Young Adults' Perceptions of Online Self-Disclosure

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Abstract

Online communication has become the primary instrument utilised by many individuals to maintain and form relationships, and self-disclosure plays an important role in the formation of close relationships online. An extensive amount of research has investigated the experiences of adolescents online. However, available knowledge about the influence of social media on young adults within the South African context is limited. Consequently, exploring young adults' perceptions of online self-disclosure becomes more relevant. The aim of this study was to explore and describe young adults' perceptions of online self-disclosure, specifically exploring what young adults' self-disclose online and what psychosocial factors impact thereupon. The present study utilised a qualitative approach and was exploratory and descriptive in design. The sample size of the present study was 13, and semi-structured interviews were utilised as the method of data collection. The data obtained was analysed using thematic analysis and six main themes were identified. This article highlights one of those themes, namely *Online Self-disclosure,* focusing specifically on the *psychosocial factors impacting upon online self-disclosure.*

Keywords: anonymity, comfort, culture, gender, intimacy, online self-disclosure, personality, qualitative research, reciprocity, trust

1. Introduction

Traditionally, communication occurred face-to-face, via telephone or by mail (Day, 2013). However, with recent advances in technology, interpersonal communication has shifted beyond the immediacy of face-to-face communication. Such technological advances have resulted in the rapid growth of Social Network Sites (SNSs) and have altered the manner in which one meets new people and establishes and maintains relationships (Day, 2013). Most individuals find the online setting for meeting others appealing, as it offers them the opportunity to meet individuals outside of their social circle, to meet individuals even with time limitations, and to meet and interact with others in a setting that is low-key and less anxiety-provoking (Campbell & Murray, 2015). Geographic mobility is typically one of the key reasons for friendships to dissolve, but, regardless of changes in physical proximity and the regularity of communication, individuals can maintain a form of intimacy with strong relationships which have a vast history of interaction (Shklovski, Kraut, & Cummings, 2008). With the recent advances in technology, long distance communication has become easy as well as affordable for most individuals (Shklovski et al., 2008). Nowadays, relationships are no longer restricted to individuals living in the same region, as modern communication technology has made it easier for individuals to maintain relationships over long distances (Utz, 2007). SNSs thus allow individuals to find partners independent of their geographic location, and maintain relationships and high school connections as they shift from one offline region to another (Shah, Shah, & Sivitonides, 2012).

Online individuals can also instantly share videos, music, pictures and other links, which may promote the formation of intimacy and the progression of relationships. According to Froneman (2016) online relationships frequently occur in a reversed sequence. Individuals connect online in the absence of physical proximity or initial physical attraction, but continue to learn about each other, develop a sense of intimacy and then make contact face-to-face. Some individuals never make physical contact in an offline context (Kozlencova, Palmatier, Fang, Xiao, & Huang, 2017). In contrast, the progression of offline interpersonal relationships proceed from the initial encounter which is based on spatial proximity and physical attractiveness, to the exploration of similarities and to self-disclosure. Online individuals are forced to depend on self-disclosure due to the lack of other strategies that are often utilised in the offline setting (Froneman, 2016).

2. Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure occurs when an individual discloses personal information about themselves to another individual (Attrill,

2012; Bareket-Bojmel & Shahar, 2011; Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2009). It can also be defined as "revealing one's thinking, feelings and beliefs to another" (Steinberg, 2007, p. 169). Self-disclosure is usually a process that is gradual and reciprocal, in which one individual's self-disclosure normally stimulates an equivalent or even greater disclosure from the other person (Walton & Rice, 2013). Self-disclosure forms a significant part of human interaction as 30% - 40% of daily communication is designed to communicate details about one's intimate relationships and experiences (Tang, Bensman, & Hatfield, 2013). Successful friendships, dating and marital relationships have been positively linked to self-disclosure about one's personal background and emotions (Tang et al., 2013). Self-disclosure is typically one of the foundations for healthy relationships (Myers & Myers, 1988) and has consistently been demonstrated as an essential first step in forming an intimate interpersonal relationship (Lu & Farzan, 2015).

3. Self-Disclosure Online

According to Rimé (2016), the internet has rapidly advanced into an extended playing field for individuals all around the globe, with people from westernised cultures spending vast amounts of time online communicating with both strangers and those they know. Friendships, romantic relationships, sexual liaisons, gaming collaborations, guidance, as well as counselling are some of the interactions that can now occur online, sometimes without individuals ever meeting face-to-face. These online interactions have resulted in an increased interest in how much detail individuals reveal and share about themselves and what the aim of such disclosures could be.

Before the internet, self-disclosure only took place between individuals who knew each other and typically occurred within their own communities (Mubarak & Mubarak, 2015). However, the internet's ability to effortlessly bring strangers together to interact has completely altered this context (Mubarak & Mubarak, 2015). SNSs have amplified the need for individuals to self-disclose online (Taddei & Contena, 2013) because an important element in the formation of close relationships is self-disclosure (Blau, 2011; Bruss & Hill, 2010, Cho, 2007).

4. Psychosocial Factors Impacting Upon Online Self-Disclosure

4.1 Personality

According to Loiacono (2015) personality plays a significant role in the way that individuals connect with others and in the manner that they present themselves to others. Personality describes the combination of characteristics that shape an individual's unique character, and is regarded as stable over time (Loiacono, 2015). Commencing in the 1960s but accelerating since then, an extensive body of research has concurred that most common trait approaches to personality can be represented by five qualities, namely extroversion or surgency, agreeableness, conscientiousness or lack of impulsivity, neuroticism or emotional stability and openness also known as openness to experience, culture or intellect. Together, these five qualities are called the Big Five (Friedman & Schustack, 2012).

According to Friedman and Schustack (2012), extroverted individuals tend to be energetic, enthusiastic, dominant, sociable and talkative. Introverted individuals are likely to be shy, retiring, passive and quiet. Individuals that are agreeable tend to be sociable, cooperative, trusting and warm, while individuals that are low on this quality are cold, argumentative and unfriendly. Conscientious individuals are typically careful, reliable, determined, organised and responsible. Neurotic individuals tend to be anxious, highly-strung, tense, erratic and worrying, whereas emotionally stable individuals are calm and content. Open individuals usually appear to be creative, witty, original and artistic, while individuals that are low on this quality are generally more shallow and conservative.

