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Anonymity and self-disclosure on MySpace

George Retelas
San Jose State University

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ANONYMITY AND SELF-DISCLOSURE ON MYSPACE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

George Retelas

December 2008

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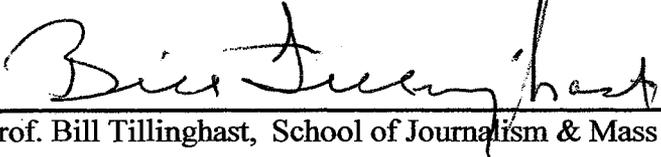
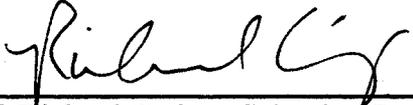
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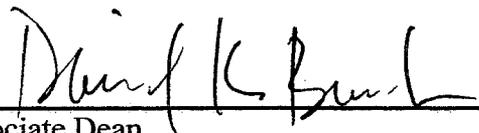
ANONYMITY AND SELF-DISCLOSURE ON MYSPACE

by
George Retelas

APPROVED FOR THE SCHOOL OF
JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATIONS

 Prof. Lily Buchwitz, School of Journalism & Mass Communications	NOV 12 / 08 Date
 Prof. Bill Tillinghast, School of Journalism & Mass Communications	11/12/08 Date
 Prof. Richard Craig, School of Journalism & Mass Communications	11/13/08 Date

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 Associate Dean	12/2/08 Date
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ABSTRACT

ANONYMITY AND SELF-DISCLOSURE ON MYSPACE

by George Retelas

This thesis investigated the role of anonymity and the amount of self-disclosure revealed on the social-networking website MySpace. Anonymity and self-disclosure were examined within MySpace to update previous computer-mediated communication research before Web 2.0 technology. This study content-analyzed MySpace website profiles that contained anonymous profile usernames (n=200) and identified profile usernames (n=200) to evaluate the amount of self-disclosure between the two. An analysis of the profiles (N=400) showed that more personal information was disclosed when MySpace profiles maintained an anonymous username. This study confirmed that self-disclosure levels increased when the participant's username remained anonymous and supports previous computer-mediated communications research on anonymity and self-disclosure within chat-rooms and blogs.

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INTRODUCTION

New media technologies have broken down the traditional one-to-many mass communication model. The audience member is no longer part of a mass, but part of a self-chosen network that has become an active audience (McQuail, 2005). The interactivity of emerging Internet technologies has allowed participants in computer-mediated communication to have greater control over their mutual discourse (Ruggiero, 2000). Recent communication technologies have extended the development of identity, community and self-presentation (Monberg, 2005). With the advancement of Web 2.0 technologies, social-networking websites such as MySpace and Facebook have expanded the landscape of computer-mediated communication. Each site is fundamentally similar; users add other users via an easy-to-use profile they create through the site. Users then meet and search for one another to add to their list of contacts, thus building up ones social network. In the process of assembling a social network, a custom profile is created in which personal information can be revealed. The present area of inquiry is the role of anonymity and self-disclosure within these online profiles. This study demonstrates that previous research on anonymity and self-disclosure on the Internet is just as applicable to current social-networking websites. To that effect, it is predicted that anonymous social-networking profiles will disclose significantly more about themselves than identified profiles, and that the role of anonymity will have a significant influence over self-disclosure.

For the purpose of this study, MySpace was selected due to a few key characteristics. First and foremost, MySpace is one of the largest of the social-networking websites but

more importantly its culture permits users to construct a fictional or realistic representation of oneself for public viewing. In contrast, social-networking websites like Facebook center on users developing a more realistic profile that does not deviate from their offline lives. Facebook also requires users to have their desired profile username screened by Facebook to determine whether that username is real (e.g., having no special characters, numerals, or inconsistent capitalization). In addition, Facebook has adopted a culture where users prefer private profiles that only contacts which they have acquired can view. As a researcher, observing privately viewable profiles would require the creation of a profile that must be added by users, which in turn could compromise the procedure. Since the topic of this study concerns anonymity and self-disclosure, MySpace offers a unique opportunity to examine the differences between the many publicly viewable anonymous and identifiable profiles on the social-networking website. In addition, concerns about publicly viewable profiles on the site have drawn much attention to safety and privacy. As powerful search engines such as Google and Yahoo continue to index the data available on public MySpace profiles, understanding anonymity and self-disclosure in this area is essential.

Previous research on the effects of computer-mediated communication has explored anonymity and self-disclosure but not as it pertains to social-networking. In 2001, Joinson discovered that revealing personal information to others using computer-mediated communication led to higher levels of self-disclosure and propelled relationships to a deeper and more intimate intensity.

