



# Trauma Disclosure on Social Networking Websites and Psychological Well-being

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**Abstract.** Trauma disclosure is associated with mental health; it could also facilitate trauma recovery. Social networking websites are transforming social interactions and becoming a big part of everyday social life. The aim of the study was to analyze how trauma disclosure on social network sites is associated with psychological well-being. **Methods.** A total of 70 participants, 37.1% ( $n = 26$ ) men, aged from 18 to 65, participated in this study. The Life Event Checklist (LEC) was used to assess traumatic experiences. The Psychological Well-being Questionnaire was used to assess psychological well-being. Questions measuring disclosure behavior on social network sites developed by the authors of this study were also included. **Results.** Participants that reported disclosing and participants that reported never disclosing their traumatic experiences on social networking sites did not differ in their psychological well-being. **Conclusions.** Results suggest that the majority of study participants did not disclose traumatic experiences on social networking sites. The disclosure of traumatic events on social network websites was not associated with psychological well-being.

**Keywords.** Disclosure, trauma, social networking websites, well-being.

## Introduction

A long tradition is in place of discussing the positive effects of people's disclosures of their emotional experiences. Starting with Freud, who introduced the "talking cure" as a way to deal with negative emotions and repressed traumas, the last decades of disclosure research have been largely influenced by Pennebaker's ideas about disclosure and its positive effects on recovering from emotional events (Pennebaker, 1982, Pennebaker & Beall, 1986, Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988). Research shows that people demonstrate a natural need to share their experiences with others after emotional events, both positive and negative (Pennebaker & Harber, 1993, Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003). It is thought to be both a personal coping mechanism used to overcome stressful experiences and also a way to create intimate relationships and receive social support (Reis & Shaver, 1988, Pennebaker, 1993). Even though researchers have been focusing on the positive side of disclosing, recent studies show that the effects of trauma disclosure depend on the circumstances and the context (Gidron, Peri, Connolly, & Shalev, 1996, Pielmaier & Maercker, 2011, Maercker & Horn, 2013).

There are numerous studies showing the positive effects of disclosing stressful events. Starting from the classic Pennebaker & Beall (1986) study which demonstrated that writing about traumatic events had better health outcomes than writing about neutral topics, followed by other studies showing positive physical and mental health outcomes (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker et al., 1988), improved psychological adjustment and decreased stress (Stiles, 1987; Donnelly & Murray, 1991) and better mood shortly after the disclosure (Horn et al., 2011 as cited in Maercker & Horn, 2013). The way disclosure is related to well-being and recovery from trauma is explained in a few perspectives. One of the primary explanations is that by disclosing a stressful or traumatic event, a person is released from the inhibition of the active thoughts and feelings – of the state of trying to hide it from others – which is proved to be connected to poorer mental and physical health (Pennebaker et al., 1988). Another important explanation is that while the disclosure of trauma takes place, a person has to face the trauma and has an opportunity to assimilate, reframe or find the meaning in the traumatic event, in this way cognitively structuring their stressful experience (Horowitz, 1993; Pennebaker, 1993). A third explanation is that trauma disclosure is necessary for establishing intimate relationships which, in turn, become part of the social support that a person receives, which is found to be connected to lesser symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Maercker and Horn, 2013; Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007). Horn et al. (2011, as cited in Maercker & Horn, 2013) found that disclosing stressful experiences to a partner resulted in better moods of both partners. However, Maercker and Horn (2013) emphasize that the potential benefits of disclosure critically depend on finding the individually appropriate context, approach and time for disclosure. Authors express that sharing behavior of the individual impacts the reactions he may get from others, which can lead to negative or positive outcomes (Maercker & Horn, 2013).

When it comes to disclosing behavior, there was an immense growth over the last decade. Social networking websites gained huge popularity over the last years, with the biggest of them, Facebook, being the 3<sup>rd</sup> most visited website in the world (Alexa Web Search Top-500, 2016) and with reports of people averagely spending from 30 minutes to two hours on it daily (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011). Social networking sites are changing the way people interact and may change the way people are disclosing their experiences, as well as the reactions they are

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eliciting in others. A few studies on the relationship between social networking websites use and mental health yield different results. Some of them show a positive connection between social network site use and social and psychological well-being (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), while others find an opposite connection (Forest & Wood, 2012). Even though people have easier access to others, what some research suggests is that the quality of the social interaction on the internet differs from the face-to-face one. Moody (2001) found that a lot of time spent on the internet was connected to more social connections, but with higher levels of emotional loneliness, meaning these connections were less intimate, which suggests that interacting online might have different quality of emotional closeness.