In the online environment, previous research has indicated that extroverts communicated more with others than introverts, as the online context increases their chances to establish new relationships (Wang & Stefanone, 2013). Two studies conducted by Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman and Gaddis (2011) investigated how personality is revealed on SNSs and showed various links between the Big Five and self-reported Facebook-related behaviours and noticeable profile information. For instance, extroversion not only predicted the prevalence of Facebook utilisation, but also involvement in the site, with extroverts (compared to introverts) showing evidence of greater levels of Facebook activity. Similarly to the offline environment, extroverts search for virtual social involvement, leaving behind a behavioural residue in the form of friend lists and picture posting (Gosling et al., 2011). Extroverts feel more comfortable in the presence of others, are willing to initiate conversations with new individuals (Loiacono, 2015), and are usually more willing to share sensitive details about themselves (Tait & Jeske, 2015). They are not timid or withdrawn in the presence of strangers and do not remain in the background during an event. Taking into account their positive emotionality and desire to develop their social networks, extroverts are likely to consider self-disclosure on SNSs as more of a benefit compared to introverts (Loiacono, 2015). Less extroverted individuals tend to decrease their verbal exchange, specifically when facing less-acquainted individuals (Zhang & Ling, 2004).

Individuals high on agreeableness have been found to self-disclose more and also tend to listen to others disclose more information in comparison to individuals that are low in agreeableness (Shearer, 2017). However, those that are high in

agreeableness are inclined to avoid conflict and desire harmony, and may be more likely to contemplate the risks of posting information than those that are less agreeable. Therefore, their aim would be to withhold information, such as strong opinions, in order to avoid conflict (Loiacono, 2015).

Conscientiousness might not be directly linked to self-disclosure (Loiacono, 2015; Shearer, 2017). For instance, conscientious individuals might think that SNSs assists them in accomplishing their goals by increasing their network and establishing connections that form part of achieving success. In contrast, they may perceive SNSs as a distraction. Therefore, their actions tend to be as a result of their perceived risks or perceived benefits (Loiacono, 2015).

Neuroticism has been positively linked with the frequency of social media usage, the utilisation of Facebook for social purposes and participating in emotional disclosures on Facebook; for example, venting about personal issues (Marshall, Lefringhausen, & Ferenczi, 2015). High levels of neuroticism have been linked with low levels of reciprocating self-disclosure and diminished friendship satisfaction (Shearer, 2017). Individuals high in neuroticism are likely to consider the risks of disclosing on SNSs more than those low in neuroticism as self-disclosure requires the individual to reveal personal details which others may use against them. Such individuals tend to perceive greater risks associated with posting personal details than those with lower levels of neuroticism (Loiacono, 2015).

Individuals with high levels of openness to experiences are inclined to perceive SNSs as an opportunity to connect and utilise its features more than those who are less open (Loiacono, 2015). Openness has also been positively linked with frequency of social media usage (Shearer, 2017). However, Loiacono (2015) found no direct association between openness and intent to self-disclose in her study. This association may be as a result of the interaction between one's perceived risks and perceived benefits, namely, being open to experience is frequently based on how one views the situation.

4.2 Trust

Trust plays a vital role in social communication and in the progression and maintenance of intimate relationships (Li, Feng, Li, & Tan, 2015). Trust can manifest in various ways and generates strong foundations from which relationships may blossom (MacCulloch, 2012). Trust and security are established when two individuals respond positively to each other over repetitive interactions, which persistently reinforces the relationship (Bruss & Hill, 2010). Trust has thus been defined as one's "willingness to be vulnerable, based on positive expectations about the actions of others" (Shih, Hsu, Yen, & Lin, 2012, p. 629).

Trust is crucial in understanding when individuals choose to share intimate details with others and when they choose secrecy (Joinson, Reips, Buchanan, & Schofield, 2010). Self-disclosure is thus greatly dependent on trust (Steinberg, 2007). Individuals are more comfortable discussing personal matters when there is a great deal of trust and consequently, reveal more information about themselves (Taddei & Contena, 2013).

4.3 Intimacy

It is presumed that intimate and close relationships are attained through self-disclosure (Yang & Tan, 2012). Intimacy is generated through open and personal disclosure and is consequently a concept that should be considered along with self-disclosure (Christensen, 2011). Self-disclosure is viewed as a prerequisite in creating intimacy (Schouten et al., 2009; Tang et al., 2013) and is an indicator of intimacy in interpersonal relationships (Tang et al., 2013). Intimacy is defined as closeness to another individual and openness in expressing and disclosing thoughts and feelings (Bauminger, Finzi-Dottan, Chason, & Har-Even, 2008).

Personal disclosures of relevant details, opinions and feelings to another individual promotes intimacy, or closeness and connectedness in relationships (Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011). The degree of intimacy signifies the strength of the relationship (Shih, Hsu, & Lee, 2015). As relationships move from casual to intimate, individuals tend to reveal more personal details about themselves (Dietz-Uhler, Bishop-Clark, & Howard, 2005), and the more information an individual discloses about themselves to a friend, the closer the connection will be between them (Christensen, 2011).

4.4 Reciprocity

It is commonly proposed that self-disclosure operates under a 'norm of reciprocity' (Cozby, 1972). Self-disclosure is a phenomenon that is reciprocal in that it impacts upon the individual disclosing and the individual being disclosed to (Christensen, 2011). This process is also known as the mutual or dyadic effect and refers to the joint disclosure by communicating individuals, in which self-disclosure by one individual is caused by the self-disclosure of the other individual (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007).

Feelings of reciprocity is a perception of one individual that the other person is willing to accept a certain degree of vulnerability to maintain the relationship, thus increasing the individual's evaluation of the relationship's value and the necessity to continue the relationship through future disclosures (Posey, Lowry, Roberts, & Ellis, 2010). Reciprocal

self-disclosure may be the core of constructing highly intimate relationships that are truly fulfilling and might even improve social interaction, satisfaction and an individual's overall quality of life (Posey et al., 2010).

