

SELF-DISCLOSURE ON THE INTERNET BASED COMMUNICATION: THE COMPARISON OF ADOLESCENT AND ADULT PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays the Internet is one of the most commonly used tools for communication among both adolescents and adults. It is said that generally this kind of communication promotes self-disclosure. However, little is known about adolescent and adult differences of self-disclosure on the Internet-based communication (IC). So, the aim of this study is to assess adolescents' and adults' self-disclosure on the IC. 51 subjects participated in the study. 39 (7 adolescents and 32 adults) of the participants were women and 12 (2 adolescents and 10 adults) were men. The participants had to fill in the online survey with open-ended questions and the questionnaire of Parks and Floyd called the Levels of Development in On-Line Relationships Self-Report. The results of the study have shown that: a) both adolescents and adults aren't likely to disclose on the IC; b) adolescents on the IC aren't likely to disclose deeper or wider than adults; c) females aren't likely to disclose more than males. It could be stated that self-disclosure on the IC is related both to the context and measurement of disclosure.

Keywords: self-disclosure; the Internet-based communication, adolescents, adults.

INTRODUCTION

It is said that self-disclosure is one of the most essential factors of any interpersonal relationship (e.g. friendship, romantic relations) (Richmond, 1990) which helps to create and maintain these relations in face-to-face and on the computer mediated communication (Bucholtz, 2013; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). This is a very important statement because nowadays the Internet is one of the most used areas for communication among both adolescents and adults (Joinson, 2001; Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007).

Social networking web-sites are the most popular sites for the Internet communication (IC), where people can share their lives with others. It is said, that social networking has high levels of self-disclosure (Elmi, Iahad, & Ahmed, 2012; Krasnova, Kolesnikova, & Gunther, 2009) as it gives an ability to communicate with offline friends and try to meet new ones (Kisilevich, Ang, & Last, 2012). According to the huge popularity of social networking sites and people's daily participation in them (Krasnova, Kolesnikova, & Gunther, 2009), it would be meaningful to discover the main aspects of self-disclosure in this area. Commonly, most researchers focus their attention on adolescents (e.g. Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007) or students while ignoring adults participation in the IC. Due to the more active involvement in the usage of electronic devices of teenagers, it is predicted that adolescents would self-disclose themselves on the Internet more than adults (diGennaro, & Dutton, 2007). Still it would be interesting to compare adults' and adolescents' disclosure on the IC.

Furthermore, researchers have shown that in general women tend to disclose deeper and wider than men (Barak, & Gluck-Ofri, 2007) while having a conversation with both sexes (Peter, & Valkenburg, 2009). However, it is still unclear if there are any gender differences of self-disclosure on the IC (Joinson, & Paine, 2007). It seems worthwhile to gain more knowledge about self-disclosure in a cyber environment.

SELF-DISCLOSURE ON THE IC

Basically self-disclosure is understood as sharing personal information with others which differs in its breadth and depth (Greene, Derlega & Mathews, 2006). According to Barak and Suler (2008), self-disclosure on the IC is alike to disclosure in the face-to-face communication.

However, it is said that in general self-disclosure on the IC is higher than in face-to-face communication (Bucholtz, 2013) because it has greater anonymity than in face-to-face communication and reduces cues (Joinson, 2001). Moreover, most disclosure on the IC is deeper and occurs faster than in face-to-face communication (McCoyd, Schwaber, 2006) because in a face-to-face meeting generally people are shy and prudent about disclosure (Rosen et al., 2008). It takes time to reveal more and more information about oneself which is required to gain trust between communicators (Bargh et al., 2002). Again, it may be related to the fact that on the IC people feel more anonymous so they are free to express themselves with less boundaries (Bucholtz, 2013) – they can create a new identity or restructure the one they have (e.g. from a closed person becoming a more open one).

Thus, it seems like self-disclosure on the IC occurs sooner and it can be deeper and more breadth than in face-to-face communication (Bargh et al., 2002; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006).

AGE DIFFERENCES

Peter with Valkenburg (2006) and Nosko, Wood, Molema (2010) state that adolescents spend more time on the IC than any other age group. Thus, it is possible to say, that adolescents are also more likely than adults to disclose on the IC.

As it was already mentioned, communication on the Internet lets people act more freely while discussing things, presenting oneself or taking part in other interactions. Thus, a communicator doesn't feel shy about telling things which he/she probably wouldn't share in face-to-face communication which makes the IC a safe place for adolescents to open up (Valkenburg, & Peter, 2009).

This led us to predict that adolescents will be more willing to disclose on the IC than adults.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

In general, it is thought that women are more likely to self-disclose than men (Barak, & Gluck-Ofri, 2007; Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007). The study of Kisilevich, Ang and Last (2012) have also shown that in general women tend to disclose more than males. So, as Valkenburg and Peter (2011) note, females can also be expected to disclose more than males on the IC.

