

MOTIVATIONS AND EFFECTS OF ANONYMOUS SELF-DISCLOSURES

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This is dedicated to Frank Warren and all of the individuals who have disclosed their secrets to world through the PostSecret project.

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## ABSTRACT

### MOTIVATIONS AND EFFECTS OF ANONYMOUS SELF-DISCLOSURES

by William R. Parker

While a large amount of literature in the communication field has focused on self-disclosure (i.e. motivations, positive benefits, risks, etc.), little research exists on anonymous self-disclosure. Thus, this study aimed to study the motivations and outcomes of anonymous self-disclosures and possible implications. Students from various communication courses at Central Michigan University were recruited on a volunteer basis to participate in this study. Those willing to participate filled out a questionnaire in class and given materials to submit a secret anonymously to the PostSecret project. Two weeks later, participants took another questionnaire in-class. Responses were compared to the first questionnaire to see if any change occurred. From the responses, participants indicated (a) individuals behave have similar reasons to self-disclose in anonymous contexts as they do in non-anonymous contexts (b) anonymous self-disclosure yielded unique benefits (catharsis and increased self-esteem) compared to anonymous self-disclosure contexts (c) there was no correlation established between depth and overall benefits.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

According to Greek Mythology, Apollo bestowed upon King Midas donkey ears after insulting the Gods. Embarrassed Midas concealed his large ears under a hat, only revealing them to his barber. King Midas told the barber if he ever told another soul he would sentence the barber to death. Soon the weight of concealing the secret began to make the barber ill. To relieve the pressure but also keep his life, the barber dug a hole in a reed field and whispered the secret into the Earth. After disclosing the King's secret, the barber's health returned. However, in the following spring the reeds grew and would whisper as the wind would pass through them the phrase, "King Midas has ass's ears." Upon hearing the news of the reeds, King Midas became enraged, however, he spared the barber's life, being unable to trace it back to the barber (Martin, 2005).

While not as dramatic as in the tale of Midas and the barber, self-disclosing private information can be a powerful act. Revealing private information can lead to long-lasting positive and negative effects on people and relationships. Sharing private information about negative events is considered a determining factor of physical and psychological health (Wegner, 1989; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Disclosing through either verbal or written means improves health, both physically and psychologically (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Pennebaker (1990) noted, "[w]hereas inhibition is potentially harmful, confronting our deepest thoughts and feelings can have remarkable short- and long-term health benefits" (p. 14). Concealing private information can have negative consequences, including increased mental stress (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006;

Wegner, 1989; Frijns et al., 2005). More specifically, self-disclosure can lead to positive outcomes of improved increased self-esteem (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006; Dilley, 2002; Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009), increased intimacy (Omarzu, 2000), increased social support (Cohen et al., 1986), and improved health benefits (Tardy, 2000; Kelly et al., 2001).

However, self-disclosure can have negative consequences, most notably in social repercussions to vulnerability and rejection (Omarzu, 2000). Risks of social vulnerability include (a) listener rejection, (b) reduction of personal integrity, (c) loss of control, and (d) the possibility of hurting or embarrassing the listener (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Omarzu, 2000). Because of these risks, many individuals choose to conceal private information. This contradiction leads to a self-disclosure paradox: individuals can receive benefits from disclosing but often do not because of negative social repercussions the self-disclosure will have. Thus, individuals choose to disclose/conceal information based on a variety of relational and contextual variables.

Communication researchers have studied the powerful nature of self-disclosure. Major theoretical concepts describe how individuals manage privacy with others (i.e. Coordinated Privacy Management; Petronio, 1991) and the decision-making process that determines whether or not to self-disclose (i.e. Social Exchange Theory; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Coordinated Privacy Management describes the privacy process and how individuals disclose private information with some individuals yet conceal information with others. Social Exchange Theory explains the complex nature of motivations based on cost and rewards the disclosure receives. These frameworks are important in illuminating the complicated process of self-disclosure with other individuals and understanding the self-disclosure paradox.

However, there is a way individuals can potentially achieve the benefits of disclosing while eliminating social vulnerability in a community known as the PostSecret project. PostSecret is an online community where individuals send their most private secrets anonymously on postcards to a man named Frank Warren. From these postcards, Warren selects roughly 20 secrets to post on his public blog each week. Based on feedback to Warren and the community, PostSecret participants report contributing to the project has been a therapeutic experience (Leopold, 2007).

Anonymity has shown to protect disclosers in eliminating these social risks while allowing potential disclosure benefits to occur (Marx, 1999). Although it is uncertain whether anonymous self-disclosure has similar positive outcomes as non-anonymous self-disclosure, this format could potentially create an ideal answer to the self-disclosure paradox. However, little research has examined communication implications of the anonymous self-disclosure process.

In this review of literature, the following sections will be discussed (a) self-disclosure, (b) Social Exchange Theory, (c) Coordinated Privacy Management, (d) anonymity, (e) PostSecret and (f) proposed hypotheses. The rationale for this order is to begin with defining self-disclosure and then expand upon the self-disclosure process and implications with current theoretical frameworks.

The following research question will guide this review of literature: Do individuals experience similar motivations and outcomes from disclosing private information anonymously as they do through non-anonymous self-disclosures?

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is a very powerful and complicated process. However, before an elaboration of the self-disclosure process can be examined, a conceptual definition will first be defined. Next, variables predicting self-disclosure will be discussed, followed by the strategies individuals use to self-disclose. Last, the benefits of self-disclosure will be discussed in addition to possible risks. The reasoning for this particular order is to establish a fundamental understanding of self-disclosure that can be used through out this review of literature and later applied to theoretical frameworks. Once defined, the self-disclosure processes and possible effects can be elaborated upon with greater clarity.

#### *Self-disclosure Definition*

Self-disclosure is an important element of communication. Qian & Scott (2007) defined self-disclosure as the communication of personal or private information, thoughts and feelings not known by observation or social interaction to other individuals. Archer (1980) echoed “self-disclosure is the act of revealing personal information to others” (p.183). The process of self-disclosure can occur through both verbal and written channels (Omarzu, 2000).

According to Omarzu (2000), three elements help categorize self-disclosure: (a) duration, (b) breadth, and (c) depth. Duration refers to the amount of time given for a specific disclosure, ranging from a singular event to a series of events occurring in several locations and timeframes. Examples of varying duration would be a lengthy

phone conversation compared to two individuals asking how each other's day has been in passing. Breadth is the range of topics discussed in a disclosure. This element refers to the number of topics discussed in given self-discourse. For example, the number of topics discussed between two individuals in a significant relationship would differ from a supervisor and subordinate discussing a new company policy. Depth refers to the degree of intimacy given in a disclosure, ranging from extremely private to public. The element of depth is highly subjective. For example, revealing a possible romantic interest may seem like a deep self-disclosure to one individual, whereas someone else may share such information freely.

#### *Variables Predicting Self-disclosure*

The decision to self-disclose private information is never straightforward (Petronio, 2002). The choice to disclose can result in positive or negative outcomes (Bok, 1982). While disclosure can lead to social connectedness and acceptance (Derlega et al., 2000; Afifi & Guerrero, 2000), disclosure of private information can also make an individual vulnerable (Derlega et al., 2000; Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). This is because self-disclosure of private information cannot be reversed, and, once an individual self-discloses to the listener, the relationship can be damaged indefinitely. Thus, before disclosing private information, costs and rewards must be weighed in the context of the specific relationship(s) (Morr-Serewicz & Petronio, 2007; Derlega et al., 2008; Bok 1982).

Individuals decide to self-disclose private information for a variety of reasons. According to Afifi & Steuber (2009), individuals reveal private information for three

different reasons: (a) need for catharsis, (b) target needs/has the right to know, and (c) the other individual is revealing private information. Derlega, Winstead, & Folk-Barron (2000) found additional reasons for deciding to reveal including: (a) social support, (b) education, (c) testing others' reactions, and (d) perceived similarity with the target. Derlega et al. (2008) studied the conditions of disclosure by asking 238 undergraduate college students reasons for self-disclosing/concealing private information. Derlega et al. (2008) reported reasons for self-disclosure with significant others included: (a) trust, (b) seeking help, (c) duty to inform, (d) similarity, (e) availability, (f) others asked, (g) level of involvement, (h) catharsis, (i) education, (j) increased intimacy, and (k) self-clarification.

The variables that overlap among these three studies include (a) catharsis, (b) education, (c) duty, (d) social support, (e) intimacy, and (f) perceived similarity. Catharsis refers to the venting of emotional tension. Education refers to the notion of informing other individuals and helping them become more knowledgeable. Duty implies a social responsibility to inform others because of relationship dynamics. Social support refers to connectedness an individual feels with the target listener. Perceived similarity refers to individuals sharing because the target shares or appears to share specific traits with the discloser.

For example, if Tim found out he was HIV positive, he might self-disclose for the various reasons noted above. For catharsis, Tim might self-disclose to get emotional release from the traumatic shock he is experiencing. For education, Tim might self-disclose to inform others of his condition and what is going on with his body. For duty, Tim might disclose because he has a duty to prevent others from catching his disease.

For social support, Tim might self-disclose to get social support and inform others that he is going through a difficult time in his life. For intimacy, Tim might disclose because of intimacy with his partner or other significant relationships in his life. For similarity, Tim might self-disclose to other HIV/AIDS patients before non-HIV/AIDS patients because of similar life experiences.

The common findings among the self-disclosure studies identified (a) general reasons for self-disclosure (catharsis, education, duty, social support, intimacy, and similarity) and (b) situational reasons for self-disclosure (testing others' reactions, others asked, availability, and self-clarification). The general reasons highlight probable rationales for all self-disclosure situations. Conversely, the specific reasons for self-disclosure articulate some reasons from situational contexts. These two lists highlight a limited degree of predictability when estimating reasons for a particular disclosure. For example, an individual self-disclosing has a high probability to be doing so because of general reasons (catharsis, education, duty, social support, intimacy, and similarity) but may be doing so because of situational reasons as well (testing others' reactions, others asked, availability, self-clarification). These discrepancies are important in highlighting how predicting self-disclosure is not an exact calculation but rather unique to the individual self-disclosing.

Thus far, two elements have been discussed: (a) the elements of self-disclosure and (b) reasons why individuals self-disclose. These two elements highlight how every self-disclosure can be unique. This uniqueness is further revealed by examining strategies individuals use to self-disclose.

### *Self-disclosure Strategies*

The act of self-disclosing private information can occur through (a) staging, (b) indirect methods, or (c) direct methods (Dindia, 1998). Depending on the social situation and the content of the self-disclosure, individuals use different strategies to self-disclose.

Dindia (1998) defined staging as when “the discloser reveals a minimal amount of information and tests the reaction of the target before self-disclosing in more depth or detail” (p. 94). For example, an individual interested in disclosing HIV-positive status might first talk to a possible confidant about the general topic of HIV/AIDS to gauge reaction and perspective on the issue (Yep, 2000). From reactions, the discloser predicts the outcome of a more direct strategy. This is the safest of the disclosure strategies because it allows an individual not to attach him/herself to the issue if there is likely to be an unfavorable response.

Indirect disclosures are another strategy used to reveal private information. This strategy uses subtle hints to communicate messages to other individuals, without explicit ownership of highly private information. For example, queer individuals hinting about a same gender attraction could be defined as an indirect disclosure to a test confidant’s reactions (Wells & Kline, 1987; Ponce, 1976; Dindia & Tieu, 1996).

Direct disclosures are the last strategy used to reveal private self-disclosures. This method communicates private information in an explicit, direct manner to confidants. Direct disclosures are the most risky of the three methods because explicit ownership creates social vulnerability. This method has been examined in the coming-out process (Dindia & Tieu, 1996; Bozett, 1980), sexual health practices (Crepaz & Marks, 2003), disengagement (Derlega & Berg, 1987), cancer diagnosis (Maguire et al., 1996), and HIV/AIDS disclosures (Powell-Cope & Brown, 1992).

While these strategies offer different levels of protection from social vulnerability, no strategy guarantees success. By starting with less invasive strategies (i.e. staging) and then moving to more direct strategies (i.e. direct disclosures), individuals can reduce uncertainty and increase predictability of respondents. However, audience reaction is unpredictable, and thus, individuals must weigh a variety of variables before deciding.

Thus far, self-disclosure has been defined as the communication of personal or private information, thoughts and feelings not known by observation or social interaction to other individuals. In addition, the reasons individual's conceal/reveal along with the strategies do so (staging, indirect and direct) have been discussed. The outcomes of these strategies can be either positive or negative. To highlight these outcomes, the specific benefits and risks of self-disclosing will be now examined in more depth.

### *Self-disclosure Benefits*

There can be several benefits from self-disclosing information. Based on the confidant's responses, the act of self-disclosing private information can lead to several positive outcomes, including (a) increased self-esteem in relationships (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006; Dilley, 2002; Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009), (b) increased intimacy (Omarzu, 2000), (c) increased social support systems (Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986), and (d) improved health benefits, specifically catharsis (Tardy, 2000; Wegner, 1989; Kelly et al., 2001; Rodriguez, & Kelly, 2006).

The first positive outcome of self-disclosure is an increase in the self-esteem of the discloser (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006; Dilley, 2002). When an audience responds

positively to self-disclosures, the discloser can feel a higher degree of acceptance. As these individuals feel more accepted, an individual's confidence can increase (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006). Frijns & Finkenauer (2009) reported similar findings through a longitudinal study on adolescences, in that individuals that kept secrets and concealed private information had lower levels of self-esteem, compared to adolescences who did not keep secrets.

Second, self-disclosure of private information can increase intimacy levels in relationships (Qian & Scott, 2007; Morr-Serwicz & Petronio, 2007; Omarzu, 2000). More specifically, by revealing experiences that make one vulnerable, individuals actively give power and express trust to the listener. For instance, Erin may reveal to Clark her history of sexual abuse. By doing so, Erin's self-disclosing of private information implies that she trusts Clark with this information. However, Omarzu (2000) did not believe self-disclosure always correlated directly to intimacy. Situational factors like time, culture and the individual's personal history influence whether intimacy development occurs (Petronio, 2002; Derlega, Winstead, & Greene, 2008). For example, high levels of self-disclosure would be interpreted differently in the individualistic United States than in collectivist Japan. An individual disclosing large amounts of information in a collectivist culture might be considered rude because of cultural norms; thus, self-disclosure could hinder intimacy development with others.

Third, self-disclosure can increase the strength of an individual's perceived social support network. Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark (1986) reported in their study of support systems of college freshmen ( $n = 188$ ) that rate of self-disclosure was a major predictor of social support. Individuals reporting high levels of self-disclosure reported stronger

social support systems. Conversely, individuals reporting low levels of self-disclosure reported weaker social support systems. Cohen et al. (1986) argued, “People willing to talk about themselves and their feelings are able to attract friends and the resources such networks provide” (p. 971). Kelly & Achter (1995) reported similar findings in individuals concealing a high degree of information report less positive attitudes towards social support systems.

