Research Article

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Privacy Perceptions: Online and Offline Self-Disclosure among WeChat Users

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Abstract

Drawing on the Cultivation Theory and the Stressor–Strain–Outcome (S-S-O) Model, this study aims to examine the connections among WeChat use, privacy perception, perceived privacy threats, perceived governmental support for privacy protection, privacy concern, privacy fatigue, and online and offline self-disclosure. A cross-sectional survey with self-administered questionnaire was conducted with 522 adult WeChat users in China and Thailand. Hypothesis testing based on Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) reveal that WeChat use, privacy perception, perceived privacy threats, perceived government support for privacy protection, privacy concern, privacy fatigue and online and offline self-disclosure are all positively related. WeChat use positively correlates with

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privacy perception, perceived privacy threats and perceived governmental support for privacy protection. Privacy perception positively predicted perceived privacy threats, but neither directly predicted online or offline self-disclosure. Perceived privacy threats are a more direct cause, and are positively associated with privacy concern, privacy fatigue, and both types of self-disclosure. Privacy concern was positively correlated with online self-disclosure, and privacy fatigue was also positively related to both online and offline self-disclosure. Perceived governmental support for privacy protection positively related to offline self-disclosure but did not directly predict online self-disclosure. And it reduced the impact of the perceived privacy threat on privacy concerns. Accordingly, the phenomenon of privacy-related behaviors on WeChat cannot be explained by the mere knowledge of privacy. Under the condition of a super-app, the reasons for a person's self-disclosure are more numerous and include threats to the self, threats, concern, etc., as well as institutional support. This study made a new academic contribution on privacy, different platforms of self-disclosure, and social media by revealing that perceived privacy threats may occur simultaneously with continuous self-disclosure, and the different paths by which privacy-related factors affect online and offline self-disclosure have been distinguished.

Keywords: *WeChat, Privacy Perception, Self-Disclosure, Cultivation Theory, Online and Offline Behavior, Governmental Privacy Protection*

Introduction

The mobile Internet has spread fast and so is digital interaction with it, particularly in China where the mobile Internet and instant messaging are popular. WeChat has become a super-app that combines communication, social media, payment, public accounts, mini-programs and daily services, which is a good environment to explore the perception of privacy and self-disclosure (Mombeuil & Uhde, 2021; Wang et al., 2025). While the privacy paradox indicates that users might still share personal data despite their concerns, prior research tends to primarily emphasize online disclosure, with less attention to the influence of privacy on self-disclosure both online and offline (Dong, 2024; Hong et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). Hence, the aim of this study is to explore the joint effect of WeChat use, privacy perception, perceived privacy threats, perceived governmental support, privacy concern and privacy fatigue on self-disclosure on WeChat as well as on self-disclosure on other platforms (online and offline) among WeChat users who continue to use WeChat

in Thailand within a different social and institutional environment.

Objectives of the Study

This study explored how people's use of WeChat affects their sense of privacy, perceived privacy threats and support for protection by the government, and willingness to disclose personal information online and offline by examining the direct impact of privacy perception on disclosure behavior, the mediating role of psychological strain, the moderating effect of governmental protection, and the different mechanisms for online and offline self-disclosure in a cultivation-oriented social media environment.

Literature Review

WeChat social media and self-disclosure in WeChat contexts

Self-disclosure is the conscious and deliberate act of sharing personal information, which involves decisions regarding timing, method and audience for disclosure. Previous research indicates that disclosure tends to happen gradually and that a vulnerability of privacy in disclosure exists (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Westin, 1967), and that computer mediated communication can decrease social cues, lower the barriers to sharing and speed up the formation of relationships. Information shared on social networking sites can be archived, shared, sought out, traced and monitored by larger audiences, altering its meaning and implications of disclosure (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In the super-app environment of WeChat, all the functions (messaging, Moments, groups, payment, public accounts, mini-programs, personalization, data analysis, and uses and gratification) can collectively contribute to users' privacy perception, perceived privacy threats, and online/offline self-disclosure.

Privacy perception, privacy fatigue, and self-disclosure

Privacy perception is a users' overall assessment of the way personal information is collected, used, misused, controlled and protected by institutions (Xu et al., 2011). Users appreciate privacy but also may share information for purposes of social interaction, convenience, dependency on the platform and/or for perceived benefits, as illustrated by the privacy paradox (Norberg et al., 2007). Privacy fatigue is a psychological state of exhaustion due to the multiple privacy choices, warnings, settings, and requests for data, which can be amplified by information and social overload,

and which can result in less privacy managing or social media reducing (Ahmad & Cavus, 2019.; Eppler & Mengis, 2004; Maier et al., 2015; Podobnik et al., 2023). As for perceived privacy threats, they include tangible threats like misuse of information, unauthorized access, surveillance or disclosure of personal data, but institutional protection in terms of regulation and accountability can mitigate perceived privacy threats (Corcoran et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2011). Thus, it could be said that WeChat self-disclosure is a multi-faceted outcome of privacy perception, perceived threats, privacy concern, privacy fatigue, and institutional support that might decrease both posting as well as interaction and platform usage (Fang, 2023; Song et al. 2021).

