Is lurking an anxiety-masking strategy on social media sites? The effects of lurking and computer anxiety on explaining information privacy concern on social media platforms

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ABSTRACT

The aggressive collection and tracking of personal information on social media continues to raise information privacy concerns, which is gaining the interest of lawmakers, organizations, researchers, and consumers. While information privacy research is mature and extensive, research on information privacy concern in the social media context is lacking. To contribute to the literature, this article presents findings from a study conducted to explain social media users' concern for information privacy (CFSMIP). Using social penetration theory, this study explores the role of lurking, a common social media participation strategy, and computer anxiety in explaining CFSMIP. Drawing on a sample of 250 avid social media users, covariance based structural equation modeling analysis revealed a strong relationship between both lurking and computer anxiety and CFSMIP. Consistent with prior research, CFSMIP mediated the relationship between both lurking and computer anxiety and users' future intentions to provide their personal information to online merchants. Insights from the research findings for theory and practice are discussed.

1. Introduction

There is a growing interest in information privacy issues on social media platforms among consumers, business leaders, privacy activists, scholars, and policy regulators (Xu & Bélanger, 2013). This interest revolves around concerns for the aggressive collection, storage, and organizations' access to users' personal information on social media sites and during online transactions. Social media platforms are designed to encourage users to self-disclose their personal information to form new social interactions or continue existing offline relationships via the Internet (Lowry, Cao, & Everard, 2011; Osatuyi, 2013). The self-disclosure of personal information on social media makes it attractive for businesses such as online merchants for marketing purposes. Consequently, organizations are increasingly adopting the use of social media features on their Internet portals as a way of extending their business offerings to customers. On the other hand, in an effort to protect the privacy of personal information from being accessed by online merchants and other third party companies, users are becoming more technology savvy.

Lurking has been documented as a conservative approach used by Internet users in online communities to protect their personal information. Other researchers describe lurking as the act of joining an online community to learn the culture of the community before making a decision to join conversations in the community (Bishop, 2007; Dennen, 2008). In this paper, lurking is conceptualized as a strategic technique used by users [social media users] to maintain the privacy of their personal information while still connected in online communities [social media platforms] to passively[1] participate in conversations.

There is a plethora of mature research in the area of information privacy concern associated with technology use. However, a detailed review of the information privacy research indicates the need for understanding individual level antecedents of privacy concern in a digital society (Bélanger & Crossler, 2011; Smith, Raine, & Zickuhr, 2011). Prior studies have explored individual level factors like personality traits (Korzaan & Boswell, 2008; Korzaan, Brooks, & Greer, 2009; Osatuyi, in press-a), prior privacy experience (Smith, Milberg, & Burke, 1996), and computer anxiety (Smith et al., 1996) across different contexts (e.g., Malhotra, Kim, & Agarwal, 2004). In addition to lurking, this study also explores the

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[1] Passive participation, as used in this paper, refers to listening to conversations rather than contributing to the conversation on social media platforms.

role of computer anxiety in explaining information privacy concern in the social media context, referred to as concern for social media information privacy (CFSMIP) Osatuyi (in press-b). Computer anxiety is included as a predictor of CFSMIP based on findings from prior research (Stewart & Segars, 2002) that indicates that it is a good predictor of information privacy concern. More importantly, computer anxiety relates to uncertainties and risks associated with increasing proliferation of digital goods and services in the current information age. Hence, the exploration of computer anxiety as a predictor of CFSMIP is warranted.

Moreover, research on the conceptualization of information privacy on social media platforms is in the exploratory stages (Lowry et al., 2011; Parameswaran & Whinston, 2007). Consequently, calls for research in the information privacy area note the need for researchers to seek to understand privacy goals beyond binary decisions to withhold or disclose information, rather to explore conceptual underpinnings of privacy in the context of social media (Xu & Bélanger, 2013). This paper attempts to address this need by (1) exploring the roles of lurking and computer anxiety on influencing users' concern for information privacy on social media platforms and (2) the mediating effect of social media users' information privacy concern (CFSMIP) on the relationship between both lurking and computer anxiety and users' intentions to share their personal information with online merchants.

