Expressing the “True Self” on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

The present research examined correlates of “true self” expression to offline friends on Facebook. The “true self” (McKenna et al., 2002) consists of qualities an individual currently possesses but does not normally express to others. In Study 1, 184 undergraduates completed an online survey assessing “true self” expression to their friends online and reported the frequency of various Facebook activities. True self expression was positively correlated with using Facebook for communicating with others, general self-disclosure, emotional disclosure, attention-seeking, and acceptance-seeking, but was unrelated to seeking connection with and expressing caring for others. In Study 2, 41 undergraduates completed the “true self” measure and their Facebook profiles were saved and coded. True self expression was positively correlated with frequency of posting on others’ walls, but not posting on one’s own wall or receiving posts from others. Finally, true self expression was positively associated with the level of personal disclosure of participants’ wall posts. These results suggest that those who feel able to express their “true self” online are more active on Facebook, have more self-oriented motivations for posting, and post more personally revealing and emotional content.

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1. Introduction

Since the first appearance of e-mail, listservs, and other forms of online communication, the Internet has changed the way we communicate with each other (see Bargh & McKenna, 2004 for a review). In recent years, Internet users have joined social networking websites (SNS) which allow them to connect with others and post information and daily updates about themselves to a large network of fellow users of their choice. SNS are so popular that in 2010, 61% of American adults used them (Zickuhr, 2010). This represents a major shift in Internet use. As recently as 2000, half of American adults did not even have an Internet connection (Rainie et al., 2000). Worldwide, Facebook is the most popular social networking site (Jain, 2010) with over one billion active users, 699 million of whom log onto the site daily (Facebook, 2013). Facebook has become so popular that in some weeks it has been the number one source of all Internet traffic in the United States (Dougherty, 2010). In recent years, social scientists have taken great interest in understanding Facebook, examining the demographic characteristics of Facebook users, motivations for Facebook use, self-presentation, and social interactions on Facebook (see Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012 for a review). Their current research will address the expression of the “true self” (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002) on Facebook.

2. Background

2.1. The “True Self”

Psychologists have long accepted the notion that the self is multi-faceted. Early scholars focused on the distinction between one’s public persona and private self (Jung, 1953). Higgins (1987) divided the self into the actual self (the way we currently see ourselves) and two self-guides, the ideal and ought self, which serve as standards to which the actual self is compared. Markus and Nurius (1986) posited that each of us has multiple possible selves that we hope to become or fear becoming.

The “true self”, as defined by Bargh et al. (2002), McKenna et al. (2002), consists of qualities that an individual currently possesses but does not normally express to others in everyday life. According to McKenna this notion is similar to the idea of the true self described by Rogers (1951). Rogers posited that the self may contain identity-important qualities that are not validated by one’s significant others. These are not necessarily undesirable traits, but rather these are traits that one would like to be acknowledged, but that one is unable to express or to have validated by others. The true self differs from other “selves” described in the psychological literature, such as Higgins’ (1987) self-guides or Markus and Nurius’ (1986) possible selves because...
unlike these other constructs, the true self contains qualities that the individual currently possesses.

2.2. Expressing the “True Self” on the Internet

Past research has revealed that some individuals feel better able to express their “true self” online (McKenna et al., 2002). McKenna et al. (2002) found that individuals who expressed the true self online were more likely to form close relationships with others that they met via the Internet, and that this was especially true for those high in social anxiety. Experimental evidence suggests that these true self qualities are actually conveyed to online interaction partners. In a lab study, Bargh et al. (2002, Experiment 3), found that online interaction partners evaluated one another as possessing more true self traits than face-to-face partners. Thus it appears that these participants were more able to express true self qualities in online than in face-to-face interactions. This expression of the true self also appears to operate at the unconscious level, with true self qualities being more cognitively accessible following online interactions (Bargh et al., 2002, Experiment 1). In research specifically addressing Facebook use, Tosun (2012) found that those with a tendency to express the true self online are likely to use Facebook as a way to establish new relationships, just as such individuals used other Internet interaction venues ten years earlier. However, those who express the true self online are likely to use the Internet as a “social substitute” for offline interactions, substituting online only relationships with strangers for offline relationships (Tosun & Lajunen, 2009), suggesting an unhealthy consequence of such self expression.

