

# Impact of Big Five Personality Traits on Social Inhibition Awareness and Extent of Self-disclosure

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**Abstract:** Inappropriate self-disclosure has created many issues in both the cyberspace and the real society that are primarily due to the weakening of social inhibition resulted from the characteristics of the Internet. The present study explored the impact of personality traits of social network users on their social inhibition awareness in self-disclosure and further investigated whether such kind of awareness would also influence the extent of users' self-disclosure. The present study conducted a survey on 216 social network users with self-disclosure experience in Guangdong Province of Mainland China. The results indicated that some personality traits will indeed significantly impact social inhibition awareness and that social inhibition awareness will also lower users' willingness to engage in self-disclosure.

**Key words:** Self-disclosure, social inhibition, big five personality.

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## 1. Introduction

As social networking becomes popular, anyone can easily share his/her own emotions with others and people who receive the information may be users' families, friends, or even strangers. Social networks allow individual users to set up public or semi-public personal pages within a fixed boundary system, unlike traditional exchanges, there is certain degree of anonymity and openness in social network exchanges. With such interactive platforms that do not have much restrictions nor limits but more freedom than the real world could offer, users can express their own thoughts more freely. But at the same time, exchanges via texts and images can also easily trigger communication problems among users such as misunderstandings of users' emotions or intentions. Some users may spread rumors or commit scams on social networks, which are regarded as disinhibited behavior on the Internet [1].

Social inhibition creates anxiety in individuals when put under social situations, who will worry about others' criticism that will lead to their compliance with the social norms and self-restriction of their own behavior. Disinhibited behavior on the Internet refers to the occurrence of cursing and conflicts via texts, excessive self-disclosure, lynching, excessive use or indulgence in cyberspace, and others [2]. As there are no restrictions on social behavior in the virtual cyberspace, users can behave in many different ways anonymously that they are not brave enough to commit in their normal daily life and will not consider the consequences that may be resulted from such behavior hence resulting in online self-disclosure behavior. According to the research background, usage rate of social network sites is increasing. Related studies have put forward that users who are more active and extravert in social network sites, the intensity of their emotional and physical support is higher in society; some studies have also confirmed that narcissism has

significant impact on self-disclosure in social network users [3]. Therefore, the impact of personality traits on self-disclosure of social network users has triggered the researcher of the present study to ponder.

The present study adopted users of social network sites as the study subjects, using the three constructs of social networking, the Big Five Personality Traits, and self-disclosure as the research framework and theoretical basis, to explore the impact of personality traits on self-disclosure behavior of social network site users.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Social Network**

Social network is a highly influential Internet platform that anyone can register as a user. Therefore, the impact of users' self-disclosure on Internet platforms should not be under-estimated. Since the Internet platforms play such an important role in the Internet and the content of users' self-disclosure greatly varies, the characteristics of social networking sites are introduced in the following section; other related studies on self-disclosure in social networking are also arranged as follows.

Chu & Meuleman [4] pointed out that self-disclosure in social networking not only facilitate participation and deepen sense of belonging in users but also strengthens interpersonal management in individuals. In social networking, users have dual identities of both disseminator and recipient, who face network users from all over the world not only including their friends and families but also strangers.

Social networking makes communication simple among people but at the same time, brings along negative impact. According to Hsiao [2], people not only want to receive services such as entertainment, information, e-commerce, and others from social networking but also to develop interpersonal relationships and communication with others; this type of people are more likely to get depressed or feel lonely. In addition, spending extended period of time communicating via the Internet will take away the communication time spent with families and friends. As the society develops, more people have become addicted to social networking resulting in lowered learning and working efficiency in real life accompanied by other phenomena such as narcissism, obsessive compulsive disorder, social anxiety, and depression. The above examples of disorganization behavior that are caused by the characteristics of networking is called disinhibited behavior on the Internet [1]

### **2.2. Online-Social Disinhibition Behavior**

Social inhibition behavior means that individuals will become anxious when facing social situations and will worry about others' criticism hence resulting in their compliance with the social norms and self-restrictions on their own behavior [5]. When an individual clearly knows about the social norm requirement in the society but is still unwilling to exert self-control on his/her own behavior, this is called social disinhibition behavior. When such behavior happens online, it is called Cyber Socially Disinhibited Behavior [2]. In the virtual cyberspace, due to its anonymous property and serious lack of social cue during communication exchanges, users may disclose many things about themselves that they do not dare to do in actual daily life, and the consequences that may have been resulted from such self-disclosure could easily and unconsciously be neglected [2]. In the following section, the definition of self-disclosure will be discussed.

