

From Bed to the Web: A Systematic Review Comparing Offline and Online Sexual Self-disclosure

Retno Setyaningsih^{1,2}, M. G. Bagus Ani Putra¹

¹ Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Airlangga

² Department of Psychology, Universitas Islam Sultan Agung

Keywords : Relationship Satisfaction, Sexual Risk Behaviour.

Abstract : Sexual self-disclosure is one of the most intimate self-disclosure, but the content is culturally stigmatized as a taboo not to be communicated in a public area. Sexual self-disclosure is common in the romantic relationship context, and believed to be related with relationship satisfaction. This systematic review examined existing research to compare offline and online sexual self-disclosure. The aim of this review was to compare the theoretical background, pattern, role, antecedent factors and outcome of sexual self-disclosure between offline and online situations. Although there are significant differences between offline and online patterns of sexual self-disclosure, both may be used as instrumental tools for maintaining the relationship and in turn lead to relationship satisfaction. Compared with men, women are more restrained about discussing sexual topics in both situations, perhaps due to cultural influence. In an online context, sexual self-disclosure also has a strong relationship with offline sexual risk behavior.

1 INTRODUCTION

Self-disclosure in an interpersonal relationship has an important role. From the perspective of social penetration theory, a more intimate relationship leads to greater willingness to open much more personal information (Altman and Taylor, 1973). People will also be more open to people who are liked, and people will love other parties who want to be more open, so that in this case reciprocity in the process of self-disclosure becomes important (Collins and Miller, 1994). Self-disclosure is an important social psychology variable as it relates to one's mental health. People who know themselves and are able to open themselves are spared from neurotic symptoms, but many can't do this due to various factors (Jourard, 1958). The research on self-disclosure in general is abundant, but for specific topics and culturally considered taboos such as the topic of sexual research it is still limited.

How many people are willing to disclose about a sexual topic with a partner, and what impact such disclosure has are an interesting topic to study. Discussing sexual preferences is assumed to have a

positive impact on romantic relationships, but not everyone can do it.

Talking about sexual topics is usually done in private rooms (in bed), especially by romantic couples who discuss sexual preferences or their likes and dislikes regarding their sexual activities. Talking openly about it with a partner is believed to increase sexual satisfaction and reduce sexual problems (Sandra Byers, 2011). On the other hand, teenagers also enjoy talking about it in public spaces with their peers. However, those sexual topics are often not related to themselves or direct self-disclosure, but rather about disguised disclosure through humor (Sanford and Eder, 1984). Interestingly, technological developments allow communication mediated by computers (the internet) across boundaries of space and time. So face-to-face communication is transformed into computer-mediated communication.

The main purpose of this study was to compare sexual self-disclosure in offline and online contexts. Further, more specifically, the aims of this study were to review the theoretical foundations, determine the pattern of sexual self-disclosure in offline and online contexts, understand the antecedent factors, analyze the role of sexual self-

disclosure, and review the outcome of sexual self-disclosure represented in the reviewed articles.

2 METHOD

We conducted a structured literature review following the guidelines by Webster and Watson (2002). Three databases (Google Scholar, ResearchGate and Sage Publication) were used to search for articles related to this topic, and were performed in January 2018. A total of 986 titles were found when we retrieved relevant studies which were related to the keywords "sexual self-disclosure", "sexual self-disclosure" + online, and sexting. Next, titles and abstracts were reviewed. At this point, we counted on the empirically tested studies, which focused on sexual self-disclosure both as a dependent and an antecedent variable, in offline and online contexts. The search and review of abstracts was done by the first author. Further research that meets the criteria was reviewed in conjunction with the second author. Surprisingly, studies focusing on sexual self-disclosure have not received much attention compared to general self-disclosure or sexual topics in general. Initially the researchers also paid attention to sexting, one form of online sexual self-disclosure (Van Ouytsel et al., 2017), but eventually research on that topic was excluded because sexting does not always refer to disclosing about self. Finally, 13 (8 offline and the remaining online/digital) articles met the criteria and were included in this study.

