**The More I Open-Up, the More You “Like” Me:**

**Self-disclosure and Intimacy as Predictors of Responsiveness in Closed Women’s Groups on Facebook**

**Abstract**

**100-150 words.**

**Keywords: 5-6 key words.**

Fifteen years after the launching of Facebook, it is safe to say that online social networks have penetrated the lives of most people around the world and have become integrated in many facets of their daily lives and activities. As a result, we have witnessed the proliferation of studies on numerous aspects of this wide phenomena, part of which are dedicated to the existence, characteristics, and patterns of usage of closed Facebook groups. Miron and Ravid (2015) examined the privacy settings of Facebook groups in Israel to consider the issue in an educational, rather than legal-ethical context. Among the multitude of virtual communities operating in the Israeli online space, there is a prominent number of closed Facebook groups founded and operated by women targeting an exclusively female audience. Some of these groups have tens of thousands of members, and a wide scope of activities is conducted in their frameworks. Some groups are designed for members familiar with one another in daily life ( e.g. share a living environment), while in others, members do not know each other outside of the group.

The current study on closed women’s groups on Facebook focuses on two very large (over 100,000 members each) Israeli groups as a case-study. The activity carried out within their frameworks is broad. The dynamics characterizing these groups, the topics discussed in posts, and the features of responsiveness to these posts, all indicate that what we are witnessing is a new social-psychological and cultural setting. In this unique environment, numerous practices of socialization, intimacy, and self-disclosure, which are not usually seen in spheres of activity among strangers, are a routine part of its overall activities, thereby marking these closed women’s groups worth studying and understanding.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the relationships between levels of self-disclosure expressed in members’ posts, levels of intimacy with regard to the type of topics raised and discussed, and the scale and nature of responsiveness to these posts.

**Theoretical Background**

**Conceptualization of a community.**

By definition, a community is a social group in which two or more people identify and interact with each other. Humans are constantly connected to groups that unite them with others by way of shared experiences, loyalties, and interests. While group members do not waive their individuality, at the same time they perceive themselves as part of an “us.” Identifying the subjective and experiential component of the community, Anderson (2006) coined the term “imagined communities” given that it is impossible to define a community by means of an objective and distinctive commonality shared by the individuals that comprise it. An online network that constitutes a community is the product of the subjective perceptions of the individuals who see themselves as part of it. Hence, most communities do not exist in reality, but are simply an idea around which a group of people unite.

Simmel (1903/2002) describes the abandonment of small villages and the relocation to large cities in the late nineteenth century. This urbanization process led to a type of alienation, which was not experienced by individuals living in small, isolated rural communities. In 1957, Ferdinand Tönnies proposed the terms *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* to distinguish between the two main types of public spaces that developed in the late nineteenth century, arguing further that these societal models reflect distinct relationship styles. *Gemeinschaft* is a community characterized by face-to-face relationships, ongoing acquaintances, and shared beliefs, that in turn constitute a social sphere in which interpersonal relationships based on deep emotions, intimacy, fellowship, and humanity develop. In contrast, *gesellschaft* is a social sphere in which social ties are based on cost-effectiveness, purposefulness, and a sense of mission.

 **The Transition to Online Groups.**

In 1993, Rheingold coined the term “virtual community” to describe a type of social group that exists solely on the Internet. These virtual communities form in cyberspace when enough people actively participating in public discussions invest a sufficient level of emotion to generate a network of interpersonal relationships. Put differently, Rheingold stresses long-term interactions between people who share an emotional attachment as a condition for the consolidation of such communities of which casual “visitors” are not part. Contrarily, Wellman (1998) argues that online communities are “online social networks,” and given his avoidance of the term “virtual” indicates that online social networks are not fundamentally different from offline communities. They function as networks of interpersonal relationships that provide mutual support, a sense of belonging, and social identity while enabling socialization and the exchange of information. In a later work, Rheingold acknowledges that the term “virtual” may be problematic and that “Virtual communities might be real communities, they might be pseudo-communities, or they might be something entirely new in the realm of social contracts” (2000: 49).

