How Are we *Really* Getting to Know One Another? Effect of Viewing Facebook Profile Information on Initial Conversational Behaviors between Strangers

Aditi Paul

Department of Communication Studies, Pace University, New York, NY, 10038
apaul2@pace.edu, 212.346.1399, @iamaditipaul

Previous studies have conjectured the positive effects of Facebook on friendship formation between strangers online. The present study is the first to provide empirical evidence to support these touted benefits of Facebook by examining the effect of viewing Facebook profiles on initial online conversations between strangers in an experimental framework. Twenty-two stranger dyads viewed their conversational partners' Facebook profiles before having a text-based online conversation with them while 19 stranger dyads did not view their partners' Facebook profile prior to the online conversation. The online conversation transcripts were coded in terms of questions, self-disclosures, and conversation topics. Results showed that individuals who viewed their partner's Facebook profiles before the online conversation asked fewer questions but made more intimate and evaluative disclosures on a broader range of topics compared to individuals who did not view their partners' Facebook profile prior to the conversation. There were no significant differences in the number of probing questions and the topics discussed between the two groups. This study showed that Facebook profile sharing before initial online interactions gave people the freedom to make deeper disclosures fostering an expedited sense of trust and intimacy, thus demonstrating the effectiveness of Facebook profiles in friendship formation.

Keywords: *social media, acquaintanceship process, Facebook, initial conversations, self-disclosures.*

The last decade has seen an exponential rise in the popularity of social network websites (SNSs). According to Facebook's recent activity report, the total number of active online users on the website during the second quarter of 2018 was a whopping 2.23 billion. While such websites have primarily been used for establishing and maintaining online contact with others one already knows in real life (Ellison, Stienfeld, & Lampe, 2007), they are increasingly becoming popular venues for initiating and building relationships between people who may not share prior

social ties with each other. For instance, Ezumah's (2013) study which examined social media use of college students found that almost 35% of the participants reported using SNSs to meet new people. A number of studies have touted the benefits of using SNSs to initiate relationships, be it friendly, romantic, or otherwise (Krasnova, Spiekermann, Koroleva, & Hildebrand, 2010; McKenna, 2008; Paul & Morrison, 2015). One of the major advantages of using SNSs hinges on the fact that such websites make the acquaintanceship process easier by helping two previously unacquainted individuals get to know one another better. People tend to disclose a lot of personal information about themselves through their SNS profiles (Stutzman, Gross, & Acquisti, 2012). Having access to this array of information helps users gain a better understanding of each other, allows them to gauge their compatibility by finding common interests, and also facilitate initial acquaintanceship conversations on more substantive grounds.

These benefits are primarily conjectural in that previous research does very little in explaining at the behavioral level how the acquaintanceship process unfolds between individuals in this comparatively novel online setting of SNSs. Even though there is empirical evidence suggesting that individuals do tend to read through and glean information from the SNS profiles of others they are trying to get to know (Antheunis, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010), *if* and *how* this information is used during initial acquaintanceship conversations remain unexamined. The present study takes the first step in this direction by (a) investigating the potential effect that exposure to SNS profile information has on three conversational behaviors, viś-a-viś, question-asking, self-disclosures, and topics of discussion, between two previously unacquainted individuals during the acquaintanceship process, and (b) comparing these conversational behaviors to that of individuals who get acquainted without access to each other's SNS profile information. This examination and comparison of initial conversational behaviors will help answer the overarching question: Have SNSs led to a fundamental shift in the process of acquaintanceship development? In other words, how are people *really* getting to know one another over SNSs? First, a brief overview of the mechanics of the acquaintanceship process is provided. Second, the potential effects of SNSs on the acquaintanceship process are explained. Finally, based on this explanation, five predictions concerning the enactment of the acquaintanceship process in an SNS-mediated environment are listed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Acquaintanceship Process

Interpersonal theorists, Berger and Calabrese (1975), identified three strategies that individuals use during the acquaintanceship process to get to know someone whom they have never met before. The first is *interactive strategies* where unacquainted individuals engage in conversations comprising of active exchanges of question-asking and self-disclosures to get more information about one another. This information helps them gain a better understating because it provides the basis on which they can predict each other's attitudes and behaviors and reduce feelings of uncertainty toward each other. The other two strategies specified by Berger and Calabrese (1975) are *passive strategies*, i.e., unobtrusively observing the other person, and *active strategies*, i.e., inquiring about the other person from shared connections. The medium of communication significantly affects the capacity in which these strategies can be used thereby affecting the overall development of the acquaintanceship process. In other words, the acquaintanceship strategies that individuals use if they communicate face-to-face versus through older communication technologies such as emails versus through newer communication technologies such as SNSs is going to be different given the variability in the affordances and restrictions of each of the communication medium.