### **2.3. Self-disclosure**

The original definition of self-disclosure is that an individual discloses his/her own personal information when communicating with others [6], which serves as both an important connection and a basic element in interpersonal relationship development. During interpersonal interaction, all related parties will indeed disclose certain amount of their personal information [7]. Based on the extent of self-disclosure of

information among the interacting parties, better understanding could be achieved among users as disclosure gets frequent and privacy level loosens [8].

As the Internet becomes more popular and the functions of social network sites continue to improve, self-disclosure has become part of everyone's life turning traditional exchanges into active online platform interactions. The functions of early social networking was relatively simple but due to the widely used function of anonymity and the introduction of synchronous and asynchronous information transfer function, efficiency of users' self-disclosure has been drastically enhanced [9]. This development trend facilitates more frequent online exchanges of personal view, feelings, and private information among users [10]. Even interpersonal relationship development and maintenance are made possible via the cyberspace. The so-called online interpersonal relationship is an interpersonal relationship that is not formed by direct face-to-face interaction but via online communication without physical presence. Self-disclosure is one of the most important interpersonal relationships; as interpersonal relationship development has transformed from traditional to online, major changes have also happened to self-disclosure. The first noticeable difference as compared to physical communication is anonymity that there is far more self-disclosure online than in face-to-face interaction, and because of the characteristic of anonymity, users would not know the true identity of each other thereby eliminating users' worry of embarrassment or the danger of revealing own secrets to others [11].

Personality traits also impact online usage behavior. For example, users who are extravert and less neurotic primarily search for online leisure services; users who are introvert and more neurotic will frequently engage in self-disclosure taking advantage of the network characteristic of anonymity; users who are more open tend to disclose more personal information online; and users who are more cautious rarely disclose information that is related to them on social network sites [12]. As the above shows, personal traits highly impact self-disclosure behavior. The present study hopes to further understand the impact of personal traits on self-disclosure behavior.

## **2.4. The Big Five Personality Traits**

There is a very long history of research on personality traits in the field of psychology but not until related scholars identified the five broad personality traits covering the entire spectrum of personality using the lexical approach that the definition and classification were then confirmed respectively as: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness.

The impact of the Big Five Personality Traits on self-disclosure has been discussed in previous literatures such as users who are more agreeable tend to disclose more of their own photos on social network sites; users who are more open tend to disclose more of their own personal information; and users who are more cautious rarely disclose information related to themselves on social network sites [13]. The present study did not explore the direct impact of the Big Five Personality Traits on self-disclosure but indirectly explored their impact on users' awareness of social inhibition as they engaged in self-disclosure behavior. In other words, among the five personality traits, which one/ones would tend to make users more aware of the impact to themselves or others resulted from the content revealed in their self-disclosure.

Therefore, based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses are put forward in the present study:

**H1: Extraversion positively impacts social inhibition awareness of social network users in self-disclosure.**

**H2: Agreeableness positively impacts social inhibition awareness of social network users in self-disclosure.**

**H3: Conscientiousness positively impacts social inhibition awareness of social network users in self-disclosure.**

**H4: Neuroticism negatively impacts social inhibition awareness of social network users in self-disclosure.**

**H5: Openness positively impacts social inhibition awareness of social network users in self-disclosure.**

The higher the social inhibition awareness is, the more cautious and considerate users are in self-disclosure. It was mentioned in the literature that being cautious and considerate will lower willingness of self-disclosure. Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forward in the present study:

**H6: Social inhibition awareness in self-disclosure negatively impacts the extent of self-disclosure.**

### 3. Study Framework and Method

#### 3.1. Study Framework

Based on the study objective and hypotheses put forward, the study framework of the present study is as shown in Fig. 1.

