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THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract:

The “Effects of Social Media on Intimate Relationships” employs a relational dialectics approach to gain insights into the nature of self-disclosure in intimate relationships via social networking site, Facebook. Data was collected using an online survey via SurveyMonkey and through in-depth interviews. Participants ranged in age from 18-40, were enrolled in a full-time degree program and were currently single or in a relationship. While the intention of the interview was to explore the connection between the level at which one self-discloses information over Facebook and their perceived connectedness to their intimate partner, not enough evidence was generated to support this claim. Findings from the study showed no connection between self-disclosed information over Facebook and one’s personal satisfaction with their significant other.

Introduction:

“The act of disclosing information about oneself activates the same sensation of pleasure in the brain that we get from eating food, getting money or having sex,” says Deborah Netburn. According to Netburn, researchers at Harvard University have conducted extensive research on the reasoning behind why some choose to disclose intimate bits of information with hundreds of “friends” via networking sites like Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook and Foursquare (Netburn, 2012).

Surveys conducted by Diana Tamir and Jason P. Mitchell show that the act of self-disclosing is considered a rewarding experience. In fact, an estimated eighty percent of those surveyed revealed that many of their Facebook and Twitter posts consist solely of their own immediate experiences (Netburn, 2012).
The study also revealed that a person with 700 or more Facebook friends experience “greater reward activity” when given the opportunity to share their thoughts and experience with a friend or family member. However, when told that their thoughts would be kept private, they experienced less of a reward sensation. People enjoy sharing information with each other, yet when given the option to share information about others, they typically turn it down, preferring the opportunity to disclose their own personal information.

“…Thinking about yourself is rewarding,” says Tamir, a researcher at Harvard, “It is important to have an audience” (Netburn, 2012).

How much will we tell others on this public arena? On Facebook we feel a sense of knowing and connection with those we choose to be friends with, says Renaldo Bernard. While we are able to limit who can see what information via status updates, and photo sharing, we still choose to self-disclose information over Facebook. However, the amount of information that is shared on the platform may be different than the amount that is shared when given out anonymously (Bernard, 2010).

**Rationale:**

The Relational Dialectics Theory of Communication aims to explore the dynamics of intimate relationships through human interaction. According to Baxter and Montgomery, relational dialectics occurs when communication parties, or participants, experience internal conflicting pulls. These “pulls” cause relationships to be in a constant state of flux, or dialectical tension. Pressures from these tensions arise over time, causing a wavelike, or cyclical feeling. The theory also supports the idea that over time, individuals will become closer through their relationship, however conflict will arise and pull them apart (Baxter and Montgomery, 1988).
There are three different interpretations, or relational dialectics within Baxter and Montgomery’s theory: connectedness and separateness; certainty and uncertainty; and finally, openness and closedness. The idea of connectedness and separateness suggests that without time spent apart from one’s significant other, one will lose sense of their individual self. The theory also suggests that it is natural for one to desire a close and permanent bond in relationships.

The idea of certainty versus uncertainty states that relational partners need predictability and assurance in their relationships. However, variety, novelty, mystery and spontaneity are needed to prevent a relationship from becoming too bland and monotonous. Finally, the idea of openness versus closedness notes the evident pressure felt among partners to be transparent and reveal extensive personal information to the other party. On the other hand, people feel a natural need for privacy. Baxter notes that this “dynamic struggle demonstrates that intimacy in relationships is not a straight-line path.”

While relational dialectics aim to identify how close one feels to others due to different situations and various factors, the theory of self-disclosure aims to identify how information that one voluntarily gives up to others plays a role in shaping one’s connections with others. As Bernard stated in his blog post, “Strategic Self-Disclosure on Facebook”, our levels of which we self-disclose vary over different social mediums. His findings showed that while people tend to be very open about their activities, experiences and opinions, they “self-segregate” their audiences, by selecting who can see what information. Some users may go as far as posting vague messages, or posting information that certain people may know the real story behind, but others, who may be outside of their personal network, would have to dig deeper to gain access to (Bernard, 2010).
Previous research has tested the relational dialectics in such a way that it can be applied to many areas, including personal relationships, family members, friends, co-workers and classmates. However little to no research has been conducted in which combines the Relational Dialectics theory, and theory of self-disclosure in a way that compares and evaluates how they impact one’s personal relationships over the Internet.

