

Investigating Reddit Self-Disclosure and Confessions in Relation to Connectedness, Social Support, and Life Satisfaction

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As a site where users can, and often do, remain anonymous, Reddit is a useful site for investigating how online disinhibition contributes to the sharing of private information. The current study surveyed Reddit users (N = 628) about the sharing of personal information unknown to their friends and families – and in particular, the use of threads developed for confessional purposes. Results revealed a connection between the sharing of personal unknown information and feelings of connectedness, social support, and life satisfaction, as well as the traits of sensation seeking and narcissism. Furthermore, the frequency of posting official

confessions was positively related to loneliness and narcissism, and negatively related to social connectedness and life satisfaction. Rating and/or commenting upon confession posts was significantly related to sensation seeking and narcissism. Finally, spending more time online, on social media, and on Reddit was associated with more self-disclosure of intimate and unknown information.

Keywords: Online Disinhibition; Reddit; Self-Disclosure; Social Connectedness, Narcissism, Social Support; Life Satisfaction; Sensation Seeking

“I do nothing at my new job and nobody has seemed to notice.” “My friend cheated on her boyfriend, I made a fake Facebook account to let him know.” “I fed my boyfriend and his friend dog food.” “I’ve been wearing women’s underwear for six months to keep my wife oblivious to the fact that I cheated on her.” “Called CPS to investigate my brother and sister in law.” “I almost killed myself yesterday.” These are examples from the all-time top posts on Reddit’s popular *r/confession*, one of many subreddits designed for the purposes of admitting one’s wrongdoings and past indiscretions. Other subreddits such as *r/confessions*, *r/offmychest*, and *r/trueoffmychest* explicitly encourage users to not only confess wrongful acts, but also controversial or secret opinions that might be weighing them down. These confession-oriented threads operate in a manner different from most social networking sites, wherein users are tied to

their offline identity and connected to those whose opinions they care about deeply. As a site where users can, and often do, remain anonymous, Reddit is useful for investigating how online disinhibition contributes to the sharing of private information.

People have always self-disclosed, but the Internet is making it easier to share every waking thought, feeling, and behavior. At the same time, there are still things that people may be reluctant to share online in spaces where they are known by name or other identifying characteristics. Reddit, by its very nature of total or partial anonymity, facilitates more uninhibited conversations. Reddit is an online network made up of more than 100,000 communities, or subreddits, each focused upon a specific topic, interest, or general theme (Reddit, 2018). Marketed as “the front page of the Internet,” Reddit, at the time of this study, was the fifth most used website in the United States and the eighth most used website globally (Alexa, 2018). Site data boasts that average active usership is more than 330 million persons across the 138,000+ communities (Reddit, 2018).

Despite Reddit’s popularity, anonymous online social spaces have received far less attention from quantitative media scholars when compared to traditional, onymous, social media such as Facebook (e.g. Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Skues, Williams, & Wise, 2012), Twitter (e.g. Pittman & Reich, 2016), and Instagram (e.g. Pittman & Reich, 2016; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). While there has been some research on Reddit, much of the work has been either qualitative (e.g. Gagnon, 2013; Robards, 2018; Pilkington & Rominov, 2017) or content analytic (e.g. Derksen, Serlachius, Petrie, & Dalbeth, 2017; Sowles et al., 2018). There is a lack of survey research specifically exploring identities and communication behaviors in spaces such as Reddit.

Using an online disinhibition framework, the current work is an exploratory study focused on the sharing and viewing of personal information on Reddit, which is often done textually in the form of confessions. Participants were given a survey about their use of Reddit, social media, and the Internet, and this was connected with their feelings about connectedness, support, and life satisfaction, as well as their desire for sensation seeking and level of narcissism. This work advances the idea of an online disinhibition effect and solidifies the importance of anonymity in the equation. The current research also helps scholars and practitioners to better understand the type of person who shares intimate content online, both from a demographic standpoint as well as a psychological one. It is

important to investigate spaces like Reddit's confession threads, wherein people post serious content such as mental health struggles, self-harm behaviors, relationship issues, sexual taboos, and general feelings of negativity or isolation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Disinhibition & Self-Disclosure

Disinhibition is defined as “any behavior that is characterized by an apparent reduction in concerns for self-presentation and the judgment of others” (Joinson, 1998, p. 4). Disinhibition is often associated with increased self-disclosure (Archer, 1980; Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993), and anonymity can increase the likelihood of enacting disinhibited behaviors (e.g. Zimbardo, 1969). Because the Internet can more easily facilitate anonymity, researchers have moved to examining disinhibition in relation to online communication. Thus, the online disinhibition effect suggests that what people do or say in cyberspace might be things they are unwilling to do or say in face-to-face settings (Suler, 2004).

