

## The effects of teacher self-disclosure via *Facebook* on teacher credibility

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Research suggests that teachers who personalize their teaching through the use of humor, stories, enthusiasm, and self-disclosure are perceived by their students to be effective in explaining course content. This experimental study examined the effects of computer-mediated teacher self-disclosure on perceptions of teacher credibility. Participants who accessed the *Facebook* website of a teacher high in self-disclosure reported higher levels of teacher credibility than participants who viewed a low self-disclosure *Facebook* website. Implications for classroom pedagogy, technology use, and areas for future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** self-disclosure; *Facebook*; competence; trustworthiness; caring; teacher credibility

### Introduction

In the classroom, teachers spend a considerable amount of time covering course content; however, they are also likely to self-disclose by sharing information about themselves, telling personal stories, and conveying their personal beliefs (Nussbaum, Comadena, and Holladay 1987). Wheelless and Grotz define self-disclosure as ‘any message about the self that a person communicates to another’ (1976, 47). Fusani contends that teacher self-disclosure is a ‘rich personal source of student-faculty communication’ (1994, 249). Research suggests that teachers who personalize their teaching through the use of humor, stories, enthusiasm, and self-disclosure are perceived by their students to be effective in explaining course content (Andersen, Norton, and Nussbaum 1981; Bryant, Comiskey, and Zillman 1979; Bryant et al. 1980; Civikly 1986; Norton and Nussbaum 1980). Recent research has explored the perceived benefits of teacher self-disclosure via *Facebook* on student outcomes (Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds 2007). The present study examines the impact of computer-mediated teacher self-disclosure on students’ perceptions of teacher credibility.<sup>1</sup>

### Teacher communication behavior

Research suggests that teachers who relate well with their students are more likely to be perceived as a credible source (Teven and Hanson 2004). Credibility refers to a

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receiver's perception of the degree to which a source is perceived as believable (McCroskey 1992). McCroskey and Teven (1999) argue that teacher credibility is the degree to which students perceive the instructor's level of competence, trustworthiness, and caring. *Competence* refers to the extent to which a teacher is perceived to know what he or she is talking about, whereas *trustworthiness* is the degree to which the teacher is perceived as honest. *Caring* refers to the extent to which the teacher is perceived to have the students' best interests in mind.

Research has revealed that teachers who are high in immediacy – nonverbal behaviors such as gesturing, smiling at the class, and speaking with vocal variation that signal closeness (Mehrabian 1971) – are often perceived as having greater credibility than non-immediate teachers (Thweatt and McCroskey 1998). McBride and Wahl (2005) argue that self-disclosure is one strategy that teachers can use to increase immediacy. Although much research has examined teacher self-disclosure in the face-to-face classroom environment, scholars have examined the construct via computer-mediated communication (O'Sullivan, Hunt, and Lippert 2004). O'Sullivan, Hunt, and Lippert examined mediated immediacy – 'the communicative cues in mediated channels that can shape perceptions of psychological closeness between interactants' – and found that factors such as font-use, language, and punctuation all affect student perceptions of teacher immediacy via computer-mediated channels (2004, 471). Furthermore, they found students who viewed a teacher's website with high levels of mediated immediacy, including forms of self-disclosure, reported high levels of motivation and affective learning, indicating positive attitudes toward the course, recommended behaviors, and the teacher. Therefore, teachers can increase mediated immediacy by including forms of self-disclosure on personal web pages; however, to date, research has not explored the effects of teacher self-disclosure on student perceptions of teacher credibility via virtual social networks.

### Teacher communication via Facebook

Social networks, such as *Friendster*, *MySpace*, and *Facebook*, offer users a medium to create a virtual identity and network with friends and family. *Facebook*, in particular, has become increasingly popular on college campuses as the network once operated exclusively for those in an academic community. As the fourth most trafficked website in the world, over 90 million active users in over 55,000 regional, work-related, and school-related networks use *Facebook* to post personal information such as pictures, hobbies, and messages to communicate with friends and family (*Facebook* 2008). The *Facebook* network is increasingly being used not only by students but also by teachers (Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds 2007).

The *Facebook* experience is quite different than an instructor's typical university-housed website – students and teachers can easily communicate with one another based on their network affiliation through *Facebook*. *Facebook* is a highly interactive virtual social network. Although it may be simple to query a teacher's website on a standard search engine, any *Facebook* user can easily search and view any other user's page through the *Facebook* network. Additionally, *Facebook* friends can post messages on a user's 'Wall', a discussion-board like device that allows users to communicate through the network.

