



Do men and women differ in privacy? Gendered privacy and (in)equality in the Internet



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how personal privacy behavior and confidence differ by gender, focusing on the dimensions of online privacy data protection and release. A hierarchical regression analysis of cross-sectional survey of a national sample ($n = 419$) revealed that men and women differed on the level of privacy protection; however, gender had no direct effect on the extent to which data release was exercised. Additionally, gender had a positive association with confidence in privacy protection, but not in the dimension of release. Our study suggests that the gender may affect subjective well-being of online privacy and potentially exacerbate the disparity rooted in socialization of gender. Implications of the findings are discussed in light of Internet access, skill and effort required for building and maintaining privacy, and the important role played by gender in indicating the need for gender-sensitive policy awareness.

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1. Introduction

Theorists have hailed the Internet as a tool of empowerment that reduces the inequality in various domains of civic life (Anderson, 2007; Negroponte, 1996). Skillful uses of the Internet lead to a narrowing gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots”. However, scholars (Boyd & Hargittai, 2010; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Hargittai & Shafer, 2006) have also raised a concern that the digitalization of personal data may bring about a persistent gender gap. In fact, many scholars (Park, Campbell, & Kwak, 2012) have worried whether the Internet can fully function as an equalizer in the domain of information privacy. The less skillful users can be inadvertently excluded from the benefit of Internet as they cannot efficiently avoid data pitfalls, whereas those who are aware of a wide range of privacy issues may effectively manage personal data. Importantly, the gender difference in privacy skills will be an important factor that determines how benefits of Internet will differ by diverse social groups (Hargittai, 2002). In other words, gender may be a dividing line that might hinder the equal engagement in the full domain of Internet.

Our study is motivated to address this issue by investigating whether Internet user behavior, in the privacy data protection and release, differs by gender. Whether digitally competent citizenship in online privacy systematically leaves out female users

is a critical question. That is, gender differences in managing privacy—especially, when women are less skillful in effectively handling personal data—can reinforce socially-constructed gender bias by replicating rather than eradicating societal disparity. We define privacy as one's ability to control the release of personally identifiable data in the context of institutional practices. Despite the concern about the information skill disparity in the digital data environment, however, little has been known about the gender difference within the domain of institutional privacy protection. Time is ripe for elaborating the presence or absence of the gender gap via systematic inquiries.

2. Theorization

2.1. Gendered privacy and technology

The notion that the personal privacy in the Internet can be ‘gendered’ suggests many propositions. For one, privacy may mean a different functioning norm to men and women because females are more sensitive in establishing private boundaries. Other proposition may be put forth to the extent to which women have been socialized differently through established social institutions such as schooling to reinforce the disparity embedded in social structure (Gramsci, 1982). This context of socialization (DiMaggio et al., 2001; Howard & Jones, 2004) is particularly useful in understanding why there may exist a privacy gender gap. In other words, men and women beyond their biological differences tend to grow up in

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different social and institutional environments that tend to incubate different skill sets.

A dominant concern for scholars examining Internet inequality in most of the earlier studies has been on the potential gender disparity in Internet access (Ono & Zavodny, 2003). At least in the U.S., however, gender inequalities in online access diminished recently. Yet this does not mean equality in user competence and skill (Hargittai, 2002; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014). Foremost, a simple binary distinction between the use of the medium and the non-use do not consider factors beyond connectivity. Offline gender inequalities also persist in the U.S. across income, education, and employment status. Important differences, especially in terms of data protection and release, may lie in how attitudes to the Internet and the sophistication of skill differ by gender, taking into account socializing factors that may be relevant for understanding how different groups are equipped to manage personal privacy (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006; Hargittai & Litt, 2013).

In this vein, Internet privacy may make gender disparity salient. On the one hand, data management skill in mediated environments can potentially favor male users who may be more skillful in various privacy tasks related to Internet technicalities (i.e., technical behaviors in data protection). On the other hand, the intrinsic privacy concern regarding underlying data exposure may – or may not – render women more likely to exercise privacy skills that are more socially-pertinent to a private–public boundary setup (i.e., social behaviors in data protection). Those with lower skills in their engagement with Internet privacy will be trapped in a cycle of disparity and may not be in shape to succeed online that requires increasing privacy skill levels.