With the aim to improve understanding and explanation of information privacy concern on social media platforms, this study seeks to empirically investigate two research questions:

RQ1: What are the roles of lurking and computer anxiety in influencing information privacy concern on social media?
RQ2: Does CFSMIP mediate the relationship between both lurking and computer anxiety and users' behavioral intentions?

The pursuit of these research questions is expected to provide an initial roadmap towards gaining a better understanding of factors that shape users' concern for information privacy with the use of social media and their information sharing behaviors with e-commerce sites.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the research approach taken in this study followed by the presentation of the study variables used to develop the research hypotheses and model. Section 3 describes the methodology used to conduct the study and the data analysis and results are presented in Section 4. Section 5 discusses the findings from the study and implications for theory and practice.

2. Theoretical background and model

2.1. Research approach

The research approach taken in this study is in the domain of exploratory research, similar to what Stebbins (Boudreau, 2010) refers to as the region of little known phenomena. This region is a combination of the report of descriptive statistics and generation of relationships between concepts based on existing data in order to contribute to the understanding of relevant existing prior related studies (Boudreau, 2010). This study is thus exploratory as it builds on extensive prior research to investigate factors that contribute to the explanation of individuals' concern for information privacy on social media platforms. The main goal of exploratory research is the production of empirically derived relationships about individuals, group, process, activity, or situation under study (Boudreau, 2010). Specifically, this study confirms relationships between computer anxiety, concern for social media information privacy, and behavioral intentions from prior studies and explores the introduction of lurking as an antecedent of privacy concern in the nomological network. Hence, the research model for this study is developed based on confirmatory and exploratory relationships between the model variables (see Fig. 1). Details of the hypothesized relationships in the research model depicted in Fig. 1 will be discussed in detail in the following sections. Pew reported that a majority of online adults use social networking or microblogging sites for social interactions (Brenner, 2013). The report also noted that most of the online adult users are in the college student age group; hence, this article will focus on that group in operationalizing hypotheses developed in the research model.

2.2. Social penetration theory

Social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) posits that the development of social relationships is linked to the communication pattern between an individual and his or her social network. Relationships begin with the exchange of basic information and gradually move on to more detailed facts. Altman and Taylor (1973) describe breadth as the variety of topics discussed at the onset of a relationship, and depth as the personal significance of those topics. Social media affords its users the ability to interact both in breadth and depth with their social ties. For instance, users on Facebook are able to adjust their privacy settings to disclose a varying degree of information with different users in their network. Similarly, researchers report that online bloggers tend to
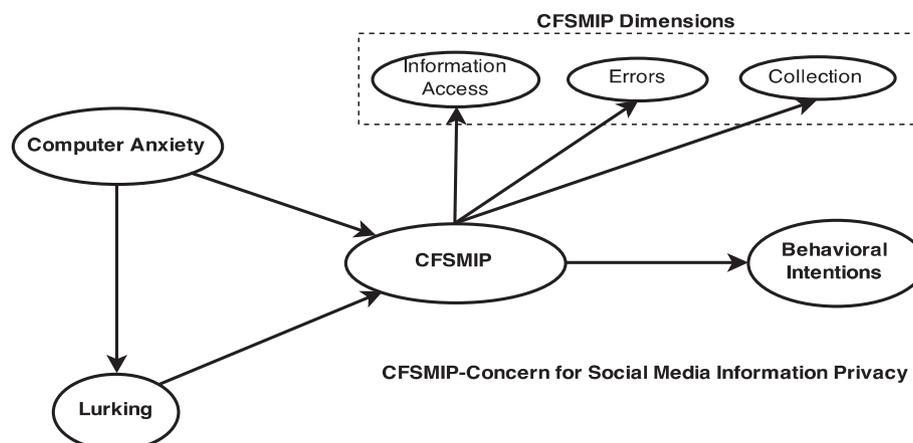

Fig. 1. Research model.