This paper investigated computer-mediated communication and its expansion towards social-networking websites. To this end, the following research has ventured towards a new area of inquiry as little work had previously been done studying the phenomenon of anonymity and self-disclosure in relation to social-networking. The research conducted was a content analysis which examined personal information published on the social-networking website MySpace and compared it to the amounts of self-disclosure between anonymous and identified profiles. Four hundred MySpace profiles were randomly selected; two hundred profiles that had an anonymous name (e.g., Self Refute) and two hundred profiles that had an identified name (e.g., Travis). A content analysis of self-disclosure revealed within the profiles answered the following research questions.

1. Does self-disclosure of personal information occur more often on MySpace profiles using an anonymous or identified profile username?
2. Is there a significant difference of self-disclosure between MySpace profiles using an anonymous or identified profile username?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

McQuail (2005) observed how recent computer-mediated communication technologies differed from other media use, as the former had fewer codes of conduct and had allowed for a higher degree of user-manipulation with its content. The ability for users to manipulate and reveal their personal information in anonymity of their username has allowed for unique communication outcomes within this medium. As the development of social-networking technology has increased, so have the opportunities for mass social outcomes, interaction and identity-exploration. The World-Wide-Web has expanded to a unique social environment that has enabled individuals to address a potential audience that is much larger than they would have access to by any other means (Jung, Youn, & McClung, 2007). Not only are individuals communicating with one another, but new media technologies have allowed users to publish who they are unparalleled to previous communication abilities. Web applications have allowed individuals to create their own interactive websites filled with postings, photos and videos (Hirshorn, 2007).

Rogers (1997) noted that the dominant communication technology of a civilization is central to its culture and attending social structure. The advantage of Internet technologies has allowed for uncharted communication opportunities in exploring community, friendship and romance. As surprising as new media technologies may appear to the public, the *30-year rule* has been a standard timeline for technologies to come into social fruition (Bucy, 2005). “The amount of time required for new ideas to fully seep into a culture has consistently averaged about three decades for at least the past

five centuries” (Bucy, 2005, p. 34). However, multiple technological breakthroughs have been occurring at once to give the illusion of times changing faster than expected. In just a few years, the definition of computer-mediated communication has outgrown itself. The long term consequences of the World-Wide-Web are still too early to predict, but what can be explored are the short-term influences of new media technologies. It is important to note that any predictions formed of a new technology may be subjected to *technomyopia*, which is a strange phenomenon that causes people to overestimate the potential short-term impact of a new technology (Bucy, 2005).

Computer-Mediated Communication

The majority of meaningful communication has occurred face-to-face, but with the advent of computer-mediated communication, the development and maintenance of relationships have emerged on a mass scale (Wright, 2004). Computer-mediated communication can be defined as any human symbolic text-based interaction conducted or facilitated through digitally-based technologies (Spitzberg, 2006). Computer-mediated communication can be broken down into two groups, exclusively Internet-based relationships and primarily Internet-based relationships (Wright, 2004). Wright described exclusively Internet-based relationships as ones that had developed without any traditional media (telephones, letters, etc.) or face-to-face interaction, while primarily Internet-based relationships were relationships that had developed prior to computer-mediated communication and were now communicated online. Wright’s 2004 research has held relevance insofar as the foundation of social-networking websites is built around

users seeking out new contacts while maintaining old ones they met by other communication means.

The asynchronous nature of computer-mediated communication permits users more time to consciously construct communicative messages to one another (Ellison et al., 2006). These computer-mediated communication cues result in participants initially feeling more comfortable despite any face-to-face insecurity. The constrictions of mediated channels (e-mail, chat, instant-messaging) over face-to-face interaction are often seen as advantageous as users are able to control their messages more carefully. However, the current online environment has moved beyond constricted mediated channels and has opened up computer-mediated communications to a much wider multimedia channel for participant self-disclosure. "Internet users with little or no knowledge of HTML can engage in web publishing and managing with the help of recent technological advances" (Jung et al., 2007, p. 30). Individuals can construct online personas which in turn shape and form ones real world persona, which carries the potential to construct cyberspace as a new frontier in the mapping of ones overall identity (Simpson, 2005).

Within exclusively Internet-based relationships, computer-mediated communication participants can explore the possibilities of selective self-presentation (Skarderud, 2003). When engaging in an online forum, gating features are replaced by a text-based communication. This is where identities can be created and the self explored in a text-based environment devoid of face-to-face communication. "This e-communication can be more friendly than face-to-face communication as the user and the recipient can

control how to present themselves with ample time, self-monitor their reactions, and expound on their positive traits” (Skarderud, 2003, p. 162).