Research gaps and conceptual linkage

While previous research has studied privacy perception and self-disclosure as well as social media fatigue, there are few studies on the combined effect of privacy awareness, perceived threats, institutional support and social media fatigue on self-disclosure in integrated social media like WeChat. Thus, this study takes WeChat as a super-app context where communication, social networking, payment, public account and mini programs are combined. It identifies and differentiates privacy perception, perceived privacy threats, privacy concern, and privacy fatigue, and examines how these factors collectively influence self-disclosure online and offline.

Research Methodology

Through a quantitative cross-sectional survey, the relationship between WeChat usage, privacy perception, perceived privacy threats, psychological reactions as well as self-disclosure was examined. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to assess the multiple latent variables and interrelated paths in a single model (Weston & Gore, 2006). The sample chosen was adult daily WeChat users in mainland China and overseas Chinese-speaking communities (as exampled by Thailand) but not representative of all WeChat users. It is important to note that the results are only between the sample surveyed, and that the perceived governmental support was based on the overall governance and regulatory environment of WeChat and personal information protection, not only on the local country of the respondents.

Research context and data collection

WeChat offers a special case for research. It brings together interpersonal communication,

content dissemination and institutionally embedded services in a single platform architecture, and such an arrangement makes the perception of privacy and the decision to disclose relatively frequent and serious (Zhang et al., 2023). Collect data through an online questionnaire on WeChat. This way is well-known in social media research and has been shown to reach active users while also keeping their interest in the response (Wang et al., 2025). Recruitment for Participation is voluntary. The information about the academic purpose of the study and guarantees of anonymity for the respondents were given before they participated. To ensure the relevance of the context, only those who regularly used WeChat were included in the final sample. Therefore, it was determined that the reported perceptions and behaviors were a result of extended use of the platform.

Data Analysis Procedures and Ethical Considerations

The sections of the data analysis are as follows. First, IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0 was used to calculate descriptive statistics and test the reliability of the measurement scale. Then, IBM SPSS AMOS 26.0 was used to conduct confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modelling (SEM). The above procedures were employed to evaluate the measurement model and test the relationships among the principal factors. Commonly reported SEM fit indices have been used for model fit analysis in line with the existing methodological guidelines (Weston & Gore, 2006). Voluntary Participation in the Survey. Inform the respondents of the purpose of the study before they fill out the questionnaire and let them know that they can leave at any time without a fine. No personally identifiable information was collected in the study, and the process of the research met the general ethical standards for social science research.

Population and sampling strategy

Regular adult WeChat users were the subject of this study, and those in connection with the Chinese WeChat ecosystem were particularly focused on. Although the first selection area was concentrated in Guangdong, Shanghai, Beijing, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu, some people in Thailand and other places were finally added to the valid sample. Therefore, the sample should be regarded as a group of active WeChat users rather than a statistically representative sample of all WeChat users in China.

Results

Samples' characteristics

Following the exclusion of incomplete and low-quality responses, 522 questionnaires were deemed valid and used for subsequent analysis, corresponding to an effective response rate of 94.9%. This reflects a relatively high standard of data quality. The proportion of men and women in the sample was almost equal, at 44.10% (n=230) and 53.10% (n=277), respectively; a small number, 1.10%, identified as LGBTQ+ and 1.70% did not disclose their gender. Most of the respondents were aged 21-40 and made up more than 70.00% of the total. As for education level, most of the participants had higher education, with a large proportion holding bachelor's degrees (42.10%), followed by vocational college students (22.0%) and graduate students (20.10%). Sample was divided into country/region of residence and non-nationality. Adult WeChat users with regular experience using the platform of any nationality were the subjects of this study. In the final valid sample, 303 respondents resided in China (58.00%), 157 respondents resided in Thailand (30.00%), and 62 resided in other regions (11.90%). These are the location of the respondents' residence at the time of data collection. As nationality was not taken as one of the demographic variables, this paper does not present data by country. The addition of Thailand-based and other region-based respondents shows that WeChat is also used by people in different areas who are still connected to the Chinese platform ecosystem.