This difference in social interactions online and offline and the different quality of emotional closeness might be relevant when considering trauma disclosure. One of the components of trauma disclosure affecting psychological well-being is building more intimate relationships and receiving social support, while failing to identify the appropriate context and time to disclose trauma can result in negative outcomes (Maercker & Horn, 2012). As the study done by Forrest and Wood (2012) on self-disclosure on Facebook suggests, self-disclosure on Facebook can elicit positive or negative reactions of others depending both on the way people disclose and who is receiving the disclosure. Bazarova's (2012) study showed that disclosing intimate details publicly on social networking sites was seen as inappropriate by others. Another study (Choi & Toma, 2014) showed that people tend to use social network sites to share positive events and more intimate media, such as photos or texts, for negative events. These studies suggest that disclosing trauma on social network sites might fail to accomplish the goal of creating a more intimate relationship and might even elicit negative reactions from others, thus not creating the usual positive link between disclosure and psychological well-being seen in usual face-to-face interactions. **The aim of this study** was to examine if people disclosing their traumatic or stressful experiences on social networking websites differed in their psychological well-being from people not disclosing their trauma on social networking sites.

## 1. Methods

### 1.1. Participants

The inclusion criteria of participants in the study were the following: 1) participants must be 18 years old or older; 2) participants must have been exposed to at least one traumatic event; 3) participants use social networking websites. In total, 70 participants were included in the study, 37.1% ( $n = 26$ ) men and 62.9% ( $n = 44$ ) women. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 65 years old ( $M = 32.99$ ,  $SD = 13.02$ ). There were 33 people in the age group between 18 to 25 years old, 24 people in the age group 26 to 45 years old and 13 people in the age group from 46 to 65 years old. The majority (82.9%,  $n = 58$ ) of participants were from big cities, 7.1% ( $n = 5$ ) from small towns, 8.6% ( $n = 6$ ) from rural areas and 1.4% ( $n = 1$ ) living abroad. More than half of participants had a university degree 52.9% ( $n = 37$ ), 28.6% ( $n = 20$ ) were university students or had a non-university level degree and 18.6% ( $n = 13$ ) had high school or lower level education.

### 1.2. Measures

The Life Events Checklist (LEC) (Weathers et al., 2013) was used to screen participants for exposure to at least one potentially traumatic life event. LEC was developed at the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder to aid in the diagnosis of PTSD (Gray, Litz, Hsu, & Lombardo, 2004). The psychometric tests of LEC indicated adequate stability, good convergence with other traumatic life events measures and showed significant correlation with PTSD symptoms (Gray et al., 2004). The LEC consists of 17 items inquiring about potentially traumatic events and the type of exposure to it ("happened to me", "witnessed it", "learned about it", "not sure", "does not apply"). Participants in this study were considered as exposed to traumatic event if they reported that the traumatic event had happened to them or if they had witnessed it happening to someone else.

The Psychological Well-being Questionnaire (WBQ, Kazlauskas & Želvienė, 2013) was used to assess the psychological well-being of participants. The WBQ was created on the basis of Ryff & Keyes (1995) theory which defines psychological well-being as a combination of autonomy, self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery, positive relationships and personal growth. This questionnaire consists of 10 items about different well-being dimensions: self-acceptance, purpose in life, autonomy, environmental mastery and personal growth. Participants are asked to rate how much they agree with each statement. The score of psychological well-being is a calculation of the average score of 10 items, and can vary from 1 to 5. The psychometric properties of the questionnaire were tested in this study, which yielded good reliability with Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.83$ .

Participants' usage of social networking websites was assessed by asking if they use social networking sites, and the examples of the social networks were given: "for example, Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and others". To measure the activity level on social networking sites, participants were asked to choose a statement that best describes their activity on social network sites with possible answers of "I rarely update my profile, post photos, comment on social networking sites" or "I often update my profile, post photos, comment on social network sites". The participants' disclosure about trauma on social network sites were assessed by asking participants the following

questions: “How often do you share your stressful or traumatic experiences on social network sites?” Possible answers were “never”, “very rarely”, “averagely”, “quite often”, “very often”. Participants were also asked, “If you have shared your stressful or traumatic experience, how much details have you disclosed?” The possible answers were “I haven’t shared any details”, “I’ve shared a few details”, “I’ve shared an average amount of details”, “I’ve shared quite some details” and “I’ve shared a lot of details”.

### 1.3. Procedure

Data was collected in Lithuania in spring 2016. Participants were recruited for the study using the snowballing recruitment strategy aiming to reach people that had experienced traumatic events. Participants were assessed through self-assessment questionnaires which they filled in with the help of trained interviewers.

