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Privacy: how it is understood and managed on Facebook. A case study of young Chileans

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Abstracts

Introduction. Facebook users continuously share varied information, including personal data and their physical locations. These practices alter the concept of privacy because data remains available to contacts, while many times it is also of public access. **Methodology.** This article analyzes how young adults (25-34 years old) from Chile conciliate the broadcasting of personal information through Facebook while taking care of their privacy. Through a case study, 20 young adults of Concepción were in-depth interviewed. **Results and conclusions.** The findings show that young adults carefully select the information that will be shared with their contacts, and adopt different strategies to protect their personal information and define who will be able to access specific contents. Concordantly and given a sense of control they consider to have over the information they share, these young adults do not perceive any threat to their social privacy (social surveillance), but they are mistrustful and feel their institutional privacy (institutional surveillance) is threatened.

Keywords

Facebook; privacy; sense of control; personal data; social media.

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1. Introduction. 2. Facebook: General background 3. The concept of privacy. 4. Method. 5. Results. 5.1 How privacy is understood. 5.2. Self-presentation and privacy. 5.3. How privacy is managed. 6. Discussion and conclusions

Traslation by **Tabita Moreno-Becerra** (Dra. en Comunicación, Retórica y Medios Digitales – Universidad de Concepción, Chile)

1. Introduction

Social media are one of the most used Internet services worldwide (Boyd, 2008; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). Understood as those “tools, services and applications that allow people to interact with others, using network technologies” (Boyd, 2008, p. 92), these services are also used on the move because of their accessibility through mobile devices (Humphreys, 2013). Precisely, mobile communication technologies, such as smart phones and tablets, have introduced a “mobile logic” (Ling & Donner, 2009) into individuals’ social interactions because they keep expectations of unending availability, no matter their physical location.

These expectations of constant availability have produced new practices among young people. They daily keep in touch and share content in a continuous process of updating social media profiles and interacting with physically close and distant others, while moving through different spaces and places of their daily lives. The broadcasted information will remain available to their social media contacts and, at the same time, it will be recorded by diverse databases.

In the particular case of Chile, the country is in the fourth place among emergent nations (Pew Research Center, 2014), regarding the use of mobile Internet. Moreover, the use of social media, with a monthly average of 5.3 hours per visitor, stands out among Internet-based activities. In fact, over a third of Chilean population maintains a social media profile (Daie, 2012, 2013, 2014), with Facebook particularly captivating users’ preferences, as it accounts for 94% of the total hours spent connected to those services (Daie, 2013).

This shows how much of the overall social media use, and Facebook in particular, now takes place on the move through mobile devices and integrated into the dynamic physical and social contexts of everyday life (Vladar & Fife, 2010; Plew, 2009; Urista et al., 2008; Hargittai, 2008). Continuously updating social media profiles with a variety of information, from basic personal data to the physical location of users, alters the concept of privacy and it raises new questions regarding individuals’ *institutional* and *social* privacy.

As Raynes-Goldie (2010) establishes, *institutional privacy* refers to the information that different institutions record through diverse databases, whose aim is developing a person’s profile as finished as possible. This profile, which gets increasingly accurate, enables these institutions to modify advertising offers according to every user’s particular interests, as it does nowadays on Facebook. The term *social privacy* refers to the information that is shared by social media users themselves

among their social ties, which has been facilitated with the use of mobile platforms and continuous access to different social media.

Although research on social media is extensive within developed countries, in Chile it is rather scarce. This research has been focused on statistics of diffusion and access (Daie, 2014) or the incidence of these services use in political participation, especially among young people (Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman, 2012; Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman, 2014). Therefore, it is a pending debt to analyze how these new scenarios of technological convergence play a role in the ways that people understand, manage and take care of their privacy. All while considering how, as Höflich (2006) claims, “The private, even the intimate, is exposed to the full gaze of the public eye” (p. 59). Consequently, the present article accounts for how young Facebook users in Chile reconcile their behavior of broadcasting personal information through this medium, as they strive to take care of their privacy.