While the debate surrounding virtualization may seem to stem from dichotomies underlying the scholarship at the time when the Internet became a universal apparatus in the mid-1990s— such as online versus offline and real versus virtual—it is also possible that the difficulty in defining online communities is rooted in the discourse surrounding the very concept of community in the context of social sciences and particularly among sociologists since the early twentieth century.

According to Granit and Nathan (2000), the development of online communities reflects post-modern sociological and cultural processes that enable individuals to share their personal narratives and identify as they perceive themselves in a tolerant and unbiased environment. Similarly, Boyd and Ellison (2007) underscore the advantage vis-à-vis individual/community relations in defining social networking sites as online platforms that allow individuals to create a public or semi-public profile, share it with others, and form relationships based on it. Riegner (2007), on the other hand, stresses the apparatus that facilitates social interaction. From his perspective, a social network is a space created to connect people with similar interests, such as hobbies and business-related networking, by way of web-based tools, such as email, chats, and blogs. Combining these emphases, Pallis et al. (2011) view a social network as a site where each user creates a list of other users with whom they are connected and, by employing a variety of tools, brings them together to build a community, interact, contribute, share knowledge, and participate in different activities. Such functional aspects of online social networking are also noted by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), who describe them as applications that allow users to communicate by creating informative personal profiles, inviting friends and acquaintances to access these profiles, send emails, and chat. Personal profiles can contain a wide range of information, text, images, videos, audio files, and blogs.

From the user’s perspective, Boyd (2011) claims that they perceive these as spheres in which they may initiate and maintain social relationships with friends and acquaintances, flirt with friends of friends, and create romantic relationships. Alternatively, they may establish business relationships or discuss social and political issues. The user’s motivation is not only to share information with those who are interested in that information (as well as with those who are not), but also, and perhaps especially, to see and be seen.

While online social networking platforms allow for the creation of private, intimate spaces in which Internet users can choose a precise level of personal exposure, they may not, in fact, have full control over the scope and identities of recipients to which their information is disclosed .

Currently, Facebook is the leading online social network that enables users to open online groups and invite other users to join them. To achieve this, the group founder chooses one of the platform’s privacy setting options: public, closed, or secret. It is important to note that there are many distinguishing factors regarding participation and exposure to content, which are frequently updated by Facebook. However, although the company informs its users of these changes, one cannot be certain that all users notice the subtle changes in the privacy clauses. Consequently, the company has been criticized for how these recurrent changes impact the users’ ability to control their privacy settings (see for example, D’Arcy & Young 2012).

A public group is open to all Facebook users without limitations on participation or message posting. In a closed group, only members are allowed to participate, however, non-group Facebook users are or can be aware of its existence. A secret group, on the other hand, comprises of selected users, recruited via private channels, with sole access to its contents.

**Self-disclosure.**

Self-disclosure is expressed in terms of an individual’s willingness to reveal details relating to their personal status, life events, and aspirations (Deci & Ryan 2011), and serves several purposes, such as increasing mutual understanding (Laurenceau et al. 1998) and building trust between partners in a relationship (Rubin 1975). Moreover, disclosure enables a person to identify and integrate meaning into processes and experiences they have undergone (Frattaroli 2006). Mechanisms of self-disclosure are regulated by norms of reciprocity, that is, a sense of social obligation to respond with a similar level of intimacy to the self-disclosures of others (Rotenberg & Chase 1992). This reciprocity is especially important in the early stages of a relationship in which those involved are becoming acquainted.