4.5 Anonymity

Anonymity is commonly suggested as a reason for an individual's tendency to self-disclose on CMC as online interaction increases anonymity (Bareket-Bojmel & Shahar, 2011; Bruss & Hill, 2010). Anonymity refers to the fact that individuals can control their own self-image online in a way that is not possible in the offline world (Schade, Sandberg, Bean, Busby, & Coyne, 2013). Anonymity decreases the risk of damaging one's personal image and having the information exposed by the other person (Ma, Hancock, & Naaman, 2016). By decreasing the risks, anonymity could increase self-disclosure overall. Anonymity allows individuals to be less restrained, possibly because they are less inhibited by other's expectations or perceive less accompanied risks of public sanction (Ma et al., 2016). When individuals are anonymous, they are not held responsible in the offline world for their communication online (Hollenbaugh & Everett, 2013).

Theoretically, it has been suggested that online anonymity works by duplicating a 'strangers on a train' experience, fostering private self-awareness, decreasing accountability concerns and forming a need to reduce uncertainty (Joinson & Paine, 2006). The 'stranger on a train' phenomenon refers to the sharing of intimate details with the anonymous person seated next to you – details that one's closest friends are unaware of. Likewise, the internet allows individuals to anonymously disclose personal experiences with people they are completely unfamiliar with, thereby altering interpersonal communication dynamics over the past decade (Bareket-Bojmel & Shahar, 2011).

4.6 Culture and Gender

Every individual holds certain beliefs, values and perceptions that are integrated into their sense of self, and are key factors that impact on the individual's views and actions. Therefore, in order to gain an understanding of an individual, it is imperative to be cognisant of their specific context and to examine how their culture has informed their sense of self (De Villiers, 2012). Culture can be defined as "the total accumulation of beliefs, norms, activities, institutions, and communication patterns" of a distinguishable group of individuals (Steinberg, 2007, p. 298). An individual's culture influences every facet of life including the manner in which one dresses, the type of food consumed and one's views on relationships, wedlock and career choices (Steinberg, 2007). Culture controls the manner in which one communicates by defining what is appropriate and what is not (Kim & Dindia, 2011). An individual's cultural values thus play a role in self-disclosure as some cultures do not encourage discussions regarding one's personal beliefs and feelings (Steinberg, 2007).

Although current literature lacks cultural studies on the utilisation of social media platforms, it nevertheless suggests the importance of examining the role that culture plays in self-disclosure, especially regarding the use of social media (Almakami, 2015). Studies conducted on self-disclosure online do not seem to provide a true indication of the cultural and social background variations that inevitably impact upon levels of self-disclosure and intimacy (Taddei, Contena, & Grana, 2010). Regardless of the lack of studies investigating the impact of culture on self-disclosure, specifically in the online context, various cultural aspects have been explored in literature. For instance, self-disclosure has been explored across individualistic-collectivistic cultures, and it has been found that individuals in individualistic cultures self-disclose more (Almakami, 2015).

Undoubtedly, African cultures vary enormously from the cultures of other countries or continents (Idang, 2015). South Africa is diverse in terms of its culture, ethnicity, language, race and other related features (Bodenstein & Naudé, 2017). In South Africa there are various cultural groups such as the Zulus, the Afrikaners and the Indians amongst many others (Boguslavsky, 2007). Furthermore, merged within the various ethnic and racial groups in South Africa are individuals who have immigrated from around the world who still maintain the identity of their cultural heritage. South Africa thus consists of a culturally diverse population which incorporates both Western values and indigenous practices and beliefs (Bodenstein & Naudé, 2017). Information examining the role of culture on self-disclosure within the South African context is minimal in the opinion of the current researcher.

Mynhardt, Baron, Branscombe and Byrne (2009) observed that in South African culture, sex and gender stereotypes appear to still be greatly rooted. Gender stereotypes are concerned with the traits that males and females presumably possess which differentiates the two genders from each other. Oberst, Chamarro and Renau (2016) state that both men and women assume self-presentations that comply with traditional codes of masculinity and femininity. According to these norms, men are perceived as more instrumental and less emotional, whereas women are viewed as more expressive. In an early study conducted by Prinsloo (as cited in Mynhardt et al., 2009), 271 South African students were asked to assess and choose from a list containing more than 170 adjectives, which for them indicated masculinity or femininity. After thoroughly examining the data obtained, Prinsloo found that white South Africans described masculinity in relation to a lack of emotional qualities, whereas black respondents described masculinity more in terms

of dominance. Furthermore, black South African respondents described femininity in terms of physical features, whereas white South Africans described femininity in terms of emotional sensitivity (Mynhardt et al., 2009).

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The current study was a qualitative study that was exploratory and descriptive in design. In its broadest sense, the qualitative approach involves research that extracts meaning, experience or perceptions from participant accounts (de Vos, Strydom, Fouche, & Delport, 2005). As such, the qualitative researcher collects data through observations, written or spoken language, and analyses the collected data to identify and categorise themes (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006). Capturing the perspectives of the participants may be a key purpose of a qualitative study (Yin, 2011). Thus, a social phenomenon examined from the participant's standpoint is one identifier of qualitative research (Williams, 2007). The present study examined online self-disclosure from the participants' viewpoint.

5.2 Sampling and Participants

Due to the increased use of social media over the past few years, it presents a possible source for the recruitment of research participants (Topolovec-Vranic & Natarajan, 2016). Therefore, in order to obtain participants, the researcher utilised social media, more specifically, Facebook and Instagram. Purposive sampling was utilised for the current study. The researcher identified potential participants between the ages of 18-28, residing in Port Elizabeth. Thereafter, as part of the recruitment phase, the researcher via text message, contacted the potential participants. The process that was followed was that participants were added to the list as they were identified, and contact was made with those who were at the top of the list. The text mentioned that the researcher was conducting a study and asked each potential participant to provide his or her email address in order for the researcher to provide them with more information should they be open to and interested in participating. The researcher then formally made contact via email by providing participants with an information letter. Table 1 illustrates the number of participants contacted by the researcher for participation in the current study.

Table 1. Number of participants contacted for participation in the present study

Participation	Number of participants
Participants who agreed to participate	13
Participants not interested in participating	5
Total	18

The demographics of the participants that took part in the current study as well as those who did not partake in the study were similar. The participants who did not partake in the current study were between the ages of 23 to 26 years. Of the 5 participants, 2 were female and 3 were male; all the participants were heterosexual. In terms of race, 4 of the participants were Coloured and 1 participant was Black. Table 2 highlights the biographical descriptions of the participants who did not partake in the study in terms of demographic variables.

