



Self-Disclosure and Managing Privacy: Implications for Interpersonal and Online Communication for Consumers and Marketers

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ABSTRACT

In our fast-changing technological world, the line between the offline and online world has become blurred and individuals are faced with constant opportunities to divulge personal details. The process of disclosing sensitive information to others is necessary for establishing, maintaining, and building relationships, both with people and businesses; however, it also creates opportunities for misuse of the disclosed information. Consumers who are willing to disclose personal information online may often be unaware of the full implications of such disclosure. By thoroughly exploring the origins and processes of self-disclosure, and outlining its development in interpersonal and online communication, individuals will become more aware of their (sometimes competing) implicit and explicit disclosure behaviors necessary for enacting strong privacy management. Utilizing communication privacy management (CPM) theory, this article proposes a framework for ongoing consideration of how self-disclosure and privacy function online. By framing privacy in terms of the literature of communicative self-disclosure, CPM instructs the building of privacy boundaries that are functional for consumers and marketers alike, allowing people to protect themselves online while also ensuring their continued enjoyment of Internet provided benefits.

KEYWORDS

Communication privacy management; marketing; online advertising; privacy; self-disclosure

Introduction

Interpersonal communication is a fundamental dimension of communication theory. A critical concept in interpersonal communication studies is the notion of *disclosure*—one communicant sharing information about him- or herself with another communicant, either a person or an organization (Cozby 1973; Petronio & Durham 2008; Wheelless 1976). Research suggests that self-disclosure may be fundamental to the creation of all relationships (Cozby 1973; Sprecher & Hendrick 2004). Self-disclosure comes into play not only within interpersonal relationships, such as with friends and intimate partners, but also in organizational relationships with employers, marketers, and organizations. Such relationships are normally founded upon at least some degree

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of self-disclosure. Disclosure of personal information almost always emerges slowly between parties over time (Altman and Taylor 1973) and is largely based on the trust established between communicants (Greene, Derlega, and Mathews 2006). Relationships involving self-disclosure may in turn lead to the formation of social bonds, upon which individuals may depend in their daily lives. Because such relationships help define our existence, learning to manage self-disclosure within all kinds of relationships is an invaluable skill. Yet in today's world, honing this particular self-management skill can be dizzyingly difficult, since we now live in a world where many of our most personal daily communications are filtered through the Internet. Deciding whether and how much to self-disclose online has thus become problematic for many people.

As we know, when someone's personal information disappears into cyberspace, he or she has effectively lost control of what happens to that information (Payne and Trumbach 2009). Precisely where personal information ends up, and who has access to it, may be anybody's guess. Many are aware of the potential for identity theft (Black, 2013), but few people really understand the apparently less significant uses to which personal information may be put when shared online. As we move forward in this technological age, individuals and companies alike will become ever more sophisticated in their use of personal information available online—from targeted advertising to Facebook registry pages for toddler birthdays. Consequently, staying on top of information-sharing trends and rules will also become increasingly important. Within the ethical and legislative arenas, in particular, keeping tabs on just what marketers and other users are actually doing with personal information retrieved online will remain a challenge. This article argues that communication privacy management (CPM), a relatively recent development in communication theory, may offer the best framework for a sophisticated, ongoing consideration of how self-disclosure and privacy function online, pointing the way toward the development of workable ethics, and even guiding legislation that can help people to protect themselves while also ensuring their continued enjoyment of the multiple benefits of Internet use.

While virtually all relationships are formed through a process of seeking and sharing information, self-disclosure can be risky (Wheeless and Grotz 1977; Viégas 2005). When we reveal personal information about ourselves to another, that “other,” be it an online marketing firm or a potential best friend, has power over us in the form of distinct bits of knowledge about what makes us tick. The risks of self-disclosure exist whether communication takes place interpersonally or in a mediated way, such as on the Internet (Andrade, Kaltcheva, and Weitz 2002). Just as in personal relationships, if individuals reveal too much personal information too soon on Internet sites, they risk being hurt or even victimized. Yet the online universe presents a number of additional challenges, such as the risk of having our identity compromised or stolen when we have revealed too much. On the other hand, many people who have trouble

self-disclosing face-to-face may feel much more comfortable doing so on Internet venues (Suler 2002), which can feel comfortably anonymous, illustrating that Internet self-disclosure is both complex and multifaceted.