Most past research on true self expression online has focused on interactions with strangers. However, in the past several years, Internet-based communications have become primarily a way to connect with existing offline friends and family members. In order to examine online true self expression to offline friends, McKenna, Buffardi, and Seidman (2005) conducted a survey assessing the extent to which people expressed hidden qualities to their offline friends online via email and instant messaging. The tendency to express the true self to existing “real life” friends when interacting with those friends via the Internet predicted important outcomes for those relationships, including an ease in discussing troublesome topics or conflicts online, and a sense that the Internet had strengthened their relationships. However, this research did not deal with social networking sites, in which information is made public to a large number of friends and acquaintances, but rather with private one-on-one online communications. Some recent research suggests that true self aspects may be expressed on Facebook, revealing that neuroticism is positively correlated with self reports of expressing hidden self-aspects through Facebook posts (Seidman, 2013). The current research will extend this work by examining how the true self is expressed to existing offline friends on Facebook, using both self report and behavioral data.

2.3. True self expression on Facebook

According to Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012), Facebook use is motivated by two primary needs: belonging and self-presentation. The need to belong is the fundamental motive to connect with and be accepted by others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Self-presentation is the attempt to influence how one is perceived by others with the goal of making a particular impression (Schlenker, 2003). Expression of the true self can be a way to fulfill both of these needs.

Self-verification is an important self-presentation goal. Self-verification is the desire to be seen by others as we see ourselves; that is, the desire to present our real and authentic selves to others (Swann, 1983, 1987). Because true self traits are a part of the existing self, and not idealized or hoped for traits, their expression online is an attempt to express the self as it truly is, and is thus an attempt at self-verification. People have a strong motivation to have identity-important self-aspects acknowledged by others, in order to ensure that they are integrated into the self-concept (Baumeister, 1998; Gollwitzer, 1986). Individuals who have self-aspects that can only be expressed online should have a greater tendency to express themselves on Facebook because it may be the only way to have certain self-aspects verified.

**Hypothesis 1.** True self expression online will be positively associated with the tendency to use Facebook as a tool to communicate with others, to disclose information, and to express emotions.

In addition, because those who express the true self online are expressing unique self-aspects, they may be especially likely to seek attention via their Facebook posts, since it is their only chance to get attention for these unique self expressions. If these are identity-important self-aspects, then being able to express them and have them validated by others can ultimately increase self-acceptance (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). This provides a strong motivation not only to express these self-aspects, but to deliberately try to get others to notice them.

**Hypothesis 2.** True self expression online will be positively associated with the use of Facebook as a way to seek attention from others.

Belonging needs can be met by expressing caring for others and by being accepted by others. People seek closeness to others for both altruistic and egoistic reasons (Park, Troisi, & Maner, 2010). Altruistic concerns involve a genuine concern for others’ needs, whereas egoistic concerns involve whether or not one’s own needs will be met by the relationship. Facebook use can satisfy both of these concerns. One can express caring and support for friends via Facebook and one can also have one’s own needs for acceptance and validation fulfilled by others on Facebook. True self expression is one way to satisfy egoistic relational motives. Validation of one’s self-concept is an important goal of close relationships (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). It is important that these hidden self-aspects be validated by others, and the Internet may allow this to occur (Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Thus, true self expression can accomplish belonging needs, namely acceptance by others. However, true self expression does not facilitate altruistic expressions of caring or concern for others, as it reflects self-oriented motives.

**Hypothesis 3.** True self expression online will be positively associated with using Facebook as a way to gain acceptance from others (egoistic belonging motive), but not as a way to show caring for others (altruistic belonging motive).

As discussed previously, it is likely that those who express the true self online are seeking validation from others of these hidden self aspects and may be more expressive on Facebook. This is similar to the pattern of behaviors exhibited by those with low self-esteem. Research shows that those with low self esteem are more comfortable expressing negative emotions on Facebook, but these self disclosures make negative impressions on others and thus may not lead to positive outcomes for their relationships (Forest & Wood, 2012). Thus, these individuals may fail to receive the validation they are seeking. A similar fate may befall those who express the true self online by being more personally disclosing. In most cases, self disclosure by one party leads to greater liking by the second party (see Collins & Miller, 1994 for review) and leads the other party to disclose in turn (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Sprecher, Treger, Wondra, Hilaire, & Wallpe,
In order to assess participants’
participation of students who currently possessed a Facebook account. All participants received extra credit in psychology courses as an incentive for participation. This data was previously analyzed by Seidman (2013) in an examination of the association between Facebook use and the Big 5 Personality traits.