The fourth of these positive outcomes is improved health. Jourard noted that self-disclosing private information is essential to a healthy life (Jourard, 1970; Morr-Serewicz & Petronio, 2007; Tubbs & Moss, 1974; Bok, 1982). More specifically, self-disclosure can be therapeutic in alleviating emotional tension, or being cathartic (MacAulay et al., 2004; Pennebaker & Francis, 1996; Pennebaker & O’Herron, 1984). Catharsis is defined as the purging of emotional tension through self-disclosure. For example, Pennebaker and Beall (1986) reported writing about private information could be therapeutic and helpful in improving overall health when recovering from traumatic experiences, such as a childhood trauma. Psychologists view catharsis to be very beneficial and it is used in many forms of psychotherapy (Wegner, 1989; Kelly et al., 2001). A relationship between self-disclosure and overall health has been found with Holocaust survivors (Pennebaker, Barger, & Tiebout, 1989), queer identities (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, Visscher, & Fahey, 1996) and bereavement (Pennebaker & O’Herron, 1984). Tardy (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of health and self-disclosure research, examining “self-reports of physical and psychological symptoms, assays of various components of the immune system, cardiovascular functioning, and morbidity and mortality rates” (p. 121). From the results, Tardy (2000) argued a positive link between the two variables in that

“[t]here is not only a great deal of evidence supporting a link between self-disclosure and health but also an emerging acceptance of this connection” (p. 121).

Kelly et al. (2001), however, noted that the process an individual takes to achieve catharsis can vary in effectiveness. Kelly et al. (2001) examined self-disclosure and catharsis by dividing 86 participants into three groups. The first group was instructed to write highly private self-disclosures with goals to reach catharsis. The second group was instructed to reframe highly private self-disclosures to seek greater understanding. The third group acted as a control group and was instructed to write about their previous day. All participants took a questionnaire asking their moods before and after the 25-minute writing sessions. These sessions were conducted four times over the course of two weeks. To measure mood, the questionnaire used a modified version of Watson et al.’s (1988) PANAS (Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule), Orlinsky & Howard’s (1966) TSR (Therapy Session Report), and Stiles & Snow’s (1984) SEQ (Session Evaluation Questionnaire). Based on these scores, the group that reframed their secrets reported higher levels of catharsis compared to the group that was aiming to achieve catharsis alone. Additionally, individuals in the catharsis group expressed negative emotions following the study, which was opposite of the intended effect. The authors argued that revealing a secret requires not just the act of self-disclosure but also the intention of reframing what the disclosure means to them. Pennebaker (1997) supported Kelly et al.’s (2001) conclusion that positively reframing events is an important element in achieving catharsis.

However, even with these benefits, sometimes self-disclosure does not occur. More specifically, sometimes the perceived risk outweighs the benefits of a particular self-disclosure. These risks will now be discussed.

### *Self-disclosure Risks*

There are several risks in self-disclosing private information. As noted earlier, self-disclosure is irreversible. Once a disclosure occurs, concealment no longer becomes a viable option. This vulnerability can lead to possible negative social implications and risks. These risks include (a) listener rejection, (b) reduction of personal integrity, (c) loss of control, and (d) possibility of hurting or embarrassing the listener (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Omarzu, 2000).

First, listener rejection refers to the fear an audience will act negatively because of the self-disclosed information. The highest level of risk for rejection is self-disclosure resulting in the termination of the relationship. For example, if Aaron has romantic interest in his best friend Julie, he risks losing his stable friendship by disclosing his feelings. In a worst-case scenario, Aaron risks damaging his friendship indefinitely.

Second, reduction of personal integrity refers to how audience members will negatively perceive the discloser's morals, ethics or motivations after the self-disclosure occurs. For example, Mark self-disclosing to his supervisor, Sharon, that he misused company funds for personal gain undoubtedly tarnishes Sharon's view of Mark as an employee.

Third, the risk of loss of control refers to the lack of ability disclosers will have in controlling future events post-disclosure. Using the previous example, after Mark self-

discloses to Sharon, Mark is ultimately reliant on Sharon's response and choice for action (e.g. suspension, termination, etc.). In another example, if Henry self-discloses to his family that he is gay, he is reliant on his family's response to whether the family accepts him as a member still. By doing so, Henry loses control over the ability to control future events with how his family accepts/does rejects him.

Fourth, the possibility of hurting or embarrassing the listener refers to a self-disclosure with information that would impact the listener in negative way. For example, if Ryan had an extramarital affair from his wife Amanda, self-disclosing this information to her would potentially hurt Amanda and damage their marriage. Additionally, if news of Ryan's extramarital affair becomes public, Amanda may be embarrassed by Ryan's actions and feel that she was at somewhat at fault for the infidelity.

These risks stem from the possible change the self-disclosure will have on the relationship. Since any change is unpredictable, individuals often fear the worse in how a receiver will respond. However, while sometimes predictions of receiver's response can be exaggerated, these risks are possible outcomes and should be considered when choosing to self-disclose.

Thus far, the review of literature has defined self-disclosure as the communication of personal or private information, thoughts, and feelings not known to other individuals. From this self-disclosure section, several elements are relevant. First, self-disclosure can be a powerful act leading to increased self-esteem in relationships (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006; Dilley, 2002; Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009), increased intimacy (Omarzu, 2000), increased social support systems (Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986), and improved health benefits, namely catharsis (Tardy, 2000; Wegner, 1989; Kelly et al., 2001). Second,

individuals engage in self-disclosure using a variety of strategies (staging, indirect, or direct) depending on the social situation (Dindia, 1998). Third, self-disclosing can have perceived risk, including listener rejection, reduction of personal integrity, loss of control, and the possibility of hurting or embarrassing the listener (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Omarzu, 2000).

To further the discussion of self-disclosure, the next section will now examine individuals' motivation to self-disclose in social settings and how this process is done with multiple individuals. To discuss these points, self-disclosure will be examined under two communication theoretical frameworks.

#### Theoretical Perspectives on Self-Disclosure and Privacy

To examine the ongoing nature of the self-disclosure process, two theoretical frameworks seem relevant. These theoretical frameworks include (a) Social Exchange Theory and (b) Coordinated Privacy Management.

Social Exchange Theory gives insight to an individual's motivation to self-disclose with other individuals. Cited as one of the most used models by the social science world (Emerson, 1976), Social Exchange Theory (SET) gives an explanation to why individuals are motivated to self-disclose or conceal with others. In addition, SET is one of the best theoretical frameworks to explain and predict behavior in wide-range of relationships. Since this literature review aims to understand the nature of anonymous self-disclosures, understanding the possible motivations of why individuals self-disclose in non-anonymous settings is important.

Coordinated Privacy Management (CPM) is one of the few theoretical frameworks to recognize the complex nature of secrecy, in sharing information in private with some individuals yet sharing between other individuals. According to Petronio & Durham (2008), CPM gives a comprehensive insight in the process how individuals self-disclose in social settings. Since this literature review aims to understand the situational nature of anonymous self-disclosure, examining CPM is important to discuss.

### *Social Exchange Theory*

SET attempts to explain how individuals evaluate choices to disclose/conceal information. SET applies an economic framework to social interaction (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). While a singular unified framework for SET is debatable (Uehara, 1990), SET successfully bridges several disciplines – most notably anthropology, sociology, and communication – by examining social transactions and relationships as an economic exchange (Cropanzo & Mitchell, 2005). The basic premise of SET is individuals make social decisions and investments based on the expectations of perceived costs and rewards of those given interactions. Like economic exchanges, social goods must have both scarcity and demand (Nord, 1969).

Thibaut & Kelley (1978) defined rewards as “whatever gives pleasure and gratification to the person” (p.8). Social rewards of an exchange fall into six different categories: (a) love, (b) status, (c) information, (d) money, (e) goods, and (f) services (Foa & Foa, 1974, 1980). The six categories range in value from particular to concrete. Particular social rewards have specific, unique value to individuals (such as a family heirloom). Concrete social rewards have tangible, widely applicable value to individuals

(such as money). Perceptions of value are uniquely subjective to each social exchange (Foa & Foa, 1974, 1980). For example, most receivers would consider money a concrete, tangible reward. Conversely, love is particular; its value is dependent on the receiver of the reward. The subjective value of rewards an individual aims to receive depends a great deal on the individual's wants/needs.

Thibaut & Kelley (1978) defined costs as factors that inhibit or deter individuals from receiving desired rewards. Individuals perceive costs as negative and thus seek to avoid them. For example, if an individual has spent time listening to a close friend for hours and that attention is not reciprocated, that interaction could be perceived as a cost. The inequitable transaction might factor into future interactions and may influence future behaviors and attitudes toward the relationship.

Based on perceived expectations of the social interactions, individuals consciously and subconsciously attempt to engage in social situations that maximize rewards and minimize costs. Individuals perceive such interactions as being profitable (Coon & Mitterer, 2007). Individuals avoid interactions perceived high in social cost and low in rewards and tend to maintain a social situation only as long as the rewards exceed costs in the ratio (Stamp, Vangelisti, & Knapp, 1994).

SET is built on two assumptions. The first assumption stems from Equity Theory, which states self-interest motivates how individuals act, determining reward/costs expectations (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). However, when individuals receive rewards, they feel obligated to the other individual(s). This leads to SET's second assumption, which states individuals have interdependent relationships and require social exchanges to accomplish goals.

To better understand social systems and Equity Theory, three types of relationships need further articulation; (a) independent, (b) dependent, and (c) interdependent. Independent relationships constitute closed systems in which outcomes are solely based on the individual. An individual living alone on a deserted island would classify as an independent relationship because the success of the individual lies entirely within his/her control. Conversely, in dependent relationships outcomes depend on another individual. Child/parent dyads are a good example of dependent relationships. Until the child has reached maturation, the child cannot survive without the parent figure, as the parent provides shelter, clothing, nourishment, and knowledge of how to survive in the world. An interdependent relationship consists of both parties participating in a social exchange, each obtaining something from the exchange that they cannot have otherwise (Cropanzo & Mitchell, 2005). Stafford (2008) noted, “interdependence means that each person’s outcomes or rewards are influenced by the others’ efforts” (p. 380). For example, coworkers socializing to give and receive a sense of connectedness are interdependent.

SET focuses on interdependent relationships because there are social exchanges between parties (Cropanzo & Mitchell, 2005). To explain how individuals perceive these interdependent ratios, Thibaut & Kelley (1978) formulated two measurements in assessing relationships: (a) comparison levels (CL) and (b) comparison levels of alternatives (CL<sub>alt</sub>).

Thibaut & Kelley (1959) defined CL as what an individual perceives he/she should receive based on a cost/rewards ratio. CL pertains to the standard by which the participant evaluates the attractiveness and the overall satisfaction of a particular

relationship. Ratios of costs/rewards resulting in higher outcomes than the CL appear satisfying to the individual. Outcomes falling below the CL threshold are considered unsatisfactory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1978). For example, Victoria enjoys her friendship with Jim, since they both take turns listening to each other's concerns. Victoria perceives the relationship to be 'profitable' since Jim listens to her problems after he talks. However, Victoria does not enjoy her relationship with Samantha, as Samantha always talks about herself and does not listen to Victoria. Victoria would consider her relationship with Jim more satisfactory and fitting to her perceived CL of friendship. Likewise, Victoria could meet someone whose contribution to the relationship exceeds the rewards she receives from Jim. Victoria could then decide to spend more time with this new person based on her CL.

Thibaut & Kelley (1959) defined CL<sub>alt</sub> as what an individual believes he/she should receive based on the available options present at the given time. CL<sub>alt</sub> is defined as the lowest level of outcomes an individual member will accept in light of available alternative opportunities in other relationships. The CL<sub>alt</sub> level depends mainly on the quality of the most attractive and readily available alternative relationships. As social relationships evolve over time, the individual's CL<sub>alt</sub> evolve as their surroundings do (Casmir, 1994). Continuing with the previous example, if Victoria needed social interaction and Jim were not present, Victoria might settle for interacting with Samantha since it would be the best alternative. If Jim returns, Victoria's CL<sub>alt</sub> would change to reflect this available option.

SET explains and predicts behavior of individuals in the social communicative world. However, SET in a communication context differs from economic frameworks in

two ways. First, social science and communication disciplines focus their concern with the solidarity of the group and the 'reciprocity obligations' of the exchange itself (Cropanzo & Mitchell, 2005). Second, this context of SET focuses more on understanding motives, goals and other social elements, rather than simple monetary exchanges (Uehara, 1990).

SET has several strengths. First, SET is highly parsimonious, meaning it does an effective job explaining interactions while remaining simplistic. Although variations have occurred over the years, SET still remains a simple framework to explain human action. Second, SET is highly predictive, and provides a fair explanation for how individuals behave. Third, SET has generated a large amount of research. Over the past 50 years, SET has been applied to many contexts within the communication discipline. The SET framework has been applied to dyadic relationships (Blau, 1964; 1994), social support groups and cost/benefit analysis (Pecchioni et al., 2005), workplace behavior and power (Cropanzo et al., 2005; Molm et al., 1999), reciprocity (Taylor & Altman, 1975; Derlega et al., 1976), leadership (Liden et al., 1997), organizational justice (Konovsky, 2000), and networks (Brass et al., 2004). Additionally, SET's framework has spawned more specified theoretical frameworks, such as Disclosure Decision Model (Omarzu, 2000) to examine how individuals strategize to manage self-disclosures to control social interactions and achieve social/personal goals

There are several limitations of SET. First, individuals' perceptions of what is considered an 'even exchange' for social costs varies. Thus, SET lacks an explanation to articulate how individuals keep balance of exchanges. Second, SET is overtly rational but humans are not always rational creatures. Irrational behaviors would not be

explained under the SET framework. In fact, where seeking rewards while avoiding costs may be a rational behavior, some individuals find it rewarding to be in relationships where they are under-rewarded, an irrational condition. For example, illogical relationships that do not have an equal exchange (namely self-less love) do not make sense under current SET frameworks.

In summary, SET explains individuals' motivations to engage in social relationships. As noted, these motivations are to maximize social rewards and minimize social costs. In regards to this study, SET provides a viable framework for understanding the social conditions for disclosing/concealing self-disclosures, in that if individuals find self-disclosing profitable, they will do so. With anonymous self-disclosures, similar motivations are expected but have not yet been tested.

In the previous section of SET, self-disclosure has been examined in terms of motivations. The process still needing discussion is how individuals navigate their private information with their social networks. A theory to examine this the most effectively in the communication discipline and gains support from of the larger two groups of researchers (interpretivists and post-positivists) is Coordinated Privacy Management (Petronio & Durham, 2008). Coordinated Privacy Management (CPM) is one of the few theoretical frameworks to recognize the multi-layers of secrecy, of information being both private from some individuals yet shared between other individuals. Additionally, Petronio & Durham (2008) used the CPM's framework in giving a comprehensive insight into how individuals self-disclose based on the contextual factors of a situation. Since anonymity is a large contributing context to the self-disclosure process in this study, CPM is a viable framework to examine the self-disclosure process.

### *Coordinated Privacy Management*

CPM examines the process individuals act upon and co-own information in their social networks. CPM better explains how individuals disclose/conceal to others in different social settings. To elaborate, the section includes CPM's (a) history, (b) principles, (c) strengths, and (d) limitations.

#### *CPM History*

First labeled as Communication Boundary Management, CPM was introduced with Petronio's (1991) and Bok's (1982) work with privacy and secrecy. Although a relatively new communication theory, extensive research supports CPM's theoretical framework. More specifically, CPM has provided insight into a variety of social settings. Notable areas of research include HIV infection disclosures (Dindia, 1998; Petronio, 2002; Derlega et al., 2008), marital communication coordination (Petronio et al., 2003; Petronio & Jones, 2006; Petronio, 1994, 2000), friendship (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998), topic avoidance (Afifi & Guerreo, 1998; McBride & Bergen, 2002), social support (Yep, 2000), pregnancy narratives (Petronio & Jones, 2006) and discussing childhood sexual abuse (Petronio et al, 1996).

