

The Social Complexities of Transgender Identity Disclosure on Social Network Sites

Oliver L. Haimson

Department of Informatics
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA, USA
ohaimson@uci.edu

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CHI'17 Extended Abstracts, May 06-11, 2017, Denver, CO, USA
ACM 978-1-4503-4656-6/17/05.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/3027063.3027136>

Abstract

In my dissertation, I examine how people manage stigmatized disclosures, and how disclosure, mental health, and social support are associated, during gender transition on social media. I first use self-reported measures from a survey about gender transition on Facebook to understand people's experiences with transgender identity disclosure. In the next phase of my dissertation research, I examine these same variables by analyzing transition blogs on Tumblr. Results will give insight into difficulties as well as potentially relieving capabilities of self-disclosure on social media. Additionally, I will uncover ways that affordances of particular social media platforms, specifically Tumblr and Facebook, enable or constrain sensitive self-disclosures.

Author Keywords

Social media; online identity; self-disclosure; social support; mental health; life transitions; gender; LGBT.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

My dissertation answers two primary questions, both in the context of trans identity on SNSs:

1. How do people manage disclosures of stigmatized major life events on SNSs?
2. What are the relationships between disclosure of a major life transition on SNSs, mental health, and social support?

Hypothesis 1: Mental health improves after trans identity disclosures.

Hypothesis 2: Social support moderates the relationship between trans identity disclosures and mental health on SNSs.

Context and Motivation

When people face major life changes, they must then make complicated decisions about how to disclose information about that change to the people around them. While such disclosures have never been simple, the pervasive and often public nature of social media complicates managing information disclosure. Particularly during life events that involve potential disapproval or estrangement from others in one's network (e.g., changes in relationship status, job termination, coming out as gay or lesbian, gender transition), decisions about how, when, and to whom to disclose can be difficult. While disclosure can be a liberating experience, making oneself known as a person with a stigmatized identity can open one up to discrimination and harassment. Thus, it is unclear the extent to which one's mental health improves or suffers after a sensitive disclosure, and how social support can mitigate some of disclosure's negative consequences.

In my dissertation, I use gender transition as a case study to understand both how people manage disclosures of stigmatized life changes, and the relationships between disclosure, mental health, and social support in online contexts. Because few other life transitions encompass such potentially drastic, numerous, and complex identity changes, gender transition allows insight into social network site (SNS) practices in a way that other major life changes do not. Studying the experiences of transgender¹ SNS users gives a unique view into the relationships between self-disclosure, mental health, and social support during

¹ Transgender is a term that refers to "people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender" [22]. I use "trans" for the

identity transitions, which I examine in my dissertation. Understanding trans experiences also illuminates how SNS features and affordances influence peoples' ability to disclose information about sensitive life transitions to their online networks.

Related Work

Disclosure of Major Life Events On Social Media

Disclosure decisions involve weighing benefits, such as social support and psychological well-being, with the possibilities of rejection and discrimination [8]. People disclose personal information more often in computer-mediated environments [15], and social media enables efficient means for self-disclosure to a wide audience. Yet, for some, participating in a social media environment requires disclosures that are more difficult, or more public, than they are comfortable with. Indeed, online, "active participation in the networked world requires disclosure of information simply to be a part of it" [18]. Life transitions' temporal aspects also make disclosure complex. Disclosure is rarely a one-time process, even for non-stigmatized information. Instead, one's identity must be disclosed time and time again throughout their lifetime, causing difficulties for many with concealable stigmatized identities [11].

Relationships between Trans Identity Disclosure, Mental Health, and Social Support

Previous work has examined the relationships between gender transition status and mental health, yet results are inconsistent. Some studies have found that the

remainder of this extended abstract to refer to the broad transgender population.

further one is in their transition, the *less* depression and anxiety they may face [5,17]. Others have found that minority stressors such as discrimination and disclosure lead to *more* depression, anxiety [3], and even suicidal ideation [19] for trans people. The inconclusiveness of prior results indicates that several effects may be in play here: a transition into the gender and identity that matches one's internal self clearly has positive mental health effects. At the same time, as one makes themselves known as trans, they encounter myriad discrimination and harassment [14]. Extant research suggests that social support has a moderating effect on the relationship between transition status and mental health. That is, social support from one's network can mitigate the negative effects of stressors like discrimination and harassment [3,5]. However, these relationships have not been examined in a social media context, as I do in this dissertation.