3.1.2. Materials and procedure
Participants followed an emailed link to an online survey. The first page of the survey was an informed consent. Participants then progressed through a series of questions assessing demographic characteristics, Facebook use habits and motivations (these items were used to create the scales described below, which are also described in Seidman (2013)), a measure of the “true self”, and additional measures not relevant to the present analysis.

3.1.2.1. The “true self”
In order to assess the extent to which participants expressed their “true self” to friends and acquaintances on the Internet, participants completed a modified version of McKenna et al. (2002) “true self” measure first used by McKenna et al. (2005). This measure contains four items. Respondents answered “yes” or “no,” to the question “Do you think you’ve given one or more of your friends a better idea of who the ‘real you’ is because of things you’ve told them online?”. Four additional items asked participants to rate the extent to which each statement characterized them on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “not at all”, 7 = “a great deal”). These items were “To what extent do you feel you’ve expressed different parts or facets of yourself in your online interactions with a friend (or friends) that you’d not expressed with them before in person?”, “How surprised do you think your friends have been by things you’ve said or done online – please think of the most extreme examples when answering this question”; “How much have you felt free to share things with a friend (or friends) online that you might have hesitated to share with them in person”; and “More generally, to what extent do you think your friends have been surprised to learn things about you through your online interactions with them?” Responses to these five items were standardized and then averaged to create the “true self” measure (\(z = .57\))

3.1.2.2. Facebook use behaviors
In order to assess participants’ patterns of Facebook use, three scales were created: Communication (communicating with others on Facebook), general self disclosure, and emotional disclosure. For all of these items, participants rated how often they engaged in the behavior, using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “never”, 7 = “all the time”). The communication scale (\(z = .847, M = 4.38, SD = 1.45\)) consisted of two items: Writing on others’ walls and commenting on others’ posts. The general self disclosure scale (\(z = .870, M = 3.39, SD = 1.28\)) consisted of six items: Changing one’s status, updating profile information, posting statuses/messages about special events, posting about daily events, posting photographs of special events, and posting photographs of daily events. Finally, the emotional disclosure scale (\(z = .909, M = 2.63, SD = 1.66\)) consisted of two items: posting about “drama in my life” and venting frustrations. These three scales were all used to test Hypothesis 1.

3.1.2.3. Facebook use motivations
In order to assess participants’ motivations for Facebook use, three scales were created: Acceptance-seeking (using Facebook in order to be accepted by others), connection/caring (using Facebook in order to main connections with others or to express caring and concern for others), and attention-seeking (using Facebook as a way to get attention from others). Once again, participants used a 7-point Likert scale to indicate how often their Facebook posts were motivated by each factor. The acceptance-seeking scale (\(z = .777, M = 3.69, SD = 1.68\)) consisted of two items: Posting to feel included and posting to get others to feel closer to oneself. This scale represents egoistic belonging motives. The connection/caring scale (\(z = .729, M = 4.27, SD = 1.50\)) contained three items: Posting to feel closer to others, to show caring for others, and to support others. This scale represents altruistic belonging motives. Finally, the attention-seeking scale (\(z = .749, M = 2.91, SD = 1.61\)) consisted of two items: Showing off and getting attention. These three scales were used to test Hypotheses 2 and 3.

3.2. Results and discussion
In order to examine the relationship between “true self” expression to friends online and specific Facebook behaviors and motivations, a series of multiple regression analyses were conducted with each behavior and motivation scale described in Section 3.1.2 as the dependent variable for each separate regression model. Gender and the number of hours the participant reported spending on Facebook weekly were entered into step 1 of each regression model as control variables. Scores on the “true self” measure were entered in step 2 for each model. Correlations between the criterion variables are displayed in Table 1. Regression coefficients for the true self measure and change in \(R^2\) (from step 1 to step 2) for each of the six regression models are displayed in Table 2. Thus, each row of Table 2 represents the results from a separate regression model.

