medication abuse) (Petermann & Winkel, 2009, p. 17; for the communicational purposes of self-injury see Misoch, 2010).

The most important feature of self-injury is that it is conducted in secrecy and is normally hidden from others (e.g., Conterio & Lader, 1998). The act of deliberately injuring oneself, as well as the consequential wounds and scars, are hidden and connected with emotions dominated by shame and guilt. This behaviour can be described as stigma management (Goffman, 1963) and can be explained as a strategy of the individual to hide discreditable information in social interactions (in this case, self-mutilation itself and the resulting wounds and scars) from others. The process of communicating its symptoms can be described as a process of self-disclosure (Misoch, 2010, 2012).

3.1.2. Note card stories

So-called (note) card stories are a new frame of self-disclosing behaviour that makes use of online audio-visual channels. This new phenomenon uses the strategies of traditional offline communication – sheets of paper or cards with handwritten messages on it – and combines these messages with the new forms of communication, where the user holds up a camera with multimedia features, use the video medium and upload this video online. This new strategy for self-disclosure shows, instead of tells, a person's personal story. This method seems to occur more and more frequently and is used for deep self-disclosures on the internet. The term 'story' (instead of history) implies the subjectivity of the presented content. One of the first and most famous videos of this genre is the video uploaded by Jonah Mowry: 'Whats Goin On...' uploaded on 10.08.2011 (so far, the video has been watched by more than 10,846,000 users). The producer of this video talks respectively writes about his experience and suffering from

mobbing, self-injury and feelings of loneliness. This visual self-disclosure, in the form of a written public confession, is followed by numerous other videos that use this same frame to reveal very private and intimate information (e.g., mobbing, death of a friend/relative, sexuality [lesbian, gay], depression, eating disorders, self-injury, loneliness and suicidal thoughts).

We decided to take (note) card-stories on YouTube as an area of investigation, as those videos are new and increasingly becoming common frames of self-disclosures online. They have rarely been investigated up to this point (Misoch, 2014).

3.2. Study 1

In 2011 we conducted a qualitative study and analysed $N = 25$ videos about self-injury. A combination of random and purposive sampling strategies was used to ensure content representativeness and to prevent cluster effects. The videos were sampled from April to May 2011 using search terms. The sample was obtained using German search terms, such as 'meine Selbstverletzung' (my self-harm), 'mein Ritzen' (my scarifying) and 'mein SVV' (my self-injury). The videos were selected from the list of results according to the list of random numbers. The selection was done after it was ensured that the videos presented self-injury as one's own experience (and not as a presentation of the topic without one's own affection) and that they were representative to the content. These videos were analysed by two different researchers (method of intercoder reliability) by using the qualitative methods of hermeneutic image analysis and content analysis (e.g., Mayring, 2008; Müller-Doohm, 1997; Sowa & Uhlig, 2006).

3.3. Study 2

In Study 2, we drew a sample of 25 videos that showed individual stories in a self-disclosing manner by using the new frame of card stories. These videos were selected in December 2012 and January 2013 from the list of results by using search terms as 'my story' or 'my card story'. This means we used a purposeful sampling strategy to ensure the content representativeness of the sample. Videos that used the frame of a card story for irony or parody were removed from the sample. The final sample was analysed by two different researchers to enhance the reliability of the data. The analysis focused on the topic, the inner (narrative) structure, and the degree of visual anonymity within the self-disclosing videos. We used hermeneutic image analysis and content analysis to provide a deeper insight into this phenomenon (e.g., Mayring, 2008; Müller-Doohm, 1997; Sowa & Uhlig, 2006).

4. Results

The common hypothesis regarding anonymity on the internet is that this condition leads to an increased willingness to reveal personal information. This assumption is based on the theory of self-awareness, which states that conditions of anonymity can lead to a decreased accountability and therefore to a reduction of public awareness. As previous research has shown, cmc leads to greater private self-awareness, enhancing the salience of one's own feelings and standards (Joinson, 1999).

The results of the two empirical studies revealed that self-disclosing behaviour occurs frequently on YouTube.

Study 1 analysed the videos published on YouTube about self-injurious behaviour. The analysis of these videos showed that all videos were uploaded using a pseudonym and not by using the real name. This is an act to protect anonymity. Furthermore, the analysis showed that most of the producers of the videos used the opportunity to stay visually anonymous while disclosing personal

information online. These findings support previous research results which detected a strong correlation between anonymity and self-disclosure. Nonetheless, 30% of the videos from our sample about self-injury were not visually anonymous and they showed either the face of the presenter or parts of the body clearly. This was quite astonishing, as it is easily possible to stay anonymous on the internet and there is no necessity, with regard to the content, to present one's face when creating a video about self-injury.