3 RESULTS

Analysis of the 7 offline and 4 online articles found five major themes: theoretical foundations, patterns of sexual self-disclosure, antecedent factors of sexual self-disclosure, role of sexual self-disclosure, and the outcome and consequence of sexual self-disclosure.

3.1 Theoretical Foundations

Based on our review we observed that past research has approached sexual self-disclosure using a variety of theoretical perspectives. The most prevalent among these is the social exchange theory. This theory states that people are motivated to engage in social acts for gaining social reward and avoiding social cost (Homans, 1961). Thus, disclosure about

sexual topics was motivated by the urgency of maintaining or increasing the intimacy of a relationship.

3.2 Patterns of Sexual Self-disclosure

The pattern difference between offline and online sexual self-disclosure is interesting to understand. The patterns of sexual self-disclosure relied on the relationship context. Our review was based on the target of sexual self-disclosure and measurement used in those studies.

Considering who was the target of sexual self-disclosure, we found a significant difference in both conditions. Sexual self-disclosure in offline contexts usually happened in romantic, dating or marriage relationships (Byers and Demmons, 1999; Greene and Faulkner, 2005; MacNeil and Byers, 2005, 2009; Tanwar and Navya, 2017; Brown and Weigel, 2017). However, in the online context, the relationship context was not specified, only declared as "cyber friend" (Chiou, 2006; Chiou & Wan, 2006; Chiou, 2007) or huge audience (Bobkowski, Brown and Neffa, 2012).

Talking about the measurement of sexual self-disclosure, the initial scale of sexual self-disclosure was developed by Herold and Way (1988) and Snell Jr. et al. (1989). Herold and Way (1988) measured sexual self-disclosure as the willingness to discuss six topic areas: my personal views on sexual morality, premarital sexual intercourse, oral sex, masturbation, my sexual thoughts or fantasies, and sexual problems or difficulties. Further, Snell Jr. et al. (1989) defined sexual self-disclosure as the willingness to discuss twelve sexual topics: (1) sexual behaviors, (2) sexual sensations, (3) sexual fantasies, (4) sexual attitudes, (5) the meaning of sex, (6) negative sexual affect, (7) positive sexual affect, (8) distressing sexual experiences, (10) sexual responsibility, (11) sexual dishonesty, and (12) rape. Both of them were not strictly different, and they emphasized the willingness to talk about sexual topics.

There were interesting findings in the differences in offline and online sexual self-disclosure patterns based on their measurements. In the offline context, three patterns were recorded in this review. Sexual self-disclosure was defined by willingness to discuss sexual topics (Herold and Way, 1988a; Snell, Jr. et al., 1989; Greene and Faulkner, 2005; Tanwar and Navya, 2017); the extent of disclosure about likes and dislikes with respect to sexual activity to a dating partner (Byers and Demmons, 1999; MacNeil and Byers, 2005, 2009), and report of the actual

level of talking about avoided sexual topics with a partner (Brown and Weigel, 2017).

In the online context, two patterns of sexual self-disclosure were recorded. First, sexual self-disclosure was defined as the willingness to talk about sexual topics (15 sexual topics that varied on level of intimacy) (Yang, Yang and Chiou, 2010; Chiou, 2006, 2007; Chiou and Wan, 2006). This pattern did not differ from the offline context; however, the target of sexual self-disclosure was strictly different. Second, online sexual self-disclosure was defined as uploading pictures or texts that reference revealing personal sexual behavior (Bobkowski, Brown and Neffa, 2012). According to the last pattern in the online context, we believe that although online sexual self-disclosure has not been widely studied, the phenomenon is widely encountered on social networking sites.

3.3 Antecedent Factors of Sexual Self-disclosure

Talking about what factors influence someone's willingness to discuss sexual topics is interesting. The review revealed several factors had a significant influence, and those were different in offline and online contexts.

First, gender had a significant influence. In general self-disclosure, previous research shows that, compared to males, females were more willing to give personal information to others (Dindia and Allen, 1992). However, in sexual self-disclosure, males were more open about sexual topics in both context situations (Greene and Faulkner, 2005; Chiou and Wan, 2006; Chiou, 2007).

