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How to Respond to Help Requests in Marketing Campaigns on Social Network Sites? A Communication Privacy Management Perspective

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ABSTRACT

SNSs are becoming a preferred venue to conduct marketing campaigns to promote brands, products, and services. Therefore, it is imperative for merchants and SNS providers to substantively understand individual users' response to help requests in a marketing campaign in SNSs. Drawing on the communication privacy management theory and privacy calculus perspective, this paper examines the main and interaction effects of privacy assurance from a merchant and relationship closeness with a sender on a recipient's participation behaviors through the recipient's privacy assessments in terms of privacy concerns and social rewards. A lab-controlled experiment was proposed to test the hypotheses in this short paper. A pilot study of 43 subjects confirmed the validity of experiment setting, and shows preliminary strong evidences to support the proposed hypotheses. Both theoretical and practical implications of the findings are expected.

Keywords

SNSs marketing campaign, relationship closeness, privacy assurance, social rewards, participation behavior.

INTRODUCTION

With a growing number of users and strong sickness of the platform, SNSs become a preferred venue for business users to conduct marketing campaigns to promote brands, products, and services (Lee and Hong 2016). In China, SNSs have been reported to be the most frequently used marketing channel, with a share of 58.3% (iResearch 2016). Marketing campaign over SNSs is designed to encourage individual users to forward campaign message to their online friends and may require them to reveal some personal information for future targeted promotion. The campaign may motivate the SNSs users to ask their online friends to participate some activities, thus the request senders may get some reward or stand a higher chance to win a prize. For instance, a typical marketing campaign over the SNS WeChat is "voting for my baby", in which the friends of the request posters need to click a

hyperlink or allow the business user to access their basic information before they can vote for their friends' baby. A triad of three stakeholders exists in such marketing campaign: the request sender, the request recipient, and the campaign provider (i.e., business user). At the same time, the individual users' approach behaviors could transfer to higher brand familiarity and strong brand use intentions (Cordoba 2001). Therefore, it is imperative for business users and SNS providers to substantively understand individual users' response to help requests during SNS marketing campaigns.

However, the marketing strategy is also skeptical for its potential to intrude users' privacy, as the business users might collect and disseminate individual users' personal information. Only when individuals believe their personal information is securely protected, they will likely connect with business users through participating in the online marketing campaigns (Van Noort et al. 2014). According to communication privacy management theory (CPM) (Metzger 2007), establishing such linkage indicates that another stakeholder is authorized to be a co-owner of private information. Given the triple-stakeholder nature of SNS marketing campaign, a recipient's privacy assessment of a help request is determined by not only the linkage between the request recipient and the campaign provider but also the linkage between the request recipient and the request sender. Extant information privacy research mainly focuses on dyadic relationships. Despite increasing research interest and privacy issues involving triads in SNS contexts (Jin 2012), there is a dearth of research elucidating mechanisms of triadic relationships on individual users' responses toward help requests in SNS marketing campaigns. Hence, the study's first objective is to investigate the influences of the recipient-sender linkage and recipient-provider linkage on recipient's privacy assessments vis-à-vis help requests in marketing campaigns from a triadic relationship perspective.

Individual users are still likely to disclose private information despite of privacy concerns. Prior study reveals that an individual's privacy-related behavior is jointly determined by both privacy concerns and certain

tangible benefits (e.g., discounts, rebates). Differing from online commercial transactions where tangible benefits are predominant, SNS campaigns are enabled by interpersonal interactions where the benefits are intangible. As there are few studies to look at such intangible benefits, our study also aims to identify specific privacy costs and benefits of individual users in evaluating help requests in SNS campaigns.

