

How Social Media Influencers Build a Brand Following by Sharing Secrets

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***Working Paper, please do not cite or quote without
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Following by Sharing Secrets

In a post on his blog “Live Your Legend” (<http://liveyourlegend.net>) entrepreneur and blogger Scott Dinsmore shared 35 “honest, personal stories, fears and facts you don’t know about me”. Some of these stories included incidents that may have been embarrassing or painful to reveal to his audience, including an arrest in high school and his love of Taylor Swift music. One might wonder why Scott would share these 35 secrets with his large audience. Although we all have a certain part of the self that we hesitate to share with others, revealing this secret information can serve two main purposes. First, keeping a secret is stressful and burdensome (Pennybacker 1989, 1990), and therefore, revealing it to others can be cathartic and therapeutic. Second, revealing secrets to others makes one more vulnerable, and thus, serves as a signal of trust vis-a-vis the audience (e.g., Altman and Taylor 1973). In turn, trust is a foundational mechanism through which relationships are built and deepened. Although all participants to social media conversations might from time to time reveal secrets, Kim et al. (2013) suggest that one group that may especially benefit from disclosing secrets online are opinion leaders and influencers, such as bloggers and microbloggers. In this paper, we examine how and why bloggers and other influencers might share secrets online.

Even though there are potential positive consequences to sharing secrets, there are also some significant risks. First, as people try becoming influencers and opinion-leaders and building themselves as brands, they are also giving up privacy

in exchange for celebrity (Belk 2013). Second, many secrets should remain undisclosed because disclosure may lead to personal embarrassment and the disapproval of others (e.g., Bok, 1982; Larson and Chastain, 1990; Stiles, 1987; Wegner and Erber 1992), thereby nullifying the positive effects of sharing. In the offline world this concern over disapproval (or rejection) functions as a barrier, which prevents individuals from being fully open about their secrets (Kelly 1998; Kelly and McKillop 1996). Yet, because of the increased anonymity and physical and interpersonal distancing that the online medium provides, these downsides to revealing secrets may not seem so extreme. Using this relative cloak of anonymity of online communication, influencers may share their deepest, darkest secrets with total strangers in a bid to increase their persuasiveness and better connect with their audience. Anecdotally at least this seems to be true. For example, it has been suggested that individuals frequently share their emotions, fears, and wishes and disclose every intimate detail of their lives on their blogs, Facebook posts, and Twitter mentions (Feiler 2014; Fowler 2012).

In this chapter, we examine when and why these influencers share secrets online. Based on an exploratory survey with 48 bloggers and the literature on secret sharing, we examine the prevalence of secret sharing as a strategy for audience building. We then describe the types of secrets that influencers disclose, as well as their motives for sharing these secrets and the emotions associated with this behavior. Past research on secret sharing suggests that people share secrets primarily to unburden themselves and gain validation and support from others as well as to build stronger relationships (Derlega and Grezelak, 1979). Our findings

support that online influencers share secrets primarily to build their brand following (increase their influence, gain the loyalty of their audience and build the size of their audience) and we find little evidence, if any, that secret sharing is used to unburden and cleanse their soul. Therefore, it seems that online influencers share secrets for strategic reasons rather than improving their own psychological well-being.

The chapter is organized as follows. First we define what a secret is. We then discuss our methodology. We look at the results of our survey in the light of what is already known about secret sharing in the social psychology literature. Finally, we discuss secret sharing as a personal brand building tool and directions for future research.

What Is a Secret?

According to the Oxford dictionary, a secret is defined as something that is “not meant to be known by others”. Similarly, psychologists define a secret as information that is deliberately kept hidden from other people (Margolis 1974). Anything that exists, either in the real physical world or in the imagination, can become a secret, whether they are facts, feelings, observations or objects, as long as they are consciously hidden from others (Wismeijer, 2011). Context can affect what is perceived to be a secret. For example, a person may be comfortable disclosing identifying information (such as an address or phone number) to a friend or colleague, while in an online context they may want to keep this information secret. Likewise, art critics are free to discuss the ending of a show among themselves but

are professionally bound to keep it a secret when they write about it in a public forum.

Some researchers conceive of a secret as “active inhibition of disclosure” (e.g., Pennebaker 1989). A secret, however, is not merely the opposite of self-disclosure (i.e., the act of revealing personal information to others) (Collin and Miller 1994) because the secret keeping process feels burdensome and stressful (Pennebaker 1989, 1990). It is an effortful process that requires cognitive and emotional resources (Frijns 2005; Lane and Wegner 1995; Wegner 1989, 1992, 1994; Wegner, Lane, and Dimitri 1994), while not disclosing personal information does not require such efforts. In other words, different from “self-disclosure inhibition,” the secret keeping process requires individuals to exert energy and resources to ensure that the secret can be kept hidden from others.