Study 2 was an analysis of the so-called (note) card stories presented on YouTube. The analysis of these videos indicated that only two sample elements did not seem to use a pseudonym (the name looked real, but this could not be proven by the chosen method of analysis), the other 23 used a name that is clearly and explicitly identifiable as a pseudonym (nick, phantasy, animal, botanic, number code). The topics of the presented videos were depression, suicidal thoughts, death of a parent, mobbing, self-injury, eating disorders, being the child of divorced parents, the parents' separation itself, bisexuality, cancer, alcoholism, panic attacks, rape, shyness and loneliness (see Misoch, 2014). With regard to visual anonymity, the analysis of the sample showed a very clear trend towards not staying visually anonymous. Twenty-one of the card story's publishers showed their faces, making them completely identifiable on a visual level. Only facial parts were shown by the other two presenters (e.g., chin) and only two remained totally anonymous within this frame of presentation.

How can these results be interpreted? As preliminary research has shown, there is a clear and close relationship between visual anonymity and the willingness to disclose, a factor that is the basis of most confession rituals. Is this relationship overestimated regarding disclosing practices through videos on the internet?

5. Theoretical considerations

Previous research indicated a strong relationship between visual anonymity, private self-awareness, social presence and the willingness to disclose information online (e.g., Joinson, 2001). However, our results suggest that this interrelation should be reconsidered, amended and revised. When we closer look at the studies' results after analysing the videos with self-disclosing content, the role of visual anonymity does not seem to be essential for the process of self-disclosure on the internet when using videos (vlogs on YouTube). This finding confirms a tendency that has already been presumed by the analysis of self-disclosing behaviour on weblogs (Hollenbaugh & Everett, 2013; Qian & Scott, 2007; Viégas, 2005).

The following model shows the already empirically proven factors that shape the process of self-disclosure on the internet and integrate the new findings to build up a comprehensive model of online self-disclosure (see Fig. 1).

The factors that are concluded to be decisive to the process of online self-disclosure are the following:

5.1. Situational determinants

The communicational situation (when using cmc) can either be characterised by a group or a single user sitting in front of his or her screen. These different situations have a core influence on the communication process and, therefore, on the individuals' willingness to reveal private and sensitive information on the internet. When the user is alone, his or her self-awareness is heightened and the potential to reveal information on the internet is consequently higher than in a group condition. We have shown above that the computer-mediated communicational situation leads – apart from other effects – to a higher willingness to disclose information. This effect can be attributed to two underlying processes: (1) The

