

How Are Important Life Events Disclosed on Facebook? Relationships with Likelihood of Sharing and Privacy

Jennifer L. Bevan, PhD, Megan B. Cummings, BA, Ashley Kubiniec, BA, Megan Mogannam, BA,
Madison Price, BA, and Rachel Todd, BA

Abstract

This study examined an aspect of Facebook disclosure that has as yet gone unexplored: whether a user prefers to share information directly, for example, through status updates, or indirectly, via photos with no caption or relationship status changes without context or explanation. The focus was on the sharing of important positive and negative life events related to romantic relationships, health, and work/school in relation to likelihood of sharing this type of information on Facebook and general attitudes toward privacy. An online survey of 599 adult Facebook users found that when positive life events were shared, users preferred to do so indirectly, whereas negative life events were more likely to be disclosed directly. Privacy shared little association with how information was shared. Implications for understanding the finer nuances of how news is shared on Facebook are discussed.

Introduction

FACEBOOK'S MISSION IS to give individuals "the power to share,"^{1(para1)} which 829 million users worldwide were doing daily in July 2014. On an average day, 15% of American Facebook users compose status updates² that are updated approximately nine times per month.³ With these status updates primarily being disclosures,⁴ it is not surprising that users tend to share personal information on Facebook more than they generally would.⁵ Accordingly, a recent review of Facebook research⁶ identified information disclosure and privacy as a primary research category, reflecting Facebook's mission.

This study extends understanding of Facebook disclosures in two unique ways. First, important life events (ILEs), which are "time-discrete transitions that mark the beginning or end of a specific status,"^{7(p594)} such as an engagement or a negative health diagnosis, are the focus of this study. Individuals are likely increasingly using social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook to share ILE news because SNSs are convenient channels of dissemination where information reaches a large group of users simultaneously.

Second, rather than assessing whether or how frequently Facebook users disclose, this study considers *how* ILEs are shared. Thus, the focus is on the nature of the disclosure message itself, rather than on simply whether the news is shared, offering a more in-depth consideration of Facebook disclosures. Do users disclose an ILEs directly (i.e., clearly and explicitly stated in a status update or wall post), or do they do so more indirectly (i.e., leaving room for interpretation, such as by posting pictures with little to no description or changing rela-

tionship status or job title/school without explanation)? Such a study is important because experiencing ILEs can have a long-term deleterious impact on subjective well-being,⁷ which could be partially abated by receiving social support from Facebook friends.⁸ Specifically, this study investigates how Facebook users disclose about the three general ILE categories^{6,9} that require the most adjustment to one's day-to-day routines—romantic relationships, health, and work/school situations—in relation to the likelihood of sharing that type of news on Facebook and general attitudes about privacy.

ILE Facebook disclosures

It is important to study the specific ILE disclosure because users will likely spend time and effort considering whether and how they will share this information on Facebook. ILEs can be positive or negative in nature: a positive relationship event could be getting married, while a negative event could be a relationship ending. People tend to post more positive than negative information on Facebook,¹⁰ and these emotional expressions are unrelated,¹¹ suggesting that these ILEs might be shared differently. Thus, both are considered in this study.

ILE disclosure topics

Romantic relationship ILEs entail communicating the coming together, involvement in, or disintegration of a romantic partnership. Facebook's public nature provides a way for its members to communicate their romantic relationship status formally (i.e., setting one's relationship status to "engaged") or informally (i.e., posting photos of a romantic

partner or tagging them in a post) to a large audience.¹² However, in Day's¹⁰ small-scale study, more than 96% of participants were unwilling to disclose personal relationship issues on their Facebook walls, suggesting that negative relationship-related ILEs such as divorce may not be directly disclosed by most users.

Health ILEs involve one's physical and mental health or well-being, physical activities/fitness, and weight management and nutrition, such as receiving a serious diagnosis or losing weight. Findings are inconsistent as to whether individuals are willing to disclose about their health on Facebook. For example, one-third of college freshmen referenced stress¹³ and depression,¹⁴ primarily via Facebook status updates. Facebook fan pages and groups about health conditions such as diabetes also provide a venue for health disclosures.¹⁵ However, 63% of participants in Day's¹⁰ study indicated that they would never share their personal health problems on their Facebook walls. Thus, there is inconsistent evidence regarding whether and how health ILEs will be shared on Facebook.

