The Direct and Indirect Sharing of Good, Important News on Facebook

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Abstract

This study examines the type of good, important news shared on Facebook and whether or not this news is shared directly or indirectly. The researchers gave participants a survey on Facebook, which assessed the variables of interest, were quantitative, self-report items regarding attitudes about sharing important news on Facebook. There were also questions regarding health disclosure patterns, relationship maintenance processes, general physical health, openness, overall stress, quality of life, and how and why they do or do not share good and bad news on Facebook. The main findings showed that family news, health news, school or work news, and relationship news were all found to be significant. Individuals who shared good family, health, and work or school news were more likely to do so directly.
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The Internet is one of the most powerful communication networks in our world today, connecting people across the globe and shaping our economic, political, and social views as a society. According to the CNBC Original Series, The Facebook Obsession, “With over half a billion users across the world, there are more people on Facebook than the entire U.S. population” (Gordon, 2011). Social networking websites such as Facebook are especially powerful, as they allow users to create personal profiles and share content among other users, including audio files, blogs, photos, and videos. Most importantly, Facebook creates an environment in which interpersonal connectivity is encouraged, making it possible for users to establish new relationships and maintain existing ones. With the rapid growth of Facebook in recent years, several questions have emerged in regards to its popularity as one of the most visited websites on the Internet today. In order to better understand the impact that this platform has on its users, this study will examine the type of good, important news shared on Facebook and whether or not this news is shared directly or indirectly.

Review of Literature

According to Kaplan and Hanelein (2010), social networking sites may be defined as “applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other” (p. 63). As mentioned previously, Facebook, which was founded by Harvard student Mark Zuckerburg in 2004, is the largest social networking site in the world. The research in this study research is specifically centered on the direct and indirect sharing of important, good news on Facebook, and although previous studies have not directly discussed
these variables in relation to each other, there have been several investigations of disclosure on Facebook and motivations for Facebook use.

**Type of Good, Important News Shared on Facebook**

The first variable—the type of good, important news shared on Facebook—includes four categories: (1) family, (2) health, (3) relationship, and (4) school or work. We consider important life events to be those that are significant to the participants; in other words, these events do not happen every day and have the potential to change or impact an aspect of their lives. In addition, these events must directly involve the Facebook users themselves.

The information that is shared among users of social networking sites such as Facebook influence the online and offline connections that are established between these individuals. In a recent study, Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais (2009) created an online survey centered around Facebook users’ disclosure and information control behaviors in order to understand; (1) the type of information that is disclosed; (2) the amount of control that exists over the disclosure of this information; and (3) the types of personalities associated with this disclosure. The results represent 343 participants from a mid-size university in Canada. The responses indicate that the participants spent an average of 38.86 minutes on Facebook each day in order to gain social capital. Of those who reported, 97% joined a network, 96% posted their birthdays, 85% shared their email addresses and hometowns, 81% publicized their relationship statuses, and 72% specified their school and programs (Christofides et al., 2009). Home addresses and phone numbers were typically not posted, but almost everyone posted a profile picture or photos with friends.

Furthermore, data in regards to disclosure on Facebook suggests a positive correlation between the need for popularity and the amount of disclosed information. In other words, the
more individuals share about their personal lives, the higher their popularity becomes as a result of their established online presence. By posting more photos, actively engaging in discussions with others, and sharing personal interests, individuals allow other users to form perceptions of their social standing. Therefore, it may be concluded that Facebook serves as a basis for identity construction. Active participation directly affects a user’s popularity, and therefore the act of limiting information prevents the construction of an individual’s online identity. In relation to our research, this article highlights the importance of disclosing different types of information in order to gain social capital.

In a similar study, Qiu, Lin, Leung, and Tov (2012) examined the concept of emotional disclosure and its applications to Facebook and real life. To do so, they utilized two theoretical concepts: enhanced self-disclosure theory and the hyper personal interaction model. According to enhanced self-disclosure theory, computer mediated communication (CMC) leads to more intimate communication interactions, causing individuals to reveal more emotional experiences than they would in face-to-face communication (Qiu et al., 2012). The hyper personal interaction model, on the other hand, explores the ways in which computer mediated communication allows individuals to manipulate their self-presentation in order to appear more socially desirable. In computer-mediated interactions, individuals can control the photos they display, the statuses they post, and the aspects of their lives that they allow to be public or private.

