

Chapter 64

Investigating Privacy Perception and Behavior on Weibo

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ABSTRACT

More than half of Chinese Internet users participate in Weibo, the most popular social media and microblogging platform in China. Weibo encourages members to voluntarily contribute personal information, leading to potential privacy invasion. This study examines how trust in other members and perceptions of government intrusion affect privacy-related attitude and behavior on this social platform. Analysis of survey responses from 221 Weibo users confirm that perceived government intrusion is strongly correlated with privacy concern and self-protective behavior. Trust towards other Weibo participants is not significantly related to privacy concern; however it has a significant negative relationship with self-protective behavior. The study also reveals that privacy concern is positively related to self-protective behavior. Findings and their implications for future research and practice are provided.

1. INTRODUCTION

Microblogging is a form of social media that allows users to broadcast short messages via various platforms to friends and followers, ensuring frequent and immediate updates on their activities, opinions, and status (Barnes & Böhringer, 2011). The most popular microblogging platform is Twitter, which has numerous clones and competitors

around the world. After China blocked Twitter in 2009, several Chinese media companies launched microblogging services that are rapidly gaining popularity. The two major microblogging service providers in China are Sina, with a market share of 56.6% and Tencent with a market share of 21.5% (iResearch, 2011). Microblogging in China is referred to as 'Weibo' (literal translation of microblogging). The China Internet Network

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Information Center (CNNIC) recently reported that 54.7% of the Chinese Internet population use Weibo, yielding 274 million microblogging participants (CNNIC, 2013).

Much like Twitter, Weibo members post tweets or messages with 140 characters or less. Its members follow and are followed by others without the need to reciprocate the relationship. Every member's Weibo page is publicly viewable, and mutual followers can exchange private messages. However, several distinct Weibo features differentiate it from Twitter. First, since each Chinese character represents a whole word, tweets written in Chinese communicate much richer content than English tweets. Additionally, Weibo users can post pictures and videos directly into their feeds. Weibo allows threaded comments on feeds, viewed under the original message and not broadcast to the user's followers. Its Chat function provides a side-by-side alternative to the private messaging system. Furthermore, it provides virtual currency for purchasing virtual goods and services on the platform. The combined features of microblogging and social networking allow Chinese Weibo to provide greater possibilities of self-expression and relationship formation.

While Weibo users relish the opportunity to express themselves and establish unique identities (Zhang & Pentina, 2012), doing so inevitably requires personal information disclosure, leading to privacy violation risks such as stolen identity, potentially damaged reputation, harassing or cyberstalking. Additionally, government use of personal information posted on Weibo may have employment, financial, and political consequences, especially since recent legislation requires using real names for Weibo registration. Despite these risks, evidence shows that more and more young people in China do not mind disclosing personal information and enjoy sharing personal life on the Internet (CNNIC, 2012b). The CNNIC report indicates that 62.2% of Chinese social media users have never worried about social media privacy issues. Social media users may be aware

of privacy violation risks, yet continue publishing public profiles with sensitive personal data.

Researchers have investigated the discrepancy among social media participants' beliefs, attitudes and behaviors using multiple theories. However, most existing research uses U.S. and student samples, limiting the roles of cultural and contextual factors in privacy perceptions and behaviors (Waters & Ackerman, 2011). Moreover, few studies consider the role of government intrusion threat in affecting privacy attitudes and behaviors. Finally, although scholarly efforts identify drivers of privacy concern, few studies examine its behavioral consequences. The current study addresses these gaps by utilizing the communication privacy management theory to empirically examine privacy-protective attitude and behavior in a Chinese social media context. In what follows, we develop our theoretical model and hypotheses, explain data collection procedures and analysis methods, and present and discuss the results. Subsequently, we suggest practical and theoretical implications of the findings.

2. THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT AND HYPOTHESES

Communication privacy management (CPM) theory (Petronio, 2002) suggests that individuals believe private information is a possession that they have the right to control. Consequently, each person forms an informational space around oneself, and its individually-established boundaries determine information sharing behavior. Depending on the situational and personal factors, any attempt by others to penetrate these boundaries can represent a threat. In social media, due to ubiquitous access to information by anyone, situational factor such as the government policy and personal factor such as trust in other members may affect individual information boundary. The resulting perceived concern may lead limited information disclosure or the provision of false information.

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