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Revealing the True Self Online: How Lurking Behavior Interacts with Exposure to Positivity Bias and Affects Self-Disclosure on Social Media

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Many have claimed that social media ultimately functions as a "highlight reel," portraying the most picturesque moments of users' lives. However, less work has focused on how individuals' use of social media affects user outcomes. This study seeks to understand how lurking and exposure to positivity bias are associated with online self-disclosure. Drawing on panel survey data from Spain (N = 570), the results reveal a negative relationship between lurking behavior and self-disclosure. In contrast, when social media users are exposed to positively biased social media content, they are more likely to self-disclose information about themselves. Finally, the interaction effect indicates that users who lurk less often—and are therefore more active social media users—are more likely to self-disclose. This association is starker when users are highly exposed to posts in which other users exhibit their achievements (positivity bias). This study contributes to the existing research on the antecedents of self-disclosure and the literature on positivity bias, further elucidating the role of the social media "highlight reel."

Keywords: lurking, passive social media use, positivity bias

It has been argued that comparison is the "thief of joy" for most—particularly because of as a result of social media use (De Vries, Moller, Wieringa, Eigenraam, & Hamelink, 2018). Since the advent of social networking sites (SNS), scholars have sought to elucidate the effect of social networking on users (see e.g., De Vries et al., 2018; Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007; Mihai-Bogdan, Runcan, & Andrioni, 2020; Trifiro & Prena, 2021; Verduyn, Ybarra, Résibois, Jonides, & Kross, 2017). This scholarly activity stems from the rapid adoption and proliferation of social media, as the medium has become ubiquitous, particularly among younger demographics. In fact, data from Pew Research indicate that nearly half of all teenagers in the United States report using the Internet "almost constantly" (Vogels, Gelles-Watnick, & Massarat, 2022)—

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further demonstrating the importance of understanding the effects that social media use may have on users' behavior and health.

There is a growing body of research focused on identifying positive outcomes associated with active social media use, such as increased levels of self-esteem and well-being (Trifiro & Prena, 2021), enhanced levels of social capital (Ellison et al., 2007), and greater social connectedness (Verduyn et al., 2017). However, this research is often overshadowed by claims from scholars about the widespread deleterious effects associated with active social media use, such as greater rates of depression and other mental health challenges (Lin et al., 2016; Mihai-Bogdan et al., 2020; Rasmussen, Punyanunt-Carter, LaFreniere, Norman, & Kimball, 2020; Zhao & Zhou, 2020), problematic smartphone use (Hinojo-Lucena, Aznar-Diaz, Caceres-Reche, Trujillo-Torres, & Romero-Rodriguez, 2020), and dissatisfaction with one's body (De Vries, Vossen, & van der Kolk-van der Boom, 2019), often resulting in dietary restraint (McLean, Paxton, Wertheim, & Masters, 2015).

This is of primary concern because social media often serves as the "highlight reel" for users' lives (Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014). Research shows that people often display their idealized, hoped-for, and positive self-portrayals on social media (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). As a result, users post their most positive, self-enhancing content and often shield negative aspects of their lives to "appear more socially desirable" (Steers et al., 2014, p. 723). Constant exposure to such positively valanced content—what has been conceptualized as "positivity bias" in the existing literature—can have deleterious effects on users, such as greater feelings of envy (Chae, 2018; Schreurs, Meier, & Vandenbosch, 2022) and depression (Steers et al., 2014; Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015). The present study seeks to build on the existing literature relative to these phenomena by focusing on how social media usage patterns and exposure to positively valanced content ("positivity bias") are associated with online self-disclosure.

Despite a growing body of work concerned with social media usage patterns and how certain usage behaviors are associated with user outcomes (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019; Trifiro & Prena, 2021; Verduyn et al., 2017), less is known about the behavioral antecedents that dictate self-disclosure on social media (Chen, 2013). While the existing literature demonstrates clear negative user outcomes associated with passive social media use (Verduyn et al., 2017), considerably less is known about how these passive behaviors, such as "lurking," are associated with self-disclosure. This is of primary concern because many SNS users are naïve to the potential dangers of revealing personal or private information online (Masur, Bazarova, & DiFranzo, 2023). Considering the potentially deleterious role exposure to positivity bias often plays in users' online experiences (Chou & Edge, 2012; Tandoc et al., 2015), we seek to elucidate the association between exposure to positivity bias, lurking behavior on social media, and self-disclosure.

We employed a two-wave panel survey of Spanish citizens. The results of the autoregressive analysis reveal a negative relationship between lurking and social media self-disclosure, further demonstrating the effects of passive social media use on users' unwillingness to disclose information to online communities. Our data show that when social media users are exposed to positivity bias—specifically, positively valanced content that users share to present themselves in the most favorable fashion—they are more likely to self-disclose information. Finally, the results from the moderation analysis suggest that exposure to positivity bias activates self-disclosure when users identify themselves as active social media

users, not lurkers. In line with the existing literature (Schreurs et al., 2022; Steers et al., 2014; Trifiro & Prena, 2021; Verduyn et al., 2017), this study seeks to examine how the interplay between social media usage patterns and exposure to positivity bias influences online users' self-disclosure, enhancing our understanding of the antecedents to self-disclosure on SNS.

