Sharing Secrets With Strangers on Social Media: By Sharing Secrets, Can You Make Your Word-Of-Mouth More Persuasive?

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This research examines the influence of sharing an intimate self-disclosure (a deep level of personal information involving risk and vulnerability) on a blogger’s ability to persuade others. We find that the effectiveness of sharing intimate self-disclosure as a persuasive tactic depends on the blogger’s relationship (communal versus exchange) with the audience.

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Sharing Secrets with Strangers on Social Media: 
By Sharing Secrets, Can You Make Your Word-of-Mouth More Persuasive?

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Bryanboy: My biggest fear is to end up being that miserable, unhappy, bitter old queen who, at first glance, seem to have it all... Every time I look at very successful people in the news, I always, always feel inferior because I haven’t achieved anything significant in this world.

Comment: This was incredibly honest, and I’m glad you posted it. I feel the same way about myself sometimes when I come to your blog, so I was very surprised to see that you feel the same way about people you admire.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this blog post, a famous fashion blogger Bryanboy (www.bryanboy.com) opens up about his own fears, vulnerabilities, and inferior feelings. His audience, in turn, appears to empathize and resonate with Bryanboy’s revealing statements. In other words, through intimate self-disclosures, Bryanboy could relate to and connect with his audience at a very personal level, sharing emotions, exchanging slice of life stories, and even searching for life meanings together. Sharing of intimate personal information (e.g., one’s own self-concepts, emotions, vulnerabilities, secrets, and inferior feelings) functions as an effective communication strategy which strengthens the relationship between a communicator and audience. However, will this communication strategy always be effective as shown in Bryanboy’s case?

The objective of this research is to provide into online word-of-mouth (WOM) strategies through the development of a conceptual framework that explains how online communicators (particularly bloggers) share intimate personal stories in their WOM messages and how such act of intimate story sharing is perceived and processed by their audiences in different types of relationships. Conceptually, this research focuses on the influence of an intimate self-disclosure (i.e., sharing of a deeper level of personal information that may potentially involve risk and a feeling of vulnerability) on the communicator’s ability to persuade others in the context of online communication between people who never meet face-to-face.

Despite the frequent sharing of personal stories on social media, its impact on persuasion is not well understood as past research has been disproportionately focus on positive impact a communicator’s sharing of private personal stories can potentially have on audience. The extant literature on self-disclosure, relationships, persuasion, and word-of-mouth communication provides evidence that sharing secrets should enhance persuasion because a blogger’s self-disclosure creates a feeling of intimacy (Altman and Taylor 1973), evokes a norm of reciprocity (Derlega, Harris, and Chaikin 1973), and strengthens relationship (Im, Lee, and Taylor 2008) with their audiences and because close, strong relationship increases persuasion (Bansal and Voyer 2000; Brown, Broderick and Lee 2007). This relationship between secret sharing and persuasion, however, may not always be positive and the possibility of negative impact is surprisingly underexplored. Specifically, in situations in which an audience is not ready for such an intimate exchange of private information, an uninvited sharing of secrets may be perceived as inappropriate or as too much information, thus mitigating the persuasiveness of a message.

To reconcile this gap, we propose that the effect of sharing secrets on the persuasive impact of a message is moderated by the nature of the relationship between the communicator and the audience. Specifically, we examine two types of relationships (Clark and Mills 1979, 1993): communal (i.e., communicators in this relationship feel responsible for audiences’ welfare and thus feel obligated to respond positively to the needs of consumers) and exchange (i.e., communicators in this relationship concern about the benefit they receive in exchange for what they give).

The key intuition of this thesis is that audiences may resist or yield to a communicator’s sharing of secrets differently based on communication norms that are expected to guide their relationships with a communicator. Norms are, by definition, guiding principles, rules that people use to determine what would be the right way to behave in given situations (Gibbs 1981; Heide and John 1992; Thibaut and Kelley 1959), in this case, in given relationship types. Indeed, marketing researchers have provided evidence that consumers use norms of interpersonal relationships as a guide in their evaluation of a brand (Aggarwal 2004), in brand information processing (Aggarwal and Law 2005), in their attitude toward loss (Aggarwal 2006), and in their responses to service failures (Wan, Hui, and Wyer Jr. 2011). Thus, we hypothesize that, depending on types of relationships (i.e., communal versus exchange) audiences are in, their expected norms of communication may be different (Clark and Mills 1979, 1993) as well as their attitudes toward a communicator’s sharing of intimate stories.

Across two studies, we test how a blogger’s sharing of intimate stories (e.g., secrets) influence the likelihood that audience will follow the blogger’s subsequent product recommendation. Study 1 (n=265) tests competing hypotheses on sharing secrets to determine whether a communicator’s act of sharing secrets can be perceived as either positive or negative in different relationships (communal vs. exchange). The study begins by asking participants to read one short paragraph which asked them to imagine as having either a communal or exchange relationship with a fitness blogger, Chris as well as a blog post with inferential cues that signal whether a blogger is either communal- or exchange-oriented. In the next section, participants read additional blog post on Chris’ blog, “livinghealthy.com”. In this post, we manipulated the level of secret sharing, which is either low or high.

As predicted, the interaction between relationship types and secret sharing on persuasion intent was significant (F(1, 264) = 9.147, p<0.05). Specifically, in a communal relationship, Chris’ sharing of highly intimate secrets (vs. low secret sharing) increased the persuasiveness of a communicator (M low secret =4.187 vs. M high secret = 4.702). In an exchange relationship, however, Chris’ highly intimate secret sharing (vs. low secret sharing) significantly lowered the persuasiveness of a communicator (M low secret =4.662 vs. M high secret = 4.184).

Study 2 identifies boundary conditions under which a communicator’s sharing of secrets backfires in communal relationship. Although study 1 suggests that secret sharing increases persuasion in
communal relationship, study 2 hypothesizes that a blogger’s secret sharing can also lower the persuasiveness of the message if shared secrets are too private to the level that they violate the norms of communal relationship. In study 2, all participants are manipulated to expect communal relationship with a fitness blogger, Chris and then to read an additional blog post where three levels of secret sharing are manipulated (low, high, and very high). Between low and high secret sharing condition, we observe the similar pattern (M low secret = 4.375 vs. M high secret = 5.069, p<0.05) shown in study 1. However, when secret sharing became highly private, it significantly lowered the persuasiveness of WOM (M high secret = 5.069 vs. M very high secret = 3.947, p<0.05).

Thus, it can be concluded that expected relationship norm plays a critical role (as a moderator) in determining how consumers perceive and process an online communicator’s sharing of intimate personal stories. In communal relationship, uninvited sharing of intimate personal stories increases persuasion while, in exchange relationship, it lowers the persuasiveness of WOM. Interestingly however, even in communal relationship, sharing of highly secretive personal stories, which can be considered as inappropriate, can significantly lower the persuasiveness of a communicator’s subsequent WOM.