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Analysis of Communication Privacy Management on TikTok

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Abstract: Social media is a digital platform that allows people to create, share and exchange information, ideas and content in various formats, such as text, images, video and audio. It allows people and groups to interact over the internet, allowing them to interact with each other in real time or asynchronously. This research aims to find out how Gen-Z carries out privacy management on the TikTok application. Methods: The research was conducted qualitatively by conducting in-depth interviews with a total of three informants with an analysis method using Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory. The results of this research are that privacy settings in the TikTok application are important and must be maintained by users. The conclusion of this research is related to how users use privacy restrictions on their respective accounts. The results of the research findings can also provide theoretical implications, namely these findings can explain that issues related to privacy in an application like TikTok are very important and as a user you must understand this before or when using the application. The practical implications are that TikTok users can take advantage of the features provided by the application as an effort to protect the privacy of their communications.

Keyword: Social Media, TikTok, Communication Privacy Management , Gen-Z

INTRODUCTION

Several new definitions of social media have emerged, both within the discipline of communication studies and across related fields such as public relations, information science, and mass media. These definitions generally converge on the idea that social media refers to digital technologies that emphasize user-generated content or interactions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Terry, 2009). Social media is often categorized based on the characteristics of its channels, either by identifying the direction of messages (Kent, 2010) or by referring to specific tools such as Facebook or Twitter to illustrate modes of interaction (Howard & Parks, 2012).

Social media has become increasingly significant in modern society. It is a form of online media that enables individuals to easily participate, share, and create content. Examples of social media include blogs, social networking sites, wikis, forums, and virtual worlds. Social media is beneficial as it facilitates interactions among individuals, expanding social connections across geographical and temporal boundaries. It allows users to communicate, express

themselves, disseminate information rapidly, and reduce communication costs (Kartini et al., 2023).

Social media was further developed in the 1970s (Ritholz, 2010) and has since become an integral part of everyday life. Its rise is closely linked to the development of Web 2.0. According to O'Reilly (2006), Web 2.0 "not only represents content provided by individuals for distribution purposes but also signifies human interaction." Over time, the term "social media" has been used to describe this form of communication. Social media is defined as "a group of internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Currently, the most widely used social media platforms include Facebook, with approximately 1.86 billion active users per month, YouTube (1 billion), WhatsApp (1 billion), Instagram (500 million), LinkedIn (433 million), Twitter (320 million), and Google+ (235 million) (Reuter & Kaufhold, 2018).

TikTok is a mobile application developed by ByteDance, a Chinese company, that allows users to record short videos using popular music or audio recordings and share them with other users (Pryde & Prichard, 2022). Although TikTok was initially launched globally in 2018, its popularity surged significantly following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Trifiro, 2023). Today, TikTok is one of the most popular social media platforms worldwide, with hundreds of millions of users, many of whom are children and adolescents who use the app to upload, watch, and browse videos or memes (Weimann & Masri, 2023). Due to its unique appeal, the average TikTok user spends approximately 52 minutes per day on the platform and watches over 200 videos daily (Sun et al., 2023).

The emergence of social media has facilitated global interactions, transforming these platforms into a "safe space" for users to engage in social interactions. Users can virtually visit distant places without physically entering someone's home. While a home is traditionally associated with privacy, social media encourages individuals to voluntarily disclose personal information. This characteristic is exemplified by TikTok, which is particularly known for its short video content. On TikTok, users are encouraged to share meaningful or unique moments from their lives (Kennedy, 2020).

Despite this encouragement and the freedom to share personal information on social media, individuals still tend to regulate and restrict information related to their privacy (Petronio, 2002). This behavior is explained by the Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory. While Social Penetration Theory posits that self-disclosure is a key factor in relationship building, CPM Theory emphasizes that individuals impose boundaries when disclosing personal information. Such boundaries are essential to maintaining relationships, as the absence of privacy regulation could lead to relational damage (Petronio, 2004). Nevertheless, self-disclosure remains a crucial element in maintaining and developing social networks. To build an authentic online profile, users must reveal certain personal information and elements (Krasnova et al., 2012). In this context, individuals must be able to regulate their privacy and establish clear boundaries between private and public content.