Literature Review

The negotiation between public and private spheres in digital spaces is a crucial determinant of self-disclosure on social media (Shore & Cummings, 2023; Trifiro, 2022). Goffman's (1959) concept of self-presentation provides a foundational understanding of how individuals manage their online personas, balancing the need for authenticity with the desire to project an idealized self. This is further complicated by the "networked public" nature of social media, where the boundaries between public and private are increasingly blurred (Boyd, 2011). Concerns about online privacy and image management significantly influence these behaviors, as users navigate the tension between maintaining privacy and engaging in social connection (Masur & Scharkow, 2016; Trepte & Reinecke, 2011; Trifiro, 2022). Additionally, factors such as self-esteem and awareness of social media use play critical roles in online self-disclosure (Michikyan, Dennis, & Subrahmanyam, 2015; Valkenburg, Koutamanis, & Vossen, 2017). Together, the theoretical perspectives outlined throughout the existing literature provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of self-disclosure in the digital age. To explain these relationships, the following section details the existing literature pertaining to the complex variables that drive—and impede—online self-disclosure.

Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory is particularly relevant to social media, where users curate their online personas through careful self-disclosure. With blurred boundaries between public and private spaces, users continually negotiate their front-stage (public) and backstage (private) selves, balancing authenticity with idealization (Trifiro, 2022). The "networked public" nature of social media amplifies this complexity, as content can reach unintended audiences (Boyd, 2011). In this sense, Goffman's (1959) framework helps us to understand the strategic behavior users engage in when deciding how much to reveal or conceal about themselves online. This tension between self-presentation and privacy underscores much of the behavior related to self-disclosure on social media, as explored by various scholars (Masur & Scharkow, 2016; Trifiro, 2022).

Social Media Usage Patterns

Active Social Media Use

How individuals use social media platforms matters. Existing research shows clear relationships between how people use social media and how they subsequently feel (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019; Trifiro & Prena, 2021; Verduyn et al., 2017). We begin with an overview of social media interaction types, highlighting how platforms allow for diverse engagement approaches, which differently influence user outcomes (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019; Trifiro & Prena, 2021; Verduyn et al., 2017). These varying usage patterns have been largely elucidated through the work of Phillipe Verduyn and colleagues, who notably defined the differences between active and passive social media use. As demonstrated in existing empirical work, active social

media use is often associated with positive user outcomes, whereas passive use often leads to negative user effects (Trifiro & Prena, 2021; Verduyn et al., 2017).

Active social media use, as defined by Verduyn et al. (2017), involves directly engaging with content from other users. This includes actions like uploading content, posting status updates, liking content, and commenting on posts (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019; Trifiro & Prena, 2021; Verduyn et al., 2017). Research shows a strong link between active engagement and the development of social capital, as users foster connections within digital communities (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019; Trifiro & Prena, 2021; Verduyn et al., 2017). Positive social relationships contribute to greater subjective well-being (Myers, 2000), and through the cultivation of social capital and connectedness, active engagement often leads to improved self-esteem and overall well-being (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019; Trifiro & Prena, 2021; Verduyn et al., 2017).

Passive Social Media Use

In contrast to active use, passive social media usage involves monitoring other people's lives without direct engagement, often referred to as "stalking" or "lurking." Verduyn et al. (2017) found a clear negative association between passive use and self-esteem, with higher rates of passive usage linked to lower self-esteem. Edelmann (2013) notes that little research has focused on lurking in online contexts, attributing this to varying definitions that complicate its study. Consequently, the role of lurking in online self-disclosure remains unclear. Generally, lurking is associated with nonparticipation (Edelmann, 2013) and has been defined as "practices that do not involve active participation in the production of content" (Leban, Seo, & Voyer, 2020, p. 515). Lurking behaviors include scrolling through timelines or monitoring posts without direct engagement.

Quantifying the proportion of lurkers on social media is inherently challenging (Edelmann, 2013). However, recent data from Pew Research show that roughly half of all adults in the United States who use Twitter are lurkers, posting fewer than five tweets a month (Odabas, 2022). One of the founders of Wikipedia notably found that more than 50% of all edits made on the site were made by only 0.7% of users (Kittur, Chi, Pendleton, Suh, & Mytkowicz, 2007; Sun, Rau, & Ma, 2014). The "90-9-1" rule suggests that social media communities consist of 90% lurkers, 9% users who edit content somewhat frequently, and only 1% actively creating and engaging with content (Romero-Hall, Petersen, Sindicic, & Li, 2020; Sun et al., 2014). As Sun et al. (2014) argue, while the proportion of online lurkers may vary by context and platform, it is well established that the majority of content in online communities is produced by a minority of users.