In face-to-face settings, interactive strategies have been found to be the most frequently used and most effective way of getting to know the other person and reduce uncertainty about them (Kellerman & Berger, 1984). Studies that have investigated the acquaintanceship process in face-to-face communication found that initially, individuals tend to ask questions and make disclosures on topics that are low-risk and superficial in nature such as biographical and demographic information, but as time goes on they proceed to discussing topics that are more personal and intimate in nature (Berger, Gardner, Clatterbuck, & Schulman, 1976; Douglas, 1990; Kellerman & Berger, 1984; Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984; Rubin, 1979). This type of information exchange varying as a function of time is in line with Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory according to which, "people are generally believed to let others know them gradually, first revealing less intimate information and only later making more personal aspects of their lives accessible" (p.6).

The analyses of interactions between individuals who used older limited-cue technologies such as emails and text messages to get to know one another have shown similar usage of strategies during the acquaintanceship process. Bereft of non-verbal cues, the absence of online venues to surreptitiously observe the other person, and the lack of knowledge of shared contacts and common friends, individuals defaulted to using interactive strategies to get to know one another on such a reduced-cue communication medium. Similar to their face-to-face counterparts, individuals using such technologies tended to ask questions and make disclosures that were shallow, superficial, and less face-threatening (Goffman, 1967) during the initial phase of the acquaintanceship process. However, with the progress of time and the development of trust, they asked more intimate questions and made deeper disclosures about themselves (Andersen & Wang, 2005; Antheunis, Schouten, & Valkenburg, 2009; Mongeau, Jacobson, & Donnerstein, 2007; Pratt, Wiseman, Cody, & Wendt, 1999; Tamborini & Westerman, 2008; Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

Social Networking Sites and the Acquaintanceship Process

Communication technologies have come a long way since the days of emails and text-based messengers. Of particular significance within the body of newer technologies is the phenomenon of SNSs, web-based services that allow individuals to (a) create a profile where they include personal information in the form of texts, photos, and videos, (b) build a list of contacts usually called the *friends list*, and (c) share different types of information with the members on this list through a virtual space (boyd & Ellison, 2007). SNS users have been shown to share information about themselves on a wide range of topics through their profiles such as their hometown, birthdate, high school, information about their college and work, and their preferences in things such as music, movies, sports, and so on (Stutzman et al., 2012). The unique affordances of SNSs such as Facebook have allowed its users to implement all three strategies during the acquaintanceship process. For example, Facebook generates a list of common acquaintances, called *mutual friends*, between any two users. This feature provides an avenue for the use of active strategies because users can get information about the person they are trying to get to know from their mutual friends. Facebook also has an instant messenger program where users can directly interact with each other allowing for interactive strategies. Lastly, Facebook users can

look up each other's profile information without explicitly having to seek permission allowing for passive strategies. Research has shown that individuals are more likely to use passive strategies with acquaintances compared to interactive and active strategies (Tamborini & Westerman, 2008; Tokunaga & Gustafson, 2014). Antheunis, et al.'s (2010) study corroborated this claim. They surveyed 704 users of *Hyves*, one of the most popular Dutch SNSs, and asked them questions about a friendship they had recently formed in *Hyves*. Participants were asked to report the type of strategies they had used to get to know their newly formed friend. Results showed that 98.9 % of 704 *Hyves* users reported getting information about their acquaintances by gleaning through their profiles, i.e., using passive strategies.

Previous studies have conjectured the benefits of using such passive strategies on the acquaintanceship process. For instance, McKenna (2008) stated:

By following online group discussions or by reading through someone's personal blog prior to interacting, a reader can initiate a discussion with a new online acquaintance already armed with a great deal of knowledge about that person's opinions, values, backgrounds, and behavior. It is rare, indeed, to be privy to this depth of information prior to making the acquaintance of another through traditional means and venues" (p. 236).

According to McKenna (2008), the main advantage of using SNSs hinges on the fact that passive information-seeking strategies enhance the use of interactive strategies. In other words, reading the information shared by individuals on their SNS profiles helps facilitate initial acquaintanceship conversations on more substantive grounds, an advantage that is not warranted to individuals interacting face-to-face or through older communication technologies. However, there is no empirical evidence at the level of particulars that shows how acquisition of such SNS profile information affects initial conversations between two unacquainted individuals and if, indeed, those interactions are indicative of being beneficial to the acquaintanceship process. The present study fills this gap by examining the content and nature of initial conversations that ensue between individuals who have seen each others' SNS profiles and comparing that to the conversations that ensue between individuals who have not seen each others' SNS profiles

prior to initial interactions. In particular, predictions are made about three conversational behaviors: question-asking, self-disclosures, and topics of discussion.

Conversational Behaviors Hypotheses

Questions. Question-asking is one of the predominant and most effective methods of seeking social and personal information about others (Kellerman & Berger, 1984). Research in face-to-face settings as well as limited-cue communication technology settings have repeatedly corroborated this claim by showing that the initial stages of conversation between strangers are marked with greater use of questions than the later stages of conversation (Antheunis et al., 2009; Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Douglas, 1990, 1994; Mongeau et al., 2007; Tamborini & Westerman, 2008; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). This declining trend in question asking as the conversation progresses with time reflects the third axiom of Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory which states that high levels of uncertainty lead to an increase in information-seeking behavior (i.e., greater question-asking), and as uncertainty levels decrease, the information-seeking behavior also decreases. Individuals who do not have any information about their conversational partners prior to interacting with them have a higher level of uncertainty and ambiguity toward each other compared to individuals who have some knowledge about their conversational partners' through their SNS profiles before initial interactions. Therefore, based on uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and findings from previous research, it can be assumed that viewing SNS profile information reduces uncertainty which in turn decreases information-seeking behavior. Hence, it is hypothesized that,

