**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**

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**Abstract**

The current research focuses on two closed Facebook groups founded and operated by women targeting an exclusively female audience, with over a hundred thousand members each. By analyzing 433 posts from one group (Study 1), and 1070 posts from a second group (Study 2), this paper aims to identify the relationships between levels of self-disclosure expressed in members’ posts, levels of intimacy with regard to the type of topics discussed, and the scale and nature of responsiveness to these posts. Findings indicate that there is a positive correlation between the level of self-disclosure in the posts and the level of responsiveness as well as the extent to which the responses engage with the posts. This correlation was evident mainly in the context of personal topics. In this sense, it appears that closed women’s groups on Facebook have the power to enrich users’ lives with new opportunities for self-expression, socialization, and empowerment.

*Keywords*: closed Facebook groups, women, self-disclosure, intimacy, responsiveness

**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**

Fifteen years after Facebook was launched, it is safe to say that online social networks have penetrated the lives of most people around the world, thereby becoming 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 phenomenon, some of which are dedicated to the existence, characteristics, and patterns of usage of closed Facebook groups. Among the multitude of virtual communities operating in the Israeli online space, there is a large 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 these frameworks. Some groups are designed for members familiar with one another in daily life (e.g., those who 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 Israeli groups with over a hundred thousand members each. The activity carried out within their frameworks is broad and includes approximately five thousand posts each month. In this unique environment, numerous socialization, intimacy, and self-disclosure practices, which are usually uncommon among strangers, are a routine aspect of the groups’ overall activities. Thus, these closed women’s groups constitute domains worthy of research and further understanding.

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**

 **Facebook Groups.** 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 acquaintancesto access these profiles, send emails, and chat. Personal profiles can contain a wide range of content, such as information, texts, images, videos, audio files, and blogs.

Facebook is the leading online social network in the world that enables its users to open online groups and invite other users to join them. To achieve this, the group founder chooses one of the following privacy settings: public, secret, and closed. It is important to note that while Facebook frequently updates the many distinguishing factors regarding participation and exposure to content and informs its users of these changes, one cannot be certain that all users notice 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 (D’Arcy & Young, 2012).

A public group is open to all Facebook users without limitations on participation or message posting. A secret group is comprised of selected users, recruited via private channels, with sole access to its contents. A closed group is based on a members-only policy that provides its users with enhanced privacy given that only group members can read or comment on posts. In these groups, moreover, anything a member posts in the group is visible only to other group members and does not appear in their Facebook activity logs (Meishar-Tal, Kurtz, & Pieterse, 2012). Non-group Facebook users are or can be aware of the closed group’s existence. In a closed group, the group manager’s involvement is usually high (Roth-Cohen & Lahav, 2018)—they are familiar to most group members, publish posts frequently, and respond to members’ posts.

While, like other online social networking platforms, Facebook enables the creation of private intimate spaces in which users can choose a precise level of personal exposure, it may limit users’ control over the scope and identities of recipients to which their information is disclosed.

Boyd (2011) claims that users perceive social media networks as spheres in which they can initiate and maintain social relationships with friends, acquaintances, and friends of friends, and establish romantic relationships. Alternatively, they may form business relationships or discuss social and political issues. Riegner (2007), in contrast, highlights the apparatus facilitating social interaction. From his perspective, a social network is a space created for the purpose of connecting people with similar interests, i.e. hobbies and business-related topics, 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, sending emails, and participating in chats. Personal profiles can contain a wide range of content, including 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, initiate relationships 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 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, is comprised of selected users, recruited via private channels, with sole access to its contents.

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**Self-disclosure.** In general, self-disclosure is a precondition for any social relationship (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Laurenceau et al., 1998). 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 their prior processes and experiences (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-disclosure of others (Rotenberg & Chase, 1992). This reciprocity is especially important in the early stages of a relationship.

In comparison to other modes of communication, the potential availability of self-disclosed information over space and time on the internet is significantly higher given its ability to contain a far greater amount of content and its potential to reach a large number of scattered users (Taddicken, 2014). Thus, self-disclosed information on the internet is enduring, replicable, scalable, searchable, and shareable (Boyd, 2008; Papacharissi & Gibson, 2011), while offline self-disclosure frequently takes place within a heterogeneous group consisting of, for example, friends, family, and colleagues (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