**Literature Review Overview:**

Several experiments stood as good tests of the relational dialectics theory. Sahlstein (2009) interviewed families who were touched by war and deployment to explore relationship dynamics between spouses or families who were separated by military affiliation. A second study conducted by Goines (2011) examined female relationships among African American women and explored the different aspects of friendship. Specifically, Goines aimed to examine how open and honest women were in regard to topics including finance, personal appearance and intelligence. In 2005, another researcher by the name of Cools examined intercultural couples and looked to establish patterns between cultural difference and how they dealt with relationship factors such as predictability, security and keeping their relationships fresh and alive. In 2009, Toller studied how the death of a child affected one’s grieving process and how negatively or positively a relationship was affected as the direct result. Lastly a team of researchers consisting of Mazer, Murphy and Simonds examined the effects of teacher self-disclosure on Facebook and the effects it had on a student’s academic motivation, their affective learning and the overall climate of the classroom.
Literature Review:

A research study of wives of soldiers who were deployed overseas due to war, Sahlstein, Macquire and Timmerman were interested in testing relational dialectics to observe the contradictions, praxis and emotions felt for the duration that the significant other or spouse was deployed. Recognizing that the events surrounding September 11, 2001 placed a serious impact on the way in which many couples relate to one another, researchers chose to explore the functionality and successes of families and marriages under deployment circumstances.

In the study, 50 women whose husbands were currently serving overseas, or who had recently returned from a deployment were selected. Of the participants, the women were an average age of 32 had been married about seven years and had at least two children. Recorded interviews were conducted on a military base, where researchers asked women to recall the deployment process of their husbands.

Through the research, three main contradictions among intimate partners emerged: certainty and uncertainty felt pre-deployment, autonomy and connection during deployment and openness and closed-ness once the couple has reunited. Researchers also found that in situations in which couples are separated by war, partners do not necessarily make decisions, or “choose” actions based on their own personal desires for the relationship. In reality couples perceive certain constraints in such huge ways that their perceived connection becomes limited.

A direct quotation from the journal article, an interviewee discusses her fear and realization that she will never have control over her own life or relationship with her significant other. Following the theory of relational dialectics, the subject openly admits her own uncertainty toward the life laid out in front of her.

“Before my husband left, it was like fear. Fear of the unknown and that loss of control. It
finally hits you. I have no say in my own life.”- Anonymous interviewee, page 427.

Being separated from one’s significant other by war must take a huge toll on both partners and their family members. Wives become responsible for raising children completely on their own and taking care of a home, constantly wondering if and when their husband will return to them. They may also feel a sense of closed-ness from the other partner, always wondering whether or not he or she is being 100 percent honest with them as well as questioning what they are really like when away from their spouse.

Friendship is a human need, which provides many with a sense of belonging, safety and self worth. In the next study, Marnel Goins (2011) combined both Relational Dialectics theory and Collins’ “Black Feminist Thought” from 2000 to explore female friendships among black women. He was seeking to examine and understand contradictions in stories told by these women to their groups of friends.

Researchers attempt to understand which life factors contribute to how we interact with other people of our own gender. “The interaction of these tensions showed that the friends engaged in group segregation and integration, which ultimately enabled them to freely express their culturally based truths without fear of marginalization,” (pp. 532). Like Baxter and Montgomery’s original Relational Dialectics theory suggests, women interviewed in this experiment showed similar tendencies.

Human interaction is the core of our beings, however, it known that things that we choose to disclose to others in our personal relationships may not always be 100 percent truthful. Rather than showing our true selves to others, we modify or bend the truth in ways we feel will make us more desirable to another person or group of people.

Through life, one may experience many losses. One may lose a job, become physically ill,
and experience a breakup or even death. However nothing is more tragic than the loss of a child. The death of a child can affect every aspect of a parent’s life, even their own relationship with their spouse or significant other. The purpose of Toller and Braithwaite’s study was to examine communication between bereaved parents and their spouses in order to understand how said death impacts the relationship and interaction of those affected.