Computer-mediated communication is a constricted medium compared to face-to-face communication because its participants are required to use strategies such as paralinguistic cues, linguistic style, politeness tactics and name usage to convey social information which influence impressions (Becker & Stamp, 2005). Individuals can take the time needed to formulate a response rather than having to respond ‘off the cuff’ as in most face-to-face meetings (Bucy, 2005). This format of communication has allowed participants the design and control of exchanged discourse to be monitored and altered from its natural flow. However, social-networking websites have expanded the complexities of earlier online communication techniques to include broader terms.

Social-Networking

“Social-networking technology is a relatively generic term used for a range of Internet-based techniques for communicating online” (Goodings, Locke, & Brown, 2007, p. 463). By its broad definition, the Internet has manifested itself in countless and clever ways, in which social-networking has now pushed the notion of building communities of user-generated content and connections to new levels (Raskin, 2006). Although the field of social-networking is still in its early development, the clout of such technologies has had a massive impact on American culture. In July 2006, MySpace alone estimated that they had over 87 million users worldwide. When put into context, MySpace in the US possessed the sum total of social-networks that rivaled the population of most European countries (Goodings et al., 2007). Just a year later in May of 2007, more than 66 million

users had visited MySpace each month, which was an astonishing 12% of all Internet minutes spent online. Facebook has been steadily catching up with 23 million users visiting its site each month (Levy, 2007). In the same month, Facebook announced that it had doubled to 26 million users since September 2006, and there has been a growing sense that MySpace's reign as the unchallenged kingpin of social media may finally have some competition (Hirshorn, 2007).

In contrast, chat rooms have appeared to be less popular today than a few years ago, as newer social-networking websites have attracted younger audiences to the Internet (Tynes, 2007). Social-networking has quickly departed from previous computer-mediated communication research involving chat rooms and blogs. Where just a few years ago computer-mediated communication was a constricted medium, it has now expanded so that users can self-disclose a much larger scope of ones identity. "Profiles consist of diverse mixtures of biographical information, personal preferences, images, weblogs and miscellaneous text" (Goodings et al., 2007, p. 463).

Social-networking has provided users with a distinctive and tailored experience over which a sense of ownership is attained that assists in self-discovery (Arthur, Sherman, Appel, & Moore, 2006). Users of social-networking attend to self-presentational strategies in their profiles, in which identity, defined broadly as the construction and maintenance of a particular version or versions of ones character, interests, and values, is an omnipresent concern (Goodings et al., 2007).

The mass majority of the youth market of 13 to 22-year-olds has been congregating on MySpace and Facebook (Raskin, 2006). Despite their fundamental similarities, there

seems to be a clear distinction between the two social-networking websites. MySpace users reveal who they want to be through their interests, yet users may deviate from who they are in face-to-face communication, while Facebook focuses on real identities and communities that users already have off-line (Atal, 2007). Hence, if Facebook users display their real-world relationships, then MySpace users are self-promoters concerned with making new connections through exaggerated, even fictionalized personas. Since both social-networking websites are wildly popular, yet have significantly different motives for users, it becomes essential to determine whether any significant difference in self-disclosure would occur due to the projection of different identities on MySpace.

Users of social-networking websites have discovered a niche where an online identity can thrive as a distinct function of an overall identity (Atal, 2007). Five key values for adopting interactive technologies on MySpace and Facebook have become the opportunity to express identities, social interaction, immediacy of constant entertainment, discovery, and the ability to create (Arthur, Sherman, Appel, & Moore, 2006). As social-networking technology is enhanced with more advanced Web 2.0 applications, further inquiry into this expanding field will become essential.

Anonymity and Self-Disclosure

Anonymity is when a person is unidentifiable yet socially requiring an audience of at least one person (Qian & Scott, 2007). Anonymity has taken a unique turn on the World-Wide-Web, as new media technologies have enticed participants to self-disclosure, thereby leading them to exchange and interact with a deeper experience. These new online tools have allowed for greater control of communication strategies and self-

representational cues. Although computer-mediated communication is not the only mode of communication where anonymity is possible, computer technology has greatly facilitated anonymity by providing many channels for communication between people separated in time and space (Qian & Scott, 2007). It is important to note that the level of anonymity found in current computer-mediated communications has drastically diminished amid the popularity of social-networking technology.

Self-disclosure can be defined as the act of revealing personal information to others (Joinson, 2001). “Researchers usually measure the extent of self-disclosure in terms of the breadth of disclosure, the depth of disclosure, or the combination of both. Breadth refers to the range of topics discussed, whereas depth refers to the degree of intimacy of the topics discussed” (Derlega & Berg, 1987, p. 82). At the time of Joinson’s 2001 study, computer-mediated communication had been characterized as having allowed individuals to lose physical body language by which they gained a non-discriminatory mode of interaction.

