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Self-Disclosure and the Liking of Participants in Reality TV

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Abstract

Reality TV shows are characterized by the very intimate self-disclosure of their participants early on in the shows. In everyday interactions, however, such intimate self-disclosure is welcomed only when it evolves gradually. This discrepancy between reality shows and real life apparently contradicts previous research documenting the similarity between real relationships and relationships with media characters. The current research explores this apparent contradiction by examining whether the relationship between self-disclosure and liking and the rules about the timing of self-disclosure that apply in everyday interactions apply in reality TV. Study 1 shows that viewers prefer characters who make early intimate disclosures, and Study 2 shows that they prefer this disclosure to evolve gradually and become more intimate, as in real relationships.

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A long tradition in communication research dating back to the seminal work of Horton and Wohl (1956) documents the similarity between real relationships and relationships with media characters (e.g., Giles, 2002). This tradition maintains, for example, that the attraction to media characters stems from the same factors underlying attraction in real-life social relationships (e.g., Rubin & McHugh, 1987), and that perceptions about media characters are based on the same information sources on which perceptions about people in real life are based (e.g., Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). If people indeed treat media characters like they treat real-life people, the rules and norms of self-disclosure in interpersonal communication should apply to relationships with media characters. One such norm is that intimate self-disclosure is welcomed in everyday interactions only in advanced stages of the relationship (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974).

However, the last decade has seen the increasing popularity of reality TV shows, which are well known for their voyeuristic nature (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007). The participants in these shows are expected to open themselves up to the public and expose themselves both physically and emotionally early on in the show (Madsen & Brinkmann, 2012). Very intimate self-disclosure in the form of a monologue has become a frequent means of achieving this expected exposure.

So why are reality shows so popular? Why do their participants so often achieve celebrity status and become models with whom the viewers identify (e.g., Nabi, So, & Santos, 2013) when they dramatically violate the norms of self-disclosure that apply in real-life interpersonal relationships? This study explores this apparent contradiction by examining whether the viewers' reaction to self-disclosure is different when watching reality shows or whether, at least in some respects, it is similar to the perceptions common in daily, face-to-face interactions.

Self-disclosure

Jourard (1971) defined self-disclosure as a verbal revelation of personal information to others. This personal information may include the experiences, attitudes, feelings, and thoughts of the individual (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993) that tend to be private in the sense that the receiver is unlikely to hear them from someone else (Waring, 1990). Research has documented the major role played by self-disclosure in the creation and continuation of social relationships. Generally, research has shown that as the relationship develops, self-disclosure becomes more intimate and includes more areas (Derlega et al., 1993). On the other hand, one of the primary signals that a relationship is starting to fade is a sharp decline in self-disclosure (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2000).

Abundant research has documented the relationship between self-disclosure and liking (Collins & Miller, 1994). Experimental studies indicate not only that liking causes self-disclosure (e.g., Critelli, Rappaport, & Golding, 1976), but also that self-disclosure causes liking (e.g., Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991). Disclosing personal information makes the revealer more familiar to the listeners. Because people usually feel more comfortable in the company of familiar people rather than with strangers, learning more about someone and being more certain about them may explain the fondness toward them (Berger, 1987). Moreover, being entrusted with personal information, especially when it involves some risk to the discloser, may make the listener feel special and trustworthy. Listeners

commonly attribute the disclosure to the speaker's liking of and confidence in them, which fosters their liking of the speaker and boosts their relationship (Collins & Miller, 1994).

However, this positive relationship between self-disclosure and liking holds as long as the self-disclosure is in line with normative expectations (Derlega et al., 1993). According to social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), disclosure of information should move from superficial to intimate as the relationship develops. In initial encounters, people are expected to disclose relatively superficial and positive information. Only in later encounters, as the relationship between the discussants develops and they have a stronger tie, is the disclosure of more intimate information normative (e.g., Bochner, 1982; Granovetter, 1973). Thus, people are not expected to disclose intimate information to strangers in their initial encounter. If they do so, they are perceived as poorly adjusted, awkward, and unlikeable (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974).

Besides being normative, the disclosure of intimate information at a later stage in the relationship's development may prompt the listener to ascribe positive attributions to this self-disclosure. Because the speaker has had enough time to get to know the listener, he or she may have chosen to reveal their personal information to that particular listener because they find him or her trustworthy, empathic, and friendly (Wortman, Adesman, Herman, & Greenberg, 1976). The listener's belief in being perceived in such a positive way by the speaker may provide positive reinforcement and promote the liking of the speaker (Collins & Miller, 1994). This kind of attribution would not be made if intimate information were shared early on in the relationship. Such revelations might be perceived as stemming from the revealer's desperate need to make self-disclosures, regardless of who the targeted listener was. Thus, in social interactions, self-disclosure leads to liking as long as it is appropriately timed and provided gradually.

However, self-disclosure is not only a part of real-life social interactions. Listening to self-disclosures made by media characters has become common practice. Although self-disclosure has become very frequent in various TV genres, there is almost no research to date that has examined its perception by the viewers (Tsay & Oliver, 2008). Hence, the goal of this study is to examine whether the relationship between self-disclosure and liking and the rules about the timing of self-disclosure that apply in social interactions also apply in the reaction of viewers to media characters.

Interaction with media characters

The communication literature clearly documents that audiences tend to form relationships with media characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In line with Reeves and Nass' (1996) idea of "media equation," according to which people respond in a social manner to any cues that are associated with human features, these relationships with media characters have some similarity to social relationships. As research has demonstrated, the attraction to media characters stems from the same factors underlying attraction in social relationships, such as similarity and likeability (Giles, 2002). As in social relationships, female media figures are more appreciated for their physical attraction, whereas males are more appreciated for their power. Similarly, physical attractiveness is more important for a media figure of the opposite gender (e.g., Cohen, 1999).

