

“I’ll throw in a courtesy like”: A poster about features, etiquette, and user privacy

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Abstract

A core understanding of the HCI community is that design can affect user behaviour. Additionally, previous research has shown there to be a link between social norms and privacy behaviours. However, there is little research to examine the connection between users’ privacy behaviours and the social norms, or etiquette, attached to specific platform features on social media. In this poster we fill this gap by presenting findings from our interview study with 22 participants, and report instances of privacy-compromising behaviour encouraged by user-perceived platform etiquette. We also discuss how this privacy-compromising etiquette may be reinforced by platforms which reward users for high levels of engagement.

1 Introduction

For years, research has been investigating users’ reasons for partaking in privacy-compromising behaviours. While some explanations focus on individual trade-off decisions or lack of education, others focus more on social factors. Theories such as the theory of Planned Behaviour [1] posit that social norms can impact behaviour, and this has also been applied to privacy contexts [6, 9, 18]. In our investigation of privacy behaviour on social media, we consider platform etiquette. The Cambridge Dictionary [7] defines etiquette as “the set of rules or customs that control accepted behaviour in particular social groups or social situations.” Referring to a list of perceived social media etiquette could be useful in further investigating the stated link between social norms and privacy behaviours. Academic literature exists attempting to explain

social media etiquette in particular contexts including marketing [17], Twitter use during medical conferences [14], and when in mourning [23]. However, there is a lack of academic research which lays out the more general etiquette surrounding the use of particular social media features, and how they relate to privacy behaviours. This is a missed opportunity considering the interconnectedness of social media and thus its obvious opportunity for propagating particular norms: “These networked publics [on social media] function as society with unwritten rules to regulate belief and behavior” [12]. As well, examining connections to particular features can help prompt discussions about how the design of the given features may affect the social norms surrounding their use.

To address this gap in the literature, we present results from an interview study with 22 participants, including social media behaviour and user-reported netiquette surrounding the use of specific social media features.

2 Background

The fact that design can affect user behaviour is undisputed in the HCI community. For example, research on privacy nudges in relation to apps [2] and social media [24] has suggested they may be effective in preventing unintended disclosure. Recently, in a negative light, the term “dark patterns” [5] has emerged to describe design which exploits users, and these exist in a privacy context as well, where users can be tricked into disclosing more information than intended [4]. Despite the awareness of the impact of design on user privacy behaviours, little research examines the intersection between platform design, social norms, and privacy behaviours.

Westin et al. [25] found evidence of “FoMO-centric design” on social media, which prompts users to behave in privacy-compromising ways to avoid negative social consequences associated with “missing out.” Their work focused more on higher-level infrastructure than particular features. In this poster, we investigate the social expectations that surround the use of particular features, to help illustrate the connection between design, social factors, and online privacy behaviours.

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3 Methodology

The analysis presented in this poster is based on data from a larger interview study about online behaviours conducted in June–July 2020. Our current research question is: (RQ) *What are the privacy-related social behaviours and expectations surrounding the use of social media features?*

Recruitment and Pre-screener We recruited participants through our university research participants Facebook group and researcher’s social media accounts, and through emails to personal contacts. Participants had to be over the age of 18, comfortable giving an interview in English, and either a current or past user of the following “online social platforms”: social media, message boards, and/or online multiplayer video games.

Interested participants completed an online pre-screener questionnaire. The pre-screener checked that participants met the inclusion criteria and included Przyblyski et al.’s [16] validated 10-item Fear of Missing Out scale, which rates participants’ FoMO levels on a scale from 10 to 50. Higher scores indicate a stronger Fear of Missing Out.

Participants We interviewed 22 participant (identified as P1 to P22) s with FoMO scores ranging from 11 to 41, and an average FoMO score of 25.8 (SD = 7.53). We did not pre-screen for gender and hence interviewed 18 women and 4 men between the ages 18 and 45, with a median age of 24. Our participants had a variety of educational and professional backgrounds. Amongst them, 12 were employed full-time, 3 were employed part-time, and one was not employed; 4 were full-time students and one identified their situation as “other”.

Questionnaires We used the same research instruments, including questionnaires, from Westin’s interview study [25], with the pre-interview questionnaire containing demographic questions, and the post-interview questionnaire containing Krasnova et al.’s [11] “User Privacy Concerns on OSNs” scale and a repeat of the FoMO scale from the pre-screener.

Interview sessions Using Skype¹ video-conferencing software, we remotely conducted each semi-structured interview. Sessions (including completion of the online pre- and post-interview questionnaires) lasted approximately 60 minutes. Participants were compensated with \$20.

Using the final interview guide presented in Westin’s [25] work as a base, interviews centred on the same topics – (i) Posting Habits, (ii) Joining and Staying on Platforms, (iii) Leaving Platforms, and (iv) Perceptions of Others’ Online Habits and Expectations. We added: (v) Online Behaviour and Expectations since Implementation of Social Distancing Measures.