1 Results were similar using a more reliable (\(z = .83\)) shortened version of the scale that omitted the first item.
between the ages of 18 and 25 (\(M = 19.88, SD = 1.33\)) responded to flyers posted in the psychology department soliciting the participation of individuals who currently possessed a Facebook page. One participant’s data was removed because he was an extreme outlier; the number of posts he made per day was more than five standard deviations above the average for this sample. All participants received extra credit in psychology courses as an incentive for participation. Participants reported spending between two and 70 h per week on Facebook (\(M = 9.50, SD = 12.30\)).

4.1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants entered the laboratory where they were greeted by a female experimenter. After explaining the procedure and obtaining informed consent, the experimenter gave participants a questionnaire packet. This packet contained demographic questions, the “true self” measure used in Study 1 (\(x = .85\)), and other measures not relevant to the current analysis.

After completing the questionnaire, participants were seated in front of a computer and asked to login to their Facebook account. They were first asked to click on their main profile page and the researcher saved this page. Participants were then instructed to click on the “Wall” tab, and click “expand all comments” so that all comments were shown. The experimenter then clicked “view older posts” twice and saved the entire page. Participants were assured that although their data would not be anonymous due to the identifying information contained in the saved profiles, it would be confidential, and they were asked to give their final consent to allow the researchers to save and code their Facebook profile. Participants were then debriefed.

4.1.3. Facebook profile coding

Two independent raters examined each saved profile page and wall. The participants’ number of friends (\(M = 635.79, SD = 436.04\)) was recorded from the main profile (Info) page. There were no disagreements between the raters on this measure. Three different types of wall posts were counted from the saved wall pages: participants' posts on his/her own wall, posts by others, and posts on others’ walls. For each of these counts, the number of posts per day was computed. Any inter-rater disagreements on these counts were resolved upon re-counting. On average, each day, participants received 1.06 (\(SD = 1.53\)) wall posts from others, made 0.93 (\(SD = 1.11\)) posts on their own wall and made 1.09 (\(SD = 0.81\)) posts on others’ walls. Finally, the raters used a 5-point Likert scale to assess the extent to which the overall content of the participant’s wall posts was personally revealing. An interclass correlation was computed to assess inter-rater reliability for the initial set of ratings. The ICC was .711, indicating substantial agreement. For profiles in which the inter-rater discrepancy was 1 point, the two raters’ scores were averaged. Discrepancies greater than 1 point were resolved through discussion. The average self disclosure rating was 2.66 (\(SD = 1.02\)).

In order to test Hypothesis 1, several variables were examined. Frequency of communication with others was assessed with the average number of posts per day the participant made on others’

4. Study 2

Study 2 is an attempt to again test Hypothesis 1, by replicating the findings of Study 1 using behavioral data gleaned from users’ Facebook profiles. Frequency of Facebook activity and level of emotional expression will both be assessed in order to test this hypothesis. In addition, in order to test Hypothesis 4, reactions by users’ friends will be gauged by examining the frequency with which others post on the users’ walls.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

Forty-one undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college in the Northeastern United States (9 males and 32 females)
Study 2 regression results for models predicting Facebook behavior from "True Self" to Hypothesis 1, and to the self-report data from Study 1, true self to use Facebook as a method to communicate with others. Contrary to Hypothesis 4, true self expression was unrelated to the frequency of others' posts on the participants' wall. Thus, those high on true self expression reached out to others more by posting on friends' walls, but did not receive the corresponding boost in activity by friends on their own wall. This lack of posts by friends could not by explained by their lacking sufficient numbers of friends, since there was no relation between number of friends and true self expression.

### Table 3
Correlations between dependent variables for Study 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Posts per day on own wall</th>
<th>Posts per day on others' walls</th>
<th>Posts per day by others</th>
<th>Wall personal disclosure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Facebook friends</td>
<td>-.041</td>
<td>-.188</td>
<td>.104</td>
<td>-.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts per day on own wall</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts per day on others' walls</td>
<td>.565***</td>
<td>.098</td>
<td>.297</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts per day by others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts per day by others</td>
<td>-.133</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 \( p < .10. 
2 \( p < .05. 
3 \( p < .001. 

walls. Frequency of self-expression was assessed by examining the average number of posts per day on the participant's own wall. Overall emotional disclosure was assessed by the coders' ratings of the participant's personal disclosure.

To test Hypothesis 4, the average number of posts per day by others on the participant's wall was used. However, frequency of posts by others could be an indicator not only of how responsive the participant's friends are, but also a simple indicator that the participant had more friends, and thus more people who could potentially post on the wall. For this reason, number of friends was also examined, to rule out this possible explanation.