According to Wallace (1999), self-disclosure is an important component in the context of online discourse. It has been found that people report a greater degree of self-disclosure in online relationships than in offline relationships (Parks & Floyd 1996). Alongside the absence of nonverbal cues, the asynchronous nature of most social networking activities affects the individual’s level of intimate disclosure (Suler 1996; Walther 2004). However, while one of the most attractive features of social networks is that they enable users to share status updates, activities, feelings, and thoughts with both friends and strangers (Jones et al. 2008; Valenzuela et al. 2009), this disclosure of personal information in the public discourse can be problematic in terms of identity theft, stalking, and harassment (Gross & Acquisti 2005; Nosko et al. 2010). On the one hand, studies show that users are aware of these dangers and take precautions regarding their privacy (Al-Saggaf 2011; Boyd & Ellison 2007; Jones et al. 2008; Young 2009), while on the other hand, given that users find it extremely difficult to refrain from sharing personal information (Edwards & Brown 2009), intimate self-disclosure in cyberspace is quite common (Jones et al. 2008; Valenzuela et al. 2009). In particular, the inherent anonymity of online social networks enables and encourages “lonely” people to share intimate information (Bonetti et al. 2010). Thus, as Hollenbaugh & Ferris (2014: 55 ) claim, “The profile of the most disclosive Facebook users in terms of amount, therefore, includes those who want to maintain their existing relationships, as well as those who want to get attention, perhaps because of their diminished social cohesion and agreeableness offline.”

This inclination toward self-disclosure is facilitated or encouraged by certain features of social networks (Mazer et al. 2007). For example, the question “What’s on your mind?” in Facebook’s status update box prompts users to share information. In general, social networks provide a user-friendly platform that easily allows for sharing photographs, updating status, and providing other information (Schumaker & Van Der Heide 2011).

Interestingly, it has been found that women display a higher degree of self-disclosure (Dindia & Allen 1992), have more developed communication skills (Korkut 2005), and are more likely to express and share their feelings and empathize with one another than men (Ridley 1993). In its tenth World Wide Web user survey, the Graphic, Visualization, and Usability Center (GVU) (1999) found that women are more likely to use the Internet for educational purposes, communication, and sharing personal information. Similarly, a comprehensive study (Weiser 2000) shows that women use the Internet primarily to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, and as a source of knowledge. In contrast, men use the Internet primarily for entertainment and pleasure. These results are supported in studies demonstrating that women are more likely than men to use the Internet to create social interactions (Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi 2000, 2003).

**Intimacy.**

According to Rheingold (1993), it is precisely what may be perceived as the Internet’s “limitations” that foster the development of intimate and meaningful relationships. As mentioned, the Internet in general, and social networks in particular, facilitate self-disclosure more than other channels of interpersonal communication. Considering that self-disclosure is one catalyst for achieving intimacy in interpersonal relationships, social networks constitute fruitful ground for nurturing intimacy in relationships. Cassidy (2001) defines intimacy as one’s capacity to share their own feelings of happiness, excitement, longing, and fear, as well as their needs and desires, while simultaneously being a receptacle for others’ similar expressions. Thus, intimacy plays a significant role in social relationships (Collins & Miller 1994) as it constitutes a dynamic, evolving process through which people learn about one another (Reis & Shaver 1988). It the context of romantic relationships, it has been found that sharing personal information through dialogue is essential for creating intimacy between partners (Greene et al. 2006). Finally, intimacy is an important component in personality development and encourages rapport (Derlega et al. 1987).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2015) the quality or condition of “being intimate” denotes three different meanings: (1) The state of being personally intimate; intimate friendship or acquaintance; familiar intercourse; close familiarity; an instance of this; (2) Euphemism for sexual intercourse; (3) Closeness of observation, knowledge, or the like.
 Intimacy is a concept that seems to be valued in modern society. According to Chambers (2006: 14), “The economic, cultural and political destabilization of traditional community values coincide with the ascendance of intimacy, privacy and the project of the self.” Bauman (2003) suggests that in individualistic Western societies, people tend to feel lost, as their lives are not organized around traditional social structures (e.g., religion or community).
 Zelizer (2009) identifies three different dimensions of intimacy: physical, informational, and emotional, while others (Plummer 2003; Marar 2012) define intimacy as related to the act of mutual sharing of inner thoughts and feelings. Marar (2012) claims that intimacy is intrinsically reciprocal as it involves knowledge of each other and mutuality.
 Some scholars contend that intimacy through social media is something other than non-mediated intimacy (e.g., Sibilia 2008; Madianou & Miller 2013). Others have seen that the opinions toward digital forms of intimacy are as potentially “diminished and dangerous corruption[s] of the real thing” (McGlotten 2013). Lambert (2016) suggests that users are still learning to negotiate intimacy in digital spaces, while Jamieson (2012) introduces the term “practices of intimacy” to refer to “practices which enable, generate, and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other.”