The first section of this article frames the study within a Chilean context, including Facebook’s background and its use in Chile, as well as the theoretical framework for the concept of privacy. Then, the methodology used in this study is detailed, and is followed by the discussion about the main findings and how they connect with the existing literature. Finally, this article concludes that Facebook users, those who participate in this study, take care of their privacy and are aware of the social and institutional surveillance that they are exposed to, consequently adopting different strategies in order to protect what they consider personal information.

2. Facebook: General background

Facebook currently has more than a billion active users around the world (Facebook, 2016). In the case of the United States, more than a half of its population (52%) uses two or more social media, but Facebook continues being people’s preference (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart & Madden, 2015). The same trend is seen in Chile, where 93% of Internet users keep a social media profile, with Facebook leading users’ preferences (Daie, 2014). For example, 86% of those between 18 and 29 years old are registered on this social media (Universidad Diego Portales, 2011).

In regard to Chile, Facebook’s massive wide spreading happened during 2008. This was clearly noticeable when in only six months the number of connected users grew by more than 2 thousand percent, going from 106 thousand 960 users in February of 2008, to 2 million 456 thousand 480 in July of the same year. Currently, and according to Facebook data (2016), Chile has 10 million active users per month, and 76% of them connect daily to this platform. With this being said, Chile is one of the countries with the most active Facebook users in Latin America.

In such a context, Chilean people, whose list of contacts average 325 friends, share huge loads of information through Facebook everyday. Even though this service, created in 2004 by a group of Harvard University’s students lead by Mark Zuckerberg, declares that its mission is giving power to people to share and create a more open and connected world (Facebook, 2016), users’ perception on the protection that the company has over their data has become a complex issue to the company’s

image. This is because today's users question the treatment and security of personal information that they share across this platform (Rogers, 2012).

Privacy care has become very important, since the use of social media has increased the volume of information that users share over the Internet. Precisely, given the amount and type of information that people post every day, it has been argued that they do not care about their privacy. In this regard, one of the concepts that has marked earlier researches about social media privacy is the notion of *privacy paradox* (Barnes, 2006), which refers to the discrepancies between people's interests in their privacy and their actual behaviors adopted in its care, which means that although users are concerned about their privacy, they make minimal efforts (even null) in order to protect their personal information. Based on this perspective, Acquisti y Gross (2006) indicate that although most users express concern about their privacy in general, they are unaware of their privacy on Facebook and, in some cases, they are simply unaware of their information visibility on this social medium.

Nevertheless, Facebook users' attitude regarding their privacy has changed over time (Utz & Krämer, 2009). Currently, users modify these services' default privacy settings, which has led to a significant increase in the use of privacy settings (Stutzman & Kramer-Duffield, 2010) and has made social media users much more active when setting up and managing their social media accounts (Pew Research Center, 2012).

While users show greater awareness and care about their accounts' privacy settings, Facebook has consistently changed its privacy policies towards a less restrictive model and more likely to reveal the actions that its users daily perform. These constant modifications have caused concern among users, who urge their contacts to meticulously protect their data (Rogers, 2012).

In general, users are concerned that "the company is eroding user privacy and making substantial information public" of their lives (Rothery, 2010, p. 23). However, and although there is an awareness to safeguard data, this task is not always easy or clear for those who are registered and actively use Facebook.

3. The concept of privacy

The privacy concept is a difficult term to define (Solove, 2008). Firstly, it is a social and contextually constructed concept, which means that it is understood differently in diverse places and contexts (Dourish & Bell, 2011). Secondly, the concept of privacy is closely linked to trust (Seigneur & Jensen, 2004) because both terms refer to the known or shared information about others. If on one hand it is necessary to share information to build trust, on the other privacy points to protect and contain such information. The more information is shared, the greater the trust, but at the same time the level of privacy decreases. Lastly, privacy corresponds to a sense of control over the social situation, the shared information and who will access that information (Boyd, 2008).

