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He Said, She Said: Gender Differences in Disclosure

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Short abstract

We explore gender differences in disclosure and find that men and women are similar in their desire and propensity to disclose positive information, but men are significantly less likely to want to disclose negatively-valenced information and more likely to cite self-presentational motives as underlying their disclosing behavior, relative to women.

Extended Abstract

The advent of an increasing array of digital communication channels and social media has enabled unprecedented levels of information sharing and self-disclosure, which can be inherently pleasurable and engender health, psychological, and social benefits (e.g., Tamir & Mitchell, 2012; Frattaroli, 2006). At the same time, these new opportunities for self-disclosure take on a public and often permanent character, amplifying the potential for material and reputational damage (Brandimarte, Vosgerau, & Acquisti, 2018; Hofstetter, Ruppell, & John, 2017). The present research explores differences in how men and women navigate these trade-offs and contributes to a vast but somewhat inconclusive literature on gender differences in self-disclosure. Although women are generally found to be more disclosing than men, gender differences are sensitive to features of the context and experimental design (Dindia & Allen, 1992). We circumvent several challenges facing the extant literature in three studies that employ novel designs and measures to explore the boundaries of gender differences in self-disclosure.

In particular, we focus on differences not only in actual disclosure but also in the psychological *desire* to disclose among men and women. A wide range of factors, such as impression management and the anticipation of negative consequences, can inhibit disclosure. At the same time, men and women face different consequences, and thus have a different set of considerations, when translating the desire to disclose into a decision of whether or not to share the information with others. Our results present a robust and systematic pattern in which women experience a stronger psychological desire to disclose and are more likely to act on that desire than their male counterparts. However, these results are driven by an interaction between gender and the valence of the information to be disclosed. Specifically, males and females exhibit a similar desire and propensity to disclose positive information, but males have a substantially lower desire and propensity to disclose *negative* information than females, reportedly due to an interest in impression management.

In **Study 1** ($N = 215$), participants were asked to recall a time when they were “dying to tell someone something” and to indicate whether or not they ultimately shared the information with others. Female participants were significantly more likely to report having had the

experience of “dying to share” than their male counterparts, 91% vs. 76%, $\chi^2(1, N = 193) = 7.88$, $p < .01$. Open-ended descriptions of these events revealed a significant interaction between gender and valence, with a substantially greater proportion of male than female responses coding as positive, 63% vs. 48%, $\chi^2(1, N = 235) = 5.66$, $p = .02$. This can be explained by gender differences in underlying motivation. When asked to select from a list of motives those that might have driven their desire to disclose, males overwhelmingly selected self-presentational motives, relative to female participants. Specifically, significantly more males reportedly wanted to disclose in order to: entertain others, $t(162) = -2.14$, $p = 0.02$; influence how others see them, $t(162) = -1.90$, $p = 0.03$; receive validation or praise, $t(162) = -1.89$, $p = 0.03$, $t(162) = -1.82$, $p = 0.04$; and reinforce their own self-image, $t(162) = -1.69$, $p = 0.05$.

Participants in **Study 2** ($N = 552$) reported their desire to disclose a variety of positive and negative “scenarios” that they had experienced in the past using a scale from -5 (*Intense, overwhelming desire to withhold*) to 5 (*Intense, overwhelming desire to share*), and subsequently indicated whether or not they ultimately shared the information with others. For both measures, we observe a main effect of gender: Female participants, on average, experienced a stronger desire to disclose than their male counterparts, $M = 1.53$ ($SD = 2.43$) vs. $M = 1.03$ ($SD = 2.47$), $t(2658) = 5.21$, $p < .01$, and women reported disclosing on average more of the scenarios (77%) compared to men (69%), $\chi^2(1, N = 2384) = 22.78$, $p < .01$. Fixed effects OLS and logistic regressions confirmed the presence of a gender-valence interaction for the desire and propensity to disclose, respectively, albeit marginal for the former measure, Desire: $b_{male \times negative} = -.31$, $t(2,540) = -1.74$, $p = 0.08$; Propensity: $b_{male \times negative}$ (as odds ratio) = 0.78, $z(2,282) = -2.37$; $p = 0.02$. ***In addition, we captured participants’ self-perceptions of their disclosing behavior using a scale from 0 (I don’t share thoughts and feelings when I should) to 10 (I share thoughts and feelings when I probably should not) and found that, on average, men perceive themselves as being too reserved: the average male rating is significantly lower than that of females, $M = 4.23$ ($SD = 1.79$) vs. $M = 5.01$ ($SD = 1.83$), $t(546) = 5.91$, $p < .01$.***

The results from the above exploratory studies were then preregistered and tested in **Study 3** ($N = 407$), where we used similar measures for the desire and propensity to disclose as in Study 2 but manipulated valence both between subjects (within a domain) and within-subjects (across domains). As hypothesized, female and male participants experienced a similar desire to disclose positive experiences, $t(799) = 0.51$, $p = .31$, but male participants experience a significantly lower desire to disclose negative experiences relative to their female counterparts, $t(789) = 4.55$, $p < .01$. This pattern of results holds for reported propensity to disclose as well, Positive: $t(729) = 1.29$, $p = .10$; Negative: $t(760) = 4.27$, $p < .01$).

The experimental paradigms employed in this research departs from the conventional study designs employed in disclosure research in ways that introduce fewer artefactual constraints and, as a result, more closely resembles actual decision-making, providing a better measure of consequential, real-world disclosing behavior. In all three studies, we consistently observe higher levels of the desire to disclose among female, as compared to male, participants when it comes to negative, but not positive, information. Men reportedly shy away from disclosing negative information in the interest of maintaining a desired image. Sharing information is increasingly prevalent in the Internet age, and gender is an important fault line when it comes to patterns both of desire to disclose and of actual disclosure.

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