In the study, 37 parents who represented 24 different grieving families were interviewed. The child’s age at death ranged from 6 months since the passing to 19 years and the child’s average age of death was 14.7 years. Using a semi-structured series of interview questions the researchers found that couples both wanted to rely on their partners for support during the time of loss and wanted to grieve on their own. One major finding of this study suggested that while parents typically grieved the loss of the child separately, they were also able to appreciate and accept the ways in which their partner grieved the loss.

“If we go up to the cemetery, uh, she goes up a lot more often than I do, uh it’s just not one of the things that I cherish but I’ll do it because I need to and if that’s what she wants me to do, I’ll do it,” (Toller, 2009).

The interviewee claims that his grieving process is much different than that of his spouse. He admits that visiting a grave in the cemetery isn’t exactly his ideal way to connect with the lost child, but he does make the occasional trip, because his wife chooses to go, and it makes her happy.

While the grieving process may differ parent-to-parent and couple to couple, humans must deal with loss in their own way. The statement provided by this person shows that although couples must keep a sense of their own independence in tact, they must also appreciate and share experiences with their partner, even in times of loss and grieving. This idea of closed-ness and
openness is an essential aspect to these changed relationships because without a proper balance of the two, a relationship will ultimately fail.

Finally, a 2005 study conducted by C. Cools explored eleven heterosexual intercultural couples. Her motivation behind the study was the lack of investigation on intercultural relationships through the lens of relational dialectics. In 2004, only 10 percent of registered married couples were living in an interracial, or intercultural relationship. In these relationships, at least one of the two partners spoke a language other than English.

A series of six interview questions were asked in which researchers sought out to learn the cultural issues, defined cultures and impacts of culture on their romantic relationships. Findings from the study included the contradiction of predictability and novelty in a relationship. Other findings of the study examined issues of openness/closed-ness and inclusion/seclusion issues.

“I think there have been enough changes that, we have been more looking for the certain things together, to find a job for you, to make this all work, I think this is such a new thing still after four years, I mean the mainstream of our relationship, I think it is more striving toward the certainty in life,” (Cools, 2005).

In this scenario the husband states that he is constantly striving toward novelty and something new in his life. The idea of always keeping a relationship fresh and exciting is one that many couples may come to deal with over the course of their relationship. Some partners may choose to part ways once they begin to feel a sense of predictability and that the “newness” of the relationship is no longer there. Others may come to rely on the same sense of predictability, finding comfort and joy in the security that their partner is always going to be around and that there are not going to be any surprises or perceived road blocks in the relationship.
Furthermore, some couples may come to fear that sense of predictability and find security and joy in constantly striving to keep things exciting. Some couples might work so hard to make the relationship feel like it is still brand new, that they may actually be hurting the relationship without knowing so.

As mentioned in *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, all verbal and nonverbal communication reveals something important about the self, and of the relationships, which surround the self. All previous research shows two common links: exploration of the shared dynamics using relational dialectics and levels of self-disclosure. By definition, self-disclosure is the interaction between two or more individuals where one individual intends to deliberately divulge personal information to another. While verbal messages one sends to others which consist of thoughts like “I feel” and “I think” reveal sensitive information, other elements including one’s jewelry, tattoos and piercings, even smiling or laughing will give away personal information to others.

The revelation of “highly sensitive” information such as personal fears and religious convictions as well as less sensitive information like personal tastes and preferences are considered a highly important variable in “romantic love” relationships. Levels of self-disclosure not only informs others how one thinks and feels, but also informs them of the state of the relationship as well as how they are or are not getting along with one another.

The shared link between self-disclosure and relational dialectics lies within the relationship itself. One may struggle to find a balance between concealing personal information and keeping a sense of independence and establishing important connections with others. Factors that may discourage one from disclosing personal information to someone else can include cultural criteria, one’s social networks, their personalities and individual differences.
Assessments of the self, the partner and even the current environment or situation may also prevent or encourage one to disclose personal information.

Several factors must be present for one to disclose personal information. These factors include a sense of “getting along”, being in a private location, the actual flow of the conversation and whether or not the recipient of the information is being attentive, asking questions and providing feedback. Once the individual or partners choose to disclose information, a mutual sense of trusting or mistrust occurs, and partners take on a co-ownership of sensitive information. However, personal reactions may have an influence on the outcomes of self-disclosure.