The CPM Theory was first developed by Petronio (2002) as a critique of Social Penetration Theory, focusing on the disclosure of personal information (Griffin, 2019). CPM Theory explains one of the most essential yet challenging social processes in daily life: managing the disclosure and protection of personal information (Petronio & Child, 2020). Petronio (2002) argues that personal information disclosure is dialectical, meaning that individuals have the autonomy to freely choose whether to disclose or conceal personal information based on their own criteria and circumstances. Petronio (2002) identifies three core elements of CPM Theory: Privacy Ownership, Privacy Control, and Privacy Turbulence.

The first element, Privacy Ownership, refers to the belief that individuals possess and recognize ownership of their personal information (Thompson et al., 2012). Petronio and Child (2020) argue that individuals hold an inherent right to control and manage their private

information. When individuals recognize their ownership of personal information, they set privacy boundaries to regulate access. The second element, Privacy Control, represents the mechanisms that individuals use to grant or deny access to their private information (Petronio, 2013). People believe they have the right to manage the flow of their personal information and exercise discretion in sharing it with others. The third element, Privacy Turbulence, occurs when individuals mismanage or breach privacy expectations, leading to unintended disclosure (Petronio & Child, 2020). A person may share private information with another individual, expecting confidentiality, yet there remains a risk that the recipient may fail to adhere to or even be unaware of the privacy rules established by the original owner (Thompson et al., 2012).

CPM Theory is grounded in five core assumptions that define how individuals regulate and manage private information. These assumptions include Private Information, Privacy Boundaries, Control and Ownership, Rule-Based Management System, and Privacy Management Dialectics (Petronio, 2002). The first assumption, Private Information, refers to the individual's ability to control their private information when interacting with others (Petronio, 2002; Kennedy et al., 2012). This involves assessing what qualifies as private information and determining the level of intimacy associated with it. The second assumption, Privacy Boundaries, concerns the distinction between public and private information (Petronio, 2002; Petronio, 2013). Privacy boundaries also involve managing personal privacy as well as collective privacy within social groups (Petronio, 2002).

The third assumption, Control and Ownership, conceptualizes privacy through the metaphor of privacy boundaries, which represent the mechanisms individuals use to store and protect their private information (Petronio & Child, 2020). CPM Theory posits that individuals perceive private information as personal property and, therefore, seek to control both its disclosure and concealment (Petronio, 2002). This desire for control arises from the potential risks associated with unregulated information disclosure. The fourth assumption, Rule-Based Management System, refers to the privacy rules that guide individuals' decisions about whether to disclose or withhold personal information (Petronio & Child, 2020). These privacy rules may be influenced by social norms, personal experiences, or situational factors. Privacy management structures help individuals regulate personal and collective privacy within different contexts (Petronio, 2002). The fifth assumption, Privacy Management Dialectics, pertains to the tension between openness and privacy, secrecy and disclosure, public and private interactions, as well as autonomy and interconnectedness (Petronio, 2002). This assumption also highlights the dialectical struggles experienced by both the discloser and the recipient when navigating shared or withheld information (Thompson et al., 2012).

CPM Theory is a well-established communication theory that provides a comprehensive explanation of self-disclosure processes in both offline and online social environments. According to CPM Theory, self-disclosure involves individuals constantly balancing the opposing forces of revealing and concealing personal information. Once disclosed, personal information becomes shared property (Petronio, 2002). The theory extends beyond individual communication and online privacy, encompassing the development and enforcement of communication boundaries through policy regulations (Snyder, 2014). Previous studies have applied CPM Theory to analyze privacy management behaviors on various social media platforms (Child & Agyeman-Budu, 2010).