Table 2. Demographic variables of the participants who did not participate in the current study

Participant	Gender	Age	Race	Sexual Orientation
1	Male	25	Coloured	Heterosexual
2	Female	25	Black	Heterosexual
3	Male	24	Coloured	Heterosexual
4	Female	23	Coloured	Heterosexual
5	Male	26	Coloured	Heterosexual

Participants that agreed to participate in the current study were between the ages of 22 to 28 years, with the average age being 24. All the participants had previous online interpersonal relationships and were currently in one or more online interpersonal relationship. There were no set criteria or limitations pertaining to the form of social media utilised by the participants. All the participants were able to communicate in English and resided in Port Elizabeth. Participants of any gender, race, or sexual orientation were included in the current study. The sample size of the present study was 13 participants. Of the 13 participants 7 were female and 6 were male; 11 of the participants were heterosexual and 2 were lesbian. In terms of race, 7 of the participants were Black, 3 participants were Coloured, 2 participants were White and 1 participant was Asian. Table 3 illustrates the biographical descriptions of the participants in the present study in terms of demographic variables.

Table 3. Demographic variables of the participants in the current study

Participant (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Race	Sexual Orientation
Athi	Male	22	Black	Heterosexual
Mpho	Male	23	Black	Heterosexual
Bongani	Male	23	Black	Heterosexual
Luzuko	Male	24	Black	Heterosexual
Rose	Female	23	Asian	Lesbian
Emma	Female	24	White	Heterosexual
Bonita	Female	24	Coloured	Heterosexual
Alyssa	Female	24	Coloured	Heterosexual
Ava	Female	26	White	Lesbian
Thandi	Female	24	Black	Heterosexual
Sihle	Male	28	Black	Heterosexual
Karabo	Female	22	Black	Heterosexual
Ari	Male	27	Coloured	Heterosexual

5.3 Data Collection

A research proposal was submitted to and approved by the various levels of research management of Nelson Mandela University. Once approval was granted, the researcher commenced with the study.

Interviews are most frequently utilised as the method of data collection in qualitative studies and the most popular type of interview is a semi-structured interview (Terre Blanche et al., 2006); as it allows the researcher to gain a comprehensive picture of the participant's beliefs, perceptions or accounts on a specific issue (de Vos et al., 2005). Thus, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were used as the method of data collection in the present study. With semi-structured interviews the researcher has an interview schedule consisting of predetermined questions; however, the interview is not dictated by the schedule, but rather guided by it (de Vos et al., 2005). The interview guide included seven questions that were explored during the interview. One key open-ended question was utilised to explore what impacts upon online self-disclosure:

> *What psychosocial factors influences you to self-disclose online?*

All interviews were conducted in the consultation room of the researcher which ensured privacy and confidentiality. The researcher audio-recorded each interview conducted. This allowed the researcher to have a complete record of every interview and demonstrated a level of seriousness to each participant (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Once all the interviews were conducted, the data collected was transcribed verbatim into text by the researcher and was utilised throughout the data analysis process. A workflow of the process followed is illustrated below.

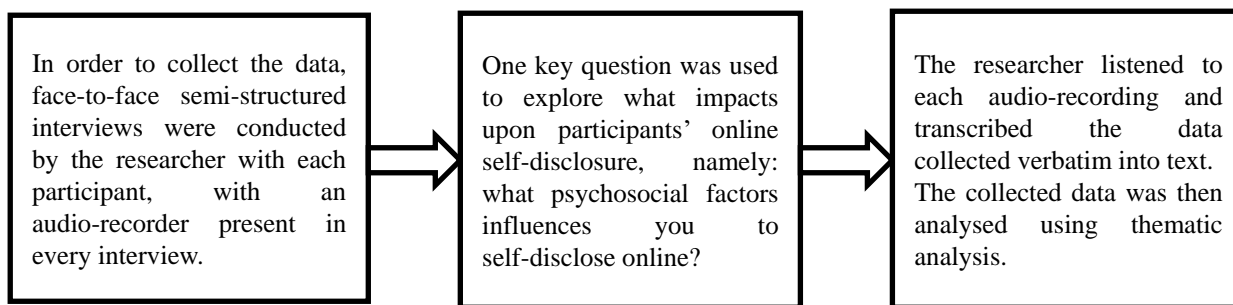| In order to collect the data, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher with each participant, with an audio-recorder present in every interview.	→	One key question was used to explore what impacts upon participants' online self-disclosure, namely: what psychosocial factors influences you to self-disclose online?	→	The researcher listened to each audio-recording and transcribed the data collected verbatim into text. The collected data was then analysed using thematic analysis.

Figure 1. Workflow of the data collection process

All identifiable information was only known to the researcher and all data containing identifiable information was safely stored in a lockable cabinet and was only accessible by the researcher. A pseudonym was selected for each participant and utilised during the course of the study to uphold and safeguard confidentiality and anonymity.

5.4 Data Analysis

The researcher utilised thematic analysis for the present study. Thematic analysis can be defined as a technique for reporting, evaluating and establishing themes in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis consists of six stages and the researcher meticulously followed the six stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the present study, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria was utilised.

6. Findings and Discussion

The participants reported various psychosocial factors that influenced self-disclosure online. Psychosocial factors included *Comfort, Personality, Trust, Intimacy, Reciprocity, Anonymity, Gender* and *Culture*. Consistent with previous research, the findings of this study demonstrated that personality in relation to extroversion, trust, intimacy, reciprocity, anonymity and gender are psychosocial factors that impacts upon online self-disclosure. The findings also showed that feeling comfortable with the other person had a direct impact upon levels of self-disclosure. Interestingly, the findings of this study revealed that gender stereotypes are still firmly embedded within the South African context and strongly influenced online self-disclosure. Additionally, the findings provided insight into the impact of culture on self-disclosure online, as available research investigating the role of culture on self-disclosure within the South African context is limited. The above-mentioned psychosocial factors will be discussed below.

6.1 Comfort

Table 4. Participants perceptions regarding comfort as a psychosocial factor

Comfort	Frequency
Impacts upon self-disclosure online	4
Not applicable	9
Total	13

Some of the participants reported that feeling comfortable with the other person influenced their self-disclosure, as illustrated in Table 4. This is evident from the following extract:

> *It doesn't take me a long time to disclose if I'm comfortable with the person. So, it's more uhm, a matter of do I feel comfortable with the person (Mpho).*

Although there is a lack of studies that have investigated the impact of comfortability in relation to self-disclosure, the present researcher is of the opinion that trust in a relationship leads to comfortableness and feeling safe enough with another person, and in turn leads to increased self-disclosure, as illustrated by the above comment, as trust is essential when a degree of uncertainty is present (Shih et al., 2012). As previously mentioned, individuals are more comfortable discussing personal matters when there is a great deal of trust and consequently reveal more information about themselves (Taddei & Contena, 2013).