Scholars have begun to explore the benefits and limitations associated with a teacher's use of *Facebook*. In a recent study, Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds (2007) found that students exposed to a high self-disclosing teacher on *Facebook* reported

higher levels of motivation, affective learning, and evaluated the climate of the teacher's classroom more positively than students who viewed a teacher's *Facebook* page featuring limited self-disclosures. Although students encouraged teachers to use *Facebook*, they also suggested that instructors practice restraint by managing the boundaries of public and private information (Petronio 2002) and avoid 'spying' on students. Absent from this line of research is how a teacher's use of *Facebook* might impact students' perceptions of his or her credibility.

### Summary and research hypothesis

Research suggests that highly immediate teachers are viewed as more caring and credible (Thweatt and McCroskey 1998) and caring teachers are often likely to receive positive evaluations (Teven and McCroskey 1997). In addition, students report positive perceptions of teachers who exhibit high levels of mediated immediacy (O'Sullivan, Hunt, and Lippert 2004). Teachers may enhance their credibility if they use *Facebook*, showing they care about their students and understand contemporary student interests. Teven and Hanson argue that 'a teacher who relates well with students is more likely to be perceived as a credible source' (2004, 40). They suggest that nonverbally immediate and caring teachers generate more positive student perceptions of credibility. Students may perceive a teacher's use of *Facebook* as an attempt to foster positive relationships with his or her students, and as a method of increasing mediated immediacy (O'Sullivan, Hunt, and Lippert 2004), both of which may have a positive effect on the teacher's credibility. Therefore, we advanced the following research hypothesis:

- H<sub>1</sub>: Participants who view a *Facebook* website of a teacher high in self-disclosure will report higher levels of teacher competence, trustworthiness, and caring (credibility) than participants who view a low self-disclosure *Facebook* website.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 129 undergraduate students (122 first-year students, 4 sophomores, 3 juniors) enrolled in sections of the basic communication course at a large Midwestern university. The participants represented various academic disciplines, as the course is required of all students at the university. The sample consisted of 38 males and 91 females, with an average age of 18.74 years (ranging from 18 to 31 years). The racial/ethnic distribution was 86% Caucasians, 6.2% African-Americans, 2.3% Asian Pacific Islanders, and 4.7% Hispanics.

### *Manipulation*

Teacher self-disclosure on *Facebook* was manipulated in photographs, biographical information, and posts on 'The Wall' in three experimental groups (high, medium, and low self-disclosures). The teacher on the *Facebook* website, a female graduate teaching assistant who taught the basic communication course, voluntarily provided all photographs. Photographs in the high self-disclosure condition showed the confederate in various social situations with friends and family in public locations. In this condition, the confederate also offered personal information about favorite

books, movie quotes, and relationship status. She also indicated that she was a member of several campus groups such as 'Cubs Fans' and 'Will Farrell Lovers'. Communication graduate teaching assistants were also asked to post fictitious comments on the 'The Wall' that highlighted social gatherings (e.g., dancing, weekend get-togethers) the confederate attended. In the medium self-disclosure condition, the photographs were limited to the confederate with family at her home. The confederate only disclosed favorite movies, books, and quotes. The low self-disclosure page featured only a face-shot of the confederate. She only disclosed information about her position at the university. In order to provide a large amount of self-disclosure in the high condition, no comments were made on 'The Wall' in either the medium or low self-disclosure web pages.

### Procedures

The instructors of record offered participants extra credit for participation in the study. Participants came to a campus computer lab during set times on weekday evenings and, upon entering, were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions. In terms of the randomization process, the first participant to enter the lab was assigned to the first condition, the second person to the second condition, the third person to the third condition, the fourth person to the first condition, etc. This process continued until all participants were randomly assigned to a condition. Each participant sat at a computer station and logged into their *Facebook* account (all participants had *Facebook* accounts). After reading an informed consent passage, the participants were then told that they would be viewing a *Facebook* site of an instructor at the university. The researchers provided each participant with the pseudonym of an instructor and asked each participant to locate the teacher's *Facebook* website. The researchers then instructed each participant to browse the *Facebook* site and develop an impression of what it would be like to be a student in a class with the teacher. Participants were then instructed to complete the research questionnaire.

### Measurement credibility

Teacher credibility was operationalized using Teven and McCroskey's (1997) measure of credibility. The instrument is composed of 18, seven-step semantic-differential scales, six each for the *competence* (intelligent/unintelligent, inexpert/expert, competent/incompetent, uninformed/informed, bright/stupid, untrained/trained); *trustworthiness* (untrustworthy/trustworthy, phony/genuine, dishonest/honest, moral/immoral, honorable/dishonorable, unethical/ethical); and *caring* (insensitive/sensitive, cares about me/does not care about me, self-centered/not self-centered, concerned with me/not concerned with me, not understanding/understanding, has my interests at heart/does not have my interests at heart) dimensions. For each bipolar adjective pair, participants were asked to place an 'X' on a blank closest to the term that best represented their perceptions of the instructor they evaluated. The middle blank was considered neutral. The items were reverse coded to reduce participant response bias. The measures had alpha reliabilities of .81 for competence ( $M = 30.17$ ,  $SD = 5.06$ ), .78 for trustworthiness ( $M = 31.12$ ,  $SD = 4.90$ ), and .72 for caring ( $M = 28.19$ ,  $SD = 5.08$ ).