Besides the importance of the main effects of linkages on privacy assessment, the joint effect of linkages remains unclear. In triadic relationships, past research shows that an individual's attitudes toward one party may be transferred from his/her attitudes toward the other party associated with the former (Phang et al. 2014; Sutanto et al. 2013). Hence, the third objective is to examine the interaction effect of the recipient–sender linkage and recipient–provider linkage on privacy assessments vis-à-vis help requests in SNS marketing campaigns.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM)

CPM is a rule-based theory proposing that people's cognitive information space is formed by developing rules with explicitly defined boundaries. Once private information becomes shared, a collective privacy boundary would emerge from a personal privacy boundary, and individuals receiving this information would become co-owners of the private information. De Bruyn and Lilien (2008) regards a linkage rule, which identifies who else should be privy to private information, as the key factor in assessing privacy issues. Establishing linkage indicates allowing another person to become a co-owner of private information (Petronio 2012). When such a linkage occurs, the new partner is responsible for protecting the private information (Petronio 2012). This study aims to extend CPM linkage rules to triadic relationships, i.e., request recipients' linkages with both campaign providers and request senders.

According to CPM, individuals pay special attention to privacy linkages, which describe the selection of new partners to be included in the privacy space, in assessing private situations. Previous studies proposed that boundary linkages can be defined as the connections that form boundary alliances between individuals as disclosers and online business user as information recipients (Metzger 2007). Linkage rules are often considered violated if the business user uses the acquired personal information for any improper purposes without individual users' awareness and consent. To reflect the request recipient-campaign provider relationship in the triad, this study adopts *privacy assurance* to explore the privacy linkage rule. Additionally, in the context of SNS marketing campaign, request recipients not only establish linkages with online business user but also connect with request senders. To reflect the recipient-sender relationship in the triad, this study adopts *relationship*

closeness, which is defined as the degree of interpersonal connection between the recipient and sender (Jin 2012), to explore the privacy linkage rule.

Privacy Calculus

Privacy calculus is a psychological process in which the costs associated with privacy disclosure are weighed against the benefits derived through privacy exposure. Past research has considered various costs and benefits in decision making. From the costs perspective, prior studies have shown that *privacy concerns*, which refer to individuals' subjective views of fairness within the context of privacy, lead individuals to handle their personal information more cautiously (Vangelisti and Caughlin 1997). Accordingly, privacy concerns are particularly important in marketing campaigns involving requesting help from friend.

From the benefits perspective, existing research also suggests that individuals are willing to give up some privacy in exchange for benefits despite of their privacy concerns (Dinev and Hart 2006). Despite the extant research on tangible compensation, such as discounts and rebates, there is preliminary research indicating that certain intangible benefits might also affect individuals' behavior in the same way (Anderson and Agarwal 2011). The friendship and respect derived from social interactions are more likely to attract individuals. Hence, this study emphasizes that the alternative benefits in this context are reflected in *social rewards*, which refer to the gratification and pleasure individuals obtain from helping others by participating in help-request marketing campaigns (Dinev and Hart 2006).

RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

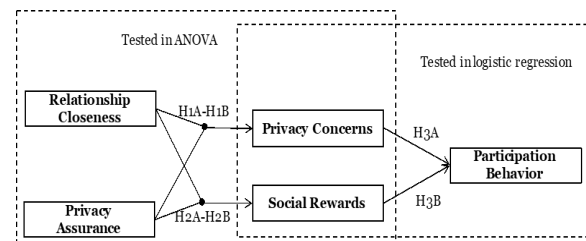


Figure 1. Research Model

Figure 1 depicts the research model of this paper. Previous research argued that high relationship closeness sources were perceived as more influential than low relationship closeness sources (Eisenberger et al. 1990). Gilly et al. (1998) stated that the expected breach of a weak relationship may generate significant privacy concerns that motivate boundary coordination in Facebook networks. Brown and Reingen (1987) noted that close relationship reduced risks and encouraged opening messages, and relationship closeness between a recipient and a sender should have a significant eliminating influence on privacy risks. Accordingly, we propose that:

H1A: Compared to low relationship closeness, high relationship closeness leads to lower privacy concerns.