Lurking, a form of passive social media use, can have negative effects on users since it prevents the development of social capital and connectedness typically fostered by SNS (Ellison et al., 2007; Verduyn et al., 2017). Research shows that individuals who lurk are often viewed negatively, perceived as purveyors who "want something for nothing" (Edelmann, 2013, p. 645). Lieberman and Schroeder (2020) suggest that lurking can also disrupt offline social interactions, contributing to greater loneliness in real life. Studies have shown clear associations between passive social media use, including lurking, and reduced self-esteem and well-being (Verduyn et al., 2017), highlighting its potential drawbacks.

Osatuyi (2015) suggests that lurking is often a conservative approach to social media use, where users aim to protect personal information. Osatuyi's (2015) work highlights a clear association between lurking, computer anxiety, and information privacy concerns. While there are many reasons why users choose to lurk (Edelmann, 2013), this study aims to explore how lurking dictates online self-disclosure. Consistent with existing research (Osatuyi, 2015), we hypothesize that users who engage in lurking behaviors will eventually disclose less personal information online, as this passive behavior (Edelmann, 2013; Verduyn et al., 2017) may stem from a desire to conceal private information (Osatuyi, 2015) or avoid risky online situations (Masur et al., 2023), among other risk-evading strategies. Considering Osatuyi's (2015) findings illustrating a clear association between lurking and users' desires to conceal private information, we hypothesize that increased lurking behavior decreases the likelihood of users sharing details about their personal lives online:

H1: Lurking behavior (T^1) is negatively associated with self-disclosure (T^2).

Social Media's Highlight Reel

Positivity Bias

Bell (2019) argues that as adolescents spend more time on social media, they are constantly exposed to the seemingly perfect lives of peers, influencers, and celebrities. This phenomenon is what Schreurs et al. (2022) refer to as "positivity bias." The constant inundation of carefully curated content displaying the most picture-perfect aspects of social media users' lives has led many to argue that SNS serve as a "highlight reel" of users' real lives (Steers et al., 2014).

Utz (2012) illustrates that positive experiences—like job promotions, vacations, or accomplishments—are the most frequently shared content on SNS, reinforcing the illusion of the highlight reel. In contrast, only a minority of users share negative experiences, such as mental health struggles or depression (Moreno et al., 2011). Furthermore, Qiu, Lin, Leung, and Tov (2012) show that SNS users are more willing to disclose positive emotions than negative ones. This creates a noticeable gap between users' online and offline lives, as social media users often express more positive emotions than they experience in real life (Qiu et al., 2012).

Reinecke and Trepte (2014) highlight the implications of positivity bias in SNS communication for the relationship between well-being and user authenticity. Research shows that the desire for authentic self-presentation is often a primary motivation for SNS users (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Trifiro, 2022). However, Reinecke and Trepte (2014) argue that expressing authentic negative feelings conflicts with social media norms, leading users to share only positive aspects of their lives. This has been widely studied, revealing clear relationships between exposure to positivity bias and deleterious outcomes, such as increased envy and depression (Chae, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2015) and the perception that others are generally happier (Chou & Edge, 2012). Conversely, Reinecke and Trepte (2014) found that greater levels of authenticity on SNS lead to increased psychological well-being.

Social Media Modeling: Social Roles and Positivity Bias

To date, there has been ample research concerning the effects of emulation and social roles on the behaviors and beliefs of others. Two decades ago, a study by Fraser and Brown (2002) showed that participants who reported strong identifications with Elvis Presley consciously modeled Presley's values and changed their own lifestyles to emulate the star. Health communication scholars have demonstrated the effects of emulation when celebrities model health behaviors, such as increased condom use (Moskowitz, Binson, & Catania, 1997) and seeking treatment for mental health disorders (Lee, 2019). This process has only been further facilitated through social media use, as SNS users often turn to these platforms for information and socialization (Vaterlaus, Patten, Roche, & Young, 2015).

Since the rise of social media, scholars have demonstrated how the online behaviors of others inform one's own social media presence. Social media users often express their identities using various strategies, such as the use of avatars and the self-disclosure of personal information about their lives (Tuten & Mintu-Wimsatt, 2018). Many of these cues are influenced by others within their online social networks (Masur et al., 2023; Peters, Chen, Kaplan, Ognibeni, & Pauwels, 2013; Tuten & Mintu-Wimsatt, 2018). Drawing on social role theory, scholars note that social media users often emulate the behaviors of others in their networks (Masur et al., 2023; Peters et al., 2013; Tuten & Mintu-Wimsatt, 2018). According to Peters et al. (2013), social roles within SNS are continuously mediated among users, particularly through the observation and imitation of others' behavior.

Referencing the context of self-disclosure, Masur et al. (2023) argue that SNS users adapt their actions to match the behaviors of others, and through this process learn what is appropriate to do on different social media platforms. Masur et al. (2023) show that social media users often adjust their self-disclosure behaviors based on what they perceive other users are doing and what behaviors other users would expect from them. Ultimately, the authors argue that social media users use these social norms as points of reference to dictate what they themselves should disclose on social media (Masur et al., 2023).