6.2 Personality

Table 5. Participants perceptions regarding personality as a psychosocial factor

Personality	Frequency
Impacts upon self-disclosure online	3
Not applicable	10
Total	13

It is important to consider personality when attempting to comprehend an individual's behaviour on SNSs (Loiacono, 2015). As illustrated in Table 5, three of the participants mentioned personality as a psychosocial factor that impacts on their self-disclosure online, specifically in relation to extroversion and openness of the other person:

> *It depends on the type of person you know. So, if it's someone who is very uhm, who's like me, who is also very liberal who's also very you know uhm, for example, doesn't mind uh, debating on certain aspects like religion, race, sex, whatever you know, all those things, that's someone like, that I'd feel more comfortable with to disclose you know, uh something to because then we can have a chat about, an honest to goodness chat about it or debate about whatever the thing is you know. Uhm, whereas someone who's more rigid in their… you know or someone who doesn't understand satire or like sarcasm you know uhm I wouldn't disclose as much to them because then there'd be like… they take it at face value and not dig a little bit deeper you know. So, those kind of people make me uncomfortable cos you like okay where's your second brain you know (Bongani).*

Bongani specifically makes reference to the other person's personality. The above-mentioned extract may be referring to the openness of the other individual. For Bongani, if the person is low on this quality he would not self-disclose, as illustrated in the above-mentioned extract.

In contrast, Mpho and Thandi indicated that their personality played a role in their online self-disclosure:

> *I think the main factor is my personality. Uh, in the same way that uhm, people who because of their personality because they more reserved they don't like talking about themselves or what they doing or what happened to them would not disclose because I'm a very open person so that's my personality, people I'm friends with, which I communicate with on the regular, that I'm comfortable with I'll be open to (Mpho).*

> *I would rather say my personality more than my gender, kind of thing, cos I can literally just blur it out, anything, right now… (Thandi).*

In the researcher's opinion, both Mpho and Thandi appear to be extroverted and as a result, are more willing to self-disclose.

6.3 Trust

Table 6. Participants perceptions regarding trust as a psychosocial factor

Trust	Frequency
Impacts upon online self-disclosure	11
Did not have an impact on self-disclosure online	2
Total	13

Trust and security are established when two individuals respond positively to each other over repetitive interactions, which persistently reinforces the relationship (Bruss & Hill, 2010). The role of trust in the context of online self-disclosure should not be underestimated, considering the absence of physical interaction in CMC, which decreases the number of social cues available in order to help validate the trustworthiness of individuals online (Shih et al., 2012). As indicated in Table 6, most of the participants reported that they shared personal information with others when there was a high level of trust, as illustrated in the following extracts:

> *I would say if the other person is showing signs of trust towards you it equally makes it easier for you to say more personal things that you wouldn't entrust to offline relationships (Athi).*

> *Trust does play a huge role like, in whether you reveal information about yourself or not (Alyssa).*

Trust played a significant role in the participants' online self-disclosure, as illustrated by the above-mentioned table and extracts. When trust is present, it leads to the sharing of delicate, sensitive and vulnerable facets of past or present internal experiences (MacCulloch, 2012).

6.4 Intimacy

Table 7. Participants perceptions regarding intimacy as a psychosocial factor

Intimacy	Frequency
Impacts upon self-disclosure online	13
Total	13

All of the participants indicated that intimacy played a significant role in their online self-disclosure, as illustrated in Table 7. The link between intimacy and self-disclosure is illustrated in the following extracts:

> *I would say the type of information I disclose depends on how intimate I am with that person that I'm speaking to (Athi).*

> *Uhm, the more closer you would feel to the person, I think the more you'd start revealing about yourself (Alyssa).*

As previously stated, intimacy is defined as closeness to another individual and openness in expressing and disclosing thoughts and feelings (Bauminger et al., 2008). Personal disclosures of relevant details, opinions and feelings to another individual promote intimacy, or closeness and connectedness in relationships (Jiang et al., 2011). The degree of intimacy signifies the strength of the relationship (Shih et al., 2015). As relationships move from casual to intimate, individuals tend to reveal more personal details about themselves (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2005), as illustrated in the above-mentioned extracts.

6.5 Reciprocity

Table 8. Participants perceptions regarding reciprocity as a psychosocial factor

Reciprocity	Frequency
Impacts upon self-disclosure online	13
Total	13

As a result of reciprocity, self-disclosure frequently intensifies from exchanging non-intimate information to highly intimate details on a wider range of topics (Jiang et al., 2011). All of the participants in the current study highlighted the importance of reciprocity in their online self-disclosure, as illustrated in Table 8. This is evident from the following extracts:

> *Well, you would want uhm, the person on the other side to respond uhm, or also to reveal personal things about themselves because uhm, I think that is what takes the relationship to the next level like, once you reveal things about yourself you would want that person to reveal things about themselves as well so that you can uhm, establish like a deeper relationship with that person so, ja (Alyssa).*

> *... Its normally like a 50/50 thing. I disclose, you disclose. Ja, I mean, I'm not gonna be the only one disclosing (Karabo).*

All of the participants in the current study were in agreement that reciprocity promotes self-disclosure.