Table 1 The descriptive analysis of samples' characteristics (N=522)

Variable	Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	230	44.1
	Female	277	53.1
	LGBTQ+	6	1.1
	Prefer not to say	9	1.7
Age	20 years old and under	54	10.2
	Aged 21 and 30	139	26.4
	Aged between 31 and 40	244	46.8
	Aged between 41 and 50	80	15.20
	Aged 51 and above	5	1.00

Table 1 The descriptive analysis of samples' characteristics (N=522) (continue)

Variable	Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Highest educational level completed	High school or below	37	7.10
	Vocational school	115	22.00
	Undergraduate degree	220	42.10
	Postgraduate degree (master level)	105	20.10
	Doctoral-level education	45	8.60
Occupation / Employment status	Student	110	21.10
	Employee	152	29.10
	Entrepreneur / Self-employed	27	5.20
	Government official	37	7.10
	Freelance	121	23.20
	Other	75	14.40
Country / Region of residence	Thailand	157	30.10
	China	303	58.00
	Other	62	11.90
Years of WeChat usage	Less than 1 year	6	1.10
	1–3 years	42	8.00
	More than 3 years	474	90.80
Average daily use of WeChat	Less than 1 hour	42	8.00
	1–3 hours	131	25.10
	More than 3–5 hours	246	47.10
	More than 5 hours	103	19.70

Initial measurement model

Based on the above descriptions, the distributions of the latent variables meet the requirements. Mean values were between 2.98 and 3.96, and the corresponding standard deviations were about 1.0; they were relatively spread out. The values of skewness and kurtosis were within the generally accepted limits (absolute skewness < 3; absolute kurtosis < 10) and thus met the normality requirements for subsequent analysis. Exploratory Factor Analysis based on principal

component extraction identified eight factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. Collectively, the above factors accounted for 64.92% of the total variation and exceeded the traditional threshold of 60.00%. All factor loadings of the items exceeded 0.50, no significant cross-loadings were found, and thus the discriminant validity of the constructs was good. Confirmatory factor analysis in AMOS also provided further support for the measurement model. Fit indices show that the model is reasonably good: $X^2/df=1.413$, GFI>0.80, AGFI>0.80, NFI>0.80, CFI>0.90, TLI>0.90, and RMSEA<0.08. All factors loading of the retained indicators were statistically significant and still exceeded the suggested cut-off values; thus, they were considered convergent. All the factors were reasonably reliable according to the inside-under-accordance test.

Structural equation modeling of the reduced model

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to examine the influence of WeChat use, privacy perception, perceived privacy threats, perceived support from the government for privacy protection, privacy concern, privacy fatigue, and self-disclosure in online and offline settings on each other. The structural model was estimated based on the theoretical framework, and both significant and non-significant hypothesized paths were reported to provide a complete understanding of the model. The reduced model had a reasonable fit for the data. The chi-square divided by degrees of freedom was 1.413 and thus did not exceed the 3.0 threshold. The absolute fit indices are all within an acceptable range: GFI=0.816, AGFI=0.806, and NFI=0.860. The increased incremental fit indices were IFI=0.954, CFI=0.954, and TLI=0.953. RMSEA = 0.028, indicating a close fit between the model and the observed data.

Direct effects among core constructs

The SEM results showed several significant direct effects. WeChat use had a positive effect on privacy perception (β=0.423, p <.001) and perceived threats to privacy (β=0.308, p <.001). This suggests that users who were more engaged with WeChat tended to report stronger awareness of privacy issues and a higher sense of privacy-related risk. Privacy perception also had a positive effect on perceived threats to privacy (β=0.249, p <.001), indicating that greater privacy awareness was associated with stronger recognition of possible privacy threats. In addition, WeChat use was positively related to perceived governmental privacy protection support (β=0.271, p <.001). Perceived threats to privacy were also significantly related to the two psychological responses

examined in the model. They positively predicted privacy concern (β=0.254, p <.001) and privacy fatigue (β=0.597, p <.001). In other words, when users perceived stronger privacy threats, they were more likely to experience both concern about privacy and fatigue from managing privacy-related risks.