It is interesting that the gender of disclosure recipients' isn't very important for females while males are more likely to disclose to male recipients (Barak, Gluck-Ofri, 2007). This amplifies that probably men are tend to trust in gender stereotypes and try not to get too deep in the disclosure (Gaia, 2013). Moreover, the study of Valkenburg and Peter (2011) has shown that in early adolescence girls disclosure increases and gets stable in the middle or late adolescence while boys disclosure starts increasing few years later than girls. Thus, it is possible to explain these changes by the different age of adolescents' puberty, however, the gender differences remain.

According to the information discussed above, we predict that on the IC adolescents will disclose more (deeper and wider) than adults.

WAYS TO ANALYZE SELF-DISCLOSURE ON THE IC

There are a lot of ways to analyse self-disclosure on the IC. Of course, the most common way to do it would be to ask the participants to fill in the given questionnaire of self-disclosure on the IC in the face-to-face interaction. However, as Joinson (2001) states, it is very important to organize the study in the area where self-disclosure occurs (online) because this could give us more specific results.

Interestingly, there are few studies of self-disclosure where researchers have tried to use the most popular IC systems. For example, Jiang, Bazarova and Hancock (2011) in their study used the AOL InstantMessenger system and live face-to-face dyad discussion to check the differences of self-disclosure in different kinds of communication areas. The other and the most popular way to analyze disclosure on the IC is an online survey with a given questionnaire (Joinson, 2001) which mostly is created by open-ended or rated questions.

We can predict that the combination of two different research methods – qualitative and quantitative – will give us a wider understanding of analysed phenomena. However, especially when analysing the answers to open-ended questions of disclosure it is very important to pay attention to the quantity (e.g.

word count) and the quality (e.g. content analysis) of given answers (Attrill, 2012). Such analysis gives us more sophisticated data. It is a question if we can compare two different used methods of the same aspect, but it is very clear that such comparison would let us see it from different ways.

All in all, in this study we have used the most popular way of researching self-disclosure online (online survey) with a mixed type of methods (qualitative and quantitative) to get wider information of the gender or age differences in disclosure on the IC.

METHODS

Organization of the study

The study was organized using the on-line survey called *apklausa.lt*. The most popular social websites in Lithuania (e.g. *facebook.com*) have been chosen to collect the data. Using random sampling, 600 private messages have been sent to the possible participants from the 5 biggest Lithuanian cities.

The information, given in the private message, included the main data about researcher, the aim of the study, the limits of using the results only for the anonymous research and the link to the created questionnaire.

Selection of the participants also depended on their age (adolescent and adult) and on their gender (male or female). In this case: 150 female adolescents, 150 male adolescents, 150 female adults and 150 male adults, with the number of 30 messages for each city, got the private messages on social websites with a request to participate in this study.

Participants

We randomly selected 51 subjects from the 5 largest Lithuanian cities participating in the study. 39 (7 adolescents and 32 adults) of the participants were women and 12 (2 adolescents and 10 adults) were men.

Adolescents' age varied from 12 to 17 years, with a mean of 14.5 years. 66.6% of them mostly spend 1-2 or 2-3 hours per day on the Internet.

Adults' age varied from 18 to 32 years. The mean of adults' age was 22.95 years. The majority of them (30.8%) stated that they spend less than an hour per day on the Internet. 25% of them have stated that they spend 1-2 hours and the other 25% - 2-3 hours per day.

Measures

To reach the aim of this study, qualitative and quantitative methods were used: open questions and the "Levels of Development in On-Line Relationships Self-Report" of Parks and Floyd (1996).

Qualitative method

Six open-ended questions by Joinson (2001) were used in this study. The questions were:

What do you most dislike about your appearance?;

What do you most like about your appearance?;
What recent event in your life has made you happy?;
What recent event in your life has made you sad?;
What has made you most proud of yourself?;
What's the most embarrassing thing you have ever done?

The breadth of self-disclosure was measured by counting the words in the answers of the participants; the depth was measured by the categories, created by analysing the answers with content analysis. Then the answers were rated into three categories: *didn't answer* (1), *abstract answer* (2), *concrete answer* (3). All information about the categories of the content analysis could be found in the article "Gender differences in self-disclosure for the unknown person on the internet communication" (Paluckaitė, & Žardeckaitė-Matulaitienė, 2012).

Quantitative method

As the quantitative method the Levels of Development in On-Line Relationships Self-Report (Parks, & Floyd, 1996) was used. Two subscales, measuring the breadth and depth of self-disclosure, have been chosen for this study. Participants had to rate the given propositions into the 5 point Likert scale, where 1 means that the participant doesn't agree with a given proposition and 5 - totally agrees with it.

Demographic questions

The participants also had to indicate their gender, age, frequency on how often do they use the Internet per day.