> *H1: Participants who view partners' SNS profiles will ask lesser number of questions during their initial conversations compared to participants who do not view partners' SNS profiles.*

Prior information acquired through SNS profiles may also alter the nature of the questions asked during initial conversations. An experimental study conducted by Dipboye, Fontenelle, and Garner (1984) demonstrated how exposure to prior information changed the nature of questions asked during interviews. They had two groups of

participants – one where participants reviewed the resume of the candidate before the interview, and the other where participants did not review any resume before the interview. Results indicated that participants who had access to the candidate's resume asked more follow-up questions because the resume provided a basis for probing information from the candidates. Jablin and Miller (1980) label such probes as secondary questions. Since viewing SNS profiles can be considered akin to reading a resume because both are sources of basic information about an individual, it is predicted that,

> H2: Participants who view partners' SNS profiles will ask a greater proportion of secondary questions during their initial conversations compared to participants who do not view partners' SNS profiles.

Self-disclosures. Together with questions, studies investigating the acquaintanceship process, both in face-to-face and in limited-cue online communication, have accounted for the nature of self-disclosures made during initial interactions (Berger et al., 1976; Douglas, 1990; Kellerman & Berger, 1984; Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984; Rubin, 1979; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). For example, Rubin (1979) found that when participants, who had never met each other before, were given the task of getting to know one another, they started the conversations disclosing superficial information about themselves and progressively moved toward disclosing more personal information. This trajectory of information exchange is in accordance with Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory. The theory states that individuals let themselves be known to others in a gradual manner starting with disclosing superficial information, and as time goes on and trust increases in the relationship, they tend to disclose information that is more personal and intimate in nature. Altman and Taylor (1973) defined intimacy of information in terms of breadth and depth. Breadth pertains to the range or number of topics on which information is disclosed, and depth pertains to the magnitude of intimacy of the information. The depth dimension is further classified into peripheral, intermediate, and core. Peripheral information is impersonal in nature such as biographic and demographic information; intermediate information is comparatively higher in intimacy such as information about one's attitudes, beliefs, and preferences; and core information is highly personal in nature such as one's beliefs, values, and needs. Social penetration

theory (1973) contends that during the acquaintanceship process, when two people are trying to get to know one another, they will start with the exchange of peripheral information on a narrow range of topics (i.e., low intimacy), and as the relationship progresses, the breadth and depth of the information disclosed will also increase (i.e., high intimacy).

SNS users tend to disclose a substantial amount of superficial information about themselves through their profiles (Stutzman et al., 2012). The information that individuals would have had to disclose about themselves during the initial conversations is already accessible to their conversational partners owing to their SNS profiles. Thus, access to SNS profiles gives individuals the opportunity to skip over the phase of disclosing superficial information and dive right into disclosing information higher in intimacy. However, individuals with no access to their partners' SNS profiles will have to initiate conversations in traditional ways, i.e., start with disclosing superficial information before moving on to more intimate topics. Based on this, it is hypothesized,

> *H3: Participants who view partners' SNS profiles will have a greater breadth and depth of self-disclosures compared to participants who do not view partner's SNS profiles prior to initial interactions.*

Besides breadth and depth, interpersonal researchers and theorists have also conceptualized intimacy in terms of evaluative and descriptive nature of self-disclosures (Morton, 1978; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Descriptive self-disclosures are those that deal with facts and demographic information about an individual. These type of disclosures are explanatory in nature. On the other hand, evaluative self-disclosures are those that reveal an individual's private judgments, feelings, and opinions. These type of disclosures are emotional in nature. Evaluative disclosures tend to be more intimate than descriptive disclosures because being privy to people's opinions, feelings, and emotions provides a deeper understanding of them compared to just knowing mere facts about them (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Li, Feng, Li, & Tan, 2015; Reis & Patrick, 1996).

SNS users tend to make descriptive as well as evaluative disclosures about themselves through their profiles. They disclose factual information such as their

hometown, education, and work, as well as their preferences in music, movies, sports teams, and so on. Having access to such information from their SNS profiles (a) eliminates the need to solicit such factual information, and (b) provides an opportunity for individuals to further elaborate on this factual information and their preferences that lead to more evaluative than descriptive self-disclosures. In contrast, individuals with no access to each others' SNS profiles will have to make descriptive disclosures before getting to evaluative disclosures. For this reason it is hypothesized,

> *H4: Participants who view partners' SNS profiles will make more evaluative disclosures and less descriptive disclosures during initial conversations compared to participants who do not view partners' SNS profiles.*

