Millennials sex differences on Snapchat perceived privacy

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ABSTRACT

Snapchat offers a distinctive feature from other social networks in that its users control the visibility of the contents they share with others by defining how long these contents may be available. Snapchat is changing the way men and women perceive online information privacy and content management. This paper aims to illustrate the relevance of social representation theory to evaluate perceived privacy in Snapchat users, with a sample of 268 young adults residing in Bogotá. A survey method was employed for data collection purposes. The results reveal that Snapchat users are concerned about their networks' privacy, with no significant sex differences, although men's perception of Snapchat privacy is safer than that of women. Finally, a discussion is presented as to the limitations and implications of these results for further studies.

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Diferencias por sexo de los «Millenials» sobre la privacidad percibida en Snapchat

RESUMEN

De las redes sociales existentes, Snapchat ofrece a sus usuarios el rasgo distintivo de permitirles controlar el tiempo que será visible el contenido que comparten con otros. Snapchat plantea un cambio en la manera cómo se concibe la privacidad de la información y el manejo de contenidos online por parte de hombres y mujeres. El objetivo de este trabajo es ilustrar la relevancia de la teoría de representaciones sociales para evaluar la privacidad percibida en usuarios de Snapchat a través de una muestra de 268 adultos jóvenes residentes en Bogotá. Con el diseño y aplicación de una encuesta especialmente adaptada se pudo observar que a los usuarios de Snapchat les preocupa la privacidad de sus redes sin que existan diferencias significativas por sexo; aunque, en comparación con sus pares femeninos, los hombres perciben que Snapchat es más segura. El artículo finaliza con una discusión sobre las limitaciones e implicaciones de estos resultados para futuros estudios.

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The popularity of digital social networks like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter offers novel paths for analyzing human behavior in the digital sphere. The data provided by these networks allows the study of different topics such as ideological consumerism in political campaigns (Correa & Camargo, 2017), promotion of health (Kite, Foley, Grunest, & Freeman, 2016), or segregation patterns in cities (Boy & Uitermark, 2016).

A sensitive topic associated with the use of these networks entails the concepts of privacy and security by young users (Vanderhoven, Schellens, Valcke, & Raes, 2014). According to Arab and Díaz (2015), adolescents have no clear boundaries between what should be “public” and what should be “private” in their social networks. The public–private division is somehow extensible to young adults. For instance, Hoy and Milne (2010) observed that women are more concerned about their privacy being invaded, and this might explain why they are more likely than men to take proactive self-protective behaviors in Facebook. These concerns, however, are reduced for users of the so-called “ephemeral social media” like Yik Yak, Slingshot, Frankly Chat or Snapchat (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2015).

Ephemeral social media share some properties of synchronous communication like face-to-face conversations, but differ in that they are typically asynchronous; that is, the contents of the social interactions are not transmitted in a steady stream but intermittently, according to the users’ availability to interact. Before the popularization of online social networks, scholars have noticed the importance of studying this type of communication in adolescents who used short message service or multimedia messaging services (Häkkilä & Chatfeld, 2005). Although most social networks provide communication tools to its users, Snapchat has been gaining popularity for young adults between 18 and 34 years old, who are also known as “Millennials” (Sashittal, DeMar, & Jassawalla, 2016; Utz, Muscanell, & Khalid, 2015).

Snapchat – first launched in April 2011 – is a smartphone app that allows users to share photos or videos, known as “snaps”, to one or several friends with the unique feature of dissolving these snaps after few seconds. In comparison with Facebook and other social networks where posts are persistent and frequently visible to a broader audience, Snapchat offers the opportunity of a less persistent and a more private communication. Known uses of Snapchat include sending funny pictures, selfies, flirting, sexting or sending sexual or pseudo-sexual material (Piwek & Joinson, 2016). According to Bayer et al. (2015) the social interactions via Snapchat were perceived as more enjoyable as they were associated with more positive mood than other networks, but this does not exclude the possibility that these interactions were also associated with lower social support, as they include sharing mundane experiences with close ties through a lightweight channel.

These results show that research interests, so far, center on the use of Snapchat. However, the perceived privacy of the ephemeral communications occurring in this network is taken for granted without adequate exploration. Needless to mention, that perceived privacy is a phenomenon that has taken place after the popularization of online social networks. As such, perceived privacy was not considered in classical conceptions of social psychology and related theoretical frameworks. Our aim in this paper is to fill this gap by highlighting the social representation theory (Howarth, 2006; Joffe, 2003), as a relevant framework for understanding perceived privacy in this network. The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The next section describes the relevance of the social representation theory for understanding social interactions in Snapchat; Section “Method” presents the method we followed in this study; and Sections “Results” and “Discussion” present the results and the discussion, respectively.

Social representation: a relevant framework for understanding perceived privacy in Snapchat

The theory of social representations has its roots in the seminal works of Serge Moscovici (Howarth, 2006) and further extensions proposed by Jean-Claude Abric (Rateau, Moliner, Christian, & Abric, 2012). Social representations are systems of values, ideas or practices that enable communication among members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the different features of their world and their individual and group history. Given the parallels between the theory of social representations and the classical approach of “Social Cognition” (Wagner, 1992), it is worth noting their differences. Such differences highlight the convenience of social representations for the study of Millennials’ sex differences on Snapchat perceived privacy.

As stated by Wagner (1992), social cognition is concerned with social knowledge and cognitive processes. The social psychology of cognitive processes is the formal discipline that aims the study of the stages, structures, and dynamic mechanisms involved in the receipt of information, as well as in its encoding, storage, and retrieval. Although social knowledge may differ between social groups, cognitive processes work at the level of the individual regardless the specific content of knowledge systems, as well as the discipline that aims testing generalizability of research results is cross-cultural psychology. The reference population is the human species as a cognitive process unity. The theory of social representations, in contrast, is concerned with culture and ideology. Its reference population is a specific social group (e.g., Millennials residing in Bogotá city). Cultural and social contents characterize, define and differentiate social groups from each other. The difference between both frameworks is better understood as follows: “No student of social representations would claim that his or her findings (...) could be generalized to other social or cultural groups” (Wagner, 1992, p. 111). Thus, the theory of social representations is adequate for “case studies”, where all of its members share common characteristics such as their spoken language, their history (e.g., the country they were raised) and their present (e.g., their country of residence).

The theory of social representations has been employed for the analysis of the so-called “risk perception” (Joffe, 2003).