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From silence to connection: when and how to share - optimizing self-disclosure for socially anxious to foster likeability – A systematic review –

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Abstract. Socially anxious fear social rejection and being negatively evaluated by others. Literature indicates that socially anxious individuals are often perceived as less likable by those around them, compared to their non-anxious counterparts. Nevertheless, there are strategies available to these individuals that may enhance their likability, with self-disclosure being one of the most notable. The present research aims to analyze studies focused on self-disclosure, providing significant insights into the conditions under which such disclosures can improve levels of likability. Identifying and addressing this aspect can offer clear and practical suggestions for socially anxious individuals, ultimately facilitating their acceptance and social integration.

Keywords. self-disclosure, likeability, social anxiety

1. Introduction

Occasionally, individuals may worry about their social interactions; however, those with social anxiety experience an intense fear during social situations, which leads them to avoid such encounters (Israelashvili et al., 2014). The hyperactivation of anxiety in social contexts significantly impairs their social functioning (Israelashvili et al., 2014). Consequently, socially anxious individuals struggle to form and maintain close relationships, often feeling less loved and more isolated than their non-anxious peers (Alden & Taylor, 2004; Alden et al., 2014; Montgomery et al., 1991; Voncken & Dijk, 2013).

Typically, they exhibit shyness when meeting new people, remain quiet in group settings, and withdraw in unfamiliar social environments. This distress can manifest in physical indicators, such as blushing and avoiding eye contact, as well as emotional symptoms, including fear, rapid heartbeat, sweating, trembling, and difficulty concentrating (Stein & Stein, 2008). Individuals with social anxiety may sometimes suppress their emotional expressions, viewing such displays as a sign of weakness (Morrison & Heimberg, 2013).



Despite their desire for companionship, they often avoid social situations for fear of being negatively perceived as unlikable or boring. As a result, they shy away from public speaking, expressing their opinions, or even getting close to others; this avoidance can lead to negative and erroneous labeling in certain contexts (Stein & Stein, 2008) and loneliness (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021).

1.1. Social Anxiety

Social anxiety is a fast-growing phenomenon that is thought to disproportionately affect young people (Jefferies & Ungar, 2020). Social interactions evoke fear, discomfort, and anxiety in socially anxious people (Alden & Taylor, 2004). The fear of being negatively evaluated by others causes difficulties in forming meaningful relations with peers, so they often struggle with feelings of loneliness as a result (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). Furthermore, experiencing an intense fear of embarrassment and humiliation is another characteristic of social anxiety (Heimberg et al., 2014). In this context, they tend to avoid social interactions, especially those face-to-face in favor of online interactions, to compensate for the lack of social support (Weidman et al., 2012).

Research shows that younger people are particularly prone to social anxiety, with about 10% affected by the end of adolescence (Burstein et al., 2011), and 90% of cases arising by age 23 (Kessler et al., 2005). It has been noted that females exhibit higher rates of social anxiety, which is also linked to unemployment, lower educational attainment, and living in rural areas (Stein et al., 2017). Leigh and Clark (2018) have investigated why social anxiety is more common among younger individuals, proposing that the transition from family dependence to peer relationships, along with the development of neurocognitive skills, like public self-awareness, may create a phase of heightened vulnerability to social anxiety. While most individuals in this crucial developmental stage are likely to experience a temporary rise in social fears (Weems & Costa, 2005), Leigh and Clark argue that those with a more inhibited temperament may be at an increased risk of developing and sustaining social anxiety (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021).

1.2. Self-disclosure and likeability

Self-disclosure refers to any information individuals share about themselves with others (Wheless, 1976). It can be assessed along various dimensions, typically categorized into quantity (like frequency, duration, and depth) and quality (including accuracy, intention, and emotional tone) (Luo & Hancock, 2020).