Highlighting TikTok influencer Alix Earle, who rapidly gained notoriety on social media seemingly overnight in 2023, CBS News notes that "casual intimacy is the hallmark of an emerging generation of online influencers who use social media to foster a sense of personal closeness with their fans" (Novak, 2023, para. 5). Inspired by the actions of others—consider Earle's disclosures about her own breast augmentation surgery (Diaz, 2023)—it is possible that this sort of exposure to positivity bias may prompt users to disclose aspects of their own personal lives. Considering elements of social role theory, wherein users are motivated to mimic the behaviors and content being posted by others (Peters et al., 2013; Tuten & Mintu-Wimsatt, 2018), exposure to positivity bias may dictate individuals' likelihood to self-disclose personal information online.

Considering the existing research concerning social role theory (Peters et al., 2013; Tuten & Mintu-Wimsatt, 2018), we hypothesize that exposure to positive content shared by one's online peer networks will motivate users to disclose their own information. It stands to reason that if social media users are constantly exposed to positive content shared by others in their online networks, they too will be motivated to share positive content, in turn disclosing personal information. We anticipate that exposure to positive content will ultimately lead users to self-disclose, particularly if the content they are exposed to is personal in nature,

further prompting users to share their own private information. We offer the following hypothesis to test the relationship between exposure to positivity bias and self-disclosure:

H2: Exposure to positivity bias (T^1) is positively associated with self-disclosure (T^2).

Interplay Between Lurking and Positivity Bias in Determining Self-Disclosure

Finally, we are particularly interested in the conditions that promote—or impede—self-disclosure on social media, as personal information shared on social media can have varying implications for users (Masur et al., 2023). The existing literature argues that social norms that encourage the sharing of personal information can ultimately expose social media users to dangerous situations, such as financial fraud or identity theft (Masur et al., 2023; Masur & Trepte, 2021). Drawing on the existing literature pertaining to positivity bias (Qiu et al., 2012; Utz, 2012) and lurking behavior (Osatuyi, 2015), we contend that these variables likely interact with one another to explain users' likelihood to self-disclose personal information online. We expect that more active social media users (those who lurk less) exposed to greater levels of positivity bias will disclose more information because positivity bias may intensify the negative association between lurking and self-disclosure (Masur et al., 2023; Peters et al., 2013; Tuten & Mintu-Wimsatt, 2018). Drawing on the concepts of social roles theory and emulation, we predict that exposure to positivity bias activates self-disclosure when users identify themselves as active social media users rather than lurkers. Thus, we offer the following hypothesis:

H3: Exposure to positivity bias (T^1) negatively moderates the association between lurking behavior (T^1) and self-disclosure (T^2), in such a way that the negative association between lurking behavior and self-disclosure is higher for those more exposed to positivity bias.

Method

Data Collection

Data for this study were obtained from a large two-wave panel survey studying Spanish citizens' attitudes, perceptions, and the effects of fake news on social media. As our work is primarily interested in short-time media effects, the time interval between waves (W) was set at one month (W1: April–May, W2: July, range: 24–36 days). Participants were recruited and financially compensated by Quatrics, a professional polling company. Participants were recruited from Spain and were required to (1) be adults (18+) and (2) provide informed consent for their participation. No representative quotas could be recruited during the second wave of data collection; thus, sample recruitment aimed to maximize participant heterogeneity in crucial variables, such as gender, age, income, education, and ethnicity. To warrant data reliability, the survey instrument for both W1 and W2 included a speeding check of 14 minutes, which represents half the median completion time for the soft launch data. In total, 91 respondents were removed from the sample. Attention checks were included in the survey instrument, and recoded variables were considered in some constructs. To be considered valid responses, all items needed to be answered (force response).

One thousand two hundred and ninety-nine participants provided valid responses at W1. The final attrition rate was 55.8%, a percentage similar to other panel survey studies (Lee, Tandoc, & Lee, 2023; Watson & Wooden, 2006), meaning that 570 valid responses were accounted for in W2. Considering the attrition rate, respondents in W2 had significant diversity in key demographic variables (see controls for further information). Zero-order correlations are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Zero-Order Correlations.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Self-disclosure T[2]	-						
Self-disclosure T[1]	.728***	-					
Lurking T[1] (3 items)	−.261***	−.221***	-				
Lurking T[1] (2 items)	−.448***	−.417***	.896***	-			
Social media use	.164	.127**	.090*	−.181***	-		
Extraversion	.119**	.153***	−.153***	−.167***	.056	-	
Exposure to positivity bias	.393***	.450***	.096*	−.134**	.295***	.077	-

Note. ***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05

Measures

Lurking

Adapted from Bishop's (2007) and Osatuyi's (2015) measurements, this construct measures users' level of active social media behavior by capturing their level of agreement with the following three items: "I do not typically post content in social media," "I use social media to listen to gossip," and "In social media I prefer not to post and read/see what others post instead." Items were averaged to create a measure of lurking behavior. Given the intermediate levels of reliability with the second item, analyses were executed with (T[1] Cronbach's α = .54; M = 5.76; SD = 2.12) and without (T[1] Spearman-Brown coefficient = .70; M = 6.23; SD = 2.60) the second item[2] (see a similar approach in Araujo, Helberger, Kruikemeier, & De Vreese, 2020).