Having into account that privacy is socially and contextually constructed, it is important to recognize how this concept has been understood in Chile. Chile's Constitution establishes the right to privacy

of every person, declaring “the inviolability [...] of every ways of private communication” (art. 19). Similar to other parts of the world, Chile has important laws that safeguard people’s economic and health data. Particularly, the 19.628 law addresses the protection of individuals’ private life and personal data, especially the data that has been recorded by private and governmental institutions. This law defines sensitive information as data related to personal aspects and moral characteristics, for example personal habits, racial origin, religious belief, physical and psychological state of health, sex life, ideology and political opinions. It is a law oriented to protect people from surveillance exerted by organizations that record individuals’ data and, therefore, it is centered in the protection of institutional privacy without considering social privacy and, subsequently, surveillance exerted by social ties like friends, acquaintances or colleagues. Currently, such legislation is under evaluation because OECD’s observers have highlighted the relevance of adapting Chilean legislation to the standards of this international organization that jealously protects private information.

Therefore, the concept of privacy needs to be conceptually understood as a socially and contextually constructed process, from the balance between private and what is disseminated, with a clear sense of control over the information that is broadcasted and with whom it is shared. In this context, it is important to recognize how these three elements are considered in Facebook users’ behaviors when they broadcast information and, at the same time, take care of protecting their personal data. Ultimately, the aim is to examine how the level of concern for the care of privacy determines practices of sharing personal information through Facebook, as well as those measures taken to safeguard that information.

4. Method

This research corresponds to an exploratory and qualitative study, whose data was gathered through in-depth interviews, applied to young adults Facebook users from Concepcion, Chile. From a criteria sample, the young adults (25 -34 years old) selected were those who use Facebook and mobile devices to keep connected. This last feature determines that the sample was composed of medium to high socioeconomic professional status, according to Chile’s socioeconomic map defined by Adimark (Adimark, 2016). Therefore, the sample does not represent the totality of the young adult Chilean population; however, it should be clarified that this study does not attempt to draw universal conclusions. Instead, it aims to describe a new reality that has not been analyzed in a Chilean context, as a strategy to lay the theoretical foundation that can subsequently guide a larger study in this area.

The in-depth interview included a section that gathered socio-demographic data and a section oriented to know how participants understood their privacy and conciliated that with their behaviors of sharing information through Facebook.

Based on Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the analysis of gathered data enables to inductively develop the theoretical postulate from those subjects defined by this study’s participants. While data comes mostly from in-depth interviews, the analysis also included the collected data in situational follow-up interviews, memes and field notes. Consequently, creating a

process of advancement in the interpretation of data and returning to reformulate and incorporate new questions as respondents contributed to articulate the studied subject.

From the starting stages of fieldwork, data was analyzed to find initial codes and analytic ideas that guided subsequent data collection and analysis. In this phase, data segments were labeled, defining initial codes and identifying key topics. Thus, initial codes emerged from a simple word or phrase to complete paragraphs, and from this process data segments were detected, which made it possible to identify theoretical categories. Drawing on the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), thematic similarities and differences were defined in order to establish some analytic directions. Then, focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) was used to the theoretical integration from most relevant and recurring codes on which emerging categories were developed.

During the coding reduction and linking of categories, Atlas.ti, software used for qualitative analysis, facilitated the process of discovering different themes that connected diverse categories and subcategories. Although the analysis showed a variety of categories and themes, only those relating to privacy, in the context of daily use of Facebook, are presented here.

5. Results

This study included twenty participants, whose ages range from 25 to 33 years old. 12 women and 8 men, all of them Facebook users, accessed this service either through mobile (primarily cell phone) or fixed devices (personal computer). Most participants (18) used smartphones to remain continuously connected to Facebook.

This study’s participants recognize the relevance of their mobile devices and the use of Facebook and other social media as part of their daily activities and as a way of keeping connected regardless of physical distances. In this context of constant connectivity, participants remain interested in their privacy, in relation to their social ties (*social privacy*), and report a high sense of control over their own information available through their Facebook accounts. At the same time, they show a sense of control over their privacy settings, much more than they did when they began using Facebook. Below, and as noted earlier, this article details only those analytic themes and categories related to privacy and the use of Facebook.

As Table 1 shows, codes and categories were grouped into three main themes: (1) How privacy is understood, (2) Self-presentation and privacy, and (3) How privacy is managed.

