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Online self-disclosure: The privacy paradox explained as a temporally discounted balance between concerns and rewards



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ABSTRACT

Technological innovations are increasingly helping people expand their social capital through online networks by offering new opportunities for sharing personal information. Online social networks are perceived to provide individuals new benefits and have led to a surge of personal data uploaded, stored, and shared. While privacy concerns are a major issue for many users of social networking sites, studies have shown that their information disclosing behavior does not align with their concerns. This gap between behavior and concern is called the privacy paradox. Several theories have been explored to explain this, but with inconsistent and incomplete results. This study investigates the paradox using a construal level theory lens. We show how a privacy breach, not yet experienced and psychologically distant, has less weight in everyday choices than more concrete and psychologically-near social networking activities and discuss the implications for research and practice.

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1. Introduction

The rise of social media is a perfect example of how progress in science and technology creates the potential for emergent issues and hazards. The use of social networking sites (SNS) is so pervasive that many consider it a routine part of daily life (Lampinen, Stutzman, & Bylund, 2011, pp. 2441–2444). Social networking sites often offer new tools to build and maintain relationships and are thus of particular importance for psychosocial development (Montgomery, 2005; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). They also act as a source of social capital accumulation, referring to the accumulated resources derived from the relationships among people within a distinct social context or network (Bourdieu, 2011; Putnam, 2001). Many core features of SNS are explicitly designed to facilitate the creation and maintenance of connections between people through the self-disclosure of information. Thus, there is a general relationship between SNS use and social capital (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010), which is considered a positive outcome that stems from relationship building (Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield, & Vitak, 2011, pp. 124–146).

A controversial topic concerning the use of SNS is the

relationship between privacy and online information disclosure. An emergent issue inherent to this type of relationship building arises when information contributed to build social capital online, in turn, exposes users to a potential loss of privacy if sensitive data are made public (Boyd, 2008). Literature shows that many SNS users are afraid their privacy might be violated online (Hoy & Milne, 2010; Yao, 2011), although few users implement all of the steps necessary to safeguard sensitive data (Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007). Some studies found a relationship between privacy concerns and online disclosure (Stutzman & Kramer-Duffield, 2010), but the literature generally agrees that privacy concerns are not a valid predictor of privacy behavior (Acquisti & Gross, 2006, pp. 36–58; Beresford, Kübler, & Preibusch, 2012; Brown, 2001; Norberg, Horne, & Horne, 2007; Tufekci, 2008; Zafeiropoulou, 2014). The gap between individuals' concerns towards privacy and privacy-related behavior is known as the "privacy paradox" (Brown, 2001; Norberg et al., 2007). Some studies have investigated the privacy paradox, although they have unfortunately provided contradicting results and incomplete explanations of the observations (Kokolakis, 2017). Users do not appear to appreciate the outcomes of their online behavior equally, whether positive (beneficial) or negative (deleterious) because the expected benefits of sharing are valued more than the potential risks (Beresford et al., 2012; Lee, Park, & Kim, 2013).

Construal level theory (CLT) helps explain differences in the

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perceived value of outcomes associated with a behavior (Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman, & Chaiken, 2009; Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002; Trope & Liberman, 2000, 2003). Construing an action in high-level, abstract terms may make an individual value the action more in the distant future, while construing the same action in lower level, more concrete terms, may make one value the action more in the near future (Trope & Liberman, 2003). We believe that application of CLT to online disclosure behavior can help explain why the privacy paradox exists and why some researchers have had difficulty explaining the phenomenon.

Using a CLT perspective, we endeavor to understand the gap between individuals' privacy concerns (perceptions) and their real behavior (actions). We propose and test an information disclosure behavioral model based on CLT. In our literature search, we cover online social networking, privacy concerns, the privacy paradox, and construal level theory. In the research model and hypotheses development section, we introduce the concept of temporal distance between action and anticipated outcomes, develop our theoretical model, and propose the research hypotheses. We define the existing tools and measures used in our methodology section and provide evidence of instrument validity. The final model focuses on the disclosure of sensitive information. The results section covers the outcome of our study, followed by a discussion of the implications of these results on the field. Last, we cover limitations of the work, include proposed directions for future research, and conclude the article.