Benign online disinhibition describes the positive aspects of disinhibition, wherein the Internet opens up the space for people to share intimate and personal parts of themselves, reveal secret emotions, aspiration, or anxieties, and engage in extraordinary acts of kindness (Suler, 2004). On the other hand, toxic online disinhibition describes the more damaging effects that the Internet can have on an individual's actions. Toxic online communication includes the use of rude or offensive language, the exhibition of hatred, threats, and engagement with the darker elements of the web (e.g. pornography, gambling, violence) in a way that is uncharacteristic of the individual's offline persona (Suler, 2004). Both benign and toxic disinhibition can be found on Reddit (Gagnon, 2013), though the former is more prevalent on confession threads, given that users are encouraged to divulge secret and personal information.

A multitude of factors have been identified as contributors to the online disinhibition effect, including anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, and a lack of eye contact (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2015; Suler, 2004). Suler (2004) refers to dissociative anonymity as the ability for identity to be hidden or altered in online spaces, and the subsequent lack of responsibility that people might therefore feel for their actions.

Anonymity frees people from the expectations of their social spheres, allowing for expressions or behaviors that might not be possible offline (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimmons, 2002). This is perhaps the driving force behind the sharing of intimate information on sites like Reddit. It is only with the freedom of escape from their social circles that many find the fearlessness to share some of their most intimate –and often embarrassing or shameful – thoughts, regrets, wishes, and fears.

Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2015) claim that it is not total namelessness that is needed for anonymity, but rather the unidentifiability that comes with being relatively unknown. The authors claim that, when identifying details like gender, age, and location are masked, online unidentifiability occurs, even if the user is noted by their real name. Thus, Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) believe that it is the combination of unidentifiability, a lack of eye contact, and invisibility that decide the degree of anonymity. In this context, invisibility refers to the ability for individuals to go unseen, or to lurk, in many online spaces (Suler, 2004). Usernames are not enough to tie individuals to an online space, and they may still experience a sense of invisibility because their corporal person is not able to be seen. A lack of eye contact may cultivate online disinhibition more so than either anonymity or invisibility alone (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012).

Another factor contributing to online disinhibition is asynchronicity (Suler, 2004). When people interact online, replies might take minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, or even years. Some replies might never come, and even if they do, an individual need not acknowledge them. This causes some people to disclose information or engage in actions online without facing consequences. It is not uncommon for Redditors to create special “throwaway” accounts that they use once, and only once, in order to post confessions. Users may respond to replies, but their attachment to a throwaway account is likely to be short-lived. Cyberspace, to some effect, might be experienced as a stage wherein people perform identities (Goffman, 1959), or aspects of their identities, that they have disassociated from their offline presentation of self. Throwaway accounts, in particular, have been linked to more disinhibited communication on Reddit (Pavalanathan & De Choudhury, 2015).

The Internet also lowers the social risks associated with communication (Baym, 2010). Because social expectations do not exist online in areas far from one's social sphere, the costs or risks of social sanctions are lessened in comparison to face-to-face settings (Bargh et al., 2002). The lowered social sanctions work together with anonymity to create an atmosphere where negative or taboo aspects of the self can be disclosed with reduced risk (Bargh et al., 2002). Nonetheless, online personas must still abide by the normative rules of the social setting they occupy (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Compared to many onymous social networks, linked to offline contacts, Reddit has much more of an "anything goes" mentality.

Self-disclosure is "the act of revealing personal information to others" (Jourard, 1971, p. 2) – information about the self that is not readily available to the public (Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969). Self-disclosure occurs widely in computer-mediated communication, or CMC (Joinson, Paine, & Buchanan, 2008; Sillence & Briggs, 2007), and accelerates more quickly online in comparison to offline self-disclosure (Davis, 2012). While this sort of disclosure can be toxic (e.g. Ben-Ze-ev, 2003), online self-disclosure is more often considered to be a form of benign disinhibition, in that CMC allows individuals to be more open and honest about themselves in comparison to offline. For instance, online chats have been associated with the sharing of personal secrets (Baraket-Bojmel & Shahar, 2011), and sharing secrets in chats with feelings of relief (Magsamen-Conrad, Billotte-Verhoff, & Greene, 2014).