6.6 Anonymity

Table 9. Participants perceptions regarding anonymity as a psychosocial factor

Anonymity	Frequency
Impacts upon self-disclosure online	13
Total	13

All the participants in the present study indicated that anonymity impacted on their online self-disclosure, as illustrated in Table 9. Anonymity may influence individuals to openly reveal their true selves without anxiety or fear (Shah et al., 2012). This is illustrated in the following extracts:

> *That's what I think makes everything so easy, the fact that you don't know each other. So, it's so easy to be like ja, I did this or this is happening to me right now and that person can't judge you cos they don't' really know you. They just a person out there somewhere doing their own thing going through their own things. They won't see you the next day and like ooh it's bad what's happening to you or whatever. So you feel like they can't judge you. It gives a sense of security like there's nothing you can like really put on me for telling you such (Athi).*

> *I feel that it's better when I don't know the person at all, someone who completely has a different perspective or an outsiders view you know and then I'd be able to talk to them more openly then someone I know because if it's for example, even my best friend you know uhm, if I were to say something to her you know then it's like okay what are you gonna say and if it comes out negatively I'm like ah well screw you then you know I think this you know. So, it... that whole judgy thing you know plays into, in, into uhm account ja (Bongani).*

> *I would disclose more if they anonymous cos maybe I'd feel like, you anonymous man, you know, or I think I'd also disclose more if I'm anonymous as well... it just makes you like think, that you've got like a bit of power, I don't know or much more like... not even strength, like courage, there we go. If one person is anonymous or you the anonymous one, it just gives me more courage to self-disclose if that makes sense? (Karabo).*

Interestingly, Luzuko points out that in being anonymous an individual can be deceptive. As Luzuko put it:

> *Uhm ja, a little I guess because if you don't actually know me I can deceive you. Like, I can, I can create this uhm, this person that actually doesn't exist and, and tell you everything that you wana hear but then ja, I think ja... Especially on social media ja, ja (Luzuko).*

The anonymity aspect may result in individuals masking their real identities and stimulating situations, feelings and beliefs that they do not actually have (Shah et al., 2012). The online setting appears to be a stage where individuals are able to manipulate information, choosing what to disclose and what to conceal (Taddei & Contena, 2013). On the net, individuals may choose to express features that they identify as more important to themselves or more fitting in the context (Taddei & Contena, 2013).

Studies that have explored the link between self-disclosure and CMC (see for example, Joinson, 2001; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002) have found that anonymity allows individuals to expose themselves during discussions without seeming ludicrous or having to experience the distress of being judged (Taddei et al., 2010). Suler (2004) refers to the online disinhibition effect as part of the amplified anonymity that the internet allows. This is the tendency of individuals to act or say something online which they would not usually express in face-to-face situations. That is, individuals separate their lives and identity offline from their online behaviour (Liu, Min, Zhai, & Smyth, 2016). They are more relaxed, feel less restrained and more willing to express themselves (Bareket-Bojmel & Shahar, 2011). Self-disclosure online frequently occurs much sooner and is more intimate than in face-to-face communication due to the reduced inhibitions and behavioural boundaries online (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2015). The above-mentioned extracts convey that anonymity encouraged participants to disclose online.

Findings regarding the perceived link between self-disclosure and anonymity have been mixed (Liu et al., 2016). Similarly, in the current study, mixed findings regarding the link between self-disclosure and anonymity were obtained. In contrast to the experience of the other participants, some participants reported that anonymity discouraged them from disclosing online. The participants expressed that they want to know to whom they are disclosing and also want the

other person to know who they are. Some of the participants also expressed that not knowing who the other person is, is dangerous and is a risk, as illustrated in the following extracts:

I don't think I would wana be anonymous and at the same time I don… I wouldn't want the other person to be like fully anonymous. Like I think I would want to know, uhm, who I'm speaking to and obviously I want to know who the person is that I'm revealing information about myself so, I think for me it would be easier to know the person, uhm, and for the person to know me as well (Alyssa).

You can't be anonymous for me to disclose things to you. I need to know who I'm dealing with and who I'm talking to and for you to be anonymous while I speak to you is not gonna work, for me personally now… I need to know you and make sure that you legit and… that kind of thing so… anonymous person no. If I was anonymous… uhm, neh, I wouldn't disclose. I don't think I would disclose cos I want you to also know me and that kind of thing, who I am and ja, I wouldn't. I'd rather listen to someone disclose to me instead of me disclosing as anonymous [Laughs] (Thandi).

I don't like anonymity for me personally, no I can't because the thing is it can be dangerous, you, you, you don't have no idea who you speaking to and you put yourself at risk you know, with disclosing sometimes personal information and then you don't know what happens or what gets done with that information that you disclose so for me it's uhm, I prefer no anonymity (Rose).

I prefer not to say stuff to anonymous people cos you don't know who it is and it could be someone you know within your immediate circles who is spying on you (Sihle).

Interestingly, Ari reported that he was okay with disclosing to someone that was anonymous, but mentioned that he would not reveal too much:

Uhm, for, for myself, uhm, it will be okay if, uhm, if I can disclose to somebody a, a, anonymous uhm, but I wouldn't disclose like too much to them cos as ja, as I said before it's like, we don't know who the person is, we not hundred percent sure yes, so, uh, uh, so, yes, I will disclose but only a certain amount of information ja (Ari).

It appears as if the uncertainty of not knowing who the other person is inhibits self-disclosure. This finding suggests that anonymity not only encourages online self-disclosure, but may also discourage self-disclosure online.

6.7 Gender

Table 10. Participants perceptions regarding gender as a psychosocial factor

Gender	Frequency
Impacts upon self-disclosure online	8
Not applicable	5
Total	13

Most of the participants reported that their gender had an impact on their self-disclosure online, as illustrated in Table 10. Interestingly, in the present study there appears to be a stereotype that women are more expressive than men and thus most of the female participants expressed that their gender influenced their self-disclosure online. This is evident from the following extracts:

I think a female is more in… more inclined to self-disclose because of the fact that we, we are more emotional beings. So, a guy won't necessarily tell someone something online unless he has an emotional part in it. I don't think a male, they don't really talk about how they feel [Giggle], so ja, I think it is more base (Emma).

I'm a female, females, we just, we tend to disclose more, I think. Uhm, men are normally the ones that are bottling everything all up, but I do, I think it does, for me though, for me (Bonita).

Gender definitely uhm, plays a role. Uhm, as a female, I've, I find myself disclosing quite a bit more there… than uhm, the males that I have in my life at the moment (Ava).