Computer-mediated communication has become a more comfortable social environment compared to face-to-face communication, as it has allowed for individuals with elevated communication apprehension to take advantage of the online environment to increase their relational interdependence (Mazur, Burns, & Emmers-Sommer, 2000). A reason for greater self-disclosure online has been the lack of gating features such as physical appearance, an apparent stigma such as stuttering, or visible shyness (McKenna et al., 2002). However, recent social-networking technologies have modified anonymity on the Internet, as users now have access to powerful multimedia tools to construct their

identity. Therefore, past studies in computer-mediated communication need to be reevaluated, as social-networking technologies have overturned the concept of online anonymity.

The anonymity of the Internet has allowed users the opportunity to take on various personas, different genders, and to express facets of themselves without fear of disapproval and sanctions by those in their real-life social circles (Bargh et al., 2002). The ability for a user to adopt an online persona is a step toward reaching a deeper truth about ones real self, a position many multi-user dungeon members take on regarding their experience (Whitty & Carr, 2003). Participation has steadily increased within social-networking websites, virtual communities, chat rooms, blogs, multi-user dungeons, and digital environments (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). As more and more users adopt social-networking technologies and other new media, the discussion and concern for these new digital environments will continue.

Computer-mediated communication participants are allowed their imagination and a sense of fantasy to communicate when using a text-based format. “The factual information we have about an online partner is more limited than our knowledge of an actual partner and our imagination must fill the gap” (Whitty & Carr, 2003, p. 880). Creative energy is required to formulate an illusion entirely based upon whatever the user selects, and is opposed to reality, a realm where many elements are given about ones identity. Therefore, online participants can inhabit any body they desire (youthful, attractive, or even the opposite gender). An online participant can invent what their fantasy partner looks like, feels like, or feels about them. They can also fantasize that

they are attracted to others and that others are attracted to them (Whitty & Carr, 2003). Yet research is lacking on how multimedia elements on social-networking websites configure the anonymity of users, which in turn may modify their self-disclosure levels.

In 2001, McKenna et al. reported that when people met on the Internet in the absence of gating features that are present in face-to-face situations, they liked one another better than they would have if they had initially met face-to-face. The tendency to self-disclose and reveal personal information to others more on a computer than face-to-face is an important ingredient to what has happened on the Internet (Joinson, 2001). Moreover, socially anxious and lonely individuals who expressed their true selves online formed close relationships and integrated them into their offline lives, while increasing their social circles and becoming less socially anxious in the process (McKenna et al., 2002). By not seeing one another online, visual prejudices are avoided and users are no longer limited by social structures or face-to-face inadequacies. In replacement of face-to-face communication, interactive spaces using social-networking technology have become forums where participants can be braver, cheekier and more deliberate (Arthur et al., 2006). However, current social-networking technology is a forum in which participants utilize and compare their photographic, cinematic, web design, and word processing abilities. If users are lacking in these proficiencies then a lack of self-disclosure may occur.

In 2001, Joinson discovered that visually anonymous people who communicated using computers disclosed more about themselves than those who were visually identifiable. "This is not due to any de-individuation experienced by computer-mediated

communication users, but rather to the interaction within anonymity” (Joinson, 2001, p. 188). The findings presented the notion of computer-mediated communication in 2001 as being more social than face-to-face interactions, as self-disclosure is not entirely dependent on the presence of the Internet or computer technology per se but for visual anonymity amongst participants. However, further assessment of current computer-mediated communications will be needed to assess the model of anonymity, and with the influx of multimedia equipped social-networking it is difficult to say how pertinent these studies will be over time.

If self-disclosure is a vital social component to developing meaningful face-to-face relationships, then it is sensible to infer that this factor is just as necessary within computer-mediated communication environments. The review of the literature confirms that anonymity assists with self-disclosure, which is a key contributor to relationship formation. As participants enter the anonymous Internet to disclose and connect with others, they will also explore the depths and limits of their online self-presentational identity.

Current research has shown that computer-mediated communication partners have engaged in more intimate questions and a deeper level of trust with self-disclosure than face-to-face participants (Ellison et al., 2006). Any public perceptions about higher levels of deception online are contradicted by research supporting how lying is just as commonplace in everyday face-to-face situations (Ellison et al., 2006). A newsgroup survey of 600 participants showed that 51% had formed close friendships and 31% had formed meaningful relationships with one another in cyberspace (Bucy, 2005).

Social-networking technologies have allowed participants to explore their identity in a more diverse way, where personal homepages, like those capable on MySpace and others, have provided individuals with opportunities to express original and alternative forms of the self (Jung et al., 2007).