Many issues that naturally arise in deciding whether to self-disclose in our personal relationships are heightened and made more complex on Internet venues, such as e-mail, blogs, or social and commercial websites. Despite widespread communication research since the mid-twentieth century (Dinev and Hart 2006; Krasnova and Veltri 2010; Petronio 1991), there remains a rapidly widening gap in our understanding of how communication research on self-disclosure applies to the Internet context. Although many people assume that their Internet presence is both anonymous and private, the Internet, in fact, opens up a brand new Pandora's Box of issues regarding the management and use of personal information. CPM provides a "first step toward building a theory of online privacy management" (Metzger, 2007, p. 21), serving as a starting point for the development of a new set of principles to help ensure both that Internet privacy is safeguarded and that relationship parameters between users and marketers are clearly defined.

Important for understanding the concept of self-disclosure, the manuscript commences by exploring the origins of self-disclosure and then highlights related components of solidarity, disclosiveness, and reciprocity in interpersonal communication. An overview of communication privacy management theory is provided, bridging interpersonal and online communication by exploring how person-to-person self-disclosure boundaries are applicable in the digital world. The author then highlights how marketing entities also use principles of self-disclosure to entice disclosure of personal information for monetary gain through selling advertisements and marketing relevant products and services to the disclosing individual. Further, privacy is linked to self-disclosure because notions of privacy affect individuals if, how, and when they self-disclose information. Ultimately, self-disclosure can be beneficial to both individuals and marketers, where success for both groups is not mutually exclusive. The article concludes by offering a plausible scenario where consumers are confident balancing the risks and benefits of online self-disclosure and marketers are willing to adhere to consumer-established privacy boundaries.

Conceptual definition of self-disclosure in interpersonal communication

The term self-disclosure has a long history in communication research that precedes CPM by decades, but nonetheless offers some important insights for today's communicative environment. Historically, the concept of self-disclosure is attributed to the work of Lewin (1935, 1936). Lewin noted strong differences in the way Americans and Germans conjure initial openness with newcomers (Reno and Kenny 1992). Following Lewin, Jourard (1971)

explored the idea of self-disclosure as a continuum from communication low in personal content with strangers or acquaintances to higher levels of personal content between a communicant and an intimate partner or therapist. Cozby (1973) defined self-disclosure as “any information about himself which Person A communicates verbally to Person B” (p. 73). Cozby thus viewed self-disclosure as a cyclical process involving varying levels of breadth and depth of information sharing (1973). These insightful views show that self-disclosure affects both the person who reveals the information and the person who receives it.

Wheeless (1978) identified the concepts of disclosiveness, interpersonal solidarity, and reciprocity as key aspects of the puzzle. Wheeless (1978) interpreted disclosiveness as the tendency, on average, to disclose private information to others across various contexts. He viewed disclosiveness as an individual’s general openness, claiming that some people are more predisposed to self-disclosure than others (Wheeless 1976). While disclosiveness is a key determinant of whether or not a person will self-disclose, in this view, disclosiveness and self-disclosure could not be conflated for Wheeless. Indeed, he saw disclosiveness as an individual characteristic, whereas he defined self-disclosure as a more general process of information sharing. This difference is significant in considering new processes of self-disclosure, such as disclosing personal information to a commercial entity on an Internet website, particularly when the website is involved in marketing. In addition to disclosiveness, interpersonal solidarity is commonly linked with self-disclosure. The concept of solidarity refers to the feeling that individuals are either close or remote, part of an “in-group,” or identifying with an “out-group” (Brown 1965). In a 1976 study, Wheeless found that self-disclosure was highest in relationships with high solidarity. Low solidarity, on the other hand, appeared to suppress self-disclosure “despite the disclosive tendencies of the individual” (Wheeless 1976, p. 59). Self-disclosure, while related to a person’s natural disclosive tendencies, then still required a sense of solidarity with the other. The notion of solidarity suggests that self-disclosure only takes place within the bounds of a certain trust that is built around shared experience, values, and goals.

More recently, Greene, Derlega, and Mathews (2006) have expanded these earlier, dualistic notions of self-disclosure, defining self-disclosure as the “interaction between at least two individuals where one intends to deliberately divulge something personal to another” (p. 411). The process of self-disclosure has also been analyzed by Jang and Stefanone (2011) as the means by which people provide personal information to others, including their thoughts, feelings, and needs. These views stress the interactive nature of self-disclosure by emphasizing how people manage their needs to communicate about themselves. Self-disclosure is viewed as an act of intimacy by Sprecher and Hendrick (2004), serving as a relationship maintenance

strategy. Self-disclosure, as an ever-changing aspect of a relationship, transforms as individuals and relationships change, according to a more recent view (Dindia 1997).