A large number of privacy-related studies have identified privacy assurance as a critical determinant of individuals' privacy concerns. In the context of help requests in SNSs marketing campaigns, request recipients' beliefs about help requests are not formed simply based on their direct connections with campaign providers (i.e., privacy assurance), because their prior perceptions about request senders (i.e., relationship closeness) can be transferred to their evaluations of the help request. Accordingly, this study suggests that the effect of privacy assurance on privacy concerns is moderated by relationship closeness. In low relationship closeness condition, individuals may receive help request from acquaintances that they perceive to emanate from dubious sources. When they cannot obtain reliable information from the sender, they would not initially perceive the help request as credible, thus relying more on the campaign provider for the requisite information (Camarero and San José 2011). If the campaign provider is certified by a reputable third party, this mitigates against risks from the individual's point of view, and he/she would be more likely to feel protected (Metzger 2007). Therefore, when relationship closeness is low, the sense of being protected conferred by privacy assurance will significantly dampen recipients' perceptions vis-a-vis privacy concerns. In contrast, in high relationship closeness condition, the recipient may have a greater propensity to perceive a source as credible and thus be less inclined to seek specific information (e.g., privacy assurance policy) about the campaign provider. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1B: In high relationship closeness condition, the effect of privacy assurance in terms of decreasing privacy concerns is less prominent than that in low relationship closeness condition.

Interpersonal relationship reflects integrity characterizing respondents' behaviors toward one another (Culnan and Bies 2003). It has found that compared with low relationship closeness, high relationship closeness is more likely to deliver information characterized by higher economic value (Shen et al. 2016). When individuals receive help requests from close friends in SNSs, their high relationship closeness helps emphasize the reciprocity characteristic of the interaction and hence enhances perceived rewards (Wuyts et al. 2004). In contrast, when individuals receive help requests from acquaintances, their low relationship closeness emphasizes the intrusive characteristic of the exchange. Therefore, we predict that:

H2A: Compared to low relationship closeness, high relationship closeness leads to higher social rewards.

Past research suggests that when the relationship closeness between the sender and the recipient is high, the potentially high benefits perceived by the recipient increase his/her further interest in learning more about

whatever the sender has sent (De Bruyn and Lilien 2008). In the context of help-request marketing campaigns, when recipients receive help requests from closely connected people, they are more likely to perceive that there will be a high reward, and this perception can transfer to the campaign provider vis-à-vis the provider's privacy assurance mechanisms. If the provider is secure, the recipient will assume that the sender has also believed in the provider. Hence, the sender is not simply involved in a messy marketing campaign that needs the recipient to sacrifice his/her personal interests, but also intends to bring certain benefits (e.g., enjoyment) to the recipient through giving him/her a help. According to the principle of reciprocity, the recipient will feel greater psychological gratification from helping the sender (Van Noort et al. 2012). Therefore, in high relationship closeness condition, the perception of being cared for that is engendered by privacy assurance will significantly enhance the recipient's social rewards perception. In contrast, in low relationship closeness condition, the recipient may perceive that the social rewards are low and be less motivated to consider the particular characteristics of the provider as a precursor to further interaction. Accordingly, whether or not the provider has a mechanism to assure privacy does not affect the perceived social benefits individuals obtain from helping others. Therefore, we propose that:

H2B: In low relationship closeness condition, the effect of privacy assurance in terms of increasing social rewards is less prominent than that in high relationship closeness condition.

Participation behavior refers to the activity in which recipients actively engage in SNSs marketing campaigns, indicating they disclose profile information to campaign provider and help their friends success in the marketing campaigns (Brown et al. 2010). It is important to investigate participation behavior because individual users' positive responses benefit merchants via brand loyalty (De Bruyn and Lilien 2008). Avoiding disclosing private information has become one of the most common strategies individuals adopt to protect their privacy (Wheless 1976). Previous research has proposed that individuals' concerns about private online information and their attitudes toward online transaction security are important antecedents to online behaviors and interactions (Lee and Hong 2016). Past studies also confirmed that higher perceptions of privacy concerns about online shopping lead to less anticipated disclosure and lower online purchase rates. In general, greater privacy concerns suggest less confidence in the reliability of others, which inevitably leads to corresponding reductions in participation behavior due to substantive potential risks to individuals. Accordingly, we propose that:

H3A: Privacy concerns will reduce the likelihood of participation behavior.

