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SOCIAL MEDIA, COMMERCIALIZATION, AND THE CONTROL OF INFORMATION

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Background

Much of the research on mobile social media has focused on end-consumer users of the technologies (e.g. Frith, 2013; Humphreys, 2007; Lindqvist, Cranshaw, Wiese, Hong, & Zimmerman, 2011). There has been a shift, however, in the categorization of users. Foursquare, like other social media, has begun attending to the business side of their user-base, that is, business owners or managers who use social media to connect with their customers. As of 2014, there were over 1,500,000 businesses on Foursquare (Foursquare, 2014). While emerging research examines how businesses adopt social media (e.g. Nah & Saxton, 2013; Vaast & Kaganer, 2013), the current study explores these business users in relation to issues of social media, commercialization, and privacy.

Privacy has been defined as the control of information, not merely the withholding or hiding of personal information (Altman, 1976). Previous social media research has examined privacy from the perspective of users, customers, or citizens whose priorities and values are sometimes pitted against those of the institutions and organizations which collect and commodify personal information (e.g. Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Albrechtslund, 2008; Barnes, 2007; boyd & Hargittai, 2010; Marwick, 2012; Trottier, 2012).

A key influence in existing research examining social media and privacy practices is Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory (Petronio, 2002) to demonstrate the dialectical tensions of disclosure and privacy for consumer users of social media (Bazarova, 2012; Waters & Ackerman, 2011). CPM theory suggests there are personal and collective rules for managing the boundaries of information revealing and concealing (Petronio, 2002). One of the key principles of CPM is that people feel they own their personal information and that when they share it with others, they become co-owners of such information. This theory was primarily based on interpersonal and family

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studies (Petronio, 2002), but its applicability to small business owners and customers warrants closer examination.

Foursquare has focused increasing attention on establishing relationships with small businesses (Bercovici, 2013). Small businesses, which represent an important economic sector, are independently owned and operated businesses that are not dominant in their field (Peterson, Albaum, & Kozmetsky, 1986). Carland, Hoy, Boulton & Carland (1984) define a small business owner as “an individual who establishes and manages a business for the principal purpose of furthering personal goals” (p. 358). This canonical definition highlights the blurry distinctions between personal and professional motivations and resources of small business owners. As such, small business owners occupy a unique position through which to understand their control and management of information through social media.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the following research questions:

- 1) What kinds of information are generated by and managed through Foursquare by venue-owners?
- 2) How do Foursquare venue-owners think about privacy and the privacy of their customers?

Method

We used an interactive and interpretive framework for data collection and analysis (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). To explore the role of Foursquare for venue-owners, the authors conducted qualitative group interviews with small business owners in New York City and Melbourne in June and August of 2013. Four groups were held, two in each country, consisting of 6-8 participants per group, for a total of 28 participants. A market research firm was hired to help recruit participants, but the authors conducted the group interviews which were video recorded and transcribed.

The criteria for recruitment was being the manager or owner of a business which had claimed a Foursquare venue that people could currently check into and having personal experience using social media services like Foursquare. Participants owned or managed bars, restaurants, bakeries, real estate companies, retail stores, auto repair garages, community centers, among other companies.

The group interviews discussed several issues related to Foursquare including: motivations for establishing the business account, customer interactions through the service, challenges of managing the account, and conceptualizations of privacy. While we were primarily interested in Foursquare, participants often reported on their social media use more broadly.

Social Media Use and Small Business

The paper explores how participants' communication privacy management occurred at three levels with Foursquare: 1) information about the company or business; 2)

information about customers; and, 3) information about the business owner or manager him or herself. Participants reflected dialectical tensions at all three levels of information.

The paper suggests that as we expand our definition of social media user, we again find dialectical values and motivations regarding privacy. Venue-owners in our study struggle with the same rules and management of the information control generated through and around social media platforms as consumer users do. While there is variation in how some of them dealt with these tensions, it is nonetheless important to bring their perspective into the discussion about privacy management and social media more broadly. Moreover, as new socio-spatial information (i.e. who checks in where) is introduced via the mobile social network, it creates new opportunities for engagement, surveillance, and commodification. We identify the key levels of information that need to be managed by venue-owners and explore the ethical dimensions and reflections regarding communication privacy management. Too often the platform or service and the users are the primary focus of inquiry, however, this research suggests that, to understand the broader picture, we must examine the perspective of these business owners as intermediaries who are simultaneously the potential producers and consumers of commodifiable socio-locative information.

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