#### *CPM Principles*

CPM has six primary principles. The first three principles are known as assumption maxims, proposing how individuals conceptualize privacy. The second three principles represent interaction maxims, predicting how individuals use communication to respond and act in managing privacy. A visual representation of CPM can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Coordinated Privacy Management Principles

Assumption maxims	
1.	Public-private dialectical tension
2.	Conceptualization of private information
3.	Privacy rules <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. culture</li> <li>b. gender</li> <li>c. motivation</li> <li>d. context</li> <li>e. risk-benefit ratio</li> </ul>
Interaction maxims	
4.	Shared boundaries <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. ownership</li> <li>b. control</li> <li>c. permeability</li> <li>d. levels</li> </ul>
5.	Boundary coordination
6.	Boundary turbulence

The first of CPM's principles frames self-disclosure as the management of tensions when revealing or concealing information. These opposing tensions occur simultaneously, meaning that individuals feel both the need to conceal and reveal at the same time. For example, an individual might want to tell a family member he/she is HIV-positive to gain social support but simultaneously want to conceal because of the fear of possible rejection. This duality is known as a dialectical tension.

The second principle of CPM focuses on the conceptualization of private information. CPM views private information as a personal possession. Thus, individuals have a right to control where the information does and does not go. By having control, individuals can choose to reveal/conceal depending on what is perceived as their best personal choice.

The third principle of CPM is privacy rules. Privacy rules reflect the decision criteria that individuals develop and use for deciding about disclosures of privacy. Privacy rules are acquired and learned through socialization. Five key factors guide privacy rule formation: (a) culture, (b) gender, (c) motivation, (d) context, and (e) risk-benefit ratio (Petronio, 2002). These factors become the foundation for rule development, providing guidelines for decisions that regulate privacy rules and management of their boundaries. First, culture plays an important part in privacy rules because society, ethnicity and/or groups value privacy differently. For example, in America and Western cultures, open communication is an essential function of society. Thus, individuals would embrace openness rather than secrecy (Gamble & Gamble, 2005). This privacy rule would differ in collectivist cultures. Similarly, gender is an important factor of privacy rules. More specifically, Petronio (2002) highlighted gender differences in privacy rule formation. For example, women need to feel confident in their target's trust, whereas men need to feel confident the situation is appropriate for private information. Third, an individual's motivation to conceal/reveal factors into how privacy rules are formed or reevaluated. If an individual wants to keep all information private, the level of motivation will dictate the overall success of this privacy rule. Fourth, the situational context is an important part of privacy rules. For example, a divorced couple will have different concealing/revealing patterns compared to a newlywed couple, because of situational history. Fifth, risk-benefit ratios factor into whether individuals will keep information private or reveal depending on perceived social outcomes. The risk-benefit ratio factor dictates that privacy rules have to be socially profitable for individuals (as noted in the previous discussion of SET).

The fourth principle of CPM is shared boundaries, meaning that once information is disclosed, the receiver(s) has co-ownership of that private information (Petronio, 2002). Together individuals create a metaphorical boundary around the private information and separate it from the public. These shared boundaries can range in size, incorporating just two individuals (e.g. co-workers, friends) to a societal level (e.g. government). Previous research has examined specific examples of disclosure with HIV patient's romantic partners (Derlega et al., 2008), doctor-patient confidentiality (Petronio, 2008), traumatic events (Pennebaker, 1990) and pregnancy narratives (Petronio & Jones, 2006).

The fifth principle of CPM is boundary coordination. Boundary coordination refers to the process by which individuals co-own and co-manage private information. Three processes directly influence boundary coordination: (a) regulation of boundary linkages (b) boundary ownership rights, and (c) boundary permeability.

First, boundary linkages represent boundaries between the discloser and recipients. Strong boundary linkages represent strong alliances and direct communication between individuals. Conversely, weak boundary linkages represent weak alliances and communication between individuals. Boundary linkages can happen either intentionally or unintentionally. For example, if John tells his girlfriend Jennifer that he has cancer, John is directly constructing a boundary with Jennifer about his private diagnosis. However, if Jennifer's roommate, Rebecca overhears John's confession, she would unintentionally become part of the boundary linkage by overhearing John's confession.

Second, boundary ownership rights are "...the rights, privileges, and amount of responsibility for co-owners of private information" (Petronio & Durham, 2008, p. 315). As individuals set up boundary structures, they coordinate responsibility explicitly or implicitly. Confidants frequently receive expectations of how the information should be handled. Using the previous example, Jennifer becomes co-owner of John's diagnosis and, to some extent, responsible for how John wants the information to be handled. Additionally when these parameters are not clear, it is more likely that a co-owner will breach a rule about how the information should be co-managed. Since Rebecca might feel less responsibility to explicitly negotiate privacy rules, coordination becomes more difficult for John.

Third, boundary permeability refers to the degree of openness within a shared boundary. As access to private information increases, boundaries become more permeable. Thus, thinner walls represent more access or openness so private information flows more easily. For example, John intended to keep this private information between Jennifer and him. In John's mind, his shared boundary with Jennifer is highly impermeable. However, since Rebecca heard John's confession, it is more permeable than he originally believed.

The sixth principle of CPM is known as boundary turbulence. Boundary turbulence refers to the outcome between individuals when boundary coordination fails. This turbulence can happen due to rule misunderstandings, incongruent expectations and limited discussions about access rules. For example, Jennifer may tell her parents about John's condition. As a result, John may feel upset and violated and change his communication behaviors in the future. This lack of rule compliance and its effects refer to what CPM note as boundary turbulence.

### *Strengths of CPM*

CPM has several significant strengths. The first strength of CPM is the theory is flexible in incorporating an individual's unique social network. For example, CPM can explain Kim's relationship with Dwight but also explain Kim's relationship with her family. From this all-encompassing approach, CPM has generated a large body of research spanning several disciplines (i.e. health, psychology, sociology, and business). As Petronio & Durham (2008) noted, "the greatest strength of CPM is its utility and heuristic value in both basic and applied research" (p. 319). A second strength of CPM is in how it reframes sharing information as a co-ownership between individuals. Previous theoretical frameworks only examined self-disclosure as a static act of disclosing, while CPM looks at such disclosures of privacy over a time and between/among relational partners.

### *Limitations of CPM*

However, CPM has some limitations. First, CPM critics argue the framework does not incorporate all situational factors that go into the process of disclosing/concealing private information. Thus, CPM cannot fully articulate an individual's decision to disclose. Second, CPM critics argue that the theory is fairly new and needs further testing, refinement, and development.

In conclusion, CPM explains how individuals choose to self-disclose/conceal private information to others. Several principles explain the process of in how private information is shared between individuals and groups and concealed from others. Additionally, notable strengths and limitations of this framework have been discussed.

In summary, the review of literature has defined self-disclosure, discussed variables that predict self-disclosure, described strategies individuals use to self-disclose, and examined both benefits and risks for self-disclosure. The section on SET discussed how individuals are motivated by cost/reward benefits with self-disclosing to others. The past section of CPM has been elaborated upon to explain the process in how private information is self-disclosed and coordinated with others individuals.

Up until this point, the research highlighted how non-anonymous disclosure processes function. Shifting focus to the topic of anonymity, it becomes apparent that little research exists. The current research on anonymity has not been explored in the same ways non-anonymous self-disclosure has. But before an examination of the lacking research can be done, an elaboration of what has been researched must be discussed.

### Anonymity

Identity is an important element of communication. While message content is important to communication process, knowing the sender's identity can be equally important (in supplying credibility, motivations, etc.). A loss of this identity is known as anonymity. To elaborate on the importance of anonymity, the first section will establish a conceptual definition of anonymity. Then, the benefits of anonymity will be discussed followed by anonymity's implications. Once benefits and implications are discussed, the limited research on anonymity will be examined.

### *Defining Anonymity*

Anonymity is defined as communication from an unknown sender (Marx, 1999). The degree of anonymity can range from being totally anonymous to lacking anonymity all together, being totally identifiable.

While total anonymity and self-disclosure might first appear to be incompatible concepts, the two are closely linked. Non-anonymous self-disclosure reveals information about both the message and the sender to one or more receivers. Anonymous self-disclosure reveals only information about the message. For example, Gavin reveals his undying love to Courtney. Courtney receives both (a) the message and (b) knowledge that Gavin sent it. From the message, Courtney gathers, "Gavin loves me". If Gavin reveals the same information anonymously, via secret love letter for example, Courtney receives (a) the message and (b) knowledge that someone sent it. From the message, Courtney gathers, "Someone loves me". However, in this example, Gavin has disclosed without revealing his identity and subjecting himself to risk to his relationship with Courtney. Although minor, this example illustrates how anonymity can affect the context of self-disclosure for senders and receivers.

Without information about identity, anonymity provides two things: (a) emphasis on message content and (b) protection to the individual from possible social repercussions. Because of these two outcomes, anonymity can be viewed as a socially desired element in specific social settings (Marx, 1999) and will be elaborated upon in the next section.

### *Benefits of Anonymous Self-disclosure*

Senders can receive benefits from anonymous communication. Sender's benefits

include (a) decreased social repercussions (Lee, 1996; Marx, 1999) and (b) therapeutic effects (Frijns et al., 2005; Pennebaker & Beall, 1996; Pennebaker, 1990). Decreased social repercussions refer to anonymous communication being untraceable, as receivers cannot punish a sender because their identity is unknown. Therapeutic effects include increased overall health (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), decreased depressive mood (Frijns et al., 2005), and increased clarity of self-concept (Frijns et al., 2005)

Marx's (1999) essay highlights the possible results from the protection anonymity allows. These outcomes fell into two different categories including (a) increased information quantity, and (b) increased enhancement of the message. Because the sender has little to no social consequence, he/she can be more honest and elaborative with messages. For example, Brandon works for a large company that enacted a policy he does not approve. If he speaks negatively about it, he knows there will be social consequences from peers and supervisors. However, if the company were to provide anonymity (e.g. online survey, suggestion box, etc.), Brandon can share his perspective and opinion honestly. The second outcome of increased protection is enhancement of the message, meaning the audience can focus only on the feedback. Using the previous example, when Brandon's supervisors receive the message feedback anonymously, they can focus only on the message because there are no social cues about its origin. Because of the protection of anonymity, supervisors are forced to deal with the validity of the issue, rather than the context of the sender. Although Marx's work is a personal essay and does not provide any application in a case study, it offers a viable list of reasons why anonymity is important and pragmatic to self-disclosure research.

However, anonymity is a variable not fully explained by communication scholars. While Marx's (1999) review highlights some benefits, little empirical research exists on how anonymity affects the communication process, in this case self-disclosure. However, even being understudied, several implications have been noted.

### *Implications of Anonymity*

Several important communication implications need consideration with anonymity. These include (a) authentication (Lee, 1996; Joinson, 2001), (b) legal ramifications (Marx, 1999), (c) alleviation (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), and (d) public action/engagement (Joinson, 2001). First, anonymous disclosures can lose authenticity from the receiver's perspective. While the sender may still perceive messages as being concise and clear as face-to-face interaction, limited interpersonal identifiers can decrease validity of the message (Lee, 1996). For example, an individual self-discloses a policy's flaws through an online format. This online message lacks the same validity information would have through a face-to-face channel, due to the lack of the visual representation of the sender. Second, anonymous messages create problems for legal systems (Lee, 1996; Brandscomb, 1995). In America, much of the online community is divided on the debate whether anonymous disclosures should be protected under First Amendment rights. With this debate, it is difficult to come to consensus on how these disclosures should be viewed in the court system, more specifically under libel and slander allegations. An example of this debate occurred in 2009 when Google was ordered by a judge to release an anonymous blogger's identity, after the blogger wrote a slanderous editorial on model Liskula Cohen (McHugh & Hartman, 2009). Third, anonymous disclosures prevent organizations from

alleviating tension with individuals directly. For example, individuals making self-harming comments (that do not achieve catharsis) cannot get the help they require if disclosures are anonymous. Last, anonymity fails to engage public action and collaboration. MacAulay et al. (2004) noted, “without identity, political transformation becomes difficult” (p. 97). In other words, a voice also needs a face for social change to occur. However, the few studies have looked at this perspective highlighting the need for such research.

### *Limited Anonymity Research*

Little scholarly literature exists on anonymity. However, examples of anonymous self-disclosure are present throughout modern society. For example, graffiti is a form of anonymous self-disclosure, in it gives a confession of expression through art. While some may view it as destructive in nature, individuals use graffiti to reflect societal climate and tensions (Gonos, Mulkern, & Poushinsky, 1976). By not leaving identification outside of initials, artists can express honest feelings and thoughts without social repercussions. Other examples of anonymity in society include roadside memorials (Buerkel-Rothfuss, 2008), alcoholics anonymous, (Tonigan, Toscova, Miller, 1995), and hate-speech online (Timofeeva, 2003). All provide a measure of catharsis through a venting of emotions without revealing the source of the message.

Anonymous self-disclosures in social settings are rare, and thus, difficult to study. Anonymous self-disclosure has been briefly examined in the context of media, including weblogs (Qian & Scott, 2007), survey research (Joinson, 2001), and self-presentation online (Gibbs et al., 2006). However, limited studies have examined anonymity in the context of self-disclosure and outcomes for the sender.

Pennebaker & Beall (1986) used anonymity in examining the link between traumatic events and physiological health. In the study, 46 participants wrote for 20 minutes over four evening sessions about an assigned topic. Participants were assured all journal entries would remain anonymous.

Participants were divided into four groups: (a) trauma-emotion, (b) trauma-fact, (c) trauma-combination, and (d) control. Trauma-emotion subjects were to write about an upsetting personal experience, focusing on the feelings of the event. Trauma-fact subjects were asked to write about the experience from an objective narrative, describing the event but not exploring the emotions associated with the event. Subjects in the trauma-combination group were asked to describe the upsetting event and write whatever came to mind. Control subjects were asked to write about trivial topics like a tree or shoe. Participants' heart rate and blood pressure were monitored during the study and self-reports were collected following each session.

Writing tasks resulted in increased blood pressure and negative psychological states both in trauma-combination and trauma-emotion groups before and after each session. However, a four-month follow up with questionnaires and medical history confirmed reductions in health visits in the trauma-emotion and trauma-combination groups compared to the control and trauma-fact groups. The control and trauma-fact groups had twice as many medical visits than the trauma-emotion and trauma-combination groups.

Pennebaker & Beall's (1986) study allowed participants to disclose personal traumatic experiences without sacrificing identity. The exemplar study showed a positive use for anonymity in the self-disclosure process and demonstrated long-lasting positive and negative effects for participants.

In recent years, the development of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), meaning communication facilitated through computers via the Internet, has increased availability and accessibility for anonymity. According to McCormick & McCormick (1992), “CMC gives users an opportunity to become intimate without necessarily knowing the ethnicity, social class, gender, age, appearance, or even the true identity of those with whom self-disclosure are shared” (p. 379). Thus, CMC has unique parameters compared to face-to-face communication. These parameters include (a) limited channel, (b) selective presentation, and (c) idealization. First, CMC lacks interpersonal cues that are typical to channels that allow face-to-face interaction. This change of format creates a more anonymous medium (Joinson, 2001; Lee, 1996). Because of this built in anonymity, individuals perceive less risk with CMC disclosures than with face-to-face interaction (Qian & Scott, 2007). Second, CMC’s format allows selective presentation of individual selves, concealing flaws and stigmas. For example, Kirk has a speech impediment. In face-to-face interaction, others recognize Kirk’s speech impediment and sometimes choose not to speak to Kirk because of it. Online, Kirk can choose to conceal or disclose such information, allowing an opportunity to present himself in a way not otherwise possible with face-to-face interaction. By doing so, individuals can control audience perceptions, revealing an idealized version of themselves that could not be done with face-to-face interaction.