To summarize, a secret is generally defined as “a conscious and effortful process of social selective information exchange that requires cognitive resources and that can be experienced as an emotional burden” (Wismeijer 2011, p. 308). A secret indicates not only a secret keeping process but also that information is kept hidden.

Having defined what a secret is we go on to investigate secret sharing by influencers in an online setting. The goal of our study is to find out how bloggers think about secret sharing, whether they do it, what constitutes a secret in their mind, why they do it and how they feel about it.

Exploratory Study

To examine these issues, we conducted an exploratory survey of a convenience sample of bloggers. Bloggers represent one type of online influencer. A complete and accurate sampling frame of bloggers does not exist, so we created a list using “top blog” lists in different domains. The blog categories included lifestyle/fashion, parenting, health and fitness, sports and recreation, theater, pets, cooking, photography and self-help. We limited our sample frame to blogs that were primarily managed by an individual (versus a collaborative blog like the “The Daily Beast”) and the categories selected tend to fit this criterion. A research assistant visited blogs on the lists and whenever possible identified the name of the primary blogger and an email address. Through this process we were able to compile a list of 208 bloggers with names and email addresses. Of these, 12 email addresses did not work.

A Qualtrics survey was sent by email to the bloggers. In addition, two reminder emails were sent to those who had not yet completed the survey. Participants were offered a chance to win a \$100 Amazon gift card for their participation. We obtained 48 complete responses, with a final response rate of 24%. To assess selection bias, we compared the distribution of blog topics among final respondents and the original list. There was some selection bias. We had a higher response rate from theater and pet bloggers, and a relatively lower response rate from fashion/lifestyle bloggers.

Survey Description

Bloggers were asked to participate in a survey about how they connect with their audiences. The survey included questions about their strategies to communicate with their audience, whether they or not share secrets and examples of secrets shared, motives for sharing secrets and emotions experienced when sharing secrets. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Sample Description

In terms of audience size, the blogs in the sample reported having between 100 and 8 million visitors per month, with a median of 12,000. About 47% of blogs had between 5,000 and 50,000 visitors per month. In terms of the types of blogs, the most common categories were performing arts/theatre (30%), lifestyle/fashion (17%), followed by personal development and health and fitness (both 13%) and pet (11%). Other categories included food and cooking, sports and recreation, and parenting.

About 49% describe their audience as primarily female and 49% as both male and female. Fifty-seven percent of the participants acknowledge that they make money from their blog, with 22% of those claiming the blog as their primary source of income. About 78% of the participants are between the ages of 21 and 50, and about two thirds (64%) are female.

Findings

Do Online Influencers Share Secrets?

There are challenges to measuring the prevalence of secret sharing by online influencers. First, what may seem like a secret to some is not a secret to others. Second, what constitutes a secret in an online context where influencers are often communicating with strangers may be different from what constitutes a secret in an offline context. Finally, influencers may not want to admit to sharing secrets because this behavior breaks a social rule or is potentially a transgression of a professional code of conduct. We attempted to address this issue in our survey by first asking participants how they connected with their blog audience in an open-ended question, followed by a question asking whether they used a specific set of communication strategies, including various forms of secret-sharing.

For the open-ended question, we asked influencers how they built a connection with their audience and had them list up to three different strategies. Approximately 27% of the participants listed some form of personal disclosure as one of their connection strategies. Some illustrative comments included “telling stories about personal experiences”, “showing vulnerability”, “sharing frustrating and difficult moments”, and “share a mix of personal details”. While not all of these responses strictly constitute secret sharing, they do indicate a desire to reveal personal information to connect with the audience. Other common strategies included interacting with the audience members via the comment system and by asking and answering questions to stimulate conversation (54%), the use of multiple social media platforms to engage with their audience members (44%), developing an interest in whatever topics their readers are interested in and tailoring their content accordingly (29%), and being honest and authentic (17%).

Additional evidence that secret sharing occurs comes from our closed-ended responses. We asked people to rate the frequency with which they use a list of strategies to communicate with their audience on a scale of 1 to 7 with 1 being Never and 7 being Very Frequently. Table 1 shows the mean values for all of the strategies on the list.