Like solidarity, the concept of reciprocity hints at an inherently social context for self-disclosure, which is usually layered with social expectations. Reciprocity is the concept that, when one person discloses an intimate thought to another, the other individual is then expected to disclose something in return (Miller and Kenny 1986). One aspect of reciprocity involves the complex concept of “likeability.” According to Miller, Berg, and Archer (1983), people naturally self-disclose more readily to those they like than to those they do not like. Additionally, Sprecher and Hendrick (2004) have found a complex relationship between a person’s willingness to self-disclose and their level of self-esteem, noting positive associations between self-disclosure and relationship qualities like commitment, love, and satisfaction. Overall, this research shows that people are drawn to relationships and both want and need to engage in self-disclosure.

To some extent, wherever self-disclosure takes place, individuals worry about their public persona and may attempt to carefully shape their persona. This process of maintaining public self-consciousness is characterized by “attention to the self as a social object” (Reno and Kenny 1992, p. 80). Conversely, individuals engaging in private self-consciousness are attending to the “covert aspects of the self,” such as attitudes, moods, and traits (Reno and Kenny 1992, p. 80). The complex interplay between public and private in the social domain has been called “impression management” (Reno and Kenny 1992, p. 80).

Impression management is indeed a central concern in online socializing. For better or worse, impression management has now become a critical consideration in online privacy and communication of all kinds, illustrating how early explorations of the psychology of person-to-person self-disclosure can serve as a strong starting point for the analysis of online relationships. Online entities, however, function according to unique rules of trust and solidarity, creating a number of new issues and opportunities around self-disclosure and, as we shall see, the development and maintenance of a public persona, within relationships that may give the impression of intimacy. These early studies emphasize that people need to have a strongly defined sense of how to manage their private self-disclosures. This observation becomes even more complex in looking at how people can satisfactorily manage their social personae in online environments without incurring undue emotional, financial, professional, or other types of risk.

Communication privacy management theory: Definition and interpretation

More recent communication-management theories, such as CPM, draw on the early communications studies outlined above, while attempting to explain

specifically how people self-disclose online. Petronio (2002) defines CPM as a practical theory “designed to provide an explanation for communicative issues about privacy that individuals face in the everyday world” (p. xvii). CPM is “wholly a communication theory” (Petronio and Durham 2008, p. 313). It makes the communicative process a central feature of relationships, examining self-disclosure in relationships from the point of view of both the disclosing individual and the recipient. CPM, unlike previous work on self-disclosure, defines it as a dialectical process in which a person constantly balances disclosing and concealing private information (Petronio and Durham 2008). Further, CPM identifies a rule-based system for explaining the process of how individuals decide how to balance disclosure and privacy (Petronio 2002). Establishing and practicing these rules helps individuals minimize the costs of self-disclosure, while simultaneously maximizing the rewards. By constantly balancing disclosure and privacy, individuals demonstrate the belief that “they have a right to own and regulate access to their private information” (Petronio 2002, p. 2). Regarding the actual content of disclosures, CPM makes private information a primary focal point. As we shall see, particularly in its consideration of managing privacy in self-disclosure, CPM lends itself well to an analysis of online self-disclosure versus privacy management.

The foundation of CPM lies in its six principles, three of which are labeled as “Assumption Maxims,” while the remaining three are termed “Interaction Maxims” (Petronio and Durham 2008). The Assumption Maxims define the management of private disclosure, while the Interaction Maxims reflect the way “communicative interactions with others are regulated when revealing and concealing private information” (Petronio and Durham 2008, p. 311).

The first Assumption Maxim, *Public-Private Dialectical Tension*, refers to the push-pull of disclosure and privacy (Petronio and Durham 2008). *Conceptualization of Private Information*, the second Assumption Maxim, asserts that individuals believe they have a right to own their personal information, and that they are thus entitled to decide whether or not to keep or disclose their information (Petronio and Durham 2008). *Privacy Rules*, the final Assumption Maxim, function as a guideline for creating privacy boundaries that govern the ebb-and-flow of private information (Petronio and Durham 2008). The Privacy Rules were developed using five criteria: cultural, gendered, motivational, contextual, and risk-benefit ratio (Petronio and Durham 2008). Taken together, Petronio and Durham (2008) argue that these rules act as internal guidelines, which individuals follow naturally in communications requiring quick decision-making about what to share and what not to share in social contexts.

In addition to these Assumption Rules, the CPM model also maps out interaction rules. The first of these, called Interaction Maxims, is *Shared Boundaries*. The *Shared Boundaries* rule posits that, when private information

is shared, the recipient becomes a co-owner of that information. Both discloser and recipient combine forces to create a “mutual boundary around the information” (Petronio and Durham 2008, p. 310). Moreover, different boundaries exist for sharing information. The most common boundary is found within dyadic, group, family, and organizational relationships, a point we will return to in later sections, when considering how an understanding of boundary changes in different situations may be helpful to Internet users.