Further connecting self-disclosure to the online disinhibition effect, it has been established that self-disclosure can be enhanced when anonymity is present online (Joinson & Paine, 2007), and that it occurs more frequently in text-based versus video-based online communication (Joinson, 2001). In their study of mental health subreddits, De Choudhury and De (2014) found that more disinhibited posts garnered more commentary and positive upvotes, or "karma." On the use of throwaway accounts, which are used once and require no e-mail upon registration, the authors claim that "such 'one-time' usage...by a large majority shows that Redditors use it as a mechanism to discuss on topics they feel guarded about" (p. 78). This one-time usage may foster users' self-disclosure, as it "gives them the opportunity to not leave any trails behind and walk away from further discussion" (p. 78). In a study investigating online disinhibition for bloggers,

Hollenbaugh and Everett (2013) found that it was visual anonymity, and not discursive anonymity, that led to more self-disclosure. Therefore, we might expect Redditors to be comfortable self-disclosing, given the lack of pictorial cues used on the site, even in non-throwaway profiles. Confession posts do not contain photographic markers of identity.

Keeping secrets means purposefully denying information to some other (Margolis, 1974), and secrets related to the self are some of the most closely vested secrets held by humans. Self-relevant secrets are secrets that involve information about the self (Kelly & McKillop, 1996). Disclosing a self-relevant secret may be beneficial, particularly if one does so with the intent to gain new insights (Kelly, Klusas, von Weiss, & Kenny, 2001). However, some scholars caution that some self-relevant secrets are better left undisclosed (e.g. Kelly & McKillop, 1996), such as confessions, which by formal definition typically involve the disclosure of moral or legal wrongdoing. Nonetheless, some confessions are more about perceived failure and guilt more than wrongdoing that affects others, and thus, their disclosure may serve therapeutic benefits. For instance, Moisio and Beruchashvili (2010) have found that Weight Watchers meetings operate as “a venue for angst-alleviating therapeutic confession” (p. 857). These authors conceive of overconsumption stories as personal confessions, expanding the definition of confession.

One of the popular confession subreddits, *r/confession* notes that, “A confession is a statement acknowledging some personal fact that you would ostensibly prefer to keep hidden. The term presumes that you are providing information that you believe other people in your life are not aware of, and is frequently associated with an admission of a moral or legal wrong.” Despite *r/confession* claiming to be a space for wrongdoing, in operation, it includes both disclosure of transgressions as well as more general self-relevant disclosure, such as those related to personality quirks, sexual activities, and personal feelings. Other confessional subreddits do not even discuss the definition of confession, such as *r/confessions*, which wants one to “Get that nasty secret off your chest” and “See the unfiltered opinions of strangers” that result. Another large subreddit, *r/offmychest*, claims to be a space for people to unload “deeply emotional things” in a “safe space” of mutual support. They list disclosures of long-standing baggage, fresh trauma, and even happy thoughts as welcomed. Confessional subreddits are varied in their scope, but all of them include self-relevant disclosures of some sort. While a small amount of

work has focused on online confessions, such as the “eco-guilt” expressed by environmentalists when conversing about their failures on online forums (Fredericks, 2014), no work has specifically examined the sharing of personal information and/or confessions on Reddit, despite its common usage for self-relevant disclosures.

CMC, Authenticity, & Psychological Outcomes

Under the online disinhibition framework, both online and offline behaviors are viewed as parts of the self, as the self does not exist separate from the environments in which it is enacted (Suler, 2004). Similarly, Baym (2010) claims that virtual identities, though they may be partitioned off into separate spaces wherein they can become distinct identities, are all a part of the self. However, the partitioning of aspects of the self might make averting responsibility for one’s actions easier. The online self might assume that one’s behavior can be left in cyberspace and somehow divorced from the offline person (Suler, 2004). Alternately, some scholars have distinguished between multiples types of selves (e.g. Bargh, et al., 2002). At the heart about debates about the online self lies the idea of authenticity. The behavioral aspect of authenticity suggests that “one acts in accordance with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings” (Harter, 2002, p. 382). This includes self-disclosing one’s inner self in terms of both positive and negative aspects (Kernis & Goldman, 2006), both of which can be found on Reddit. While acting differently in disparate social contexts and roles does not inherently constitute inauthenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006), the self may feel more authentic in certain spaces and in certain roles and people feel more satisfied in roles in which they can be more authentic (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Illardi, 1997). More authenticity in one’s social roles has been related to higher self-esteem, and lower depression, anxiety, stress, and symptomology (Sheldon et al., 1997).

Being a more authentic self may have beneficial outcomes in terms of online communication. For instance, authenticity on social networking sites has been shown to lead to better subjective well-being, with longitudinal effects on positive affect and life satisfaction (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). Most of the research in this area has been on how individuals’ usage of traditional social networks – ones where one is known to their contacts and vice versa – impact psychological outcomes. Less work has established how

self-disclosure and enacting authenticity on more anonymous sites like Reddit may impact one's psychological health.