Topics of discussion

Apart from questions and self-disclosures, exposure to partners' SNS profile information can affect the types of topics discussed during initial conversations. In traditional settings, when individuals do not have any access to each others' SNS profiles, they tend to start conversations with safe, non-threatening topics such as the weather or current affairs. Svennevig (2000) calls them the "setting topics" (p.240). These topics of conversation are low in risk but also low in their reward value. They do not contribute to a sense of familiarity and do not help in establishing common ground that is crucial for further development of conversations. SNS profiles have made it possible to figure out rewarding topics of discussion. By perusing each others' SNS profiles, individuals are able to identify topics of similarity such as similar taste in music, movies, and books, and also shared knowledge about places of work, education, and friends. As a result, individuals who have access to each others' SNS profiles will tend to gravitate toward discussing topics which inculcate a sense of similarity and familiarity with each other. In contrast, individuals who do not view their partners' SNS profiles will not be able to streamline their conversations to discuss such topics of similarity to that extent. Hence it is hypothesized that,

> *H5: Participants who view partners' SNS profiles prior will discuss more topics of similarity during initial interactions compared to participants who do not view partners' profiles prior to online chatting.*

METHODS

The data from Paul and Morrison's (2015) study is used for the present analyses. Paul and Morrison (2015) conducted an experiment to investigate the effect of looking at conversational partners' Facebook profile information before versus after initial conversations on three relational variables: uncertainty reduction, perceived similarity, and liking. They recruited 98 participants registered in undergraduate courses at a large Midwestern university in the United States. The participants were asked to email the researchers the link to their public Facebook profiles with the following information: their first and last name, gender, school and work information, their current location, hometown, favorite music, movies, television shows, books, and sports teams. If the participants did not have information on any of these fields, they were asked to update it and email back the link to the updated profile. The researchers then took a screen-shot of the profiles and saved the screenshot as a jpeg file in a jump drive. In order to control for variability in the type and amount of profile information, any extra information bits captured from the profile were removed from the jpeg file. The participants were then instructed to sign up for a one-hour time slot with someone they had not met before and asked to come in to the communication laboratory for participating in the study. This resulted in the formation of 49 stranger dyads. After the participants arrived at the lab, they were first seated in two different rooms to ensure that they would remain unacquainted. They were then randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions: profile-then-chat (PTC) or chat-then-profile (CTP). In both the conditions, the participants were informed that their task was to get to know the person they were paired with as much as possible. In the PTC condition, the participants first looked at their partners' Facebook profile screenshot and filled out a survey reporting their feelings of uncertainty, perceived similarity, and liking toward each other. Following this, they were logged into the chat portal *Chatzy.com,* where they engaged in a fifteen-minute online conversation with each other. At the end of the conversation they took another survey reporting on the same three variables along with other demographic variables. The CTP participants performed the same tasks but in reverse order, i.e., they had an online conversation with each other before seeing each other's Facebook profile screenshots.

Paul and Morrison (2015) had captured the online chat transcripts of the 49 dyads using the software *Chatzy.com* and stored them in MS Word format. These transcripts were used for the present analyses. Eight out of the 49 transcripts had to be eliminated for technical issues. For this reason, the final number of transcripts included in this study was 41, with 22 being in the PTC condition and 19 being in the CTP condition. Within the context of the present study, the PTC transcripts served as transcripts of conversations that ensued between participants who had viewed each others' SNS profiles and CTP transcripts served as the transcripts of conversations that ensued between participants who had not viewed each others' SNS profiles. The participant characteristics are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Measures	Chat-then-Profile(CTP)	Profile-then-Chat(PTC)
N = 82	38	44
Gender		
Female (F)	19	27
Male (M)	19	17
Dyad Composition		
Same-Sex Dyads	8	26
Opposite-Sex Dyads	30	18
Age of Participants		
18-21	25	24
22-25	9	14
26-30	2	4
31 and above	2	2
Race of Participants		
Caucasian	26	23
Asian	6	11
African-American	3	6
Latino/Hispanic	1	1
Middle Eastern	2	0
Native American	0	2
Asian American	0	1

For this study, six undergraduate coders were recruited who received honors credit for their participation in the coding process. The six coders were divided into three groups, each group consisting of two coders. The first group of coders unitized the chat transcripts into single thought units. A thought unit was defined as a non-reflective clause, that is, one that can stand-alone and does not distort the meaning of the rest of the sentence if it is taken away. It is a single complete thought with a subject and a verb (Dollard & Mowrer, 1947). Therefore, thought units were primarily independent clauses. When both the coders agreed upon a judgment, it was accepted. Disagreements were resolved through discussion. The coding process led to the identification of 2,918 thought units. These thought units were then used by the second and third group of coders to identify the frequency and type of questions, breadth, depth, and nature (descriptive vs. evaluative) self-disclosures, and topics of discussion. The inter-coder reliability of each of these variables is listed in Table 2.