Boundary Coordination, the second Interaction Principle, refers to the co-managing and co-owning of information by individuals (Petronio and Durham 2008). CPM hypothesizes that, instead of taking place in a unidirectional communication process, in a line that flows directly from the discloser to the recipient, information disclosure affects both. In this view, once self-disclosure has occurred, both parties become responsible for co-management of the information. Likewise, the third Interaction Maxim, *Boundary Turbulence*, states that, when information is co-owned, smooth information-management is necessary to avoid conflict or turbulence. This maxim holds that the co-managers (discloser and recipient) “coordinate their actions” around disclosing the information to others or keeping it private (Petronio and Durham 2008, p. 316). This third and final maxim governing the shared management of boundaries between discloser and recipient implies that, once information is shared, both parties also share an ethical imperative to manage the information so as to minimize potential harm to the discloser. Once again, we will find that this aspect of boundary-setting is important when considering user safety online.

CPM is a cogent theoretical starting point for explaining and understanding the social process of self-disclosure. Moreover, the theory is useful both in explaining how various disclosure rules function online, as well as in mapping out potential guidelines for managing personal information once it has been shared. CPM helps explain the decision-making process people must engage in as they decide when, how, and to whom they will disclose personal information in any communicative situation, particularly when opposing impulses compete for the speaker simultaneously to reveal and conceal information. CPM's exposition of privacy boundaries in person-to-person self-disclosure makes an important contribution to our understanding of the mechanisms of consumer self-disclosure in the semi-public Internet realm, particularly to marketers who may themselves utilize aspects of communication theory to encourage greater online self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure in interactive online communications

As we have seen, self-disclosure is important in establishing, maintaining, and building relationships. Internet marketers, in particular, may draw upon the literature of self-disclosure considered in the first part of this article in order

to design effective websites and online presences meant to encourage people to self-disclose more readily. Whether communication takes place in person or online, the rules of self-disclosure are a significant aspect of relationship building that savvy marketers are more than willing to take advantage of. Unlike online communication, however, face-to-face communication presents a clear set of visual and cognitive cues that can help define expectations for exchanging personal or even intimate information. Current research into online communications devotes considerable attention to the relative absence of (or at least difference in) these visual and cognitive cues, finding, as might be expected, that disclosure cues function differently online.

When considering the mechanisms of online bonding through self-disclosure, for instance, we find that online communication easily lends itself to familiar bonding patterns, particularly when sites are artfully designed. Of course, since self-disclosure online is a voluntary process, online users freely provide information without being under duress or threat. Yet many consumers may be unaware that they are often carefully coaxed to self-disclose by Web designs created by well-informed marketers who use cutting-edge, research-based communication techniques in their marketing approaches. In conceptually defining self-disclosure for online communication, therefore, scholars typically affix additional descriptors to their analyses.

Interpersonal communication, for example, defined as “one person providing personal information to another” (Cozby 1973; Wheelless and Grotz 1976; Dindia 1997; Jang and Stefanone 2011), is re-conceptualized in theories about online communication as a process in which a message containing private information is communicated electronically from one individual to another individual, or individual to an online platform (blog, chat room, and so forth). This definition may build upon earlier meanings, but must be significantly amended when considering what it means to communicate online. The communicative act is significantly changed when considering social network systems in which people believe they are “talking” to another person, while being, in fact, unable to identify the receiver’s goals and motivations. Krasnova and Veltri (2010), for example, define online self-disclosure as “the amount of information shared on a user’s profile as well as in the process of the communication with others” (p. 1). This definition underscores the idea that issues such as self-disclosure, privacy, trust, and anonymity are as important in online self-disclosures as they are in interpersonal self-revelation.

Self-disclosure and privacy go hand in hand, in this view, since privacy is a significant aspect of decision-making around all types of self-disclosure (Mesch and Beker 2010). Privacy can be defined as an “individual’s right to control access to his or her personal information within defined contexts” (Markel 2005, p. 202). Westin (1967) defined privacy as an individual’s right “to control, edit, manage, and delete information about them[selves] and

decide when, how, and to what extent that information is communicated to others” (p. 7). In further conceptualizing privacy, Mesch and Beker (2010) argue that privacy is a “general human need” (p. 570). When considering online self-disclosure, though, privacy issues are much more complex than in other types of interpersonal communication, since online communication involves many different actors, some of whom may be unknown to the discloser.