As previously stated, scholars have long investigated the relationship between using social media such as Facebook and feelings of connection, support, and life satisfaction. Social connectedness is a reference to one's feelings of self in relation to other persons; it is about how emotionally close one feels to others and to society (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Loneliness, on the other hand, is the lack of connectedness and the perception that one's social network is lacking (Hays & DiMatteo, 1987). It has been determined that the use of image-based social media is related to a decrease in loneliness (Pittman, 2015; Pittman & Reich, 2016). While this same effect has not been found to occur with the use of text-based sites, Reddit operates in a different manner than many other text-based social media sites. Sharing a deeply personal confession may, in fact, make persons feel less alone and more connected. In some effect, Reddit may operate more like an anonymous forum than typical social media, and research indicates that anonymous forums can be important sources of social support for those who are struggling (e.g. Beaudoin, & Tao, 2007; Horgan, McCarthy, & Sweeney, 2013; Mazzoni, & Cicognani, 2014).

Lonely people are also known to use social media more frequently (Skues, Williams, & Wise, 2012), and Facebook use has been related to an alternative form of social connectedness than one experiences offline (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013). It is unclear whether Reddit users are driven by the same need for social connection. It is possible that Reddit confessions operate similarly to Instagram, wherein consuming or interacting with others' content is associated with lower loneliness but posting one's own content is related to higher levels of loneliness (Yang, 2016).

The current study was also interested in perceptions of social support for users of Reddit and, in particular, those who shared intimate information and confessions on the site. Because Reddit's confession threads are rooted in the provision of social support, this was an important variable to investigate in relation to the current study. In one study by Olson, Liu, and Shulz (2012), participants who received high levels of emotional support on Facebook were found to be more likely to have continued usage of the site. Whether Reddit usage coincides with a higher or lower level of perceived social support has

remained uncertain. It is possible that posting intimate details online occurs because of a lack of offline social support. Using anonymous social media – and in particular, using throwaway accounts – has been associated with the seeking of social support. For example, in a qualitative analysis of sexual abuse subreddits, Andalibi, Haimson, De Choudhury, and Forte (2016) found that posts looking for indirect and direct support were more likely to be posted from throwaway accounts.

Some scholars have found that life satisfaction is not increased by the use of Facebook to stay in touch with friends (Olson, Liu, & Shulz, 2012). Others have found that image-based sites like Instagram, where many people connect to more strangers than on Facebook, does foster more life satisfaction (Pittman & Reich, 2016). Therefore, it may not be the connection to one's offline network that promotes life satisfaction. The anonymity afforded by Reddit may, alternatively, promote life satisfaction by freeing individuals from the restraints of their social circles and connecting individuals to different types of persons than those found in their offline networks. In fact, it is whether one uses social media in an active sense (e.g. posting, commenting, liking) versus a passive sense (e.g. lurking) that seems to impact life satisfaction and the effects on well-being (Verduyn, Ybarra, Résibois, Jonides, & Kross, 2017). Little work has examined passive Reddit use, despite the fact that it is especially easy to lurk on Reddit, where all content is publicly accessible without logging in (versus Facebook, Snapchat, or other social networks that often require friendship with a user and/or profile creation to view much of the content). Consequently, life satisfaction, level of connection and perceived social support were examined both in relation to active usage (e.g. posting, interacting with others' posts), as well as passive usage (e.g. reading posts).

Individual Personality Traits

The current study also investigated whether the traits of sensation seeking and/or narcissism would be related to self-disclosure on Reddit. Sensation-seeking is a personality trait that is illustrated by “the need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experiences” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 10). Because of the connection between disinhibition and recklessness (Orlebeke, van der Molen, Dolan, & Stoffels, 1990), scholars have been interested in how sensation-seeking impacts behaviors such as smoking or risky sex. The

current research assumes that, while there is a small level of risk with posting personal information and confessions on the Internet, there may be a level of thrill or adventure when posting something secret or taboo that no one knows.

Narcissism may also impact the sharing of personal information on Reddit, as narcissism has been associated with the use of more traditional social networks such as Facebook (Kapidzic, 2013) and Instagram (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Narcissism is a personality trait indicating an exaggerated self-concept, along with a higher level of perceived importance and a strong craving to be admired (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). Given that Reddit is anonymous to a large degree, narcissism may not play as large a role as it does in social networks that are based around the strategic online presentation of the offline persona. Nonetheless, there is little data on the connection, or lack of connection, between narcissism and anonymous social networks.

The Current Study

Given the literature on online disinhibition, self-disclosure, authenticity, and social media's relation to personality traits and psychological outcomes, the following research questions and hypotheses were posed:

RQ1: How many individuals report creating new “throwaway” accounts in order to post confessions on Reddit?