Table 2
Inter-coder Reliabilities

Coding Categories	Cohen's Kappa
Unitizing chat transcripts into thought units	.91
Identifying Questions	.97
Identifying Secondary Questions	.93
Identifying Self-Disclosures/Information/Other	.88
Identifying Peripheral/Intermediate/Core Disclosures	.88
Identifying Breadth of Disclosures	.78
Identifying Evaluative Disclosures	.93
Identifying Descriptive Disclosures	.93
Identifying similarity in topics of discussion	.96

Questions. The second group of coders identified the total number of questions and secondary questions. Morris's (1976) explanation of questions as "an expression of inquiry that invites or calls for a reply; an interrogative sentence, phrase, or gesture" (p. 1070) was used as the operational definition of questions. Secondary questions, or probes, were operationally defined as questions that request further information on topics that already have been introduced in the conversation. These questions do not make sense when taken

out of context (Jablin & Miller, 1980; Tengler & Jablin, 1983). Questions that probed on information viewed in partner's Facebook profile were also coded as secondary questions. The proportion of secondary questions was calculated by dividing the total number of secondary questions by the total number of questions.

Self-disclosures. The second group of coders also identified self-disclosures. Self-disclosures were operationalized as thought units that revealed personal information, i.e., described the participant in some way or referred to certain affective responses by the participant (Dindia, 1983). Sometimes, participants tended to discuss things that did not communicate anything personal such as objective factual information about things such as third parties, places, movies, music, books, television shows, and sports. These were coded as *information*. Additionally, feedback words, greetings, and back-channeling elements were coded as *other*.

Intimacy level of self-disclosures. The same two coders identified the breadth and depth of self-disclosures. The modified coding scheme developed by Tidwell (1997), which was based on Taylor and Altman's (1966) schema, was used to code for the breadth dimension of self-disclosure with one minor change – the eleventh category was not used because it overlapped with the *other* category code that distinguished between self-disclosure from information in this study. The depth of self-disclosure was coded using Altman and Taylor's (1973) schema of peripheral, intermediate, and core levels of informational intimacy.

Nature of self-disclosures. The second group of coders also identified the evaluative and descriptive nature of self-disclosures. The operational definitions of descriptive and evaluative self-disclosures followed that of Morton (1978) and Reiss and Shaver (1988). Descriptive self-disclosures were defined as disclosures that reveal personal facts and information about oneself and evaluative self-disclosures were defined as disclosures that reveal one's private feelings, opinions, and judgments.

Similarity in topics of discussion. The third group of coders identified instances of *similarity in topics of discussion*, i.e., topics that established similarities, common ground, and familiarity between participants. (1) Baseline keywords and phrases such as "me too", "same here", "so did I", "as well" that indicated an occurrence of similarity and common ground, (2) phrases such as "so is mine", "I feel the same way", "exactly", "I agree" that

indicated agreement or attitudinal similarity on various topics of conversation, (3) similarity in past, present, and future experiences, (4) similarity in social circle to the same community or group, and (5) shared knowledge (e.g., sharing an awareness or understanding of the same things) were all coded as *topics of similarity*.

RESULTS

The hypotheses were assessed using multivariate analysis of variance, with (a) the total number of questions asked, (b) the proportion of secondary questions asked, (c) breadth of disclosure, (d) depth of disclosures (peripheral, intermediate, and core), (e) nature of disclosures (evaluative, descriptive) and (f) similarity in topics of discussion as the dependent variables, and the experimental condition (PTC or CTP) as the independent variable. Since the allocation of same-sex and opposite-sex dyads was not perfectly randomized, the dyad composition variable (0 = same sex, 1 = opposite-sex) was entered as a covariate in the analyses.

H1. The data were consistent with this hypothesis. Results showed that the average number of questions asked by the CTP participants ($n = 38$; $M = 9.82$, $SD = 3.6$) was significantly higher than the average number of questions asked by PTC participants ($n = 44$; $M = 7.86$, $SD = 3.49$), $F(1, 78) = 5.22$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$.

H2. The data were not consistent with this hypothesis. The proportion of secondary questions asked by PTC participants ($M = 0.71$, $SD = 0.18$) did not significantly differ from the CTP participants ($M = 0.73$, $SD = 0.16$), $F(1, 78) = 0.63$, $p > .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Viewing partners' Facebook profile did not increase the likelihood of probing them based on the profile information. Post-hoc analysis on PTC participants revealed that only 9 % of the probing questions asked during the conversation were actually based on Facebook information whereas 91 % percent of the secondary questions were based on information that participants discussed in the conversation.

H3. The data were partially consistent with the third hypothesis. The third hypothesis predicted that the intimacy of conversation for PTC participants would be higher than CTP participants. Both breadth and depth of self-disclosure were used to assess the intimacy of conversations between participants. In the breadth category, PTC participants had greater breadth ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.18$) than CTP participants ($M = 4.34$,

$SD = 1.21$), $F(1, 78) = 4.06$, $p<.05$, $\eta_p^2=.05$. In the depth category, PTC and CTP participants were significantly different from each other in the peripheral and intermediate levels but not in the core level. CTP participants reported greater number of peripheral self-disclosures ($M = 9.63$, $SD = 4.99$) compared to PTC participants ($M = 7.48$, $SD = 3.25$), $F(1, 78) = 5.30$, $p<.05$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. This trend flipped in intermediate self-disclosures as PTC participants had a greater number of intermediate self-disclosures ($M = 16.71$, $SD = 8.19$) compared to the CTP participants ($M = 13.45$, $SD = 5.70$), $F(1, 78) = 4.34$, $p<.05$, $\eta_p^2=.05$. The difference in the number of core disclosures made by PTC participants ($M = 0.25$, $SD = 0.78$) and CTP participants ($M = 0.11$, $SD = 0.39$) was not statistically significant, $F(1, 78) = 3.33$, $p<.05$, $\eta_p^2=.04$. These results indicate that PTC participants reported greater breadth of self-disclosure and greater intermediate depth of self-disclosure than CTP participants.