### Manipulation check

Participants responded to two items designed to assess the effectiveness of the independent variable manipulation: ‘The instructor described on the *Facebook* website provided photographs’ (high:  $M = 4.59$ ,  $SD = .82$ ; medium:  $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ; low:  $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ) and ‘The instructor described on the *Facebook* website reveals personal information about her personal life’ (high:  $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = .51$ ; medium:  $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = .81$ ; low:  $M = 1.68$ ,  $SD = .93$ ). The items contained a five-point Likert scale with options ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’.

### Results

A one-way ANOVA performed on the manipulation check revealed a statistically significant difference between the three groups on the photograph item ( $F(2, 126) = 28.45$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .31$ ) and personal information item ( $F(2, 126) = 152.28$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .71$ ). Participants who viewed the teacher’s *Facebook* site with high self-disclosure reported higher mean scores than participants who viewed the teacher’s *Facebook* page containing low self-disclosure, indicating that the manipulation of teacher self-disclosure was successful. Table 1 provides cell means and standard deviations.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for manipulation check by experimental condition.

	High self-disclosure	Medium self-disclosure	Low self-disclosure
Instructor provided photographs	$M = 4.59_a$ $SD = .82$	$M = 3.39_a$ $SD = 1.28$	$M = 2.66_a$ $SD = 1.43$
Instructor reveals personal information	$M = 4.50_b$ $SD = .51$	$M = 3.75_b$ $SD = .81$	$M = 1.68_b$ $SD = .93$

Note: Means with a common subscript are significantly different at the .05 level.

The hypothesis predicted that participants who viewed the *Facebook* website of a teacher high in self-disclosure would report higher levels of teacher competence, trustworthiness, and caring (credibility) than participants who viewed the low self-disclosure *Facebook* page. This hypothesis was partially supported. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference between the high self-disclosure and low self-disclosure conditions,  $F(2, 124) = 4.62$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ . Participants in the high self-disclosure condition reported higher levels of trustworthiness ( $M = 32.16$ ,  $SD = 5.17$ ),  $F(2, 126) = 3.81$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ , and caring ( $M = 29.36$ ,  $SD = 5.51$ ),  $F(2, 125) = 5.41$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .08$ , than participants in the low self-disclosure group (trustworthiness:  $M = 29.44$ ,  $SD = 3.80$ ; caring:  $M = 26.12$ ,  $SD = 4.09$ ). Analysis failed to reveal a significant difference between the high condition ( $M = 31.14$ ,  $SD = 4.83$ ) and low condition ( $M = 29.02$ ,  $SD = 4.20$ ) on competence,  $F(2, 125) = 1.88$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ . Table 2 provides cell means and standard deviations.

### Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the impact of teacher self-disclosure via *Facebook* on students’ perceptions of teacher credibility. The findings suggest that teachers who exhibit high levels of self-disclosure on a *Facebook* website may appear

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for teacher credibility by experimental condition.

	High self-disclosure	Medium self-disclosure	Low self-disclosure
Competence	$M = 31.14$ $SD = 4.83$	$M = 30.30$ $SD = 5.86$	$M = 29.02$ $SD = 4.20$
Trustworthiness	$M = 32.16_b$ $SD = 5.17$	$M = 31.64$ $SD = 5.21$	$M = 29.44_b$ $SD = 3.80$
Caring	$M = 29.36_c$ $SD = 5.51$	$M = 28.95_d$ $SD = 4.98$	$M = 26.12_{cd}$ $SD = 4.09$

Note: Means with a common subscript are significantly different at the .05 level.

more credible than teachers low in computer-mediated self-disclosure. However, given the nature of the *Facebook* network and the small to moderate effect sizes reported here, we recommend that teachers approach the use of *Facebook* cautiously. The present study suggests, however, that when a teacher self-discloses certain information, such as personal pictures, messages from friends and family, and opinions on certain topics, students might perceive similarities between themselves and the instructor. This invites a rich area of future research in terms of the relationship between mediated self-disclosure and other important student perceptions, such as immediacy and homophily.