## 2. Results

The traumatic experiences of the participants’ lifetimes and their psychological well-being were analyzed. The analysis of participants’ traumatic experience yielded that they had experienced from 1 to 10 potentially traumatic events. On average, participants were exposed to 3.89 ( $SD = 2.27$ ) traumatic events during their lifetime. The psychological well-being of participants ranged from 2.9 to 5.0, with the average of 3.96 ( $SD = 0.49$ ).

All participants were using social networking sites, but 81.4 % ( $n = 57$ ) reported rarely updating their profile, posting photos and commenting on online social network sites, while 18.6% ( $n = 13$ ) reported often updating their profile, posting photos and commenting on social network sites. The majority (78.6%,  $n = 55$ ) of participants reported never disclosing their stressful or traumatic experience on social network sites, 18.6% ( $n = 13$ ) reported disclosing them very rarely and 2.9% ( $n = 2$ ) reported having done so often to as sufficient degree. Of those participants that reported having disclosed their traumatic/stressful experiences on social networking sites, 8 (53.3%) said they hadn’t disclosed any details concerning the traumatic event, 3 (20%) reported having disclosed a few details, 2 (13.3%) admitted to disclosing an average amount of details and 2 (13.3%) said to have disclosed quite some details. There were no gender ( $\chi^2 = 0.90$ ,  $p = .34$ ) or age ( $\chi^2 = 3.21$ ,  $p = .20$ ) effects on frequency of disclosing traumatic events on online social networking sites, and no gender ( $\chi^2 = 1.47$ ,  $p = .48$ ) or age effects ( $\chi^2 = 0.06$ ,  $p = .81$ ) on how much details they disclose about traumatic experience on social networking sites.

**Table No. 1.** The psychological well-being (WBQ) comparison between participants that had disclosed and participants that had never disclosed traumatic experiences on social networking websites.

Group	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
Never disclosed	55	4.01 (0.46)	-1.63	.103
Disclosed	15	3.79 (0.60)		

Note. WBQ = Psychological Well-being Questionnaire

To test how the disclosing of traumatic/stressful experiences on social network sites was associated with psychological well-being, participants were divided into two groups: those who had never disclosed their traumatic or stressful experiences ( $n = 55$ ) in social network sites and those who had reported disclosing those experiences at least very rarely or more often ( $n = 15$ ). First, the traumatic experiences of the two groups were analyzed. Participants that never disclosed trauma experienced on average 3.82 potentially traumatic events and participants that disclosed trauma on social network sites experienced 4.13 potentially traumatic events. A Mann-Whitney test analysis found the means difference to not be significantly different ( $Z = -0.83$ ,  $p = .409$ ). The means of psychological well-being of the two groups can be seen in Table No. 1. Although the psychological well-being of participants that had never disclosed their traumatic/stressful experiences on social networking sites is a little bit higher, a Mann-Whitney test analysis yielded that the psychological well-being of two groups is not significantly different ( $p > .05$ ).

## 3. Discussion

An analysis of the participants’ traumatic experience showed that participants on average were exposed to 3.96 traumatic events, which is similar to the findings in other studies in the Lithuanian sample (Mažulytė, Gailienė, Skėrytė-Kazlauskienė, Grigutytė, Eimontas & Kazlauskas, 2014) and their psychological well-being did not differ from the WBQ adaptation sample (Kazlauskas, Želvienė, & Naujokaitė, 2013).

While reporting their disclosure behavior on social networking sites, the majority (78.6%) of participants reported never having disclosed their traumatic/stressful experience on social networking sites, and half of the people that had disclosed their traumatic experiences online reported having not disclosing any details of the event. In research literature, it is assumed that disclosure is a natural need and the majority of people share their experiences with others (Pennebaker, Zech, & Rime, 2001). In a review done by Rimé et al. (1992), authors concluded that across the studies of emotional events, both negative and positive were shared in about 90% of cases and 60% of them were shared on the same day as the event happened, with the exclusion of events linked with guilt and shame. The disclosure of events connected to guilt and shame were delayed more. Trauma is strongly linked to guilt and shame feelings and it is known that people have contradictory feelings about disclosing their traumatic experience. Mueller and Maercker (2008) found that the urge to talk about trauma and the reluctance to talk about trauma are two constructs of disclosure that are not opposite, but independent of each other. This means that the disclosing of trauma in face-to-face situations is probably lower than the reported 90% of cases of Rime et al. (1992). The low traumatic disclosure rate found in our study is in line with the results of social media studies that suggest people are much more likely to share positive events than negative ones on social networking sites (Bazarova, 2012; Choi & Toma, 2014).