The time spent with media figures often makes the audience feel intimately involved in their lives. As in social relationships, the longer the exposure, the more intense the relationship (Perse & Rubin, 1989

). This association between length of exposure and intensity of the relationship is mediated by the viewers' confidence in their attribution for the characters' behavior. As uncertainty reduction theory predicts, the more the viewers are exposed to the characters and get to know them, the more they are confident in the attribution they ascribe to these characters' behavior, which, in turn, strengthens their parasocial relationship (Perse & Rubin, 1989). This last idea suggests that people tend to like media characters who disclose more intimate information about themselves.

Self-disclosure by media characters

The development of mass media broadened the context typical of self-disclosure from the interpersonal to the public arena. Self-disclosure has become a major component of the content of many communication channels and genres including blogs on the Internet, radio call-in advice programs, talk shows, and reality TV (e.g., Katriel, 2004). Television, in particular, has become a major outlet for the expression of intimate emotions, and reality TV is a TV genre in which self-disclosure is particularly prominent (Aslama & Pantti, 2006).

Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt (2003, p. 304) defined reality TV as "programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives, as these events occur." In these programs, the participants represent themselves and do not play a role. They act naturally, without a script, and are often filmed in their home or work environment (Nabi et al., 2003).

Unlike in talk shows in which the participants' self-disclosure is typically in the form of an interview during which the self-discloser answers questions and interacts with the show's host, in reality TV self-disclosure is usually in the form of a monologue (Aslama & Pantti, 2006). As Aslama and Pantti argue, this monologue gives the impression that the speaker is truly opening up and revealing his or her inner emotions. As in real life, the self-discloser looks at the audience while delivering his or her monologue, which seems to be directed at the viewers. This practice creates a sense of intimacy, as if the speaker were revealing his or her emotions and thoughts to the individual viewer (Woodstock, 2011). Indeed, a recent study has established that when a media character looks directly at the audience and speaks directly to it, the audience tends to feel that they are involved in a social interaction with that character (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011).

In reality TV, therefore, the audience may feel like the target of the self-discloser. Having said that, one might argue that while for the discloser, the self-disclosing experience is quite different from the real-life self-disclosing experience, for the viewer, the experience is quite similar. The reality TV participant discloses his or her intimate feelings and thoughts to an unknown audience, a process that Stefanone and Lackaff (2009) call a nondirected self-disclosure. The individual viewer, on the other hand, is watching the show's participants make disclosures directly to him or her, imitating the intimacy common in real-life self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure, like gossip and the display of sexual acts and nudity, may be regarded as an ingredient of voyeuristic content, which previous research has demonstrated contributes to the appeal of reality TV (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007). These behaviors, which social norms regard as private and shameful, are much more normative in reality programming (Baruh, 2009). Thus, according to Baruh, the same intimate behaviors that people refrain from displaying in public are welcomed in the domain of reality TV. Although in their real social lives people are expected to show restraint both in

exposing themselves and in watching others exposing themselves, reality TV may allow both the source and the recipient to break these social norms. As Baruh puts it, "The participants choose disclosure instead of modesty, and the viewers choose not to look away, but rather gaze carefully when private moments are revealed" (p. 195).

Similarly, in their discussion of the reality program *Paradise Hotel*, Madsen and Brinkmann (2012) describe the norm of the early revealing of very intimate and provocative information. These researchers explain that the participants in the show are aware of the fact that they are expected to break the taboos of everyday encounters and expose themselves both physically and mentally right from the start. Based on their previous experience with reality TV, the viewers learn to expect this type of sensational behavior (Murray, 2009). As Raney (2004) claimed, viewers who are repeatedly exposed to certain media texts form schemas regarding these texts, and those schemas lead them to expect characters to behave in a certain way.

Having become accustomed to this provocative early self-disclosure, the viewers might expect the reality show's participants to engage in this behavior and view this behavior as normative in that context. Because people usually like those who behave normatively (Leone, 2010), and because the norm for the timing of intimate revealing is different in reality TV, we would expect different reactions to early intimate revelations in real life than in reality TV. Unlike in everyday encounters in which people who disclose intimate information in an initial encounter are perceived as awkward and unlikeable, the viewers of reality shows might like the characters who reveal intimate information at an early stage. This possibility leads us to the first research hypothesis,

H1: There will be an interaction between the degree of intimacy of the disclosure and the perceived timing of the disclosure on the degree of the liking of the character. More intimate self-disclosure will make the character more likeable, especially when the participants are told that they are watching the early stages of the show.

To strengthen the validity of the liking measure, we wanted to examine related behavioral intentions as well. In many reality shows the audience plays a part, usually by sending text messages that influence the chances of the character's remaining on the show and winning the competition (Wei, 2008). We hypothesize that the viewers will tend to send text messages in favor of a character who self-discloses intimately at an early stage of the show.

H2: There will be an interaction between the degree of intimacy of the disclosure and the perceived timing of the disclosure on the audience's tendency to send text messages favoring the character. More intimate self-disclosure will lead to more intentions to send text messages, especially when that self-disclosure takes place in the early stages of the show.

Previous researchers have claimed that provocative physical and mental exposure satisfies the voyeuristic needs of the viewers and thus contributes to the appeal of reality TV (e.g., Papacharissi &

Mendelson, 2007). Given that early intimate disclosures are more provocative than late disclosures, they may be more enjoyable to viewers than late disclosures. Therefore, we posit that:

H3: There will be an interactive effect between the degree of intimacy of the character's disclosure and the timing of the disclosure on the audience's viewing enjoyment. More intimate self-disclosure will make the viewing more enjoyable, especially in the early stages of the show.