Two primary models explain the relationship between self-disclosure and liking (Collins & Miller, 1994). The first model treats self-disclosure as part of social exchange within ongoing relationships. Altman and Taylor (1973) emphasized that self-disclosure is essential for relationship formation, proposing their social penetration theory, which posits that relationships deepen through increased self-disclosure in both depth and breadth. The amount of self-disclosure exchanged can indicate the growing closeness between partners (Taylor, 1979). In this view, disclosure is seen as a rewarding experience for the recipient, signaling the discloser's affection and interest in a more intimate relationship. Thus, in line with social exchange theories, individuals are likely to feel more attracted to those who provide rewarding interactions (Worthy et al., 1969).

The second model stems from information-processing theories of attraction, suggesting that liking is influenced by positive beliefs about a person; the more favorable these beliefs, the stronger



the attraction (Ajzen, 1977). In this context, self-disclosure is linked to liking through the development of positive perceptions of the discloser. For instance, individuals who share personal information may be perceived as more trustworthy, friendly, and warm (Ajzen, 1977). Supporting this, experimental studies show that people tend to form more positive impressions of those who are open about themselves compared to those who are less so (e.g., Kleinke & Kahn, 1980).

More recent evidence sustains that reciprocal self-disclosure significantly enhances trust and interpersonal liking, compared to unilateral or non-reciprocal sharing (Sprecher et al., 2013). In summary, social exchange and information-processing models provide a framework for understanding why individuals are generally more attracted to those who disclose personal information. However, researchers also recognize that there are circumstances where self-disclosure may not be perceived as rewarding and might not result in favorable impressions. Various situational and contextual factors can influence the relationship between disclosure and liking (Collins & Miller, 1994).

2. Methodology

2.1. Overview of the present study

The purpose of this study is to explore how self-disclosure may contribute to increased likability scores for socially anxious individuals. According to the specialized literature, self-disclosure is mentioned as one of the strategies that may increase peer likeability (e.g., Voncken et al., 2020). In this context, our study aims to explore how exactly self-disclosure may indeed increase peer likeability, especially for those who are socially anxious.

2.2. Literature systematic research

To identify studies potentially relevant to the present study, a systematic search was made in three academic databases PsychInfo, PubMed, and Medline. Also, references were searched in the most recent articles and syntheses on the subject of social anxiety, likeability, and self-disclosure. After searching these databases, an additional Google Scholar search was performed to identify other potentially relevant studies. Additionally, the studies identified following the analysis of the bibliography of the articles found in the previously specified databases were also taken into account. The following keywords were used: self-disclosure, social anxiety/social phobia, likeability/sympathy, adolescents, and adults, to identify studies analyzing how self-disclosure has an important role in increasing likeability in social anxiety. To maximize the number of relevant articles from the specialized literature, terms and phrases associated with social anxiety, social rejection, and likeability were used, along with concepts such as adults or adolescents. Also, specific word groupings such as likeability and social anxiety, sympathy, and social rejection, and mediators in social anxiety and likeability (especially in the Google Scholar search process) were used to make the search process clear and specifically and to identify articles that bring into focus the link between self-disclosure, likeability, and social anxiety.



2.3. The selection of studies. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

In the process of identifying and selecting relevant articles, only studies that met the criteria specified below were included in this literature review.

- a) The articles were written in English (regardless of the country where the study was conducted).
- b) The samples used in the research concerned teenagers and adults.
- c) Articles were based on studies published in scientific journals.
- d) The studies were published in the last 10 years (2013-2024 period).
- e) The studies that included analyzing the concept of self-disclosure, increasing the level of likeability, and variables in the likeability – social anxiety relationship.

Regarding the exclusion criteria that were the basis for the selection of the articles, they are as follows:

- a) Qualitative studies, case studies, and non-empirical studies.
- b) Studies examining self-disclosure in other domains (e.g. therapy, marketing).
- c) Studies exploring self-disclosure and the relationship between social anxiety and likeability among children and seniors.
- d) Articles written in languages other than English.
- e) Articles older than 5 years (relative to the date on which the present analysis was carried out).