A key feature of stereotypes is that it causes individuals to view themselves and others in a specific way (Mynhardt et al., 2009). Thus, men and women are susceptible to different normative expectations, which may result in gender differences in behaviour (Oberst et al., 2016). Gender differences may thus impact on the amount of self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships (Christensen, 2011). For instance, the nature of self-disclosure is greatly influenced by gender dissimilarities in communication styles. Women are usually more inclined to disclose information about themselves while men tend to disclose far less information about themselves (Cho, 2007; Steinberg, 2007; Wang, Burke, & Kraut, 2016). Consequently, women are likely to have more intimate relationships (Christensen, 2011). Therefore, intimate disclosures by men might defy expectations and be viewed as less appropriate, than similar disclosures by

women. Consequently, men might be perceived as maladjusted if they do self-disclose, while women might be perceived as maladjusted for not self-disclosing (Collins & Miller, 1994). This raises the question as to whether or not the amount of information revealed by individuals in their interpersonal relationships is socially constructed by gender. For instance, the question can be raised whether women feel the need to share substantial amounts of detail about their lives with their closest friends? Similarly, do men feel restricted to self-disclose because of their gender (Christensen, 2011)?

Athi stated:

> *I would say it has somewhat of a role in all of this cos some things are easier for guys to do than it would be for a female to do online (Athi).*

From this comment the researcher is of the opinion that Athi might be alluding to gender stereotypes. Sihle also commented on gender stereotypes, specifically related to men and highlights how disclosures by men are seen as less appropriate:

> *There's this perception that guys don't go through this and that and uhm, so, because of that now, uh, you faced with the question that: do I be macho or do I talk about this thing that will make me feel weak and uhm… so, it's easier to share… for instance stuff that you can't share with someone face-to-face if you a guy cos they not there to judge you immediately, you know. And sometimes they might just unfriend you or whatever or un, unfollow you or if… and it's over, done with, you know, so there's no, there's no immediate ramification for, for sharing or being seen as weak cos they can't literally go and say "ah, this guy was weak" cos no one knows you from their circles of close friends, you know, immediate friends so, so, the, the, there are no immediate ramifications, so, the whole thing with gender does play a factor, uhm, with, with, with, with self-disclosure. Uhm, you can either chose like with culture to, to either swim with the tide or swim against the tide and I, I, I chose to swim against cos I mean if I'm frustrated, if I'm feeling sad I've got to share that you know (Sihle).*

Sihle's comment about not being immediately judged and not being known by the other person's close friends may be referring to an aspect of online anonymity. As previously stated, anonymity allows individuals to be less restrained, possibly because they are less inhibited by others expectations or perceive less accompanied risks of public sanction (Ma et al., 2016). When individuals are anonymous, they are not held responsible in the offline world for communication online (Hollenbaugh & Everett, 2013). In addition, Sihle stated that he does not comply with traditional codes of masculinity.

Rose indicated that her gender was a psychosocial factor and expressed that people were fascinated by her because she chooses not to follow the traditional roles of femininity:

> *Yes. This is the part where I say I know some people are very fascinated with me. Because I know I'm different. I know I'm different. I don't fall from the usual, like everyone else is normal and I'm crazy and stuff. And some people get fascinated with it, they want to know more, they curious, they become very curious and I enjoy it … like even you can look at me now, you can see I'm different, I don't have to explain it… maybe it's because I'm gay (Rose).*

Although both Sihle and Rose indicated that gender is a psychosocial factor, they both challenge the traditional codes of masculinity and femininity. Stereotypically masculine and stereotypically feminine features have transformed in recent years and traditional masculine and feminine roles are losing their significance (Oberst et al., 2016). In contrast to the above, some of the participants reported that their gender did not play a role in their self-disclosure behaviours. This is evident from the following extracts:

> *No I don't…I don't think my gender or culture has anything to do with it (Mpho).*

> *No, like I, I can say, I'm not even a feminist you know. So, no, no [Laughs]. No, it's got nothing to do with my gender, it really has to do with like, the whole what are people gonna say, what are people thinking, it's for people basically (Karabo).*

Gender variations in self-disclosure behaviours have been explored, but findings are inconclusive in most studies. Many studies support the view that women disclose more than men, while some investigations have found no significant gender variations in self-disclosure (Yu, 2014). In the present study most of the participants were in agreement that women self-disclose more than men and gender stereotypes appeared to be still greatly rooted. However, some participants reported that gender did not impact on their self-disclosure behaviours.

6.7.1 Gender of the Other Person

Table 11. Participants perceptions regarding the impact of the other person's gender on self-disclosure

Gender of the other person	Frequency
Impacts upon online self-disclosure	5
Not applicable	8
Total	13

Table 11 illustrates the impact of the other person's gender on the participants online self-disclosure. According to Christensen (2011), it is relevant to examine same-sex and cross-sex friendships. For instance, a study conducted by Bowman (as cited in Christensen, 2011) found that same-sex male friendships tend to be fairly non-disclosive. The study found that American men are inclined to feel uncomfortable in describing their same-sex friendships as intimate. Thus, it may be argued that men are less inclined to engage in self-disclosure in their same-sex friendships, as self-disclosure results in intimacy. In the present study, only one of the male participants reported being more comfortable disclosing to females than to males, but the reason he provided was that men talked about women in a specific way. As Bongani put it:

> So I'm more comfortable around more females cos the whole like guys talking around, wa... like standing around talking about girls in certain ways that kind of puts me off. Uhm, if its things to do with like relationships for example, I don't readily disclose to a lot of my guy friends... I'll more disclose to females than guys if I were to put it in that sense... it does limit what I say to certain people (Bongani).

Interestingly, some of the female participants expressed that they were more comfortable disclosing to females than to males:

> Uhm, I wouldn't feel comfortable with a male ...if he was gay then okay fine, but if it was a straight male, I think that might open up things that you don't want open, if that makes sense (Emma).

> There are like, obviously there are certain things that I would rather not disclose to a certain gender. For me I relate better to females especially because uhm we kind a have like the same mind set or whatever (Bonita)

> I don't think personally that I would reveal any personal information about myself to a male that I don't really know (Alyssa)

> Uhm, I think initially uhm, when I get to know people it's more comfortable for me uhm, disclosing to women. I think in general uhm, because, because I was sexually abused by a male, I think that's always something that will, to a degree, stick with me (Ava).

For Ava, it is important to note that her experience of sexual abuse plays a significant role in why she is more comfortable disclosing to females.

In contrast to the above, some of the participants expressed that they were comfortable disclosing to both males and females:

> Uhm no, it doesn't actually... I have many female and male friends, like gay friends. No, it doesn't actually ...I don't discriminate, I don't, I'm not bias... If you are good to me I'm gonna be g... good to you. That's about it, ja (Luzuko).