**Responsiveness.**

User behaviors on social media platforms can be divided into three categories: consuming, contributing, and creating (Muntinga et al. 2011). Each category requires a different amount of cognitive efforts on part of the user. Consuming involves reading and watching without contributing to or creating contents at all. Contributing refers to interaction between users, for instance, participation in online groups, and user interaction with content, such as commenting on posts. Creating involves producing and publishing content. Thus, the user’s cognitive effort when creating a post is greater than when consuming a post. On Facebook, these behaviors involve distinct levels of engagement: clicking ‘like’ is indicative of the lowest level of engagement; ‘share’ requires greater cognitive effort and user commitment; and ‘comment’(or creating a new post) requires the highest cognitive effort.

**Engagement.**
 Engagement has been conceptualized as having a behavioral and emotional structure (Jacques et al. 1995). In the context of the interaction between the audience and the content, Jenkins et al. (2013) argue that engagement has benefits for both sides in the communication process, the audience and the industry. Quesenbery (2003) adds that users’ engagement in the digital environment is strongly correlated with their level of satisfaction with the technological platform. Emotional engagement involves three levels of processing: first, the immediate and direct level, which includes positive or negative emotions (such as laughter or excitement); the second level involves deeper meta-cognitive and psychosocial processes (Frijda 1986; Gross 1999; Lazarus 1991); and the third involves further reassessment of media-related experiences that are particularly meaningful in the long-term (Oliver & Bartsch 2010).**Research Hypotheses**

In light of the literature review above, three hypotheses were formulated for this study:

H1: A positive correlation will be found between the level of self-disclosure and the level of responsiveness.

H2: A positive correlation will be found between the level of intimacy and the level of responsiveness.

H3: Intimacy will mediate the correlation between self-disclosure and responsiveness.

**Study 1**

Our first study aimed to examine the dynamic of writing and reacting, i.e. self-expression and responsiveness, in a large closed online women’s group. This group is characterized by its declared orientation—sexuality and intimate relationships. Not only its name reflects this orientation, but also the “about” section, as well as recurrent comments (by the group administrators and members) indicative of rather homogenous discussion topics. Accordingly, we assumed that a closed group with an intimate orientation that emphasizes and encourages self-disclosure and responsiveness would be a suitable environment in which to examine this study’s hypotheses.

**Methodology**

**Participants.**

433 posts from this group were coded: the majority were personal (62.1%) and 54.2% were non-anonymous in nature. The average number of comments was 81.21 (125.05), the average number of likes was 127.18 (282.11), and the average number of “special likes” (including emoticons) was 70.02 (167.24). Most posts were emotional (64.1%) and most responding comments were positive (68%). Examining the Facebook profiles of all post writers, we found that 81.2% were fully or partially closed.

**Research Variables.**

***Independent variable.***

*Self-disclosure* was measured using the Self-Disclosure Index (SDI) (Miller et al. 1983). SDI is a 10-item scale measuring self-disclosure in a range of personal factors (habits, feelings, emotions, relationships). Using a Likert scale ranging from 0 (not discussing the factor at all) to 4 (fully and completely discussing the factor), participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of the statements (e.g., “Things I have done which I am proud of,” “What is important to me in life”). Internal reliability of the scale was high (α = .915).