As we know, the topic of privacy has gained more and more consumer attention. Indeed, consumers are becoming progressively aware of the complex array of privacy concerns faced in online environments (Krasnova, Kolesnikova, and Guenther 2009). In response, scholars have begun to question the effect of privacy needs and potential privacy violations in online self-disclosure (Krasnova, Kolesnikova, and Guenther 2009). According to Petronio and Durham (2008), CPM must then take a broader view of self-disclosure, showing how privacy and self-disclosure are not just related concepts, but combine to create the assumption of privacy in self-disclosure. Additionally, Petronio asserts that “CPM makes private information, the content of what is disclosed, a primary focal point” (Petronio 2002, p. 3). Joinson et al. (2010) conclude that an individual’s privacy concerns directly influences that person’s willingness to disclose information online. Further, Krasnova, Kolesnikova, and Guenther (2009) found privacy concerns to be a significant hurdle to online self-disclosure. Social network users, for example, are constantly engaged in protecting some of their private information, while also engaging in and receiving pleasure from online social network activities. Even though a user of an online social network third party application is warned in advance of the potential for collection and utilization of private information, the individual may decide to actively engage in the application, or be unaware of the real possibilities for abuse.

Bypassing the privacy warning and utilizing the application can be attributed to people’s needs for instant gratification combined with the common perception that privacy risks are merely vague concerns (Krasnova, Kolesnikova, and Guenther 2009). But users “out looking for fun” may end up being surprised by the factual loss of privacy when they are suddenly embroiled in a scam or some other abuse directly related to their risky self-disclosures online (Krasnova, Kolesnikova, and Guenther 2009). CPM theory explains people’s willingness to self-disclose despite warnings about risks by arguing that individuals are constantly maximizing rewards and minimizing the costs associated with self-disclosure: individuals will disclose information using various criteria, only one of which is a risk-benefit ratio criteria (Petronio 2002). And of course, in the online venue, users are often wrong, mistakenly weighing risks only to decide in their own favor. Petronio (2002) believes that it is “necessary to control our privacy boundaries ... because we need to balance the risks and gains of revealing private

information” (p. 65). Yet whether or not people are able to protect their boundaries around private information online is highly dependent on that individual’s understanding of the potential risks of sharing such information, as well as their comprehension of how and by whom that information may be used or shared.

Online trust and anonymity

Trust is an important aspect of deciding whether or not to self-disclose, as we have seen, and people often make mistakes in deciding whom to trust. Marketers clearly understand the value of building a trustworthy image online. Krasnova et al. (2010) note that, in order to encourage user trust, reliable online social networks attempt to implement fair privacy policies designed to protect users from aggressive marketers. On the other hand, Joinson et al. (2010) note how anonymity (a form of privacy) can increase self-disclosure, since trust issues become increasingly irrelevant if Internet users believe their communications are anonymous. Believing that their information-sharing is anonymous may lead some users to share personal information more recklessly than they might otherwise, a finding that reinforces the need for general guiding principles to protect unskillful Internet users.

According to Suler (2002), in fact, individuals involved in online interactions are more likely to loosen up, may be less guarded in expressing their ideas, and may feel more uninhibited. Anonymity can be expressed either in the visual or the discursive online fields (Scott 2004). Visual anonymity refers to the situation where “one cannot sense the physical presence of a message source” (p. 129), whereas discursive anonymity is related to verbal communication in which “specific comments cannot be attributed to a specific individual source” (Scott 2004, p. 129). Many of us have experienced the feeling that “no one will know” when we write or post something out of character. The feeling that the online environment is anonymous may spark a sense of bravado; however, online anonymity is virtually an oxymoron, since it is not only traced and catalogued but is indeed inherently “public.” In fact, anonymity is only anonymous until someone tries to “find out” who we are.

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), or human communications that take place using two or more electronic devices (McQuail, 2005), thus encourages people to accept the concept of anonymity at face value. Anonymity seems plausible since we see that commentators do indeed leave online comments with no visual identification, but CMC shows how untrue such an assumption must be. People may feel as though “no one is watching,” giving them a sense that others are somehow “not really there” and fostering the appearance that all users belong to the same social group (Walther 2011).

Yet this assumption is fraught with misunderstanding. Tidwell and Walther (2002) illustrated the psychological effects of assuming anonymity when they compared individuals in a CMC group with people interacting interpersonally, finding that the CMC group was far more likely to elicit and disclose personal information. Furthermore, Walther et al. (2005) noted how e-mail and Internet-based chat systems allow for hiding the sender's identity, psychologically separating the sender from the content of the message. The sense of being anonymous becomes problematic in online communication when users believe they cannot be identified, leading some to the mistaken faith that divulging personal information online is safe, even when sent to multiple recipients.