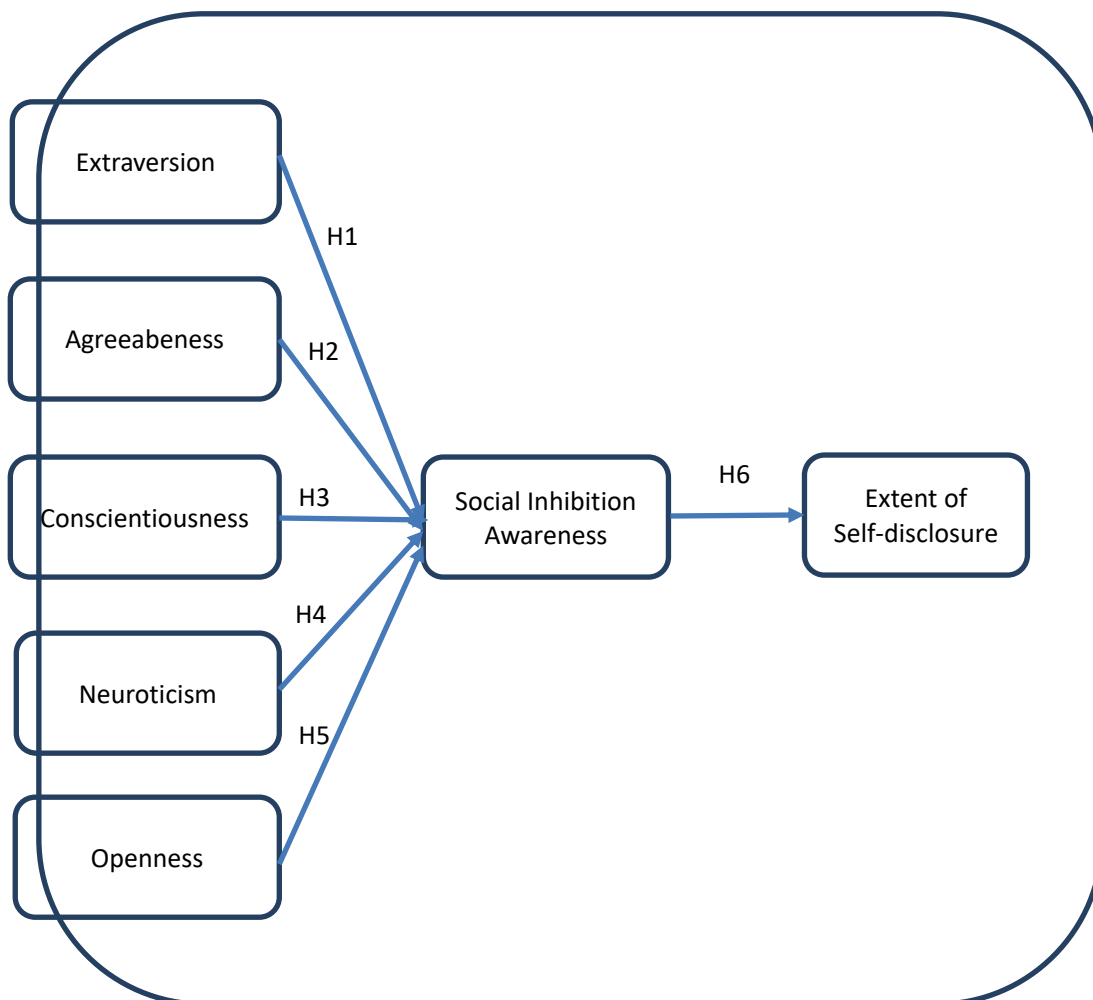


Fig. 1. Study framework.

#### 3.2. Study Method

The Likert 5-point scale was employed in the questionnaire that included seven variables. To simplify

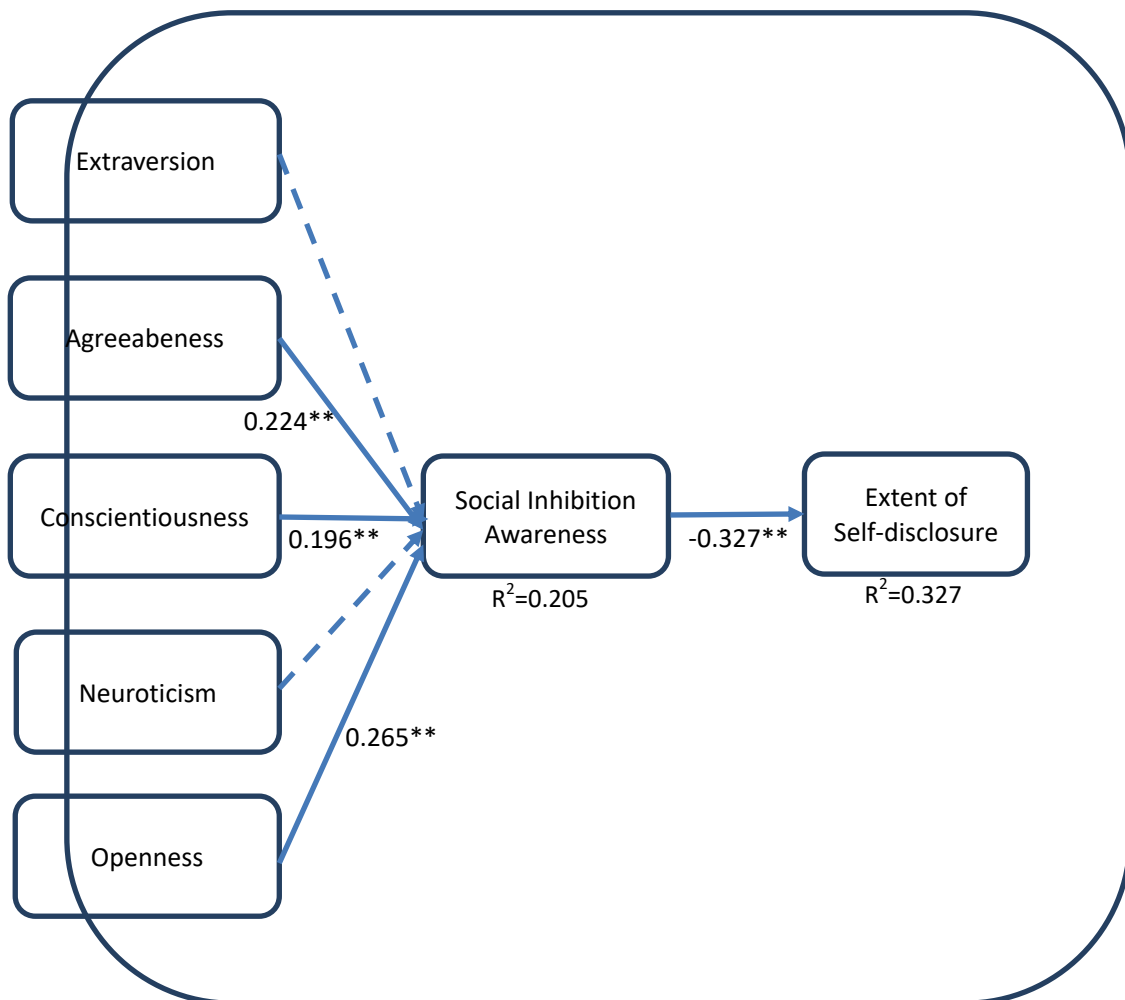
data analysis and promote subjects' willingness in filling out the questionnaires, items with low factor loading and not applicable to the present study were eliminated; the final version of the questionnaire was then formed after these revisions were made.