***Mediated variable*.**

*Level of intimacy* was measured by classifying each post according to its content’s level of intimacy: low, medium, and high. A post that included technical details or advice was defined as a post with a low level of intimacy; a post that called attention to the writer on a personal level was defined as having a medium level of intimacy; and a post that included personal information about the writer and her life was defined as having a high level of intimacy.

***Dependent variable.***

*Responsiveness.*Based on the literature review (with some modification to render it more relevant for this case-study), this variable was divided into three consecutive levels: a high level of responsiveness (commenting on posts), a medium level of responsiveness (using emoticon likes), and a low level of responsiveness (using regular likes). The levels were numbered from 1-3: 3 for comments, 2 for emoticon likes, and 1 for regular likes.

**Results and Discussion**

To examine the correlation between the level of self-disclosure and the level of responsiveness, (H1) a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted, and no significant correlation was found (r = .080, p > .05) (Table 1).

To examine the correlation between the level of intimacy and the level of responsiveness (H2), a Spearman correlation analysis was conducted and a positive correlation was found (r = .445, p < .001). In other words, we found that the higher the post’s level of intimacy, the more responses, regular likes, and ‘special likes’ it generated (Table 1).

To examine the mediating role of intimacy in the relationship between self-disclosure and responsiveness, we used Hayes’ (2018) PROCESS bootstrapping command with 5,000 iterations (Model 4). The analysis treated self-disclosure as a predicting variable, intimacy as the mediator, and responsiveness as the dependent variable. Results show that the 95% confidence interval for the direct effect of self-disclosure on responsiveness included 0 (95% CI [-145.43, 297.41] with 5,000 resamples *F* (2,385) = 2.59, p > .05, Rsq=1.3%). However, the indirect effect of self-disclosure on responsiveness through group intimacy did not include 0 (95% CI [4.08, 180.23] with 5,000 resamples. In other words, while the model does not indicate an effect of self-disclosure on responsiveness, it does indicate an indirect effect of self-disclosure on responsiveness through group intimacy (Figure 1).

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**Study 2**

In order to extend the corpus of this research and analyze the phenomenon beyond the boundaries of a distinctive women’s group, a second study was conducted. In this study we examined a much larger number of posts (1070) derived from another closed Facebook group designated for women only. Unlike our first study , in this study we deliberately selected a group with a broad and varied spectrum of discussion topics and areas of interest related to women; in fact, the group’s “about” section indicates that all discussion topics related to women and/or are of interest to women are welcome. We assumed that a comparative analysis between this group and the distinctively different Study 1. group would contribute to a much better understanding of the phenomenon.

**Methodology**

**Participants.**

1070 posts from a large closed women’s Facebook group (with no clearly defined orientation for writing and discussion topics) were coded. The majority of posts were personal (70.7%), while practically all were non-anonymous (99.7%). The average number of comments was 56.12 (99.11), the average number of likes was 90.67 (274.65), and the average number of “emoticon likes” was 46.53 (172.92). Most posts were emotional (60%) and most response comments to them were positive (63.3%). Examining the Facebook profiles of all post writers, we have found that 88.1% were fully or partially closed.

**Results and Discussion**

To examine the correlation between the level of self-disclosure and the level of responsiveness (H1), a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted, and a positive correlation was found (r = .261, p < .001). In other words, the higher the level of self-disclosure in the post, the more responses it generated (Table 2).

To examine the correlation between the level of intimacy and the level of responsiveness (H2), a Spearman correlation analysis was conducted, and a positive correlation was found (r = .223, p < .001). Thus, the higher a post’s level of intimacy , the more responses it generated (Table 2).

