Analysis on Offline Social Anxiety Triggered by Privacy Exposure from Unrestrained Online Expression

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Abstract. This paper explores whether freedom of expression online has resulted in a loss of privacy and thus negatively impacted off-line social anxiety. It is a theoretical literature review and qualitative mechanism analysis, rather than an original questionnaire, interviews or a database-based empirical study. Based on online disinhibition theory, research on self-disclosure, networked-publics theory, and social anxiety has developed a conceptual model in this paper: Unrestricted online expression increases the likelihood of privacy leakage; this exposure then triggers a loss of control, fear of negative evaluation, anticipatory shame and online-offline self-discrepancy; these mediating paths may ultimately lead to an increase in offline social anxiety. The paper also explains the group differences and boundary conditions. Adolescents and young adults are more sensitive, as peer judgment, identity formation and school-based social networks may make the disclosure of private information more serious. Not all Exposure leads to anxiety. Self-esteem, social support, privacy literacy, content sensitivity and relationship closeness may reduce or increase this effect. The two factors are the social environment that triggers digital privacy risks and reduced awareness of risks in the mind of individuals. Practical responses should combine school-based privacy literacy education, family and community education, platform redistribution warnings and psychological support after exposure.

Keywords: Online expression, privacy exposure, self-disclosure, online disinhibition, offline social anxiety, privacy literacy.

1. Introduction

Digital communication has changed how emotions and lives are expressed by the people. Posts, comments, short videos, voice messages, stories and group chats are all used to communicate casually and quickly. These forms of expression are often private in nature because they happen among friends, classmates, colleagues and followers. The form of digital communication is not the same as that of face-to-face conversation. After posting, the content may be copied, screenshotted, forwarded, searched for and reinterpreted long after the original circumstances have vanished. The same expression that once offered comfort or closeness may later be used by others as proof.

The results of the leak are not limited to online communication. A user may be in a classroom, at work, at home during a family gathering, or in a peer group, and thus fear that others have seen an old post, a private picture, relationship details, or emotional expressions. At this time, the person will also be concerned about what is said. They do not know what will be said about them outside of school. Therefore, offline social anxiety can be seen as a spillover effect of digital exposure; that is, an online event becomes a source of self-monitoring, shame and avoidance in face-to-face situations.

This paper is not an original survey, interview study or statistical analysis based on a public database. It is a theoretical literature review that also conducts a qualitative mechanism analysis. Compile published studies on online disinhibition, self-disclosure, privacy concern, networked publics and social anxiety, and then use scenario-based analysis to clarify the mechanism connecting expression, exposure and offline anxiety. Methodology needs to be introduced because this time the goal is not to find a new causal coefficient but to build a model that will be applied in subsequent empirical tests.

2. Core Variables and Theoretical Model

Unrestrained online expression is the independent variable; that is, it refers to frequent, impulsive, or highly emotional self-disclosure in digital environments. Mediator is the extent of privacy exposure both directly and indirectly caused by leakage. Actual exposure refers to the spread of private content by copy-pasting, forwarding or being viewed by non-intended parties; perceived exposure is a user's belief that such exposure has occurred or may occur in the future. Psychological mediators include a loss of control, fear of negative evaluation, anticipatory shame and online-offline self-discrepancy. The dependent variable is offline social anxiety, which includes avoidance behaviours, excessive self-monitoring, fear of being judged, reduced participation in face-to-face interactions, etc.

The proposed model is: Unrestrained online expression → Privacy exposure → Loss of control / Fear of negative evaluation / Anticipatory shame / Online-offline self-discrepancy → Offline social anxiety. Age, self-esteem, privacy literacy, social support, content sensitivity and relationship closeness are used as moderators. For example, a fourteen-year-old student may be very sensitive to a screenshot that has spread in a class group because peer approval is very important to him at school. A thirty-year-old adult might still feel self-conscious, but they are generally more established in their self-concept, have clearer social boundaries and more coping mechanisms. Therefore, the same exposure will have different psychological effects on different people.

Table 1. Conceptual model of privacy exposure and offline social anxiety

Stage	Core content
Input variable	Unrestrained online expression: impulsive posting, emotional self-disclosure, casual sharing of daily life and relationships
Exposure mechanism	Screenshots, forwarding, cross-circle circulation, decontextualized interpretation and resurfacing of old records
Psychological mediators	Loss of control, fear of negative evaluation, anticipatory shame and online-offline self-discrepancy
Outcome variable	Offline social anxiety: avoidance, self-monitoring, fear of being judged and reduced participation in face-to-face interaction
Moderators	Age, self-esteem, privacy literacy, social support, content type and relationship closeness

3. Why Online Expression Becomes Unrestrained

Online expression is often less restricted due to the disinhibition effect in the internet. Suler believes that anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, psychological distance and a lack of authority may increase a person's willingness to disclose or behave excessively online compared with in their daily life [1]. Socially anxious individuals may feel that online spaces are safer than face-to-face interactions because they have more control over when, how and to what extent they are visible. However, this perceived safety is unreliable. The same platform that facilitates expression also helps to save and spread the content more easily.