While self-disclosure fosters connections, it also increases an individual's vulnerability to exploitation by others. Given the risks associated with disclosure, individuals must weigh the potential benefits and drawbacks before sharing personal information. Establishing privacy boundaries allows individuals to determine when, how much, and with whom they disclose private information, as well as to set expectations for shared ownership once disclosure occurs (Petronio, 2002).

Social media has become a primary mode of communication, enabling instantaneous interaction across various platforms. Social networking sites offer users new ways to engage,

maintain relationships, and share information online (Waters & Ackerman, 2011). However, as privacy risks become increasingly unpredictable, privacy management has emerged as a critical issue for consumers, researchers, and practitioners. Studies indicate that privacy remains a key factor influencing users' interactions with emerging technologies, particularly collaborative social technologies (Stutzman & Hartzog, 2012). For example, Waters and Ackerman (2011) found that a user's ability to manage privacy settings effectively impacts their experience on Facebook, as individuals assess both the positive and negative consequences of self-disclosure. Similarly, Browning and Sanderson (2012) discovered that Twitter enables students to maintain social connections, seek information, and share insights with followers. Furthermore, Thompson (2011) applied CPM Theory to study student-athlete interactions with academic advisors, revealing that privacy management dilemmas influence interpersonal relationships in academic settings.

TikTok differs from Facebook and Instagram in terms of platform characteristics. In contrast to mainstream platforms that emphasize curated self-presentation, TikTok positions itself as a space for uninhibited self-expression, particularly among teenagers who engage in spontaneous and playful content creation (Barta & Andalibi, 2021; Lamont, 2020). The platform allows users to authentically express themselves without the formal social constraints often observed on Facebook and Instagram. Unlike these platforms, TikTok does not require direct user interaction to engage with a community; instead, it curates content for users based on their preferences through the "For You" page (Ebert et al., 2023).

Despite its appeal, TikTok presents privacy challenges as it encourages users to be highly authentic and open. As a result, users must navigate privacy boundaries independently, carefully regulating what they share and with whom. In the digital sphere, identity formation serves as a bridge between the need for social interaction and the necessity of privacy. However, online intimacy comes with inherent risks, as compromising personal integrity and security may lead to serious consequences, particularly for content creators. Thus, the key to safe social interactions on TikTok lies not in emphasizing absolute privacy, but rather in establishing clear boundaries (Trifiro, 2023). Users must take proactive measures to protect their personal information, control audience engagement, and mitigate potential threats while maintaining authenticity within the digital landscape.

METHOD

The study is based on Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory and aims to explore how Generation Z manages their privacy on TikTok. Data collection was conducted through interviews with three informants who are active TikTok users. The interviews, lasting less than an hour, were conducted via Zoom using a structured questioning format. The pre-prepared questions covered various aspects, including usage patterns, privacy concerns, interactions with other users, message management, data security, awareness of risks, and actions taken to protect privacy.

This study requires three informants to participate in interviews regarding Privacy Management on the TikTok application. The selection of informants is based on specific criteria to ensure the relevance and depth of the findings. The primary requirement is that participants must belong to Generation Z, specifically individuals aged 18 to 25 years. This age group is selected as they represent the most active demographic on social media platforms, including TikTok, and are highly engaged in digital interactions that involve various levels of privacy management.

In addition to age, informants must be active TikTok users who regularly engage with the platform. This includes individuals who frequently create or share content, interact with other users through comments, likes, and direct messages, or consistently consume videos within the application. Their level of activity ensures that they have firsthand experience with TikTok's

privacy settings and features, providing valuable insights into how privacy is managed in practice.

Furthermore, informants must reside in the Greater Jakarta area (Jabodetabek), which includes Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and Bekasi. This geographic focus allows the study to analyze privacy management behaviors within an urban, digitally connected environment where social media usage is widespread. Understanding how users from this region navigate privacy concerns on TikTok contributes to a localized perspective on digital privacy awareness and online interactions.

