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NAVIGATING BETWEEN PRIVACY SETTINGS AND VISIBILITY RULES: ONLINE SELF-DISCLOSURE IN THE SOCIAL WEB

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In this paper, we focus our attention on the most popular social networking website, Facebook, and analyze the strategies of online self-disclosure and privacy management. Since its arrival – more than 10 years ago – Facebook has transformed the ways in which we communicate with each other in many aspects of our lives (Ellison et al. 2011; Aubrey and Rill, 2013; Fox et al., 2013). However, it has also attracted harsh criticism for its approach to privacy and transparency (Raynes-Goldie, 2010). Facebook has reshaped the way in which individuals think about themselves and construct their identities, with potentially profound consequences stemming from changing boundaries between the private and the public and making social relations visible (Albrechtslund, 2008; Livingstone, 2008; Bazarova et al., 2013; Ellison and boyd, 2013; Hodkinson, 2015).

As highlighted by Stutzman et al., ‘Because social network sites thrive on peer-produced content, disclosure is often concomitant with site use’ (2012:10). Social benefits that Facebook gives in exchange for status updates, photos and videos shared within it are appealing yet problematic. In Facebook, the regulation of social interaction can occur in a number of ways (for example, users may limit access to their profile to ‘Friends only’), and users employ a range of tactics and strategies to protect and manage their online presence, including self-censorship, social steganography and withdrawal of content (Tufekci, 2008; Ellison et al., 2011; Lampinen et al., 2011; Stutzman et al., 2012; Marwick and boyd, 2014; Acquisti et al., 2015). In this sense, the platform’s settings, in conjunction with personal attitudes and behaviors, represent a critical component in determining how and with whom users interact and how they selectively control access to information about themselves (Lampinen et al., 2011; Hogan, 2010).

Extending the existing research on privacy to a European context, we investigate the attitudes toward privacy on Facebook among young Italian people (ages 18-34) by means of their strategies of voluntary self-disclosure, management of the visibility rules

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and audience selectivity. The research was conducted in Udine, Italy, and involved a convenience sample of Italian college students. With a structured online survey, we collected 1,125 responses and decided to analyze a subsample of 813 respondents (41% of men and 59% of women) (1) who reported that they have a Facebook account and (2) who ranged between 18 and 34 years old (82.8 % aged between 18-25 and 17.2% aged 26 or over). The questionnaire consisted of 44 single and multiple-choice questions, which were selected mainly by reviewing the literature and adapting questions from previous studies (Madden and Smith, 2010; Bach, et al., 2011; Lenhart et al., 2011). We specifically analyzed the respondents' main privacy concerns, exploring to which degree personal information is disclosed (i.e., what information is protected, how information is shared, who has access, etc.), whether the concerns relate more to other users, Facebook as a company or third-parties partner, and if these concerns are differentiated by gender.

In general, our results show that the data that are most often kept private and not shared with the Facebook friends are mobile phone number, postal address of residence, and usernames of instant messaging services. The only form of contact details that respondents are inclined to make public is the e-mail address. On the contrary, the level of self-disclosure is high concerning data, such as date of birth, hometown and religion, which are made public to all (not only to Facebook friends) by more than 30 % of the respondents.

The data analysis reveals that the contact information presents the most pronounced gender differences: women are more careful to reveal their contact details with others, especially the mobile phone number, while men are more willing to share their political views and working status on Facebook than women. The two items that do not present statistically significant gender differences are the date of birth and email address.

Only a small minority of the respondents (less than 3%) use Friend lists to control the visibility of content and to restrict it to a specific group of people.

Regarding the levels of privacy concern, in general, it emerged that the highest level of concern is experienced against other users than against Facebook and third-party partners. Women are consistently more concerned about privacy-related risks and are more worried than men about the privacy against other users and privacy against third parties. They are more aware of the online protection of their private sphere and adopt a pro-active self-protection, based on different practices of information disclosure than men. We suggest that these results, from one hand, may be related to a sense of insecurity and to a major risk perception by the women. From the other hand, they may be linked also to the traditional role of women as the organizers and maintainers of the private sphere (Fortunati, 2007).

Further research is needed to 1) overcome the limitations imposed by the sample used in this study, whose findings are hardly generalizable (but comparable, given that also many other studies on Facebook and privacy were conducted among university students); and 2) analyse, through qualitative exploration, the users' practices for the management of the visibility rules and the negotiation of the boundaries between private and public.

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