Research Questions

Previous research on computer-mediated communication has focused on the advantage that anonymity has allowed for self-disclosure within email, chat-rooms and blogs, but more research on how anonymity and self-disclosure relate towards social-networking technologies will benefit computer-mediated communications research. Using this starting point, the following research was an extended query into Joinson's 2001 study on anonymity and self-disclosure in computer-mediated communication. Since 2001, social interaction in online communities has grown and drastically revolutionized the way individuals interact on the World-Wide-Web. Consequently, the conducted research was aimed at updating the potential attributes that anonymity and self-disclosure have on social-networking websites, more specifically MySpace. To determine whether past research on anonymity and self-disclosure in computer-mediated communication is relevant to current social-networking technology, the following research questions were posited:

1. Does self-disclosure of personal information occur more often on MySpace profiles using an anonymous or identified username?
2. Is there a significant difference of self-disclosure between MySpace profiles using an anonymous or identified username?

METHOD

In order to verify whether higher amounts of self-disclosure were experienced with anonymous or identified MySpace profiles, the researcher conducted a content analysis of 400 randomly sampled profiles. The research extended Joinson's 2001 study to adapt to social-networking technologies that have, since 2001, flipped computer-mediated communications on its head. The research question was posited as a content analysis because it was the most inclusive method to evaluate the amounts of self-disclosure and personal information found in the profiles. By comparing and analyzing the content in each profile, the author has anticipated the result of self-disclosure that would occur with anonymous username MySpace profiles (e.g., SteenieBean21, WowCoolFrenchFriesDanzig, Rblonde1017) and identified username MySpace profiles (e.g., Christina, Brandon, Rachael). Based on Joinson's 2001 study, the researcher hypothesized the following:

1. It is predicted that MySpace profiles with an anonymous username will disclose significantly more about themselves than MySpace profiles with an identified username.
2. It is predicted that the role of anonymity will have a significant influence over self-disclosure of personal information within MySpace profiles.

Sample Population

The sample population was acquired by randomly selecting MySpace profiles through the website's browse feature, which allows users to conduct a general search of all public profiles. The profiles selected were ones for public viewing, as privately

viewable profiles would require the researcher to be requested as one of their contacts. A content analysis of public MySpace profiles was the most direct and simplified means to analyze the data. In addition, investigating the full disclosure of public MySpace profiles, unlike Facebook, allowed the researcher to correlate the results of the data to concerns about anonymity and self-disclosure in the public sphere as it pertains to the Internet.

Materials

The researcher incurred minimal costs, as the study required only a free MySpace account and an Internet connection to evaluate the profiles.

Procedure

The researcher randomly selected 200 anonymous and two 200 identified username MySpace profiles through the website's browse feature. The researcher has evaluated only self-disclosing data that would identify the user (e.g., text or photos).

Anonymity

Anonymous – Any profile that was perceived as a fictitious name (e.g., The Lucky Dame, BIG\$MAKER, Dr. Z@pper).

Identified – Any profile that was perceived as a real name and featured no special characters, numbers or punctuation (e.g., Lilly, Bill, Richard).

Numerical Coding for Anonymity (A)

When a profile contained an anonymous username it was coded as **1**.

When a profile contained an identified username it was coded as **0**.

Basic Information

Profiles were first categorized as “Basic Information.” Each section within “Basic Information” had a select amount of predefined variables to choose from, while the remainder were coded as having or not having personal information in that subcategory.

Gender – An entry that was selected as Male, Female, or No Answer.

Age – An entry of age that ranged from 18-99.

Region – An entry that contained any country or U.S. state. States were categorized using the U.S. Census at: http://www.census.gov/geo/www/us_regdiv.pdf

Marital Status – A preset category of several entries from which to select.

Education – A preset category of several educational entries from which to select.

Culture/Ethnicity – A preset category of several ethnic entries from which to select.

Profile Picture – The main picture used to identify the user.

Headline – A highly visible entry field capable of a limited number of characters.

Sexual Orientation – A preset category of several entries from which to select.

Hometown – A category to enter any town or city.

Religion – A preset category of several entries from which to select.

Smoker – An entry that can be selected as Yes, No, or No Answer.

Drinker – An entry that can be selected as Yes, No, or No Answer.

Children – A preset category of several entries from which to select.

Numerical Coding for Basic Information - Gender (BI.G)

A profile shown as Male was coded as **1**.

A profile shown as Female was coded as **2**.

A profile shown as No Answer was coded as **0**.

Numerical Coding for Basic Information - Age (BI.A)

When a profile age ranged <19 it was coded as **1**.

When a profile age ranged 19-21 it was coded as **2**.

When a profile age ranged 22-25 it was coded as **3**.