2.1.1. Privacy in the two dimensions

Goffman (1965) defined privacy as a central component of everyday interaction in human lives. His underlying concern was the individual ability to be able to reveal self and selves selectively. In this vein, however, it is important to note that there are the mixed empirical findings with regards to gender difference. A study by Turow, Feldman, and Meltzer (2005) found that privacy skill may not be at par between men and women. But there is also evidence that suggests the gender difference may not be particularly salient in highly interactive social network sites – such as Facebook (e.g., Boyd & Hargittai, 2010) or Twitter (e.g., Humphreys, 2011) – because female users are more inclined to privacy control in a confined and close interpersonal relationship. As some of studies reported contradictory findings, we do not have conclusive evidence yet with regards to the gender difference in terms of (1) release and (2) protective dimension of Internet privacy behavior and confidence.

In the institutional context of personal data collection and surveillance, there has been a conspicuous absence of the empirical work investigating the gender difference in perceived privacy confidence and behavior. Nevertheless, we find a fundamental premise of this work in the statement made by Hargittai and Shafer (2006). They said, “The extent to which human capital is fostered, employed, and recognized is profoundly social and has often been examined along the gender lines” (p.434). This is an important insight that addresses how socialization process in education, organizations, or occupational settings often biases against women and affects the development of competence among women. As the socialization of gender guides men and women into different paths of choices and values, they may make different decisions in information environments (Lally, 2002). The early studies (e.g., Fisher, 1994), which examined the development of telephone use in the U.S., also documented the subtle social construction of gender by which to harness different roles in the use of new technology.

One line of the literature focuses on how much individuals are concerned about privacy, with the gender as one of the

contributing factors to attitudinal difference (e.g., Sheehan, 1999; Westin, 1998). Another line of studies focuses on the ability to manage the private–public boundaries and the disclosure of personal data in the use of social networks, including participation in civic and political activities (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Hogan, 2010; Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008). These lines of research are becoming increasingly concerned with the two related but discrete aspects of privacy management – one defined as ‘release of data’ and the other as ‘protective measures’. In other domains, the studies point out that men are more likely to show high confidence (Torkzadeh & Van Dyke, 2002). Women, on the contrary, tend to display less confidence in tech related activities (Schumacher & Morahan-Martin, 2000). However, we do not know how such differences would play out for privacy confidence, with a paucity of empirical findings regarding privacy from a national sample.

This warrants further investigation. First, in examining digital competence, we need to assess both the positive (i.e., protect) and the negative (i.e., release) assessment of information competence – as prior inquiries (e.g., Park et al., 2012) focused on the one dimension in the exclusion of the other. Second, unlike prior studies that solely focused on attitudinal concern, it is important to investigate the level of confidence associated with personal data behavior (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006). Finally, analytically, predictive multivariate models will advance understandings of various social conditions that may contribute to gender (dis)parity. In short, the understanding of digital competence related to Internet privacy must be refined within the existing social context of gender (see Fisher, 1994).

2.2. The present study

The analysis presented in this study strives to contribute to the understanding of privacy behavior through the lens of gender parity. Conceptually, it is valuable to theorize Internet privacy in the digital divide debate by bridging the two fields that already moved beyond the concern about online access. For that purpose, privacy may be regarded as a process constitutive of data protection as well as release as privacy-related online activities are one of the most prominent skills that help define one’s digital wellbeing. The discussion also has to be linked to a consideration of online abilities in related social contexts such as age and marriage (Kennedy, Wellman, & Klement, 2003; Lally, 2002), i.e., to what extent the additional social statuses of age and marriage disrupt or encourage the existing gender dynamics.

Early Internet studies (e.g., Howard & Jones, 2004) that examined general online-skills consistently found that age is associated with variations of online skills, as younger users often lead the adoption and the use of new technologies. We cannot be conclusive about the effect of age, given the skill level difference among different age-cohorts (see Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). However, it is reasonable to suspect that the female users, especially those older users, may not possess privacy skills that are at par with those by men. This is particularly so because there is a lack of social support available to the older Internet-user group (e.g., Freese, Rivas, & Hargittai, 2006). When it comes to marriage status, we also posit its potential interactive relationship with gender. The issue can be potentially important to investigate because at least for women, marriage and the associated duties such as childbearing or increased housework can offset any positive effects of Internet access itself (see Freese et al., 2006). Another way of saying this is that the marital status may exacerbate the gender difference because women are socially-expected to carry disproportionately-large housework burdens in their roles (Kessler & McRae, 1982).

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