In summary, the past section discussed the nature of anonymity in self-disclosure. Positive outcomes of anonymous self-disclosure included catharsis (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), increased social protection (Marx, 1999), increased information quantity (Marx, 1999), and increased enhancement of the message content (Marx, 1999). Constraints of

anonymous disclosures included (a) authentication (Lee, 1996; Joinson, 2001), (b) legal ramifications (Marx, 1999), (c) alleviation (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), and (d) public action/engagement (Joinson, 2001). Nonetheless, even with the availability of anonymity with CMC, research with anonymous self-disclosure has not fully been explored. However, in recent years, the development of the PostSecret project has brought new questions about the nature of anonymous self-disclosures and is an area worth examination.

### PostSecret

As noted earlier, due to specific social conditions that must align, finding a context where anonymity and private self-disclosure merge can be difficult. However, the PostSecret project directly gives a viable case study to look at private self-disclosures in an anonymous context. The following section regarding the PostSecret community will discuss the PostSecret project, describe its origins, and examine the feedback/responses to the project.

#### *The PostSecret Project*

The PostSecret project consists of an online community where individuals mail private thoughts anonymously on postcards to a man named Frank Warren. From the postcards mailed, Warren selects roughly 20 postcards and posts them onto his PostSecret blog site every Sunday. The purpose of the PostSecret project is to create a nonjudgmental place to disclose secrets that might be considered taboo otherwise to share publicly such as mental disorders, sexual abuse, and sexual fetishes (Catron, 2009; Warren, 2007).

Several elements make the PostSecret project unique. PostSecret's unique hybrid of old (postal mail) and new technology (the Internet/weblogs) forces users to be deliberate and intentional about/when self-disclosing (Puentes, 2006). And unlike the other online confessional formats (i.e. group hug.us, notproud.com, and dailyconfession.com, sixbillionsecrets.com, likealittle.com), PostSecrets take a large amount of time and energy to create and cannot be submitted on impulse. Furthermore, PostSecret does not allow instant gratification of self-disclosure. Once the postcard is created and sent, it is not instantly published. It can take a long time for the PostSecret to be published on the PostSecret site, if at all.

PostSecret's disclosures contain visual and verbal fragments that become a hybrid of both the visual and essay narratives (MacAulay et al., 2004; Flanagan, 2007). Warren believes these factors create the authenticity that makes the PostSecret project unique (Catron, 2009).

Another element that makes PostSecret unique is the content of the disclosures. Due to the ambiguity of the project, some secrets are "snapshot" confessions, leaving untold stories to be subjectively interpreted (Flanagan, 2007; Pesca, 2008; Norris, 2005). Some argue the ambiguity of the project contributes to the allure to individuals. For visual reference, some of the posted secrets in the PostSecret project are presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Examples of PostSecret Postcards  
Retrieved from the PostSecret Community blog  
(<http://www.postsecretcommunity.com/chat/>) on April 15, 2010.

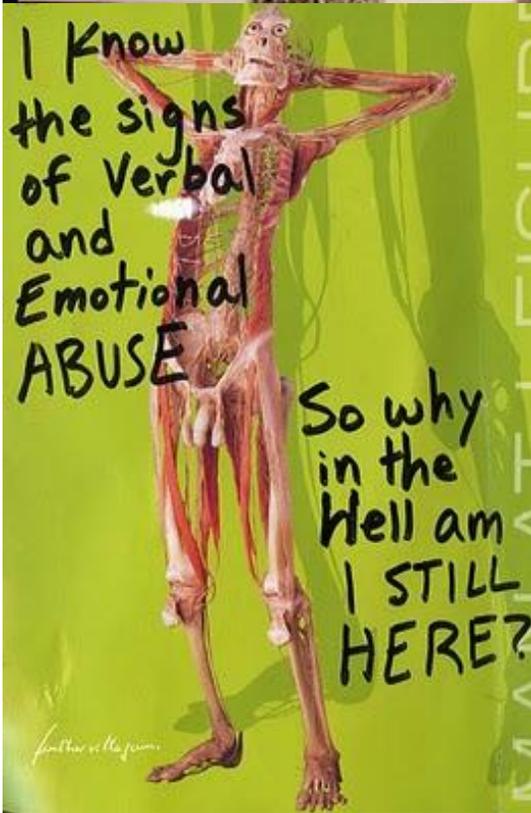
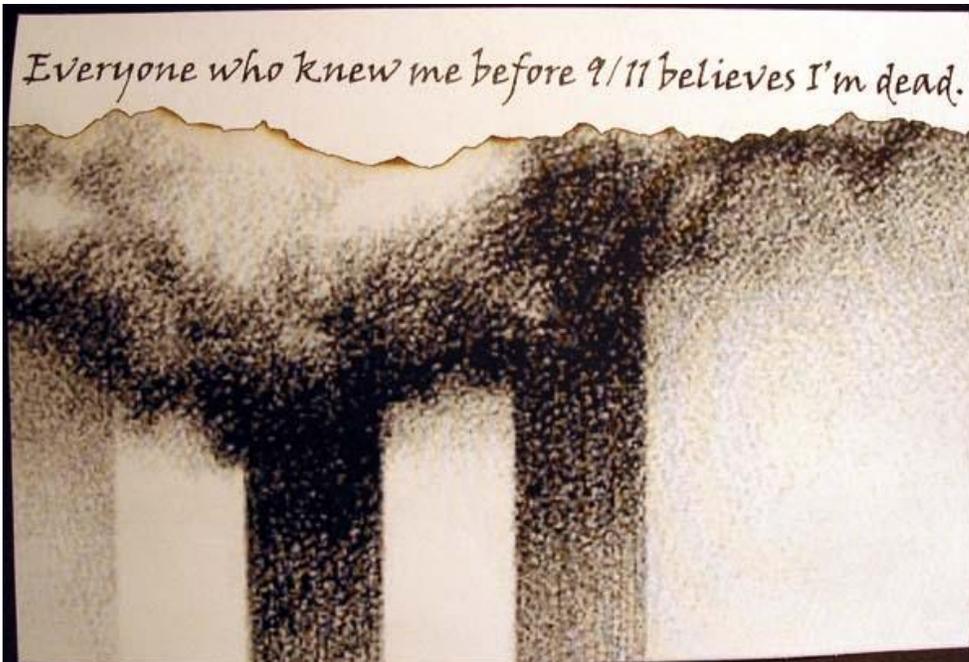


Figure 1. Continued

The secrets revealed in PostSecret range in topic (Pesca, 2005). Generally, PostSecret showcases several stigmatized topics, including (but not limited to) sexual abuse, traumatic experiences, family secrets, mental disorders, and deviant behavior (Puente, 2006). DeGroot (2008) examined content posted at the [postsecret.blogspot.com](http://postsecret.blogspot.com) for five weeks, reviewing 120 postcards under Burke's poetic frames. DeGroot (2008) found the postcards had two predominant themes including (a) burlesques ideas and (b) comedic secrets. Reflecting on the PostSecret project, Warren noted three observations: many Americans have (a) creative visual talents, (b) poetic capabilities, and (c) something to hide and define as a secret (Puente, 2006).

### *PostSecret History*

The PostSecret project began in 2004, when creator Frank Warren distributed 3,000 postcards to strangers around the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Warren's directions on the postcards read as follows:

“You are invited to anonymously contribute your secrets to PostSecret. Each secret can be a regret, hope, funny experience, unseen kindness, fantasy, belief, fear, betrayal, erotic desire, feeling, confession or childhood humiliation. Reveal anything – as long as it is true and you have never shared it with anyone before. (Warren, n.d., PostSecret Community Blog)”

Additionally, Warren gave some tips. The suggestions were as follows:

“Be brief – The fewer words used the better. Be legible – Use big, clear and bold lettering. Be creative – Let the postcard be your canvas (Warren, n.d., PostSecret Community Blog).”

The last direction was for participants to send their finished postcards to Warren's home address. The initial response rate was relatively slow, as only a few postcards were returned in the first few weeks. Over the following months, however, the postcards started arriving in larger numbers. Eventually, Warren had enough for his initial project to showcase the secrets in an art exhibition in November 2004 (Leopold, 2007; DeGroot, 2008). Warren's original initial intent was for the PostSecret project to conclude after the exhibition, but the postcards kept arriving in his mailbox. Unbeknownst to Warren, news about the PostSecret project spread across the nation and more individuals continued to send him their secrets on postcards. Warren began to scan the postcards to a blog, which created the foundation of the PostSecret community. This routine has continued every week since, and the blog is updated every Sunday with new secrets on [www.postsecret.com](http://www.postsecret.com). After starting the project years ago, Warren reports he is still receiving anywhere from 100 to 200 postcards each day (Flanagan, 2007).

#### *PostSecret Responses/Feedback*

PostSecret continues to grow and have a large cultural following. PostSecret receives more than three million visitors each month and is the third most popular blog online (Puente, 2006; Short, 2009). Warren has become an "accidental artist," (Flanagan, 2007) and hailed as the "most trusted stranger in America" based on the number of secrets dropped in his mailbox (Puente, 2006, p. 1). PostSecret has received six blog awards by the Internet community (Short, 2009). *Forbes Magazine* in 2009 rated Warren as being the most popular "web celebrity" (Short, 2009). Warren has published five PostSecret books and has spoken across the nation at college campuses sharing his

perspective on the power of secrets and the PostSecret project (MacAulay et al., 2004). Additionally, a PostSecret MySpace page, Facebook page, and Twitter account now exist, updating news to the PostSecret Community (DeGroot, 2008). Under Warren's direction, the PostSecret blog operates with no advertisements in hopes of keeping the project a safe place to disclose without glaring outside influences (DeGroot, 2008).

The PostSecret project has also positively changed the lives of the individuals who participate (Norris, 2005). Gail Saltz, author of *Anatomy of a Secret Life*, elaborates, "Frank Warren [with PostSecret has] provided a forum that enables people to feel like they're sharing or getting a secret off their chests but without being exposed" (Puente, 2006, p. 1). By doing so, PostSecret becomes an emotionally empowering environment. Additionally, PostSecret requires little boundary coordination from a CPM perspective, as Warren already sets the rules with the project: be honest but be anonymous.

Another change in participant's lives is the PostSecret submission being a first-step disclosure. Warren believes the PostSecret disclosures are a first-step for many individuals in a larger disclosure process (Leopold, 2007). By the first-step disclosure, Warren argued individuals disclosing anonymously can lead to non-anonymous self-disclosures. Such a claim is not yet explored empirically, but is a point of interest in this study. Warren reported in *A Lifetime Of Secrets* (2007), "Even though sharing a secret is difficult, in many cases it provides motivation to take charge in life" (p. 1). PostSecret has been noted by the media to have long-lasting effects on both the participants and viewers of the project (Todd, 2007; Boxer, 2005; Norris, 2005).

Despite PostSecret's cultural success, there are some negative responses to the PostSecret community. Most notable, PostSecret contributors do not always remain

anonymous. For example, when a student from an Ivy League college wrote a very specific secret that was later posted on the weblog, people recognized the owner by her handwriting and questioned her. Soon after, she asked Warren to take the secret off the site, and Warren obliged (Leopold, 2007). While this situation rarely occurs, it exposes PostSecret's ability to make participants become non-anonymous making them potentially social vulnerable. Other critiques of the project claim that PostSecret promotes narcissism (Boxer, 2005).

The application of the PostSecret project in other social settings adds to additional criticisms. Many administrators do not like PostSecret programs occurring in schools, even with PostSecret's therapeutic and connective nature. Administrators argue the project is impulsive in nature and question the legality of secrets criticizing other students or teachers and the responsibility of addressing self-harm confessions to which intervention cannot occur (Puente, 2006). Last, critics argue PostSecret does not address the long-term effects of disclosing a secret. Evan Imber-Black, family therapist and author of *The Secret Life of Families*, presented this warning: "... opening a secret is just the first step. [Posting on PostSecret] might offer some measure of relief, but I'm not sure how long it lasts. When a secret opens, it usually takes time and relational work to get a new equilibrium" (Puente, 2006, p. 1).

### Summary

In this review of literature, many facets of self-disclosure have been discussed. First, self-disclosure was defined as the communication of personal or private information, thoughts and feelings not known by observation or social interaction to other

individuals. Second, the reasons (catharsis, education, duty, social support, intimacy, and similarity) and strategies (staging, indirect and direct) individuals use to self-disclose private information were elaborated upon to highlight the complicated nature of self-disclosure. Benefits of self-disclosing private information include increased self-esteem in relationships (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006; Dilly, 2002; Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009), increased intimacy (Omarzu, 2000), increased social support (Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986), and health benefits, namely catharsis (Tardy, 2000; Wegner, 1989; Kelly et al., 2001). Risks of self-disclosure include listener rejection, reduction of personal integrity, loss of control, and the possibility of hurting or embarrassing the listener (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Omarzu, 2000). Motivations into why an individual self-discloses were then explored using SET. Individuals desire low social cost and high social reward in social interactions. CPM highlighted the complex nature of disclosing private information in social settings, describing the choice to disclose as being highly subjective in nature. The social benefits and implications of anonymous self-disclosure were discussed along with a brief discussion of the limited research available. Last, the PostSecret project was reviewed as a viable case study by which to explore anonymous self-disclosures.

As noted, whereas the review of literature has elaborated upon the power of self-disclosure, little research has examined self-disclosure power in the context of anonymity. It is unknown if anonymous self-disclosure motivations and effects mirror those revealed for non-anonymous self-disclosure discussed in the review of literature.

### *Proposed Hypotheses*

Four hypotheses will examine two areas of focus regarding anonymous self-disclosure: (a) motivations and (b) effects. These areas have been examined with the extensive research discussed in the review of literature in non-anonymous contexts. However, to fully understand self-disclosure in anonymous settings, similar research on anonymous self-disclosure needs to be explored.

The first hypothesis focuses on the conditions and motivations individuals experience to anonymously self-disclose. The second and third hypotheses focus on the effects of anonymous self-disclosures. The fourth hypothesis focuses on specific behavior of an individual post-anonymous self-disclosure.

First, individuals act based on perceived outcomes of a cost-reward ratio of social interaction based on SET literature. Ideally, individuals seek low social costs and high social rewards. With PostSecret, the perceived cost is disclosing extremely private information to which the sender may become identified in the public sphere. Perceived rewards include little social repercussions (Lee, 1996), complete honesty (MacAulay et al., 2004), and alleviation of tensions (Wegner, 1989; Frijns, 2005; Pennebaker, 1990). Based on the framework of SET, this rationale is supported by individuals socially acting on their best alternatives. The unique format of PostSecret allows reduction of potential risks that would be present in face-to-face disclosures (Derlega et al., 2008; Petronio, 2002). However, exploration of this notion needs further articulation empirically. Based on the literature review, the first hypothesis offered is as follows:

H1: Individuals participate in anonymous disclosures (i.e. the PostSecret project) because of the low perceived social cost and high-perceived benefits from the disclosure.

Second, Jourard (1970) noted a healthy lifestyle requires individuals to self-disclose. As previous research notes, concealing private information can lead to psychological stress (Wegner, 1989; Frijns, 2005). By disclosing private information anonymously, individuals should feel cathartic relief after participating in the PostSecret project, reflecting similar findings of Kelly et al. (2001) and Pennebaker & Beall (1986). Thus, individuals should expect catharsis after submitting to the PostSecret project. Additionally, individuals should report similar outcomes in regards to disclosure and self-esteem (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006; Dilly, 2002) and perceived social support (Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986). However, the lack of identity may have little impact on social networks, thus this dimension of anonymous self-disclosure will be a more broad research question to see if any change exists. Additionally, intimacy will not be examined, as intimacy requires vulnerability and identification. Therefore, a second hypothesis states:

H2: Individuals experience similar positive benefits from anonymous self-disclosures as from non-anonymous self-disclosure.