Second, in offline contexts, a contextual model proposed to explain the factors that contribute to a person's willingness or unwillingness to disclose about sexual topics (Brown and Weigel, 2017). Based on a contextual model, people will engage in sexual self-disclosure if the relationship context factors (responsiveness, uncertainty, general communication quality and relationship satisfaction) and the sexual disclosure context (risks, consequences and depth of disclosure) provide greater support for self-disclosure (Brown and Weigel, 2017). When someone felt that the environment was safe for expressing sexual self-disclosure, he/she would share their intimate sexual desires and beliefs with his/her partner, even for taboo topics.

Third, in the online context, cyberspace's anonymity, de-individuation and impression management predicted the higher willingness to

discuss sexual topics in cyberspace (Chiou, 2006). But that research found that those factors might not be the main factors in an individual's level of sexual self-disclosure, because compared with real life, adolescents had the same level in revealing sexual topics in cyberspace (Chiou and Wan, 2006).

The last antecedent factors were based on problem behavior theory (Jessor & Jessor, 1997 in Bobkowski et al., 2012). Online sexual self-disclosure is believed to fit with the category of a sexual risk behavior, positively correlated with sexual risk behavior offline and negatively correlated with protective behaviors. Higher sexual experience, sexual debut and casual sex in offline contexts predicted higher sexual self-disclosure in online contexts (Bobkowski et al., 2012).

3.4 Role of Sexual Self-disclosure

Sexual self-disclosure was believed to be one indicator of sexual well-being, and the dynamic role of sexual self-disclosure is clearly explained in two studies (MacNeil and Byers, 2005, 2009). Two roles of sexual self-disclosure in romantic relationships are instrumental and expressive. Both are only discussed in the offline context.

Sexual self-disclosure had an instrumental role, disclosure of sexual likes and dislikes was a way of informing and getting more of what was desired or reducing what was sexually unwanted from one's partner. The final goal was reaching greater partner understanding of sexual rewards and reducing sexual costs.

Sexual self-disclosure had an expressive role when the goal of disclosure was to express sexual likes and dislikes and gain a more positive response from the partner. On this point, the reciprocal dynamic of sexual self-disclosure contributes to relationship satisfaction.

3.5 Outcome of Sexual Self-disclosure

The question about the importance of sexual self-disclosure in a romantic relationship is talking about the outcome of sexual self-disclosure in offline contexts, especially in romantic relationships. Sexual satisfaction is the main outcome of sexual self-disclosure between partners. Sexual satisfaction was believed to be the outcome of sexual self-disclosure with their partner. Sexual self-disclosure affects sexual satisfaction through increasing sexual rewards and overall relationship satisfaction (Byers and Demmons, 1999; MacNeil and Byers, 2009, 2005; Brown and Weigel, 2017).

In online contexts, the negative outcome might be considered. “Sexual self-disclosure is of concern because of the potential detrimental implications for the minority of young people who produce them, and for their peers who consume them” (Bobkowski, Brown and Neffa, 2012). As online sexual self-disclosure is classified as a risk behavior, we must try to eliminate the negative outcome of this behavior.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This review found that sexual self-disclosure is an important aspect in a romantic relationship, and leads to sexual and relationship satisfaction. The instrumental and expressive pathways are the best explanation for the association between sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction.

The pattern of sexual self-disclosure in offline and online contexts is discussing sexual topics with a specific target. However, in the specific pattern found in social networking sites, the sexual self-disclosure is revealing sexual activities through pictures and text.

Male participants showed a greater willingness to communicate sexual disclosure in both offline and online contexts. Males were more likely to communicate sexual disclosures because there was less impact of cultural double standards for a man than for woman (Greene and Faulkner, 2005)

There were two limitations to this study. First, the sample of the reviewed articles was not homogenous. In offline contexts the majority of the sample were university students and adults, but in the online context the sample were adolescents. That difference might have potential significance due to developmental tasks and the real relationship context. Second is the variable of sexual self-disclosure itself. The variable sometimes becomes antecedent and sometimes becomes a dependent variable. On this point, it must be difficult to establish the real differences between them. Further study must clearly find the differences based on the typical sample characteristics and the same relationship context both offline and online.