> Whether the person is male or female if we've established uhm, overtime, the intimacy, we, we, we've established uhm, reciprocity, we've established, uhm, trust, we've uh, broken down whatever barrier that may have been, you know, in the way, and we sort of have an understanding of each other, right. Whether it's male or female I, I don't, I don... it doesn't really affect, you know, ja (Sihle).

Interestingly, although Bongani previously reported that he was more comfortable disclosing to females, he also expressed that if it's a close relationship then he has no problem in disclosing to a male. As Bongani put it:

> As long as it's a closer relationship I don't have any problem disclosing things to guys (Bongani).

The above-mentioned comments suggest that self-disclosure will occur as long as it's a close and trusting relationship and that the gender of the other person is not significant.

6.8 Culture

Table 12. Participants perceptions regarding culture as a psychosocial factor

Culture	Frequency
Impacts upon self-disclosure online	5
Did not impact on self-disclosure online	8
Total	13

South Africa consists of a culturally diverse population which incorporates both Western values and indigenous practices and beliefs (Bodenstein & Naudé, 2017). Therefore, the present researcher was particularly interested in whether or not culture impacted on the participants' online self-disclosure behaviours. Mixed findings were obtained regarding the influence of culture on self-disclosure online, as illustrated in Table 12. Some of the participants indicated that their culture played a role in their self-disclosure behaviours. For Rose and Ava their cultures limited their self-disclosure online:

Yes. The thing is there is so many religious people online they attacked any and every one they don't feel happy with so, you must be wary of what you say and how you say it. Like with me I can't just say anything or what I actually would like to say because I know that people watching that, are gonna disagree with me and things, you know because our views are different. Our views are very different (Rose).

From my personal experience in the white culture and especially the Afrikaans culture uhm, is quite conservative. Uhm, when looking at my parents or my grandparents' uhm, they would always say that uhm, certain personal aspects of yourself you keep to yourself and you keep between you, yourself and your family members. You don't tell anyone else about this. So, it could be something devastating that happened to you, but you're not allowed to sharell (share/tell) your friends because uhm, no one else besides you and your family members are supposed to know. Uhm, I think that's, something that's filtered through a great deal into myself... (Ava).

For Sihle, he expressed that culture plays a role in self-disclosure behaviours, but that he chooses to go against what his culture dictates:

Uhm, traditionally with culture you, you, you don't wana be seen as weak especially with, with African cultures, uhm, and the whole patriarchy uhm, as a men you must be this and that uhm, you go to the bush you'd be taught that nonsense uhm, so culture does play a factor. It plays a factor whether you say yes or no in a sense that you can chose yes I will submit to what the culture dictates or no, uhm, I will actually chose to not submit to what the culture dictates. So, it does play, it does play a huge part. You decide to either follow the tide or swim against the tide so... I swim against the tide. I ask questions about a lot of things. I'm not liked for that, but its fine (Sihle).

Bonita reported that her culture also influences her self-disclosure, but not in a significant way. As Bonita put it:

My culture [Laughs]... Uhm, I'd have to say yes ...it does influence it does in a... not in a huge way, but it defines me, so... and it's a part of me so, like, yes (Bonita).

Emma reported that she does not identify closely with any one culture, but expressed that the culture of today's society impacts on people's self-disclosure behaviours and actually permits it. As Emma put it:

Okay, as a white person we don't really have a culture [Laughs]. But, I think the culture that we live in today's society, I think yes it does influence because it's more acceptable for us to have friendships that you don't necessarily see the person, like you can... you can be speaking to someone in China and its fine. So, I think culturally I'm not limited at all and I think my... the culture that I am in it actually, not encourages it, but it, it allows it. So ja (Emma).

In contrast to the above-mentioned participants, a few of the participants in the current study reported that their culture does not play a role in their self-disclosure behaviours. This is evident from the following extracts:

Hm, not really because for the most part our family is very liberal, so we...as much as we, we, we can... we like uhm, yes church, yes culture, you know all that we very liberal in the sense where as you know do... be free you know as long as it doesn't directly harm you and it doesn't harm anyone else in any way then you free to disclose or say whatever, do whatever you want... So, I've been lucky enough to grow up in such a family who, who was like okay cool, do you (Bongani).

No, not really. I don't think it's really a cultural thing that allows you to give information about yourself. It's more how you, uhm, like how you are as a person I think, ja (Alyssa).

No. Really, no. I mean, I, I'm Zulu, we, we, we have a really strong cultural thing, but I mean I wasn't really raised that deep into to like, so, so you know, like I can post a picture of myself in a bikini whereas my other cousins, it would be even bad for them to even own bikini's. But, I mean, we both Zulu, but we were just raised differently (Karabo).

This finding suggests that culture has been transforming over the years as it no longer impacts on every facet of an individual's life.

7. Conclusion

This article demonstrated the various psychosocial factors that impacted upon young adults' online self-disclosure. The findings provided valuable information regarding online self-disclosure within the South African context. More specifically, the findings add to the knowledge of young adults' experiences and what influences them to self-disclose online. The findings of the present study yielded some insight into the impact of culture on online self-disclosure. Thus, this study is one of the first to add to the knowledge of the impact of culture on online self-disclosure in South Africa. This study also demonstrated gender differences in relation to online self-disclosure and revealed that online self-disclosure within South Africa is still greatly influenced by gender stereotypes. Additionally, the findings of the study highlighted the influence of comfortability in relation to online self-disclosure. Furthermore, personality, trust, intimacy, reciprocity and anonymity were psychosocial factors that impacted upon the participants' online self-disclosure.

A number of limitations have been recognised in the present study. The study had a small sample size and therefore, the findings of the study are not generalisable to the larger population. In addition, the study only included participants that resided in Port Elizabeth. There were no set criteria in terms of the type of social media used by participants, thus the influence that a particular social media site could have on online self-disclosure has not been examined.

It is recommended that more studies be conducted in the field of cyber psychology focusing on young adults' online experiences within South Africa, more specifically exploring the impact that different social media sites could have on online self-disclosure. There is also a great need for studies with a specific focus on the impact of culture in relation to online self-disclosure. Future studies will generate more insight into this aspect. It is also suggested that future studies explore differences between the various cultural groups in relation to self-disclosure, as this study was not comparative. Future studies should utilise or include a quantitative approach as well as utilise a larger sample size in order to generalise the findings to the larger population. Overall, the present study yielded valuable findings which future studies can expand on.

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