The benefits of information disclosure have been suggested to have a significant association with disclosure

behaviors. In social interactions, individuals exchange information based on reciprocity norms (Doolin et al. 2007). Previous research has suggested that the more individuals care about others' responses, the more they tend to indicate the value of social association for them (Doolin et al. 2007). In social interactions, individuals tend to return favors received from others. Individuals who receive intrinsic benefits from helping others are more likely to share information on social commerce sites. In this study, performing participation behavior means that a recipient helps a sender in a campaign. Consequently, a recipient is more likely to increase participation behavior toward the rewarding interaction due to the benefits from doing that. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H3B: Social rewards will increase the likelihood of participation behavior.

PROPOSED RESEARCH METHOD

A laboratory experiment with a 2 (privacy assurance: low vs. high) × 2 (relationship closeness: low vs. high) factorial design was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses. Regarding privacy assurance, business users deal with collected personal information based on their privacy policies, which strictly follow guidelines from trust verification authorities. For instance, EC Trust China, one local privacy certification organization in China, has a set of privacy-related standard principles and implementation guidelines that business users use to safeguard the privacy of personal information. Once violations occur, this seal would be revoked. Because EC Trust China is widely known in China and the seal is applicable to business users, strong privacy assurance was manipulated by presenting subjects with an EC Trust China seal with a URL link to the online privacy policy of business users, while weak privacy assurance denotes the absence of this seal. Relationship closeness was operationalized at two levels: low (a new acquaintance with whom there had been no prior interaction) and high (a good friend with frequent interactions). With regards to designing relationship closeness, the experiment involved a simulation of a help-request campaign using a hypothetical scenario, which has been broadly used in prior IS research. In the hypothetical scenario, assuming that someone with certain relational closeness sent campaign link to seek help, the participants would map to a similar friend in their real life.

To improve the realism of the experiment, the marketing campaign was launched on the WeChat platform. We created a WeChat business account to launch the campaign, and we could observe the data from the WeChat business account, such as whether the users clicked on the campaign message and participated. To test the hypotheses, an SNS campaign for a fictitious business user was designed for this study to increase external validity while avoiding confounds with pre-existing attitudes to actual merchants. The campaign was

integrated in the online experiment, which consisted of two screens: the starting screen and the interactive screen. The starting screen introduced the business user, which was a clothing mall, and the campaign, which was to help a friend win coupon. The interactive screen provided a function for individuals to participate. If individuals want to help their friends, they need to provide their own profile information to the business user, including profile names, avatar, gender and the posts they share on the profile. The campaign information presented to different groups is identical, except in terms of privacy assurance on the second screen.

The manipulation check for privacy assurance was performed by asking subjects three binary (i.e., true/false) questions regarding whether the business user was awarded the EC Trust China seal. The manipulation check for relationship closeness was conducted by asking subjects to rate four items measuring their perceptions of relationship closeness with the sender (Granovetter 1973). To measure the privacy concerns, this study used the scale for information privacy concern (Anderson and Agarwal 2011). Social rewards were captured using measurement items adapted from Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997). The dependent variable participation behavior is a binary variable. We assign a value of 1 to those who participated in the campaign as requested and 0 to those who do not.

PILOT STUDY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

A pilot test with 43 subjects was conducted prior to the main experiment. The experimental design was further improved based on the feedbacks collected from the pilot study. The results showed that the average scores of relationship closeness among the two conditions were 3.60 and 5.81 ($t=4.36$, $p < 0.01$), and the average scores of privacy assurance among the two conditions were 1.33 and 1.88 ($t=5.15$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that the experiment settings of two independent variables were valid. ANOVA will be used to test H1A to H2B, and logistic regression will be used to test H3A and H3B. Data analysis of the pilot study shows significant evidences for supporting the proposed hypotheses. The pilot test helps us to follow the experimental set of the pilot test directly in the main experiment.

The study is current at the stage of conducting main experiment. In sum, this study seeks to enrich the understanding of SNS marketing campaign participation by considering the effects of privacy assurance and relationship closeness from the dyadic perspective. This study establishes that recipient' perceptions of both privacy concerns and social rewards influence their behavioral responses to help-request from friends in SNS marketing campaigns. This study also hopes to provide practical guidelines for online business users in design marketing campaigns and managerial suggestions for SNSs providers in managing user information privacy.

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