H4. The data was consistent with the fourth hypothesis. PTC participants made more evaluative disclosures ($M = 14.77$, $SD = 7.32$) compared to CTP participants ($M = 11.84$, $SD = 5.33$, $F(1, 78) = 5.07$, $p<.05$, $\eta_p^2=.06$. PTC participants also made less descriptive disclosures ($M = 9.68$, $SD = 3.71$) compared to CTP participants ($M = 11.68$, $SD = 5.89$, $F(1, 78) = 4.86$, $p<.05$, $\eta_p^2=.06$.

H5. The data was not consistent with the fifth hypothesis. Even though PTC participants tended to use more topics that established conversational similarity ($M = 6.41$, $SD = 2.81$) compared to CTP participants ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 3.52$), there was no significant difference between the two groups, $F(1, 78) = 1.54$, $p>.05$, $\eta_p^2=.02$.

DISCUSSION

The debate whether communication mediated by technology is conducive for meeting new people and forming interpersonal connections has long been settled. What were emails, online chat forums, and multi-player programs before, have now been replaced by newer technologies such as SNSs such as Facebook. The unique affordances of SNSs have raised important questions about processes of forming such interpersonal connections and if these processes are fundamentally different from the ones exhibited in older technologies or face-to-face settings. This investigation sought to answer these questions by studying how exposure to SNS profile information can affect the

conversational behaviors during the acquaintanceship process. The findings of the study suggested that exposure to partners' Facebook profile information did, in fact, alter certain conversational behaviors. In particular, it affected the frequency of questions asked and the level of intimacy of information shared between participants. Participants with prior access to each other's SNS profile information, asked fewer questions to their partners but also voluntarily disclosed information about themselves that were high in intimacy. They (a) disclosed information on a greater number of topics, (b) disclosed more intermediate than peripheral level information, and (c) shared more personal thoughts, judgments, and feelings than just factual information about themselves. In contrast, participants with no prior knowledge about each other from their SNS profiles asked more questions and shared more superficial and factual information about themselves. Exposure to SNS profile information did not, however, affect the tendency of probing during conversations nor did it increase the likelihood of discussing topics that established a sense of similarity and familiarity between participants. The findings of the study have several implications on the acquaintanceship process develops in the novel setting of SNSs.

First, the tendency of participants to avoid overusing Facebook profile information as probes even if they had the information at their disposal can be interpreted as the new way of maintaining social appropriateness during the acquaintanceship process in SNSs. Berger and Kellerman (1983) stress the importance of being socially appropriate during the acquaintanceship process. They suggest that even if the main purpose of the acquaintanceship process is to get to know the other person as much as possible, people should be cognizant of the directness and the appropriateness of the information-seeking strategies they employ during this process. If people profusely probe their partners on their SNS profile information, they could come off as a "Facebook stalker", i.e., someone who compulsively monitors the social information presented in the profiles by others (Dubow, 2007). This behavior could raise privacy concerns because others might think they are being stalked which could make people lose face (Goffman, 1967). In order to avoid such scenarios, people might actively limit citing their partners' Facebook profile information during initial acquaintanceship conversations and probing them on it.

Second, prior exposure to partners' Facebook profile information increasing the range of topics of conversation could be indicative of heightened impulsive behavior among

participants. Goldenson (1984) defines impulse as a "strong sometimes irresistible urge; a sudden inclination to act without deliberation" (pg. 37). This means that impulses are not planned, but they arise immediately when exposed to a stimulus. Impulsive behavior can also be extrapolated to understand why participants discussed a wider range of topics after being exposed to their conversational partners' Facebook profiles. Categories of information from Facebook profiles such as movies, music, television shows, and so on might have acted as stimuli that may have given rise to an impulse in the participants to use these categories of information as conversational material. Participants might not have had any intentions of using certain topics as conversational material, but the mere exposure to the stimuli (i.e. information from Facebook profiles), might have led them to impulsively use it in conversation. Thus, it can be contended that exposure to SNS profile information leads to *impulsive conversations,* the unplanned decision of talking about something upon being exposed it.

Lastly, exposure to conversational partners' Facebook profile information increasing the intimacy of information shared during initial conversations between previously unacquainted individuals is in line with previous research on limited-cue communication technologies such as emails and online chat systems. For instance, Tidwell and Walther (2002) found that strangers who got to know each other by interacting via emails achieved greater conversational intimacy at an accelerated pace compared to strangers who interacted face-to-face. Thus, the trend of achieving higher intimacy at an accelerated pace continues in cue-rich new medium of online communication such as SNSs as well. Since intimacy of self-disclosures is positively correlated with feelings of trust (MacDonald, Kessel, & Fuller, 1972; Steel, 1991; Wheeless & Grotz, 1977), in can be concluded that being privy of partners' SNS profile information before initial conversations allows individuals to develop a heightened level of closeness and trust with each other during the acquaintanceship process.

