Self-disclosure in Chinese micro-blogging: A social exchange theory perspective

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A B S T R A C T

This paper examines the influence of social benefits and costs on self-disclosure in the context of micro-blogging in China. Data were collected from 441 micro-blogging users, employing an online survey. Self-disclosure is measured in terms of amount, depth, honesty, intent, and valence of disclosure. The study found that relationship building, enjoyment and trust in service providers are positively related to self-disclosure, while perceived anonymity of self and perceived risk are negatively related to self-disclosure. However, convenience of relationship maintenance and self-presentation are not related to self-disclosure.

1. Introduction

Micro-blogging is a rapidly growing and increasingly popular activity because it offers timeliness and convenience [1–3]. Micro-blogging is a broadcast medium in the form of blogging (e.g., Twitter, Tumblr, Sina-Weibo). It differs from traditional blogging in that its content is typically shorter, being limited to 140 character blocks. It provides a channel for people to post and share what they are reading, thinking and experiencing in their daily lives. There are some differences between micro-blogging and other social network sites (e.g., Facebook, Google+). Micro-blogging focuses on information dissemination and interactivity among users in an open platform, whereas social network sites facilitate users developing social relationships among their social networks. It is reported that by the end of 2012, there were over 500 million registered users of Sina-Weibo, a form of micro-bogging in China that is similar in nature to Twitter, with daily users numbering 46.2 million [4]. The implications of having high amounts of user generated content and updated, highly identifiable personal information published via social media has attracted the attention of disciplines ranging from marketing and operations to finance and human resource management [5].

The dilemma is that while social media users may enjoy the benefits of extending their social network and maintaining their existing relationships, there is also a perceived risk in disclosing their personal information. The ease of sharing information when micro-blogging has made users not only more "transparent" but also more vulnerable to privacy information misuse. According to the Internet Society's [6] global Internet user survey, among global users who disclosed personal information online, 19% experienced subsequent misuse of their personal information. In China, the percentage is even higher. The Internet Society [6] user survey reported that in China, 62% of users' personal information was misused.

The aim of this study is to examine the effect of perceived social costs, and benefits, of self-disclosure on self-disclosure in micro-blogging using Chinese data. Specifically, we examine the effects of perceived anonymity of self, perceived privacy risk, trust in the service provider, relationship building, convenience of relationship maintenance, enjoyment and self-presentation on actual self-disclosure of information via micro-blogging.

We make four contributions to the literature on the antecedents of self-disclosure in online social networking. Recently, much attention has been given to study of the costs and benefits of online social networking [1–3,7]. However, no study has explored the social benefits and costs as antecedents of self-disclosure among micro-bloggers in China. Hence, our first contribution is to use a Chinese sample. For cultural and political reasons, research

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findings using western samples may not necessarily be generalizable to China. According to Posey et al. [3], the predictors of self-disclosure could differ across cultures. Based on Hofstede [8], China can be regarded as having a collectivist culture. Countries with collectivist cultural tendencies are more open and more prone to reciprocity, both of which suggest higher levels of self-disclosure, all things being equal.

However, the monitoring of Internet traffic in China is higher than in western countries and the potential for the misuse of personal information is higher [9]. As discussed above, the misuse of personal information provided on the Internet is reported to be higher in China than the world average. In such an environment, people will be less likely to disclose personal information, and this may also affect the relevance of specific antecedents to disclosure, such as trust in the service provider and the perceived privacy risk of disclosure. Consequently, our focus on China allows us to answer the following question: How do individuals in collectivist societies weigh costs and benefits in a technological environment where privacy invasions are expected?

The second contribution is that we extend social exchange theory (SET) to micro-blogging. Prior research has typically applied SET in the context of direct marketing, e-commerce, mobile services or online healthcare [10–12]. Little research on information systems using SET has focused on traditional self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships. There is research addressing social media platforms, such as online chat rooms or Facebook [1–3,7]. The benefits in the context of social networking are different from those in e-commerce and mobile services. In e-commerce and mobile services, users disclose personal information to receive financial rewards, such as discounts or rebates, or personalized services [13,14]. However, in social media, these two benefits are much less prominent and perhaps may not exist at all [13]. Instead, in social media platforms, the expected net social benefit may be the main motivation for self-disclosure within the SET framework. For this reason, focusing on micro-blogging, rather than e-commerce, provides an appropriate context in which to extend the application of SET.