TABLE 1: Analytic themes, categories and codes in relation to privacy on Facebook

ANALYTIC THEMES	CATEGORY NAME	EXAMPLE	CODES INCLUDED IN CATEGORY
How privacy is understood	What is meant by private information?	<p>“Private information is something that I do not want to share with others or just with a few trustworthy people. I don’t know, privacy is related to trust as well.” (Cristina)</p> <p>“The most important private thing for me is the</p>	Privacy in relation to trust / Privacy as personal information / Private information / Private information and family

		family. I will not publish anything about my girlfriend.” (Carlos)	
	Privacy as a sense of control	<p>“It is your decision what you want to share, and you have to learn how to protect yourself the same way you protect your wallet when you are on the streets.” (Claudio)</p> <p>“I do not publish anything embarrassing. Nothing I would not want my boss to see.” (Natalia)</p>	Sense of control / what people decide NOT to publish / Sharing information / Personal information protection / personal information concerns
	Content and social ties broadcasting (social privacy)	<p>“I don’t like Facebook because there is too much gossip. I can search for a person, and there it is, his or her entire history.” (Carlos)</p> <p>“I found that somehow, Facebook is used a lot for gossiping too. There are a lot of people who don’t feel anything for their friends on Facebook. They just want to be able to know what is happening in their lives.” (Claudia)</p>	Meddling in the lives of others / Rubbernecking / Criticism about monitoring others’ information / Desire to be updated about others’ lives
	Facebook databases and third parties (institutional privacy)	<p>“I have the impression that it is [Facebook] so less private than people likely think or perceive. I am sure Facebook collects tons of information about us and sells it.” (Lily)</p> <p>“Does not matter. All our information is on Internet, and it is possible to find it in any place: banks and large companies always share their databases among them. What you have to protect is the password of your banking account.” (Claudio)</p>	Personal information used by third parties / Data gathering for selling / Resignation to data collection by companies
	Privacy and life roles	<p>“Yes, it is just I, I have now become like this, I believe it is due to being a mom, because I didn’t use to see it that way ahhhh. Now, due to having a son, I do not even expose pictures of him that much. I mean, I do share them with mine [family members and friends] that is why I created another Facebook account, because I do like privacy. Therefore, I am now kind of backing the idea to care for privacy, but I think it is because I am a mom.” (Paula)</p>	Changes of life roles / children’s privacy protection / others’ privacy protection / changes in the modes of using Facebook
Self-presentation and privacy	What people share about themselves	<p>“I know some people share everything, everything. However, I am aware who my audience is and what part of me I want to expose. I do not share everything; it is not my entire life. It is just an online persona.” (Cristina)</p>	Self-presentation / awareness of who gets a message / What people expose of themselves / self-awareness
	Personal information and privacy	<p>“I try to publish only generic or entertaining issues, but nothing that can expose my privacy and my personal information.” (Paulina)</p>	What decide to publish / parameters to publish or not / Degree of exposure / In which cases people publish content
	Face-to-face and Facebook	<p>“People who do not filter what they share on Facebook, neither filter their comments in online</p>	Face-to-face conversations / behaviors through Facebook

	relationships	conversations. Shown behaviors on social media are simply an echo of how those people actually are.” (Claudio)	/ what is shared face-to-face / what is shared on Facebook
How privacy is managed	Safeguard strategies: Facebook account privacy settings	“The other time I modified [privacy settings] in order to just let my friends see my things [...]. I modified that because before it was public, anyone who saw my name could check everything.” (Felipe)	Modify default privacy settings / Protect access password / Define account with private access / Restrict public posts / Publish pictures with private access
	Safeguard strategies: Publication for specific targets	“My Facebook profile is highly private and I share information just with my friends. I have never published anything with public access, and I set different lists of contacts to publish some stuff just for a group of friends.” (Carolina)	Create list of contacts / Content according to groups / Friends as trustworthy publics
	Safeguard strategies: Use of different social media according to purposes	“I use Facebook to connect with my family and closer friends, while I use Twitter to publish more generic and public information.” (Angélica)	Why use Facebook / Why use Twitter / Why use other social media
	Safeguard strategies: Use of more than one Facebook account	I have two Facebook accounts. In one of them, I almost do not have any friends, and I just use it to play. The another account is the real one, and I use it to keep in contact with my friends.” (Claudio)	Number of Facebook accounts / Why do you use more than one Facebook account? / When do you use more than one Facebook account? Facebook account to play / Nicknames use
	Safeguard strategies: Contact list updates	“I usually check my list of contacts, and I delete people with whom I am not frequently interacting.” (Andrea)	Remove tags / Lock contacts / Delete contacts
	How privacy is NOT protected	“Sometimes, there are people who are on Facebook and have friends and everything there, everything, everything, what they do, where they live; it is like leaving the door to your house open with the key outside.” (Martín)	Careless behaviors / Little care of published information / Criticism of what others publish / information that should not be published