To examine the mediating role of intimacy in the relationship between self-disclosure and responsiveness, we used Hayes’ (2018) PROCESS bootstrapping command with 5,000 iterations (Model 4). The analysis treated self-disclosure as a predicting variable, intimacy as the mediator, and responsiveness as the dependent variable. Results show that the 95% confidence interval for the direct effect between self-disclosure on responsiveness did not include 0 (95% CI [301.85, 570.45] with 5,000 resamples *F* (2,904) = 40.49, p > .001, Rsq=8.2%). Likewise, the indirect effect of self-disclosure on responsiveness through group intimacy also did not include 0 (95% CI [43.17, 142.14] with 5,000 resamples. In other words, the model indicates a direct effect of self-disclosure on responsiveness and an indirect effect of self-disclosure on responsiveness through group intimacy (Figure 2).

 Insert Table 2. here

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**General Discussion**

The findings of both studies indicate that there is a positive connection between the level of self-disclosure in written posts in the two closed women’s Facebook groups examined. We also found that there is a positive connection between the scope of responsiveness and depths of engagement vis-à-vis these posts, however, this correlation is contingent on two conditions: in regard to the women’s group dealing with general women-related topics, it was found that the more the post writers disclosed themselves, so the number of responses, regular likes, and special likes (emoticons) they generated increased. Surprisingly, in the women’s group oriented toward sexual and intimate discourse, this correlation was not found. It is possible that this stems from the fact that in a group with a distinctive orientation toward revelatory discourse, the very choice to play by the accepted rules is not rewarded by way of excess responsiveness, while in a group that enables various types of discourse, including instrumental discourse on non-personal issues, the choice to write in a more revelatory manner is perceived by the group members as an invitation to respond by way of expressing empathy, interest, and involvement.

 The level of intimacy that characterized the choice of post topics, was positively and clearly correlated with the level of responsiveness in both studies alike. The higher the level of intimacy, that is, the more the discussion topics were personal, so the number of responses, standard likes, and special likes (emoticons) increased. The intimacy variable was found to mediate between the level of self-disclosure and the level of responsiveness in both groups, that is, a rise in the level of self-disclosure indirectly led to a rise in the level of responsiveness mediated by the level of intimacy. In other words, when the level of self-disclosure rose in the context of personal discussion topics, a high level of responsiveness was identified in both groups.

 These findings accord with the findings of previous studies which showed that personal discourse between the parties creates intimacy between them (Green et al. 2006) and that intimacy is a significant factor in the discourse that encourages closeness between the parties (Derleg et al. 1987).

 Analysis of the findings of Studies 1. and 2. Indicates, as do many studies in related fields, that certain aspects of social behavioral patterns familiar from the non-online sphere are manifested also in the online sphere. At the same time, the fact that expressions of intimacy, self-disclosure, and emotional and empathetic responses exist between strangers, without any supplementary face-to-face encounter, demonstrates that the online space has the power to enrich our lives with new opportunities for self-expression, socialization, and empowerment. In this sense, it appears that the closed women’s groups on Facebook may make a significant contribution to the lives of their members.

**Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to this study. First, both studies examined the discourse in a single group as a case-study, and therefore, it is possible that either or both cases are not representative of a broader phenomenon. To rectify this, other groups should be tested to determine whether the results of this study are replicated and present a similar picture. Second, analysis of the variables “self-disclosure level” and “intimacy level” was determined by the researchers and it may therefore be appropriate for further studies to attempt the development of a better instrument for gaging these variables or appoint judges to evaluate the variables.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, this study aims for a better understanding of the connection between the openness of the discourse in closed Facebook groups and its impact on the responsiveness of group members, and to learn more about the mechanism that explains this connection. The study found that this linkage is influenced by two variables—the groups’ orientation and features and the level of intimacy produced via open discourse. It appears that this study constitutes a first exploratory attempt toward a more comprehensive investigation of the issue of responsiveness in closed social networking groups as a function of openness and intimate discourse, and its findings add to the extant literature on the topic of openness in discourse in the online space and its impact on the audience.

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