The results of this study contribute to prior research that suggests teacher self-disclosure has a positive influence on important variables such as teacher clarity (Wambach and Brothen 1997), student participation (Fusani 1994; Goldstein and Benassi 1994), and student motivation, affective learning, and classroom climate (Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds 2007; Sorensen 1989). Teachers can present themselves through *Facebook* as individuals who function outside of the classroom in social situations unlike the traditional face-to-face classroom environment.

Although our findings reveal a positive association between teacher self-disclosure and perceptions of teacher credibility, instructors should be consistent with their self-disclosure on *Facebook* and their teaching style in the classroom. Teachers who exhibit a relaxed personality on *Facebook* with informal photographs and entertaining messages, but operate their classrooms strictly, may create violated expectations resulting in negative effects on students. Future research might address the relationship between the instructor's self-disclosure on *Facebook* and their teaching style in the classroom to examine if inconsistencies have adverse effects on their credibility or on important student outcomes such as motivation and learning. Scholars must also explore if a curvilinear relationship exists in terms of teacher self-disclosure on *Facebook*. In other words, can teacher self-disclosure reach an exceedingly high level and result in negative student perceptions?

Certain forms of face-to-face self-disclosure can have disastrous effects on teacher credibility (Kearney et al. 1991); however, the nature of computer-mediated communication allows teachers to determine how they appear on *Facebook*. Teachers can strategically reveal photographs and personal information that present them as competent, trustworthy, and caring instructors. Scholars might explore how certain forms of mediated self-disclosure, such as photographs, personal beliefs, and relationship status, affect student perceptions of teacher credibility.

Despite the benefits of *Facebook*, there is a potential hazard – *Facebook* friends can post messages on a user's 'Wall', a discussion-board like device that allows users

to communicate through the network. Although teachers might have control over the content they disclose on their university-housed web pages, friends, strangers, or other students can post defamatory messages on users' *Facebook* websites, heightening concerns about its impact on teacher credibility. Instructors may violate student expectations of proper teacher behaviors and damage their credibility if they self-disclose on *Facebook* while communicating with students. Kearney et al. (1991) reported that students react negatively if teachers misbehave and stray from the subject while sharing personal information in the classroom. However, Thweatt and McCroskey found that highly immediate teachers were viewed as more caring and credible than non-immediate teachers regardless if misbehaviors were noted. In fact, they note that high teacher immediacy tends to 'soften the negative impact of teacher misbehaviors' (1998, 348). With this in mind, teachers who potentially engage in negative self-disclosure via *Facebook* might be rated favorably simply due to their presence in the virtual social network.

It is important to note that our findings do not indicate a significant difference between the high and low self-disclosure conditions on competence. However, scholars note that teacher immediacy and caring can have significant effects on an instructor's credibility, specifically competence and trustworthiness (Teven and Hanson 2004). If teachers present themselves on *Facebook* as highly immediate and caring, they may positively affect student perceptions of teacher competence. It is important to note, however, that certain self-disclosures can have negative effects on teacher competence (Kearney et al. 1991). The nature of the *Facebook* network allows teachers to determine how they appear to student users. Teachers can strategically reveal photographs and personal information that would unlikely have negative ramifications on their perceived level of competence. Future research might further explore how computer-mediated teacher self-disclosure can impact the three dimensions of teacher credibility – competence, caring, and trustworthiness (Teven and McCroskey 1997).

This study is not without limitations. This study explored participants' reactions to a female teacher's use of *Facebook* as the confederate was a female graduate teaching assistant. Scholars must examine how a teacher's sex, age, and status (e.g., graduate teaching assistant or a tenured professor) affect student perceptions and learning outcomes. In the present study, participants reported their perceptions of a teacher they did not know. Without a doubt, teacher-student relationships evolve throughout the course of an academic term. Future research might explore how student evaluations of a teacher's use of *Facebook* might differ according to their familiarity with the instructor and how specific types of teacher self-disclosure (e.g., relationship disclosures, photographs, political beliefs, etc.) can influence student perceptions (Kearney et al. 1991).

Emerging as a contemporary technological tool, *Facebook* offers substantial benefits for students and their instructors. Teachers may utilize *Facebook* as a way to foster their relationships with students; however, they should proceed with caution. The large amount of social software options that are available to users (e.g., *Facebook*, *MSN*, *Friendster*) can increase the likelihood that one teacher who appears on one virtual social network might also appear on another application. Therefore, teachers who are part of virtual social networks should remain attuned to the technological complexities that accompany participation in these networks. At the same time, we anticipate that students can learn from *Facebook* using teachers who present themselves in a positive light on this virtual social network and others. In the end, we

hope that this study offers instructors a unique method to nurture communication in the traditional classroom and in the online environment, while at the same time appearing as competent, trustworthy, and caring teachers.

### Note

1. A prior version of this article was included in a proceeding of the Russian Communication Association, 2008.

### Notes on contributors

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