Source: Authors’ own creation

5.1. How privacy is understood

Participants understand their privacy in relation to the information they decide to publish and that they prefer to keep private, particularly all the information regarding family, couple, friends or trustworthy people. In this sense, they relate privacy to the degree of trust towards others, which means they prefer to share information only with those they trust.

In this regard, the level of privacy care is modified according to the roles that each person must assume within society. For instance, becoming a mother to Claudia meant to increase her measures

to protect the privacy of the information she published through Facebook or simply decrease the number of posts she made through this platform. Something similar is expressed by those participants who have joined the labor market, for which they pay more attention to the content they publish, because they would not like to make available on Facebook any information that could be seen by his superior at work.

In every participant's affirmations, it is possible to appreciate that they do not express concerns about their privacy because they declare a sense of control over the information they share with their Facebook contacts, especially because they use this medium to stay in touch with people they already have met face-to-face and, moreover, are trusted. All participants keep their accounts configured on private mode and, therefore, they mainly share information with their list of contacts.

If on one hand participants are careful about what they publish, on the other hand they recognize and criticize the use of Facebook to keep abreast of others' activities. They identify one of their practices of monitoring the activities of their contacts on Facebook using the *facebucear* concept. Resulting from the combination of the terms Facebook and *bucear* (Spanish for the verb to dive), this word is used by participants to describe how they use the platform to exert social surveillance. This term refers to the ongoing action of scrutinizing the information published by an individual's contacts as a way to stay informed about what is going on with them.

In this sense, participants critically reflect on the passive use of Facebook, marked by users' preference of checking others' information instead of producing content or updating their own profiles. Although participants give a negative connotation to this use and declare they should try to avoid it because it is seen as meddling in other people's lives, it is recognized as a generalized practice among most Facebook users with whom they continually interact.

It is relevant to note that participants like Claudio equally care for activities that might compromise their privacy in both physical and digital spaces of their daily lives. Nevertheless, and in general, all privacy-care strategies mentioned by participants point to the protection of their social privacy. In fact, they assert having control over content and personal information their friends or Facebook contacts can see.

However, they are more pessimistic with regard to the protection of their institutional privacy, one that can be vertically exerted by both public and private organizations (Facebook records and its delivery to third parties). Although the Chilean law safeguards the protection of citizens' institutional privacy, participants declare being aware that their data is gathered by private and public organizations; and they show awareness that their data is recorded, stored and delivered to third parties by Facebook. As a result, they feel there is very little they can do against it, except to avoid publishing information they want to keep private.

5.2. Self-presentation and privacy

As happens in any physical and digital space, participants present a part of their personality through Facebook, depending on the circumstances and recipients of their messages. For example,

participants choose to publish positive and more impersonal information, such as “I have to exercise because I ate too much” (Natalia) or “generic or entertaining topics” (Paulina). Even further, some participants declare to create a character to show on social media in general, and on Facebook in particular.

Depicted strategies emerge in response to the diversity of audiences (family, friends, colleagues, etc.) that Facebook users have within their list of contacts. Considering this diversity, participants publish what they enjoy, like their tastes related to literature, music, sport and others, or who their best friends are. By contrast, they avoid publishing information about their hometowns, age, failures, negative moods, or embarrassing situations. For instance, as Cristina says, “I would not publish a picture of me waking up because one tries to present a pleasant part of oneself.” Consequently, they prefer not to publish emotions because they consider it is too personal, unless those emotions might be positive: joy, the satisfaction of a good conversation with someone, a surprise visit from a friend, among others.

In those cases in which shared information is not generic, participants choose to publish it for specific targets or lists of defined people from their total contacts. Nevertheless, according to participants, the information every user chooses to share simply constitutes a reflection of how that person is in his/her daily life. Therefore, someone who does not care about his/her data on Facebook will neither do in his/her offline life.

