

A SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO PRIVACY CONCERN ON FACEBOOK: THE ROLE OF RELATIONAL MOBILITY

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ABSTRACT

While numerous studies turn to Hofstede's (1983) dimensions of culture to explain between-country differences in privacy concern (both on and offline), the direction of those dimension's effects are inconsistent across studies. The present study takes a socio-ecological approach to the phenomenon of differing societal levels of privacy concern on Facebook, introducing societal levels of relational mobility as a predicting factor. Relational mobility is the degree to which there are options regarding interpersonal relationships in any given society or social context (Yuki et al., 2007). Self-disclosure, which courts rejection, is risky in low relational mobility environments, where few opportunities exist to form new relationships. Therefore, one might expect to see higher levels of privacy concern (desire to control the dissemination of personal information) on Facebook in low relational mobility societies. Multilevel regression analysis from a 20-country web-based questionnaire ($N=962$) showed, however, while relational mobility significantly predicts privacy concern, the direction of effect was opposite to the original hypothesis; high relational mobility leads to high levels of privacy concern. A follow-up study demonstrated that this relationship is mediated by self-presentation on Facebook; in "relational open market" high relational mobility societies, where relational success depends on proactive and strategic presentation of self to others, Facebook users disclose a greater volume of information on Facebook, thus leading to higher concern about who might access that information. Low relational mobility society users disclose less, thus have less information online to be concerned about. Implications for online user engagement for global enterprise and social network sites are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Previous studies show that people in different countries greatly differ in online privacy concern (e.g., Krasnova & Veltri, 2010). These differences are often explained in terms of national culture differences, such as Hofstede's (1983) dimensions of culture. A weakness of this "explanation" is in its tautological nature; simply equating what theorists claim "culture" prescribes, with people's behavior. Addressing this limitation, a novel theoretical account from a socio-ecological/adaptationist perspective was proposed, focusing on the effect of a socio-ecological factor, relational mobility. Relational mobility is the degree to which there are options regarding interpersonal relationships in any given society or social context (Yuki et al., 2007). This paper's original hypothesis rested on the assumption that in low relational mobility societies (e.g., Japan), where there exist relatively few opportunities to form new relationships, excessive self-disclosure (which courts the risk of social rejection) should lead to more concern for controlling the dissemination of information about oneself (higher privacy concern) – including on social network sites such as Facebook. Conversely, in high relational mobility societies (e.g. USA) where self-disclosure plays a role in fostering commitment in otherwise relatively unstable relationships (Schug et al., 2010), one should expect less concern for privacy.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This hypothesis was tested by comparing Facebook users' privacy concern across 20 countries ($N = 962$). Privacy concern scores and relational mobility perceptions were measured using a web-based questionnaire translated into 12 languages. Participants were recruited by Facebook ads,

snowball sampling, and Amazon Mechanical Turk. Procrustes factor analysis demonstrated the validity of relational mobility scale across a large sample of societies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Multilevel regression analysis confirmed that relational mobility explains up to 55% of variance in Facebook privacy concern scores across societies. However, the direction of the effect was opposite to the original hypothesis; higher societal levels of relational mobility are associated with higher privacy concern on Facebook (Figure 1; Hofstede's dimensions of culture did not show any significant effect).

Attempting to account for this discrepancy, the interplay between relational mobility, self-disclosure, and privacy concern was revisited: In high relational mobility societies, where individuals inhabit a relatively open relational market, strategic and relatively copious self-presentation signaling high social value is adaptive; this leads to relational success. In low relational mobility societies, where relationships are relatively stable, this is not as important (c.f., Falk et al., 2009). Therefore one would expect high relational mobility to be associated with greater volume of self-presentation, and accordingly, individuals with more personal information online should be more concerned with privacy.

To test this hypothesis, a follow-up web-survey was conducted with 96 Japanese and 100 American Facebook users. Mediation analysis showed that indeed, the relationship between relational mobility and privacy concern is mediated by self-presentation on Facebook.

The paper concludes that relational mobility can be a significant predictor of privacy concern on Facebook. It is suggested that for enterprise and social network sites wishing to maximize user engagement online, privacy concern should be taken into account with particular attention to societal differences in relational mobility as a predictor.

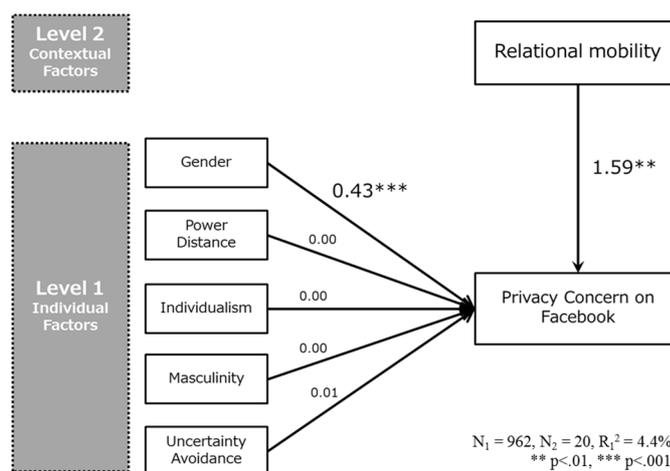


Figure 1 – Relational Mobility and Privacy Concern on Facebook Multilevel Model

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