Research Approach

Worldview

In this dissertation I apply both a post-positivist and a constructivist worldview. It is untraditional to mix these approaches, but this mixture is necessary and important given my research topic. Statistical modeling can uncover relationships between variables like disclosure, social support, and mental health. At the same time, as seminal queer theory work has shown [7], identity and gender are complex, socially constructed, continually changing, and unique to each person in ways that cannot be captured using quantitative methods. These approaches are not necessarily discordant; philosopher Christine Korsgaard argued that "constructivism and realism are perfectly compatible. If constructivism is true, then normative concepts may ... be taken to refer to certain complex

facts about the solutions to practical problems faced by self-conscious rational beings" [16]. As such, I employ both worldviews in my data collection and analysis.

Research Approach

I apply an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach. First, I use statistical modeling and computational linguistics to understand the relationships between disclosure, social support, and mental health. Next, I use qualitative analysis of open-ended survey data and interviews to validate findings and add nuance based on people's complex experiences. This combination of methods provides a better understanding than either approach could provide alone [9].

Study Design and Methods

My dissertation consists of two phases: a survey of Facebook users, and a computational analysis of Tumblr transition blogs.

Phase 1: Survey of Facebook Users

METHODS

The first phase of research presented in this dissertation includes two studies [12,13], both of which draw from the results of an online survey aimed at trans people who experienced gender transition on SNSs.

STUDY 1: DISCLOSURE, STRESS, AND SUPPORT

This study [12] addresses research questions 1 and 2 by examining participants' experiences with stress, disclosure, and support throughout the gender transition process on Facebook. Results demonstrate that disclosure-related Facebook account management activities impact stress during gender transition both

Phase 2 Methods and Study Design

- ❑ Getting familiar with and immersed in the data
- ❑ Data collection (~250 Tumblr transition blogs)
- ❑ Topic modeling over time
- ❑ Characterizing and detecting disclosures
- ❑ Measuring mental health and affect over time
- ❑ Measuring social support over time
- ❑ Understanding relationships between disclosures, mental health, and social support
- ❑ Interviews (~ $N = 20$) to understand motivations and validate findings

positively and negatively. In particular, I argue that although practices around disclosure on Facebook are stressful, online network support can mitigate some of this stress.

STUDY 2: DIGITAL FOOTPRINTS AND CHANGING NETWORKS

This study [13] addresses research question 1 by reflecting on the ways that digital footprints representative of a past identity, and the networks surrounding that past identity, often persist even in cases when people wish to forget that past. Online data, in the form of photos, names, and gender markers, can provide a link between one's social network and their previous identity, which can be problematic when trying to separate from that identity. Thus, during identity transitions, people attempt to manage this link both by editing self-presentational data, and by editing the configuration of the network itself. Because SNSs are often designed to support persistence of networks and engagement with digital content from one's past, those who wish to edit digital artifacts and friends lists must do so manually, which is time consuming and can be emotionally painful. Designing explicitly for forgetting in addition to remembering is an important future design challenge.

Phase 2: Computational Analysis of Tumblr Transition Blogs

This study addresses the dissertation's overarching research questions, but using a platform-specific (Tumblr) and method-specific (computational linguistics followed by interviews) approach. In this work, I apply computational linguistic and topic modeling techniques to "transition blogs," a common genre on Tumblr, to understand how linguistic indicators of mental health change after gender transition disclosures. These

methods allow me to extract meaning from a large sample of blogs over a substantial period of time.

Expected Contributions

This work contributes an empirical examination of how disclosure, mental health, and social support are associated during life transitions on social media. My work is the first so far to empirically study gender transition and trans identities on SNSs, building onto existing work on identity experimentation online (e.g., [4,21,23]), life transitions and online identity on social media (e.g., [6,10,20,24]), and disclosure on SNSs (e.g., [1,2,18]). Additionally, few researchers have linked queer theory with HCI, an important connection that has natural overlap given the importance of categorization in each. Finally, I make a methodological contribution by demonstrating the feasibility of using computational linguistic methods to understand the relationships between disclosure and mental health over time.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my advisor, Gillian Hayes, for all of her support and guidance throughout my PhD, and to my committee members, Gloria Mark, Bonnie Ruberg, and Andrea Forte, for their valuable feedback. I would like to acknowledge Jed Brubaker and Lynn Dombrowski, my co-authors on some of this research. Thanks also to Nazanin Andalibi, and to STAR Group members, for continued support and feedback. This work is funded in part by a National Science Foundation GRFP fellowship.

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