Work and school ILEs both involve being affiliated with a formal institution or organization and examples include receiving a scholarship or being fired. Findings regarding work/school news on Facebook indicate that this ILE category may not be shared on Facebook frequently. For example, tensions caused by mixing personal and professional friends on Facebook may inhibit users from sharing work news.¹⁶ Indeed, more than 70% of users reported being unwilling to share their work-related problems on their Facebook walls.¹⁰ Further, though 46% of college students informally discussed school on Facebook, they preferred to keep their academic and Facebook lives separate.¹⁷

The above research indicates that individuals' consideration of whether to disclose on Facebook can vary according to what the specific news is. These disclosure decisions may further be affected by whether the ILE news is positive or negative in nature. Depending upon the type of ILE and whether it is positive or negative, users may want their friends to know what is going on, but not to answer questions or provide further details. Thus, based on the dearth of research on how ILE news is shared on Facebook and the inconsistent findings reviewed above, the first two research questions ask whether the likelihood of sharing news about positive or negative ILEs on Facebook predicts whether this news is disclosed directly or indirectly:

RQ1: Is the likelihood of disclosing positive ILEs on Facebook related to how directly or indirectly ILEs about positive (a) relationship, (b) health, and (c) work/school news are shared?

RQ2: Is the likelihood of disclosing negative ILEs on Facebook related to how directly or indirectly ILEs about negative (a) relationship, (b) health, and (c) work/school news are shared?

Privacy

Privacy is "the feeling that one has the right to own private information, either personally or collectively."^{18(p6)} Although privacy concerns do exist among Facebook users, most still disclose a great deal of personal information,

creating a balancing act regarding what is shared and with whom it is shared.⁵ It is argued that perhaps this discrepancy can partially be explained by how users self-disclose: they may do so indirectly in the hope of effectively balancing openness with privacy, or they may be direct after deciding that information should be public rather than private. Thus, the final two research questions ask if general concerns about privacy predict whether relationship, health, and work/school ILEs are shared directly or indirectly:

RQ3: Is a general concern about privacy related to how directly or indirectly ILEs about positive (a) relationship, (b) health, and (c) work/school news are shared?

RQ4: Is a general concern about privacy related to how directly or indirectly ILEs about negative (a) relationship, (b) health, and (c) work/school news are shared?

Methods

Participants and general procedures

The sample ($N=599$) consisted of 114 males and 442 females; 332 were current college students ($n=216$ not current students; $M_{\text{age}}=26$ years, $SD=10.84$ years, range = 18–70 years). Participants reported being white ($n=389$), Asian ($n=67$), Hispanic or Latino ($n=47$), bi/multiracial ($n=28$), black or African American ($n=14$), American Indian or Alaska native ($n=5$), native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander ($n=4$), and other ($n=4$). The highest completed education level included high school degree/GED certified ($n=13$), some college ($n=292$), undergraduate degree ($n=150$), and graduate degree ($n=68$; totals do not add up to 599 because participants did not complete all items).

Upon receiving university Institutional Review Board approval, researchers at a small, private university in the Western United States recruited for the online survey by: (a) collecting willing individuals' e-mail addresses to send two e-mails with the study Web link; (b) posting on SNSs, with initial participants then reposting or sharing the study information; and (c) posting on the department subject pool Web site; subject pool students provided their name on a separate online survey for required course credit.

After consenting to participate, respondents read the following definition—created for this study—and then recalled ILEs that directly involved them:

We consider important life events as those that are significant to you—ones that don't happen every day and that could change or impact an aspect of your life. These life events can be good ones, such as getting engaged, or bad ones, such as receiving a negative health diagnosis. These events may be ones that you anticipate, or ones that come as a surprise to you.

The anonymous survey took approximately 10–15 minutes to complete. Except for the department subject pool students, no compensation was provided.

Measures

Facebook use. Three items adapted from Ellison et al.¹⁹ assessed Facebook use: (a) length of time (more than 5 years

TABLE 1. FREQUENCIES BY CATEGORY OF HOW IMPORTANT LIFE EVENT (ILE) NEWS IS SHARED

	Directly shared	Indirectly shared	Not applicable: not shared on Facebook	Not applicable: never experienced
<i>Positive ILE:</i>				
Relationship	146	182	142	127
Health	103	64	300	130
Work/School	285	179	110	24
<i>Negative ILE:</i>				
Relationship	23	95	336	145
Health	34	33	397	131
Work/School	41	44	411	103

Note. Total $N = 599$.

$n = 308$; 37 months–5 years, $n = 220$; 13 months–3 years, $n = 58$; 7 months–1 year, 3–6 months, $n = 3$; < 3 months, $n = 6$; did not respond, $n = 1$); (b) minutes per day spent (31–60 minutes $n = 160$; > 3 hours, $n = 31$; 2–3 hours, $n = 51$; 1–2 hours, $n = 149$; 10–30 minutes, $n = 154$; < 10 minutes, $n = 52$; did not respond, $n = 2$); and (c) number of friends ($M = 702.65$, $SD = 505.33$, range = 20–4,900).