Self-disclosure is not to say carelessly. Many people are lonely and anxious, so they turn to the internet. Valkenburg and Peter have found that although the forms of communication young people are adopting online are desirable, they are also associated with certain problems; although new avenues for forming relationships and understanding oneself are offered online, so too are new dangers [2]. Chan's study of social networking users has also reported that social anxiety is positively correlated with self-disclosure in the presence of online disinhibition and psychological stress [3]. Therefore, people who are anxious offline may rely more heavily on online expression and are thus more vulnerable to future privacy risks.

Privacy concern and privacy literacy shape this process. Krasnova and others believe that people share their personal information on social networks hoping to gain some social advantages and are willing to bear the privacy risk [4]. Based on the survey of 452 university students by Ampong and others, a higher perception of privacy risk is related to a reduced willingness for self-disclosure on

social networking sites [5]. Based on the above, it can be concluded that disclosure is motivated by both immediate social rewards and delayed social risks. People with a low sense of privacy are less aware that screenshots can spread widely or reach a large number of people, and thus feel less concern.

4. Real Mechanisms of Privacy Exposure

The first is screenshot sharing. The original poster of a post may delete it, but screenshots have been taken by others on their phones, in group chats, or stored in the cloud. Screenshots are divorced from their original time, place and intended recipients. A private complaint in a temporary story, a joke among a few, or a picture shared with close friends can all be made into permanent objects for forwarding. This leads to a feeling of lost control before any open rebellion.

The second is a crossover circulation device. The content may go from close friends to classmates, from classmates to family members, from family members to teachers or colleagues or strangers. Boyd refers to networked publics as places that are persistent, replicable, scalable and searchable [8]. This means that the affordances of communication will be received by different groups of people. Adolescents are particularly stressed because the self they show to friends may be playful, emotional or rebellious, but the self they present to parents and teachers is usually obedient and controlled. When these groups fragment, all the different groups are forced to take on a single, unregulated public figure.

The third is a lack of context. A sarcastic remark may be regarded as hostility; a brief outburst of emotion is taken to mean a stable personality feature; and a private argument is considered to demonstrate a lack of ethics. Marwick and Boyd have shown that although social media users often believe they are talking to a hypothetical audience, this audience may be more widespread and less predictable in reality [7]. When the context is lost, expression is turned into proof against the user.

The fourth is internet memory. Old posts, comments, photos and chat records may be rediscovered in a fight, during a change of school or a job search, or with a new partner. This "old-account digging" effect gives users the sense that the past has never been fully gone. A person who has had their old content used against them may be wary of later offline relationships, fearing that new classmates, colleagues or romantic partners will find and interpret the previous statements differently.

5. From Exposure to Offline Social Anxiety

When people feel that they have lost control over their own images, the sense of privacy loss is more pronounced. Social anxiety is also a fear of negative evaluation, which is the belief that one will be judged, rejected or mocked by others. Private online information will not be exposed in offline communication due to fear of judgment. The user can imagine particular people, such as classmates, teachers, colleagues, family members or friends, and see the content to form an opinion. O'Day and Heimberg's systematic review have shown that there are many connections between the use of social media and social anxiety, such as evaluative apprehension, comparison, loneliness, and various modes of platform use [6].

The second is anticipated shame. People are ashamed of themselves both after being criticized and before joining society. They may think that others already know some private information and disclose it at any time. Therefore, there is self-monitoring; one does not speak much, avoids eye contact, withdraws from group activities, or keeps checking to see if others are talking about them. Therefore, even when no one speaks about the exposed content openly, anxiety will remain due to uncertainty.

The third and most direct link is online-offline self-discrepancy. People have different versions of themselves in various places. A person may be funny, emotional or critical online but quiet, responsible and reserved offline. Privacy exposure is dangerous because it requires these versions to meet. The contents are not just information; they are also a version of the self that does not conform to the desired offline identity. Adolescents have a stronger sense of incongruence because their sense

of self is still developing, and peer evaluation is emotionally significant. Adults may be motivated by a sense of professionalism, family honour or other reasons.

When fear of evaluation, anticipatory shame and self-discrepancy are strong, people will be reluctant to act. They may reduce participation in class, avoid joining in group activities, or choose to communicate by writing instead. Therefore, it will not address the issue. The less often a person is offline, the fewer chances they have to correct the other person's view or restore trust. Thus, a vicious circle is formed: Anxiety drives one to express online; online expression results in exposure risks; these risks increase offline anxiety; offline anxiety prompts further dependence on the internet.