In their research, the authors hypothesize that Facebook users will present themselves as having better emotional wellbeing through the disclosure of positive experiences over negative ones. To test this, they distributed two surveys: the first asked individuals to rate how likely they were to disclose emotional experiences, both on Facebook and in real life, and the second asked participants to rate the emotional wellbeing of their friends on Facebook and in real life. The
responses were gathered from a sample of 185 college students who had all been Facebook users for over one year and had more than 50 Facebook friends. Ultimately, the hypotheses were supported, as participants disclosed positive emotions on Facebook more often than negative emotions. Therefore, the idea that individuals are more likely to present themselves in a positive light online through the disclosure of positive emotional experiences is supported. While this study does not explicitly address the direct or indirect disclosure of information on Facebook, it does relate to the sharing of positive emotional experiences.

More specifically, Park, Jin, and Jin (2011) examined the relationship between self-disclosure and relational intimacy as it applies to Facebook. The main focus of their research is to reveal the need for affiliation—or gratification—from a relationship and to examine the motivations behind basic human desires while utilizing Facebook. This study also seeks to associate the need for affiliation with the desire for relationship maintenance, establish associations between self-disclosure honesty and motivations for relationship maintenance, and predict the connections between quality dimensions of self-disclosure and intimacy on Facebook. To test this, the researchers administered an online survey to a sample of 1,500 students, who were randomly selected from a large, public university. The results from this study indicate that it is theoretically rational to associate the relationship initiation and motivation for relationship maintenance to intimacy. This particular study is beneficial to our research because it aids in the understanding of why people post on Facebook and the amount of self-disclosure that individuals are willing to reveal while online.

Finally, research conducted by Special and Li-Barber (2012) aims to explore the different levels of self-disclosure on Facebook through the evaluation of motives for posting information and the relationship between an individual’s Facebook page and their social goals. In their study,
the researchers found that most people have a high level of disclosure and satisfaction with Facebook. They also found that the amount of time a person is logged on to Facebook is directly related to the personal satisfaction they gain from the site. Finally, they found that males disclose more basic and contact information than females, which the authors believe is a result of females being more paranoid. The amount of information disclosed on Facebook profiles is largely a result of the user’s level of social interaction, which relates to our research because it provides us with information about why individuals choose to disclose certain information on their profiles.

**Direct or Indirect Sharing of Good, Important News on Facebook**

The second variable guiding this study—direct or indirect sharing of good, important news on Facebook—is concerned with the ways in which participants initially share good news on their profiles. Direct sharing involves the disclosure of the news event in a status update or as a written post. Indirect sharing, on the other hand, involves changing a job title or relationship status without explanation, posting a picture with little description, or allowing others to post about the news and tagging the user.

As a result of the rapid growth of social media, more people are communicating via Facebook than ever before. However, it is much more difficult to form impressions of others when communicating on Facebook due to the lack of non-verbal cues. According to Chou and Edge (2012), it is often easier for individuals to form impressions of others based on information they can easily recall, and Facebook allows for the recall of pictures and statements with the click of a button. People often post pictures of happy moments, therefore giving the impression that these individuals are happy (Chou & Edge, 2012?). In addition, the correspondence bias occurs when people assume that the actions and words of others are reflective of their personality,
instead of taking situational factors into consideration (Chou & Edge, 2012). When looking at pictures on Facebook, it is easy for the user to conclude that others are happy while ignoring the circumstances that made them so.

In their study, Chou and Edge (2012) hypothesized that those who use Facebook more often and have more strangers as their Facebook friends are more likely to perceive others are having better lives and less likely to think that life is fair. To test this, they distributed questionnaires to 425 undergraduate students in Utah, which included three perceptions: (1) others have a better life; (2) others are happier; and (3) life is fair. The results support both hypotheses and confirm the theory that using Facebook impacts an individual’s perception of other people. In other words, those who spend more time on Facebook agree that others are happy and that life is unfair. Also, those who have more strangers as Facebook friends agree that others have better lives. This study is important to our research because it speaks to the ways in which indirect sharing of good news through the posting of Facebook photos has a direct impact on the impression you make on others.