H2a: Individuals experience catharsis when self-disclosing anonymously.

H2b: Individuals experience increase in self-esteem when self-disclosing anonymously.

RQ: Do individuals experience increase in social support when self-disclosing anonymously?

Third, one of the primary directions of the PostSecret project explicitly asks for participants to share the intimate self-disclosure (Warren, n.d.). As previous self-disclosure research stated, revealing intimate information can lead to positive benefits

(Afifi & Caughlin, 2006; Dilly, 2002; Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009; Cohen et al., 1986; Kelly et al., 2001; Tardy, 2000; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986) but can also lead to social vulnerability (Omarzu, 2000). Following this notion, the higher the perceived risk, the higher the tension that secret puts on an individual. Thus, the more intimate the self-disclosure the greater the benefit the self-disclosing the private information would be. Therefore, a third hypothesis states:

H3: The more intimate the anonymous self-disclosure, the higher level of benefits the individual will experience.

Fourth, Warren noted PostSecret disclosures may constitute a first-step and motivator for revealing face-to-face (Leopold, 2007). Such implications would be beneficial to know, however, little empirical support exists to justify this claim.

Therefore, a fourth hypothesis states:

H4: Disclosing through the PostSecret project will lead to face-to-face disclosures or the desire to disclose the information.

## Conclusion

Self-disclosure can have powerful effects resulting in both benefits and possible risks. Anonymity may provide self-disclosure benefits while also reducing/eliminating social vulnerability. This first chapter has developed a foundation for this research project to study anonymous self-disclosure. The second chapter will describe the proposed methodology for studying these research questions and hypotheses.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODOLOGY

As noted in the previous section, the current study was designed to gain a better understanding of the motivations and effects of anonymous self-disclosures. This chapter will discuss the methods used to test the four hypotheses presented in the first chapter. The sections of this chapter include (a) design, (b) variables, (c) participants, (d) instruments, (e) procedures, and (f) data treatment.

#### Design

The basic design of this study was for participants to contribute to the PostSecret project and study the effects of their anonymous self-disclosure. More specifically, this study was designed to examine the participants' levels of social support, catharsis, and self-esteem before and after self-disclosing to the PostSecret project. The nature of the post-test/pre-test was necessary to establish the existing levels of these variables and examine any change (and to what degree) may have occurred through anonymous self-disclosure process.

The method of data collection in this study was through quantitative surveys. The main reason for this choice was due to the large number of participants expected to participate in this study. In addition, if the sample was large enough, the quantitative data could be generalized beyond the participants to a wider audience outside of the sample population (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000).

## Variables

### *Independent Variable*

The independent variable in this study was the individual's perception of depth of their self-disclosure. This perception could range from being a very deep disclosure (known by none or one individual) to not very deep (known by many). The method in which self-disclosure depth was measured will be articulated further in the instrument section of this chapter.

### *Dependent Variables*

The dependent variables in this study included perceived (a) social support, (b) catharsis, and (c) self-esteem. The methods by which these variables were measured will be articulated further in the instrument section of this chapter.

Social support is defined as having four dimensions, including (a) emotional /informational support, (b) tangible support, (c) positive social interaction, and (d) affectionate support (Sherbourne & Steward, 1991). All four dimensions result in the overall level of social support an individual perceives. This overall level was examined pre- and post-anonymous disclosure.

Catharsis is defined as the release of emotional tension. As noted in the previous chapter, self-disclosure has been a method to achieve catharsis (Kelly et al., 2001). However, this relationship has been only tested with non-anonymous self-disclosures. For this study, evaluating the cathartic effects of anonymously self-disclosing was an area of focus.

Self-esteem is defined as the degree to which an individual respects one's self (Rosenberg, 1979). An individual reporting a high level of self-esteem would be considered to respect him or herself and have a high sense of worth (Rosenberg, 1979; Gray-Little, Williams, & Hancock, 1976). An individual reporting low levels of self-esteem would not respect him- or herself believing that he/she is worthless. As noted in the previous chapter, self-disclosure and self-esteem were linked, but only researched in non-anonymous self-disclosure settings. For this study, establishing if a participant's self-esteem was affected by an anonymous self-disclosure was another area of focus.

### Participants

The participants of this study consisted of students from sections of undergraduate communication courses at Central Michigan University. These courses included one section of COM 100, six sections of COM 101, two sections of COM 361, and one section of COM 562. COM 100 and COM 101 were an introductory course in the communication discipline and COM 101 fulfilled a university competency for graduation. COM 361 was an advanced communication class for undergraduates and focused on interpersonal communication, specifically self-disclosure, making this particular study especially relevant to these students. COM 562 focused on the communication processes within family groups and systems. These groups of participants were a convenience sample to the researcher. All participants in this group were 18 years or older. Individuals under 18 were asked not to take part in the study. Participation relied on instructors giving extra credit to students who participate in submitting their secrets to the PostSecret project. Students not wanting to participate in

the project did not receive any participation credit from this activity. If a student wanted to earn extra credit but did not want to participate in this project, they were instructed to talk with their instructor about an alternative assignment. All participation/extra credit incentives were discussed with instructors prior to the experimentation.

### Instruments

For this study, a survey-based instrument questionnaire was used that comprised of five sections: (a) self-disclosure depth, (b) social support, (c) catharsis, (d) self-esteem, and (e) exploratory questions.

Depth of the participant's self-disclosure was assessed by using a 7-point Likert scale to rank the perceived depth of their disclosed PostSecret. This Likert scale asked the participant to select the degree of depth information self-disclose and ranged from 1 (not very deep) to 7 (very deep). This question instructed participants to "select the level of privacy your information was that you disclosed to PostSecret". Only the second questionnaire asked about depth, as it was to report about the anonymous self-disclosure to PostSecret.

Social support was measured using the Medical Outcomes Study (MOS) scale. The MOS was a 20-item questionnaire scale measuring with the overall reliability of the MOS is 0.97 (Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991).

Catharsis was measured using the Session Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ) scale. The SEQ was used by Kelly et al. (2001) to evaluate catharsis after the revealing of secrets to confidants. The SEQ consists of 24 semantic differential scales rated from 1 to 7 with bipolar opposites, divided into two sections. The first section of the measure was

prefaced by the phrase “This session was...”, followed by the bipolar opposites of *bad/good, safe/dangerous, difficult/easy, valuable/worthless, shallow/deep, relaxed/tense, unpleasant/pleasant, full/empty, weak/powerful, special/ordinary, rough/smooth, and comfortable/uncomfortable*. The second section was prefaced by the phrase “Right now I feel...”, followed by the bipolar opposites of *happy/sad, angry/pleased, active/still, uncertain/definitive, involved/detached, calm/excited, confident/afraid, alert/sleepy, friendly/unfriendly, slow/fast, joyful/joyless, and quiet/aroused*. For purposes of this study, the sections prefaces will be modified from “This session was...”, and “Right now I feel...” to “Contributing to PostSecret was...” and “In regards to my PostSecret contribution, I feel...”. SEQ had an overall rating of the effectiveness of the session on a 1 (not effective) to 7 (very effective) scale to measure a patient’s global impression of the session. All of uses of the scale indicated a high reliability of 0.8 (Stiles & Snow, 1984). The last item was modified to explicitly ask the participant’s global impression of the PostSecret submission, on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree) in the self-disclosure being satisfactory.

Self-esteem levels were measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (RSE). The RSE scale was a 10-item scale that asked participants to rate the appropriate answer for each item, depending on whether they “strongly agree”, “agree”, “disagree”, or “strongly disagree” with given statements. Some sample statements included “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”, “At times I think I am no good at all,” and “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.” For scoring on the RSE, a method of combined scoring was used. Low self-esteem responses “disagree” or “strongly disagree” were indicated on items 1, 3, 4, 7, 10, and “strongly agree” or “agree” on items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9. In past

applications of the scale, the RSE indicated an internal consistency rating 0.92 on a Guttman scale coefficient of reproducibility (Rosenberg, 1979). Specifically, Fleming & Courtney (1984) reported a high reliability with college students ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ), a sample used for this study.

Exploratory questions were used to obtain descriptive data to understand the perceptions and experiences of the PostSecret project and anonymous self-disclosure. The exploratory questions included (a) “Did sending in to PostSecret meet your perceived expectations?”, (b) “How safe did you feel disclosing to PostSecret, in that your secret would remain anonymous?”, (c) “How fearful were you in having your anonymity compromised with PostSecret?”, (d) “Since disclosing to PostSecret, did you share your secret with an individual face-to-face?”, (e) “Do you plan on sending a secret into PostSecret in the future?”, and (f) “How would you rate your overall experience with disclosing to PostSecret?”. The focus of these questions were to elicit participant’s specific behaviors after disclosing to the PostSecret project, and were important to give further insight to the anonymous self-disclosure process.

Another exploratory question asked participants if they chose not to self-disclose to the PostSecret project the reasons why they chose to do so. The question “Why did you chose not to self-disclose to the PostSecret project?” was followed by several responses including (a) “I was fearful of rejection”, (b) “I was fearful of embarrassment”, (c) “I thought my identity might be compromised”, (d) “I thought it might compromise my integrity”, (e) “I felt it was a loss of information control”, (f) “I did not expect it to be worthwhile”, (g) “I thought it might be unethical”, (h) “I forgot to complete the assignment”, and (i) “Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_”. The question will also specify

for participants to “check all that apply”. This question was placed towards the beginning of the questionnaire for convenience for the participants.

### Procedures

Permission to administer the survey questionnaires was granted through the Institutional Review Board of Central Michigan University. Once completed, data collection from the communication student groups occurred on two different sessions scheduled prior with the class instructor. The first session occurred early Fall 2010 academic semester and the second session occurred two weeks later.

During the first session, the researcher (a) briefly introduced himself to the students, (b) identified what the PostSecret project was through discussion and the video at <http://www.postsecretcommunity.com/video>, (c) described how the PostSecret project related to self-disclosure topic matter, and (d) described the study. Following this, the researcher asked the class to participate in the PostSecret project. The researcher described how over the next two weeks the students willing to participate would be asked to send in a PostSecret to Frank Warren’s project. The researcher explained that during a class period two weeks later, the researcher would ask students to complete another survey questionnaire. The researcher explained the survey and the minimal risks associated two surveys. Participants informed that all questionnaires would take roughly 10 minutes to 15 minutes to complete. Additionally, participants were informed that they could stop taking the survey if they felt uncomfortable with the questions asked. Those who participated could potentially receive extra credit/participation credit depending on

the instructor's discretion. The researcher instructed the individuals not willing to participate in the study to not fill a survey out, but turn it in when others were done.

Then, the researcher instructed participants to use the last 4-digits of their phone number as their personalized tracking number. Following this, the researcher informed the participants not to share the tracking number outside of the context of this study.

Then, written consent forms were distributed (Appendix C) by the researcher in addition to the first questionnaire (Appendix A). Instrument sections examined self-esteem, social support and exploratory questions in this questionnaire. The students were asked to return the questionnaire in a box at the front of the room upon completion (and sign a sheet informing the instructor they completed and wanted participation credit). After this was complete, the researcher gave each participant a pre-addressed postcard with the required postage. At this time the researcher waited quietly for approximately 10 minutes. At the end of 10 minutes, the researcher asked if anyone needed additional time and waited until all questionnaires were completed. The researcher left contact information if any participants had follow up questions over the course of the week or if they wanted to share more about their experience.

The second questionnaire occurred two weeks after the first questionnaire took place. The researcher asked if there are any questions or concerns the class had during the past week in regards to the project and address them. The researcher then explained the survey to the participants and how it was going to take approximately take 15 minutes to complete. Once this was done, the researcher distributed the questionnaire to every student present during the first session (Appendix B for a copy of the questionnaire). Like the first questionnaire, the students were asked to return the questionnaire face down

in a box at the front of the room upon completion. This questionnaire directly asked if the student participated in the project or not, giving another check to secure the validity of the data. Additionally, instrument sections measuring depth, self-esteem, social support, catharsis and exploratory questions were in this questionnaire. At the end of 15 minutes, the researcher asked if anyone needed additional time. Once again, the researcher left contact information for any participants if they had any follow up questions or would like to share their experiences in submitting to PostSecret project.

### Data Treatment

Once the information was collected, the next step was to analyze the quantitative data from the questionnaires. The quantitative data was examined by the following procedures. First, the researcher checked for blank or incomplete surveys. Surveys left blank were discarded. Partially completed surveys were determined valid on a case-by-case basis. Once all usable questionnaires were collected, the quantitative information was inputted into a Microsoft Excel document (v.12.2, for Mac) and then exported into SPSS (v. 18, for Mac) for data treatment. For the open-ended responses, responses were recorded and evaluated. Next, the data highlighting the independent variables and dependent variables were labeled. From here, the distribution statistics of means, standard deviations, and correlations were calculated and recorded. Last, the data was examined to prove/disprove the hypotheses.

### Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to explain the methodology of the proposed study. The methodology discussed included (a) design, (b) variables, (c) participants, (d)

instruments, (e) procedures, (f) data treatment and analysis. The next chapter will explore the results that were found from this methodology.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

The presentation of results is divided into three sections. The first section presents the descriptive results of the study. The second section presents the analysis of the hypotheses. The last section closes the chapter with a brief summary of this study's findings.

#### Descriptive Results

In the study, 229 individuals were given the pre-test and a postcard to send in an anonymous self-disclosure to the PostSecret project. From the pre-test questionnaire, participants reported high interest in participating ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 0.916$ ) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = unlikely to 5 = very likely). However, from the 229 individuals who completed a pre-test, only 167 post-tests linked to the pre-test groups via tracking number. From these 167 participants, only 83 submitted an anonymous self-disclosure, while 84 did not submit an anonymous self-disclosure.

#### Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis one predicted individuals would participate in anonymous self-disclosure if the individual perceived low social costs and high benefits. To evaluate hypothesis one, two approaches were examined from perspectives of (a) those who participated and (b) those who chose not to participate.

From the participant group ( $n = 83$ ) the responses to three post-test open ended questions were analyzed, including (a) #60 "Did sending into PostSecret meet your expectations? If yes, how so? If no, why not?", (b) #61 "How safe did you feel disclosing

to the PostSecret in that your secret would remain anonymous?”, and (c) #62 “How fearful were you in having your anonymity compromised with your PostSecret?”.

Answers from these three questions were documented when participants mentioned a low social cost (i.e. anonymity) and/or high-perceived benefit (i.e. catharsis, social support, self-esteem). From these post-test questions, 37.35% of the respondents ( $n = 31$ ) reported low social cost being the most common reason to participate. Table 2 lists other reasons for participation.

Table 2. Descriptive Data of Response Mentioned for Participating in Anonymous Self-disclosure

Type of reason mentioned	Number of responses	%
Low social cost & high benefit – Catharsis	14	16.86
Low social cost & high benefit – Social support	1	1.58
Low social cost & high benefit – Self-articulation	1	1.58
Only low social cost	31	37.34
Only high benefit – Catharsis	8	9.63
Only high benefit – Social support	2	2.40
Only high benefit – Self-articulation	2	2.40
None – No reason given	24	28.91
Total number	83	100.00

Out of 84 participants who did not anonymously self-disclose, 39 reported forgetting to complete the assignment. Since these participants did not actively choose to not to participate, their responses were discarded in the evaluation process.