**Research Questions:**

Previous research already completed in areas including family life, personal friendships as well as professional and scholastic environments have lead the researcher to pursue further research in the area of intimate relationships. Thus, the following research questions were developed:

1. What is the relationship between self-disclosure and perceived connectedness to others?
2. Is there a connection between what one self-discloses to others via social networking and perceived connectedness to others?
3. Does the degree of which one self discloses in intimate relationships vary between male and female audiences?
Methods:

In order to understand how social media plays a role in effecting the ways in which people relate to their significant other, extensive research was conducted using both the Relational Dialectics theory, and the theory of self-disclosure. Initial reading was conducted to gain insight on what has been previously studied, as well as to determine areas for further examination.

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews to determine what effect, if any, that social media had on intimate relationships. A pre-determined sampling of college students enrolled at Rochester Institute of Technology was used to gather necessary information.

A convenience sample consisted of 1,240 men and women between the ages of 18 and 40, who were enrolled in some type of degree program. Participants were either single, in an intimate relationship, engaged or married. Lengths of the participant’s relationships ranged between several months in length and 18 years. For purposes of this study, one’s sexual orientation played no role in determining who was eligible to participate in interviews.

The variety in one’s age, their relationship status and the length of their relationship served as a way to gain as much information as possible in relation to their perceived connection to their significant other. Introductory emails were sent out to 180 students via MyCourses. Facebook messages introducing the topic of interest and asking for participant’s help reached approximately 1,060 potential research subjects. Of the 1,240 individuals reached during this process, 23 respondents agreed to participate in the interview process. Among the 23 individuals, three participants agreed to participate in a one on one personal interview, and 20 individuals agreed to participate in the survey generated on SurveyMonkey.
The semi-structured interviews took place over the course of four days. A list of open-ended questions were generated for the interview, however research subjects were free to respond based on their own experiences and personal opinion. Research subjects were allowed to select the location of the interviews, in order to preserve some level of comfort during the process, as well as to avoid any potential bias and to generate the most accurate and truthful responses possible.

Data collection was conducted in two ways. First the researcher brought along her own personal, password protected laptop, and audio recorded the interviews. Secondly, she took written notes with a pencil and paper in order to document the physical environment, as well as any other notable events during the interview such as hand gestures, long pauses and nervous twitches.

**Discussion:**

Of the 1,240 individuals who were contacted, 20 individuals volunteered to participate in the study. Three in-depth interviews were conducted in which the respondents met with the researcher one on one and answered a series of twenty-three interview questions. Of these respondents, one individual was a single female, and the other two consisted of an engaged male and a married male. Each revealed that their current, or longest lasting relationship was between two and eight years in length.

Most respondents showed a hesitance in discussing sensitive, personal information. Thus, a second option was created for research, in which the researcher created an online survey, via Survey Monkey. The survey consisted of 10 similar questions, which asked participants about their relationship status, questions about self-disclosed information with their partner on
Facebook, and their overall satisfaction of the relationship. Of the 20 respondents, 17 individuals opted to complete this online survey.

When asked if the self-disclosed content of one’s significant other changed the way in which they perceived the overall quality of the relationship, one respondent answered, “Maybe if I was only dating her, but now that I'm marrying her, nothing really disclosed would change the way I perceive her. Well unless she put up that she was getting a tattoo, those I don't like!”

Another respondent revealed that his significant other’s shared content has made him think of her in a negative way on more than one occasion. A second respondent referred to some content as “annoying, especially when my girlfriend complains about her life for everyone to see.”

Of these respondents, only one was single, while three were married, and 15 were either in a relationship or engaged. On a scale of one to ten, respondents ranked their overall satisfaction with their relationship a seven or better, and every respondent both in one-on-one interviews and online, shared that they feel more connected to their partner face to face.

**Conclusion:**

*Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research:*

One limitation of this study is relying on a small convenience sample. Because only 20 of about 1,200 people responded to the study, the responses generated are not truly representative of the population as a whole. Therefore, one cannot completely assume that a relationship between self-disclosed information and one’s connection to there significant other does not exist. Additionally, one’s self reported information might not accurately reflect the reality of which one self discloses and how it affects their relationship in an intimate way.
This study does however provide a stepping-stone for which future research can be conducted. Potential further research on this topic may employ additional research subjects to get a more accurate representation of the population. Researchers may also consider evaluating the ways in which self-disclosing information over Facebook may have an impact on all of one’s personal relationships. Other areas for research may include evaluating one’s self-disclosure on other social platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest.