People differ in their fondness for reality TV. We hypothesize that people who watch these shows quite often will react more positively to early disclosures than those who watch these shows less frequently. This hypothesis is based on two lines of reasoning. First, it is reasonable to assume that those who like to watch reality TV are looking for the voyeuristic and provocative elements they offer (e.g., Baruh, 2009). They choose to watch these shows because their previous exposure to them taught them that they gratify their needs (Atkin, 1985 ; Levy & Windahl, 1984).

Second, we assume that those who are more accustomed to watching reality TV have internalized the norms of self-disclosure modeled in it. Because they view these shows more frequently, their schema regarding the timing of self-disclosure in these shows might be more developed (Raney, 2004). Similarly, according to cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1990), heavy viewers accept the worldviews presented in the media. Thus, their frequent viewing of early disclosures might make them regard this behavior as accepted and normative. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H4: The interaction between the degree of intimacy of the disclosure and the perceived timing of the disclosure on the liking of the character will be more evident among heavy viewers than among light viewers of reality shows.

H5: The interaction between the degree of intimacy of the disclosure and the perceived timing of the disclosure on intentions to send text messages favoring the character will be more evident among heavy viewers than among light viewers of reality shows.

H6: The interaction between the degree of intimacy of the disclosure and the perceived timing of the disclosure on viewing enjoyment will be more evident among heavy viewers than among light viewers of reality shows.

We tested the above hypotheses in Study 1 in which we manipulated the perceived timing and depth of self-disclosure and examined their effect on the reaction to the characters in the context of the popular reality show *Big Brother* .

Study 1

Overview

We examined hypotheses 1–3 in Study 1 in the context of a 2 (timing attached to the self-disclosure) × 2 (depth of self-disclosure) × 2 (character's gender) between subjects factorial design. For the experimental stimulus, we chose the show *Big Brother*. Our rationale for choosing this show is its immense popularity worldwide and the fact that it is broadcast in various countries in a very similar format. This feature allowed us to show our participants segments from this show that was broadcasted in a different country whose language was unknown to them without alienating them by showing them an unfamiliar show.

Thus, we had our Israeli participants watch the segments of the show from Finland. Because the participants were not familiar with the Finnish language, we were able to manipulate the degree of intimacy of the information conveyed by translating the same segments into more intimate or less intimate self-disclosures (that were provided in Hebrew subtitles superimposed on the screen). Using this procedure enabled us to conduct precise manipulations without confounding them with the many differences that exist between two distinct segments.

Method

Participants

The participants were 204 students from a university in Israel; 117 were female and 87 were male. Their mean age was 25.28 ($SD = 3.26$). The participants volunteered to participate in the experiment in exchange for 40 shekels (the equivalent of \$11 at that time).

Materials and procedure

The participants were asked to come to the communication laboratory where they sat in separate cubicles in front of a computer.¹ They were handed a questionnaire that included an introduction and a series of questions measuring the dependent variables, intervening variables, and various demographics. The first page contained the introduction. The participants were thanked for agreeing to participate in a study on reality shows around the world. The participants were told that in the coming minutes they would watch a segment from the show *Big Brother* that was broadcast in Finland.

Randomly, half of the participants were told that this segment was from the second episode of that program's season, and half were told that it was taken from the 15th episode. In this manner, we manipulated the perceived timing of the self-disclosure. This manipulation follows that of Chaikin and Derlega (1974) who gave their participants information about the stage of the relationship between the self-discloser and his or her target.

Although this kind of manipulation does not change the actual timing of the disclosure, it manipulates the perceived timing without confounding it with differences that occur between short-term and long-term relationships. Most importantly, it allows us to examine the reactions of the viewers to self-disclosures that they perceived as occurring early or late in the show.

After receiving the instructions, the participants were asked to watch a 1-minute segment from the Finnish version of *Big Brother*. The segment started with the show's guest explaining what would happen in tonight's show. The translation provided for all of the participants was as follows:

The *Big Brother* show today is a special program towards the Saturday ousting. As usual, each tenant will receive half a minute to share with the viewers the thoughts he's had since the last show. Later on, a new mission will be on its way and at its end, immunity will be granted to one of the tenants.

Having heard this introduction, the participants were randomly assigned to view either a young man or a young woman (our manipulation of the character's gender) who spoke directly to the camera. The translation of their statements was the third manipulation, the degree of intimacy of the self-disclosure. Randomly, half of the participants received a translation that revealed intimate information, and half received a translation that provided more superficial information. The intimate condition was as follows:

Hi, it's me, Cathleen. I wanted to talk about my difficulty in getting close to guys here and trusting them, and that's because just before I got to the show, my boyfriend left me after 3 years for someone else. And I'm afraid to start a new relationship with someone and get hurt again. I know that the show can be an opportunity for me to move on, but it's too hard for me to just forget about him, especially because I still have feelings for him... The truth is that I also got used to being with just him, and I devoted myself to the relationship for so long that I sort of lost touch with my friends and I no longer know how to get close to people. I hope and want to have a chance in this show to stop being afraid and be able to trust the people I meet here and maybe even fall in love again...

The superficial condition was as follows:

Hi, it's me, Cathleen. In the last few days I've noticed that it's not so easy being shut up in one place in which you cannot really be alone and you're being watched all the time. But on the other hand, I also enjoy that the show helped me meet new people, girls and guys, who I never would have had a chance of knowing in my normal life. And it's also cool that people who are so diverse live in the same house. And the truth is that there are really cute guys here, even if it's a little bit strange to meet someone that way, in a situation in which you don't have any other choice because we are shut up here 24 hours a day together as if there are no people in the world outside.

The translations for the segments presenting the young man were almost identical, with the exception of very small changes that had to be made in order to match the translation to the character's speech. As is evident, we attempted to make the content of the superficial self-disclosure and the intimate self-

disclosure quite similar. The differences that had to be made were crucial for manipulating the level of intimacy, similar to the manipulations in previous research by Berg and Archer (1983) and by Chaikin and Derlega (1974).² After viewing the show's segment, the participants were asked to answer a questionnaire.