The participants who actively chose not to submit an anonymous self-disclosure ( $n = 45$ ) gave insights to reasons why they did not self-disclose. From question #4 of the post-test, which asked “If you did not disclose to the PostSecret project, please indicate the reasons and the degree to why you chose not to send in to the PostSecret (please mark

that all apply),” responses were coded for high social cost and low benefits. Those who reported *fear of rejection, fear of embarrassment, identity being compromised, and fear of loss of information control* were coded as perceiving high social cost. Those who reported *not expecting participation to be worthwhile, expecting participation to be unethical, integrity being compromised, and not wanting to participate* were coded as having low perceived benefit. Write-in responses not fitting into either a social cost or perceived benefit were documented as other (Table 4).

Table 3. Response Mentioned for Not Participating in Anonymous Self-disclosure

Type of response mentioned	Number of responses	%
Both high perceived social cost & low perceived benefits	5	11.11%
Only high perceived social cost	10	22.22%
Only low perceived benefit	11	24.44%
Other	19	42.22%
Total number	45	100.00%

From the responses, the most predominant reason individuals chose not to anonymously self disclose were other reasons not highlighted in the questionnaire (42.22%,  $n = 19$ ). These other reasons are listed in Table 4. However, the cumulative percentages of individuals of who cited a high social cost and/or a low perceived benefit (57.77%,  $n = 26$ ) were higher than the other category.

Table 4. Other Mentioned Reasons for Not Participating in Anonymous Self-disclosure

- “Was very busy...”
- “Too busy with classes and forgot”
- “I could not think of a secret”
- “I couldn’t think of a good secret”
- “Didn’t feel secret was worthy; I have it now to send in”
- “No time”

- "I wrote a card but held onto it for its meaning"
  - "I want to take my time on it and had no spare time"
  - "I needed to come to terms with my secret first"
  - "I lost the post card in the transit back to the dorms"
  - "I didn't want to break down while doing it and after"
  - "I filled it out but just never mailed it"
  - "I didn't like the idea"
  - "I didn't have time to be as creative as I wanted to"
  - "I did not have time to plan on to in the future"
  - "Didn't care enough"
  - "Could not think of a secret"
  - "Busy"
  - "Because it's a secret"
- 

The results support hypothesis one because (a) participants who did submit to the project mentioned doing so because of either a low social cost and/or high-perceived benefit and (b) individuals did not participate if they did not see a perceived benefit and/or thought the social cost to be too high to self-disclose. However, since the design of this project did not examine participants and non-participants responses through identical questions, such support is statistically limited.

## Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis two predicted individuals would experience self-disclosure benefits from anonymously self-disclosing. Three different possible benefits were tested, including (a) catharsis, (b) self-esteem, and (c) social support.

For catharsis, scores of the participants' group post-test questionnaire were compared against the average scale for the Self Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ) instrument. For SEQ scoring, anything higher than 100 is considered cathartic for participants as neutral scores equal a score of 100. Additionally, the greater the

respondent's score is higher from 100, the greater the cathartic experiences. From the participants' group post-test scores, the participants reported a significantly high level of catharsis ( $N = 79$ ,  $M = 122.68$ ,  $SD = 18.76$ ). As hypothesized, participants reported catharsis through an anonymous self-disclosure.

For self-esteem, a paired t-test between the pre-test group Rosenberg Self-Esteem (RSE) scale scores ( $M = 35.54$ ,  $SD = 4.911$ ) and post-test group RSE scores ( $M = 36.86$ ,  $SD = 4.94$ ) indicated a significant increase in individual's self-esteem ( $t(80) = -3.72$ ,  $p = .00$ ). Thus, this information supported hypothesis two in regards to self-esteem.

For social support, a paired t-test between pre-test group Medical Outcomes Survey (MOS) scores ( $M = 78.30$ ,  $SD = 11.876$ ) and post-test group MOS scores ( $M = 78.650$ ,  $SD = 12.970$ ) indicated a non-significant increase between means ( $t(82) = -.481$ ,  $p = .632$ ). This information did not support hypothesis two in regards to social support.

In summary, hypothesis two was partially supported in the data for those that chose to anonymously self-disclose. More specifically, both catharsis and self-esteem were experienced benefits, while social support was found to not be.

### Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis three postulated a positive correlation between the depth of the anonymous self-disclosure and perceived benefits of the self-disclosure. By comparing correlations between the independent variable of depth ( $M = 5.22$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) against the three dependent variables (catharsis ( $r = -0.033$ ,  $p = 0.386$ ), self-esteem ( $r = -0.125$ ,  $p = 0.137$ ), and social support ( $r = -0.024$ ,  $p = 0.418$ )) no variables had a significant correlation. Thus, hypothesis three was not supported.

## Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis four predicted participating in anonymous self-disclosure would lead participants to self-disclosing face-to-face. From the participants ( $N = 83$ ), only 26% ( $n = 21$ ) disclosed their secret face-to-face post-anonymous self-disclosure, while 73.5% ( $n = 62$ ) chose to not self-disclose face-to-face. Post-test question #63 “Since disclosing to PostSecret, did you share your secret with an individual face-to-face? If so, why did you disclose your secret face-to-face? If not, why did you not disclose your secret face-to-face?” gave additional information to participant’s behavior.

Individuals who self-disclosed face-to-face after anonymously self-disclosing ( $n = 21$ ) were subjective in their reasons for their behavior. Table 4 shows participant’s responses from the questionnaire. Only one participant did not give a supplemental reasoning to self-disclose face-to-face.

Table 4. Participant’s reasons for self-disclosing face-to-face after anonymously self-disclosing

- 
- “Many feel the same way I do ”
  - “I felt comfortable ”
  - “I was with one of my closest friends. We were a little liquored up ”
  - “I was talking to my friend about PostSecret and just told her ”
  - “I wanted her to know that I broke dad’s VCR, not her, I felt like we are at the point in our lives that secrets are meaningless to keep between us ”
  - “I told my roommate about the project and she asked me what I was going to disclose so I told her ”
  - “They asked and wanted to know my story ”
  - “Because she kind of guessed before, just said it out loud ”
  - “Because it was a mutual agreement, we both shared our secret to each other ”
  - “It was about them ”
  - “Because it was my boyfriend and its part of my past that I thought he should know ”
  - “To see if my fear was valid ”
  - “I needed to tell someone and get feedback ”
  - “I had to tell someone ”
  - “I just needed to get it out. I didn’t want to miss out ”
  - “Felt I needed to ”

- "We smoke together"
  - "Boredom"
  - "Because I hadn't before and wanted to"
  - "They saw it on my desk"
- 

Individuals who chose not to self-disclose face-to-face after anonymously self-disclosing ( $n = 62$ ) responded with similar subjective reasons (Table 5 for participant's reasoning). Only 13 participants did not give a supplemental reasoning to not self-disclose face-to-face.

Table 5. Participant's Reasons for Not Self-disclosing Face-to-Face after Anonymously Self-disclosing

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- "I don't want anyone else to know"
- "Some things you keep to yourself"
- "The people I NEED to tell, I can't"
- "It was something I wanted to keep to myself"
- "Because its still a secret"
- "Not something I would disclose to anyone"
- "I would keep it for myself, its very personal"
- "Because its such a powerful secret it could potentially wreak havoc on my life"
- "It is a secret for a reason. We all need our secrets to be human and to be an individual"
- "It's not something I would ever tell someone who knows me"
- "I don't want anyone to know it"
- "Because it's a secret"
- "It's a secret"
- "Not something I feel comfortable enough with yet"
- "No one needs to know that it's my secret"
- "I don't want to tell anyone"
- "It is my inner most secret. Disclosing would be lacking anonymity"
- "Not comfortable"
- "I did not want someone I know to know that information"
- "I was not ready to admit to people who knew me because I did not want them thinking I lied"
- "The person who my PostSecret was about is in this class and is my roommate and could hurt our 'friendship' more"
- "It just hasn't been the right timing to focus on myself"
- "I thought it would cause unnecessary problems"

Table 5. (continued)

---

- "Too ashamed to actually admit it "
  - "I'm too scared to "
  - "Uncomfortable "
  - "Still hard to do "
  - "It's harder to say face-to-face then to write down "
  - "I am afraid to "
  - "I am too afraid to tell others because they might think I'm overreacting "
  - "I didn't find it necessary "
  - "I didn't feel the need to. It never came up "
  - "I didn't want to "
  - "I didn't want to "
  - "I didn't want to "
  - "Did not want to! Isn't that the point? "
  - "Personal reasons "
  - "Too personal "
  - "Just was too personal "
  - "Not a thing commonly brought up "
  - "I have not felt the need to do so "
  - "I already have talked with people about it but it caused me to think more about forgiving the person "
  - "I feel like it is not as big a secret to disclose to everyone "
  - "It's not important to them, and only special to me "
  - "Cause it wasn't a very deep or meaningful secret "
  - "It wasn't really much of a secret "
- 

Since participant's reasoning varied in explaining their behavior, hypothesis four was not supported or disproven with the given design. Thus, hypothesis four was inconclusive.

### Summary of Results

The presentation of the data in this chapter revealed many results. First, individuals participated in anonymous self-disclosure because of low social cost and high-perceived benefits. Second, catharsis and self-esteem were the only reported benefits of anonymously self-disclosing. Third, no correlation was found between depth and catharsis, self-esteem, and/or social support. Last, anonymous self-disclosures can

lead to non-anonymous self-disclosure/face-to-face self-disclosure, but a post-face-to-face self-disclosure does not always occur. The next chapter will discuss the implications of these results.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

This chapter presents four sections. The first section will explain the findings of the current study on anonymous self-disclosure in more detail. The second section will discuss the implications one might draw from this study. The third section will illustrate some limitations of these results. The fourth section will present some suggestions for future research. The chapter then will close with a summary and conclusion of the study.

#### Explanation of Findings

The primary purpose of this study was to determine the overall effect of anonymity on the self-disclosure process. The results of the present study yielded interesting findings, both reiterating and expanding previous self-disclosure research in the context of anonymity. First, the results highlighted the reasons individuals anonymously self-disclose. Second, anonymous self-disclosure was found to have unique benefits as compared to non-anonymous self-disclosure. Third, there was no significant relationship between self-disclosure depth and perceived benefits. Fourth, anonymous self-disclosures do not always lead individuals to face-to-face self-disclosure.

#### *Reasons to Anonymously Self-disclose*

The first finding worth explaining in greater detail is participants' reasons to choose to anonymously self-disclose or not. As predicted, a fundamental reason participants engaged in the anonymous self-disclosure process was if they perceived a low social cost and/or high-perceived benefit. More specifically, low social cost was the

most popular reason to anonymously self-disclose ( $n = 31, 37.34\%$ ). Conversely, the most popular reason for not self-disclosing was low perceived benefits. These two outcomes supported what Social Exchange Theory predicted would occur: anonymity made the cost/benefit ratios attractive for a large portion of participants to self-disclose.

However, while these two outcomes (disclose/not disclose) accounted for a large majority of the participants' behaviors, these outcomes did not account for all participants' behaviors. In examining participants' responses for those who completed both pre-test and post-test questionnaires but did not participate in anonymous self-disclosure ( $N = 84$ ), a large subgroup (45%,  $n = 39$ ) forgot to complete the assignment altogether. While this subgroup is a minority, it is a significant indication that motivation (or lack thereof) was a notable factor regarding contributions to the study. In hindsight, this finding aligns with self-disclosure research, as an individual will only disclose if motivated to do so (Petronio, 2002).

Furthermore, these reasons (perception of low social cost/high benefits and motivation) indicate anonymous self-disclosure is an extremely personal and complicated process. Similar to non-anonymous self-disclosure, a general factor to prompt anonymous self-disclosure was catharsis, but whether the self-disclosure process happened relied greatly on the individual making the decision (Delerga, 2008; Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Derlerga, Winstead, Folk-Barron, 2000). Two large groups of the study either (a) forgot to submit the self-disclosure ( $n = 39$ ) or (b) cited other reasons for not self-disclosing ( $n = 19$ ). These reasons ranged from "being very busy" to "not liking the idea" (Table 5 in Chapter III for a complete list of reasons). These two groups emphasize the personal investment component of the self-disclosure process.

Furthermore, while self-disclosure can be manipulated by anonymity to create a situation with minimal social cost and maximized benefits, participation in anonymous self-disclosure participation is not guaranteed.

In summary, the findings thus far indicate anonymous self-disclosures behave similar to non-anonymous self-disclosure in that individuals participate only if they perceive low social cost and high benefits. Of the two, low social cost was the most popular reason for participation. Conversely, both (a) forgetting to submit and (b) citing personal reasons (Table 5) were the most popular reasons for individuals not to self-disclose. Therefore, like non-anonymous self-disclosure, reasons why individuals anonymous self-disclose appear to be highly subjective in nature.

#### *Anonymous Self-disclosure Benefits*

The second finding identifies the benefits participants reported after anonymously self-disclosing. More specifically, participants experienced both catharsis and increased self-esteem. However, participants reported no change in social support levels post-anonymous self-disclosure.

Reports of catharsis and increased self-esteem are congruent with current self-disclosure research. As previously discussed, individuals often experience catharsis when self-disclosing private information, as the process purges emotional tension (MacAulay et al. 2004; Pennebaker & Frances, 1996; Pennebaker & O'Herron, 1984). Because participants self-disclosed anonymously, they could be completely honest and did not have to worry about any negative social ramifications. The process of having such concealment of private information lifted (at least for a brief period of time) left

participants feeling positive about the self-disclosure. By this purging process, participants experienced catharsis.

Additionally, the participant's increased self-esteem coincides with self-disclosure research. As discussed in Chapter I, self-disclosure can increase the self-esteem of the discloser (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006; Dilley, 2002). This claim is based on the notion the discloser experiences a sense of acceptance when the audience responds positively to a particular message. As the discloser feels more accepted, the discloser's confidence also increases (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006). With anonymous self-disclosure, this same process seems probable. Since the PostSecret project advertises a non-judgmental place that welcomes all secrets, no matter how dark or grotesque, it is likely senders had a positive perception about those who received their secret. Because the disclosers felt accepted, their self-esteem increased.

Anonymous self-disclosure, however, did not change levels of social support. After a reexamination of the non-anonymous self-disclosure research, there is a possible explanation for this finding. Cohen et al. (1986) stated social support only increases if individuals talk and elaborate with other individuals through face-to-face dialogue. This study did not follow what Cohen et al. described, having neither (a) face-to-face context nor (b) dialogue. Additionally, the anonymous self-disclosure process did not allow any traditional feedback mechanisms (i.e. explicit/implicit verbal responses, non-verbal gestures) for the sender to gauge how his or her self-disclosure was received. Because of the anonymity and lack of direct, instantaneous feedback mechanisms, it is understandable why participants did not perceive a change in social support.

### *Depth and Perceived Benefit Correlations*

The third finding relates to the lack of correlation between depth and expected self-disclosure benefits (of catharsis, self-esteem, and social support). This lack of correlation implies that there is no relationship between variables. An individual self-disclosing extremely private information experiences similar benefits (catharsis, increased self-esteem) as someone revealing moderately private information. While the results did not support a relationship, it seems a relationship should be present.

To find this relationship, a slight refinement of this hypothesis incorporating the variable of trauma might be helpful. The American Psychiatric Association (1980) defined trauma as a “recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost anyone (n.p.g)”. Because individuals often conceal information about traumatic events (Petronio, 2002), it is likely trauma is a factor with the level of experienced benefits. However, trauma was not a factor previously considered. To illustrate this point, consider the following highly, intimate self-disclosures: (a) “I pee in the shower” and (b) “I was sexually assaulted by my father as a child.” While both secrets are highly intimate, their subject matter differs significantly. More specifically, the first secret is highly personal but not nearly as traumatic as the second. As stated in previous non-anonymous self-disclosure research, concealing traumatic, private information can be potentially harmful (Pennebaker, 1990). Since self-disclosure may release such tension, it would seem likely the subject has an effect on the self-disclosure outcome. Unfortunately, this study did not ask participants to rate the severity of trauma related to their self-disclosure. Rather, the questionnaire only asked the level of intimacy

of the private information. Thus, if participants were to rate the severity of the trauma they disclosed, a correlation between the depth and greater perceived benefits variables might have become more apparent.