How news was shared. How positive and negative news about relationship, health, and work/school ILEs was shared on Facebook was measured using a series of single items created for this study. Examples of each ILE were provided, and participants were asked “Have you shared this news (if you shared this news on Facebook both directly and indirectly, please indicate how you *first* shared the news).” See Table 1 for frequencies for each type of news.

Likelihood of sharing news. Two-item, Likert-type scales, each containing two items (1 = “strongly disagree,” 5 = “strongly agree”) were created to measure how likely participants were to disclose positive and negative news about ILEs on Facebook (e.g., “When I have bad news, I post about it on Facebook”; positive $M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.22$, $\alpha = 0.90$; negative $M = 1.85$, $SD = 1.03$, $\alpha = 0.92$).

Privacy. McKinney et al.’s²⁰ four-item, Likert-type scale (1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree”) measured

privacy (e.g., “Keeping information about myself private is very important to me”; $M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.14$, $\alpha = 0.69$).

Results

Preliminary analyses

First, Facebook usage was examined in relation to the three predictor variables via two-tailed, bivariate correlations. The number of Facebook friends was negatively related to likelihood of sharing negative news ($r = -0.09$, $p < 0.05$) and privacy ($r = -0.18$, $p < 0.001$), and minutes per day on Facebook was significantly related to likelihood of sharing positive ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$) and negative ($r = 0.16$, $p < 0.001$) news on Facebook and privacy ($r = -0.11$, $p < 0.05$). Next, based upon previous research,^{21,22} age (via two-tailed, bivariate correlations) and gender (via univariate analyses of variance) were considered as potential covariates of the three predictor variables. Age was significantly correlated with likelihood of sharing positive ($r = 0.13$, $p < 0.01$) and negative ($r = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$) news on Facebook. Females were also more likely than males were to share positive news on Facebook, $F(1, 554) = 10.46$, $p < 0.01$. Thus, these variables were included as covariates in the primary analyses where appropriate.

Primary analyses

A series of binary logistic regression analyses were conducted, where directness of sharing each type of ILE news on Facebook (1 = direct, 2 = indirect) was the outcome variable; number of Facebook friends, minutes per day on Facebook, age, and gender (1 = female, 2 = male) were entered into the first block (when appropriate); and likelihood of sharing ILEs on Facebook or privacy were included in the second block. For RQ1, those who are more likely to share news about positive ILEs on Facebook were significantly more likely to share positive (a) relationship, (b) health, and (c) work/school ILE news indirectly than directly. The more individuals are likely to share negative ILE news on Facebook, the more likely they are to share negative (RQ2a) relationship, (RQ2b) health, and (RQ2c) work/school news directly than indirectly.

For RQ3, privacy was unrelated to how positive (a) relationship or (b) health ILE news was shared on Facebook.

TABLE 2. RESEARCH QUESTION BINARY LOGISTIC REGRESSION STATISTICS AND COVARIATE SIGNIFICANCE

	Likelihood of sharing ILE news on Facebook Wald	Odds ratio	95% CI	Privacy Wald	Odds ratio	95% CI
Positive relationship ILE ^a	9.41**	1.50	[1.16, 1.95]	1.09	0.89	[0.72, 1.11]
Positive health ILE ^b	7.58**	1.74	[1.17, 2.59]	0.01	1.01	[0.75, 1.34]
Positive work/school ILE ^c	48.82***	2.08	[1.69, 2.57]	4.02*	0.82	[0.68, 0.99]
Negative relationship ILE ^b	19.05***	0.56	[0.42, 0.72]	1.12	1.14	[0.89, 1.46]
Negative health ILE ^d	4.64*	0.56	[0.33, 0.95]	0.64	0.80	[0.47, 1.37]
Negative work/school ILE ^e	5.72*	0.54	[0.33, 0.89]	0.25	1.12	[0.71, 1.77]

Note. The likelihood of sharing ILE news on Facebook variable is positive for the positive ILE topics and negative for the negative ILE topics.

^aThe number of Facebook friends and age covariates are significant.

^bOnly the age covariate is significant.

^cOnly the number of Facebook friends covariate is significant.

^dNo covariates are significant.

^eOnly the minutes per day on Facebook covariate is significant.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Higher privacy levels predicted sharing positive (RQ3c) work/school news more directly than indirectly. There were no significant associations for privacy and how negative ILEs were shared (RQ4). See Table 2 for statistics and significant covariates.