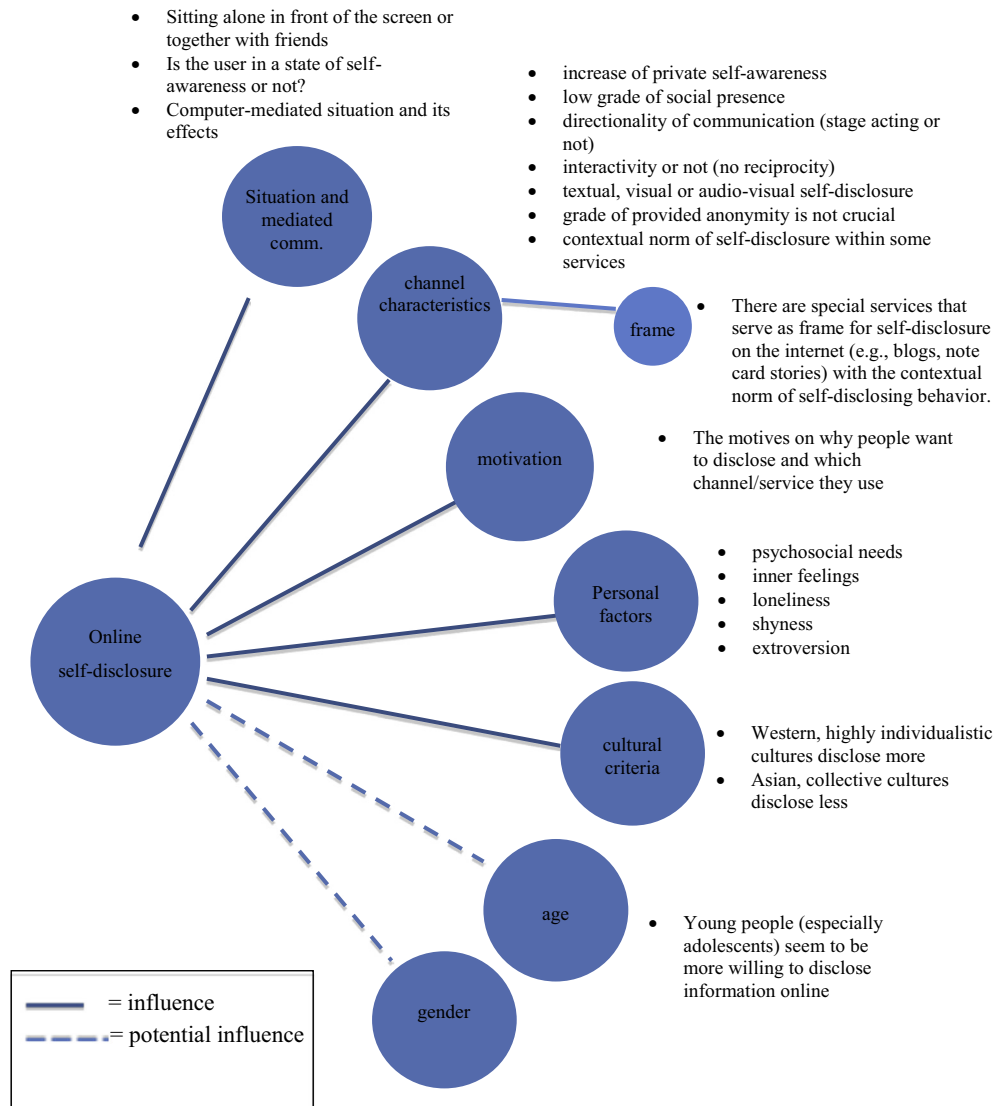


Fig. 1. Factors that influence online self-disclosure.

mediated situation of cmc increases private self-awareness and lowers public self-awareness (e.g., [Joinson, 2001](#)). This effect leads to a behaviour that is oriented towards one's own standards and norms and is less socially desired ([Joinson, 1999](#)); (2) The mediated situation of cmc further leads to a lower grade of social presence. Social presence can be defined as the degree of 'salience of the other person in the interaction' ([Short et al., 1976, p. 64](#)) or as the feeling of non mediation (if we apply this model to mediated communication as cmc).

5.2. Channel characteristics

Using internet services for interpersonal communication has particular characteristics dependent on the choice of the channel. The most significant distinguishing element is the opportunity of synchronic or asynchronous message exchange; textual, visual, audio or audio-visual exchange and individual, group or mass communication within a strongly interlinked or rarely cross-linked area. These conditions are depending on the internet service and can either enhance or hinder the processes of self-disclosure.

The most crucial factor for the occurrence of online self-disclosure seems to be the directionality. Our studies show that there are

numerous videos that convey very private and sensitive information to the unknown public on YouTube by disclosing their identity visually ([Misoch, 2014](#)). Unidirectional settings enhance the processes of initial self-disclosure (like the 'stranger on the train affect') as they increase private self-awareness and also include self-reflexivity. The grade of interactivity seems to affect this process. As demonstrated, asynchronous services with low interactivity, such as personal webpages or videos, enhance the willingness to reveal authentic and/or otherwise hidden information about the presenters (e.g., [Buten, 1996](#); [Misoch, 2010, 2014](#)). The same applies for weblogs, a service that is highly interconnected, but always needs the preparation of the content in advance before publishing. Weblogs are rather multimedia diaries than communicational platforms and are used as media for self-reflection and self-presentation ([McNeill, 2005](#); [Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004](#)).

As a subcategory, we can find certain services that promote and enhance self-disclosure on the internet. Examples are blogs ([Hollenbaugh & Everett, 2013](#); [Qian & Scott, 2007](#); [Viégas, 2005](#)) or videos, called 'note card stories' ([Misoch, 2014](#)), which generate a particular frame ([Goffman, 1974](#)) for online self-disclosure. This frame tells the viewers what kind of content and meaning they

can expect. It is shown in our two studies that these frames guide the expectation of the users and their acting, and that particular internet services develop a frame and a contextual norm of self-disclosing behaviour, which is bound to particular frames within particular services (Misoch, 2014).