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Sample	Adolescents and adults	Children, Elder people
Main concepts	Social Anxiety, Self-Disclosure, Likeability	Other concepts that enhance likeability (e.g., physical attractiveness)
Results	How specifically self-disclosure enhances socially anxious likeability	Other strategies that enhance socially anxious likeability
Design	Experiments, Correlational Studies	Qualitative studies, case studies, non-empirical studies

2.4. The selection and evaluation of the studies

The search procedure led to the identification of more than 13,600 studies from all specified databases. After the selection of studies, the search results were exported to Endnote, where duplicate articles were deleted. Studies were then assessed for eligibility and relevance based on their titles and abstracts. If the title did not provide enough information or if a final decision could not be made about the article, the next step was to evaluate the full article.

After screening the titles, study abstracts were screened and all articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded. Further, the full texts of the remaining articles were searched. Articles were reviewed once more to ensure that they met the specified criteria and to ensure that they were eligible for inclusion in further analysis. Next, an additional non-systematic search of



the studies in Google Scholar was performed, as well as a review of the references found in the previously reviewed studies.

The main variables include social anxiety, likeability, sympathy, and self-disclosure. It is important to note that regarding the initial included studies, those that focused on how self-disclosure contributes to increasing the level of likeability in social anxiety were selected since these concepts are the subject of further studies presented in this paper. Also, by identifying the studies that used similar or almost similar concepts to those used in the present work, we wanted to track what is the state of knowledge related to the current topic at the time of this analysis and what other concepts were studied alongside the main concepts and outcomes to further serve as a benchmark for further studies.

The information obtained from the selected studies included: the research design and the type of study, the age of the participants, the instruments used to evaluate the studied concepts, co-variables, correlated variables, mediators, moderators, as well as other results specified in the next chapter.

3. Results

A wide range of literature emphasized the connection between self-disclosure and likeability (e.g., Sprecher et al., 2013). For example, in an experimental study conducted by Sprecher et al. (2013), the researchers used unfamiliar undergraduates to examine the effects of giving versus receiving self-disclosures. The findings underscored that receiving disclosures had a stronger impact on likeability: thus, after initial interactions, participants who received disclosures liked their partner more, enjoyed the interaction, and felt closer to the partner. Additionally, reciprocal self-disclosure further increased likeability, showing the dynamic nature of such exchanges.

In small social groups, individuals with social anxiety who expect to be liked are more prone to use positive self-disclosure, which in return enhances their perception of likeability. However, individuals with higher levels of social anxiety tended to have lower expectations of being liked. This cognitive bias often influences their social behavior. Participants with lower social anxiety levels disclosed more when they anticipated being liked, suggesting a confidence-driven approach to social interaction. Conversely, highly socially anxious participants disclosed less when they had higher expectations of being liked, potentially as a self-protective mechanism to avoid potential judgment or rejection. Social anxiety was not directly associated with observer ratings of likeability, self-disclosure, or mimicry. This indicates that socially anxious individuals can appear as likeable as others during structured social interactions. In highly structured tasks, socially anxious individuals performed comparably to those with lower anxiety levels. However, their self-protective strategies (e.g., limiting self-disclosure) might contribute to long-term feelings of social disconnectedness in less structured settings. In conclusion, structured social environments may fade some challenges faced by socially anxious individuals. However, their self-protective behaviors might hinder deeper interpersonal connections over time. Therapeutic approaches could



focus on addressing these cognitive biases and encouraging adaptive self-disclosure to improve social outcomes (Voncken et al., 2020).

In their study, Kreiner & Levi-Belz (2019) used a mixed approach, using traditional and innovative measures of self-disclosure, such as acoustic and verbal features (intonation, fluency, particular choice of words) in real-time. When self-disclosure is moderated (without too many details), contextualized (relevant to the topic in discussion), and authentic (using a sincere tone and natural) it can influence how likeable the interlocutor is perceived.

When disclosing to a computer partner (chatbot), emotional self-disclosure has been found to be more effective than factual self-disclosure due to enhanced perceived understanding, increased intimacy of the disclosure, and cognitive reappraisal. Interestingly, these benefits occur regardless of whether the partner is perceived as a chatbot or a real person (Ho et al., 2018).