In a similar study by Ross, Orr, Sisic, Arseneault, Simmering, and Orr (2009), the researchers center their focus on the Five-Factor Model (McCrae, 1992) by relating neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness to how one communicates via Facebook. In other words, they explore the ways in which competency and personality affects university students’ use of Facebook and interaction with others. To do this, they distributed a 28-item questionnaire to 97 students in southwestern Ontario.

It was discovered that individuals with high neuroticism prefer Facebook wall postings, whereas those with low neuroticism prefer photo sharing. This is because those who are more neurotic tend to experience higher levels of psychological distress and generally gravitate
towards areas in which they have greater control. Facebook wall postings give individuals more control over how and when to respond, whereas shared photos can communicate more than what is intended. Additionally, those with low extraversion utilize Facebook more to communicate because those with high extraversion are as social online as they are offline. Individuals who are low in extraversion and agreeableness are unsuccessful on Facebook because, by nature, their personalities prevent them from building offline relationships that can potentially continue online. Lastly, those with high conscientiousness do not fully employ Facebook as a primary mode of communication because they generally avoid computer mediated communication.

Overall, the more organized, diligent, and scrupulous a person is, the more responsible and less likely they are to procrastinate and use social media as a way to connect with others. Ultimately, this study supports our research because the findings contribute to our questions about Facebook users and their disclosure of important, good news. Specific personality traits, as outlined above, influence the ways in which individuals utilize Facebook features and share information directly or indirectly. For example, Facebook users with low neuroticism prefer the indirect sharing of photos, whereas Facebook users with high neuroticism prefer the direct sharing of wall postings.

More specifically, Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini (2007) explored the relatively new concept of trust and privacy concern in relation to Facebook. Their research focused on the ways in which an individual’s trust in Facebook or MySpace, as well as their trust in other users, affects their willingness to share information and develop new relationships. The researchers also sought to identify the relationship between privacy concern and an individual’s willingness to share information and develop new relationships. To test this, the authors created two online surveys with identical questions: one for Facebook and one for MySpace. Interestingly, their
findings show that Facebook and MySpace users express similar levels of concern in regards to privacy. MySpace users, however, are more likely to develop new relationships on the site than Facebook members. At the same time, Facebook members are more trusting in the site and its users, and report more willingness to share identifying information about themselves. Above all, the idea that Facebook users willingly disclose information on their profiles is central to our research on the sharing of news on Facebook.

Finally, research conducted by Yang and Brown (2012) is centered on the ways in which adolescents use Facebook and explores the motives that exist among college-aged individuals. In their study, the researchers had students at a university in the Midwest complete a questionnaire about their Facebook use and its relation to their college experience as a whole. The results of the survey indicate that college students seek to stay connected with pre-college friends while also establishing new online relationships with their peers. In general, students tend to struggle with the maintenance of pre-existing relationships while they are away from home, and therefore, many turn to Facebook in order to do so. Ultimately, the researchers concluded the following: “Status updating was associated negatively with social adjustment and positively with loneliness only for those who were less motivated to use Facebook to maintain existing relationships” (p. 412). In other words, students who do not necessarily use Facebook to maintain existing relationships update their statuses on Facebook out of loneliness, and not as a result of their social adjustment to college. These findings are significant to our research because they identify the reasons why a specific group of individuals—or college students, in this case—choose to engage in the activity of status updating on Facebook. We anticipate that a vast majority of our participants will fall into this age range, and therefore view these findings as being highly applicable.
Rationale

Based on the above literature, we are unsure as to whether or not important, good news is more likely to be shared by Facebook users in a direct or an indirect manner. It is clear that Facebook users disclose important, good news on their profiles. However, the extent to which this news is shared varies among Facebook users, as illustrated in previous research. Therefore, we have developed the following research question in order to examine both direct and indirect sharing:

RQ: Is important, good news—whether it is (a) family, (b) health, (c) relationship, or (d) school or work news—more likely to be shared by Facebook users in a direct or an indirect manner?