RESULTS

Age differences on the IC

First of all, this study has shown that people aren't likely to disclose on the IC because from the 600 of sent invitations to participate in the study only 51 of them have filled-in the given online questionnaire. So the total response rate was 8% with 7% of adults and 1% of adolescents.

In order to analyse the differences between adolescents and adults disclosure on the IC, the Mann-Whitney U test for self-report, word count and content analysis was used. The test has shown that mean rank of word count describing the breadth of self-disclosure for adolescents is 21.96 and for adults - 27.24, however, this result is not statistically significant ($Z=-1.080$, $p>0.05$). The mean rank of the breadth of disclosure in self-report for adolescents is 25.33 and for adults - 26.21 and it also is not statistically significant ($Z=-0.719$, $p>0.05$). These results show that there are no age differences in the breadth of self-disclosure.

The analysis of the depth of self-disclosure in the open-ended questions has shown that the mean rank for adolescents is 22.21 and for adults - 27.17. It would be possible to say that adults are disclosing deeper than adolescents on the IC but the received result was not statistically significant ($Z=-1.035$, $p>0.05$). On the analysis of self-report's subscale of the depth of disclosure the mean rank for adolescents is 27.58 and for adults - 25.51 and this result isn't statistically

significant ($Z=-0.424$, $p>0.05$). These results give us an idea that there are no age differences on the depth of self-disclosure on the IC.

Gender differences on the IC

To analyse if there were any gender differences of self-disclosure on the IC, the Mann-Whitney U test for self-report, word count and content analysis was used. The analysis has shown that mean rank of word count describing the breadth of self-disclosure for women is 25.67 and for men - 27.08, however, is not statistically significant ($Z=-0.289$, $p>0.05$). The mean rank of the breadth of disclosure in self-report for women is 26.78 and for men - 23.46 and it also is not statistically significant ($Z=-0.684$, $p>0.05$). It leads us to state that there is no gender differences in the breadth of self-disclosure.

The content analysis of the open-ended questions has shown that the mean rank of the depth of self-disclosure for women is 25.33 and for men - 28.17. It would be possible to say that men are disclosing deeper than women on the IC but received result was not statistically significant ($Z=-0.592$, $p>0.05$). The results of self-report's subscale of the depth of disclosure (Table 1) has shown the opposite: the mean rank for women is 28.36 and for men - 18.33 and this result is statistically significant ($Z=5.953$, $p>0.05$). If we rely on this, we could say that women on the IC are likely to disclose deeper than men. However, we have got the different results in the used qualitative and quantitative results which probably means that this statement is measurement based.

CONCLUSIONS

This study gives us a great opportunity to better understand the self-disclosure of adolescents and adults on the IC and it also extends our knowledge on the Internet research and the methodology in itself. The main aim of present research was to find out the peculiarities of adolescents and adults' self-disclosure on the IC as the Internet is one of the most used devices for communication.

One of the most important results we have gained from this research is the basic willingness to disclose on the IC. It is said that the most common response rate on the research based on the Internet is around 5% (Hoffman, Novak, & Peralta, 1999). In our study the response of participants' rate is 8%. As Joinson and Paine (2006) states, the refusal to answer or not answer could also be seen as disclosure, meaning that the participant isn't willing to disclose. Thus, it is possible to state that both adolescents and adults are not likely to disclose on Internet based communication. This result could be related to the statement that in general on the social sites people are used to communicating with the ones they already know. Moreover, diGennaro and Dutton (2007) claims that adolescents tend to disclose on the IC more than adults. However, in this study no statistically significant differences were found: adolescents are not likely to disclose wider or deeper than adults. Pujazon-Zazik with Park (2010) and Joinson with Paine (2006) note that the tendency to think that adolescents are more likely to self-disclose on the IC than adults mostly depends

on the fact that adolescents use the Internet for communication more often than adults do.

In terms of gender differences, it is stereotypically thought that females tend to disclose more than males (Joinson, 2001; Whitty, 2010) because women generally are seen as good listeners (Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007). Only the results of self-rated instrument have shown that females tend to disclose deeper than males. Thus, the use of quantitative and qualitative methods in this study has shown that gender differences on self-disclosure are measurement based. It doesn't mean that quantitative or qualitative methods aren't suitable in the online survey. However, self-disclosure is a very specific part of communication and, probably, it could be best understood through qualitative issues (Barak, & Gluck-Ofri, 2007).

To sum up, it would be meaningful to mention that the results of this research impose the need for the further research of self-disclosure on the IC. However, it is very important to pay attention to the low participation rate in online research.

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Table 1. The mean ranks of Mann-Whitney U test in self-report by gender.

Subscale	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Depth of self-disclosure	Female	39	28.36	1106.00	-2.054	0.040
	Male	12	18.33	220.0		
Breadth of self-disclosure	Female	39	26.78	1044.50	-0.684	0.494
	Male	12	23.46	281.50		

Source: Own research.