CONCLUSION

Previous studies have touted the positive effects that SNSs have on relationship initiation and friendship formation between previously unacquainted individuals

(Krasnova, et al., 2010; McKenna, 2008). This study was the first of its kind in providing empirical evidence for substantiating the claim that SNS profile information is beneficial for the development of the acquaintanceship process by analyzing conversations between individuals who had seen each others' Facebook profiles prior to interaction versus individuals who had not seen each others' Facebook profiles. Conversational analysis revealed that prior exposure to SNS profiles led individuals to share deeper and more personal information without having to ask more questions thus answering the overarching question that SNSs have indeed brought a fundamental shift in the development of the acquaintanceship process. SNSs provide an opportunity to develop an accelerated sense of intimacy and trust among acquaintances, thereby laying the foundation of future rewarding relationships.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There are several ways in which this study can be extended and improved. First, this study used Facebook as the prototype SNS. Even though Facebook is popular among all demographic groups in the United States, it is evident that the popularity of Facebook among young adults is dwindling. According to a recent Pew report, Americans between the ages of 18-24 are using Instagram and Snapchat as socialization tools rather than Facebook (Gramlich, 2018). This study should be replicated using these technologies to increase the ecological validity of the findings.

Second, the study incorporated a limited number of text-based fields of information from participants' Facebook profiles to control for variability of information and physical attractiveness evaluations of participants' photographs. Future studies can include other elements of the profile and other types of information.

Lastly, the conversational analyses focused on three conversational behaviors: question-asking, self-disclosures, and similarity in topics of conversation. Future studies can code other conversational behaviors such as the use of politeness strategies during initial conversations. Individuals use politeness strategies to negotiate the social appropriateness of the use of information-seeking strategies during the acquaintanceship process. Since politeness has also been shown to increase liking and attraction (Bell &

Daly, 1984), analyzing the use of these strategies can further inform our understanding of the effect of viewing SNS profiles on the overall trajectory of acquaintanceship development.

References

Altman, I., & Taylor, D. A. (1973). *Social penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Andersen, P., & Wang, H. (2005). *Self-disclosure in long-distance friendships: A comparison between face-to-face and computer-mediated communication.* Paper presented at the conference of the International Communication Association, New York, NY.

Antheunis, M. L., Peter, J., Schouten, A. P., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2009). *Intervening processes between computer-mediated communication and interpersonal attraction: An experimental comparison.* In Annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Chicago, Illinois.

Antheunis, M. L., Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2010). Getting acquainted through social network sites: Testing a model of uncertainty reduction and social attraction. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *26*, 100-109.

Bell, R. A., & Daly, J. A. (1984). The affinity-seeking function of communication. *Communications Monographs*, *51*, 91-115.

Berger, C. R., & Bradac, J. J. (1982). *Language and social knowledge: Uncertainty in interpersonal relationships*. London: Edward Arnold.

Berger, C. R., & Calabrese, R. J. (1975). Some explorations in initial interaction and beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research*, *1*, 99-112.

Berger, C. R., Gardner, R. R., Clatterbuck, G. W., & Schulman, L. S. (1976). Perceptions of information sequencing in relationship development. *Human Communication Research*, *3*, 29-46.

Berger, C. R., & Kellermann, K. A. (1983). To ask or not to ask: Is that a question? *Communication yearbook*, *7*, 342-368.

boyd, d. m., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *13*, 210–230.

Dindia, K. (1983). Reciprocity of self-disclosure: A sequential analysis. In M. Burgoon (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 6* (pp. 506–528). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage

Dipboye, R. L., Fontenelle, G. A., & Garner, K. (1984). Effects of previewing the application on interview process and outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *69*, 118-128.

Dubow B. (2007) Confessions of "Facebook stalkers." Retrieved from www.usatoday.com/tech/webguide/internetlife/2007–03- 07-facebook-stalking_N.htm

Dollard, J., & Mowrer, O. (1947). A method of measuring tension in written documents. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *42*, 323-332.

Douglas, W. (1990). Uncertainty, information seeking, and liking during initial interaction. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, *54*, 66–81.

Douglas, W. (1994). The acquaintanceship process: An examination of uncertainty, information seeking, and social attraction during initial conversation. *Communication Research*, *21*, 154-176.

Ellison, N. B., Lampe, C., & Steinfield, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook "friends:" Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites.*Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *12*, 1143-1168.

Ezumah, B. A. (2013). College students' use of social media: Site preferences, uses and gratifications theory revisited. *International Journal of Social Science, 4*(5), 27–34.

Goffman, I. (1967). *On Face-Work. In Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior.* New York: Pantheon.

Goldenson, R. M. (1984). *Longman dictionary of psychology and psychiatry.* New York, NY: Longman.