Self-disclosure in different online communication venues

Finally, the various forms of online communication have also been shown to affect how individuals disclose. For example, Jang and Stefanone (2011) reported that bloggers who post intimate information are likely to hold “traditional normative expectations” (p. 1054) towards self-disclosure. Additionally, bloggers' self-disclosure appears to be prevalent, but some bloggers are nonetheless more predisposed to self-disclosure than others (Qian and Scott 2007). In a content analysis of 260 blogs, Papacharissi (2007) confirmed that blogs serve as platform for personal expression, presenting the ideal medium for self-disclosure. Qian and Scott (2007) noted that bloggers with more visual anonymity are unlikely to disclose more information than those with less visual anonymity. Just as in other venues, blogs are often falsely perceived as anonymous, which can create a false sense of security, increasing people's willingness to self-disclose—even when they should not. As with other venues, bloggers can attract savvy marketers simply by virtue of the content of their self-disclosures, which are, in fact, far from anonymous.

In blogs, as well as in other social venues online, convenience, relationship building, and enjoyment are significantly linked to an individual's level of information disclosure (Krasnova et al. 2010). Likewise, Palmieri et al. (2012) found that Facebook users often feel less uncertain about a user who discloses more versus a user who discloses less. In fact, the breadth and depth of self-disclosure by Facebook users seems to increase group predictability and interdependence (Wright et al. 2008). Here again, wise marketers may use self-disclosure to attract groups of people with shared interests to an interest in products, drawing on information innocently revealed to “friends” online, in order to make money.

Research implications of self-disclosure: Interpersonal versus online

The differences and similarities between offline and online self-disclosure patterns leads to some fascinating implications and potential areas for study,

especially given the apparent willingness of online users to disclose more information online than in person. As we have seen, there is much evidence to suggest that people exhibit decreased inhibitions about disclosing personal information online (Joinson 2001; Dean 2010). Such findings should be taken as a warning for frequent Internet users; they are probably not surprising to Internet marketers, who are highly aware of the untapped marketing potential from social networking sites and other online venues. The trend toward higher rates of self-disclosure in online versus face-to-face communications simply increases consumer vulnerability to aggressive marketing using information gathered online (Joinson 2001; Qian and Scott 2007).

Additionally, Mesch and Beker (2010) show the decreasing importance of nonverbal cues in decision-making about whether to self-disclose. The loss of this important source of visual information about an online recipient's trustworthiness cannot be overstated. While online methods of self-disclosure are neither all good nor all bad, they do represent a significant change in how people build intimacy and define private versus public information. What was once considered completely private, may now be relatively open to the public through social networking, e-mailing, and blogging. Perceived anonymity may encourage people to trust more than they should, but privacy is, in fact, a scarce online resource.

To properly assess risks and benefits of online self-disclosure, Nguyen, Bin, and Campbell (2012) suggest the development of a self-disclosure scale that could eventually lead to a unified theory of self-disclosure. Because we currently lack a proper framework to measure and assess online privacy management strategies (Child and Petronio 2011), such a unified conceptual framework could be extremely useful and would surely be an invaluable tool for discovering safer, more effective ways of protecting consumers. Additionally, an integrated theory of communication would "provide firm foundations for measuring self-disclosure" (Nguyen, Bin, and Campbell 2012, p. 109).

While CPM is not yet able to explain all self-disclosure-related phenomena, it does present a robust initial theory that might help increase our understanding of the multifaceted issues concerning Internet privacy versus self-disclosure, helping us to set boundaries and rules for safer information sharing. Thus, CPM provides a "first step toward building a theory of online privacy management" (Metzger 2007, p. 21)—but of course we are only at the beginning.

Pro-consumer benefits and implications of awareness of online self-disclosure practices

While various consumer programs exist to educate consumers about online privacy and disclosure (Electronic Frontier Foundation 2012; Federal Trade

Commission 2012; TRUSTe 2012), the public needs to be further educated about how to balance enjoyment with information disclosure. Krasnova et al. (2009) state that, “Despite being aware of the privacy risks on the platform, OSN [Online Social Network] users may reveal personal information in the process of looking for fun” (p. 7). Yet it is possible to have fun on social networks with disclosing too much. Consumers need to be taught how to judge the wisdom of disclosing their information online. Balancing enjoyment and information disclosure correlates with CPM’s theoretical premise of maximizing rewards and minimizing costs associated with self-disclosure.

Most importantly, consumers should be made aware of the value of speaking out. A pro-consumer wave seems to be sweeping the United States. This pro-consumer attitude will help by encouraging consumers to question how their information is used and by highlighting abuses. Consumer activism that places direct pressure on organizations to clearly document their information-collecting practices could go a long way toward achieving a better framework of online consumer protection. Websites like WikiLeaks have already demonstrated the effectiveness of public disclosures by consumers and organizations in setting limits on insensitive corporate practices.