All the questionnaires were sampled from Guangdong province of China. There were 216 valid questionnaires which included 76 that were filled out by males and 140 that were filled out by females; 80% of the sample age was at the range of 18-24; all questionnaire respondents had self-disclosure experience in social networking.

In terms of reliability, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients of all variables were greater than 0.75 indicating that the questionnaire had high degree of reliability and that the selected survey subjects were appropriate.

#### 4. Analysis Results and Conclusions

The analysis results of the study framework put forward in the present study are as shown in Fig. 2, which shows that, among the 7 hypotheses proposed in the present study, H1 and H4 were not supported in the analysis, that is, extraversion and neuroticism defined in the Big Five Personality Traits did not generate significant impact on social inhibition awareness whereas other hypotheses were supported in the analysis.



(\*\*:99% confidence level)

Fig. 2. Result of analysis.

The goal of the present study was to explore whether personality traits of social network site users would

impact social inhibition awareness in self-disclosure and whether such awareness would impact the users' extent of self-disclosure. The study results indicated that social inhibition awareness in extravert, agreeable, and conscientious users could significantly be enhanced when engaging self-disclosure, but no significant impact was found in extravert and neurotic users.

Users who are friendly, courteous, considerate, and helpful are more likely to feel social inhibition during self-disclosure on social network sites because this type of users tend to trust others, have empathy on others, and are friendly; therefore, users who are conscientious, reliable, and attentive to details are prone to feel social inhibition in self-disclosure on social network sites because this type of users are organized and have high expectation of themselves; and users who are full of imagination, like changes, affectionate, and like to try new things are prone to feel social inhibition during self-disclosure on social network sites. Users who tend to have strong personality traits mentioned above are less likely to engage in excessive self-disclosure behavior in social networks.

The trend in e-commerce development shows that social functions are gradually penetrating into every aspect of our daily life among all walks of life making self-disclosure part of users' daily routine. However, the characteristics of anonymity and non-timeliness in networks have weakened social inhibition in self-disclosure behavior that have further created many other problems and resulted in corporate losses. Starting from the perspective of personality traits, the present study investigated users of which types of traits would tend to possess higher social inhibition awareness in self-disclosure helping related e-commerce businesses better understand users' characteristics when designing and managing self-disclosure functions. Based on existing literatures and the results of the present study, the following management recommendations are put forward:

- 1) In designing self-disclosure functions, businesses should strive to explain in empathetic words augmented with small heart-warming icons and tips, and avoid warning sentences that are threatening to effectively enhance users' awareness of social inhibition.
- 2) In staff trainings, businesses should always remind staff of any adverse consequences that may be resulted from inappropriate self-disclosure to promote prudence level in staff. Businesses should also spend time aside from staff trainings and work to promote physical face-to-face communication, and to enhance social cues and emotional intensity among staff members strengthening the function of social inhibition.

Technologies are invented with the hope to bring along more convenience and efficiency to life. Self-disclosure via the Internet has greatly lowered the cost but has also created many problems due to the high occurrence rate of self-disclosure. Emotion strengthening is a viable way to enhance users' awareness of social inhibition that can effectively alleviate possible problems resulted from self-disclosure and relieve businesses from incurring unnecessary costs.

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