According to Wallace (1999), self-disclosure is an important component in the context of online discourse. It has been found that individuals report a greater degree of self-disclosure in online relationships than in offline relationships (Parks & Floyd, 1996). Alongside the lack of nonverbal cues, the asynchronous nature of most social networking activities effects users’ level of intimate disclosure (Suler, 1996; Walther, 2004). One of the most attractive features of social networks is that users can share updates about their status, feelings, thoughts, and actions with both friends and strangers (Jones et al., 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009). However, such public disclosure of personal information can be problematic in terms of identity theft, stalking, and harassment (Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Nosko et al., 2010). Studies show that while participants are cautious regarding their privacy and are aware of these dangers (Al-Saggaf, 2011; Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Jones et al., 2008; Young, 2009), intimate self-disclosure in cyberspace is quite common (Jones et al., 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009) given users’ difficulty to refrain from sharing personal information (Edwards and Brown, 2009). In particular, the inherent anonymity of online social networks enables and encourages “lonely” people to share intimate information (Bonetti et al., 2010). As Hollenbaugh and Ferris (2014) 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” (p. 55).

This inclination toward self-disclosure is facilitated or encouraged by certain social network features (Mazer et al., 2007). For example, the question “What’s on your mind?” in Facebook’s status update box prompts users to share information.

Interestingly, it has been found that women display a higher degree of self-disclosure (Dindia & Allen, 1992) 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 primarily use the internet to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, and as a source of knowledge. In contrast, men use the internet mostly 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), what may be perceived as one of the internet’s “limitations,” that is, the physical distance between users, is in fact what fosters 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. Cassidy (2001) defines intimacy as an individual’s capacity to share feelings of happiness, excitement, longing, and fear, as well as their needs and desires, while simultaneously being a receptacle for similar expressions articulated by others. Plummer (2003) defines intimacy as related to the mutual sharing of inner thoughts and feelings, while Marar (2012) claims that intimacy is intrinsically reciprocal as it involves knowledge of the other and mutuality. 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). In 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 in that it encourages rapport (Derlega et al., 1987).

Intimacy is a valued concept in modern society. According to Chambers (2006), “The economic, cultural and political destabilization of traditional community values coincide with the ascendance of intimacy, privacy and the project of the self” (p. 14). In a similar vein, the Oxford English Dictionary (2015) provides three meanings for the quality or condition of “being intimate”: 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.
 Lambert (2016) suggests that users are still learning to negotiate intimacy in digital spaces. Others have seen that users’ opinions toward digital forms of intimacy are as potentially “diminished and dangerous corruption[s] of the real thing” (McGlotten, 2013). 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” (p. 1).

**Responsiveness.** Responsiveness within social media interactions is crucial for their function as social platforms (Ariel & Avidar, 2015). Social media platforms promote a norm whereby the frequency with which feedback given to posts can be understood as gaining other users’ attention (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014). User behavior on social media platforms can be divided into three categories: consuming, contributing, and creating (Muntinga et al., 2011). Each category requires a significant cognitive effort on part of the user. Consuming involves reading and watching without contributing to or creating content at all. Contributing refers to the interaction between users, for instance, participation in online groups or user interaction with content, such as commenting on posts. Creating involves producing and publishing content. Accordingly, the user’s cognitive effort is greater when creating as opposed to consuming a post. Avidar (2013) proposes a pyramid scheme for responsiveness in which responses, in terms of their potential contribution to relational outcomes, range from noninteractive (a response that does not refer to a request), through reactive (that solely refers to a request), to interactive (that refers to a request and initiates an additional turn/s at the same time). 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.

**Research Hypotheses**

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

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

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

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

**Methodology**

A quantitative content analysis was used to examine posts from the closed Facebook groups. All posts for this research, were randomly sampled within three weeks of group activity. Overall, 433 posts were sampled in Study 1 and 1070 posts in Study 2. The posts were coded by three professional coders. We began the coding process by conducting a Pilot on 150 posts. These posts were coded simultaneously by all three coders with an inter-coder reliability of Cronbach-Alpha = 0.82. In a follow-up round table meeting with the coders we discussed the variance between them, as well as several problems they pointed out in the coding sheet. As a result, a few minor adjustments were made to improve the coding sheet.

 All coders, as well as two of the authors, are women and approved members of the sampled closed Facebook groups. In order to refrain from any possible damage to group members’ anonymity and dignity, no identifying personal details of any kind were coded, used, presented or published. Neither original texts nor have sections or elements of the posts (citations, photos, etc.) have not been published by us on any platform. Our study received IRB approval, as requested.