In discussing the pro-consumer implications of self-disclosure, therefore, it is vital to state that an overarching goal of consumer education should be the analysis of data-collection practices. It is also imperative that we establish clearer consumer-protection guidelines, as an inherent aspect of building consumer awareness. The main question pro-consumer advocates must ask is: “How do we teach consumers to adequately protect their information?” Facebook statistics from March 2017 cite 1.87 billion users (Statista 2017), underscoring the urgent need for systematic education of Internet users about online self-disclosure. Considering the heavy usage of social networking sites, pragmatic goals about consumer empowerment and education should be a major focus of consumer education campaigns, perhaps starting from primary school.

The true nature of social networks is emphasized in the word “social,” implying that all aspects of the platform involve sharing of information with friends only; the rapid adoption of social networks was originally driven by the idea of acquiring and distributing information through a hub of friends. As social networks add scores of new members per year, however, friend connections often increase to the point where people may have so-called friends whom they do not even know. These enormous networks do often translate into marketing connections that may enable marketers and other organizations to collect and sell targeted information to consumers whose personal data is open for virtually anyone to see.

Changing the parameters of consumer privacy and protection may therefore lie, not so much with the individual, as with the group aspect of online social networks. Several marketers have already initiated social marketing

schemes whereby individuals may take advantage of products or service “Liked” or recommended by friends (Williams 2011). Similar in concept is the digital word-of-mouth, where a friend lends credibility to products and services with an online thumbs-up (Hof 2011). Turning this approach upside down, consumers might increase their privacy simply by using the network’s social power, demanding closer monitoring of their information by friends, family, and other contacts, and giving a “thumbs down” to companies that fail to respect privacy. Informal online dialogues between friends could help set limits on marketers by affecting sales, particularly if such groups became widespread.

This idea is not farfetched, since Facebook’s data collection actually started out as an “opt-in” communication choice. After several new decisions on their privacy policy, some options were changed to “opt-out” (Emigh 2010). While some consumers make the conscious, voluntary choice to enroll in online activities (opt-in), they should also be given the option of not disclosing information (opt-out). The Direct Marketing Association (DMAaction.org 2011) and the Interactive Advertising Bureau (Ingis 2009) provide clear ethical guidelines for consumer information collection, but the process of privacy protection is often “opt-out.” Users of online social networks and other online activities would do well to push for voluntary “opt-in” information collection practices as well.

Lastly, consumers should be given the choice of precisely when they will be targeted as customers. For instance, Facebook users who buy a certain brand are more likely to spend money on that brand than non-Facebook fans (Lipsman et al. 2012). Announcing these preferences online can lead to them being lifelong victims of targeted marketing campaigns. Consumers might do well to demand their right to both time and alter their exposure to product offers, rather than remaining passive consumers of aggressive advertising for products they neither want nor need.

Pro-industry benefits and implications of awareness of online self-disclosure practices

Marketers are highly dependent on self-disclosures to establish and maintain relationships and service online customers. As such, most online marketing is predicated on self-disclosures, which depend on the consumer-marketer relationships. Relationship marketing provides the basis for online transactions (e-commerce) when consumers disclose information (address, buying preferences, and so forth) in exchange for tailored products and services from online marketers and websites. Online social network users present a voluntarily updated and highly distinguishable profile that can be used for consumer segmentation, data mining, direct communication, and highly segmented online advertising (Krasnova et al. 2010).

Facing the ever-present pro-consumer/anti-consumerism movement, marketers and organizations might benefit from casting themselves as “pro-consumer.” Many companies over the years have commoditized the pro-consumer movement (Beucke 2012). It is only logical for organizations to appear consumer friendly. Consumer friendliness can in fact strengthen brands and increase consumer loyalty. Brand loyalty provides great dividends, as current customers spend 67% more than new customers (Fenn 2010). Krasnova et al. (2009) state that online social network providers can “ensure the appropriate level of communication necessary for long-term self-sustainability” (p. 7). With the right limits, market sustainability and internet self-disclosure can become mutually supportive.

Further, by creating the “appropriate level of communication necessary for long-term self-sustainability” (Krasnova et al. 2009, p. 7), marketers may be able to take advantage of currently low levels of Internet regulation by government. Being pro-consumer includes the advantage of lower government regulation, since consumers usually believe that organizational self-regulation of privacy is more appropriate than government intervention. The Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) openly lobbies for self-regulation, precisely in the pursuit of preventing governmental regulation of privacy and consumer practices (Ingis 2009). The IAB’s website informs consumers that online behavioral advertising helps to “provide you with more relevant advertising on the websites you visit,” as well as how online advertising “supports the free content, products and services you use online; what choices you have; and how to use browser controls to enhance your privacy” (Digital Advertising Alliance 2010).