The questionnaire included questions about demographics and the participants' tendency to watch reality TV. The last category included questions about the degree to which they watch *Big Brother* and three other reality TV shows. Participants provided their answers on a 10-point scale ranging from *never* to *very frequently*.³ This category also included questions about the degree to which the participants enjoyed watching reality TV generally and the reality show *Big Brother* specifically. Once again, participants provided their answers on a 10-point scale ranging from *did not enjoy at all* to *enjoyed a lot*. An index of the tendency to watch reality shows was calculated based on the mean of the above questions, dropping an item related to one of the reality shows that reduced the reliability (a total of five items). The index ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 2.28$, $\alpha = .84$) was based on a scale of 1 to 10 (larger numbers representing a greater tendency to watch).

Moreover, the questionnaire included a manipulation check on the perceived intimacy of the disclosure taken from Tsay and Oliver (2008). The participants were asked to report to what degree they thought that the information that the character revealed about himself or herself was intimate (vs. not intimate), personal (vs. not personal), revealing (vs. not revealing), private (vs. public), and deep (vs. superficial). Participants provided their answers on a semantic differential scale ranging from 1 to 10. An index of depth of self-disclosure was calculated based on the mean of the five questions mentioned above. The index ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 2.31$, $\alpha = .92$) was based on a scale of 1 to 10 (larger numbers representing greater depth).

The dependent variable, liking of the figure depicted in the segment, was measured using three questions: the degree to which the viewer liked that character, the degree to which the viewer would have liked to know that character better and the degree to which the viewer would have liked to be friends with that character. The answers were based on a 10-point scale, ranging from *not at all* to *very much*. An index of liking of the character was calculated based on the mean of the three questions mentioned above. The index ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 2.11$) was based on a scale of 1 to 10 (larger numbers representing greater liking), with a Cronbach's α reliability of .91.

The dependent variable, behavioral intentions, was measured using the questions: "If the character you watched were a candidate for dismissal from the Big Brother house and you could send a text message for him or her, would you do that?" (With answers based on a 1–10 scale ranging from *definitely yes* to *definitely no*), and "How many text messages would you send?" (With answers based on 1–10 scale ranging from *many* to *none*). An index of behavioral intentions was calculated based on the mean of these two questions. The index ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.66$; $r_s = .71$, $p < .001$) was based on a scale of 1 to 10 (larger numbers representing a greater tendency to send text messages).

The dependent variable of enjoyment was measured using the questions: "To what degree did you enjoy watching the segment?" (With answers based on a 1–10 scale ranging from *enjoyed a lot* to *did not enjoy at all*) and "To what extent would you have liked to continue watching the episode from which the segment was taken?" (With answers based on a 1–10 scale ranging from *want to very much* to *not want to at all*). An index of enjoyment was calculated based on these two questions. The index ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.94$; $r_s = .61$, $p < .001$) was based on a scale of 1 to 10 (larger numbers

representing greater enjoyment).⁴ When the participants finished filling out the questionnaire, they were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Before examining the effect on each of the dependent variables (attraction, behavioral intentions, and enjoyment), we conducted a three-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) on the three of them with the perceived timing of the self-disclosure, the depth of the self-disclosure, and the character's gender as the independent variables. There were no significant main effects of the level of intimacy, $F(3, 194) = 1.40$, $p > .1$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$ and the perceived timing, $F(3, 194) = 0.87$, $p > .1$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. As expected, this analysis revealed a significant interaction between the timing and the depth of the self-disclosure, $F(3, 194) = 4.48$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$.

To better understand the nature of the interaction, two one-way MANOVAs were conducted separately for the early revelation and late revelation with the depth of the self-disclosure as the independent variable. There was a significant effect of the depth of the self-disclosure in the early revelation, $F(3, 98) = 5.12$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$. The participants responded more positively to the character who revealed intimate information than to the character who revealed superficial information. There was no effect of the depth of the self-disclosure in the late revelation, $F(3, 98) = 0.71$, *ns*. The participants in that condition responded similarly to the intimate revealer and to the superficial revealer.

There was also a significant main effect of the character's gender, $F(3, 194) = 3.17$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. The participants responded more positively to the female character than to the male character. Importantly, the character's gender did not interact either with the timing of the disclosure and/or with the depth of the self-disclosure $p > .1$. Following this significant interactive effect in the MANOVA, we examined the effect on each of the dependent variables separately.

Attraction to the character

A three-way ANOVA was conducted with the timing of the self-disclosure, the depth of the self-disclosure and the character's gender as the independent variables, and the liking of the character as the dependent variable. As H1 expected, this analysis revealed a significant interaction between the timing and the depth of the self-disclosure, $F(1, 196) = 5.13$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$.

To better understand the nature of the interaction, two one-way ANOVAs were conducted separately for the early revelation and late revelation with the depth of the self-disclosure as the independent variable and liking as the dependent variable. There was a significant effect of the depth of the self-disclosure in the early revelation, $F(1, 100) = 6.24$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. The participants liked the character who revealed intimate information ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 2.22$) more than the character who revealed superficial information ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.96$). There was no effect of the depth of the self-disclosure in the late revelation, $F(1, 100) = 0.31$, *ns*. The participants liked the intimate revealer ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.95$) to the same degree that they liked the superficial revealer ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 2.21$).

There was also a significant main effect of the character's gender, $F(1, 196) = 8.17$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. The participants liked the female character more ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 2.20$) than the male character ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.94$). Importantly, the character's gender did not have an interactive effect on attraction, either with the timing of the disclosure and/or with the depth of the self-disclosure $p > .1$.

Behavioral intentions regarding the character

A three-way ANOVA was conducted with the timing of the self-disclosure, the depth of the self-disclosure and the character's gender as the independent variables, and behavioral intentions toward the character as the dependent variable. As H2 expected, this analysis revealed a significant interaction between the timing and the depth of the self-disclosure, $F(1, 196) = 10.81, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .05$.