TABLE 1
Mean Ratings on Use of Communication Strategies
(n = 48)

| | MEAN | STD. DEV. |
|---|-------------|------------------|
| * I provide my own personal viewpoint on topics of interest. | 6.19 | 1.10 |
| I respond personally to posts and questions. | 5.83 | 1.48 |
| I try to be as responsive as possible to my audience's needs. | 5.75 | 1.42 |
| I disclose any incentives I may receive. | 5.73 | 1.77 |
| I look for new information to share. | 5.67 | 1.52 |
| I try to be objective. | 5.50 | 1.73 |
| * I disclose private and intimate details about my life. | 5.08 | 1.87 |
| * I reveal information about my personal life. | 4.37 | 1.77 |
| I share my emotions and feelings. | 4.31 | 1.70 |
| * I reveal information about my identity (such as where I live and work). | 4.12 | 2.02 |
| I post and comment on other bloggers' sites. | 3.77 | 2.13 |
| I accept commercial incentives. | 3.73 | 2.09 |
| * I post pictures of myself and/or family. | 3.04 | 1.75 |

Note: Measured on a 7-point scale from 1 = Never to 7 = Very Frequently.

We conducted a factor analysis of these items and the five starred items in Table 1 loaded on a single factor, which explained the most variance. We interpret that factor as disclosure of private information and details. This finding is not evidence of secret sharing in a strict sense. However, it is evidence that these respondents rely on disclosure of personal details as a communication strategy.

From the means it is clear that some of these strategies were among the most frequently used, particularly sharing one's own personal point of view and disclosing private and intimate details about their lives.

Finally, when asked explicitly if they had ever shared a secret with their social media audience, 19% of the respondents said yes. This question differentiates secret sharing from mere information disclosure by allowing the respondents to determine what does or does not constitute a secret. In addition, while we are limited by the small sample size, we do see a tendency (non-significant) for bloggers that make money off their blogs to admit to secret sharing more (22%) than those who do not (15%). We also constructed a scale using the five starred items in Table 1. We find that the respondents that said that they shared secrets scored significantly higher on this disclosure of private information scale ($M = 5.56$) versus those who said they did not ($M = 4.47, F_{1,46} = 6.55, p < .01$). Our results suggest that as bloggers and online influencers seek to build their personal brand and following, they use disclosures of intimate personal information, and that for a subset of these people, this means sharing information they consider a secret. In addition, we have some evidence that these are deliberate strategies rather than accidental disclosures.

What are the Different Types of Secrets?

We find that although many respondents reported engaging in disclosure of intimate and personal information, when asked specifically whether or not they had shared a secret, only nine participants said yes. Therefore, there may be a semantic

distinction between what constitutes a secret in the eyes of these online influencers versus the more general conceptualizations of secrets that one may encounter in the perception of the broader population. These influencers are people with a very public personal brand and persona, and thus the barrier between the private and the public domain has likely shifted making them less likely to consider something to be a secret. When one lives in the public eye, one trades off privacy for fame (Belk 2013).

In order to better understand the types of secrets shared by our online influencers, we asked them to list an example of a secret they had shared. Among the participants who said that they shared a secret with their social media audience, we found three general types of secrets. The largest category (5 out of 9) was secrets regarding physical or mental health. Most of these were conditions where there was the possibility of social stigma such as eating disorders and/or mental health issues. The second category constituted secrets about relationships. Here again, there were some extreme examples including personal abuse. The final category was revealing spoilers to an audience about shows prior to airing. Revealing this information could be perceived as a violation of professional norms, in particular, depending on how that information was obtained. For instance, one blogger was able to get spoilers about a TV show by covertly photographing the set. Our findings are consistent with work suggesting that secrets are likely to indicate negative or stigmatizing personal information about the secret keepers (Norton, Feldman, and Tafoya 1974) since people have a tendency to hide their most

traumatic, embarrassing, or disturbing personal experiences and to report them as their secrets.

In addition, we had a closed-ended list of different types of secrets that people might share on social media. The nine people who indicated that they had shared a secret with their audience indicated whether or not they had shared a secret of each type. The three biggest categories (six people each) were sharing something about their family, sharing something about a relationship and a personal confession. This finding is somewhat surprising given that across various ranges of topics, researchers find that sexual secrets and the desire for a romantic relationship are considered as the most secretive personal information (e.g., Hill et al., 1993; Kelly, 1998; Kelly et al., 2001). Other research on online sharing shows that while anonymity may not be the main driver (or motive) of online secret sharing, it certainly stimulates individuals to share their private details more freely online (Barak and Ofri 2007; Suler 2004). It is possible that this relative anonymity and physical distancing are enabling our respondents to reveal these types of secrets to their audience. We also find that people are less likely to share secrets regarding their work life or gossip about other people. Overall, our findings indicate that the secrets shared by these influencers tend to be very self-focused and wary of implicating others. For the blog categories in our sample, violating other peoples' privacy would detract from building one's own personal brand. Therefore, if secrets are to be shared, they are likely to be about the self or an abstract target object.