5.3. Motivation

The motivation to communicate online is a very important determinant for the willingness to reveal information about one's self. Research has shown that people who look for romantic relationships online are more willing to disclose information than those who have no such intentions (e.g., Kim, Klautke, & Serota, 2009). Cho (2007) has demonstrated empirically that the depth of self-disclosure is correlated with the motive for online chatting. A study on personal homepages showed that people selectively reveal personal information and that the motive 'self expression' leads, as must be expected, to an increased self-disclosure on a personal homepage (Papacharissi, 2002).

5.4. Personal characteristics and emotions

Research has detected that individuals have specific characteristics that can lead them to an increased willingness to disclose information. These characteristics include loneliness, shyness, life satisfaction, and health (e.g., Franzoi & Davis, 1985; Pearce & Sharp, 1973; Solano, Batten, & Parish, 1982; Stricker, 2003).

5.5. Cultural criteria

The manner by which private information is regulated is strongly culturally shaped. Private information is strongly regulated from a cultural point of view (Altman, 1977; Petronio, 2002). It has, for instance, been conjectured that the Canadian collectivistic culture leads to a greater level of self-disclosure in relation to the American culture (Buhr & Freedman, 2001). There is a huge difference between the disclosure behaviours of the Western, Asian and Eastern cultures (e.g., Chen, 1995; McDonald-Scott, Machizawa, & Satoh, 1992; Mitchell, 1998) and we can say that one's culture also affects online self-disclosure (e.g. Goh, 2011).

5.6. Gender

There are contradictory findings concerning the influence of gender in online self-disclosing behaviour. In previous research, some differences in online self-disclosure were found (Dominick, 1999; Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmohl, & Sapp, 2006). Other studies did not find any gender differentiation (Cho, 2007; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). Those studies that found differences indicated that women were more likely to disclose private information than men (Bond, 2009). This finding, however, needs further research. In any case, gender might be an element of online self-disclosure, but the research results did not allow us to come to a precise conclusion at this time.

5.7. Age

With regard to the variable age of the users, it is suggested that younger people are more willing to disclose information online because they have a greater affinity to digital media ('digital natives', Prensky, 2001). A study dealing with Myspace revealed that there was an age difference when it came to self-disclosing behaviour. Younger users significantly disclose more information than older users do (Kim et al., 2009). Therefore, age might be a

decisive element for online self-disclosure. However, there is insufficient reliable data to generalise this finding.

6. Discussion

Self-disclosure is a central part of human communication. It plays a decisive role within the development of social relationships. Self-disclosure can be differentiated with respect to duration, amount, and depth (Cozby, 1973). The examples exploited in this paper are altogether examples of profound self-disclosure, as the users present online stigmatising and other embarrassing self-related contents like self-injury, depression, suicidal thoughts, loneliness, and mobbing. The analysed videos are all examples of disclosures that do not appear in a dyadic or interactive situation. These disclosures take place in a unidirectional situation, wherein the user presents himself or herself and his or her inner feelings to the unknown audience on the internet.

As previous research has shown, people tend to have a higher willingness to disclose information when using cmc. Based on these results, our analysis focused on the role of visual anonymity, since prior research had indicated a strong connection between online self-disclosure and visual anonymity. Conversely, the data from our analysis showed no clear connection between visual anonymity and the willingness to disclose information. This applies, in particular, to self-disclosures that are audio-visually presented on YouTube, especially within the frame of the so-called note card stories.

Considering the discussed factors for the processes of online self-disclosure in the analysed cases, we encountered extremely special situations of communication via videos on YouTube. These situations can be characterised as asynchronous, unidirectional communicational situations that are not part of an interactional process. These particular disclosures do not develop from a superficial level to a more intimate level as opposed to what is expected based on the social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

Considering the developmental character and different stages of self-disclosure, it can be said that the Social Penetration Theory is not applicable to the self-disclosures on YouTube. The analysis based on the Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory developed by Petronio (2002) is not applicable as well. This theory assumes that there is a dialectical relationship between privacy and openness. According to this theory, people use considerations of risk and benefit to decide whether or not they would disclose. In addition, this theory states that these decisions are based on communication goals or cultural expectations (Petronio & Reiersen, 2009, p. 366). Even though CPM explains the complexities of confidentiality regulation, it is not applicable to self-disclosing videos on YouTube. In the case of self-disclosure in videos, no privacy regulation takes place within the situation because the disclosing individuals have already decided in advance to reveal certain contents and to produce and upload their video. Regulation processes, as meant in the CPM, can only be found in dyadic or multidirectional communication situations.

