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# Rethinking Self-disclosure: Online and Offline

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## **Abstract**

Self-disclosure has long been of interest to social psychologist and communication scholars. More recently, when scholars started to understand self-disclosure behavior online, their language reflected an assumed online/offline dichotomy with considerable reference to anonymity "online." Using depression-related image sharing as a context for thinking about issues of self-disclosure and the limits of online/offline distinctions, we challenge this binary notion and suggest a spectrum conceptualization instead. We argue that online and offline worlds were never truly separate and have become increasingly inter-connected as more interactions move online and ubiquitous mobile devices support always-on mediated social connections. Furthermore, the notion of "true self" which has at times been thought of as the "offline" self is nonexistent; rather our identities are faceted, and different media are designed in ways that encourage different kinds of self-disclosure, just as different face-to-face social contexts do.

## **Author Keywords**

Self-disclosure; Identity

## **Introduction**

Historically, new mediation forms have first been experienced as "virtual" as they have been thought to replace or mediate other forms of mediation thought of as "real" over time [1]. In "Life on the Screen" [2], Turkle investigated engagement in MUDs and MOOs and reported that people felt liberated from the

confines of their “real” world identities which are often self-characterized as inadequate. Slater [1] contrasts the world Turkle investigates with an ethnographic study of Internet use in relation to Trinidad [3]: “*By starting from people’s practice, rather than presumptions about media characteristics such as virtuality, it became clear that the online/offline distinction played little if any role in people’s use or experience of the Internet: people integrated the various Internet media into existing social practices and identities.*” He argues that virtuality is not a feature of the media, rather is just one social practice of media use among others [1].

The ways social technologies are being used support the notion that there are tight connections between online and offline social experiences when it comes to self-disclosure. Using online health support groups or other social media to seek and provide social support which has been shown to influence health, and social media users’ concerns regarding context collapse [4] and privacy are some examples that show how the online and offline contexts for self-disclosure that used to be viewed as separate, are in reality intertwined. In this position paper, we think of one’s identity as a faceted construct; People maintain social boundaries and disinherit different facets of themselves according to the social situation. We focus on expressing these facets, especially when it comes to ones that are considered negative, controversial, or carry social stigma with them and on the ways that different contexts support disclosure.

### **Questions**

We ask, ***what would it mean to think about self-disclosure in social media if we do not fall back on the online/offline distinction? What other ways of thinking about the online and the offline might be more useful in this context? Do social media users make a distinction between online and offline in these contexts, and if they do, when/why/how do they do it and how do they make sense of it?*** We take the case of sharing depression-related content on

Instagram as an example [5], but think variations of our questions are important ones to ask in other situations in which people have a hard time deciding to disclose, or actually face or worry about facing negative consequences as a result of doing so.

In the early days, going online seemed to detach one from place and body. But now, ***does image sharing serve to bridge people’s experiences of the physical world and their “mediated” communities? How is someone’s identity as it relates to depression, informed by their computer-mediated and non-computer-mediated experiences? How can we think about the experience of depression as the context to understand people’s use of Instagram, and how can we understand their experience of depression in light of how they use Instagram? How do people decide about disclosing visual and verbal stories about their experience with depression in various settings? How do they think this disclosure and its potential positive and negative consequences form their experience of depression? And in the end, how do we design to improve these experiences? For example, if people experiencing depression look for social support in the process of self-disclosure, then how do we design social technologies to support this?*** We do not provide answers here, as responding to these questions calls for complex empirical studies, rather we raise questions to illustrate how we think about this topic. Next, we discuss a small snapshot of related work and suggest ways that we might be able to revisit the offline/online binary.