Moreover, while SET has been applied before to social media platforms such as Facebook, because of the difference between Facebook and micro-blogging, research findings for Facebook may not necessarily be generalizable to micro-blogging. Unlike Facebook, micro-blogging is not a real-name social media. Users in micro-blogging are permitted to use either their real name or an anonymous username, although they must submit identifying information, such as their ID card number, to the service provider when they register to satisfy government requirements. This difference may influence the nature of social exchange across the two platforms in different ways. Thus, the application of SET to micro-blogging extends the range of social media to which SET has been applied.

The third contribution of the current study is that we use a multi-dimensional construct of self-disclosure. Most of the extant research on self-disclosure uses a global measure of self-disclosure (e.g., [2,13,15]). Self-disclosure is a multi-dimensional construct. By using a multi-dimensional construct of self-disclosure, we can obtain a more comprehensive understanding of self-disclosure than when using a one-dimensional construct. Specifically, in this study we conceptualized self-disclosure as a second-order construct that is formatively composed of five first-order reflective sub-constructs: amount, depth, honesty, intent and valence [3].

The fourth contribution is that we use a more comprehensive set of measures for benefit, cost and risk than existing studies. We incorporate three cost and risk variables and four benefit variables, which is more comprehensive than existing studies in the literature (e.g., [2,3,13,15,16]).

The remainder of the paper is set out as follows. The next section gives an outline of SET and presents our hypotheses. The subsequent section outlines the research method, followed by the results. The last section of the paper offers a discussion and details implications and limitations of the study. In addition, we offer some directions for future research.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

2.1. Theoretical model

In this section, we propose a theoretical model of self-disclosure for Chinese micro-bloggers. Self-disclosure refers to what individuals voluntarily and intentionally reveal about themselves to others, including their thoughts, feelings, and experiences [1,2,17]. Specifically, such information could be personal information, interests, feelings, photographs, messages, attitudes, experiences, relationship status, information about family and information about work, all revealed through their profiles [2,18,19]. Self-disclosure is generally a positive experience that includes benefits such as the formation of intimate associations, reduced stress levels, social acceptance and reclaimed internal energy [3].

Self-disclosure is a multi-dimensional construct that includes dimensions such as amount, depth, honesty, intent and valence [20]. In the current study, we use these five sub-dimensions of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure amount represents the frequency and duration of an individual's disclosure. Depth reflects the degree of intimacy in the communication. Honesty refers to the accuracy with which one communicates information about oneself. Intent refers to an individual's control and awareness over his or her self-disclosure. Valance is the positive nature of the information being disclosed.

Self-disclosure plays an integral role in relationship development. SET can be used to explain the cognitive process through which individuals engage in online self-disclosure. SET suggests that relationships are formed by a subjective cost–benefit analysis and the comparison of alternatives [21]. Specifically, when engaging in a relationship, the individual will perform a cost–benefit analysis in which he or she will consider whether the net benefits of social actions justify the potential loss. SET predicts that the individual will engage in activities that promote relationships if the perceived net benefits of disclosure are equal to, or greater than, the perceived cost of the action [22]. SET is also premised on reciprocity. A person is more likely to disclose information if he or she expects that the other party will reciprocate by sharing similar information about themselves.

SET views exchange as a social behavior that may result in both tangible and intangible outcomes. In the case of social media, such as micro-blogging, one would expect the intangible benefits to play a much larger role in affecting individuals' behavior than in a commercial context because the exchange of monetary benefits in social interaction is atypical. In social media, individuals are attracted by the potential to develop and maintain social relationships. Sometimes users interact with others in micro-blogging simply for relaxation and enjoyment [13]. These potential benefits are traded off against the perceived cost of intrusiveness when deciding whether to disclose information.

While SET provides a general theoretical foundation for our self-disclosure model, social penetration theory (SPT) [23] can provide a more specific framework for understanding online self-disclosure. SPT applies the essential concepts of SET to interpersonal communications generally and to self-disclosure specifically [3]. SPT explains and predicts relational closeness, which is reflected in the depth of self-disclosure in a relationship. SPT posits that "people assess interpersonal rewards and costs gained from interaction with others, and that the advancement of the