Method

Participants

The sample (N = 599) consisted of 114 males and 442 females (did not respond n = 43) whose average age was 26 years (SD = 10.84, range = 18-70). The race/ethnicity breakdown was White (n = 389), Asian (n = 67), Hispanic/Latino (n = 47), Bi/multiracial (n = 28), Black or African American (n = 14), American Indian or Alaska native (n = 5), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (n = 4), and Other (n = 1; did not respond n = 44). Some participants said that they were currently students at a college or university (n = 332), whereas others said that they were not (n = 216; did not respond n = 51). Participants’ highest completed education level included high school/GED (n = 13), some college (n = 292), college (n = 150), some graduate school (n = 31), and graduate school (n = 68; did not respond n = 45).

In regards to Facebook usage, participants indicated that they have been on Facebook for less than three months (n = 6), three to six months (n = 3), seven months to one year (n = 3), 13
months to three years ($n = 58$), 37 months to five years ($n = 220$), and more than five years ($n = 308$; did not respond $n = 1$). In terms of their daily use, participants reported using Facebook for less than 10 minutes ($n = 52$), 10 to 30 minutes ($n = 154$), 31 to 60 minutes ($n = 160$), one to two hours ($n = 149$), 2 to 3 hours ($n = 51$), and more than three hours ($n = 31$; did not respond $n = 2$). Finally, participants had an average of 702 total Facebook friends ($SD = 505.33$, range = 20-4900).

**Measures**

**Type of good, important news shared on Facebook**

The type of good, important news shared on Facebook was measured via a single item. Participants were asked the following question: “Have you shared the following types of good news about important life events on Facebook?” This question had a yes-no response format and included four items developed for this study: family news, health news, relationship news, and school or work news. For family news, including pregnancies and births, participants indicated yes ($n = 192$), no ($n = 225$), and not applicable ($n = 181$; did not respond $n = 1$). For health news, including positive diagnoses, weight loss, and major physical milestones, participants reported yes ($n = 152$), no ($n = 336$), and not applicable ($n = 111$). For relationship news, including anniversaries, engagements, and weddings, participants indicated yes ($n = 297$), no ($n = 171$), and not applicable ($n = 130$; did not respond $n = 1$). Finally, for school or work news, including job interviews, graduations, and raises, participants reported yes ($n = 444$), no ($n = 134$), and not applicable ($n = 20$; did not respond $n = 2$).

**Direct or indirect sharing of good, important news on Facebook**

Whether good news was shared directly or indirectly was also measured via a single item. Participants were asked the following question: “How did you share the following types of good
news about important life events on Facebook?” Participants who shared good news on Facebook both directly and indirectly were asked to indicate how they first shared the news. This question included four response options developed for this study: (1) directly (clearly describing the news in a status update or written post), (2) indirectly (posting pictures with little to no description, changing your relationship status or job title without explanation, or allowing others to post about the news or event and tagging you), (3) not applicable (event not shared on Facebook), and (4) not applicable (event not experienced since joining Facebook).

For family news, participants indicated sharing this news directly (n = 119) and indirectly (n = 90). Some participants had never shared this type of important life event on Facebook (n = 203), while others had never experienced it (n = 185; did not respond n = 2). For health news, participants reported sharing this news directly (n = 103) and indirectly (n = 65). Some participants had never shared this type of important life event on Facebook (n = 300), while others had never experienced it (n = 130; did not respond n = 2). For relationship news, participants reported indicated sharing this news directly (n = 146) and indirectly (n = 182). Some participants had never shared this type of important life event on Facebook (n = 142), while others had never experienced it (n = 127; did not respond n = 2). Finally, for school or work news, participants reported sharing this news directly (n = 444) and indirectly (n = 134). Some participants, however, had never experienced this type of important life event (n = 20; did not respond n = 1).