Discussion

A number of interesting findings emerged from this study. First, whether ILE news would be shared directly or indirectly did not vary according to the specific ILE topic (i.e., relationship, health, or work/school). Rather, the positive or negative nature of the ILE news had the greatest impact on how it would be shared. That Facebook users—when deciding to share important positive relationship, health, and work/school ILE news—preferred to do so indirectly instead of directly (RQ1) suggests that they may not want to appear overly boastful about significant happy events in their lives. This implies that users recognize that there might be limits to the extent to which they can create and craft positive versions of themselves online,²³ at least when it comes to positive ILEs. Perhaps these individuals are aware of the negative impact that viewing positive, happy information posted by others can have on users²⁴ and realize that announcing this type of information on Facebook is akin to broadcasting it to a large group of people rather than interacting with individuals more intimately.²⁵

In contrast, participants reported that when they were likely to share negative ILE news with their Facebook friends, they would rather do so directly than indirectly (RQ2). Such a finding is consistent with research reporting that one-third of college students will directly disclose their stress¹³ and depression¹⁴ in Facebook status updates. However, it is in contrast to the findings that the majority of Facebook users would not post their personal health or work-related issues on their Facebook walls,¹⁰ nor would they frequently discuss school.¹⁷

As with the decision to share positive ILEs indirectly, perhaps choosing to share negative ILEs directly is a strategic one. In other words, Facebook users may be seeking social support by directly sharing their negative ILEs. Facebook provides contact with weak and strong ties, both of which can be helpful in providing social support. In fact, according to Albrecht and Goldsmith,^{26(p269)} “support from weak ties likely increases the diversity or heterogeneity of one’s contacts while increasing information, goods, and services.” As Facebook social support is associated with reduced stress and increased well-being,⁸ users may recognize that directly sharing negative ILE news may provide benefits such as assistance and support from their Facebook friends.

Finally, the results for RQ3 show that general concern for privacy has little impact on how ILE news is shared on Facebook. Once individuals share ILE news on Facebook—either directly or indirectly—they have likely already decided to shift that information from the private to the public sphere, likely thus making general concern for privacy a more distal predictor of how this type of news is disclosed. In addition, the findings for RQ3 are consistent with Christofides et al.,⁵ who observed a nonsignificant relationship between the need to control Facebook information and likelihood of Facebook disclosures, as well as

different predictors of both processes. Thus, future research should also consider the extent to which trust, self-esteem, and need for popularity predict how news is shared on Facebook.

Limitations and conclusion

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, the sample was comprised primarily of white, female university students, with an average age of 26 years, which is younger than the average age of Facebook users (38 years).²⁷ Future research should strive to gather samples that include older and adolescent Facebook users as well as users from other countries. Second, an ILE is a fairly rare, unique form of Facebook disclosure, meaning that some of the negative news directly and indirectly shared cell sizes were relatively small. How Facebook users directly and indirectly share information about their daily lives should also be studied to gain a broader understanding of how SNS users self-disclose.

In conclusion, when Facebook users experience important romantic relationship, health, or work/school life events, how they share this news with their Facebook friends is partially predicted by whether the news is positive or negative in nature. In contrast, general inclination toward privacy has little predictive power in determining whether ILE news is shared directly or indirectly on Facebook. These findings provide a more in-depth understanding of Facebook disclosures, and suggest that Facebook users are more discriminating than they are given credit for when it comes to the method they select for sharing ILE news. Considering specific topics, the significance of the information, and the various methods of disclosure options on Facebook in future research will provide a more nuanced picture of self-disclosure on SNSs.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Shanda Aguirre, Sarah Buckley, Tucker Cohen, Colette Conner, Allison Friedman, Alexandra Galante, Ruth Gomez, Amy Hammer, Brittany Hanna, Allison Harf, James Harris, Brent Hellesen, Emily Hepp, Anne Hornung, Sophia Kaaha, Mebrak Kahsai, Julia Kaplan, Minyoung Lee, Katherine May Leon, Chris Letourneau, Megan Mitchell, Neelima Muckatira, Liliane Neubecker, Alexa Pratt, Caroline Schaffrath, Patrick Schoenberg, Priscilla Spradlin, Elizabeth Telhami, Brenda Tilos, Aylia Zaidi, and Ingrid Zeledon for their assistance in data collection.