The comparison of the well-being of people disclosing trauma and stressful events with people that never disclose these experiences on social networking websites did not yield any significant differences. While studies show the benefits of traumatic disclosure (Pennebaker et al., 1988), as mentioned before, disclosure behavior as well as its consequences may differ a lot depending on whether done on social networking sites and face-to-face. It is not surprising, as disclosure is an intimate act. For example, the Mehl & Pennebaker (2003) study found that right after the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, people more often began to engage in dyadic rather than group conversations, possibly to create a more intimate disclosure. Since trauma is connected to feelings of guilt and shame, it's understandable that people carefully choose whom to disclose it to. The Clark & Taraban (1991) study found that friends and more distant acquaintances are reacting differently to a person's disclosure. When the acquaintance receives the disclosure of negative emotions, they react more negatively and the likeability of the person who disclosed these emotions decreases more, as opposed to when these emotions are disclosed to a friend. On social networking sites, a person is connected to a large group of friends and acquaintances. A study by Dunbar (2016) yielded that people averagely had 150 Facebook friends, but people reported that only 4.1 were dependable and 13.6 expressed sympathy during an "emotional crisis". As Forest and Wood (2012) explains, disclosure on Facebook lacks the relationship-promoting quality of creating intimacy. When a person discloses his traumatic or stressful experience to hundreds of people on Facebook, one's close friends are unlikely to see the disclosure as a sign of trust or intimacy seeking (Forest & Wood, 2012). What is more, the disclosure of traumatic experience can elicit negative reactions from people that are not close to a person (Clark & Taraban, 1991; Forest & Wood, 2012) and public, yet intimate acts of disclosure on Facebook were perceived as inappropriate by others (Bazarova, 2012). The fact that disclosure behavior differs strongly in its quality as well as the lack of the relationship promoting quality can explain why disclosures of traumatic experiences on social network sites are not linked to a better well-being.

It is important to recognize the limitations of the study. The sample of participants in the study was small, and the group of people who reported disclosing their traumatic experiences on social networking sites was not big. A bigger sample might yield more accurate results. Furthermore, from the people who reported disclosing their traumatic or stressful experiences on social network sites, the majority reported disclosing it very rarely, so their disclosing behavior on social network sites is not strongly pronounced, which makes two compared groups not strongly differentiated. And finally, social network usage is complex behavior with different layers, so when people are disclosing their traumatic experience on social networking sites it might be in a few different settings, ways and audiences depending on the social network, while in this study the disclosing on social network sites were generalized to one type of disclosure behavior. Participants in this study were asked to report their behavior on social networking sites in general, but there are a variety of social networks, as well as different ways to disclose and communicate with others on these sites. A more complex analysis of trauma disclosure behavior might yield more accurate results.

## Conclusions

- Only a small part of participants had disclosed their traumatic experience on social networking sites.
- Participants who had disclosed their traumatic experiences on social network sites did not differ in their psychological well-being from participants who had never disclosed their traumatic experiences on social network sites.

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# Traumos atskleidimas internetiniuose socialiniuose tinkluose ir psichologinė gerovė

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**Santrauka.** Traumos atskleidimas gali būti susijęs su geresne psichine ir fizine sveikata ir padėti atsigausti po traumos. Internetu pasiekiami socialiniai tinklai keičia socialines sąveikas ir tampa didele kasdienio socialinio gyvenimo dalimi. Šio tyrimo tikslas buvo nustatyti, ar traumos atskleidimas socialinių tinklų puslapiuose yra susijęs su didesne psichologine gerove. **Metodai.** Tyrime dalyvavo 70 asmenų nuo 18 iki 65 metų amžiaus, iš jų 37.1 proc. ( $n = 26$ ) vyrų. Trauminei patirčiai įvertinti buvo naudotas Trauminės patirties klausimynas (LEC), psichologinė gerovė vertinta Psichologinės gerovės klausimynu (WBQ). Taip pat naudoti klausimai, skirti atsiskleidimo socialinių tinklų puslapiuose elgesiui vertinti. **Rezultatai.** Tyrimo dalyvių, kurie nurodė atskleidę savo trauminę patirtį socialinių tinklų puslapiuose, psichologinė gerovė nesiskyrė nuo tų, kurie nurodė niekada neatskleidę savo trauminės patirties socialinių tinklų puslapiuose. **Išvados.** Rezultatai rodo, kad dauguma tyrimo dalyvių neatskleidžia savo trauminių patirčių socialinių tinklų puslapiuose ir atskleidimas socialinių tinklų puslapiuose nebuvo susijęs su dalyvių psichologine gerove.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** traumos atskleidimas, internetiniai socialiniai tinklai, psichologinė gerovė.

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