Exposure to Positivity Bias

Drawing on the literature on social media positivity bias (Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2022) and social media self-promotion (Park, 2019), this construct measures how often participants in the last month in social media were exposed to posts in which "Your friends exhibit their achievements," "Users you know boast about things they do," and "The profiles you follow brag about their life." Items were averaged to create a measure of exposure to positivity bias (T[1] Cronbach's α = .92; M = 5.49; SD = 2.53).

[2] Results are reported for the measure with higher reliability (without the second item), but differences are communicated in the notes (Table 1, 2, and 3).

Self-Disclosure

To measure the extent to which participants engaged in self-disclosure on social media, we adapted Wang and Stefanone's (2013) measurement of self-disclosure on Facebook. Specifically, items were modified to refer to general social media use, rather than focusing on a specific platform: "I often talk about my feelings on social media," "I often post something about my relationships and private life on social media," "I often post photos of me and my friends on social media," and "I often express my thoughts and true self completely on social media." Items were averaged to create a measure of self-disclosure (T^1 Cronbach's α = .90; M = 3.37; SD = 2.32; T^2 Cronbach's α = .92; M = 3.33; SD = 2.30).

Controls

Different control variables were included in the OLS regression to isolate the effects of the predictor variables on the independent variable. Specifically, given that self-disclosure levels may be affected by demographic characteristics (Gefen & Ridings, 2005; Sharif, Soroya, Ahmad, & Mahmood, 2021), the first block of the regression analysis included standard survey measurements of age (M = 30.69), gender (females = 46.6%), education (median = university completed), ethnicity (White = 97.2%), and income (median = 1,500–1,999 euros). Likewise, as citizens' social media use (single item; 1 = never 10 = all the time, T^1 M = 8.16, SD = 2.21) and extraversion (two-item averaged scale measuring respondents' level of agreement with: "I see myself as someone who is reserved" (Reversed), "I see myself as someone who is outgoing, sociable"; T^1 Cronbach's α = .59; M = 4.80; SD = 2.58; Rammstedt & John, 2007), may also affect respondents levels of social media self-disclosure, we controlled for both in the second block of the regression.

Data Analysis

Including demographic controls such as age, gender, education, ethnicity, and income, as well as measures of social media use and extraversion, is vital to isolate the specific effects of lurking and exposure to positivity bias on self-disclosure. These controls help to account for potential confounding variables that might otherwise bias the results, ensuring that the analysis more accurately reflects the unique contributions of the key independent variables. By accounting for these variables within the statistical analysis, we can more precisely explore the interplay between passive engagement, exposure to idealized content, and the decision to share personal information on social media.

In social sciences, autoregressive models are frequently employed to establish and reinforce causal order by considering the temporal sequence of variables (Burant, 2022; Roth & MacKinnon, 2013). This method ensures that the hypothesized causal variable precedes the dependent variable, thereby strengthening causal claims by establishing temporal precedence (Burant, 2022; Roth & MacKinnon, 2013). To test our hypotheses, an OLS autoregressive regression was conducted, controlling for baseline scores of the dependent variable and confounding factors at T^1, while analyzing levels of the criterion variable (self-disclosure) at T^2. Moderation effects were examined using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2017), specifically utilizing model 1 with 5,000 bootstrap samples and a 95% confidence interval. Before testing

the moderation, exposure to positivity bias and lurking were mean-centered to facilitate interpretation of the results. The values of the moderator in the conditional table are the mean and +/- SD from the mean.

Results

As previously described, an autoregressive regression was conducted to test the first and second hypotheses. The first hypothesis predicted that lurking (T^1) is negatively associated with self-disclosure (T^2). The results of the regression reported in Table 2 confirm our predictions, suggesting that higher levels of lurking at T^1 are associated with negative levels of social media self-disclosure at T^2 (β = -.158, p = .000), thus confirming H1.

Table 2. Autoregressive OLS Regression Predicting Self-Disclosure T^2.

Predictors	Self-disclosure T^2	
Block 1: Autoregressive T^1	β (Std. Error)	P
Self-disclosure	.583(.036)	**.000**
ΔR^2	52.9%	
Block 2: Demographics T^1		
Age	−.015(.005)	**.006**
Gender	.152(.134)	.256
Ethnic	−.638(.391)	.104
Education	−.010(.027)	.700
Income	.016(.041)	.701
ΔR^2	1.1%	
Block 3: Social media use and extraversion T^1		
Social media use	.024(.031)	.440
Extraversion	.001(.032)	.964
ΔR^2	0.4%	
Block 5: Variables of Interest T^1		
Lurking	−.158(.028)	**.000**
Exposure to positivity bias	.067(.030)	**.025**
ΔR^2	2.7%	
TOTAL ΔR^2	57.1%	

Note. Unstandardized beta coefficients are reported with standard errors in brackets. Statistically significant *p* values are in bold. Same patterns (direction of the coefficients and significance) when testing lurking with the second item.