By actively promoting the notion that self-regulation benefits consumers, marketers may be able to retain more, not less, control over how they collect and utilize consumer information. Marketers and organizations seeking to increase online collection of consumer data would be wise to self-regulate, in light of the risks that direct government regulation would impose harsher “constraints on action” (Bowie and Jamal 2006, p. 338). Indeed, we have already seen how marketers in the European Union are already experiencing the negative consequences of government privacy regulations (Mandalia 2012).

As we have seen, while consumers often desire “opt-in” options, organizations have traditionally solicited “opt-out” choices, in which consumers must request that information not be collected. By supporting “opt-in” choices, however, corporations might actually increase consumers’ perceptions that their organization is both pro-consumer and trustworthy. The opt-in choice helps establish trust, a vital concern for most consumers when deciding whether to interact with an organization online, and trust is always a concern for consumers engaging in electronic purchases (Ang and Lee 2000). Increasing trust in online environments is thus conducive to consumer self-disclosure (Joinson et al. 2010). When consumers trust a marketer or

organization, they are much more likely to share a greater breadth and depth of personal information. Opt-in choices give consumers the sense that they decide, rather than having corporations decide for them.

CPM explains how voluntary disclosure of information by individuals might lead to an increase in the breadth and depth of information collected by marketers. If marketers adhere to the *Privacy Rules* assumption of CPM, allowing individuals to create the boundaries of disclosure and privacy, people might well be more willing to divulge lucrative information. Conversely, if marketers fail to adhere to privacy rules, the quality of information obtained might be of lesser value. Current consumer concerns about “data mining” may stem from consumers’ perceived lack of options in creating privacy boundaries and rules. Marketers would do well to respect consumers’ privacy needs, communicating that respect in actions that could, ironically, result in even more useful consumer self-disclosure.

Conclusion

This article has explored the conceptual application of self-disclosure in online situations where individuals must self-disclose personal information. Utilizing CPM theory to bridge interpersonal and online disclosures, the author established a connection between one’s privacy and decisions of how and when to self-disclose. Through exploring contemporary scenarios of digital disclosure, the author has also provided a foundation for future research.

While CPM is not yet able to explain all self-disclosure-related phenomena, it does provide a robust initial theory that might help increase our understanding of the multifaceted issues concerning Internet privacy versus self-disclosure, helping us to set boundaries and rules for safer information sharing. Thus, CPM provides a “first step toward building a theory of online privacy management” (Metzger 2007, p. 21)—but of course we are only at the beginning. Understanding the mechanisms that lead people to divulge personal information online is critical to building a new framework for understanding of online privacy. People are concerned about these issues, and rightly so. By framing privacy in terms of the literature of communicative self-disclosure, CPM theory points the way to building privacy boundaries that are functional for consumers and marketers alike. Thus, CPM can help lead to a more balanced and open dialogue around proactive consumer self-regulation, providing benefits to both sides. Consumers might be better informed and, in turn, better able to play an active role in protecting their personal information; organizations could continue to market to online consumers, but within the respectful parameters set by individual groups and corporate ethics committees—all with limited government interference. Achieving a perfect balance of pro-consumer and pro-organization action will be difficult, but

according to CPM's risk-benefit ratio, an equitable approach that encourages informed and aware consumers provides a good starting point for both.

The direction of future research inspired by these topics could include a number of relevant topics in policy, Internet commerce, and theory building. In the realm of public policy and Internet regulation, what was once considered completely private information, may now be relatively open to the public through social networking, e-mailing, and blogging. The changing nature of how technology influences the perception of private information should be explored, and how the concept of self-disclosure has evolved, including implicit or explicit self-disclosure. In addition, it would be helpful to create media literacy campaigns informing consumers about disclosure practices and ways to protect or limit disclosures. Since privacy policies and software license agreements may be skimmed over by users, it has been advised that creation of a privacy label may act similar to nutrition labels, where users are informed what disclosure risks are present. Lastly, for theory building, the exploration of what factors drive or inhibit disclosure in online settings and development of a self-disclosure scale could eventually lead to a unified theory of self-disclosure.

Consumers need to feel confident that they can balance the risks and benefits of online self-disclosure. Marketers, in return, must be willing to respect and adhere to consumer-established privacy boundaries. Only in these circumstances will increasingly savvy consumers continue to be willing to disclose information without fear of abuse. Self-governance by consumers may, in fact, prove beneficial to the general public as well as to marketers. Without strong self-regulation, the Internet stands to lose some of the characteristic freedom and openness that attracts people to it in the first place, but with little or no regulation, government will surely have to step in.

Author note

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