REFERENCES

Altman, I. and Taylor, D.A., 1973. *Social penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*. New

- York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- Bobkowski, P.S., Brown, J.D. and Neffa, D.R., 2012. “Hit me up and we can get down” US youths’ risk behaviors and sexual self-disclosure in MySpace profiles. *Journal of Children and Media*, 6(1), pp.119–134.
- Brown, R.D. and Weigel, D.J., 2017. Exploring a Contextual Model of Sexual Self-Disclosure and Sexual Satisfaction. *Journal of Sex Research*, 00(00), pp.1–12.
- Byers, E.S. and Demmons, S., 1999. Sexual satisfaction and sexual self-disclosure within dating relationships. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 36(2), pp.180–189.
- Chiou, W.-B., 2007. Adolescents’ Reply Intent for Sexual Disclosure in Cyberspace: Gender Differences and Effects of Anonymity and Topic Intimacy. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 10(5), pp.725–728.
- Chiou, W. Bin, 2006. Adolescents’ sexual self-disclosure on the internet: Deindividuation and impression management. *Adolescence*, 41(163), pp.547–561.
- Chiou, W. and Wan, C., 2006. Sexual self-disclosure in Cyberspace among Taiwanese adolescents: gender differences and the interplay of Cyberspace and real life. *Cyberpsychology & behavior: the impact of the Internet, multimedia and virtual reality on behavior and society*, 9(1), pp.46–53.
- Collins, N.L. and Miller, L.C., 1994. Self - Disclosure and Liking: A Meta - Analytic Review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 116(3), pp.457–475.
- Dindia, K. and Allen, M., 1992. Sex Differences in Self-Disclosure: A Meta-Analysis Sex Differences in Self-Disclosure: A Meta-Analysis. 112(August 1992), pp.106–124.
- Greene, K. and Faulkner, S.L., 2005. Gender, belief in the sexual double standard, and sexual talk in heterosexual dating relationships. *Sex Roles*, 53(3–4), pp.239–251.
- Herold, E.S. and Way, L., 1988a. Sexual self-disclosure among university women. *Journal of Sex Research*, 24(1), pp.1–14.
- Herold, E.S. and Way, L., 1988b. Sexual Self-Disclosure Among University Women. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 24(1), pp.1–14.
- Jourard, S.M., 1958. A Study of Self- Disclosure. *Scientific American*, 198(5), pp.77–82.
- MacNeil, S. and Byers, E.S., 2005. Dyadic assessment of sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction in heterosexual dating couples. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 22(2), pp.169–181.
- MacNeil, S. and Byers, E.S., 2009. Role of sexual self-disclosure in the sexual satisfaction of long-term heterosexual couples. *Journal of Sex Research*, 46(1), pp.3–14.
- Van Ouytsel, J., Ponnet, K., Walrave, M. and D’Haenens, L., 2017. Adolescent sexting from a social learning perspective. *Telematics and Informatics*, 34(1), pp.287–298.
- Sandra Byers, E., 2011. Beyond the birds and the bees and was it good for you?: Thirty years of research on sexual communication. *Canadian Psychology*, 52(1), pp.20–28.

- Sanford, S. and Eder, D., 1984. Adolescent Humor During Peer Interaction. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 47(3), pp.235–243.
- Snell, Jr., W.E., Belk, S.S., Papini, D.R. and Clark, S., 1989. Development and Validation of the Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale. *Annals of Sex Research*, 2, pp.307–334.
- Tanwar, K. and Navya, N., 2017. study of sexual self-disclosure and quality of life in single and dual earning couples. *International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences*, 4(6), pp.240–255.
- Webster, J. and Watson, R.T., 2002. Analyzing the Past to Prepare for the Future: Writing a Literature Review. *MIS Quarterly*, 26(2), pp.xiii–xxiii.
- Yang, M.L., Yang, C.C. and Chiou, W. Bin, 2010. Differences in engaging in sexual disclosure between real life and cyberspace among adolescents: Social penetration model revisited. *Current Psychology*, 29(2), pp.144–154.