Table 2 Path analysis results

Hypothetical path			Estimate	S.E.	t	P	Hypothesis number
Privacy perception	<---	WeChat use	0.423	0.048	9.041	***	HP1
Perceived threats to privacy	<---	WeChat use	0.308	0.039	6.253	***	HP2
Perceived threats to privacy	<---	Privacy perception	0.249	0.037	5.138	***	HP3
Perceived governmental privacy protection support	<---	WeChat use	0.271	0.045	5.779	***	HP4
Privacy concern	<---	Perceived threats to privacy	0.254	0.052	5.426	***	HP5
Privacy fatigue	<---	Perceived threats to privacy	0.597	0.059	11.282	***	HP6
Online self-disclosure	<---	Privacy perception	0.06	0.047	1.696	0.090	HP7
Offline self-disclosure	<---	Privacy perception	0.004	0.044	0.107	0.915	HP8
Online self-disclosure	<---	Perceived threats to privacy	0.407	0.086	8.286	***	HP9
Offline self-disclosure	<---	Perceived threats to privacy	0.241	0.073	4.705	***	HP10

Table 2 Path analysis results (continue)

Hypothetical path			Estimate	S.E.	t	P	Hypothesis number
Online self-disclosure	<---	Perceived governmental privacy protection support	0.059	0.046	1.784	0.074	HP11
Offline self-disclosure	<---	Perceived governmental privacy protection Support	0.156	0.044	4.09	***	HP12
Online self-disclosure	<---	Privacy concern	0.096	0.052	2.88	0.004**	HP13
Online self-disclosure	<---	Privacy fatigue	0.35	0.068	8.059	***	HP14
Offline self-disclosure	<---	Privacy fatigue	0.425	0.064	8.444	***	HP15

Effects on self-disclosure in online and offline contexts

No significant predictive effect of privacy perception was observed for either online self-disclosure (β=0.060, p > .05) or offline self-disclosure (β=0.004, p=.915). By contrast, perceived privacy threats demonstrated significant positive relationships with both online (β=0.407, p <.001) and offline self-disclosure (β=0.241, p <.001). Institutional factors displayed context-specific effects. Perceived governmental privacy protection support was not significantly related to online self-disclosure (β=0.059, p >.05) but positively predicted offline self-disclosure (β=0.156, p <.001). The effects of psychological responses varied across disclosure contexts. Privacy concern was found to positively relate to online self-disclosure (β=0.096, p <.01), while privacy fatigue demonstrated strong positive relationships with both online (β=0.350, p <.001) and offline self-disclosure (β=0.425, p <.001).

Mediation effects

Bootstrap analysis was used to test the indirect effects in the model. The results showed that privacy perception did not mediate the relationship between WeChat use and online self-disclosure (indirect effect=0.025,95%CI [−0.006,0.061], p >.05). It also did not mediate the relationship between WeChat use and offline self-disclosure (indirect effect=0.002,95%CI [−0.039,0.051], p >.05). These findings suggest that privacy perception alone did not explain how WeChat use was linked to disclosure behavior. Perceived privacy threats showed a different pattern. They significantly mediated the relationship between WeChat use and online self-disclosure (indirect effect=0.126,95%CI [0.079,0.178], p <.001), as well as the relationship between WeChat use and offline self-disclosure (indirect effect=0.074,95%CI [0.033,0.133], p <.001). This indicates that WeChat use was associated with stronger perceived privacy threats, which in turn were related to greater disclosure in both contexts. The chain mediation results also showed significant indirect pathways through privacy concern and privacy fatigue, as the confidence intervals did not include zero.

Moderation effects

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine whether perceived governmental privacy protection support moderated the proposed relationships. The interaction between perceived privacy threats and governmental privacy protection support significantly predicted privacy concern (β=0.088, t=2.073, p <.05). After the interaction term was added, the explained variance increased slightly (ΔR^2 = 0.008), and the overall model remained significant (F=8.318, p <.001). However, the same moderation effect was not found for offline self-disclosure. This result suggests that perceived governmental privacy protection support may buffer users' concern when they perceive privacy threats, but its moderating role does not extend equally to all behavioral outcomes.

Hypothesis testing results and interpretation

Most of the proposed hypotheses were supported by the results of the structural equation modeling, such as direct effects (HP1-HP6, HP9-HP10, HP12-HP15), selected mediation pathways (HP18-HP24) and selected institutional moderation effects (HP25-HP27). Other than that, however, HP7, HP8, HP11, and HP28 were not supported, pointing to obvious differences between online and

offline self-disclosure mechanisms. Online self-disclosure is more related to platform behaviors (e.g. messages, posts, comments etc.) and offline self-disclosure is more related to real-life relationships, payments, business communication, services etc. and cross-border activities. The positive result of the perceived privacy threat on both online and offline self-disclosure indicates that the more sensitive the user is to the threat of privacy, the more they may self-disclose on WeChat, due to platform dependence, convenience, social expectation and fatigue, which is like the privacy paradox. The non-significant findings are also important: privacy perception might be too broad to directly impact disclosure, and governmental privacy protection might be less of a factor in online disclosure than simply getting used to using the platform or having a near-term communication need. In general, the results show that privacy perception, perceived threat, psychological response and disclosure behavior can be differentiated, and that Cultivation Theory and the S-S-O Model (Stressor–Strain–Outcome) in which WeChat use is as a stimulus, privacy perception and perceived threat as cognitive evaluations, privacy concern and privacy fatigue as internal responses, and online/offline self-disclosure as behavioral outcomes are supported.