To better understand the nature of the interaction, two one-way ANOVAs were conducted separately for the early revelation and late revelation with the depth of the self-disclosure as the independent variable and behavioral intentions as the dependent variable. There was a significant effect of the depth of the self-disclosure in the early revelation, $F(1, 100) = 10.69, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .10$. The participants intended to send more text messages supporting the character who revealed more intimate information ($M = 2.91, SD = 1.73$) than they intended to do for the character who revealed more superficial information ($M = 1.91, SD = 1.33$). There was no effect of the depth of the self-disclosure in the late revelation, $F(1, 100) = 0.15, ns$. The participants intended to send text messages supporting the intimate revealer ($M = 2.22, SD = 1.49$) to the same degree that they intended to do so for the superficial revealer ($M = 2.71, SD = 1.91$). There were no significant main effects or interactive effects of the character's gender.

Enjoyment of watching

A three-way ANOVA was conducted with the timing of the self-disclosure, the depth of the self-disclosure, and the character's gender as the independent variables, and the enjoyment of watching the segment as the dependent variable. As H3 expected, this main effect analysis revealed a significant interaction between the timing and the depth of the self-disclosure, $F(1, 196) = 8.31, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .04$.

To better understand the nature of the interaction, two one-way ANOVAs were conducted separately for the early revelation and late revelation with the depth of the self-disclosure as the independent variable and enjoyment as the dependent variable. There was a significant effect of the depth of the self-disclosure in the early revelation, $F(1, 100) = 12.18, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .11$. The participants enjoyed watching the character who revealed intimate information ($M = 3.66, SD = 2.08$) more than the character who revealed superficial information ($M = 2.37, SD = 1.65$). There was no effect of the depth of the self-disclosure in the late revelation, $F(1, 100) = 0.42, ns$. The participants enjoyed watching the intimate revealer ($M = 3.07, SD = 1.75$) to the same degree that they enjoyed watching the superficial revealer ($M = 3.31, SD = 2.07$).

There was a significant main effect of the character's gender, $F(1, 196) = 5.22, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .03$. The participants enjoyed watching the female character more ($M = 3.39, SD = 1.97$) than the male character ($M = 2.81, SD = 1.88$). Importantly, the character's gender did not have an interactive effect on enjoyment, either with the timing of the disclosure and/or with the depth of the self-disclosure.

The responses of heavy and light viewers

To examine H4–H6, we divided the participants into two groups based on whether they scored above or below 3.1 (the median score) on the tendency to watch reality shows index. These groups differed

significantly with regard to the enjoyment they derived from watching the segments ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.53$ for light viewers and $M = 3.71$, $SD = 2.11$ for heavy viewers, $p < .01$), with regard to their intentions to send SMS messages ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.43$ for light viewers and $M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.84$ for heavy viewers, $p < .05$), and of course with regard to their tendency to watch reality TV ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.62$ for light viewers and $M = 5.67$, $SD = 1.66$ for heavy viewers, $p < .01$). They also differed in a marginally significant way in their liking of the characters ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 2.04$ for light viewers and $M = 4.41$, $SD = 2.15$ for heavy viewers, $p = .08$).

We conducted three three-way ANOVAs with the timing of the self-disclosure, the depth of the self-disclosure, and the tendency to watch reality TV (light or heavy watchers) as the independent variables, and the liking of the character, the intention to send text messages, and the enjoyment of watching the segment as the dependent variables. Given that the division of the participants into the groups of light and heavy viewers was not based on a random assignment, we added the age and gender of participants as covariates in the model.

Although there was no significant three-way interaction on the liking of the character, when splitting the sample into heavy and light viewers, the pattern was consistent with H4. Two two-way ANOVAs were conducted separately for heavy and light viewers. As hypothesized, the interaction between the degree of intimacy of the disclosure and the timing of the disclosure on the liking of the character was significant only for heavy viewers $F(1, 96) = 5.21$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, not for light viewers, $F(1, 96) = 0.67$, *ns*.

Similarly, although there was no significant three-way interactive effect on the intention to send text messages, when splitting the sample into heavy and light viewers, the pattern was consistent with H5. Two two-way ANOVAs were conducted separately for heavy and light viewers. As hypothesized, the interaction between the degree of intimacy of the disclosure and the timing of the disclosure on the intention to send text messages was significant only for heavy viewers $F(1, 96) = 7.62$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, not for light viewers $F(1, 96) = 3.08$, *ns*.

Finally, as H6 expected, there was a significant three-way interaction between the timing and depth of the self-disclosure and the tendency to watch reality TV on the enjoyment of watching such shows, $F(1, 194) = 4.56$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. In order to better understand the nature of the interaction, two two-way ANOVAs were conducted separately for heavy and light viewers. As hypothesized, the interaction between the degree of intimacy of the disclosure and the timing of the disclosure on the enjoyment of watching was significant only for heavy viewers $F(1, 96) = 10.69$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .1$, not for light viewers $F(1, 96) = 0.61$, *ns*.

Discussion

Abundant research in social psychology and interpersonal communication has established that people who disclose themselves intimately to strangers or to people who are merely acquaintances are perceived as socially incompetent and maladjusted (e.g., Chaikin & Derlega, 1974). As social penetration theory claims, at the beginning of a relationship, people are expected to provide only superficial information about themselves. As the relationship develops, the information is expected to become more intimate (Altman & Taylor, 1973). However, these expectations seemingly do not prevail in the realm of reality TV shows.

Unlike in real life, the viewers liked the early revealers of intimate information and did not like the late revealers of intimate information. One explanation for this finding may be that the viewers, especially those who are heavy viewers of reality TV, might have formed a schema for these types of shows and based on this schema, perceived early intimate disclosures as expected and normative (Raney, 2004). Moreover, when watching reality shows, people (especially those who are frequent watchers of these shows) are looking for provocative stimuli. Intimate disclosures made after one is fairly well-acquainted with the character are not sufficiently provocative, reducing the attraction to the character and the enjoyment of watching the show.

