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Adolescents' privacy concerns and information disclosure online: The role of parents and the Internet

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the role of parents and the Internet in adolescents' online privacy concerns and information disclosing behaviors. Specifically, instructive and restrictive parental mediation, adolescents' self-disclosure to parents about their Internet experiences, time spent on the Internet, and participation in online communication activities were examined as factors that may impact adolescents' concerns about online privacy, willingness to disclose personally identifiable information, and actual disclosure of personal information online. A survey conducted in Singapore with 746 adolescents aged 12–18 revealed that instructive parental mediation based on parent-adolescent communication was more effective than restrictive parental mediation based on rule-making and controlling in reducing information disclosure among adolescents. Adolescents' self-disclosure to parents about their Internet experiences was found to be positively associated with their privacy concerns but did not foster privacy protection behaviors. While online chatting had a positive relationship with privacy concerns, excessive use of the Internet and frequent participation in social networking and online gaming resulted in increased information disclosure.

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1. Introduction

Online communication has become an indispensable part of adolescents' lives (Turkle, 2011). According to *Pew Research Internet Project (2013a)*, 93% of teens aged 12–17 in the USA have a computer at home, and about 74% of them surf the Internet on mobile devices. *EU Kids Online (Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, & Olafsson, 2011)* reported that 77% of teens aged 13–16 in Europe have a profile on a social networking site (SNS), and that one third of them have more than 100 contacts on their SNSs.

Adolescents' prevalent use of the Internet for communication and social interactions has raised concerns about their vulnerability to privacy risks (Feng & Xie, 2014). A survey with teens aged 13–17 in the USA revealed that adolescents share various types of personal information such as their name, email address, and photos of themselves online (McAfee, 2010). *EU Kids Online* has found that only 43% of social networking site users aged 9–16 set their social network profiles as private (Livingstone et al., 2011). *Pew Research*

Internet Project (2013b) has reported that the number of adolescents sharing personal information online is on an upward trend. That is, more adolescents share personal information online today than they did in the past.

Parents are worried about risks associated with information sharing and try to monitor and control their children's Internet use (Livingstone et al., 2011; McAfee, 2012). However, it is not an easy task for parents to effectively supervise their adolescent children's Internet use and assess risks associated with it. One reason might be that adolescents develop ways to avoid parental monitoring as they become experienced in media technology. According to McAfee (2012), about 7 in 10 adolescents have hidden their online behaviors from their parents by using strategies such as clearing the browser history, minimizing the web browser when parents are nearby, and deleting instant messages. Furthermore, as adolescents tend to pursue more autonomy and freedom from their parents and consider Internet use as a personal activity, they are not very willing to share their online experiences with parents and feel even resentful if parents attempt to control their Internet activities (Valkenburg, Piotrowski, Hermanns, & de Leeuw, 2013).

Despite the challenges parents face, research does suggest that parents affect how adolescents use and are influenced by the

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Internet (Livingstone et al., 2011; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Mesch, 2009). Thus, an important question would be “Which type of parental practice increases or decreases adolescents’ privacy risks online?” Guided by parental mediation theory (Clark, 2011) and parental knowledge theory (Kerr & Stattin, 2000), the present study attempts to answer this question by examining how parental efforts to mediate adolescents’ Internet use (parental mediation) and adolescents’ talking to their parents about their Internet experiences (self-disclosure to parents) are associated with adolescents’ online privacy-related perceptions and behaviors (privacy concerns, willingness to disclose personally identifiable information (PII), and actual disclosure of personal information online).

In addition to parental influence, this study examines the role of the Internet. Media play an important role in youths’ acquisition and development of social skills and behaviors (John, 1999), and today’s adolescents rely heavily on the Internet to develop self-identity and social relationships (Turkle, 2011). Prior studies have suggested that higher levels of Internet use can increase the chance that adolescents engage in risky online behaviors (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; McAfee, 2012). However, little is known about which type of Internet activity increases privacy risks among adolescents. Thus, this study investigates how the levels of engagement in different types of online communication activities, as well as the amount of time spent on the Internet, are associated with privacy perceptions and behaviors of adolescents.

