Priming & Privacy: How Subtle Trust Cues Online Affect Consumer Disclosure and Purchase Intentions

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In five studies, we show how in spite of increasing privacy concerns online (Pilot), people are more likely to disclose highly personal information based on subtle cues of trust including verbal primes (Study 1), social network size (Study 2), friends’ online engagement (Study 3), and privacy policy fluency (Study 4).

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/2401553/volumes/v46/NA-46

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT  

Consumers are quick to say that maintaining privacy in an increasingly digital world is more and more difficult (Pilot). Yet recent research (Mourey) suggests that consumers are more sensitive to subtle cues when they experience a choice as “feeling difficult.” The purpose of the current project is to explore whether the increased feelings of difficulty in maintaining privacy online counter-intuitively makes consumers more likely to disclose personal information when exposed to subtle cues that prime “trust.” Five studies show that individuals are more likely to disclose highly personal information based on subtle cues of trust including verbal trust primes (Study 1), social network size (Study 2), friends’ online engagement (Study 3), and the verbal and visual fluency of a website’s privacy policy (Study 4), all without their conscious awareness.

Literature Review  

A growing body of research has shown that privacy disclosure decisions are strongly influenced by contextual factors. Consider, for example, observing others sharing private information makes individuals more likely to share, an online “herding effect” (Acquisti et al., 2012; John et al., 2011). These prior projects found that individuals engage in comparative behavior based on the signals of others and suggests that such signals—e.g., social network size, the engagement of others online—implicitly influence behavior. However, recent research also suggests that the influence of subtle cues (a.k.a. primes) is rarely as straightforward as once thought. Indeed, the same studies involving subtle cues and priming (Schnall, Benton, and Harvey, 2008) have been replicated (Arbesfeld et al., 2014), not replicated, or replicated with results in the opposite direction (Johnson et al., 2014). To address these inconsistencies, recent research (Mourey, forthcoming) proposed a two-part model to explain both when primes are likely to exert a stronger influence and in which direction those primes are likely to influence behavior. First, he proposes that individuals are more likely to employ contextual cues when tasks “feel difficult.” Second, when difficulty is interpreted to mean a task is “impossible” and individuals “give up” mentally (i.e., not waste cognitive effort on an impossible task), a prime exerts a prime-consistent effect. Alternatively, when difficulty is interpreted to mean a task is “important,” individuals process more deliberately and, in doing so, exhibit prime-reactance (Ferguson and Bargh, 2004).

For the current project, participants should be more sensitive to trust/distrust primes when engaging in a difficult task online (e.g., maintaining privacy, assessing an unknown company), and the direction of that influence depends on what they interpret that difficulty to mean.

Pilot  

The purpose of the pilot was to show that participants do, in fact, experience difficulty with respect to maintaining privacy in online contexts. Participants (N = 107) found maintaining privacy difficult online in general (M = 4.31, SD = 1.60; t(106) = 1.99, p < .05), on social networks (M = 4.41, SD = 1.70; t(106) = 2.50, p < .01), and in the real world (M = 4.42, SD = 1.55; t(106) = 2.81, p < .01); and that maintaining privacy was becoming more difficult (M = 5.56, SD = 1.18; t(106) = 13.74, p < .001). This first study provided support for the studies that each rely on maintaining privacy in online contexts as a difficult scenario.

Study 1  

Study 1 relies on verbal priming to cue trust, distrust, or nothing (control). Participants (N = 122) completed word descrambling tasks containing trust cue words, distrust cue words, or neutral words. Participants then drafted a post for their preferred social network and asked to indicate which information from a list of twenty personal they would be willing to disclose. Participants also indicated how much they trusted the site and completed the 12-question Interpretation of Difficulty (IoD) scale regarding their perceptions of difficulty doing the task. Results revealed that trust primes led to more trust and distrust primes to more distrust for people who interpreted difficulty to mean “impossible,” (the opposite was true for participants who interpreted difficulty to mean “important”). Thus, we obtain initial support for our hypothesis.

Study 2  

Study 2 relies on social network size and prior theorizing on “herding effects” in which social network size is a cue of trust (larger = more trust). The study design was the same as Study 1 with the verbal primes replaced by participants’ attention being drawn to the size of their social network. Results revealed that participants (N = 203) were willing to disclose more private information the larger their network if difficulty was interpreted as impossible, with trust mediating the effect.

Study 3  

Study 3 also looked at a practical application of this subtle cue online influence by using a feature common to most social networks: number of likes on an item. Greater engagement from friends has been shown to cue more engagement from individuals. Here, the priming stimuli was an ad liked by 24 (or 2) friends, and the dependent measure of interest was how likely participants indicated they were to try the made-up restaurant featured in the ad. Trust was also measured. Results showed that participants (N = 197) randomly assigned to the “many friends” ad condition were more likely to try the restaurant if they interpreted the difficulty of the task as “impossible.” Effects, again, were mediated via trust, as friend engagement influenced trust, which, in turn, influenced willingness to try an unknown restaurant.

Study 4  

The final study used privacy policy as the contextual stimulus, varying both the perceptual fluency (figure/ground contrast) and the verbal fluency (complexity of language). Participants (N = 214) first reviewed the privacy policy, then indicated the same disclosure decisions as done in the prior studies, as well as measures of difficulty and trust. Results showed that easy-to-read (difficult-to-read) privacy policies increased (diminished) trust which, in turn, increased (decreased) disclosure of private information.

General Discussion  

Five studies support that 1) consumers find maintaining privacy increasingly difficult, and 2) in these difficult situations, subtle cues
of trust/distrust exert greater influence on disclosing personal information. Counterintuitively, increasing difficulty maintaining privacy online makes people more sensitive to cues that encourage more disclosure.

REFERENCES
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