The second hypothesis predicted that exposure to positivity bias (T^1) is positively associated with self-disclosure (T^2). The results of the regression analysis revealed a positive and statistically significant temporal order association between exposure to positivity bias T^1 and self-disclosure T^2 (β =.067, p = .025), thus empirically supporting H2.

Beyond the main independent variables, only age was statistically significant and negatively associated with self-disclosure (β = −0.15, p = .006). Younger users are more prone to self-disclose

information on social media platforms. The difference in behavior across age groups supports the idea that younger users are more prone to engage in self-disclosure, potentially because of different levels of comfort or familiarity with social media platforms. The explained variance of the variables of interest amounted to ΔR^2 2.7% of self-disclosure, while the total variance explained by all controls and independent variables included in the autoregressive regression was 57.1%.

Finally, H3 predicted a moderation effect of exposure to positivity bias (T^1) over the association between lurking (T^1) and self-disclosure (T^2), in such a way that the negative association between lurking behavior and self-disclosure will be higher for the more exposed to positivity bias. In line with the existing research pertaining to the relationships between active social media use and user outcomes (Trifiro & Prena, 2021; Verduyn et al., 2017), we expect that when users lurk less (i.e., they are more active in social media), they are more likely to disclose personal information. However, we expect that this association will be starker when users are highly exposed to positivity bias. The results of the moderation analysis reported in Table 3 indicated the existence of a moderation ($\beta = -.025$, $p = .005$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.5\%$).

Table 3. Autoregressive Moderating Effects Test.

	Self-disclosure T^2	p
Block 1: All Prior Blocks Table 2		
ΔR^2	57.1%	
Block 2: Moderation/Interaction		
Lurking T^1 * Exposure to positivity bias T^1	−.025 (.009)	**.005**
ΔR^2	0.5%	
Total R^2	57.6%	

Note. Estimates are unstandardized beta coefficients. Standardized errors between brackets. Interaction effects based on bootstrapping to 5,000 samples with biased corrected confidence intervals set at 95%. The effects account for the same control variables found in Table 2. Lurking and exposure to positivity bias were mean-centered before the moderation in the macro-PROCESS for SPSS. Same pattern (direction of the coefficient and significance) when testing lurking with the second item.

Findings from the conditional analysis (Table 4) suggest that, across all levels of positivity bias, lurking is significantly and negatively associated with self-disclosure; however, this association is intensified at higher levels of positivity bias. The moderation analysis suggests that exposure to positivity bias activates self-disclosure when users are active (i.e., report lower levels of lurking; Figure 1), thus confirming H3.

Table 4. Conditional Effect of Lurking (T^1) Over Self-Disclosure (T^2) at Values of Exposure to Positivity Bias (T^1).

Exposure to positivity bias	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
−2.536	−.091	.036	−2.469	**.013**	−.163	−.018
.000	−.154	.027	−5.574	**.000**	−.209	−.100
2.536	−.218	.035	−6.191	**.000**	−.287	−.149

Note. The moderator variable (exposure to positivity bias T^1) is the mean and +/- SD from the mean. Same pattern (direction of the coefficient and significance) when testing lurking with the second item.

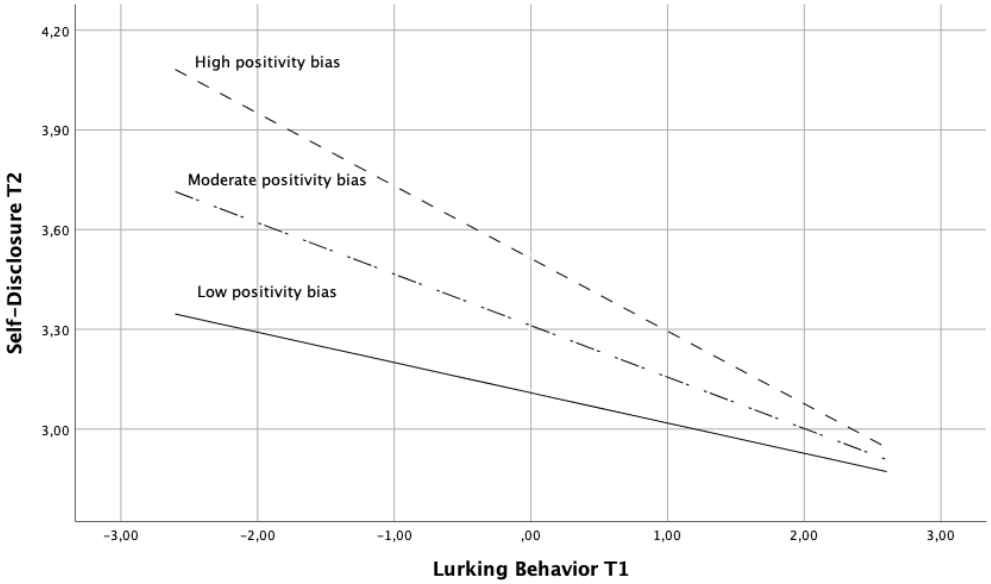

Figure 1. Conditional effect of lurking (T^1) over self-disclosure (T^2) at values of exposure to positivity bias (T^1).