¹<https://skype.com/>

Analysis While coding the interviews for our primary study, we identified additional under-explored themes in the data relating to particular features and social etiquette. Based on these themes, we created a new codebook and both researchers recoded all interviews, intermittently meeting to discuss agreements and disagreements in coding. Once all data had been coded, we moved to a more refined analysis where we identified patterns and discussed themes.

Both researchers conducting the analysis have backgrounds in usable security and privacy research. One has completed a Masters in human-computer interaction, and the other a Masters in computer science. Both have previous experience with conducting qualitative research and the corresponding analysis processes.

4 Results

We found that overall, there was an expectation of a certain “normal” level of presence and activity on social media. Participants’ reaction to non-active users was largely negative; they used terms such as “luddite,” “alien” (P7), and “suspicious” (P15) to describe non-users, with some going as far as saying non-active users think they are “better” than others. Below is some of the social media “etiquette” that we uncovered in the analysis of our interviews, which spans across platforms and focuses on instances where participants mentioned particular features and demonstrated privacy concerns or discomfort.

4.1 “You Hit Accept and Move On”

From credit card details, to mailing address, to date of birth, participants are inundated with requests for personal information that make them uncomfortable from the moment they first open an app or website. Unavoidable prompts, such as those suggesting linking of accounts, further trigger reluctance. Requests to access the user’s microphone and location give some participants a “Big Brother feeling” (P1) that waxes and wanes as they continue using the app. “I do feel uncomfortable in the moment, but it goes away as soon as I hit accept. Overall when I see a profile of myself [being] built online and [see] that kind of information gathering, I feel increasingly uncomfortable over time” (P3).

Despite privacy concerns and discomfort, participants install apps and join websites to avoid causing inconveniencing or offending their friends. They discussed using Meetup, Facebook, dating apps, Snapchat, TikTok, Uno, and Houseparty. “HouseParty asks you, like, every question under the sun. And I’m like, ‘if this thing asks for my mother’s maiden name, this is like the most in-depth phishing thing I’ve ever seen in my life.’ But yeah, I did reluctantly put that on my phone [...] What made me cave? My friends really wanted to play and I didn’t want to be the party pooper” (P19). Participants have an impression that accepting dubious information requests is simply a given: “I mean, I think it’s what we’ve been taught

since we were kids, right? Just agree and continue because otherwise you can't use it" (P6).

4.2 Don't be rude; engage

Participants noted feeling socially pressured into certain forms of engagement, or feeling that it was an act of "courtesy" to "give [friends] their numbers" (P1) (i.e., by increasing their status count indicators), whether in the form of likes, comments, or views. After receiving interaction from others, participants felt the need to "return the favour" (P5). "[If] someone likes my post and then the same person shares something, [...] I feel really compelled to like the post. I feel bad if I don't because they recently liked something that I posted." This is because, as P4 explains it, it is unclear whether a post gone unliked by a friend means the friend has not seen it, or if they actively dislike it. This insecurity can lead to behaviours such as deleting posts, deleting and reposting at a different time to see if it receives more engagement (P14), or spam-liking another user's posts until they reciprocate.

Overall, there was an expectation that if a friend sees your post, they should interact with it. While users do not always know if their friend is online or has seen a post, online statuses and tagging – which sends the user a notification – can increase pressure. Being tagged in a post led users to re-share or interact with it, in the form of a comment, like, or react. These included being tagged in a Memory, which users may interpret as pressure to reflect their own nostalgia.

Participants also feel pressure to participate in online challenges if they have been tagged or "nominated," and feel the need to "play along" with funny comments or reply to comments more generally, even if they would prefer to end a conversation (P12). Livestreams that show who is viewing also prompt participants to watch or keep watching; P17 watched a friend's baby gender reveal to completion due to a fear of hurting the parents' feelings if they left early. Each of the above situations can lead to potentially privacy-compromising situations where users feel obligated to engage in social niceties that may involve sharing or disclosing more than is comfortable.

4.3 Nonreciprocal friendship is awkward

Pressure to disclose also exists when it comes to allowing others access to one's profile and activity, through friending or following. Even when participants felt uncomfortable accepting a friend request, they did so to avoid potential future awkward interactions with acquaintances. When participants no longer want to see another user's posts, quietly muting or unfollowing becomes preferable to outright unfriending them, to avoid social fallout, but this may not address the ongoing disclosure which made them uncomfortable in the first place.

Participants also want to present an image of being socially desired by assuring that the publicly visible ratio between fol-

lowers and people they follow remains balanced. It is a social faux-pas to be following many more people than you have following you. "The ratio thing on Instagram with followers versus following is something that I pay attention to. And I think others pay attention too" (P1). This ratio is important enough that one participant mentioned liking multiple posts on a user's profile to get noticed and have their follow or friendship request reciprocated.