When a profile age ranged 26-29 it was coded as **3**.

When a profile age ranged 30+ it was coded as **0**.

Numerical Coding for Basic Information - Region (BI.R)

A profile showing one of the following Western U.S. states was coded as **1**.

Alaska – AK, Hawaii – HI, Washington – WA, Oregon – OR, California – CA,
Montana – MT, Idaho – ID, Wyoming – WY, Nevada – NV, Utah – UT,
Colorado – CO, Arizona – AZ, New Mexico – NM

A profile showing one of the following Midwestern U.S. states was coded as **2**.

North Dakota – ND, South Dakota – SD, Nebraska – NE, Kansas – KS,
Minnesota – MN, Iowa – IA, Missouri – MO, Wisconsin – WI, Illinois – IL,
Michigan – MI, Indiana – IN, Ohio – OH,

A profile showing one of the following Southern U.S. states was coded as **3**.

Oklahoma – OK, Texas – TX, Arkansas – AR, Louisiana – LA, Kentucky – KY,
Tennessee – TN, Mississippi – MS, Alabama – AL, Florida – FL, Georgia – GA,
North Carolina – NC, South Carolina – SC, Virginia – VA, West Virginia – WV,
Maryland – MD, Delaware – DE, District of Columbia – DC

A profile showing one of the following Northeastern U.S. states was coded as **4**.

Pennsylvania – PA, New York – NY, New Jersey – NJ, Connecticut – CT, Rhode Island – RI, Massachusetts – MA, Vermont – VT, New Hampshire – NH, Maine – ME

A profile showing any country or region outside the U.S. was coded as **5**.

A profile shown as No Answer was coded as **0**.

Numerical Coding for Basic Information – Marital Status (BI.M)

A profile shown as Single was coded as **1**.

A profile shown as In a Relationship was coded as **2**.

A profile shown as Engaged was coded as **3**.

A profile shown as Married was coded as **4**.

A profile shown as Divorced was coded as **5**.

A profile shown as Swinger was coded as **6**.

Numerical Coding for Basic Information – Education (BI.E)

A profile shown as High School was coded as **1**.

A profile shown as Some College was coded as **2**.

A profile shown as In College was coded as **3**.

A profile shown as College Graduate was coded as **4**.

A profile shown as Grad/Professional School was coded as **5**.

A profile shown as Post Grad was coded as **6**.

A profile shown as No Answer was coded as **0**.

Numerical Coding for Basic Information – Culture/Ethnicity (BI.CE)

A profile shown as Asian was coded as **1**.

A profile shown as Black/African Descent was coded as **2**.

A profile shown as East Indian was coded as **3**.

A profile shown as Latino Hispanic was coded as **4**.

A profile shown as Middle Eastern was coded as **5**.

A profile shown as Native American was coded as **6**.

A profile shown as Pacific Islander was coded as **7**.

A profile shown as White/Caucasian was coded as **8**.

A profile shown as No Answer was coded as **0**.

Numerical Coding for Basic Information – Profile Picture (BI.P)

When a user's profile contained an identified Profile Picture it was coded as **1**.

When a user's profile contained an unidentified Profile Picture it was coded as **0**.

Numerical Coding for Basic Information – Smoker (BI.S)

A profile containing a Smoking Status was coded as **1**.

A profile not containing a Smoking Status was coded as **0**.

Numerical Coding for Basic Information – Children (BI.C)

A profile containing a Children Status was coded as **1**.

A profile not containing a Children Status was coded as **0**.

Personality

Profiles were categorized under "Personality" with three subcategories. The following three subcategories consisted of entries typed as a narrative format, with an unlimited amount of data that could be inserted as personal information.

About Me – A category where users describe what they are like.

I'd Like to Meet – A category where users describe who they would like to meet.

General – A category where users reveal any other significant personal information.

Self-Disclosure Index

To classify self-disclosure in the “Personality” profile fields, the researcher used Miller, Berg and Archer’s Self-Disclosure Index (Miller, Berg & Archer, 1983). Measuring the personal information revealed as self-disclosure in these sections was mutually inclusive and completely exhaustive within the nine categories found in the Self-Disclosure Index.

My personal habits (e.g., I love to go snowboarding on the weekends).

Things I have done which I feel guilty about (e.g., Sometimes I party too much).

Things I wouldn’t do in public (e.g., I don’t like to go out and drink).

My deepest feelings (e.g., I love my boyfriend)

What I like and dislike about myself (e.g., I wish I were taller).

What is important to me in life (e.g., Riding my horses is the world to me).

What makes me the person I am (e.g., My parents have had the most impact on me).

My worst fears (e.g., I’m afraid that I’ll never meet the right person).