Having said that, the results of Study 1 do not indicate whether the perceptions of self-disclosure in the reality TV domain are different from those common in real-life interactions in quantitative or qualitative terms. In other words, the liking of the early revealers might mean that on reality TV, people prefer to know everything about the participants right from the start, a pattern that is totally different from their preference in real-life interactions (e.g., Chaikin & Derlega, 1974).

Alternatively, the results might mean that the viewers expect and like the early disclosure of intimate and provocative information that gradually becomes even more intimate. This pattern is quite similar to that common in real-life interactions, although it differs in quantity. In reality TV, the expectation is that self-disclosure generally begins at a higher level of intimacy than in real life.

Study 1 could not provide an answer to that issue because the participants were all presented with one episode of self-disclosure. In order to determine whether the viewers prefer intensifying self-disclosure to instantaneous self-disclosure, it is necessary to present the viewers with several episodes of self-disclosure that vary in their degree of intimacy. This was done in Study 2.

Study 2

Based on previous research, one could hypothesize both a preference for intensifying and instantaneous self-disclosure in the reality TV domain. On the one hand, in line with the results of Study 1, the viewers might appreciate early and instantaneous disclosure by media characters, especially in reality TV, because it is an integral and expected part of this genre (e.g., Baruh, 2009). If indeed the social norm of gradual disclosure does not exist in reality TV, the viewers of that genre might respond favorably to a character who self-discloses everything in an unrestrained manner early in the stages of their encounter with him or her.

Moreover, the reasons mentioned in the literature for liking gradual disclosers are all related to the characteristics of social interaction, not to those of one-sided interactions between a viewer and a media character. As stated previously, people expect the disclosure of information to become more intimate as the relationship between the discloser and the target develops. This amplification in intimacy is an indication that the discloser likes the target of the disclosure.

The viewers might understand that no real relationships are formed between them and the media characters, and thus do not expect disclosures in reality TV to follow the same timing as those made by people in real-life social interactions. Moreover, given the one-sided nature of the relationship, the viewer cannot attribute the later revealing of information to the discloser's finding him or her trustworthy or empathic. According to that logic, a gradual disclosure in reality TV would not be

rewarded in the same way that a gradual disclosure in real-life social interactions is.

Having said that, it is nevertheless hypothesized here that just as in social interactions (e.g., Chaikin & Derlega, 1974), self-disclosure in reality TV is preferred when it evolves gradually, starting as intimate and becoming more and more intimate as the relationship develops. This assumption is based on the literature concerning perceptions of and responses to media characters, which suggests a close resemblance between these processes and those relating to people in real-life social relationships (e.g., Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). The viewer responds to the media characters and forms impressions of these characters as if they were real people (Giles, 2003; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991).

This should be particularly true in reality TV in which the characters are presented as real people who are filmed while acting naturally without adhering to a script (Nabi et al., 2003). Even if they are aware of the relationship's being one-sided, the viewers adopt the same rules of impression formation that they use in real-life social relationships (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991).

Given that in these relationships they are used to seeing gradual disclosures as an indication of the development of the relationship and of the discloser's liking of them, they view the media characters who self-disclose gradually in a positive light. Thus, we assume that the viewer will transfer the real-life expectation for intensifying self-disclosure into the realm of the TV show.

H7: Viewers of reality TV will perceive a media figure who self-discloses as more likeable when the disclosures are presented as becoming more intimate over time compared with the case in which the intimate disclosures are presented as being made instantaneously.

Thus, our aim in the current research is to examine the impact of the perceived timing of self-disclosure on favorable feelings toward figures in reality TV. We base our hypothesis on previous research documenting the relationship between the perceived timing of self-disclosure and the liking of the disclosers in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Chaikin & Derlega, 1974). Therefore, in Study 2 we focus on the dependent variable of the degree of liking of the media characters who self-disclose.

In TV, just as in real life, the timing of self-disclosure is confounded with other variables that might impact liking. Gradual self-disclosure over an extended period of time might result in greater liking than instantaneous disclosure not because of the timing of the disclosure, but because the relationship itself has had time to develop, or merely because the increased exposure resulted in greater liking (Zajonc, 1968). Similarly, the gradual disclosure of information over a period of time may be related to greater liking because the target has had the chance to be exposed to other information related to the discloser in the time that passed until he or she made more intimate disclosures.

In this study, therefore, we needed to manipulate only the perceived timing, while keeping all of the other variables constant. We accomplished this goal by allowing two groups of viewers to watch the same three segments in which the character's self-disclosures gradually became more intimate. These segments differed only in the timing attached to them. They were presented to the first group as three segments from the first episode (instantaneous disclosure of intimate information) and to the second group as segments from three different episodes (gradual disclosure—becoming more intimate with time).

In line with Study 1, which did not find any interactive effect of the character's gender, we did not manipulate the character's gender in Study 2 and used only a female figure. Unlike in Study 1, we did not expect the effect of perceived timing on the liking of the characters to be different for light and heavy viewers of reality TV. The effect of the timing of self-disclosure characterizes everyday interactions (Collins & Miller, 1994) and is not unique to reality shows. Thus, we assumed that while the expected threshold for intimate self-disclosure is higher for heavy viewers of reality TV, as was demonstrated in Study 1, their preference for gradual disclosure would resemble that of light viewers.

Method

Participants

The participants were 66 students of a university in Israel who volunteered to participate in the experiment that was conducted at the end of an academic lecture. Of them, 32 were male and 34 female. The ages ranged from 19 to 55 years, with a mean age of 31.34 ($SD = 9.75$).

