

A dual privacy decision model for online social networks



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ABSTRACT

Privacy concerns in online social network (OSN) use include the desire to control both *information* and *interaction*, leading to the “*dual privacy decision*” in which individuals choose *what* information to release and also *who* may view it. OSN privacy controls now offer users more choices in this arena. We assess motivations that may override a user’s concept of privacy, and we present four key motivations for OSN use: ability (1) to seek information, (2) to socialize, (3) to express oneself to others, and (4) to meet social expectations or to please others. We find that the privacy calculus constructs influence the manner in which OSN users handle different informational categories.

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1. Introduction

Technology has been shown to shift attitudes about and expectations of privacy [29]. The growth of digital communication and the rise of online social networks (OSNs), defined as technologies that support online relationships with others and self-disclosure behaviors [15], allow for a form of near constant social interaction and information exchange. It has been proposed that “privacy might be a problem for anyone who leads a life mediated in part by digital technologies” [41]. Today’s youth, including the generation currently entering adulthood, are the first to have been exposed to such technologies throughout their lives. In fact, “young people will be the first to experience the aggregated effect of living a digitally mediated life, with the corresponding creating of various identities and digital dossiers over a long period of time” [35]. Although empirical results to this end are lacking, it has been suggested that young people show less concern about their privacy [14,38,41]. Another way to look at this phenomenon would be to consider that as technology shifts a greater portion of our socialization and relationship management onto the Internet, those growing up under this paradigm may be developing new

views on privacy that may not be viewed strictly as being less privacy oriented. Moreover, those living a digitally mediated life may benefit from a discussion of alternatives and from more granular approaches to managing privacy online. Thus, the way we examine privacy may benefit from new approaches, especially with respect to OSNs. The present study examines information disclosure and interaction management in the digital space mediated by OSNs such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc. [30,35,46,54] using classical social psychology theory adapted for the OSN environment.

Concepts from a classical exposition on privacy by Laufer and Wolfe [29] have been used widely in many studies throughout subsequent decades [8,11–13,19]. Among other contributions, Laufer and Wolfe’s paper suggested two crucial and intertwined principles that we will use in the current study. First, they considered privacy as an “interpersonal concept” and suggested that the concept of privacy is realized and experienced on a daily basis through acts of managing relationships [29]. Second, they suggested that there exist situation-specific conditions under which an individual’s privacy concept could be supplanted. In the privacy literature, this is often referred to as the *privacy calculus*. That is, an individual has a concept of privacy (which we suggest is his or her desire to manage his or her information and interaction) that indicates how he or she will behave in a particular situation. This privacy concept may be superseded in a given situation if the individual is given a reward for violating his or her privacy concept that is more highly valued than the privacy concept itself. Our

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study will explore this phenomenon in the OSN context. Hence, our study contributes to the literature in two distinct ways: (1) we explore the privacy concept through managing information and interaction, which is a novel approach in the information systems (IS) literature, and (2) we explore the privacy tradeoff using this novel privacy concept and the privacy calculus scales modified for OSNs.

Laufer and Wolfe [29] suggested that a relationship, as an actionable event, consists in controlling or managing two elements: information and interaction. We argue that technology, in the form of OSNs, renders decisions related to the control of these two elements increasingly important and more tangible. Social networking sites are increasingly moving toward a realization of what we refer to as a “dual privacy decision.” The “dual privacy decision” on an OSN is illustrated in Fig. 1. In this example, the user is posting a status update (i.e., information – “Let’s go Argentina!”) to an audience (i.e., interaction – “Only Me”).

There are three unique aspects to the “dual privacy decision” on an OSN that warrant more discussion because they distinguish the OSN context from a typical individual-to-business information release. Information privacy has been studied broadly in the IS field. For comprehensive reviews, see [5,47,48]. Many traditional studies of privacy in the IS literature have focused on the exchange of information between consumers and businesses [11,12,34,48]. This exchange is very important, but the properties of such an information exchange are quite different from the properties of privacy decisions in social computing.