Things I have done which I am proud of (e.g., I’m so excited I’ve graduated).

My close relationships with other people (e.g., My best friend is Shelly).

Numerical Coding for Personality (P1) – About Me

A profile containing an entry for the Self-Disclosure Index was coded as **1**.

A profile not containing an entry for the Self-Disclosure Index was coded as **0**.

Numerical Coding for Personality (P2) – I’d Like to Meet

A profile containing an entry for the Self-Disclosure Index was coded as **1**.

A profile not containing an entry for the Self-Disclosure Index was coded as **0**.

Numerical Coding for Personality (P3) – General

A profile containing an entry for the Self-Disclosure Index was coded as **1**.

A profile not containing an entry for the Self-Disclosure Index was coded as **0**.

Interests

The remaining data on the profiles was categorized under Interests. Each section within Interests was quantified by how many self-disclosing entries were made into each subcategory.

Music – Any musical artist or band.

Movies – Any film or movie title.

Television – Any television series.

Books – Any book title.

Heroes – Any individual, whether real or fictitious.

Photo – Any photo that identifies the user based on their main profile picture.

Numerical Coding for Interests (IN)

When a users profile contained an entry from any one of the following categories, the data was coded as a numerical quantity.

Interests – Music (IN1)

A profile containing a musical artist or band title was quantified as an entry.

Interests – Movies (IN2)

A profile containing a theatrical film title was quantified as an entry.

Interests – Television (IN3)

A profile containing a television series title was quantified as an entry.

Interests – Books (IN4)

A profile containing a book title was quantified as an entry.

Interests – Heroes (IN5)

A profile containing the name of an individual or fictional character was quantified as an entry.

Interests – Photos (IN6)

A profile containing an identifying photo of the primary user was quantified as an entry.

RESULTS

Of the 400 MySpace profiles randomly selected, 41.2% were female and 58.8% were male. Most profiles were in their late teens to early twenties (75.5%) and few profiles were more than thirty years old (24.5%). Of the profiles, 25.3% were in high school and 35.5% were in college or had college degrees.

Tables 1 and 2 display a significant tendency of profile anonymity in relation to age and education. As age and education increased, so did MySpace users trend towards an identified username for their profile.

Table 1. Percentage of profiles according to Age

Age	Profile Type	
	Anonymous (<i>n</i> = 200)	Identified (<i>n</i> = 200)
< 19	77.4%	22.6%
19-21	58.5	41.5
22-25	51.8	48.2
26-29	46.3	53.7
> 30	33.7	66.3
Total	50.0	50.0

χ^2 (23.014, *n*= 400)= 23.756, *p*=.001

Table 2. Percentage of profiles according to Education

Education	Profile Type	
	Anonymous (n= 200)	Identified (n= 200)
High School	63.4%	36.6%
Some College	48.0	52.0
In College	47.1	52.9
College Graduate	35.1	64.9
Grad/Professional	41.2	58.8
Post Grad	0.0	100.0
No Answer	52.4	47.6

$$\chi^2 (15.374, n=400) = 16.317, p=.018$$

According to Table 3, US regions from the West, Midwest and Northeast all projected similar results towards an anonymous and identified profile. However, a unique trend in the South showed that users were not as favorable towards an anonymous username.

Table 3. Percentage of profiles according to US Regions

US Region	Profile Type	
	Anonymous (n= 200)	Identified (n= 200)
West	55.1%	44.9%
Midwest	55.4	44.6
South	40.9	59.1
Northeast	55.7	44.3

$\chi^2 (7.803, n= 400) = 7.835, p=.050$

In Table 4, the ethnicity of MySpace profiles revealed that minority groups selected anonymity over an identified profile username, while Caucasians showed no significant preference.

Table 4. Percentage of profiles users according to Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Profile Type	
	Anonymous <i>(n= 200)</i>	Identified <i>(n= 200)</i>
Asian	80.0%	20.0%
Black African	65.2	34.8
Latino Hispanic	69.2	30.8
Native American	100.0	0.0
Pacific Islander	0.0	100.0
White Caucasian	48.8	51.2
No Answer	42.1	57.9

$\chi^2(13.290, n= 400)= 14.722, p=.039$

The first hypothesis predicted that MySpace profiles with an anonymous username would disclose more personal information than MySpace profiles with an identified username. In addition, it was anticipated that the role of anonymity would have a significant influence over self-disclosure within MySpace profiles. Both hypotheses were confirmed. As Tables 5 through 9 all displayed an increase in self-disclosure amongst profiles that had an anonymous profile username.

According to Miller, Berg and Archer's 1983 Self-Disclosure Index, Table 5 showed the distribution of personal information that MySpace users were able to describe in their profile. Of the ten categories that users personal information could be quantified into, five of them were statistically significant to report. Of the five Self-Disclosure Index categories reported, four showed a significant trend where anonymity contributed to higher levels of self-disclosure.

