

Going Dark: An Investigation Into Willing Non-Disclosure on Social Platforms

Andrew Schwarz

Louisiana State University, USA

Social Networking Sites (SNS) provide the opportunity for a user of the site to share and disclose information about their lives with a circle of friends, family, and acquaintances. Users of SNS spend hours per day sharing information, photos, videos, and recommendations on the platform that enable them to create close relationships and stay connected with others. The business model of SNS is predicated upon this behavior – to find ways for users to spend more time on these sites, create stickiness, and disclose more about their daily activities in order for an increase in revenue for the platform. SNS then draw upon this data to create profiles of users and leverage this data through behavioral advertising.

From an academic perspective, the behavior of disclosing information about one-self is termed self-disclosure and is defined as the action to disclose personal information when interacting with others. The advent of SNS has brought mixed results with the benefits and the costs associated with disclosing such personal information. Previous studies have found that self-disclosure strengthens interpersonal relationships and communication with friends on SNS, but also threatens the privacy of that individual if posts and information is shared with others. Yet, the predominant view within academic research and within the business community has been to seek to understand how to facilitate the increase of self-disclosure.

A variety of previous theoretical approaches have sought to understand how to increase the willingness of individuals to share information on SNS. Previous work has found that the willingness to disclose information is a function of three types of variables: (1) Demographic variables and internal states of the individual (e.g. age, gender, frequency of Social Media use, and emotional state); (2) socio-psychological factors (e.g. social anxiety, loneliness, and social skills, functional goals, etc.); and (3) contextual factors specific to the platform (e.g. anonymity and social media features). The overarching objective of previous work to examine self-disclosure on SNS has been predicated on one goal – to explain how to make individuals disclose more.

While the objective of increasing sharing is understandable from an academic and business perspective, the body of research is predicated on an assumption that an adopter *should* continue to utilize the SNS deeper to disclose more. As a volitional behavior, the willingness to share represents, therefore, a post-adoption usage behavior and normatively, more disclosure is better. Yet, what if an adopter were to continue to utilize the SNS (and thus continue as an adopter), but choose the volitional alteration of their post-adoption behavior to choose to disclose less? Specifically, what are the factors that determine why a user of a SNS will choose to remain an adopter and select to stop sharing for a specific period of time (a behavior termed “going dark”) and then come back to the SNS to resume their pattern of behavior?

The phenomenon of “going dark” has appeared within the non-academic literature. For example, LeBron James chooses to “go dark” during the NBA Finals to focus upon his game. Taylor Swift chose to “go dark” prior to the release of her most recent album to bring attention to her social media presence. Thus, from a non-academic perspective, the post-adoption behavior of choosing to stop sharing on an SNS and then resuming the post-dark behavior has evidence in practice. Yet, academically, no previous work has sought to explain why individuals make this behavioral choice. Alternatively, the majority of previous work within SNS has been focused upon five main areas: (a) Increasing stickiness within SNS; (b) Increasing disclosure within SNS; (c) Explaining adoption versus non-adoption; (d) Understanding discontinuance; or (e) Investigating the “dark side” of SNS. None of the five predominant strands of SNS research has

sought to understand why the trajectory of disclosure is volitionally altered while the user continues as an adopter. This work seeks to fill the previously unexplored area of “going dark.”

This exploratory work will draw upon inhibitor theory to understand the volitional behavior of adopters opting to “go dark,” for a specific period of time. Drawing from qualitative interviews conducted with 73 undergraduate students at a university in the Southeastern United States who are current Facebook users, yet at one point chose to “go dark,” this presentation will use the Critical Incidents Technique to analyze the data and report upon the unique set of inhibiting factors that differentiates between “going dark” behavior and continued use behavior among adopters. Specifically, this work will report upon a unique set of inhibiting influences that have no parallels within the set of enabling variables that have been studied up to this point. In uncovering a unique set of factors that explain the new phenomenon of “going dark,” this work will break new ground in our understanding of the cognitive processes of adopters with the context of a new type of behavioral usage. The presentation will conclude with implications for practitioners and academics and will point to future opportunities for researchers that seek to further understand willing non-disclosure, or the phenomenon of “going dark.”