Procedures

The survey was conducted via SurveyMonkey.com and targeted Facebook users age 18 and over. Participants were first recruited from communication studies classes at Chapman University in Orange, California. A member of the research team described the study and
distributed a recruitment sheet to interested individuals to write down their email addresses. This sheet also described the study and gave potential participants the opportunity to consent to two emails with the study link: one as an initial description of the study and another reminder message five days later. Participants were then able to complete the study at their own convenience, as there was not an obligation or a reward for doing so. Participants were also recruited online through status updates on various social networking sites, including Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. Initial participants were encouraged to send the survey to other individuals who may be interested, which created a snowball sample.

Participants clicked on a provided survey weblink, where the first page of the survey included informed consent information and a Social/Behavioral Participant Bill of Rights. The beginning questions asked general information about participants’ use of Facebook. The following questions, which assessed the variables of interest, were quantitative, self-report items regarding attitudes about sharing important news on Facebook. Participants were asked about health disclosure patterns, relationship maintenance processes, general physical health, openness, overall stress, quality of life, and how and why they do or do not share good and bad news on Facebook. The end of the survey included demographic items. The anonymous survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete and compensation was not provided.

**Results**

The research question asked: Is important, good news—whether it is (a) family, (b) health, (c) relationship or (d) school or work news—more likely to be shared by Facebook users in a direct or indirect manner? A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine these relationships. For family news, the test was significant, $\chi^2 (1) = 16.71, p < .05$. The individuals who shared good family news were more likely to do so directly ($n = 109$) than
indirectly (n = 65). For health news, the test was significant, $\chi^2(1) = 10.61$, $p < .05$. The individuals who shared good health news were more likely to do so directly (n = 93) than indirectly (n = 43). For relationship news, the test was significant, $\chi^2(1) = 12.79$, $p < .05$. The individuals who shared good relationship news were slightly more likely to do so indirectly (n = 150) than directly (n = 141). Finally, in terms of work or school news, the test was significant, $\chi^2(1) = 41.54$, $p < .05$. The individuals who shared good work or school news were significantly more likely to do so directly (n = 280) than indirectly (n = 147).

**Discussion**

In summary, the purpose of this study was to determine whether (a) family, (b) health, (c) relationship, and (d) school or work news was more likely to be shared on Facebook in a direct or an indirect manner. As a result, individuals who shared good family, health, and work or school news were more likely to do so directly. However, individuals who shared good relationship news were more likely to do so indirectly. News shared in a direct manner was clearly described in a status update or a written post, whereas news shared indirectly was posted with little to no description. In this section, we will discuss the meaning, implications, and limitations of our findings, and will conclude by providing a few suggestions for future research.

**Meaning of Findings**

In order to make meaningful conclusions about the major concepts outlined in our survey, grouping strategies were utilized when collecting data from the participants. In regards to our research question, grouping procedures helped to identify if important, good news was more likely to be shared by Facebook users in a direct or an indirect manner. These procedures, which grouped variables such as direct and indirect sharing and good and bad news, allowed for an in-depth examination of the influence of these variables on general Facebook disclosure. Our
respondents were more likely to share family, health, and work or school news in a direct manner and relationship news in an indirect manner. Overall, each of these categories yielded significant results, providing us with accurate information about the variables in question.

As discussed previously, Christofides et al., (2009) focused their study on the links between information disclosure, social standing, and popularity. After conducting our research, we, too believe that information disclosure is associated with an individual’s desire to improve their social standing. Although family and health news is relevant, positive relationship, work, and school news is even more indicative of success, especially for young adults. Considering the age range of our participants, we believe that they may have been motivated to disclose these types of news in order to gain social capital and appear more successful in the eyes of their peers.

Overall, our study is valuable because it provides insight into the ways in which Facebook users disclose information on their profiles. It is clear that Facebook users disclose important, good news and that the extent to which this news is shared varies among individuals. Not only do our findings support these claims, but they also expand on them, especially through our exploration of four different types of news. However, research on Facebook usage remains limited, especially in regards to our specific variables. While direct and indirect sharing is a topic of very little discussion, we are confident that data will become available as social media continues to expand.