Discussion

This study examined how WeChat use is related to privacy perception, perceived privacy threats, psychological responses, and self-disclosure in online and offline settings. The findings suggest that users' privacy-related behavior should be understood in relation to their continuing experience with the platform, rather than as a series of separate disclosure decisions. Based on the above results, a relatively high frequency of use of WeChat is associated with both a stronger feeling of privacy and an increased sense of privacy threats. The above pattern suggests that, given the high frequency of use for communication, information spreading and data-related functions in WeChat, privacy risks may be relatively high. According to cultivation theory, repeated exposure to privacy-related signals can gradually increase the people's sense of the need for privacy in their daily lives on the platform. Privacy perception will be positively related to the perceived risk of privacy breaches. Therefore, people who are more concerned about their private information may be more aware of the threats that everyday use of WeChat poses to such data, such as the dissemination of personal information and reduced privacy.

Perceived privacy threats were positively related to self-disclosure, which is a "privacy paradox," because users might be aware of privacy risks, but decided to use WeChat due to its

social and functional irreplaceability (Barth & de Jong, 2017; Kokolakis, 2017). Other factors that can negatively influence the motivation or capability of users to manage disclosure are convenience, trust, the perception of protection, frequent disclosure and privacy fatigue (Mombeuil & Uhde, 2021; Tian et al., 2022; Van der Schyff et al., 2023; Dong, 2024). The results also indicate that the construct of privacy perception failed to directly predict and mediate self-disclosure; however, it did predict and mediate for both online and offline disclosure and additional chain effects of privacy concern and privacy fatigue. The impact of perceived threats on privacy concern was moderated by perceived governmental support, indicating that trust in government institutions may alleviate perceived threats, but did not completely alter disclosure behavior.

Conclusion

This study explores how a sense of privacy affects one's willingness to share on the daily-use platform of WeChat. Based on the above research, it is found that users' privacy-related cognition and emotions are associated with a sustained interest in using the platform rather than being caused by an isolated disclosure. Therefore, it can also be seen that cultivation theory has been extended to digital platforms. Repeatedly using WeChat may cause people to become more aware of their own privacy risks in the platform, thus experiencing mental health issues such as a sense of insecurity and mental exhaustion. At the same time, the study also found that online and offline self-disclosure are not in the same form. The Contexts have various types of judgement, trust and perceived risk. SEM are employed for research, and bootstrap mediation and moderation analyses are conducted. This way can help us study the issue of privacy in hybrid communication environments that are closely linked to online interaction and offline social life.

As for theoretical contributions and practical implications, this research further elaborates on the privacy paradox in the context of super-app WeChat by demonstrating that platform dependence, functional necessity, privacy fatigue and perceived institutional protection might explain why users continue to disclose their information despite the presence of privacy risks (Barth & de Jong, 2017; Dong, 2024; Kokolakis, 2017). It further adopts the S-S-O model to describe the different online and offline disclosure outcomes of WeChat use, privacy perception, perceived privacy threats, privacy concern and privacy fatigue, extending the self-disclosure theory to such highly integrated communication, payment, services and cross-border communication environment like WeChat (Mombeuil & Uhde, 2021; Van der Schyff et al., 2023). In practical terms, the results

indicate that the provision of privacy education is not sufficient to decrease disclosure, but platforms and institutions should strive to lessen privacy fatigue, make privacy management easier, minimize unnecessary privacy alerts, and increase perceptions of control and safety.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design is unable to reveal reasons for causality. In the future, a longitudinal or experimental design will be more suitable to examine how changes in the perception of privacy, privacy concern and privacy fatigue over time affect disclosure behavior. Second, most of the research has been conducted in the context of WeChat and Chinese social media. Although the above study is useful for the following research, be aware that the application scope of this study will be restricted. Because of different institutional systems, regulatory expectations, cultural values and platform operations around the world, people's behavior in terms of privacy will also differ. Despite the above deficiencies, this study has indicated that self-disclosure on social media is influenced by factors beyond a person's general sense of privacy. Cognitive evaluation, emotional response, perceived threat and institutional factors are all related to disclosure behavior. Therefore, privacy behavior in the present day's digital space is not uniform but changes with the situation.

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