2. Literature review

2.1. Online social networking

The rise of online mediated communication into the relationship development process has changed individuals' lives, enabling them to connect asynchronously and synchronously with others while expanding circles of friends and acquaintances (S. Jones & Fox, 2009). Facebook exploited the unaddressed need to maintain and grow social networks in an increasingly busy modern life (Ling et al., 2005; Moyle, 2004). This likely resulted in the platform's rapid increase in users since its inception in 2004. Evidence supports that SNS are changing social dynamics at both micro and macro levels, with online and offline impacts on life (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Online social networking has become so pervasive that SNS users perceive a level of emotional support and companionship greater than general Internet users and almost equivalent to that of married or cohabitating individuals (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011; Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014).

The growing body of literature investigating subjective motivational reasons for using SNS focuses mainly on psychosocial development, such as identity construction and expression (Boyd & Heer, 2006), social capital development (Ellison, Lampe, et al., 2011, pp. 124–146; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), and entertainment (Reinecke, Vorderer, & Knop, 2014). Research shows that active online use of SNS provides opportunity to satisfy three fundamental individual needs: (a) diversion and entertainment; (b) development of self-identity, autonomy, and personal growth; and (c) social relationships (Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009; Trepte & Reinecke, 2011). *Entertainment need* research is guided by the assumption that SNS users seek enjoyment and positive affective states. However, this perspective falls short of explaining exposure to negative stimuli when consuming media content. In *identity construction and expression*, SNS users as a population play a crucial role because they establish and reinforce social norms. The need for identity construction is typical for teenagers and young

adults. Studies on emerging adults facing the developmental task of establishing intimate relationships with people in their lives showed SNS to be central in this process (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). By interacting with unfamiliar others in the SNS, teenagers and young adults are socialized into society, learning through action how to build their social identity (Boyd, 2007, 2008).

The *need for social relationships* is valued most by SNS users (Lee et al., 2013). Research in the past decade shows social capital (Adler & Kwon, 2002) outcomes are particularly significant considerations when studying SNS use (Burke et al., 2010; Ellison et al., 2007; Ellison, Vitak, Steinfield, Gray, & Lampe, 2011, pp. 124–146; Steinfield, DiMicco, Ellison, & Lampe, 2009; Steinfield et al., 2008). A significant portion of the adult population cultivates social resources through SNS. They target both the development of strong ties, such as supportive friends and family, and weaker ties, such as the friends of friends and general interest groups (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014). The expected outcome is a perception of increased social support, sense of community, and satisfaction in life (Oh et al., 2014). *Social rewards*, defined as the gratification and satisfaction derived from participating in online interpersonal interactions (Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990), have been found to motivate users to be more socially active online (Jiang, Heng, & Choi, 2013; Trepte & Reinecke, 2013). Furthermore, thanks to SNS rewarding interactions, the relationship between social gratification and information self-disclosure is reciprocal, following a reinforcing spiral process (Slater, 2007). The constant availability of intimate information and the immediacy of increased social capital in exchange affects users' online self-disclosure practices in the SNS (Trepte & Reinecke, 2013). The obvious side effect of self-reinforcing interaction derives from the primary function of the SNS to consume, store, and distribute personal content about the self. The user's dilemma is the tension created by the desire to use SNS and to maintain the privacy of sensitive personal information.

2.2. Privacy

Literature offers a rich discussion on the nature, definition, and conceptualization of privacy. Privacy can be defined as a right, a commodity, and a state. Privacy can be segmented into different categories, namely information privacy, social privacy, psychological privacy, and physical privacy (Burgoon, 1982; Clarke, 1999; Smith, Dinev, & Xu, 2011). For the purpose of our study, we employ information privacy, defined as "*the interest an individual has in controlling, or at least significantly influencing, the handling of data about themselves*" (Bélanger & Crossler, 2011). This definition includes four taxonomic dimensions: collection, unauthorized secondary use, improper access, and errors. Because designing a direct measure is nearly impossible, privacy-related research in the social sciences uses related proxies to measure privacy.

Information Systems (IS) literature has moved towards treating privacy concern as a measurable privacy proxy (Smith et al., 2011). Findings show that privacy concern influences intentions to purchase online (Malhotra, Kim, & Agarwal, 2004), willingness to disclose sensitive personal information to create personal profiles (Culnan & Armstrong, 1999), and preferences for regulatory environments (Milberg, Smith, & Burke, 2000). Individuals with high levels of privacy concern may employ various privacy-protection responses to control the flow of sensitive information and minimize privacy-related risks (Son & Kim, 2008). Ellison, Lampe, et al. (2011) and Ellison, Vitak, et al. (2011) found a correlation between privacy concern and a strategy of restricting online communication to select friends. However, such privacy-protection strategies negatively affect accruing social capital (Putnam, 2001).

Following the economic view of privacy as a commodity, people

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