RQ2: Will individuals who post unknown intimate information on Reddit differ from those who do not post intimate information in terms of feelings of connection, satisfaction, and support?

RQ3: Will frequency of a) posting, b) reading, and/or c) interacting with confessions on Reddit be related to participants' feelings of connection, satisfaction, and support?

H1: Posting unknown intimate information on Reddit will be associated with a) higher sensation-seeking and b) higher narcissism.

H2: People who spend more time on Reddit, social media, and the Internet will be more likely to post unknown personal information.

METHODS

Participants and Procedures

Participants were recruited on Reddit using targeted advertisements and by posting the study in related subreddits with the permission of moderators. Participants were given the opportunity to enter into a draw for \$100 gift cards upon completion of the study. A total of 722 participants began the survey, and 629 completed the full survey. One additional participant was deleted from the sample for what appeared to be a falsified survey (e.g. no variation in responses at all), leaving a final sample of 628 Reddit users.

There was relatively little diversity in terms of age and race, but much diversity in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation. Participants were mainly young adults ($M = 27.58$, $SD = 8.68$), though ages ranged from 19 to 69. The majority of participants reported being Caucasian ($n = 478$, 76.1%). Most participants reported being single and never married ($n = 453$, 72.1%). Heterosexuals ($n = 413$, 65.8%) dominated in the sample, however, there was a sizable number of bisexual ($n = 111$, 17.7%), pansexual ($n = 51$, 8.1%), and homosexual ($n = 35$, 5.6%) participants. Male-identified individuals made up the majority of the sample ($n = 464$, 73.9%). The remainder of participants identified as female ($n = 98$, 15.6%) or transgender/non-binary/other ($n = 66$, 10.5%).

Participants were asked to complete an online survey about their use of Reddit and other social media. In particular, participants were asked about how they post, view, and interact with personal information and confessions on Reddit. The survey also contained scales related to participants' connectedness, life satisfaction, and support, as well as sensation-seeking and narcissism. Finally, participants were asked about their demographics.

Measures

Usage. Participants were asked about their usage of a) Reddit, b) social media, and c) the Internet as a whole. Participants were asked to estimate the previous day's use in these three areas, with the assumption that the previous day would be representative of the average day, and to round up to the nearest hour. Many participants did not round up or rounded to the nearest half hour. Half-hour reports were maintained, and anything below this was rounded to the nearest half hour. On average, participants reported spending 6.98 hours online the previous day ($SD = 3.88$), 3.67 hours on social media the previous day ($SD = 2.7$), and 2.29 hours on Reddit the previous day ($SD = 1.95$).

Unknown personal information. To assess whether a participant utilized Reddit for confessional purposes, participants were asked if they had ever posted personal information that is unknown to the majority or all of their friends and family. This variable was labelled *unknown personal information*, and 258 (41.1%) of participants reported sharing this type of information.

Confessions. Participants were asked about how often they post, view, or interact with subreddits designed for the sole purpose of confessions (e.g. *r/offmychest* or *r/Confession*). Interaction was measured in the form of comments as well as rating of posts, which operates in the form of upvoting and downvoting on Reddit. Participants answered on a scale ranging from *never* (1) to *always* (5). The majority of participants reported never posting on confession subreddits ($n = 487$, 77.5%), though one quarter posted at least occasionally ($M = 1.32$, $SD = .67$). Most participants ($n = 468$, 74.5%) reported reading confession posts at least occasionally ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.18$). Fewer people reported commenting upon ($M = 1.54$, $SD = .87$) or rating ($M = 1.92$, $SD = 1.14$) confession posts.

Connectedness. Connectedness was measured in two ways: by assessing feelings of social connectedness, as well as feelings of loneliness. The Social Connectedness Scale (Lee & Robbins, 1995) assessed the former, and participants were provided with eight statements and a scale ranging from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1), adapted from the original 7-point scale ($\alpha = .94$). A higher score indicates stronger feelings of social connectedness ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.13$). Loneliness was assessed using the Three-Item Loneliness Scale (Hughes, Waite, Hawkley, & Cacioppo, 2004), which includes three items measured on a scale from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1). This scale had acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .87$). A higher score indicates stronger feelings of loneliness ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.28$).

Life satisfaction. The five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was used to assess participants' life satisfaction ($\alpha = .89$). The original 7-point scale was altered to a 5-point one ranging from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1). A higher score indicates greater life satisfaction ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.06$).

Social support. Participants' feelings of social support were measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988), a 12-item scale ($\alpha = .91$). The original 7-point scale was altered to a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1). A higher score indicates a higher level of perceived social support ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .95$).