We can, therefore, come to the conclusion that self-disclosures on YouTube are very specific forms of confidentiality management and can be described by the following characteristics:

- (1) A certain kind of stage acting, as the user produces a media product by himself and uploads this medium for public viewing.
- (2) Unidirectional situation (presenter sends his disclosure to the public).
- (3) Social interaction is subordinated, as it can only develop afterwards.

- (4) No reciprocal self-disclosure can take place.
- (5) Audio-visual content.
- (6) Unknown and dispersed public.
- (7) Sender can be (but does not need to be) anonymised within his video.

The self-disclosures on YouTube are not integrated in any immediate communication. Even though videos can be viewed and commented or rated by others, these kinds of reactions must be seen differently from situations of direct interactions and immediate responses. We are fundamentally faced with a different kind of situation as the user must make a decision on what content he or she should disclose (or not) at the time before he or she produces and uploads his or her video. The interactive components of this process, as described in the model, are situational factors, individual motivations, the individual's personality, the time spent online (experience with the medium), gender, age, culture and the characteristics of the medium (channel).

While other theories proceed from the assumption of a balance between disclosure and privacy (Petronio, 2002), we have not found an evidence that any such balancing takes place in the process of self-disclosure on YouTube. These self-disclosures are rather like public confessions – they are bold and simple, produced in a manner of stage acting (Lennox, 1987).

Since stage acting is unidirectional, the people watching the videos can first be referred to as the audience. It is only in the second step where the spectators might become social interactants. When social (inter-)acting is dependent on the reactions from others, stage acting is 'noncontingent upon that feedback and depends on predetermined scripts for direction' (ibid., p. 113). This script, applied to self-disclosures on YouTube, is then the dramaturgical pattern of how the users want to disclose their information online. This might be realised by telling their story to the camera, by writing or by showing pictures that illustrate their story. With regard to the data from Study 1, we reveal that an individual's self-disclosure on YouTube, dealing with self-injury, uses primary visual channels and produces videos as a collage of texts and pictures (Misoch, 2012). In Study 2 (card stories), we found textual self-disclosures. The auditive channel is used to intensify the emotional state and expression of the video.

Based on the assumption that anonymity does not seem to be a necessary condition for people disclosing information on YouTube, we can conclude that a reference can be made to unidirectional stage acting. The most significant characteristics are a heightened private self-awareness, a lowered feeling of social presence of the other users and the lack of interactivity in the unidirectional situation. All these characteristics lead to a heightened willingness not only to disclose information, but also to disclose one's own identity initially. This might be explained by the effects of media characteristics, or by a strategy to create trust: '[k]nowing a speaker's identity is necessary to better evaluate the truthfulness of the assertions' (Barnes, 1999, p. 386).

Therefore, showing one's own identity within online confessions can be explained as a strategy to become more credible online. It can also be seen as a decisive criterion and strategy to be evaluated as authentic, due to the fact that the human body functions as a reference for trustworthy communication not only offline but also online (Misoch, 2008).

7. Limitations and future research directions

This study presents a model of factors that, for their part, shape the process of online self-disclosure. This should be understood with some reservation due to its limitations.

First, the model does not consist of factors that have been proven empirically. Some need further investigation. This model is a draft structure. It summarises the factors that are expected to influence the occurrence of self-disclosing behaviour on the internet.

Second, the studies conducted followed a qualitative approach. The sampling was not representative in a statistical sense, but rather in a sense of representativeness to the content. It was drawn by using a strategy with combined random sampling and purpose strategies. The validity of the data was proven by investigator triangulation. Two researchers evaluated the gathered data with respect to its content. The reliability of the data was ensured by intercoder reliability. Two independent researchers coded the data. In case of intercoder disagreement, the coding was discussed and the data was coded once again.

Third, this study wants to allow a first insight into the patterns of online self-disclosure, which are not bound to visual anonymity. As we focused on the videos on YouTube, future research should investigate other internet services that can enhance the processes of self-disclosure without the factor of visual anonymity to allow the development of models and theories with a wide scope and generalisable statements.

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