Lastly, informants must be willing to participate in the study through a structured interview with the researcher. The interviews will be conducted remotely via Zoom and will last approximately one hour. The discussion will cover various aspects of TikTok privacy management, including usage patterns, privacy concerns, interactions with other users, message management, data security, awareness of risks, and protective measures taken to safeguard personal information. By engaging with informants who meet these criteria, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Generation Z regulates their privacy on TikTok within a contemporary digital landscape.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Every individual has their own way of managing personal information. This study finds that Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory provides a useful framework for exploring how individuals regulate their personal information on social media platforms, particularly TikTok. Users implement strategies to decide what information to share and with whom. Individuals perceive personal information as their own property and feel the need to control it by either disclosing or concealing specific details. The motivation behind this control is largely driven by the potential risks associated with uncontrolled exposure of personal information.

People have varying preferences and levels of comfort regarding self-disclosure on social media. Some TikTok users may be open and freely share their content, while others adopt a more cautious approach in revealing personal information. Several factors influence privacy preferences, including the type of information shared, the platform used, and the motivation for engaging with social media. This study also identifies informants who have had negative experiences, such as receiving inappropriate comments or unsolicited messages. The findings highlight that controlling personal information is crucial for users. TikTok users manage their shared content through the platform's privacy settings, including private accounts, comment and message filters, private uploads, and other features. Additionally, informants demonstrate a tendency to carefully curate their content by selectively disclosing personal details and avoiding full exposure of private information. This approach serves as a strategy to maintain control over the flow of personal data on the platform.

According to interview findings, all three informants predominantly share content related to their daily lives on TikTok. The first informant frequently uploads videos featuring their partner, friends, or family. The second and third informants often post content related to travel experiences. The third informant also utilizes TikTok for educational purposes, sharing tips on TOEFL preparation, Academic Potential Test (TPA) strategies, university admissions guidance, and scholarship information.

Fundamentally, the type of information shared on TikTok varies based on individual preferences. However, all three informants reported avoiding the disclosure of highly private information, such as personal identification details, intimate relationships, health issues, or financial matters. Nonetheless, they acknowledge the necessity of providing basic personal details, such as phone numbers and email addresses, when registering on TikTok.

All three informants expressed concerns about disclosing personal data, such as phone numbers and email addresses, as part of TikTok's registration requirements. They were skeptical about

the security of such information, fearing potential misuse by malicious actors. TikTok also has a policy requiring users to integrate their accounts with email and WhatsApp, which raised concerns for the third informant, who feared that such integration might allow unauthorized access to their email or WhatsApp account.

The second informant recounted experiences of receiving fraudulent messages and unsolicited interactions, which heightened their concerns about potential cybercrimes if their personal data were compromised. Based on the interviews, the most significant risks associated with sharing personal information on TikTok include unauthorized data access and the potential for cybercrimes resulting from privacy breaches.

To manage their personal information on TikTok, all three informants actively use the platform's privacy settings. These include private accounts, private content settings, comment and message filters, and content deletion options. Both the first and second informants frequently enable the private account feature. Specifically, the first informant avoids using their real name as a username and does not display a personal photo. Additionally, they switch to a private account when a video they uploaded gains significant public attention. Similarly, the second informant enables the private account setting when they wish to prevent unwanted interactions or stalking from other TikTok users. Despite the availability of privacy features, all three informants emphasized the importance of exercising personal discretion in determining what content is appropriate for public display on TikTok.