#### *Post-anonymous Self-disclosure Behaviors*

The last finding relates to the subjective nature of post-anonymous self-disclosure behavior. Similar to the varying reasons for self-disclosure, individuals follow a subjective decision-making process when it comes to disclosing post-anonymous self-disclosures. Furthermore, while anonymous self-disclosure offers individuals practice in letting go of private information, it does not directly cause individuals to non-anonymously self-disclose. This finding aligns with self-disclosure research of face-to-face self-disclosure as a highly complex and subjective process (Petronio, 2002). As stated in Chapter I, there is not an all-encompassing variable that automatically makes an individual self-disclose. The same appears to be true for post-anonymous self-disclosures.

These findings indicate another variable affecting the self-disclosure process, following the anonymous self-disclosure(s). While some participants felt confident anonymously self-disclosing and self-disclosed face-to-face, some participants did not feel they needed to self-disclose face-to-face. And while there were instances in which anonymous self-disclosure led to non-anonymous self-disclosure, specific reasons why this behavior occurred were not articulated. The primary reason this information could not be established was because the questionnaire did not ask qualitative questions exploring that behavior.

A possible explanation for the discrepancy between disclosing/concealing behavior could be that an individual's social network influences whether an he/she discloses to others face-to-face. If an individual's social network contains confidants present and accessible to self-disclose with face-to-face after anonymously self-disclosing, perhaps anonymous self-disclosure is the practice he/she needs to gain comfort and disclose to these individuals face-to-face. If an individual does not have confidants in his or her social network, perhaps anonymous self-disclosure is as far as the self-disclosure process can go.

Another possible explanation is based on how individuals perceive self-disclosure before the anonymous self-disclosure. Perhaps previous experiences with self-disclosure and their outcomes play a large role in how individuals frame the anonymous self-disclosure experience. Specifically, a negative experience disclosing non-anonymously may strongly influence the likelihood of such a future self-disclosure. For example, Jake is fine disclosing his secret "I'm attracted to men" to PostSecret because it is anonymous; however, he will not disclose face-to-face because he was ostracized by his family when he self-disclosed to them. Needless to say, an individual's preconceived notions of self-disclosure need to be further explored to justify this claim.

In summary, this study yielded several key findings. First, individuals behave similarly in anonymous contexts as they do in non-anonymous contexts in terms of their reasons to self-disclose. Second, participants experienced catharsis and increased self-esteem through anonymous self-disclosures. Third, no relationship was established between depth and self-disclosure's overall benefits. Fourth, a majority of participants often did not self-disclose face-to-face after anonymously self-disclosing, but some did.

### *Implications of Findings*

There are several implications of these findings that contribute to the greater body of self-disclosure research. These implications include (a) pragmatic application to general and specific populations, (b) ethical implications, and (c) theoretical implications.

#### *Pragmatic Application to Anonymous Self-disclosure*

The first implication involves the real world applications anonymous self-disclosures can potentially have for given populations. These populations include both (a) general populations and (b) specific populations.

For general populations, anonymous self-disclosure is a channel for any individual to experience catharsis and increased self-esteem without having to confront others directly. While ethical implications still need to be discussed (and will be discussed in future sections), the findings of this study imply the process of anonymous self-disclosure can act as a temporary release for individuals to free themselves of the weight of private information. Releasing this weight of withholding secrets is important because withholding secrets can potentially cause negative consequences of mental stress (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006; Wegner, 1989; Frijns, 2005).

As the introduction of this body of literature stated, individuals are continually subject to the self-disclosure paradox: individuals benefit from disclosing but often cannot because of the negative social repercussions the self-disclosure will have. However, the current study's findings imply a bypass of the described paradox. Since there are no social costs with anonymously self-disclosing to PostSecret, individuals are able to set themselves free of the weight of concealing and experience some of the self-disclosure benefits.

Additionally, these outcomes of anonymous self-disclosure imply several benefits to specific population groups, most notably psychologists. As stated in Chapter I, catharsis is viewed as beneficial in psychotherapy (Wegner, 1989; Kelly et al. 2001). The application of anonymous self-disclosure to the world of psychology could be an important resource for psychologists to give to patients as supplemental support and release, remaining a resource long after scheduled treatment.

For example, consider an individual going to weekly therapy. Between therapy visits, the individual becomes increasingly stressed about childhood abuse, particularly at night before going to bed. Since talking with a therapist at the late hour is impractical, the individual could focus energy on creating an anonymous self-disclosure to the PostSecret project and experience some short-term catharsis. While perhaps not as effective as having another individual to process events with, this method is a convenient way to self-disclose and experience catharsis without the need of another person to be present or identity to be compromised. This application is similar the technique of patients writing in a journal, however is uniquely different because through the anonymous self-disclosure process, the confession leaves the individual to the greater world. With the journal entry, the individual holds onto the issues (both literally and metaphorically). While a journal can be a good fit for some, the PostSecret format allows individuals the ability to pick options for remedy – whether they want to create a long dialogue and keep it (through a journal) or create a poetic sentence and send it out to the world (through PostSecret).

Additionally, the implication that a participant's self-esteem can increase by anonymously self-disclosing is a fundamental finding. To the psychology world, self-

esteem is part of a person's identity. Individuals reporting high self-esteem are regarded as psychologically well off, while individuals reporting low self-esteem often have problems in social life (Diener, 1984; Kaplan, 1975; Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001; Tennen & Affleck, 1993). To attempt to help individuals reporting low self-esteem, psychologists often try to increase the individual's self-esteem. The findings of this study point to an additional method an individual can use to increase his/her self-esteem with little to no social cost. This solution would seem helpful for individuals who are prone to suffer from low levels of self-esteem. For example, children and adolescences who historically have been prone to low self-esteem might not want to talk to another individual about private secrets or thoughts. However, through the introverted construction of anonymous self-disclosure (in reflecting and creating a PostSecret), these individuals can experience the benefits of anonymously self-disclosing without having to talk to any individual face-to-face.

### *Ethical Implications*

The third major implication to discuss is the ethical questions these findings pose regarding the anonymous self-disclosure process. These ethical implications include (a) unbiased benefits and (b) social perception.

First, these findings imply anonymous self-disclose can be a benefit to any individual. Based on these preliminary findings, anonymous self-disclosures do not discriminate in who can experience catharsis and self-esteem. With access to catharsis and increase in self-esteem available to everyone, should everyone have the right to feel better about their deepest, darkest secret?

Consider the following example: Paul anonymously self-discloses, “I murdered and got away with it” to PostSecret. While Paul originally felt upset and haunted by this secret, based on these findings, Paul starts to feel better about the whole incident post-disclosure. Should Paul feel this way about a murder even when the guilt he would have felt had he not anonymously self-disclosed may have brought him to confess about the crime to the authorities? Since anonymous self-disclosure benefits appear unbiased to self-disclosure content, there is no way of letting only the moral, just citizens benefit from this forum.

The second ethical implication is based on social perception and appropriateness. Based on this study’s findings, when individuals anonymously self-disclosed, they felt better about their secrets. However, if anonymous self-disclosure led to individuals self-disclosing face-to-face, the lack of feedback mechanisms found in anonymous self-disclosure could potentially set the individual up for failure. Consider the last example with Paul anonymously self-disclosing “I murdered and got away with it.” Based on this study’s results, Paul feels better after the self-disclosure, so much so that Paul decides to tell his wife Karen. However, through anonymously self-disclosing, Paul did not receive any feedback regarding whether his secret is acceptable/not acceptable to self-disclose face-to-face. Since Paul feels cathartic about his self-disclosure experience and could be misguided in how it would be perceived in the social world, Paul runs the risk of revealing too much to Karen, opening up to the same risks of self-disclosing. These risks include (a) listener rejection, (b) reduction of personal integrity, (c) loss of control, and (d) possibility of hurting or embarrassing the listener (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996;

Omarzu, 2000). Because anonymous self-disclosure could lead individuals to make detrimental choices within social networks, the process of anonymously self-disclosing must be understood by self-disclosers in order not to misperceive social appropriateness.

### *Theoretical Implications*

The final implication of this study is what these findings mean to current self-disclosure theory. More specifically, the findings presented in this study highlight anonymous self-disclosures supporting both self-disclosure frameworks discussed in Chapter I. These frameworks include (a) Social Exchange Theory (SET) and (b) Coordinated Privacy Management theory (CPM).

For SET, a fundamental assumption is individuals make self-disclosure choices based on a cost/benefits ratio and comparative options. This study's findings support the notion the cost/benefit ratio is a primary reason for individual participation in anonymous self-disclosures. While there may be situational factors influencing individual reasoning, for the most part, anonymity seems to make the self-disclosure process attractive.

There were, however, several individuals who forgot to submit an anonymous self-disclosure ( $n = 39$ ). This subgroup highlights one of SET's limitations – specifically, being over rational. As proposed, self-disclosure should have been perceived as having low social cost and high perceived benefits. Under these conditions, it would appear a logical and attractive exchange for all participants. However, this did not occur. Thus, SET does not account for all human behavior. This particular subgroup's non-compliance with the project cannot fully be explained by SET.

Examining CPM through the anonymous self-disclosure lens illustrates the CPM processes in a new way. As discussed in Chapter I, the purpose of CPM is to examine the process of how individuals act upon and co-own their social networks. Additionally, scholars have regarded CPM as an all-encompassing approach to self-disclosure and privacy (Petronio & Durham, 2008).

From the findings, anonymous self-disclosures coincide with the theoretical framework previously outlined, so much so that anonymous self-disclosure at times highlights a better understanding of these CPM processes. These CPM processes include (a) conceptualization of private information, (b) boundary coordination, (c) boundary ownership rights, and (d) boundary turbulence.

The first of the CPM concepts anonymous self-disclosure highlight is the conceptualization of private information. As previously discussed, this CPM concept defines private information as a personal possession. As a possession, individuals have a right to control said information and can choose to reveal or conceal depending on what is perceived as their best personal choice. With this study, this concept materialized through the creation of an anonymous self-disclosure to PostSecret. In creating the postcard, an individual has a tangible item that he or she can choose to send/or not send to the PostSecret community. While previous perspectives have only viewed self-disclosure as an untouchable object and act, this application of the theory restructures self-disclosure into tangible object.

Second, anonymous self-disclosure highlights the CPM framework of shared boundaries. As discussed earlier, shared boundaries refer to the receiver having co-ownership of the sender's private information once the message is sent (Petronio, 2002).

In this study, PostSecret (i.e. Frank Warren) receives and becomes a co-owner of the sender's private information. However, Warren has no way of linking this information to its owner.

Third, boundary coordination takes shared boundaries a step further and examines how individuals co-manage private information. While the sender's confession is his or her own, once it is sent to the PostSecret community, it also belongs to the collective. And while the public never knows the identity of the sender, the self-disclosure itself becomes co-owned by both the sender and the PostSecret community.

The last of the CPM concepts that anonymous self-disclosure illustrates is boundary turbulence. Since PostSecret respects sender anonymity and cannot follow-up with the sender, boundary turbulence can never occur. And since a violation of the boundary coordination cannot occur, boundary turbulence is impossible.

To review, anonymous self-disclosure highlights CPM concepts extremely well, as it gives a great amount of support to the CPM theory. Additionally, this anonymous self-disclosure research seems to support the SET framework in cost/benefit ratios, while also highlighting SET's limitations in being too rational.

In summary, there were three primary implications of this study's findings. These implications included (a) pragmatic application to general and specific populations, (b) ethical implications, and (c) theoretical implications. These implications highlight many additional questions on the topic of anonymous self-disclosure. To discuss these questions, recommendations for future research will now be outlined.

## Recommendations for Future Research

While the current study may give a foundational and functional perspective on anonymity and self-disclosure, future research needs to explore anonymous self-disclosure further. More specifically, areas for future study should focus on (a) more diverse populations, (b) different instrumentation, (c) a different experimental design, and (d) different message medium.

### *More Diverse Populations*

For future research in anonymous self-disclosure, incorporating more diverse populations should be a priority, especially if anonymous self-disclosures were to be used in the proposed pragmatic applications (i.e. therapy sessions). Specifically, future research should focus on attracting diverse participants in four different areas, including (a) generations, (b) culture, (c) gender, and (d) non-student.

First, future research should select populations from various generations. The 83 participants ages ranged from 18 to 32, with an average age of 19.79. Since generations communicate with different proficiencies (Jonas-Dwyer & Pospigul, 2004), it is possible anonymous self-disclosure results would differ between generational cohorts. For example, members of the Millennial Generation (born between 1980 and 2000) are known to self-disclose much about themselves through Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) via the Internet (Jonas-Dwyer & Pospigul, 2004). Since CMC has been around for a majority of the Millennial Generation's existence, they are much more comfortable communicating and self-disclosing online than any other generation.

For another example, members of the Silent Generation (born between 1925 and 1942) are known for their strict, conservative values supporting both authority and security (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Since these values could conflict with some of the basis of the PostSecret project (e.g. anonymity security, ethics, etc.), evaluating whether members of this generation would anonymously self-disclose would be a unique point of interest. And since these generational patterns are unique, exploring different age groups would be a key point of interest for future research.

On the same rationale, the second population that future research should incorporate is individuals from different cultures, more specifically individualistic and collectivist. As individualistic cultures tend to favor openness in communication styles when compared to collectivist cultures (Gamble & Gamble, 2005), individuals from individualistic cultures may be more likely to anonymously self-disclose since they favor openness. Conversely, individuals from collectivist cultures may feel different about sharing private information, even under the protection of anonymity.

Third, future research should select populations focusing on gender. As discussed in the CPM literature of Chapter I, men and women differ in privacy rule formation (Petronio, 2002). Specifically, women need to feel confident in their target's trust, where men need to feel confident that the situation is appropriate for private information. Since anonymous self-disclosures deal directly with privacy, trust, and appropriateness, examining self-disclosure from the gender perspective could yield unique results.

Fourth, future research should examine populations containing non-communication students. Since communication students were the only participants of the

study, there might be a self-disclosure bias with their view of the project. More specifically, students are taught through communication coursework the benefits/risks of self-disclosure and may be more educated on the subject of self-disclosure than non-communication students.

For this reason, studying a more diverse population of individuals would be helpful in improving the study's external validity. By examining these populations, a better understanding of how anonymous self-disclosure works can be determined.

#### *Different Instrumentation*

Evaluating the same variables with different instruments would provide more comprehensive information regarding anonymous self-disclosure outcomes. While the quantitative scales of the Self Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Evaluation (RSE), and Medical Outcomes Survey (MOS) showed reliable measures for variables (of catharsis, self-esteem, and social support respectively), the scales did not collect information about how individuals were feeling through the process. Information these scales did not measure include (a) How did individuals feel before, during, and after the experience of anonymously self-disclosing? (b) Did participants expectations change between data surveys? How so? (c) Was there ever a point when participants regretted sending in their PostSecrets? If so, why? If not, why not? Thus, a qualitative approach might give more insight to the process behind what the scales are reporting.