First, let us consider the intricacies of the information found on an OSN. The information that a user can place in the “update status” field is virtually unrestricted. For example, the user can post a status update about a new song he or she likes, an opinion on a current event, thoughts about how he or she is feeling at the moment, a picture of a new pair of shoes that he or she is considering for purchase, etc. Thus, the perceived sensitivity and future consequences of the released information may vary. Although it is certainly possible that users could release no information at all (i.e., not use the OSN or use the site in a strictly information-seeking capacity), thus avoiding the “dual privacy decision” entirely, an important consideration is that OSNs need individuals to release information to thrive. OSN users are trading

in information. That is, users expect to see other peoples’ information, or else, they would not use the site. Research has shown that receiving information from friends, staying connected, and posting personal information create a sense of belonging to a community and generate pleasure, which explains the user’s intent to keep using the OSN [31]. Additionally, for information to be available for consumption, some users must release information (generate content). The OSN would not last long if it could not encourage people to generate content. Therefore, in an OSN environment, it is in everyone’s interest to promote the exchange of information. This suggests that an exploration of granular information/interaction decisions on OSNs is crucial and leads to the following research question:

RQ1: How can we classify types of information release behaviors on OSN platforms?

Second, let us explore the concept of interaction management on an OSN. On current OSNs (as in the Facebook example in Fig. 1), the user may specify the audience permitted to view the post. In an online environment, the immediately reachable audience for any released information is potentially very large. This characteristic of OSNs makes it more difficult to retract or minimize the consequences of information release. Choosing a restricted subset of individuals as an initial audience does not prevent information leakage (i.e., a third party gaining access to the information), but it may at least slow the spread of the information. Thus, opportunities to manage the audience may add another layer to privacy management on an OSN. In fact, many OSNs now allow for more flexible control over the audience with whom a user initially shares information. Therefore, OSN users must now often make very conscious choices about which information to release and to whom. This is a “dual privacy decision” that incorporates the management of both elements of the relationship specified by Laufer and Wolfe and leads us to the following research question:

RQ2: What are the different effects of the perceived need for information control and interaction control on how individuals manage their OSN data?

The preceding discussion provides an illustration of the complexities of privacy decisions on an OSN. Our study will examine OSN privacy behaviors, given a piece of information to release and options to manage the audience that has initial access to that information. We believe that by exploring the information–interaction management interplay we can provide insights into the design of social platforms that could encourage greater levels of interaction while providing a level of comfort to the users about their privacy in terms of their control over relationships. Furthermore, our study provides the opportunity to examine the influence of a user’s concept of privacy on information/interaction decisions using specific types of information in an environment (OSN) that may provide rewards that supersede the privacy concept. It is to this privacy calculus that we now turn.

The third consideration is not unique to OSNs, but the form it takes is unique to each context. If the audience for a status update is limited, not only are some disadvantages of the OSN possibly reduced (i.e., less likelihood of an unwanted party accessing the information) but some benefits of the OSN may also be constrained (e.g., socialization is reduced because less people have the opportunity to participate in a conversation the status update stimulates). Therefore, it is possible that a user may so desire socialization that he or she will override his or her privacy concept (i.e., desire to manage information or interaction) to socialize. The concept of a “calculus of behavior”, put forth by Laufer and Wolfe [29], has been utilized widely in the IS literature. This concept presupposes a rational decision process to determine whether the benefits gained by disclosing certain information to others are

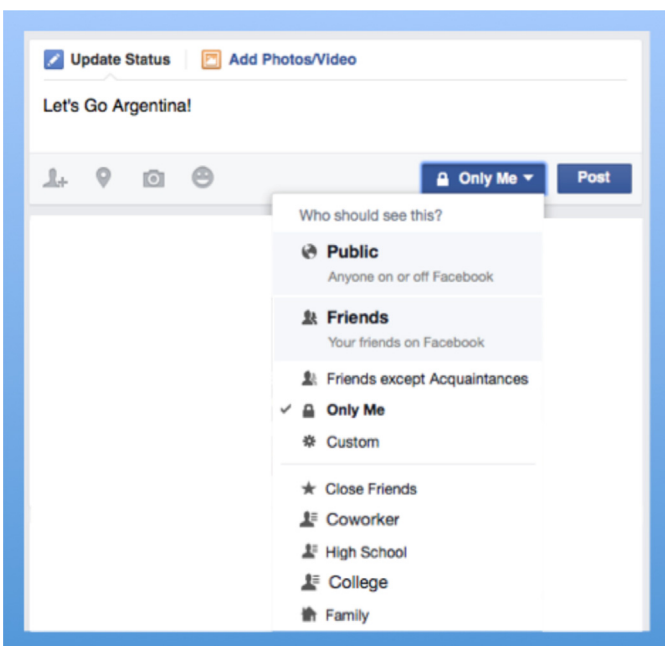


Fig. 1. Contrasting privacy decisions.

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