In Table 6, the mean of identifying photos in MySpace profiles calculated and a significant level of self-disclosure when profiles remained anonymous. Anonymous username profiles contained a greater number of photographs compared to profiles with an identified username.

Table 5. Distribution of content using the Self-Disclosure Index

	Self-Disclosure									
	Things I wouldn't do in public		My deepest feelings		What is important to me in life		What makes me the person I am		My worst fears	
	Anony. (n=200)	Ident. (n=200)	Anony. (n=200)	Ident. (n=200)	Anony. (n=200)	Ident. (n=200)	Anony. (n=200)	Ident. (n=200)	Anony. (n=200)	Ident. (n=200)
Mean	.06	.03	.66	.44	.26	.16	.28	.45	.08	.02
df	398	367.945	398	302.982	398	354.804	.770	.976	.457	.223
F	4.255		12.205		9.221		9.842		13.068	
Sig.	.040		.001		.003		.002		.001	

Table 6. Distribution of profiles according to Photos

	Profile Type	
Photos	Anonymous <i>(n= 200)</i>	Identified <i>(n= 200)</i>
Mean	44.46	30.56
df	398	360.627
F	4.075	4.075
Sig.	.044	.044

N=400

In Table 7, the distribution of musical interests and personal habits of MySpace users was reported. It was discovered that users disclosed more information about their musical interests and personal habits in their profile when their username remained anonymous.

Table 7. Distribution of profiles according to Music and Habits

Interests	Profile Type			
	Music		Habits	
	Anonymous (n=200)	Identified (n=200)	Anonymous (n=200)	Identified (n=200)
Mean	12.77	8.90	6.78	5.94
df	398	367.828	398	385.098
F	6.005		5.105	
Sig.	.015		.024	

N=400

A unique result of the data showed a significant disparity of MySpace users and disclosure of their smoking habits. In Table 8, anonymous profiles reported an overwhelming percentage of users that revealed they smoked (70.8%), while identified profiles did not (29.2%).

Table 8. Percentage of profiles according to Smoking Habits

	Profile Type	
Smoker	Anonymous (n= 200)	Identified (n= 200)
Yes	70.8%	29.2%
No	43.8	56.2
No Answer	48.4	51.6

$\chi^2 (14.094, n= 400) = 14.448, p=.001$

An additional outcome of the study discovered a disagreement among MySpace users and their interest in having children. In Table 9, a vast difference was reported amongst anonymous profiles as showing a significant disinterest in having children (75%) in contrast to identified profiles (26.7%).

Table 9. Percentage of profiles interested in having Children

	Profile Type	
	Anonymous (n= 200)	Identified (n= 200)
Children		
I Don't Want Kids	73.3%	26.7%
Love Kids But Not For Me	55.6	44.4
Undecided	70.0	30.0
Someday	50.8	49.2
Expecting	100.0	0.0
Proud Parent	37.1	62.9
No Answer	51.7	48.3

$\chi^2 (17.239, n= 400) = 14.448, p = .008$

DISCUSSION

The central goal of this study was to test predictions about the association of anonymity and self-disclosure as it relates to the social-networking website MySpace. As predicted, profiles that contained an anonymous profile username disclosed significantly more about the person than profiles that contained an identified profile username. Furthermore, the opportunity to remain anonymous within online interaction showed that self-disclosure was not only apparent but occurred in a significant amount. In addition, the conducted research validated Joinson's 2001 previous study on chat room self-disclosure by affirming that username anonymity played a key factor in the amount of personal information revealed between online participants. As the landscape on computer-mediated communications has included a broader scope of tools for participants to publish their personal information, a broader scope of research will be needed to understand it as well.

This study is limited in a few key respects. Although anonymity was accurately measured by username identification, self-disclosure did not take into account customizable web design features of MySpace personal profiles or embedded streaming video content. Due to the scope of the study, only text and photos were examined. Future research will want to explore the role of anonymity and self-disclosure within online virtual environments that use avatars (e.g., SecondLife), where participants create a customized computer-generated model of oneself online.

In conclusion, social-networking websites such as MySpace, have allowed for a transformation of identity that can deviate from one's offline identity (Skarderud, 2003).

Participants are able to construct and reconstruct their identity in numerous and anonymous ways online, and they form relationships by interacting with and disclosing information to one another on a scale that is beyond traditional communication capabilities (Bucy, 2005). As the new media landscape continues to expand, further and more frequent research will be required to understand the developing aspects of social-networking technology and the many components of online social interaction associated with anonymity and self-disclosure.

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