### 4.2. Results and discussion

In order to examine the relationship between "true self" expression to friends online and the frequency of Facebook behaviors and emotional expression, a series of multiple regression analyses were conducted with each profile element described in Section 4.1.3 as the dependent variable for each model. Gender and the number of hours the participant reported spending on Facebook weekly were entered into step 1 of each regression model as control variables, and scores on the "true self" measure were entered in step 2. Correlations between the criterion variables are displayed in Table 3. Regression coefficients for the true self measure and change in \( R^2 \) (from step 1 to step 2) for the five regression models are displayed in Table 4. Thus, each row of Table 4 represents the results from a separate regression model.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, true self scores were positively associated with frequency of posting on others' walls. This indicates that those who express the "true self" online are more likely to use Facebook as a method to communicate with others. Contrary to Hypothesis 1, and to the self-report data from Study 1, true self scores were unrelated to frequency of posting on one's own wall, but the relationship was in the expected direction and scores on the true self measure did account for 6.3% of the variance in posting activity. Also consistent with Hypothesis 1, which predicted greater emotional disclosure by those who express the "true self" online, those who expressed the true self were significantly more likely to personally disclose in their wall posts, as assessed by the independent coders. As predicted by Hypothesis 4, true self expression was unrelated to the frequency of others' posts on the participants' wall. Thus, those high on true self expression reached out to others more by posting on friends' walls, but did not receive the corresponding boost in activity by friends on their own wall. This lack of posts by friends could not by explained by their lacking sufficient numbers of friends, since there was no relation between number of friends and true self expression.

### 5. Conclusions

These results suggest that those who feel more able to express their "true self" online post on Facebook more frequently and post more personally revealing and emotional content, even controlling for how much time they spend on the site. In addition, Study 1 suggests that those who express the "true self" online tend to post for more self-oriented reasons, such as getting attention and feeling included, rather than other-oriented motivations, like expressing caring for others. Study 2 replicated the behavioral findings of Study 1, using data from actual user profiles. Study 2 confirmed that those who express the true self online are more likely to post on others' walls and are more likely to disclose intimate information on Facebook. However, those who scored highly on the measure of the true self were not more likely to post on their own wall, contrary to the results of Study 1. This may be due to the smaller sample size, as the effect was in the expect direction and true self expression accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in posting behaviors. Additionally, it is possible that when self-reporting, participants may not be accurate in differentiating between the frequency of posts to their own vs. others' walls.

These findings also suggest that those who express their true self online may not be getting the social validation they seek. Despite having the same number of friends as those who do not express their true self online and posting on friends' walls more frequently, Study 2 showed that those who express the true self do not receive more wall posts from others in response to their greater expressiveness. These individuals appear to reach out to others with higher frequency and greater intensity (revealing more private information), but this is not met by a higher frequency of responses. This may be a result of the fact that these individuals use Facebook more for self-oriented motives, rather than other-oriented motives, as demonstrated in Study 1. Their self-oriented motives may be apparent to their Facebook friends, causing them to not respond in kind. Alternatively, there could be a disconnect between the levels of self-disclosure with which these users and their friends are comfortable. Future researchers should investigate the long term consequences of true self expression on Facebook and others' reactions to it. The current findings suggest that the tendency to express the true self online to existing friends is associated with specific Facebook behaviors and motivations, but the consequences of these behaviors are not currently well understood.

These findings add to the larger literature on true self expression online. Most prior research on true self expression has focused on Internet-initiated relationships (Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna et al., 2002; Tosun, 2012; Tosun & Lajunen, 2009), which only represent a small portion of online social interactions. The only study to focus on true self expression to offline friends as a trait-like individual difference examined private email and instant message communications (McKenna et al., 2005), which, with the advent of social networking sites, have become only a small part.
of online social interactions. Facebook offers new, and less private, ways to connect with a network of friends and acquaintances. In one sense, it represents communication with close others, but in another sense it approximates the communication with strangers that characterized early Internet social communication, as many Facebook friends are not well-known to the user. Evidence does in fact suggest that self-presentation and identity construction on social networking sites does differ from other online environments (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Social networking sites may be an especially fertile ground for the expression of the true self, opening up the possibility to seek validation of hidden self aspects from a broad range of social network members.

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