Materials and procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to two experimental conditions. Each experimental group was directed to a different classroom.⁵ The participants were told that they were about to watch three segments taken from the reality TV series *The Models*, which is a program that follows young women who are training to become models and are competing against one another to become "the next Israeli model."⁶ In one group the participants were informed that the segments were taken from the first episode of that series, while in the second group they were told that the segments were taken from three different episodes (episodes 1, 4, and 9). At this point, participants viewed the three segments in which the same female figure disclosed personal information that became more intimate from segment to segment.⁷ The segments were separated by subtitles that again indicated either the number of the segment from the same episode or the number of the episode from which the segment was taken.

After viewing the video, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire included questions about demographics and about the participants' tendency to watch reality TV. The last category included questions about the degree to which participants watched *The Models* as well as four other reality TV shows. Participants provided their answers on a 3-point scale ranging from *never* to *very frequently*. This category also included a question about the degree to which the participants enjoyed watching reality TV generally. The answers to this question were ranked on a 7-point scale ranging from *to a very large extent* to *to a very small extent*.

An index of tendency to watch reality shows was calculated based on the mean of the z -scores of the answers to the above six questions, dropping one item that reduced the reliability ($M = -.002$, $SD = 0.67$, $\alpha = .70$). The questionnaire also included a question about the enjoyment of watching the segments they watched from *The Models* ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.31$) and two questions measuring the degree of comfort in watching the character make self-disclosures. Participants provided their answers on a 7-point scale ranging from *to a very large extent* to *to a very small extent*.

The dependent variable, liking of the female figure depicted in the segments, was measured using two questions: the degree to which the viewer would have liked to be friends with that character and the degree to which the viewer liked that character. Participants provided their answers on a 7-point scale

ranging from *to a very large extent* to *to a very small extent*. An index of liking was formed from the mean of these two questions. The index ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.24$; $r_s = .60$, $p < .001$) was based on a scale of 1 to 7 (larger numbers representing greater liking).

Results

Attraction to the character

A one-way ANOVA was conducted with timing as the independent variable and liking of the female figure as the dependent variable. This analysis revealed a significant difference between the timing conditions on the degree of liking, $F(1, 64) = 5.09$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. As H7 expected, the liking of the female figure was greater when the disclosure segments were presented as parts of various episodes ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.37$) than when they were presented as parts of the first episode ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 1.00$).

As expected, there was no difference between light and heavy viewers of reality TV in the effect of the timing of the self-disclosure on the liking of the characters. As in Study 1, we divided the participants into two groups based on whether they scored above or below 3.5 (the median score) on the tendency to watch reality shows index. Then we conducted a two-way ANOVA with the timing of the self-disclosure and the tendency to watch reality TV (light or heavy watchers) as the independent variables, and the liking of the characters as the dependent variable.

There was a significant main effect of the tendency to watch such shows. The heavy viewers liked the character more ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.19$) than the light viewers ($M = 1.92$, $SD = 1.19$), $F(1, 62) = 5.41$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. However, there was no significant effect of the interaction between the timing of the self-disclosure and the extent of watching reality TV, $F(1, 62) = 0.02$, ns . Likewise, when entering the participants' gender as another independent variable, no main effect was evident for the participants' gender on the liking of the character, $F(1, 62) = 4.46$, $p > .1$, ns . There was also no interactive effect between the gender of the viewer and the perceived timing on the liking of the character, $F(1, 62) = 1.35$, ns .

General discussion

The current research sought to explore an apparent contradiction. A long research tradition tells us that viewers react similarly to people in their lives and to media characters (e.g., Giles, 2002). However, in the increasingly popular TV reality shows, characters reveal intimate details about themselves very early on (cf. Nabi et al., 2003), whereas in everyday interactions people are expected to reveal nonintimate information at the beginning of the relationship and gradually reveal more intimate information as the relationship develops (e.g., Bochner, 1982).

Combining the results of Studies 1 and 2 shows that the viewers of reality TV like behavior that is similar to that which they like in real life: the disclosure of information that becomes more and more intimate with time. That is, they apply the same norms of restraint from their real-life social relationships to their relationships with media characters. However, unlike in real life, in reality TV, they like the discloser who is intimate and provocative from the start. The media character whom the

viewers like the best is the one who reveals intimate information immediately and then reveals increasingly more intimate information as the show progresses. Although the preferred pattern is like that in real life, the threshold for what is considered acceptable self-disclosure in the beginning of a relationship is higher in reality TV.

This higher threshold for what is considered acceptable and welcomed self-disclosure in the early stage of a reality TV show might stem from the schema formed in the minds of the viewers who are exposed to these kinds of shows (Raney, 2004). Having become accustomed to the early self-disclosure, the viewers of reality TV might expect it from the characters who participate in the show and view it as normative in that context. Because people prefer individuals who behave normatively (Leone, 2010), they like the early self-disclosers.

This argument is strengthened by the finding that the pattern just described is especially evident among heavy viewers of reality TV, whose schema regarding the expected timing of self-disclosure in reality TV is probably well formed. This finding is also consistent with cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1990), according to which heavy viewers accept the worldviews presented in the media. Thus, their frequent viewing of early self-disclosures might have made them view this behavior as accepted and normative. Based on this idea, one can argue that heavy viewers who internalize the norm for early self-disclosure apply it in their own lives. Indeed, we are currently working on a new research program for studying the effect of exposure to reality TV on self-disclosure norms in interpersonal relationships.

Having said that, we still demonstrated that as in real relationships, in reality TV the viewers prefer individuals who disclose information that becomes more intimate with time. This finding joins a growing body of research documenting people's tendency to treat media similarly to real life (e.g., Reeves & Nass, 1996), or more specifically, to respond to media characters as they respond to people in their real lives (e.g., Cohen, 1999). While previous research has focused mainly on the characteristics of the media figures (such as attractiveness, e.g., Hoffner & Cantor, 1985) and of the viewers (such as attachment style, e.g., Cohen, 1997) that cause the latter to be attracted to the former, this study examined the effect of the behavioral pattern of the media figure.

