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| Social Media & Social Penetration Theory |
| COMM 400 Final Research Paper |

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**Introduction**

The highly popular social media site, Facebook, as we all have come to know very well, the use of it so widespread most people go on it several times again without really thinking about it. The story of how Facebook came to be was shared and told in the movie, “The Social Network,” (2010) which inherently was founded by the now very famous (and rich) Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 at a mere age of 19 years old while a student at Harvard University (then known as thefacebook.com). In 2010, 6 years after its initial launch, Facebook users have reached an astounding estimated 400 million people per month (Carlson, 2010). The relevance of Facebook today is inarguable.

In this independent George Mason Communicational research study, the research question sought to be answered was what is the impact of the social media website Facebook on creating a framework for deeper intimacy in relationships? This research question stemmed primarily from the social penetration theory, which postulates that as time increases, the more likely two or more people will share information with one another, or self-disclose (Altman & Taylor, 1973). My hypothesis is that since Facebook facilitates the sharing of information between friends and followers, the level of self-disclosure, or bonding will occur more likely than not.

In 1973, communication researchers Altman and Taylor developed a theory known as the social penetration theory, which postulates that as time increases, the more likely a group of people (2 or more) will share information with one another, or self-disclose. Inherently, this concept hypothesizes that bonds form between people throughout the course of the relationship through the disclosure of personal and intimate information of the self. The social penetration theory was implicated to further examine and understand the complicated scaffolding how relationships are cultivated over time. On a scientific, or epistemological level, Altman and Taylor used the “if-then approach,” which predicts over the course of 5 stages that relationships will increase in comfortabilty levels, as compared to a “multi-layered onion,” which I will elaborate upon in this paper later.

Self-disclosure, or the main component in the Altman & Taylors social penetration model, is the intentional sharing of information about oneself, whether high-risk or low-risk. It examines the cost-reward benefit theorem by looking at the motivations behind why people share certain information with one another, and analyzing the breadth and depth (or level of connection) of that information being self-disclosed.

In general, the individual self is a naturally protective, privacy- oriented person, unless otherwise provided further costs to sharing private information on personal matters. In support of the uncertainty reduction theory, the social penetration model illustrates the desire of people to eliminate possible risk of the “unknown,” or uncertainty. On varying levels, self disclosure provides for an avenue of eliminating the unfamiliar throughout different relationships. The impact of widely popular social media website Facebook provides for accelerated growth in penetrating social environments by allowing for personal posts on personal information such as thoughts, feelings, actions, etc.

**Literature Review**

In this research paper I will include qualitative study measurements on how the frequency of contact between people online as well as face to face is related over time. “Support, empathy, compassion, and understanding are all powerful rewards that motivate self-disclosure” (Bazarova, 2011). Facebook encourages all levels of self disclosure by providing different privacy settings and the encouragement of the maintenance of relationships.

My study on the social penetration model will focus on small sample pool of around 100-150 students of George Mason University college students ages 18-26. Data measurement in this research will include convenience samples such as surveys, questionnaires and personal interviews (5-10 people). The interviews, in which I will compose questions related to Facebook usage and frequency of contact between the specific relationship “best friend” both online and face to face, as well the perceived progression of both parties on the relationship at first meeting and as of current. This process will be categorized as background variables, which are effected by the subjects individual experiences.

More simply put, this communicational qualitative study will focus primarily on the impact of Facebook and correlation on varying levels of self-disclosure and rate of relationship growth. In concordance Jiang’s (2013) article self-disclosure is described as similar to a “multi layered onion”, and can be compared to Facebook’s superficial layer of communication (ie: a simple friend request) to a deep connection and mutual trust (ie: frequent private messaging and frequent commenting).

Stemming from the social penetration theory’s development in 1973, it is considered to be a highly heuristic theory, meaning there is much still yet to be researched and more data to be found on the social penetration model. Toubia (et. Al) hold the standpoint that the social penetration model holds a “low to neutral validity,” by asserting that the theory is based on a “systems theory,” or unmeasured, unquantifiable data source. The authors of the article critique the social penetration model by evaluating its consistency in its claims, and later gives credibility to the theory by stating that the study of it will better society as a whole and is of great importance to the further study of communication.

In the McCarthy article (2009), self-disclosure is defined as the act of making ourselves “transparent” interpersonally through verbal/non-verbal communication, and is categorized either as revealing or unrevealing. The “traditional” view (before the emergence of social media’s effect) of the social penetration model claims that an individual’s, (both male and females’) sexual disclosure choices should be similarly linked online via social media tools as well as in person. (Yang, 2010). This article evaluates further study of the SPM, focusing primarily on the subject of sexual disclosure between subjects, and the link between increased sexual intimacy as enforced by social media/Facebook. Interestingly, the study was conducted in Taiwan in 2007, and with widespread popularity of social media included in this research, it was found that males were participating in more sexual self-disclosure in this “cyberspace” world than females. Data focus was found in 3 major demographic areas in Taiwan and the instruments to gather such data were 450 questionnaires, and their method was to narrow down several “hot sexual” topics encouraging honesty using the Likert scale of 1-11 (least likely to likely).