### **Prior Work**

The social identity model of deindividuation, hyperpersonal CMC theory, reduced cues theory, social information processing theory, and media richness theory are some of the theories that have been proposed in the literature to account for observations of self-disclosure in computer-mediated compared to offline settings in dyadic interactions. Due to the

overlapping predictions of these theories, it has been posed that we need to have an overarching theory of communication explaining disclosure in both online and offline dyadic and other forms of interactions [6]. In thinking about socially and negatively viewed aspects of self or emotions, the notion of self verification as an important self-presentation goal is relevant. We want to be seen by others as we see ourselves [7]. We want to share our emotions with others, be it positive or negative [8]. Yet, we do not always do so, because we have self-presentation and impression management concerns [9] and there are risks associated with disclosure (e.g. relational, identity, self-worth, well-being). In the context of mediated expressions of self, scholars have suggested that it is when people engage in counter-normative or stigmatized behaviors that they most need identity segmentation and tools for focused sharing [10]. The self-disclosure literature provides theories about how people decide to disclose (e.g. [11] [12]). SNS affordances provide a new context for self-disclosure and impact behaviors related to self-disclosure [13]. Some scholars have argued that anonymity in CMC works similar to the "strangers on the train" experience [14]. Others have argued that any account of online self-disclosure that is based only on media effects (e.g. visual anonymity) is mistaken [15].

But what is this "self" that we want others to see as we see and yet we face challenges as we want to fully express it, "online" and "offline"? Psychologists have long made the case that the notion of "self" is multifaceted. Individuals are both what they inhibit and what they disinhibit in various social situations. We find Suler's line of thought about disinhibition and the self relevant here. He asks whether the disinhibition effect [16] releases one's "true" self, and suggests that thinking of personality as constructed in layers, with the "true self" living beneath the surface is a problematic way of thinking about self-disclosure. Instead, he discusses how the "self" is a way more complex notion than that of the layered model.

Particularly, based on his in-depth investigation of the online disinhibition effect, this notion is too vague and simplified. According to Freud, as Suler discusses, the negatively viewed aspects of self are part of us, as are the psychological defenses (e.g. suppression) that Anna Freud has categorized. Suler further suggests that a single online disinhibited self does not even exist [17].

## **Discussion**

We suggest that one useful way to think about self-disclosure in such vulnerable situations is to think how different media and traditional social situations encourage and form different kinds of self-disclosure behavior as well as responses to and engagement with it. For example, a teenager who self-harms might show their cuts to a friend over coffee, might show a friend an image depicting their cuts over coffee, or might use other communication channels (e.g. text, IM) to share that with a friend. They might post that photo to their Instagram with an imagined/actual audience, which might or might not include that friend, and they might try to hide it from their parents. In all of these decisions, informed by dyadic disclosure theories developed for non-mediated contexts, the discloser might think about their audience and how they might respond, and then decide on the disclosure components (e.g. content, audience, channel), disclose and evaluate consequences and as such inform future disclosure behavior. Yet, we do not have an overarching theory that can fully explain disclosure in one to many contexts and takes into account the context provided by technological affordances. In line with Suler's ideas, we think that all of the above alternatives reflect key aspects of the discloser's identity that tend to surface in different social and psychological conditions. As such, we think taking an ecological perspective to investigate self-disclosure in the context of non-conforming emotions or aspects of the self is crucial. If someone is shy at a party but more sociable online, neither of these accounts is more "real" or "true" or "authentic" than the other. Rather both are facets of who this person is, just revealed within situational contexts. In

fact, SNS affordances provide a new context for self-disclosure [13] and we need to further investigate how; as social technologies could enable people to perform their identities [9] in more diverse situations.

We think with the presence of social technologies in many aspects of our daily lives, thinking of online and offline as two exclusive concepts is not a useful model anymore. Rather we suggest thinking about conceptualizing them on a spectrum characterized by the types and extent to which factors affecting the disclosure process are at play. Instead of asking questions that assume there are two separate worlds and one true self, we should ask how people who use these technologies understand and perform identities through variously mediated means along the mediation spectrum, depending on psychological, social, cultural, and technological factors. Focusing on the context of socially stigmatized or negatively perceived aspects of identity and emotions, and guided by questions posed earlier, we hope to develop a theoretical framework that attends to disclosure behavior and engagement with it along this spectrum taking into account various factors (e.g. goals, audience, personal) and suggest testable design recommendations with the overarching goal of improving sensitive disclosure experiences.

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