**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**

The current research focuses on two closed Facebook groups founded and operated by women and targeting an exclusively female audience, with over 100,000 members each. By analyzing 433 posts from one group (study 1), and another 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 scope 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**

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, 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 case study on closed women’s groups on Facebook focuses on two Israeli groups, with over 100,000 members each. The activity carried out within their frameworks is broad with a approxematly 5000 post each month. 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 the groups’ overall activities, thereby marking these closed women’s groups as worthy of study and 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 information, text, images, videos, audio files, and blogs.

Facebook is the leading online social network in the world. Facebook enables its 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 settings options: public, secret, or closed. 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 (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. In a closed group, only members are allowed to participate; The closed group gives its members enhance privacy since only group members can read or comment on posts. Furthermore, anything a member posts in the group is visible only to other group members and does not appear in their logs of Facebook activities. It is (Meishar-Tal, Kurtz, & Pieterse, 2012). Non-group Facebook users are or can be aware of the closed group's existence. In a closed group, manager involvement is usually high (Roth-Cohen & Lahav, 2018). Involved managers are well-known to most group members, publish posts frequently and respond to member posts

While Facebook, like other online social networking platforms, allows 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.

Boyd (2011) claims that users perceive social media such as Facebook 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.

Riegner (2007) 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, 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 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.

On the Internet, the potential availability of the self-disclosed information over space and time is, in comparison with other modes of communication, significantly greater. The range of the content increases, and it potentially becomes available to a large number of scattered users (Taddicken, 2014). Self-disclosed information on the Internet is therefore persistent, replicable, scalable, searchable and shareable (Boyd, 2008; Papacharissi & Gibson, 2011). Self-disclosure on the Social Web frequently occurs to a heterogeneous audience consisting of different social relationships, 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 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, p. 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.

Interestingly, it has been found that women display a higher degree of self-disclosure (Dindia & Allen, 1992), 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), what may be perceived as the Internet’s “limitations”, the physical distance between users, is in turn what 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 a fruitful ground for nurturing intimacy in relationships. Cassidy (2001) defines intimacy as the capacity to share feelings of happiness, excitement, longing, and fear, as well as their needs and desires, while simultaneously being a receptacle for others’ similar expressions. Plummer (2003) 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 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). 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).

Intimacy is a valued concept in modern society. According to Chambers (2006, p. 14), “The economic, cultural and political destabilization of traditional community values coincide with the ascendance of intimacy, privacy and the project of the self.” 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.
 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, p. 1) 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.**

Responsiveness within the interactions on social media is crucial for their function as social platforms (Ariel & Avidar, 2015). Social media promote a norm whereby the frequency with which posts feedback is given can be understood as gaining attention from other users (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, 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. Avidar (2013) suggested a responsiveness pyramid in which responses vary in their potential contribution to relational outcomes and distinguish between three types of responses: noninteractive (that does not refer to a request), reactive (that solely refers to a request), or 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 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.

**Methodology**

A quantitative content analysis was used to examine posts from the closed-facebook group. All posts for this research, have been randomaly sampled within three weeks of group activity. Overall, 433 post have been samples in study 1 and 1070 posts in study 2. The post have been coded by three well-trained coders. We began the coding process by conducting a Pilot on 150 posts. These posts were coded in parallel 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 have discussed the variance between them, as well as a few problems in the coding sheet they had pointed out. As a result, a few minor adjustments have been made to improve the coding sheet.

 All coders, as well as two of the authors, are women and approved members of the closed Facebook groups. In order to refrain from any possible damage to group members' anonymity and dignity, no identifying personal details of any kind, have been coded, used, presented or published. Original texts have not been published by us on any platform, nor have parts of those posts (citations, photos, etc.). Our study has gained an IRB approval, as requested.

**Research Variables.**

***Independent variable.***

*Level of Self-disclosure*. For the current study, and based on existing literature, as was previously detailed, this variable was defined as the degree of openness and self-exposure in posts that groups' members had written. *Self-disclosure* was 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 attitude, a personal experience with any service/care giver, etc., was defined as having a **low** level of self-disclosure. A post that included personal stories about family, friends, and other people 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 medical issues, 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 in a sensitive issue 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 author had passed 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.* For the current study, and based on existing literature, as was previously detailed, 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 **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.

**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 subject matter—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). 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 explained in the Methodology section.

**Results and Discussion**

General features of the posts

Among the 433 posts that were coded for this study, 62.1% were personal and 54.2% were posted non-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). The post's writer expressed emotion within the content of most of the posts (64.1%) and most of the responding comments were 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’ (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).

 Insert Table 1. here

 Insert Figure 1. here

**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 (e.g. childcare, career development, women in politics); in fact, the group’s “about” section indicates that all discussion topics related to women and 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. All posts from this group were coded according to the guidelines explained in the Methodology section.

**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 “emoticon likes” was 46.53 (172.92). Most posts were expressive (60%) and reflected an emotional response toward the self, a person, 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’ (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

Insert Figure 2 here

**General Discussion**

The findings of both studies indicate that there is a (direct or indirect) correlation between the level of self-disclosure in written posts in the two closed women’s Facebook groups and the scope of responsiveness as well as the extent to which the responses 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 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 also manifested 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.

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 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, we examined the phenomenon only on women's groups without a comparison with other social groups such as men, children, and others. Future research should examine the hypotheses of this study in the context of other groups as well and identify similarities and differences between them.

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 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 discourse in the online space.

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