Sensation seeking. The Brief Sensation Seeking Scale (Hoyle, Stephenson, Palmgreen, Lorch & Donohew, 2002) was utilized to explore participants' sensation seeking ($\alpha = .79$). Participants responded to eight items on a scale ranging from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1). A higher score indicates a higher level of sensation seeking ($M = 3.15$, $SD = .87$).

Narcissism. Participants' narcissism was measured using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-13 (Gentile et al., 2013), a 13-item scale with high reliability (.82). Participants responded to statements on a scale ranging from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1), and a higher score indicates greater narcissistic tendencies ($M = 2.70$, $SD = .70$).

Throwaway accounts. Participants were asked about whether they used their regular username to post confessions, whether they used a "throwaway" account to post confessions, or whether they had done both in the past.

RESULTS

The first research question investigated the use of "throwaway" accounts for posting Reddit confessions. Of the 141 participants who reported having posted on a confession subreddit, only 28.4% ($n = 40$) reported always using their regular Reddit username. Twenty-seven percent of confession posters ($n = 38$) always used a "throwaway" account, and the majority of confession posters (44.7%, $n = 63$) reported having used both their regular username and a "throwaway" at some point in the past.

To test the second research question, participants were asked if they had ever posted information on Reddit that was unknown to most of their friends and family. This "unknown personal information" variable served as the grouping variable in the analysis, and connectedness, loneliness, life satisfaction, and support as the test variables. The effect for social connectedness was significant, $t(625) = 3.45$, $p = .001$, with those who had

shared unknown personal information on Reddit ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.15$) reporting lower feelings of social connectedness than those who had never shared such information on Reddit ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.10$). Correspondingly, loneliness was also a significant variable, $t(625) = 4.19$, $p < .001$. Participants who reported sharing unknown personal information on Reddit reported feeling significantly lonelier ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.28$) than those who did not share unknown personal information on Reddit ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.25$). Perceptions of social support, $t(625) = 2.53$, $p = .01$, were also lower for those who reported sharing unknown personal information ($M = 3.51$, $SD = .97$) than for those who reported never having done so ($M = 3.71$, $SD = .93$). Finally, satisfaction with life was marginally significant, $t(625) = 1.92$, $p = .06$, with those who had shared unknown personal information on Reddit ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.08$) exhibiting less life satisfaction than those who had never done so ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.05$).

Whereas unknown personal information could conceivably be shared on any subreddit, confession subreddits are a specific place designed for sharing such information. While some of the confession subreddits focus on wrongdoing specifically, such as *r/confession*, which highlights moral and legal wrongs, others take a broader approach to defining confession by allowing any self-relevant disclosure. RQ3 examined similar variables to RQ2, but in relation to confession-specific subreddits. In addition to the frequency of posting on confession subreddits, reading confessions and interacting with confessions (through comments or voting) were used as predictors. Four multiple linear regressions were run, each using the frequency variables (posting, reading, commenting, voting on confessions) as predictor variables, with one of four psychological variables (social connectedness, loneliness, life satisfaction, social support) as the dependent variable.

For social connectedness, the model was significant, $R^2 = .02$, $F(4, 623) = 3.36$, $p = .01$. Of the four frequency variables, only posting confessions significantly predicted feelings of social connectedness, $\beta = -.13$, $p < .01$. As confession posting frequency increases, feelings of social connectedness decrease. Frequency of confession reading ($\beta = .02$, $p = .70$), commenting ($\beta = -.02$, $p = .77$), and voting ($\beta = -.03$, $p = .61$) did not significantly add to the model.

With loneliness as the dependent variable, the model was marginally significant, $R^2 = .01$, $F(4, 623) = 2.22$, $p = .07$. Again, the frequency of posting confessions was the sole variable to significantly predict feelings of loneliness, $\beta = .13$, $p < .01$. As posting frequency increases, so too does feelings of loneliness. Frequency of confession reading ($\beta = -.03$, $p = .62$), commenting ($\beta = -.04$, $p = .54$), and voting ($\beta = .03$, $p = .65$) did not significantly add to the model.

The model for life satisfaction was not significant, $R^2 = .01$, $F(4, 623) = 1.31$, $p = .27$. However, frequency of posting Reddit confessions was a significant predictor of life satisfaction, $\beta = -.10$, $p = .04$. As posting frequency increases, feelings of life satisfaction decrease. Frequency of confession reading ($\beta < .01$, $p = .96$), commenting ($\beta = .02$, $p = .68$), and voting ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .86$) did not significantly add to the model.