Why Do People Share Secrets?

At some point, individuals may decide to share a secret (and thus the information is no longer “secret” by definition). Psychologists find that sharing of secrets is driven mainly by five different motives: self-clarification, social validation, social control, relationship development, and expression (Derlega and Grezelak, 1979). The self-clarification motive stems from a communicator’s need to recognize his or her position. By telling one’s private story to others, people can clarify their thinking and views. Social validation indicates an effort to confirm one’s sense of being and self-esteem. Social control is an attempt to control the behaviors of others. Relationship development motives build on norms of reciprocity – people reciprocate the counterparty’s secret sharing to develop an equitable, intimate bond. People generally share their secretive stories mainly to connect with others who have similar concerns or fears, thereby feeling closer and attached to one another. Further, the motive for expression suggests that disclosing personal emotional events to others is a compelling human need (Rimé 1995; Tait and Silver 1989). Without having any intended objectives, people frequently share their secrets simply because they cannot resist the urge to share responding to their need for expression. Finally, individuals may share their secrets to get some help or support from others. The human need to belong or connect to a group or community (Baumeister and Leary 1995) may be the primary motivation underlying the decision to keep or disclose a secret (e.g., Wismeijer 2011).

In order to discern the online influencers’ motives for secret sharing we asked them an open-ended question wherein we had them list their reasons for

sharing the secret that they had previously described. In addition we also had them rate a list of 16 possible motives on a 7-point Not at all Important / Important scale.

We did not really see any evidence of either self-clarification or social validation as a motive for secret sharing within our sample. Nor did our influencers talk about sharing secrets simply out of a compelling need to express themselves. Of the five motives suggested in the literature, the only motive that directly fits our data is the relationship development motive. Relationship development is achieved by two main strategies—helping others and building trust with the audience. For example, one blogger says that she shares secrets online *“To help my readers understand that they are not alone and to gain their trust.”* while another blogger says, *“I felt I had an honest relationship with the audience I had built and I thought disclosing my story would be a help to others.”* Another respondent says, *“Everything I share is to help others learn from the situation. I don't expose for shock value. I won't write about a difficult or private situation unless I can share what I've learned that can bring more happiness into people's lives.”*

In addition, our data highlights another motive for secret sharing that seems unique to online influencers, namely a desire to create special or novel content. Per our data, respondents tend to share secrets that are about under-shared or under-discussed topics, which in turn enable them to create unique content that differentiates their blog from other websites and helps to build their personal brand. For instance, one respondent mentions that, *“There's a lot of clinical information regarding pregnancy available, but less sharing about emotional struggles.”* Another blogger has this to say regarding their motivation behind sharing a secret, *“I felt it*

would provide an interesting perspective on a topic that is rarely discussed openly.” A related but slightly different example of secret sharing that enables the creation of unique content is providing impersonal information that the audience would not be privy to otherwise. For example, multiple theater bloggers mention providing plot endings or spoilers to shows prior to actual public performance or airing. While these types of spoilers might be perceived as a breach as of professional conduct in some instances, such disclosures provide an avenue through which bloggers can add value for their audience.

The responses to the closed-ended list (shown in Table 2) are consistent with the above. Two out of the three highest rated reasons are about relationship building (To build a relationship with my audience, To be more closely connected to my audience). In addition, the highest rated reason was to be authentic. In social media, authenticity can be considered the Holy Grail of brand relationship building and persuasion. In addition, in contrast to the existing literature on secret sharing, the need for support and cleansing one’s soul are the lowest rated reasons on the list and do not appear to be very important at all. These findings provide further evidence that for these online influencers, secret sharing a strategic decision, rather than a form of self-therapy or unburdening.

Table 2
Mean Ratings of Secret Sharing Motives
(n = 9)

| | Mean |
|---|-------------|
| To be authentic | 6.44 |
| To build a relationship with my audience | 6.00 |
| To be more closely connected to my audience | 5.67 |
| To express my feelings | 5.56 |
| To help my audience understand me better | 4.78 |
| To persuade or influence people | 4.67 |
| To gain new insights | 4.56 |
| To gain catharsis | 4.11 |
| To feel positive about myself | 4.00 |
| To feel better | 3.78 |
| To relieve stress | 3.63 |
| To reciprocate secret sharing by members of my audience | 3.33 |
| To get help or support | 2.89 |
| To cleanse my soul | 2.67 |

Rated on a 7-point scale, with 1 = Not at all Important and 7 = Important. (n = 9)

Overall, our findings show that in contrast with the motives identified in the psychology literature on secret sharing, most of the motives identified by these online influencers are “other-focused” as opposed to being focused on the person sharing the secret. They reveal a focus on the audience, which is consistent with a customer-centric approach to personal brand building.

