

Relations between privacy behaviors and social capital on

"Facebook" / Sivan Gonen

Abstract

Social network websites have gained much attention over the past decade, both from academic communities in many disciplines and from millions of users. Those users visit them daily, share information, experiences and emotions, upload pictures and let the public of network friends into their personal space. The sense of community that social networks instill and the user-friendly interface they provide encourage their members to publicize information about themselves frequently, thus contributing to the creation and maintenance of comprehensive up-to-date profiles about themselves. As a result, they are exposed to many privacy risks. In order to deal with those risks, users develop plenty of strategies regarding their privacy behaviors. In light of the multiple risks to their privacy, inevitably one wonders about the purpose for which those users reveal personal details and jeopardize their privacy. The answer lies in the term of social capital, which assembles the abundance of benefits that social network users gain from participating in the widespread activity of the network. Social capital consists of two types: Binding capital, meaning emotional and social support, mutual interaction and reciprocity; and bridging capital, meaning information and opportunity sharing, broadening one's horizons and belonging to a community. Binding social capital is obtained from strong social ties with close friends, as opposed to bridging social capital, which is usually obtained from weak ties with acquaintances belonging to broader social circles. Those acquaintances are often different from the individual, come from diverse fields of interest and therefore can expose him to new information and opportunities. Our research deals with relations between social network users' privacy behaviors and their achieved social capital.

Objective

Our research objectives were to determine the nature of the relationship between privacy and social capital in "Facebook" social network and to figure out whether

decreasing user's privacy is associated with or contributes to achieving social capital, and if so, how that mechanism of exchange works. Our research also measured social trust, a personality based variable that has to do with social connections. Its involvement in the relations between privacy behaviors and social capital was tested. Furthermore, we measured a number of demographic characteristics in order to test their associations to privacy behaviors and social capital. The rationale of the research was based vastly on the social exchange theory (an economical theory by essence) which argues that the individual is driven by considerations of subjective costs versus benefits of the physical or abstract resources that are invested and produced by his social interaction processes. Our assumptions, devised in that spirit, presume social network users are interested in keeping their privacy, out of a fundamental need to protect it. However, they are forced to make "investments", in the form of certain privacy sacrifices, in order to yield "returns" in response.

Methods

The research was conducted among 140 Israeli "Facebook" users, via a quantitative method using closed-ended questionnaires. The "investment" in decreased privacy is assessed using four privacy measures: Friend selectivity (how selective the user is being while friending others on Facebook), number of Facebook friends (the actual amount of friends in his network lists), privacy control (users' usage of Facebook privacy definitions and their strictness of privacy protection) and information exposure (users' amount of self-exposure on Facebook, including personal pictures, thoughts, opinions etc). the users "return" from the network was assessed using two variables: Bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Moreover, personality traits were measured, including social trust and a few demographic characteristics.

Results

Our research revealed several inner relations amongst the measured privacy behaviors on Facebook: Friend selectivity was found positively associated with privacy control and information exposure. Privacy control and number of Facebook friends were also found to be positively associated with information exposure. Beyond that, research findings show that privacy (as well as its measures tested in this research) is indeed associated with social capital on Facebook, but not in the superficial manner we originally assumed, stipulating that decreasing privacy promotes social capital, but

rather in a more complex model comprising balance and regulation between privacy behaviors. As a part of that balance and regulation act, a certain amount of self exposure is necessary, which is manifested by information exposure and number of Facebook friends being positively correlated with social capital. The number of Facebook friends was found to be positively correlated and a predictor of bridging social capital. Information exposure was found to be positively correlated and a predictor of both bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Nevertheless, our findings indicate that friend selectivity and privacy control also promote social capital, hence expressing the model's balance between self exposure and privacy. Friend selectivity was found to be positively correlated and a predictor of bonding social capital. Privacy control was found to be positively correlated and a predictor of both types of social capital. Additionally, our model was found to have mediation effects, supporting the concept of balance and regulation between privacy behaviors. Privacy control was found to be a mediator between friend selectivity and bonding social capital. Therefore, greater friend selectivity increases privacy control, which in turn induces higher bonding social capital. Information exposure was found to be a mediator between privacy control and both bonding and bridging social capital. Therefore, increased privacy control leads to greater information exposure, which in turn encourages higher bonding and bridging social capital. As for personality traits tested in the research, social trust did not prove to be significantly related to privacy behaviors that were tested, nor was it related to social capital. Nonetheless, a few demographic characteristics proved to be significantly correlated with social trust and some privacy behaviors.

Conclusions

Privacy measures were able to explain 33% and 32% of the total variance in bonding social capital and bridging social capital on "Facebook", respectively. This undeniable evidence leads to the conclusion that apparently, privacy has some sway over the creation of social capital in social network websites and "Facebook" in particular. In conclusion, we describe methodological and research contributions. Moreover, we derive a list of recommendations, based on our research results. Those include practical recommendations for social network website and application designers, meant to help them tailor the network operation and implementation to its users and also for social network users' community ("Facebook" in particularly) about efficient

behavior on online social networks, intended to maximize social capital along with keeping user's privacy. Furthermore, we draw recommendations for further research, needed for bridging gaps in the existing body of knowledge and broadening it.

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