Finally, when examining social support as the dependent variable, the regression model was similarly insignificant, $R^2 < .01$, $F(4, 623) = .33$, $p = .86$. None of the variables, including frequency of confession posting ($\beta = -.04$, $p = .46$), reading ($\beta < .03$, $p = .57$), commenting ($\beta < .01$, $p = .99$), nor voting ($\beta = -.03$, $p = .57$) significantly added to the model.

The first hypothesis predicted that those who report having posted intimate information unknown to most of their family and friends on Reddit would exhibit higher levels of a) sensation-seeking and b) narcissism in comparison to those who reported not having made such disclosures. Independent samples t-tests were used to test both H1a and H1b. For H1a, the effect was significant, $t(625) = 2.07$, $p = .04$. People who shared unknown personal information reported higher levels of sensation seeking ($M = 3.24$, $SD = .86$) than those who did not share this information on Reddit ($M = 3.09$, $SD = .87$). The final part of H1 examined narcissism in relation to the grouping variable. There were no significant differences in narcissism for those who shared unknown personal information on Reddit versus those who did not, $t(625) = 1.33$, $p = .18$.

H2 predicted that people who spend more time on Reddit, social media, and the Internet will be more likely to post unknown personal information on Reddit. To assess this hypothesis, the dichotomous unknown personal information variable was used as the grouping variable, and an independent samples t-test was run with the three usage variables as test variables. Results indicated significant effects for hours spent online,

$t(625) = 2.31, p = .02$, hours spent on social media, $t(625) = 3.76, p < .001$, and hours spent on Reddit, $t(506) = 3.92, p < .001$. Firstly, those who posted unknown personal information on Reddit ($M = 7.41, SD = 4.08$) reported spending more hours online than those who had not posted such information ($M = 6.68, SD = 3.71$). They also reported more daily social media time ($M = 4.16, SD = 2.91$) and Reddit time ($M = 2.66, SD = 2.08$) compared to the daily social media time ($M = 3.34, SD = 2.5$) and Reddit time ($M = 2.03, SD = 1.82$) of those who did not share unknown personal information on Reddit. Thus, the second hypothesis was supported.

DISCUSSION

The current work investigated Reddit from an online disinhibition perspective, with the belief that Reddit, as a site, provides a unique avenue for the sharing of personal information. Reddit is both social in the way of most other social networks, but largely anonymous in the manner of more salacious cyberspace locations, such as chat rooms or forums. At the most extreme, the social but distant nature of the site facilitates the sharing of personal information in the form of “confession” posts, or posts with the sole purpose of being confessionary in a way that posters seemingly cannot offline. The present study found a connection between the online self-disclosure of personal information, both generally and in the form of confessions, and a number of interesting and important variables.

Firstly, results indicated that participants who shared personal information on Reddit – information unknown to their friends and family – had on average lower levels of social connectedness, social support, and life satisfaction, as well as greater feelings of loneliness, when compared to those who did not share. It is evident from the findings that people who engage in the posting of deeply personal information on Reddit do so because they feel, for whatever reason, disconnected and alone. Given the large amount of mental health and self-harm confessions on Reddit, it is possible that the site offers support to those who need it most. Reddit, in itself, may substitute offline connection and support, and may have positive effects that keep individuals from further self-harm behaviors. Future work should investigate the offline behaviors of Redditors, particularly those who post in confession and mental health spaces.

Post frequency on confession-specific threads was also positively related to loneliness, and negatively related to social connectedness and perceived social support. The more frequently a person posts on confession subreddits, the more likely they are to lack connection and to have deep feelings of isolation. If it is people who lack connection and lack social support that utilize confession threads the most, these particular Reddit threads may operate as a place of therapeutic benefit. While the occasional therapy advertisement is present on these subreddits, there are no official resources offered to posters who may be struggling with mental, sexual, relational, or identity-related issues. This may be an avenue for future interventions by practitioners on Reddit, such as in the form of in-the-moment chat with a therapist or crisis counselor.

Due to the correlational nature of the data, it is also possible that using Reddit to share personal unknown information and/or confessions more often is the cause of loneliness and disconnection. A person who is using the Internet to replace offline connection might find responses in the form of online comments and ratings to be less fulfilling than the social support and companionship that one can find offline. The current study did not specifically examine offline versus online social support, but future scholarship should examine whether Reddit is used to replace or supplement support-seeking behaviors offline. Certain personalities might be more drawn to Reddit, and researchers might also choose to investigate the traits that are associated with the use of this particular anonymous online space.