Robustness Checks and Additional Analysis

As reported in the methods section, all main analyses to test our predictions were conducted with and without the second item of lurking because of the relatively low internal consistency of the construct. Beyond this conservative and transparent analysis, we also performed additional checks to ascertain the potential strength of our predictions. Specifically, we changed the model specification of our regression, removing all control variables from the analysis. The goal here is to avoid any illusion of statistical control (Carlson & Yu, 2012) that may indeed confound the interpretation of findings. The results of the autoregressive regression (thus including the autoregressive term) fully supported our hypothesis (lurking, 2 items: $\beta = -.161$, $p = .000$; exposure to positivity bias: $\beta = .086$, $p = .003$; lurking, 3 items: $\beta = -.140$, $p = .000$; exposure to positivity bias: $\beta = .104$, $p = .000$). Similarly, we tested the moderation effect without control variables, including only the autoregressive term (i.e., self-disclosure in T^1) as a covariate. Results considering lurking with two items ($\beta = -.025$, $p = .008$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.5\%$) were consistent with our predictions, but not with three items ($\beta = -.009$, $p = .052$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.3\%$), yet very close to significance.

Finally, as the association between lurking and self-disclosure and exposure to positivity bias and self-disclosure might not be one-directional but reciprocal—as has been found in other empirical projects (see Schmuck, Karsay, Matthes, & Stevic, 2019)—we tested for reverse causality. Specifically, we tested whether self-disclosure at T^1 influenced both exposure to positivity bias and lurking at T^2. Controlling for the same variables as reported in Table 2, we found no significant effects of self-disclosure in T^1 over exposure to positivity bias in T^2 ($\beta = .022$, $p = .604$). The results were also similar without any control variable ($\beta = .073$, $p = .073$). However, after controls, we found that lower levels of self-disclosure in T^1 were related to

higher levels of lurking in T^2 with ($\beta = -.066$, $p = .037$) and without ($\beta = -.106$, $p = .008$) the second item. The results were similar without controls, both when including ($\beta = -.067$, $p = .019$) and excluding ($\beta = -.120$, $p = .001$) the second item. Taken together, our findings suggest reciprocal causality between lurking and self-disclosure.

Discussion

With an increasing number of individuals utilizing social media on a daily basis, we argue that it is important to understand the antecedents that prompt self-disclosure because many SNS users neglect to realize the ramifications of disclosing personal information online (Masur et al., 2023). As social media users learn appropriate posting behaviors and social norms related to SNS through the emulation and imitation of others (Masur et al., 2023; Peters et al., 2013; Tuten & Mintu-Wimsatt, 2018), our study seeks to highlight the antecedents of the variables that predict online self-disclosure. While research shows clear negative user effects associated with passive social media use (Verduyn et al., 2017), considerably less is known about how lurking behavior may prompt—or impede—online self-disclosure. Furthermore, considering the burgeoning existing literature concerning the deleterious effects of exposure to positivity bias (Chae, 2018; Schreurs et al., 2022; Steers et al., 2014; Tandoc et al., 2015), we seek to elucidate the interplay between lurking on social media and exposure to positivity bias on self-disclosure.

Our data show a negative link between lurking and social media self-disclosure, which aligns with existing research that describes lurking as passively viewing others' posts without engagement (Edelmann, 2013). Consequently, a tendency to lurk is likely associated with reduced self-disclosure. This may protect users by limiting the personal information they share online, which could otherwise increase their vulnerability to risks like financial fraud or identity theft (Masur et al., 2023; Masur & Trepte, 2021).

Lurking has been linked to negative effects on users (Verduyn et al., 2017), reinforcing the potential downsides of passive social media use. Research could expand on this by exploring how self-disclosure might lead to positive outcomes, such as increased self-esteem and well-being. Generally, lurking carries a negative connotation because of its nonparticipative nature, and its inconsistent conceptualization has divided the literature (Edelmann, 2013). Our findings illustrate that lurking cannot necessarily be considered a "one size fits all" phenomenon in which deleterious effects may be granted. Considering that certain levels of self-disclosure may have adverse effects for users (Masur et al., 2023; Masur & Trepte, 2021), our results reveal potentially positive outcomes associated with lurking behaviors. Future research should delve into the underlying motivations and varied effects on users.