**Research Variables**

**Independent variable:****Level of self-disclosure.** Based on the extant literature, this variable was defined as the degree of openness and self-exposure in group members’ posts. Self-disclosurewas measured by classifying each post according to its content’s level of openness and self-exposure: extremely low, low, medium, high, and extremely high. A post that included no personal information and/or insights of any kind, was defined as a post with an extremely low level of self-disclosure. A post that included information about a member’s political orientation, personal experiences with a service/care giver, etc., was defined as having a lowlevel of self-disclosure. A post that included personal stories about family, friends, and other individuals in the member’s life, as well as posts in which she had asked for helpful information and/or advice in areas such as career, motherhood, and health, were defined as having a medium level of self-disclosure. A post that included stories about sensitive matters like personal failures, as well as posts that included a call for helpful information/advice on a sensitive subject, such as romantic relationships, sexuality, mental problems, etc., were defined as having a high level of self-disclosure, while posts that included personal information about extremely sensitive matters, like incidents in which the member had broken the law, shared a detailed sexual experience, suicidal thoughts or other extreme, non-normative thoughts and/or actions, were defined as having an extremely high level of self-disclosure.

**Mediated variable: Level of intimacy***.* Based on the existing literature, this mediated variable was defined with regard to the main topics to which the posts related. Level of intimacy was measured by classifying each post according to its content’s level of intimacy: low, medium, and high. A post that referred to technical, political, and other non-personal issues, was defined as a post with a low level of intimacy. A post that referred to common personal issues (e.g. motherhood, career, women’s rights, health, etc.) was defined as having a medium level of intimacy; and a post that referred to very personal, intimate issues (e.g. romantic relationship, sexuality, self-esteem) was defined as having a highlevel of intimacy.

**Dependent variable:****Responsiveness.**Based on the literature review (with some modifications 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 3 for comments, 2 for emoticon likes, and 1 for regular likes.

**Study 1**

Our first study aimed to examine the dynamics of writing and responding, i.e., self-expression and responsiveness, in a large closed online women’s group. This group’s declared subject matter—sexuality and intimate relationships—is reflected in both its “about” section and recurrent comments (by the group administrators and members). 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. 433 posts from this group were coded according to the guidelines outlined above.

**Results and Discussion**

**General Features of the Posts**

Among the 433 posts coded for this study, 62.1% were personal and 54.2% were not posted anonymously. 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). In 64.1% of the posts, the writers expressed emotion and the responding comments to these posts were mostly positive (68%). Examining the Facebook profiles of all post writers, we found that 81.2% were fully or partially restricted.

**Main Results**

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’s (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 a 95% confidence interval for the direct effect of self-disclosure on responsiveness that 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).

Insert Table 1 here

Insert Figure 1 here

**Study 2**

In order to extend the corpus of research on and analyze of 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 (1,070) derived from another closed Facebook group designated for women only. Unlike our first study, in this study we deliberately selected a group with a wide variety of discussion topics and areas of interest related to women (e.g. childcare, career development, women in politics); in fact, the group’s “about” section indicates that all discussion topics related and of interest to women are appropriate. 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. All posts from this group were coded according to the guidelines outlined above.

**Results and Discussion**

**General Features of the Posts**

A large majority of the 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 “special likes” (with emoticons) was 46.53 (172.92). Most posts were expressive (60%) and reflected an emotional response toward the self, an individual, or some event. Most response comments to the posts were positive (63.3%).

**Main Results**

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’s (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 did not include 0 (95% CI [43.17, 142.14] with 5,000 resamples. Thus, 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

Insert Figure 2 here

**General Discussion**

The findings of both studies indicate that there is either a direct or indirect correlation between the level of self-disclosure and .... in written posts in closed women’s Facebook groups as well as with the scope of responsiveness and the extent to which they engage with the posts. However, this correlation is contingent on two conditions: in regard to the group dealing with general women-related topics, it was found that the more post writers disclosed information about themselves, so the number of responses, regular likes, and “special likes” 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” they generated, 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. Thus, 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 those of previous studies demonstrating that personal discourse creates intimacy between the parties involved (Green et al., 2006) and that intimacy is a significant factor in discourse that encourages closeness between them (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 as well online. 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 the lives of individuals 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 their members’ lives.

There are several 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 one or both are not representative of a broader phenomenon. To rectify this, other groups should be tested to determine whether they replicate the results of this study and present a similar picture. Second, we examined the phenomenon in women’s groups only without comparing our results to studies focused on other social groups, such as men and children. Future research should examine the hypotheses of this study in the context of other groups as well to identify similarities and differences between them.

To conclude, this study aims for a better understanding of the connection between openness and discourse in closed Facebook groups and its impact on the responsiveness of group members, and of the mechanism that can explain this connection. It found that this linkage is influenced by two variables—the groups’ orientation and features and the level of intimacy generated through open discourse. It appears that this study constitutes an 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 online discourse .

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