In conclusion there is not enough evidence to support the claim that the degree to which one self-discloses personal information via Facebook varies between male and female users. There is also not a visible relationship between one’s self-disclosed information and their perceived connection to their intimate partner, as every respondent to the study admitted to preferring a face-to-face connection and to sharing information with the significant other before posting anything online.
References:


Appendix:

Informed Consent:

EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Introduction:
You are invited to join a research study to look at how the use of social media affects one’s personal, intimate relationships. Please take whatever time you need to discuss the study with your family and friends, or anyone else you wish to. The decision to participate, or not participate, is up to you.

In this study, I am investigating how one’s self disclosed information on Facebook plays a role in shaping the overall attitudes and perceptions of their relationships with others, in particular, their significant others.

What does this study involve?
You will be asked to answer a series of questions related to self-disclosure over Facebook. Some questions will require a simple yes or no response, where others may ask you to explain your responses in some more detail. All of your responses will be audio recorded on my personal, password protected computer and will only be used for purposes of this study. I estimate that the entire process will take no more than 30 minutes.

Revealing personal information may lead to some discomfort on behalf of the research subjects. Should you feel any sort of discomfort, please contact RIT’s counseling center immediately at (585) 475-2261.

Confidentiality:
Your name will not be used when data from this study are published. Every effort will be made to keep your research records and other personal information completely confidential.

Your rights as a participant:
Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right not to participate at all or leave this study at any time. Deciding not to participate or choosing to leave the study will not result in any penalty and will not harm your relationship with your friends or significant other.

If you have any questions about the study, any problems, suggestions, or experience any discomfort please contact the researcher, Alexandria Strader by phone at (585) 694-8354, or by email at acs1715@gmail.com
Interview Questions I:

1. Name: (For researcher’s purposes only):
2. Age:
3. Major:
4. Relationship status:
5. How long have you been in a relationship with this person?
6. If you’re not currently in a relationship, how long was your longest relationship?
7. Are you Facebook friends with your significant other?
8. Do you feel that being connected with your significant other on Facebook helps enhance the connection that the two of you share?
9. Does information shared by your significant other relate to your personal life?
10. Does the information shared by your significant other relate to the functionality of your relationship with them?
11. Can you recall a time in which your significant other shared personal information to their Facebook friends before sharing this information with you first? Explain how you reacted to this?
12. Does self-disclosed content of your significant other change the way in which you perceive them, or the overall quality of the relationship?
13. Can you recall a time in which information shared by your significant other made you think of them in a negative way?
14. Have you ever treated your significant other differently based upon something that was shared on their profile?
15. Has your significant other ever treated you differently based on something that you posted to your profile?
16. How do you feel when your significant other adds someone on facebook that you do not know?
17. Do you feel a different attitude towards female and male Facebook friends?
18. How do you think your significant other feels when you add a new friend on Facebook? Do you think that their gender impacts this attitude?

19. How do you feel when your significant other is tagged in photos from an event, which you weren’t invited to or able to attend?

20. How do you think your significant other feels when you are tagged in photos from an event, which they weren’t invited to or able to attend?

21. How would you rate the overall quality of your relationship?

22. How connected does Facebook make you feel to your significant other?

23. Do you feel more connected to your significant other over Facebook, or face to face?
Interview Questions II:

1. What is your current relationship status?
2. How long have you been in a relationship?
3. Are you Facebook friends with your significant other?
4. Do you feel that being connected with your significant other on Facebook helps to enhance the connection that the two of you share?
5. Does information shared by your significant other relate to the functionality of your relationship with them?
6. Can you recall a time in which your significant other shared personal information with their Facebook friends before sharing it with you? Explain how you reacted to this news.
7. Does self-disclosed content from your significant other change the way in which you perceive them, or the overall quality of your relationship?
8. Can you recall a time in which the information that was shared by your significant other made you think of them in a negative way?
9. On a scale of 1-10, how would you relate the overall quality of your relationship?
10. Do you feel more connected to your significant other over Facebook, or face-to-face?