#### *Different Design*

Third, a different design to the experiment could be beneficial for future research, specifically focusing on the duration of the experienced benefits. For example, a

longitudinal approach may yield more informative results by monitoring the dependent variables at more data points, post-anonymous self-disclosure. A possible format would include participants (a) completing a pre-test, (b) submitting their anonymous self-disclosure on specific date and time, and (c) completing a post-test every following week for three weeks. Under this design, the participants supply more data points to accurately reflect any changes in the dependent variables over the course of a month, rather than a snapshot two weeks later. Additionally, testing participants four months to a year after the anonymous self-disclosure could illustrate how the sender perceived the overall disclosure process and longevity of experienced benefits. This design could complement both the Pennebaker (1997) and Kelly et al. (2001) studies where participants were tested four months after initial anonymous self-disclosure. While a modified timetable might not show dramatic changes in benefits, testing the longevity of experienced benefits is an element worth exploring. Since anonymous self-disclosure is a relatively untested field of communication, exploring the longevity of the experienced benefits should be evaluated.

#### *Different Message Medium*

Fourth, future research should explore the medium through which anonymous self-disclosures are sent. While the PostSecret format was chosen because of both anonymity and the intentional method participants chose to self-disclose, it is not to say results are exclusively limited to this format. Do other formats, such as anonymous CMC formats (e.g. sixbillionsecrets.com, likealittle.com), yield different results? Since different formats of face-to-face self-disclosure would yield similar results (e.g. face-to-

face communication in person v. face-to-face communication through online video conferencing), non-anonymous contexts are likely to follow the similar trend. However, exploration needs to be done to verify such a claim with certainty.

To review, there are several areas of future research scholars can examine anonymous self-disclosures. Specifically, future areas of study should focus on (a) more diverse populations, (b) different instrumentation, (c) a different experimental design, and (d) different message medium.

### Conclusion

In summary, this research study sought to establish the effect of anonymity on the act of self-disclosure. The findings indicated that individuals behave similarly in anonymous contexts as they do in non-anonymous contexts when it comes to their reasons to self-disclose. Additionally, findings indicated anonymous self-disclosure had different benefits (catharsis and increased self-esteem) compared to anonymous self-disclosure contexts. There was no correlation established between depth and overall benefits in the context of anonymity/anonymous self-disclosure, although a possible revision was given to explore this relationship in future research.

In addition to discussing the findings, several implications were discussed, including (a) the pragmatic application of anonymous self-disclosure to general and specific populations, (b) ethical implications, and (c) theoretical implications. Finally, recommendation for future research was explored, including (a) more diverse populations, (b) different instruments, (c) different experimental design, and (d) different

medium. Overall, the present study provides evidence anonymous self-disclosures are an important area of the communication discipline often overlooked, but one for future exploration in years to come.

Perhaps if Midas's barber lived in the modern world and had the same opportunities individuals have today (i.e. the PostSecret project), his safety would have not been in such jeopardy from self-disclosing King Midas's secret. However, while the context between whispering into the ground and writing on a postcard may differ, the anonymous self-disclosure process highlights a timeless urge for humans to self-disclose private information. And although the context may change, because of individual's timeless need to self-disclose, the anonymous self-disclosure process will undoubtedly continue in years to come.

## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SURVEY 1

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study by completing this survey! Keeping with the integrity of the PostSecret project, results of this survey will remain anonymous. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or distressed with this questionnaire or the subject matter, please abandon the survey.

Instructions: Please do not write your name or any identifying information anywhere on this survey besides the following three questions.

1. Please indicate the last four digits of your primary phone number: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Please indicate your age: \_\_\_\_\_

Social Support

Instructions: Next are some questions about the support that is available to you. Please respond appropriately and honestly to the following questions.

3. About how many close friends and close relatives do you have (people you feel at ease with and can talk to about what is on your mind)?

Write in number of close friends and close relatives: \_\_\_\_\_

Instructions: People sometimes look to others for companionship, assistance, or other types of support. Please circle the number that corresponds to each question of you social support with the following questions in mind: How often is each of the following kinds of support available to you if you need it?

4. Someone to help you if your were confined to a bed
 

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
5. Someone you can count on to listen to you when you need to talk
 

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
6. Someone to give you good advice about a crisis
 

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
7. Someone to take you to the doctor if you needed it
 

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
8. Someone who shows you love and affection.
 

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	

9. Someone to have a good time with  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 None of the time                      Some of the time                      All of the time
10. Someone to give you information to help you understand a situation  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 None of the time                      Some of the time                      All of the time
11. Someone to confide in or talk to about yourself or your problems  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 None of the time                      Some of the time                      All of the time
12. Someone who hugs you  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 None of the time                      Some of the time                      All of the time
13. Someone to get together with for relaxation  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 None of the time                      Some of the time                      All of the time
14. Someone to prepare your meals if you were unable to do it yourself  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 None of the time                      Some of the time                      All of the time
15. Someone whose advice you really want  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 None of the time                      Some of the time                      All of the time
16. Someone to do things with to help you get your mind off things  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 None of the time                      Some of the time                      All of the time
17. Someone to help with daily chores if you were sick  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 None of the time                      Some of the time                      All of the time
18. Someone to share your most private worries and fears with  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 None of the time                      Some of the time                      All of the time
19. Someone to turn to for suggestions about how to deal with a personal problem  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 None of the time                      Some of the time                      All of the time
20. Someone to do something enjoyable with  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 None of the time                      Some of the time                      All of the time
21. Someone who understands your problems  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 None of the time                      Some of the time                      All of the time
22. Someone to love and make you feel wanted  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 None of the time                      Some of the time                      All of the time



35. Please indicate your overall apprehension in contributing to the PostSecret project for this study:

1	2	3	4	5
Not apprehensive at all		Neutral		Very apprehensive

a. If you were apprehensive, what were you apprehensive about?

b. If you were not apprehensive, why did you feel this way?

36. What is the overall likelihood you will contribute to the PostSecret project for this study?

1	2	3	4	5
Unlikely		Neutral		Likely

Thank you for your participating in this study!

APPENDIX B

SURVEY 2

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study by completing this survey! Keeping with the integrity of the PostSecret project, results of this survey will remain completely anonymous, outside of your personalized tracking number. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or distressed with this questionnaire or the subject matter, please abandon the survey.

Demographic Information

Instructions: Please do not write your name or any identifying information anywhere on this survey besides the following three questions.

1. Please indicate the last four digits of your primary phone number: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Please indicate your age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Over the past two weeks, did you send in a secret to PostSecret?  
Yes                      No
4. If you did not disclose to the PostSecret project, please indicate the reasons and the degree to why you chose not to send in to PostSecret (please mark all that apply):

	Did not apply		Applied a great deal
I was fearful of rejection	1	2	3
I was fearful of embarrassment	1	2	3
I thought my identity might be compromised	1	2	3
I thought it might compromise my integrity	1	2	3
I felt it was a loss of information control	1	2	3
I did not expect it to be worthwhile	1	2	3
I thought it might be unethical	1	2	3

- \_\_\_\_\_ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ I forgot to complete assignment
- \_\_\_\_\_ I did not want to participate in the experiment

Social Support

Instructions: Next are some questions about the support that is available to you. Please respond appropriately and honestly to the following questions.

4. About how many close friends and close relatives do you have (people you feel at ease with and can talk to about what is on your mind)?

Write in number of close friends and close relatives: \_\_\_\_\_

Instructions: People sometimes look to others for companionship, assistance, or other types of support. Please circle the number that corresponds to each question of you social support with the following questions in mind: How often is each of the following kinds of support available to you if you need it?

5. Someone to help you if your were confined to a bed  

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
  
6. Someone you can count on to listen to you when you need to talk  

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
  
7. Someone to give you good advice about a crisis  

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
  
8. Someone to take you to the doctor if you needed it  

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
  
9. Someone who shows you love and affection  

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
  
10. Someone to have a good time with  

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
  
11. Someone to give you information to help you understand a situation  

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
  
12. Someone to confide in or talk to about yourself or your problems  

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
  
13. Someone who hugs you  

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
  
14. Someone to get together with for relaxation  

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
  
15. Someone to prepare your meals if you were unable to do it yourself  

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Some of the time		All of the time	
  
16. Someone whose advice you really want

- |     |  |   |                  |   |                 |
|-----|--|---|------------------|---|-----------------|
|     | 1  | 2 | 3                | 4 | 5               |
|     | None of the time   |   | Some of the time |   | All of the time |
| 17. | Someone to do things with to help you get your mind off things               |   |                  |   |                 |
|     | 1  | 2 | 3                | 4 | 5               |
|     | None of the time   |   | Some of the time |   | All of the time |
| 18. | Someone to help with daily chores if you were sick                           |   |                  |   |                 |
|     | 1  | 2 | 3                | 4 | 5               |
|     | None of the time   |   | Some of the time |   | All of the time |
| 19. | Someone to share your most private worries and fears with                    |   |                  |   |                 |
|     | 1  | 2 | 3                | 4 | 5               |
|     | None of the time   |   | Some of the time |   | All of the time |
| 20. | Someone to turn to for suggestions about how to deal with a personal problem |   |                  |   |                 |
|     | 1  | 2 | 3                | 4 | 5               |
|     | None of the time   |   | Some of the time |   | All of the time |
| 21. | Someone to do something enjoyable with                                       |   |                  |   |                 |
|     | 1  | 2 | 3                | 4 | 5               |
|     | None of the time   |   | Some of the time |   | All of the time |
| 22. | Someone who understands your problems  |   |                  |   |                 |
|     | 1  | 2 | 3                | 4 | 5               |
|     | None of the time   |   | Some of the time |   | All of the time |
| 23. | Someone to love and make you feel wanted                                     |   |                  |   |                 |
|     | 1  | 2 | 3                | 4 | 5               |
|     | None of the time   |   | Some of the time |   | All of the time |

#### Depth

Instructions: For the following question, please indicate the level of privacy your information was that you disclosed to PostSecret.

- |     |               |   |   |   |   |   |           |
|-----|---------------|---|---|---|---|---|-----------|
| 24. | 1             | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7         |
|     | Not very deep |   |   |   |   |   | Very deep |

#### Self-Esteem

Instructions: For the following questions, please record the appropriate answer for each item, depending on whether you 1 = Strongly agree 2 = Agree 3 = Disagree 4 = Strongly disagree with it.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 25. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 26. At times I think I am no good at all.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 27. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

\_\_\_\_\_ 28. I am able to do things as well as most other people.

\_\_\_\_\_ 29. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

\_\_\_\_\_ 30. I certainly feel useless at times.

\_\_\_\_\_ 31. I feel that I'm a person of worth.

\_\_\_\_\_ 32. I wish I could have more respect for myself.

\_\_\_\_\_ 33. All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure.

\_\_\_\_\_ 34. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

### Catharsis

Instructions: For the following questions, please indicate how you feel contributing to PostSecret:

35.	1 Bad	2	3	4	5	6	7 Good
36.	1 Safe	2	3	4	5	6	7 Dangerous
37.	1 Difficult	2	3	4	5	6	7 Easy
38.	1 Valuable	2	3	4	5	6	7 Worthless
39.	1 Shallow	2	3	4	5	6	7 Deep
40.	1 Relaxed	2	3	4	5	6	7 Tense
41.	1 Unpleasant	2	3	4	5	6	7 Pleasant
42.	1 Full	2	3	4	5	6	7 Empty
43.	1 Weak	2	3	4	5	6	7 Powerful





62. How fearful were you in having your anonymity compromised with your PostSecret?
- |                    |   |         |   |                    |
|--------------------|---|---------|---|--------------------|
| 1                  | 2 | 3       | 4 | 5                  |
| Completely fearful |   | Neutral |   | Not fearful at all |

Please explain your answer:

63. Since disclosing to PostSecret, did you share your secret with an individual face-to-face?
- Yes   No   Unsure

i. If so, what was the perceived response by the other individual?

- |          |   |         |   |          |
|----------|---|---------|---|----------|
| 1        | 2 | 3       | 4 | 5        |
| Negative |   | Neutral |   | Positive |

ii. If so, why did you disclose your secret face-to-face?

iii. If not, why did you not disclose your secret face-to-face?

64. Do you plan on sending a secret into PostSecret in the future?
- Yes   No   Unsure

65. How would you rate your overall experience with disclosing to PostSecret?
- |          |   |         |   |          |
|----------|---|---------|---|----------|
| 1        | 2 | 3       | 4 | 5        |
| Negative |   | Neutral |   | Positive |

Thank you for your participating in this study!

## APPENDIX C

### ADULT CONSENT FORM



Study Title: Motivations and effects of anonymous self-disclosures

Research Investigators' Names and Departments (include Advisor, if researcher is a student): William Parker & Nancy Buerkel-Rothfuss

Contact information for researcher (and Advisor, if researcher is a student): William Parker (248)-701-9788 & Nancy Buerkel-Rothfuss (989)-774-3991

You are invited to participate in a research study on the outcomes and motivations of anonymous self-disclosures. The following information should help you make an informed decision or not to participate. If you have any questions, please contact William Parker or Dr. Buerkel-Rothfuss.

The purpose of this study is to learn about the motivations and outcomes of anonymous self-disclosures. This research is being conducted in fulfillment of requirements for a master's degree from Central Michigan University.

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to submit a secret into the PostSecret project and asked to fill out a questionnaire with Likert-type scales that will collect self-reported data. More specifically, in conclusion of this consent form and agreeing to participate, the researcher will distribute a questionnaire that will take a few minutes to complete. After this is done, the instructor will distribute a postcard and ask you to submit a PostSecret into the PostSecret project over the course of the next two weeks. After two weeks the researcher will come back and distribute another questionnaire for you to complete asking about your experience with submitting to the PostSecret project.

Filling out the questionnaires should take approximately 10 minutes of your time. There are two sessions of questionnaires. Additional time may vary to construct your secret and send it in the mail.

Participation in this study will most likely result in minimal risk to you. It is possible that you may experience distress as you are asked to think about highly private information and anonymously self-disclose it to the PostSecret project. It is important that you know beforehand that you will be asked to think about private secrets that may be unpleasant. If you do encounter distress, feel free to contact William Parker, Dr. Buerkel-Rothfuss, the CMU Counseling Center (989-774-3381), or Listening Ear Counseling Services (989-772-2918).

This research will give you an idea of how we collect data in the field of communication. It may also help us gain better insight into how anonymous self-disclosures may function. Depending on your instructor, you may earn extra credit as a result of participation in this study. On the other hand it is possible that you may not receive compensation or reward for participation.

You will not identify yourself on the questionnaire besides your tracking number. Therefore, there is no way for either of the investigators to know who filled out which set of questionnaires beyond this number. While your name will be on the consent form, it will be submitted separately from the questionnaire. All questionnaires will be destroyed after the data are coded onto disk.

You may refuse to participate in this study. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which individuals participating will be entitled. You may stop participating once you have started filling out the questionnaires. Your cooperation and participation are completely voluntary.

If you have any questions at any other time, please feel free to contact William Parker or Dr. Buerkel-Rothfuss by letter, email or phone:

William Parker  
Speech Communication and Dramatic Arts  
Central Michigan University  
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859  
248-701-9788  
[parke1wr@cmich.edu](mailto:parke1wr@cmich.edu)

Dr. Nancy Buerkel-Rothfuss  
Speech Communication and Dramatic Arts  
Central Michigan University  
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859  
989-774-3991  
[nbr@charter.net](mailto:nbr@charter.net)

If you are not satisfied with the manner in which this study is being conducted, you may report (anonymously if you so choose) any complaints to the Institutional Review Board by calling 989-774-6777, or addressing a letter to the Institutional Review Board, 251 Foust Hall Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859.

*My signature below indicates that all my questions have been answered. I agree to participate in the project as described above.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date Signed

***A copy of this form has been given to me.*** \_\_\_\_\_ Subject's Initials

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Responsible Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date Signed

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