5.3. How privacy is managed

Consistent with the sense of control that participants declare to keep over their own information, they report to use different mechanisms to better protect their data, such as modifying their privacy settings on Facebook, publishing content for specific groups and not for the entire list of contacts, using different social media according to diverse purposes, determining whether or not allowing for public access to certain shared information, updating their contact list (lock, delete), and even maintaining more than one Facebook account.

Other strategies shown by participants correspond to the creation of fake accounts to check other people’s information or just playing without being recognized, the use of nicknames in order to protect their social identities and make it difficult to be found through search engines, deleting older publications or tags on other individuals’ pictures, and adding to their list of contacts on Facebook only people previously known face-to-face.

In other words, the study’s participants are aware of the need to take measures to protect their privacy. As a result, they choose to restrict the access of others to their profiles, remove their names from pictures where they have been labeled or, quite simply, delete people from their contact list on Facebook.

None of the participants refer to him/herself as someone who does not protect his/her privacy. Each time they mention modes of neglecting privacy, they report the role of third parties, whose behaviors jeopardize their personal information and, therefore, their privacy. Most of actions identified as

neglected are related to sharing the list of friends, posting house locations and places where they are physically, what they are doing at a given moment, children's pictures, breakups and emotions of sadness, among others.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Young adults from Concepción, Chile, composed this study's participant group. They are frequent users of social media in general, and Facebook in particular. As active Facebook users, participants take care of the information they share and with whom they do it through this social medium. They show high levels of awareness of privacy issues and how to protect it, especially from *social surveillance*. In order to do this, they change privacy settings of their Facebook accounts and adopt different strategies to protect their personal data. Participants do not feel their personal privacy is threatened by the use of social media, because they understand privacy as a sense of control over the information they share (Boyd, 2008), while they perceive and declare that such control is on their hands.

Consistent with the existing literature, the attitudes of these users in relation to privacy have changed over time, so they now declare to have more control over their own shared content (Utz & Krämer, 2009; Tufekci, 2008). Therefore, their attitude towards privacy is related to the levels of perceived control over their own information and who can access it (de Souza e Silva, 2012; Boyd, 2008). However, it draws attention that participants on the one hand declare to protect their privacy, know their audiences and maintain control over what they want or not to publish, but on the other hand they criticize the possibility of meddling on others' information, an issue that it is even declared as the main activity done on Facebook. As a result, it is feared to ask how it is possible to know so much details of every person through Facebook, if users are supposedly being very careful about what they post.

In this sense, it is possible to see that there exist dissonances between what participants declare to publish and what they actually broadcast through Facebook, as there is more information than what they point as possible to share. Due to this, it is important to consider a following research step that uses other instruments for data collection, such as participants' actual postings, as well as their interactions with others through Facebook, so it would be possible to compare what they declare to publish with that they actually share on the platform.

In relation to the institutional surveillance, it is seen that participants do not trust Facebook because of the ways they perceive the company manages its users' data. Moreover, they remain aware that different institutions and huge corporations continually gather personal information that Facebook users post. In this regarding, they express resignation as they feel they cannot avoid it and, therefore, the only way of keeping something in private is simply not to publish it on the Internet.

In conclusion, this study's findings show how this group of young adults reconciles their mobile practices of Facebook use and behaviors of sharing information with the care of their privacy. Nonetheless, future researches should include other techniques to gather data, increase the number of participants, as well as considering a more varied sample according to socioeconomic and

educational backgrounds, especially bearing in mind that the use of information and communication technologies is highly influenced by economic and educational differences in Chile (Canessa, Maldifassi & Quezada, 2011). This is especially relevant in Chile where the uneven income distribution determines a differential access and appropriation of technologies (OECD, 2013).

In fact, most of this study's participants show high access to technologies due to their better economic and educational reality. As a result, it is crucial to analyze how people of lower socioeconomic and educational backgrounds behave in order to assess if there are differences, especially regarding the control they keep when they share information through Facebook. In the same way, it would be interesting to examine how other age groups, like teenagers, respond in order to determine if they also present this sense of control over the information they post on social media and the adoption of strategies to protect their privacy.

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