While our findings highlight the potential positive outcomes of lurking behavior, it is important to recognize the complexities surrounding social media usage patterns. Passive social media use, specifically lurking, is often conceptualized through a binary lens—either beneficial or harmful. However, our results challenge this notion by showing that it cannot be considered a "one size fits all" phenomenon. Future research would benefit from delving deeper into the different types of social media usage behaviors and exploring their relationships with various other variables, such as social context, user goals, and platform type. Expanding this understanding would contribute to a more nuanced perspective on social

media usage, moving beyond the simplistic "good versus bad" binary commonly applied to social media usage patterns.

In contrast, we observed a positive relationship between exposure to positivity bias and self-disclosure, meaning that when users are exposed to positively valanced information, they are more likely to disclose information about themselves. Considering Ellison et al.'s (2007) arguments concerning social media's facilitation of social capital and social connectedness, we posit that exposure to others' positively valanced content prompts users to post more about themselves. With a constant influx of carefully curated and designed content at users' fingertips shared by celebrities and influencers, it is possible that users are motivated to share aspects of their own lives when exposed to the lives of others.

Our findings related to the relationship between exposure to positivity bias and self-disclosure align with existing work demonstrating that users of SNS observe and adopt norms relative to social media use via the behaviors of others. As users observe the modeling of appropriate social norms and online behaviors displayed by those in their online networks, this ultimately informs their future actions (Masur et al., 2023; Peters et al., 2013; Tuten & Mintu-Wimsatt, 2018). With nearly half of all teenagers in the United States reporting being online "almost constantly" (Vogels et al., 2022), this presents considerable implications relative to the power associated with prominent social media figures and influencers in the modern digital age.

This suggestion aligns with our findings concerning H3, further elucidating the interplay between lurking and exposure to positivity bias on self-disclosure. The moderation analysis suggests that exposure to positivity bias activates self-disclosure when users are more active on social media. While active social media users were more likely to self-disclose, this association was stronger when participants reported greater exposure to positivity bias—illustrating the role of the actual content that users are exposed to in determining their own behaviors. This finding further expands on prior research demonstrating how social media users learn model behaviors from their peers (Masur et al., 2023; Peters et al., 2013; Tuten & Mintu-Wimsatt, 2018), expanding on the effects of social roles on SNS. Furthermore, our work builds on the existing literature concerning the role of social media usage patterns in user outcomes (Trifiro & Prena, 2021; Verduyn et al., 2017), demonstrating the antecedents to self-disclosure on social media.

One aim of the present study is to connect the burgeoning existing bodies of work concerning social media usage patterns (Trifiro & Prena, 2021; Verduyn et al., 2017) and social comparison and positivity bias (Bell, 2019; Chou & Edge, 2012; De Vries et al., 2018; Schreurs et al., 2022; Tandoc et al., 2015). The results of the present study illustrate how the presence of positively valanced content moderates the effect of lurking behaviors on self-disclosure. Future research may benefit from further investigating the various antecedents of self-disclosure, such as time spent on social media, sociodemographic variables, and mental health concerns. Furthermore, future work can focus on the kind of positivity bias users are exposed to and whether a specific content type affects individuals' likelihood to disclose personal information.

Our findings extend existing theories of social capital and social comparison, offering new insights into how online behaviors are influenced by the content users are exposed to and the social norms they observe. This research highlights the dual role of social media as both a facilitator and a potential deterrent

of self-disclosure, depending on the user's engagement level and exposure to curated content. From a practical standpoint, our study suggests that social media platforms and users should be aware of the potential consequences of exposure to positivity bias. Platforms might consider developing features that encourage balanced content consumption, helping users to avoid the potential pitfalls of constant exposure to idealized versions of others' lives. Additionally, educators and mental health professionals could leverage these findings to promote digital literacy, encouraging more informed and cautious self-disclosure practices among social media users, especially younger demographics who are highly active online.

Finally, the findings strengthen the existing literature concerning the increasingly blurred lines between the public and private spheres (Shore & Cummings, 2023; Trifiro, 2022), lending insight into how individuals navigate these boundaries through impression management strategies, as outlined by Goffman (1959). Goffman's (1959) concept of self-presentation is particularly relevant when considering the growing prevalence and importance of digitally mediated spaces, where users carefully manage how they are perceived—balancing the desire for authenticity with the pressures of projecting an idealized self (Trifiro, 2022). This tension contributes to a deeper understanding of how online environments complicate the traditional distinctions between public and private interactions (Shore & Cummings, 2023; Trifiro, 2022).

While the findings of this study are robust, they are not without limitations. Our reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases that may affect the accuracy of our results. Future research may also benefit from employing experimental designs to causally capture the antecedents of online self-disclosure. Additionally, further exploration of the specific types of positivity bias and their differential impacts on self-disclosure would deepen our understanding of these phenomena. A more nuanced investigation into the sociodemographic factors and mental health variables that influence self-disclosure could also provide valuable insights into tailoring interventions aimed at promoting safe and positive social media use. The inclusion of positivity bias makes this study one of the first, to our knowledge, to combine these important variables to understand their interrelationships in fostering—or impeding—self-disclosure on social media.

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