4.4 Show off your life

Most participants were preoccupied with showcasing the positive, "highlight reel" (P15) version of their life on social media. They felt expected to prove that they are having a good time. This included posting about major positive events in their life, such as graduation, a new job, or marriage even if they felt that this was a private moment. Participants also wanted to appear 'relevant', by avoiding posting older, stale information and opting to post about events while they were still happening or shortly thereafter. Even when not leaving the house during COVID-19 lockdowns, participants observed users who continued to preserve their positive online image or brand by posting photos "wearing some fancy clothes or something like that" (P11).

On top of staying relevant, users also felt the need to post in a varied way. Participants using Instagram described the importance of keeping the content on one's 'grid' (Instagram's 9×9 format for showcasing posts on user profiles) appropriately varied and aesthetically pleasing, by alternating types of content or picture patterns, to attract more followers. Less refined content that does not fit into the user's current grid aesthetic was relegated to Stories (temporary posts that disappear after 24 hours) or spam accounts.

4.5 Keep up with "the algorithm"

Many participants took special care to both monitor and increase engagement. Some participants did so by consciously taking advantage of the unwritten rules (or "game" (P19)) of social media algorithms (often referred to as "the algorithm") which decide which posts and users are displayed to other users and in what order. Participants were aware that users whose posts receive more engagement are more likely to be prioritized on others' feeds or the 'explore' or suggested content page, which means participants sometimes tried to play the "game" of social media in order to increase engagement. This might include keeping one's profile public, choosing to post permanently over sharing a story since these have a greater possibility of being re-shared, and using stories to promote their own or others' more permanent content. Playing the "game" can be problematic when it encourages users to post in privacy-compromising ways for the sake of engagement.

5 Discussion

5.1 How features impact behaviour

Many of our participants either implicitly or explicitly linked their own social acceptance or success to particular social media features. Preoccupation with the “numbers game” can be linked to features which, self-evidently, display numbers (especially publicly), whether it be of followers, comments, views, or likes. Participants reported a social expectation of reciprocity relating to these numbers, especially in cases where little thought or effort is perceived necessary (such as “liking”). Consequences of not adhering to expected reciprocity or engagement from social media connections included negative feelings such as offense or guilt, and repercussions such as unfollowing or unfriending. These feelings were especially present where platforms had automatically made the user’s online presence or viewing status visible to others (arguably leaking private information), or where it was more obvious they had likely seen the content, such as after having received a notification about being tagged. Participants also reported making their profiles public to gain more engagement despite privacy concerns.

5.2 Influencers: netiquette ambassadors

Another factor which likely plays a role in privacy netiquette is the phenomenon of the “influencer.” As celebrities of social media, influencers’ follower counts typically begin in the tens of thousands. They receive incentives both from advertising companies [20] and social media platforms [10, 22, 26] to garner high levels of engagement from followers, including gaining access to exclusive features [21]. As such, influencers apply a range of tactics to increase engagement [8, 19], such as consistently posting about new events in one’s life [21]. As influencers’ style of posting and interacting with others is highly visible, we posit they likely contribute to the engagement-focused, and often privacy-compromising, social norms on the platform.

Indeed, in our interviews we found this behaviour extended to “average” users, as well, with many of our participants reporting a high concern for managing their impression online, such as by posting frequently, keeping their profile public, posting personal life events, and disclosing more information than they are comfortable doing. While many current influencer tactics may encourage users to share more about their lives, they could likely also encourage more privacy-preserving behaviour in the community instead.

5.3 Privacy Implications

Our findings paint a picture of social media etiquette focused around receiving and reciprocating engagement. This can often be in a privacy-compromising way, from the expectation

to opt-in to invasive permissions or terms and conditions, to providing increased information about oneself through likes and comments, to regularly posting about one’s life in stories or posts. Meanwhile, less active or “lurking” behaviour is seen as asocial, even though users have myriad reasons for not participating online [3, 13, 15], some actually being pro-social. Some platforms have an environment where lurking is considered more acceptable or even expected, and perhaps we should be looking to these as inspiration towards encouraging platforms with less engagement-focused social etiquette.

6 Future Work

We found that social media etiquette is largely based around increasing engagement and portraying life in an attractive way, which often requires users to behave in privacy-compromising ways. As our study was primarily exploratory in nature, much of our discovery of etiquette surrounding particular features happened organically in the course of the interviews with participants, and as such we did not discuss every feature or etiquette with every participant. Future work could benefit from diving more deeply into the particular themes discovered in this study, in order to further explore just how particular design features of social media lead to increased privacy-compromising behaviours in users.

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