In 2000, communication researcher Omarzu came up with the Disclosure Decision Model, which sought to predict “disclosure characteristics” and patterns in relational intimacy and durations of time being spent between people (Bazarova, 2011). This article lists 4 major assertions on social media relating to, but not limited to message presence, visibility, and connections between people. Through the use of Facebook a person is inherently able to “shape” themselves or define themselves in any light of their choosing in a public spectrum. In addition , the research article hypothesized that social media users’ personal goals were to increase intimacy between one another in both a personal and public context.

The rationale for why this social media communicational study on self-disclosure on Facebook fills a gap in prior research is to attempt to make further connections, correlations, and tests to find out whether ethnicity or gender affects various postings onto Facebook, and further gain valuable information (on a small scale) on genuinity, positivity/negativity and frequency of people’s posts. Facebook is extremely relevant and deems necessary to be studied even further in order to continually build upon a somewhat already stable foundation of knowledge in this area of research. Varied levels of self-disclosure is inevitable on Facebook, and this study sought to broaden that breadth and depth of knowledge on the topic of social media with the Qualtrics online survey test.

In conclusion, in this independent study of the social penetration model, the impact of social media website Facebook has high and positive influence and serves as a catalyst in creating a framework for deeper intimacy in relationships. Facebook serves as a vital tool in reducing uncertainty in relationships by the availability of information shared on one’s profile. This research’s focus group (5-10 interviewees, 100-150 survey-informants), both male and female, will provide for a small sampling of qualitative data collection on the effect of Facebook and developing further self-disclosure between college students (ages 18-26). A relationship exists between the link between the process of social penetration and social media’s modern relevancy in building intimacy and trust between individuals, or the concept of self-disclosure as demonstrated by many research articles on this communicational theory.

**Methods**

The methods used in this self-disclosure study included the posting of the link to my online Qualtric survey onto personal Facebook page and tagged about 40 people; and I got two shares of the link on friends pages. Then I posted the online survey onto GMU’s Facebook page as well as the COMM 400 Discussion Board link and asked for help from classmates and fellow students to take the quick survey. Lastly, I asked my boyfriend to help me share the link and he emailed about 25-30 contacts.

The survey I conducted for this research was 5-10 minute 16 question survey that focused on questioning people’s social media behaviors. It contained a demographics section on whether the survey taker was a GMU student, male/female, their ethnic background (Hispanic, Caucasian, African American, Native American, Asian, or other and their age range (18-31+).

The rest of the survey contained a section designed to measure frequency of contact, personal privacy settings, self-assessment on self-disclosure habits, and lastly, asked how many friends they had on Facebook and compared that number to how many friends the survey taker communicated with daily outside Facebook via emailing, phone calls, texting, or face to face.

The self-disclosure survey was modeled after a scale Dr. Broeckelman-Post found online from <http://www.austincc.edu> in which there were 31 questions that measured self-disclosure habits, but I shaved it down to just 12 questions I found relevant to the study and non-repetitive, as I do not find those to be highly effective in this kind of study. The Qualtrics survey on was designed to compared and contrasted female vs. male responses/levels of comfort ability, evaluate whether my hypothesis was accurate on a small sample scale, and examined correlation between frequency & positivity/negativity of personal posts.

**Results and Discussion**

After running detailed correlational and frequency tests on the subject matter, it was found that there was no significant difference between females and males in responses. This of course was limited by small sample scale of only 49 people. It was also found that there was no significance between different ethnicities in responses either. People who are negative disclose less (significant P-value), and correlation was discovered between genuinity & positivity in people’s posts. Interestingly as well, the study’s results demonstrated that overall, the older people are, the less frequent they post onto Facebook.

59 total surveys were started; 49 completed, 10 were left incomplete and left out of the data analysis. Data included 30 females (61%), 19 males (39%), Hispanic: 4 (8%) Caucasian: 27 (56%), African American: 6 (13%), Native American: 0, Asian: 5 (10%) and Other: 6 (13%). 6 people (13%) attended George Mason University; 42 (88%) did not, which was interesting. I believe that was due the fact that most of my friends have graduated already, and my boyfriend is older, in his upper 30’s, therefore 45% of survey takers were in the 31+ age range, so his connections are older and out of school as well. This significantly skewed the results, with a Minimum Value of 1, a Maximum Value of 2, Mean of 1.60, Variance being 0.24, and finally , the Standard Deviation was significant at two tailed test value of 0.49.

This study supported the assertion that Facebook serves as a catalyst in creating deeper intimacy in relationships, with no difference or much significant difference in gender or ethnic backgrounds. Frequent Facebook posts (viewed by friends) reduces uncertainty in relationships by the availability of information shared on one’s profile. Small sampling (49 people) limits the credibility of data conclusion’s hypothesis; still provides for small scope of valuable information Hypothesis was met in this research via communicational online survey.

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