2. Literature review

2.1. Concept of privacy and online privacy issues among adolescents

While privacy has been conceptualized in many ways across different disciplines (Wildemuth, 2008), the current study adopted the concept of privacy proposed by Westin (1967), who defined privacy as individuals’ right to manage and control their personal information in the process of communication. Westin’s concept of privacy suggests that one’s privacy management is contingent upon his/her privacy perceptions and willingness to control his/her own privacy, as well as the extent to which media technology requires personal information from media users or allows users to control their own privacy. The concept of privacy proposed by Westin is deemed suitable for the present study as it examines how adolescents perceive and manage privacy in the new media environment.

Privacy, conceptualized as one’s right to manage his or her personal information, has become one of the most important issues in the field of communication with the emergence of the Internet as an enabler of synchronous and immediate exchange of information among communication participants (Jiang, Heng, & Choi, 2013). Being interactive in nature, websites and online applications encourage users’ active input and self-disclosure. For instance, Internet users are often required to reveal and share personal information when they use online services, join online groups, or shop online (Galegher, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1998; Metzger, 2006). Users also voluntarily disclose personal information to reduce mutual uncertainty in computer-mediated communication (Tidwell & Walther, 2002) and to enrich online communication and social networking experiences (Feng & Xie, 2014; Jiang et al., 2013; Taraszow, Aristodemou, Shitta, Laouris, & Arsoy, 2010).

Online communication is a major activity for today’s adolescents, and as stated earlier, their information disclosure is fairly common on the Internet. Furthermore, adolescents have a significant level of purchasing power and substantially influence adult purchases made from their homes (Friedman, 2000). Thus, they are viewed as an important consumer segment by marketers, especially in the online environment (Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003). Encouraged by the ability of the Internet to attract adolescents,

marketers have developed a wide range of strategies to reach and appeal to online adolescents (Montgomery & Chester, 2009). To reach the right target in the right context, marketers collect personal information from young Internet users by using collection tools such as cookie placing, location-based advertising, and behavioral targeting (Feng & Xie, 2014). Marketers also encourage adolescent consumers to disclose more personal information in exchange for enhanced online communication experiences (Youn, 2008).

Based on our study’s adopted definition of privacy that focuses on one’s ability to control personal information, consumers’ privacy is likely to be significantly compromised when their personal information is taken out of their control, such as when marketers collect information unbeknown to the consumers or use information beyond the original purposes initially informed to them (Nowak & Phelps, 1995). Thus, the invasion of privacy can be a serious issue when adolescents do not know, or do not attempt to know, how and by whom their information is collected and analyzed. For instance, SNS users do not tend to read privacy policies carefully when they register for the SNS services (Ou, 2011). Such disregard of personal information usage and protection is likely to result in lower levels of privacy concerns and excessive personal information disclosure among Internet users. Likewise, online risks can increase when adolescents are not fully aware of the fact that their personal information is being collected and utilized for unknown purposes (Feng & Xie, 2014). Types of risks that adolescents can be exposed to when they fail to control own personal information online include, but are not limited to, cyberbullying, online stalking, identity theft, and exposure to unwanted or inappropriate advertising content (Moscardelli & Divine, 2007; Trepte & Reinecke, 2011; Youn, 2008).

The role of adolescents as both consumers and Internet users makes it important to examine adolescents’ online privacy-related perceptions and behaviors, and the factors influencing them. This study examines parental practices and parent-adolescent communication, as well as the way adolescents’ use the Internet as potential influencers of adolescents’ privacy concerns and information disclosure online.

2.2. Parental mediation

Parents play an important role in the process through which young people acquire and develop social attitudes and behaviors (John, 1999). As primary caregivers, parents take care of their children and teach them what is considered right and wrong in society. Parents transfer knowledge and skills to their children through modeling, reinforcement, and social interactions (Laible & Thompson, 2007). Parents also control resources available to children and manage the environment to protect children from any harmful social influences (Grusec & Davidov, 2007), including potentially negative effects of adolescents’ Internet use (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Lwin, Stanaland, & Miyazaki, 2008; Mesch, 2009).

Parental mediation research focuses on the role of parents as socialization agents in youngsters’ media consumption (Clark, 2011). Parental mediation refers to strategies that parents employ to control and supervise their child’s media use (Warren, 2001). Parental mediation theory acknowledges that children can be affected by their exposure to media, but that such media effects can be mediated or mitigated by the extent to which parents are involved in monitoring and supervising children’s media use (Mesch, 2009). This theory overarches both mass media and interpersonal communication in that it examines how the degree to which mass media affect children is influenced by parent-child communication and interaction (Clark, 2011).

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