The survey also indicated that people with more feelings of connection and higher perceived social support were less likely to share personal information online. They also had higher life satisfaction. Nonetheless, these users, while not sharing intimate information, engage with other Redditors' personal disclosures by reading them. It is possible that these users are able to boost their own perceived life satisfaction by means of comparing themselves to the users who are struggling. Self-enhancement by means of comparing oneself with others who are perceived to be worse off, known as downward social comparison (Wills, 1981) could explain the fascination with observing others' posts. Furthermore, social comparison has been related to the usage of other social networks, such as Facebook (Lee, 2014). There may very well be a subjective attitude of being "better than" that guides Redditor consumption of confessions, though it is also possible that

readers are fully driven by curiosity, boredom, or some other factor. Potential research on the uses and gratifications of Reddit and confession threads, in particular, would be useful. Compared to other popular online spaces like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, comparatively little is known about Reddit, its users, and why exactly it is so popular.

Furthermore, while interacting with confession posts in the form of comments was negatively related to social connectedness, it was not related to loneliness, social support perception, or life satisfaction. Rating Reddit confessions was not related to any of these four variables, which begets the question of why, exactly, people are rating and commenting upon confessions if not for a lack of offline connection and satisfaction. Future work should investigate whether engagement is driven by empathetic concern, or whether it is spurred by boredom and the tendency of confessions to have a high degree of shock value. Future work should also content analyze comments to uncover whether they provide social support and/or sympathy, or whether they operate as the avenues for judgment and scorn.

It is consequential that the sharing of intimate information on Reddit was significantly related to sensation seeking, as sensation seeking is commonly associated with toxic behaviors such as risky sexual practices (e.g. Kalichman et al., 1994; Zuckerman & Khulman, 2010). This finding illuminates that there is an element of adventure in sharing a personal, and relatively hidden, self-disclosure online that might facilitate similar feelings that one gets when put at physical, rather than reputational, risk. Gaither and Sellbom's (2003) findings suggest that those who score high on sensation seeking are less concerned with impression management, and this seems to extend to Reddit communication practices.

There is no evidence that making intimate self-disclosures is associated with narcissistic tendencies. This is surprising, given the very nature of confession-style Reddit posts. On subreddits such as r/confessions and r/offmychest, for example, the confessor is the center of attention. Since narcissists tend to crave a higher than normal degree of attention in everyday life (Buffardi & Campbell, 1998), it is likely that they crave attention online as well, and that seems to be the case even when their identity is not explicitly known. Narcissism has been studied in relation to Instagram (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016) and Facebook (Kapidzic, 2013; Skues et al., 2012), but rarely gets mentioned

in discussions of anonymous social spaces online. Perhaps it is the fact that one is often unnamed on Reddit that makes narcissists less likely to utilize this social network, in comparison with networks on which one might receive credit for content in a way that is linked to their offline persona.

Just over one quarter Redditors who posted confessions reported doing so using a “throwaway” account. This indicates that Reddit users likely do not consider their profiles to be a strong reflection of their offline self, in comparison to other social networks where one customarily lists their name and/or facial photo in the profile. Consequently, Redditors are often willing to post potentially embarrassing, damaging, immoral, and/or even criminal information linking back to their overall Reddit “persona.” While a “throwaway” account may provide even more perceived anonymity, Redditors may already feel they have enough concealment in their ordinary usage of the site. Future work should consider the type and valence of content posted using throwaway accounts in comparison to other usernames. One limitation of the present work is that there was no differentiation between confessions of a transgressive nature and others that fell outside this realm.

While sharing unknown personal information was associated with amount of time spent online, on social media, and on Reddit, it is impossible to know in which direction this relationship exists. It is possible that those who spend more time online and on Reddit develop a desire to share, particularly if they frequent subreddits encouraging such behavior. It is also possible that those who want to self-disclose online seek out the Internet, social media, and Reddit more often. This is a limitation, as it is with all survey research, of the current study. Future work must take an experimental approach in order to expand what is known about sites like Reddit, 4Chan, and Yik Yak, the ways that individuals use them, and the effects they have. The current work was also limited in that it relied on self-selection and, thus, may not be reflective of each and every person who posts or lurks on Reddit. Furthermore, while there was great diversity in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity, a rarity for research of this type, there remained the problems of a majority-Caucasian and majority-millennial sample.

Reddit is an extremely popular website, dubbed the “front page of the Internet” for a reason. The present study investigated the sharing and consumption of personal information on Reddit, both in terms of sharing intimate information unknown to friends

and family in general, as well as in posts on the popular confession-specific subreddits. Results indicated that personal self-disclosures on Reddit are significantly related to feelings of connection, social support, and life satisfaction, as well as traits like sensation-seeking and narcissism. While Reddit has long been known for its “throwaway” accounts, the current work makes it seem possible that, for some at least, the site itself operates as a “throwaway” social network, wherein people visit to see, post, and do things they cannot or will not do on anonymous social media.

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