This pattern of results of preferring media figures who make more intimate disclosures about themselves over time might be attributed to the nature of the self-disclosure in the current research. The disclosure was in the form of a monologue, which, as stated above, is common on reality TV (Aslama & Pantti, 2006). As in social interactions, the self-discloser in the current research looked at the camera, giving the audience the impression that they were the target of her self-disclosure.

Future research might examine the impact of the perceived timing of the disclosure on the liking of the character when the disclosure is made as part of a dialogue between two TV characters. In that case, the viewer might feel like an outsider who is exposed to intimate information not aimed at his or her ears. If this is true, the viewer in that situation might not apply the same norms of restraint and the same rules of impression formation that are used in real-life social interactions. In social relationships, people are used to seeing later disclosure as an indication that the discloser likes them. However, if the disclosure is not directed at them, they might not view the characters who make gradual self-disclosures in a positive light.

Alternatively, they might take into account the stage of the relationship between the two characters, rather than between themselves and the discloser. Moreover, in that situation the viewers might

receive more enjoyment from voyeurism—being exposed to intimate information seemingly not directed at them. Future research into these questions might also benefit from interviewing the perceivers regarding their thoughts and affects while watching reality TV. This practice might provide illuminating information about the processes involved.⁸

Recent research has documented a positive relationship between the personality trait of voyeurism and the consumption of reality TV (Baruh, 2010). Future research might examine the preferences of viewers who score high versus low in voyeurism for the timing of self-disclosures. Study 1 showed that the preference for early intimate disclosure is more evident in heavy viewers of reality TV than in light viewers. In line with this finding, one might hypothesize that those who score high in voyeurism would respond more positively to early intimate disclosures.

Another avenue for future research would be to examine the impact of the perceived timing of the disclosure on attraction in other TV genres and reality TV subgenres. The current research used only one program in each of the studies. While this fact should not undermine the theoretical contribution of this study (Shapiro, 2002), future research might explore the generalizability of the current findings to other TV programs. The viewers in the current research might have applied the same norms of intensifying disclosures they use in real-life social interactions to reality TV because they viewed this genre or the particular reality TV subgenre used in the current research as representing real life. It might be interesting, for example, to examine the effect of timing in talk shows, in which the development of a relationship between the viewer and the characters is limited, and in soap operas, in which the discloser is presumably perceived more as an actor adhering to a script.

The current research sheds some light on a particular aspect of the growing and fascinating field of the relationship between viewers and media characters. This was done by drawing on both mass media and interpersonal communication theories whose integration is particularly important in today's society in which communication technologies blur the lines between mass communication and interpersonal communication (O'Sullivan, 1999, 2005). In addition to its contribution to theory and research, this study has practical implications for producers and even for participants in reality TV shows. As the liking of characters is related to developing parasocial relationships and this, in turn, enhances the enjoyment of watching the program (e.g., Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006), producers might advise the participants in reality shows to make intimate revelations about themselves from the start, but not to open up all at once. The participants would be well advised to keep some of their most intimate information for later stages in the show and "reveal their cards" gradually.

Notes

- 1 The participants engaged in this study after participating in another, unrelated study.
- 2 As the four versions of the text (intimate vs. superficial by a man and a woman) were created by us and were not the authentic translation of the characters' lines, it was important to examine the perceived appropriateness of the translation to the nonverbal communication of the speakers. Thus, we conducted a pilot study with 120 participants from a population similar to that of the main study. We conducted the same three manipulations as in the main study. The participants were randomly assigned to view one of the clips. Then, they were asked to answer

three questions related to the degree to which they thought the text in the translation was consistent with the nonverbal behavior of the character, including the voice, body language, and facial expression. There were no significant main or interactive effects of the timing or of the gender of the characters. However, there was a main effect of the intimacy level. The nonintimate condition was perceived as more consistent with the translation than the intimate condition. Given that people usually prefer and like others whose nonverbal and verbal behavior is consistent (e.g., Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002), this finding might have resulted in greater liking of the character who makes nonintimate self-disclosures. As our hypotheses (and findings) are in exactly the opposite direction (greater liking of the intimate self-discloser), we can conclude that the level of consistency between the translation and the nonverbal behavior of the characters cannot serve as an alternative explanation for the findings.

- 3 The shows that were presented in the questionnaire were the most heavily watched at that time according to the rating tabloids. They also represented the various subgenres of reality TV.
- 4 The questionnaire also included identification and character attributes scales. These variables were not directly related to the current research and thus are not reported.
- 5 The data for this research was collected in two academic classes. The participants in each of the classes were randomly distributed into the two experimental conditions that were conducted in separate classrooms.
- 6 This program was chosen because we expected it to be unfamiliar to most of the viewers. Indeed, this program ranked lowest in acquaintance level compared with four other popular reality TV shows ($M = 1.31$, $SD = 0.50$) (measured on a scale ranging from 1 to 3 with 1 meaning *never watched* and 3 meaning *frequently watched*).
- 7 A pilot test was conducted in order to make sure that the personal details provided in the three segments differed in their perceived intimacy. The participants were 77 university students who volunteered to participate in the experiment. The participants viewed the three segments used in Study 2. After watching each video segment, the participants were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale the degree to which they thought the disclosure in that segment was intimate. A repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant difference in level of intimacy between the three segments, $F(2, 74) = 127.79$, $p < .001$. The participants perceived the first segment to be less intimate ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.24$) than the second ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.49$), and the third segment was perceived as the most intimate ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 1.29$). A contrast analysis revealed that the evaluation of each of the segments significantly differed from that of the other two segments, $p < .01$.
- 8 We want to thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

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