Each of the informants reported experiencing privacy intrusions from unknown users at some point. To mitigate such concerns, they actively utilize TikTok's privacy features. For example, the private account setting is commonly used when they wish to avoid being stalked, though it may be temporarily deactivated when they intend to share content that is inspirational or appealing to a broader audience. Another key strategy involves the use of comment filters, allowing users to block certain keywords to prevent inappropriate or offensive comments from appearing on their videos. This measure ensures a safer viewing experience for both the content creator and their audience. Additionally, informants emphasize the importance of limiting the disclosure of personally identifiable information, preventing others from tracking them or exploiting their data for malicious purposes. When faced with privacy violations, such as unsolicited direct messages, stalking, or inappropriate comments, the informants generally adopt a non-engagement approach, choosing to ignore such interactions rather than responding. This passive strategy helps prevent further privacy breaches or potential escalation of online harassment.

The strategies employed by users are significantly supported by TikTok's built-in privacy features, which facilitate protection against privacy violations. However, it is important to recognize that when users engage with a platform like TikTok, they inherently accept certain risks, including potential privacy breaches. Based on the informants' experiences, their privacy strategies—such as restricting profile visibility, limiting comments, and controlling uploaded content—are effective in enhancing privacy and security. These measures contribute to greater user comfort and reduce the likelihood of privacy violations, both from TikTok itself and from other users.

All three informants expressed concerns regarding the requirement to provide personal contact information (phone number or WhatsApp) for TikTok registration. They feared that such details could be leaked and exploited for fraudulent activities. Another significant concern was TikTok's integration with email and WhatsApp, which allows the platform to send notifications through multiple channels. The third informant questioned the necessity of receiving TikTok notifications via WhatsApp and email, arguing that notifications should be confined to the TikTok platform itself. Meanwhile, the first informant preferred email integration over phone number synchronization, believing that phone numbers are more susceptible to data breaches. The second and third informants shared concerns that syncing

phone numbers and emails increases the risk of account hacking, as a breach in one account could compromise others.

Additionally, the third informant raised concerns about TikTok's administrative access to user data, questioning whether TikTok staff could retrieve personal account information. Another privacy issue highlighted was TikTok's universal download feature, which allows any user to download content, potentially leading to content theft or misuse. Despite these concerns, all informants expressed their intention to continue using TikTok, provided that the platform does not implement unclear or disadvantageous policy changes. Their continued engagement depends on how TikTok's policies evolve over time.

To enhance user privacy protection, TikTok should implement stronger content and comment moderation policies—particularly for inappropriate or harmful content. Although users can manually personalize these settings, it would be beneficial for TikTok to establish default privacy protections, particularly for new users who may be unfamiliar with privacy settings. All three informants expressed greater concern about privacy violations from other users rather than TikTok itself. Therefore, TikTok should take proactive measures to anticipate and prevent privacy threats before they occur.

As a platform that encourages users to share personal and authentic content, TikTok must also address the risks of content theft by implementing stricter policies against unauthorized downloads and the misuse of content through third-party applications. By enhancing its privacy features and enforcing stricter user protection policies, TikTok can improve user trust and safety, ensuring a more secure environment for content creators and viewers alike.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings from this study, privacy management is a crucial aspect that must be maintained when using social media platforms such as TikTok. The behavior observed among users aligns with Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory, which suggests that individuals have a natural tendency to restrict access to their private information. Consequently, users implement personal regulatory strategies to control their content exposure and manage interactions with others. This highlights the importance of privacy control mechanisms on social media platforms.

Personalization features and expanded privacy settings are essential in empowering users to effectively regulate their privacy. As demonstrated by the informants, establishing boundaries is the primary approach to safeguarding personal information. Therefore, providing users with greater flexibility in privacy customization is key to enhancing their ability to navigate and manage their online presence securely.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce the significance of privacy concerns in digital applications such as TikTok. Users must recognize and understand privacy implications before or during their engagement with the platform. From a practical standpoint, TikTok users should leverage the platform's built-in privacy features to enhance their communication privacy. By utilizing available privacy tools, users can better protect their personal information, regulate interactions, and mitigate potential privacy risks while engaging with social media.

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