Impact of Anonymity on Information Sharing through Internal Psychological Processes: A Case of South Korean Online Communities

Ho Lee, Graduate School of Information, Yonsei University, Republic of Korea
Jaewon Choi, Department of Business Administration, Soonchunhyang University, Republic of Korea
Kyung Kyu Kim, Graduate School of Information, Yonsei University, Republic of Korea
Ae Ri Lee, Department of Management Information Systems, Yuhan University, Republic of Korea

ABSTRACT

Many web users post their opinions and information without revealing their identities (i.e., demographics, social standing, and/or expertise); anonymity has become a common form of information exchange in online communities such as social media sites and Internet forums. In the meantime, negative social consequences have resulted from anonymous activities in online communities. Existing literature reports largely mixed results about the impact of online anonymity on online community outcomes. In an effort to clarify these mixed results, this study proposes a new operational definition of online anonymity that consists of three dimensions: unlinkability, unobservability, and pseudonymity. The data used in this study was collected from 238 online community users through a web-based survey conducted in South Korea. The results show that unlinkability, unobservability and pseudonymity positively influence self-discrepancy, which in turn positively influences the quality and quantity of information sharing.

Keywords: Anonymity, Information Sharing, Online Communities, Pseudonymity, Self-Discrepancy, Social Media, Unlinkability, Unobservability

DOI: 10.4018/jgim.2014070103
INTRODUCTION

Online communities such as social networks, Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, microblogging, and wikis have become a common medium of information exchange in an online world. An online community is “an aggregation of individuals who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms” (Porter, 2004). Using nicknames or not very meaningful user IDs, users can exchange their opinions or information in online communities without having to reveal their real identities. Anonymity has become a common aspect of information exchange and, thus, it has been an important issue for online community research (Correa et al., 2010). One can observe new patterns of online behavior due to online anonymity, such as experimenting with different online identities (Rosenmann & Safir, 2006), engaging in behaviors typically disapproved of by others without fear of being held accountable ( Christopherson, 2007), or active participation by those who have less power in an offline world (Dubrovsky et al., 1991). Therefore, increasing attention has been paid to online anonymity (Benjumea et al., 2008; Rowland, 2000).

Anonymity generally refers to “the inability of others to identify an individual or for others to identify one’s self” (Christopherson, 2007, pp. 3039-3040). However, various definitions of online anonymity (e.g., technical anonymity vs. social anonymity, process anonymity vs. content anonymity) and a lack of clear explanations about the relationships with other constructs closely related to online anonymity such as self-concept inhibit our understanding of complex relationships between online anonymity and online community outcomes. For this reason, academic scholars such as Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, and de Groot (2001) have called for further research that attempts to provide a more refined analysis of online anonymity, both in terms of the dimensions and degrees of anonymity.

With regard to empirical studies about anonymity in various academic fields (e.g., social psychology and management), mixed results have been reported due to the conceptual ambiguity. Some studies have found negative effects of online anonymity such as an increase in anti-normative behaviors (Mann, 1981; Zimbardo, 1969), while others have found positive effects on privacy, leading to greater psychological well-being (e.g., Pedersen, 1997). Meanwhile, numerous significant social consequences such as suicide due to malicious comments have resulted from anonymity in online communities. This study argues that these mixed findings can be attributed, to some extent, to ambiguous operational definitions of anonymity. Extant literature about online anonymity has mainly focused on the effects of anonymity without clearly distinguishing the various dimensions of the construct. For example, some research has included a pseudonym as part of online anonymity (Hiltz et al., 1989; Weisband et al., 1995), while others excluded that dimension (Jessup & Tansik, 1991). Considering this situation, a clear operational definition of online anonymity has yet to come. The purpose of this study is to propose an operational definition of online anonymity in the context of online communities so that we can shed light on the mixed empirical results.

Predicating on the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework (Bitner, 1992; Animesh et al., 2011), this study considers self-discrepancy to be a mediating variable between online anonymity and community outcomes. Self-discrepancy refers to the extent to which an online identity differs from a real identity (Suh, 2013). Existing theories related to online anonymity such as self-discrepancy theory and self-presentation theory consider self-concept to be at the center of anonymity research. For example, self-presentation theory states that in an online environment, users can take advantage of the possibility of creating multiple representations of themselves to explore different selves (Turkle, 1997). Given the central role of self-concept in online anonymity, self-discrepancy is considered to be an appropriate mediator.
Decision Support and Data Warehousing: Challenges of a Global Information Environment
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/decision-support-data-warehousing/19014?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/decision-support-data-warehousing/19014?camid=4v1a)