Emotional Outcomes of Secret Sharing:

As mentioned previously, one of the key characteristics of a secret is that there are strong emotions associated both with keeping the secret as well as the potential outcomes from disclosing the same. Given that, we were interested in looking at the impact that secret sharing has on the online influencers themselves.

As mentioned earlier, secret sharing by online influencers involves a tradeoff. Traditionally, there are barriers to secret sharing that mostly revolve around a fear of disapproval or rejection (Kelly 1998; Kelly and McKillop 1996). In particular, we were interested in whether these influencers were worried about the potential disapproval from their readers upon sharing a secret.

However, what we find instead is that secret sharing by online influencers leads to a mix of positive and negative emotions with the positive emotions seeming dominant. Across 14 emotions, we had the participants rate how they felt when they shared the secret (5-point Strongly Disagree/Strongly Agree scale). The top emotions were pride (M=3.89), anxiety (M=3.78) and content (M=3.67) followed by relieved (M=3.56), excited (M=3.44) and pleased (M=3.44) respectively. Participants felt relatively no shame (M=1.44), sadness (M=1.44) or embarrassment (M=2.11), emotions which are sometimes associated with secret sharing (Manen and Levering, 1996; Newth and Rachman, 2001). These results indicate that the influencers feel good upon sharing secrets with their audience and there's very limited indication that secret sharing among these influencers is emotionally taxing.

Taking these findings with the bloggers' stated motives for secret sharing suggests that these influencers feel as though they have helped their audience members and/or increased the trust with their audience through the process of secret sharing further enhancing their personal brand.

Conclusion

Our exploratory study of secret sharing among online influencers reveals several key findings. First, we are able to establish the prevalence of disclosure of intimate personal information among online influencers. However, at the same time, there is relatively limited self-reporting of secret sharing. We believe that because online influencers have a public persona, they have a higher bar for what is considered to be a secret.

Second, we find that secret sharing among these influencers is strategic and purposeful rather than accidental. This conclusion is supported by our findings that the secrets shared by these bloggers tend to be about the self and abstract objects and not about others, which could be damaging to the personal brand. In addition, the motives for secret sharing are focused on relationship development, authenticity and providing novel information rather than receiving support or cleansing one's soul. Finally, there appears to be low social or emotional costs to secret sharing and the emotional outcomes are mostly positive.

We see some important differences between secret sharing among these online bloggers versus what has been described in the secret sharing literature. First, the very understanding of what kind of information might be considered a secret seems to differ in this domain. The types of secrets that are shared are potentially more extreme even though the audience is much larger. In addition, the secrets are confined to certain topics that help enhance the personal brand. Finally, the motives for sharing secrets appear to be quite different in that there's much more of a focus on how the secret will help build a relationship and less focus on

self-related outcomes. In fact, it appears that bloggers use secret sharing as one way of providing differentiated content and value to their customers.

Our conclusions are limited by the methodology that we used in the study. First, we have a very small convenience sample of bloggers, which are just one type of online influencer. Without the ability to probe we were not able to get the depth of understanding on what a secret means to these people and the risks associated with sharing secrets. We asked people about why they share secrets but did not ask questions about why they did *not* share secrets. It is also possible that we are underestimating the prevalence of secret sharing because these people live in the public eye and have a higher threshold for what constitutes a secret.

Finally, our methodology does not allow us to assess the outcomes associated with secret sharing, limiting our ability to develop specific implications for bloggers. Anecdotally, from our own observation of various blogs, posts that involve what can be construed as secret sharing appear to get significant engagement including comments, questions and reciprocal secret sharing from audience members. In addition, the effectiveness of secret sharing is likely to vary with the characteristics of the blog and consequently the audience and our sample size does not allow for us to examine this issue. For example, secret sharing is likely to be more effective in communally oriented blogs versus those that are exchange oriented. Clearly, additional research is needed to better understand the exact process through which secret sharing as a strategy helps with personal brand building, relationship development and gaining a loyal following.

To summarize, a key to building one's online brand and following is to develop strong relationships and provide unique content and value to the audience. Selective secret sharing appears to be one approach that online influencers can use towards this goal. Our hope is that this initial investigation into secret sharing spurs additional research on this strategy as well as the broader phenomenon of online personal brand building.

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