6. Empirical Support, Group Differences and Boundary Conditions

This paper has not conducted original surveys or used public databases. Support for this has been provided by published and publicly available academic research. Chan's 234-person study of social networking users found that social anxiety was positively associated with self-disclosure, and also reported that online disinhibition and psychological stress moderated this link [3]. Ampong and others conducted surveys of 452 students, found that all three were correlated with self-disclosure: privacy risk, privacy concern, and perceived benefits [5]. The above results support the construction of the proposed links among social anxiety, disinhibition, privacy risk and disclosure, but they do not provide complete evidence for the offline spillover model.

Therefore, the article will present a few testable hypotheses rather than making certain causal claims. First, a higher frequency of private or emotional online disclosure is expected to increase the risk of privacy exposure. Second, a high-frequency exposure is expected to be linked with more severe offline anxiety, especially when the exposed content is intimate, controversial or inconsistent with one's offline self. Third, lower privacy literacy is expected to reduce the sense of risk and increase impulsive disclosure. Fourth, enhanced social support will be available to reduce anxiety from exposure. Future empirical studies can use questionnaire scales to measure the frequency of disclosure, experience of exposure, privacy literacy, perceived loss of control, fear of negative evaluation, self-discrepancy and offline social anxiety, etc., to test this model.

The groups are not the same. Adolescents are more sensitive because school life is highly focused on peers, and their sense of self is still developing [9]. A screenshot in a class group can lead to teasing, exclusion from the group, loss of teacher attention, and family disputes. Young people are in the middle; they use social media frequently but are also under new pressure for performance in work and life. Adults may also be harmed, but they generally have a more stable self-esteem, clearer boundaries, and more repair resources.

A full-featured model should also have boundary conditions. Not all exposure is anxiety. It varies according to personality, self-esteem, social support, type of content, audience hostility and closeness of relationship. Exposure to ordinary hobbies will likely cause only mild anxiety; however, close relationships, family problems, emotional crises or stigmatising experiences are likely to result in more severe anxiety. Disclosure to a close friend may be feasible; however, the same content reaching strangers, teachers, employers or hostile peers will likely cause significant harm. Supportive friends and family can reduce shame; ridicule and moral judgment may increase offline anxiety [10].

7. Practical Responses and Intervention Strategies

First, start by holding school-based privacy literacy classes. Such courses should also teach the passwords and accounts. The four modules should be digital permanence, audience boundaries, emotional posts and repair strategies. Students need to learn that posts, screenshots and chat records can be preserved even after deletion; messages intended for friends may pose a risk if seen by classmates, parents or teachers; anger and sadness can lead to impulsive posting; and after exposure, they should know how to request deletion, seek help and respond to distorted interpretations.

The school will also set rules to prohibit the spreading of unauthorized screenshots, public shaming, and the use of old posts to bully other students. Connect these rules to mental health education to help students understand that exposure of private information can lead to feelings of shame, withdrawal and anxiety. The family and community should not respond to online mistakes by only punishing. Severe punishment will cause shame and make adolescents unable to talk about problems. A more practical reply is to address the audience's risk, emotions and repair.

The design of the platform will reduce exposure risks. Some countermeasures include more explicit audience selection interfaces, stronger default privacy settings for minors, warnings before forwarding sensitive content, limits on cross-group forwarding, and an easier-to-use reporting tool for non-consensual redistribution. Platforms can also show a "cool-off" prompt for posts with excessively emotional language or personal information. Such prompts should not limit expression, but help users slow down and reconsider the audience and future reach of their work.

Some psychological assistance will be provided for the affected people. Schools and counselling services can provide short-term support for managing shame and the fear of evaluation, and gradually resume face-to-face interactions. The peer group will not share private content and will correct the wrong understanding. It is not to be rid of online speech, but rather to prevent one instance of online behavior from turning into an extended problem offline.

8. Conclusion

This paper has proposed that offline social anxiety stemming from a loss of privacy can be modelled as follows: unrestrained expression on the internet increases the risk of privacy disclosure; this disclosure leads to a sense of loss of control, fear of negative evaluation, anticipatory shame and online-offline self-discrepancy, all of which are factors contributing to offline social anxiety. Not all are the same. The following are examples of boundary conditions for different kinds of harm: age, self-esteem, social support, content type, relationship closeness, etc.

There are two theoretical contributions. First, the study will combine online disinhibition theory, research on self-disclosure, privacy studies, networked publics theory and social-anxiety theory into a single explanatory path. Therefore, the direction of research should be adjusted; that is to say, how does "online expression leads to anxiety" occur in society on a more concrete level? Second, there is a deficiency in research that often focuses on online anxiety or online privacy concerns and gives less attention to offline spillover. Digital disclosure may appear in classrooms, at work, in the family, and among peers to alter offline confidence and social participation.

Therefore, although the people concerned are told to be more careful, their anxiety over privacy breaches is not alleviated. Improve people's information literacy and sense of responsibility; enhance educational and organizational support through cooperation among schools, families, communities and platforms. Concrete countermeasures include privacy classes, anti-screenshot regulations, family education sessions, community workshops, platform redistribution warnings and psychological support for those affected by exposure.

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