Author Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

References

1. Facebook (2014). Key facts. <http://newsroom.fb.com/Key-Facts> (accessed July 17, 2014).
2. Hampton KN, Goulet LS, et al. (2011) Social networking sites and our lives. Pew Internet and American Life Project. www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2011/PIP%20-%20Social%20networking%20sites%20and%20our%20lives.pdf (accessed July 17, 2014).
3. Hampton KN, Goulet LS, Marlow C, et al. (2012) Why most Facebook users get more than they give. Pew Internet

- and American Life Project. www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2012/PIP_Facebook%20users_2.3.12.pdf (accessed July 17, 2014).
4. Ledbetter AM, Mazer JP, DeGroot JM, et al. Attitudes toward online self-connection and self-disclosure as predictors of Facebook communication and relational closeness. *Communication Research* 2011; 38:27–53.
 5. Christofides E, Muise A, Desmarais S. Information disclosure and control on Facebook: are they two sides of the same coin or two different processes? *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 2009; 12:341–342.
 6. Wilson RE, Gosling SD, Graham LT. A review of Facebook research in the social sciences. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 2012; 7:203–220.
 7. Luhmann L, Hofmann W, Eid M, et al. Subjective well-being and adaptation to life events: a meta-analysis. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 2011; 102:592–615.
 8. Nabi RL, Prestin A, So J. Facebook friends with (health) benefits? Exploring social network site use and perceptions of social support, stress, and well-being. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior & Social Networking* 2013; 10:721–727.
 9. Holmes TH, Rahe RH. The social readjustment rating scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 1967; 11:213–218.
 10. Day S. Self-disclosure on Facebook: how much do we really reveal? *Journal of Applied Computing & Information Technology* 2013; 17:article 6.
 11. Kramer ADI, Guillory JE, Hancock JT. Experimental evidence of massive scale emotional contagion through social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 2014; 111:8788–8790.
 12. Fox J, Warber KM, Makstaller DC. The role of Facebook in romantic relationship development: an exploration of Knapp's relational stage model. *Journal of Social & Personal Relationships* 2013; 30:771–794.
 13. Egan KG, Moreno MA. Prevalence of stress references on college freshmen Facebook profiles. *CIN: Computers, Information, Nursing* 2011; 29:586–592.
 14. Whitehill JM, Brockman LN, Moreno MA. "Just talk to me": communicating with college students about depression disclosures on Facebook. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 2013; 52:122–127.
 15. Woolley P, Peterson M. Efficacy of a health-related Facebook social networking site on health-seeking behaviors. *Social Marketing Quarterly* 2013; 18:29–39.
 16. Wang Y, Norcie G, Komanduri S, et al. I regretted the minute I pressed share: a qualitative study of regrets on Facebook. *Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium on Usable Privacy & Security* 2010; Paper 10.
 17. Madge C, Meek J, Wellens J, et al. Facebook, social integration and informal learning at university: "It is more for socialising and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work." *Learning, Media & Technology* 2009; 34:141–155.
 18. Petronio S. (2002) *Boundaries of privacy: dialectics of disclosure*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
 19. Ellison N, Steinfield C, Lampe C. The benefits of Facebook "friends": social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 2007; 12:1143–1168.
 20. McKinney BC, Kelly L, Duran RL. Narcissism or openness? College students' use of Facebook and Twitter. *Communication Research Reports* 2012; 29:108–118.
 21. Christofides E, Muise A, Desmarais S. Hey mom, what's on your Facebook? Comparing Facebook disclosure and privacy in adolescents and adults. *Social Psychological & Personality Science* 2012; 3:48–54.
 22. Tifferet S, Vilnai-Yavetz I. Gender differences in Facebook self-presentation: an international randomized study. *Computers in Human Behavior* 2014; 35:388–399.
 23. Kim J, Lee JR. The Facebook paths to happiness: effects of the number of Facebook friends and self-presentation on subjective well-being. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, & Social Networking* 2010; 14:359–364.
 24. Chou HG, Edge N. "They are happier and having better lives than I am": the impact of using Facebook on perceptions of others' lives. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, & Social Networking* 2012; 15:117–121.
 25. McEwan B. Sharing, caring, and surveilling: an actor-partner interdependence model examination of Facebook relational maintenance strategies. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, & Social Networking* 2013; 16:863–869.
 26. Albrecht TL, Goldsmith DJ. (2008) Social support, social networks, and health. In Thompson TL, Dorsey A, Miller K, Parrott R, eds. *Handbook of health communication*. New York: Taylor & Francis, pp. 263–284.
 27. Hollenbaugh EE, Ferris AL. Facebook self-disclosure: examining the role of traits, social cohesion, and motives. *Computers in Human Behavior* 2014; 30:50–58.

Address correspondence to:
 Dr. Jennifer L. Bevan
 Chapman University
 1 University Drive
 Orange, CA 92866

E-mail: bevan@chapman.edu