

MASTER'S THESIS

Am I being watched on the internet?: examining user perceptions of privacy, stress and self-monitoring under online surveillance

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ABSTRACT

Modes of communication in modern society have become instant and frequent. Internet users usually post ongoing activities and check their friends' statuses with texts and photos in social networking sites. During information seeking and sharing processes, they enable peer-to-peer surveillance on the Internet.

The present research adopts Foucault's (1977) Panopticon as a metaphor to investigate this new advent of online surveillance. Surveillance from unknown people on the Internet may not always exist, but the perception of being surveilled could be embedded in the users' mind. This kind of suspicion may generate some surveillance effects such as low self-esteem and communication discouragement, namely panoptic effects without the presence of actual surveillance (Botan, 1996). This study focuses on the negative panoptic effects to Internet users, leading to three hypotheses related to privacy infringement, Internet stress and self-monitoring.

An online survey was conducted with 325 respondents aged from 18 to 29. Regression analyses were used to investigate the explanatory power of one's perception of being surveilled on the outcome variables. The results showed that the respondents with higher level of perceived online surveillance report higher sense of privacy infringement, more situational stress and higher desire of self-monitoring in their online disclosure. With awareness of being surveilled, the respondents realize the information they share online may be exposed to anonymous observers and be prone to storage and dissemination, resulting in privacy infringement. Since online information could be exposed and misused, the respondents feel stressful to share their views and emotions online. They may conduct self-censorship on their online disclosure so as to acquire credits from other Internet users and avoid punishment for improper manner. Implications of these findings are discussed in detail.

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