Gramlich, J. (2018). 5 facts about Americans and Facebook. Retrieved from http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/10/5-facts-about-americans-and-facebook/

Jablin, F. M., & Miller, V. D. (1980). Interviewer and applicant questioning behavior in employment interviews. *Management Communication Quarterly, 4*, 51-86.

Kellerman, K. A., & Berger C. R. (1984). Affect and the acquisition of social information: Sit back, relax, and tell me about yourself. In R. N. Bostrom (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 8* (pp. 412-45). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Krasnova, H., Spiekermann, S., Koroleva, K., & Hildebrand, T. (2010). Online social networks: why we disclose. *Journal of Information Technology, 25*, 109-125.

Laurenceau, J. P., Barrett, L. F., & Pietromonaco, P. R. (1998). Intimacy as an interpersonal process: The importance of self-disclosure, partner disclosure, and perceived partner responsiveness in interpersonal exchanges. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74*, 1238-1251.

Li, S., Feng, B., Li, N., & Tan, X. (2015). How social context cues in support seeker profile influence support provider's self-disclosure in online support forums. *Communication Quarterly, 63*, 586-602.

MacDonald, A. P., Kessel, V. S., & Fuller, J. B. (1972). Self-disclosure and two kinds of trust. *Psychological Reports, 30*(1), 143-148.

Maynard, D. W., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1984). Topical talk, ritual and the social organization of relationships. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 47*, 301-316.

McKenna, K.Y. (2008). Myspace or your place: Relationship initiation and development in the wired and wireless world. In A. Wenzel, J. Harvey and S. Sprecher (Eds.), *Handbook of Relationship Initiation* (pp. 235-247). New York: Psychology Press.

Morton, T. L. (1978). Intimacy and reciprocity of exchange: A comparison of spouses and strangers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 36*(1), 72.

Mongeau, P. A., Jacobsen, J. L., & Donnerstein, C. (2007). Generalizing from undergraduates to single adults: Defining dates and first date goals. *Communication Research, 34*, 526-547

Morris, W. (Ed.). (1976). The American heritage dictionary of the English language. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Paul, A., & Morrison, K. (2015, June). *Does your Facebook profile help or harm you? Examining the sequence of information seeking strategies on uncertainty reduction in social networking sites.* Poster presented at the International Association of Relationship Research, New Brunswick, NJ.

Pratt, L., Wiseman, R. L., Cody, M. J., & Wendt, P. F. (1999). Interrogative strategies and information exchange in computer-mediated communication. *Communication Quarterly, 47*, 46-66

Reis, H. T., & Shaver, P. (1988). Intimacy as an interpersonal process. Fn S. Duck (Ed.), *Handbook of Personal Relationships* (pp. 367- 389). Chichester, England: Wiley.

Reis, H. X, & Patrick, B. C. (1996). Attachment and intimacy: Component processes. In E. T. Higgins & A. W. Kruglanski (Eds.), *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles* (pp. 523-563). New York: Guilford Press.

Rubin, R. B. (1979). The effect of context on information seeking across the span of initial interactions. *Communication Quarterly*, *27*, 13-20.

Steel, J. L. (1991). Interpersonal correlates of trust and self-disclosure. *Psychological Reports*, *68*, 1319-1320.

Stutzman, F., Gross, R., & Acquisti, A. (2012). Silent listeners: The evolution of privacy and disclosure on Facebook. *Journal of Privacy and Confidentiality*, *4*, 7-41.

Svennevig, J. (2000). *Getting Acquainted in Conversation*. Philadelphia: John Benjamin Li Publishing Company.

Tamborini, R., & Westerman, D. (2008). *Uncertainty reduction over time in initial stranger interactions: A social information processing theory approach*. Paper presented at the conference of the International Communication Association, Montreal, Canada.

Taylor, D. A., & Altman, I. (1966). Intimacy-scaled stimuli for use in studies of interpersonal relations. *Psychological Reports*, *19*, 729–730.

Tengler, C. D., & Jablin, F. M. (1983). Effects of question type, orientation, and sequencing in the employment screening interview. *Communications Monographs*, *50*, 245-263.

Tidwell, L. C. (1997). *Comparison of anticipated interaction, channel, and communication goal on impression formation, self-disclosure, and relational orientation: getting to know one another a bit at a time* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

Tidwell, L. C., & Walther, J. B. (2002). Computer-mediated communication effects on disclosure, impressions, and interpersonal evaluations: Getting to know one another a bit at a time. *Human Communication Research*, *28*, 317-348.

Tokunaga, R. S., & Gustafson, A. (2014). Seeking interpersonal information over the Internet: An application of the theory of motivated information management to Internet use. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *31*(8), 1019-1039.

Wheeless, L. R. (1978). A follow-up study of the relationships among trust, disclosure, and interpersonal solidarity. *Human Communication Research*, *4*, 143-157.

Wheeless, L. R., & Grotz, J. (1976). Conceptualization and measurement of reported self-disclosure. *Human Communication Research*, *2*, 338-346.

Funding and Acknowledgements

Online Connections

To follow these authors in social media:
Aditi Paul: https://www.linkedin.com/in/aditi-paul-74713117/, @iamaditipaul