The Relationship of Family Communication Patterns to
Teenagers' Attitudes toward Online Privacy

Seounmi Youn, Emerson College[1]

Abstract

With teens becoming one of the fastest growing population segments, online marketers have begun actively collecting personal and family information from teens through interactive marketing. Such information collection practices by online marketers have raised public concerns due to teens' and family privacy loss (Donnerstein, 2002; Turow & Nir, 2000). In response to privacy advocates and educators' concern, this study examines how teens understand the ways that marketers collect and use personal information on the Internet. In particular, this study explores how different styles of family communication affect teens' perception and attitudes regarding online privacy. Family communication patterns (FCP) are very important in the consumer socialization process because parents share their consumer skills and knowledge with their children through communicative interaction (Carlson, Grossbart, & Stuenkel, 1992). It is speculated that different family communication patterns may result in different socialization outcomes from marketers' information gathering and use practices. Prior studies have identified two distinct patterns of family communication: socio- and concept-oriented communications (Carlson, Walsh, Laczniak, & Grossbart, 1994; Moore & Moschis, 1981).

Survey data from 395 high school students were used for this study. Hierarchical multiple regressions were performed to examine the effect of family communication patterns on teens' perceptions and attitudes about online privacy issues. The results show that compared to their counterparts, teens from a concept-oriented communication background are more likely to discuss privacy issues with their parents, engage in marketing independent purchase decision online, have privacy knowledge, and perceive benefits resulting from information disclosure. They also tend to show skeptical attitudes toward privacy issues. In contrast, teens from a socio-oriented communication background are more likely to have family rules for Internet use, go online with parents, provide data online with parental supervision, and be sensitive to possible risks associated with information disclosure. These teens also show skeptical attitudes toward privacy.

The results of this study provide useful information to educators who aim to increase the effectiveness of parental involvement in Internet use as a socialization tool. Different educational programs may need to be implemented for teens from a socio- or concept-oriented family communication background, respectively. For teens from a socio-oriented communication environment, consumer educators need to deliver programs enhancing privacy knowledge and awareness of benefits teens may receive from providing information to the websites. Educators should also inform these teens of alternative options of dealing with possible risks resulting from information disclosure. On the other hands, for teens from a concept-oriented communication environment, educators need to develop a program that addresses potential risks that teens may experience when they divulge personal information to online marketers and how to deal with these risks.

References

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[1] Assistant Professor, Department of Marketing Communication, Emerson College, 120 Boylston Street, Boston, MA 02116-4624, seounmi_han_youn@emerson.edu, 617-824-8722