Furthermore, as expected, self-disclosure in online settings is easier for individuals with social anxiety, as the absence of physical social cues that typically induce discomfort creates a safer environment for relationship-building (Mýlek et al., 2024).

Moreover, in digital spaces, consistent and well-adjusted self-disclosure offers a less threatening setting for social interactions, helping socially anxious individuals improve their confidence. Plus, positive online self-disclosure enhances the quality of social relationships. However, social anxiety moderates the impact of positive feedback, as socially anxious individuals may struggle to perceive such feedback as genuinely positive. Progressive self-disclosure, starting with non-threatening information, is particularly effective for increasing the likeability of socially anxious individuals. This approach emphasizes the importance of gradual, consistent self-disclosure in maintaining and enhancing likeability and social connections (Liu et al., 2023).

Orr & Moscovitch (2015) examined how individuals, especially those with social anxiety, engage in inauthentic self-disclosure (e.g., dishonest or exaggerated self-presentation). It was found that this type of behavior often reduces perceived authenticity, resulting in lower likeability ratings. Social anxiety exacerbates this effect, as anxious individuals tend to overuse these strategies in an attempt to avoid rejection. These behaviors backfire, leading to negative social impressions. In conclusion, this research suggests that honesty in self-disclosure not only fosters authenticity but also increases likeability, whereas inauthentic disclosure may harm interpersonal relationships and trust.

Trepte et al., (2020) highlighted that the self-disclosure of others and perceived similarity increased participants' willingness to disclose information. The impact of similarity was partially mediated by the users' expectations regarding support and concerns over privacy.

There are a lot of studies that explored the effects of safety behaviors in maintaining self-disclosure (e.g., Leigh et al., 2021). However, in a study by Stentz and Cogle (2022), safety behaviors (SB) fading resulted in a slight increase in self-reported willingness to disclose personal and emotional information compared to the control group. However, these effects were modest. SB fading did lead to greater observer-rated disclosure during the speech task compared to the



control, but this effect was only seen in individuals who were high in dispositional self-disclosure at the start.

4. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to expand upon previous research by exploring the conditions of self-disclosure in order to enhance socially anxious likeability ratings.

Self-disclosure, when appropriately executed, enhances likeability by fostering intimacy, trust, and positive interpersonal impressions. It seems that online environments provide a safer space for socially anxious individuals to engage in self-disclosure due to the absence of intimidating physical cues. However, their fear of negative evaluation can still moderate the impact of positive feedback, reducing the potential benefits (Liu et al., 2023). Emotional self-disclosure is more effective than factual disclosure because it deepens perceived understanding and connection, regardless of the communication partner (e.g., chatbot or human) (Mýlek et al., 2024). Similarly, consistent and positively oriented self-disclosure improves social relationships (Liu et al., 2023). Receiving self-disclosure increases likeability more than giving it alone. Reciprocal disclosure fosters mutual trust and connection, which are key to maintaining positive social interactions (Sprecher et al., 2013).

On the other hand, inauthentic or dishonest self-disclosure undermines perceived authenticity and trust, particularly in socially anxious individuals. This strategy often backfires, leading to lower likeability ratings and less favorable social impressions, especially when insincerity is detected (Liu et al., 2023).

Implications

Our study has several implications. First, since the virtual environment has become so accessible, especially after the pandemic, online platforms can integrate features encouraging authentic self-disclosure while offering mechanisms to moderate privacy concerns, making them safer for individuals prone to social anxiety. Second, specialized communication training programs could teach individuals the value of progressive and reciprocal self-disclosure in both personal and professional settings to foster stronger relationships. Nevertheless, therapists working with socially anxious clients should encourage gradual and sincere self-disclosure to build confidence and improve social skills.

Future research

Future research should investigate how cultural norms affect perceptions of authentic versus inauthentic self-disclosure and its impact on likeability. It would also be interesting to explore real-time fluctuations in self-disclosure behavior using advanced technologies (e.g., AI-driven conversational analyses) to understand how context and mood impact authenticity and likeability. Moreover, longitudinal studies could examine how consistent patterns of authentic or inauthentic self-disclosure influence long-term relationship satisfaction and trust-building.



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