Implications

While social media is constantly evolving, one idea remains the same: people in the “real world” are using Facebook and will continue to do so for years to come. As we have established, the Internet is one of the most powerful communication networks in our world today. Facebook users have a unique contribution, as the information they choose to share has the potential to
reach hundreds—and sometimes thousands—of people within a matter of minutes. The average age of our participants was 26.2 years old, suggesting that younger generations are active users of the site as well. This is especially important because young people often forget that the news they share on Facebook extends far beyond their close groups of friends. Social media content is permanent, and we encourage everyone to be mindful of the information they choose to disclose, regardless if it is good, important, or related to family, health, relationships, work, and school.

At the same time, disclosure of positive news on Facebook has the potential to serve as a powerful advertising and networking tool. Advertisers can use the results from this study to aid in developing their marketing strategies, choosing to disclose their information directly or indirectly depending on their target audiences. Individuals can also utilize Facebook to network with their peers by disclosing certain types news. Information disclosure aids in the growth of social and professional networks for people both young and old.

**Limitations**

Although the present study has many positive implications, there are a few limitations that may have weakened its outcomes. First, an online survey was used to conduct research. We chose to conduct a survey for its many advantages, but there are also several disadvantages to this method of research. For example, the standardized questions may have been worded in a way that restricts participants from expressing their attitudes, circumstances, or experiences. In addition, surveys cannot measure current actions, but instead rely on self-reports of hypothetical or past actions, therefore limiting the responses of our participants.

Secondly, our recruitment method may also be viewed as a limitation. We recruited participants from our college courses and networks of Facebook friends, but unfortunately, these groups are not an accurate representation of the Facebook population as a whole. As a result, our
sample was dominated by females and did not demonstrate variety in terms of race or ethnicity. However, knowledge of these limitations will allow researchers to perform similar studies with increased success. It is our hope that future research will address these limitations in order to expand on our current knowledge of Facebook disclosure.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it was determined that the type of news shared on Facebook affected the way it was disclosed online. Not only this, but the type of important, good news shared by the participants was also related to the demographics represented in the sample. For example, 48% of participants had completed some college upon completing the survey, and the average age was found to be approximately 26 years old. Considering these demographics, it is logical to assume that these participants would disclose information about important life events relating to work or school, such as graduation, having a job interview, being hired, or getting a raise. Interestingly, this type of news had the highest frequency, with nearly 75% of participants reporting that they had experienced these types of life events. Furthermore, as a result of the fact that the most respondents experienced this type of positive news compared to the others, they were more likely to disclose information pertaining to this news in a direct manner.

It can be assumed that, because there was more familiarity with this type of news, the participants felt more confident and, as a result, more motivated to directly state their information instead of implying it through the posting of pictures. Along the same line, it may also be argued that this type of news is more difficult to share indirectly in comparison to the other types. For example, in consideration of good relationship news, which had the second highest number of participants who reported experiencing these types of life events, the users were more likely to share indirectly. Due to the fact that relationship-based news often involves
ceremonies or symbolic gestures, such as weddings or engagement rings, there are more opportunities to capture these moments in photos. However, it is not common for an individual to post a photo upon receiving a job interview or a pay raise, as these events do not involve tangible items or rituals that can be photographed.

As a whole, the research indicates that there is a correlation between the type of information disclosed by Facebook users—either directly or indirectly—and the personal events that are taking place in their offline lives. The ways in which users share information was fairly split between direct and indirect, but their age and education level were larger indicators than we initially expected. An analysis of the findings shows that a participant’s age determines how much of that user’s life had been lived up to the point of completing the survey, therefore dictating what they were and were not able to directly share.

Based on these results, it is suggested that future research be conducted on older Facebook users to determine; (1) if older users share more family and health than younger users; and (2) if this news is shared directly or indirectly. As stated previously, the type of news influences the ways in which the information is disclosed based on how it is most easily communicated. Our participants, who were younger in age, shared relationship and work or school news more than family or health news. Therefore, a future direction for this research would be to study the types of news shared most often by older Facebook users. This will provide greater insight into the on and offline values of individuals at different points in their lives.
References


