

Caring is not enough: The importance of Internet skills for online privacy protection

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Research Interest

In an information society with ubiquitous information disclosure, privacy has become a central concern in public policy. Companies often do not want to and states often cannot protect users' privacy, therefore self-help measures are gaining importance in Internet governance. We hypothesize that privacy protection behavior is promoted by the attitude that personal information needs to be protected, by general Internet skills, and as a behavioral intensifier by the experience that one's privacy has been violated in the past.

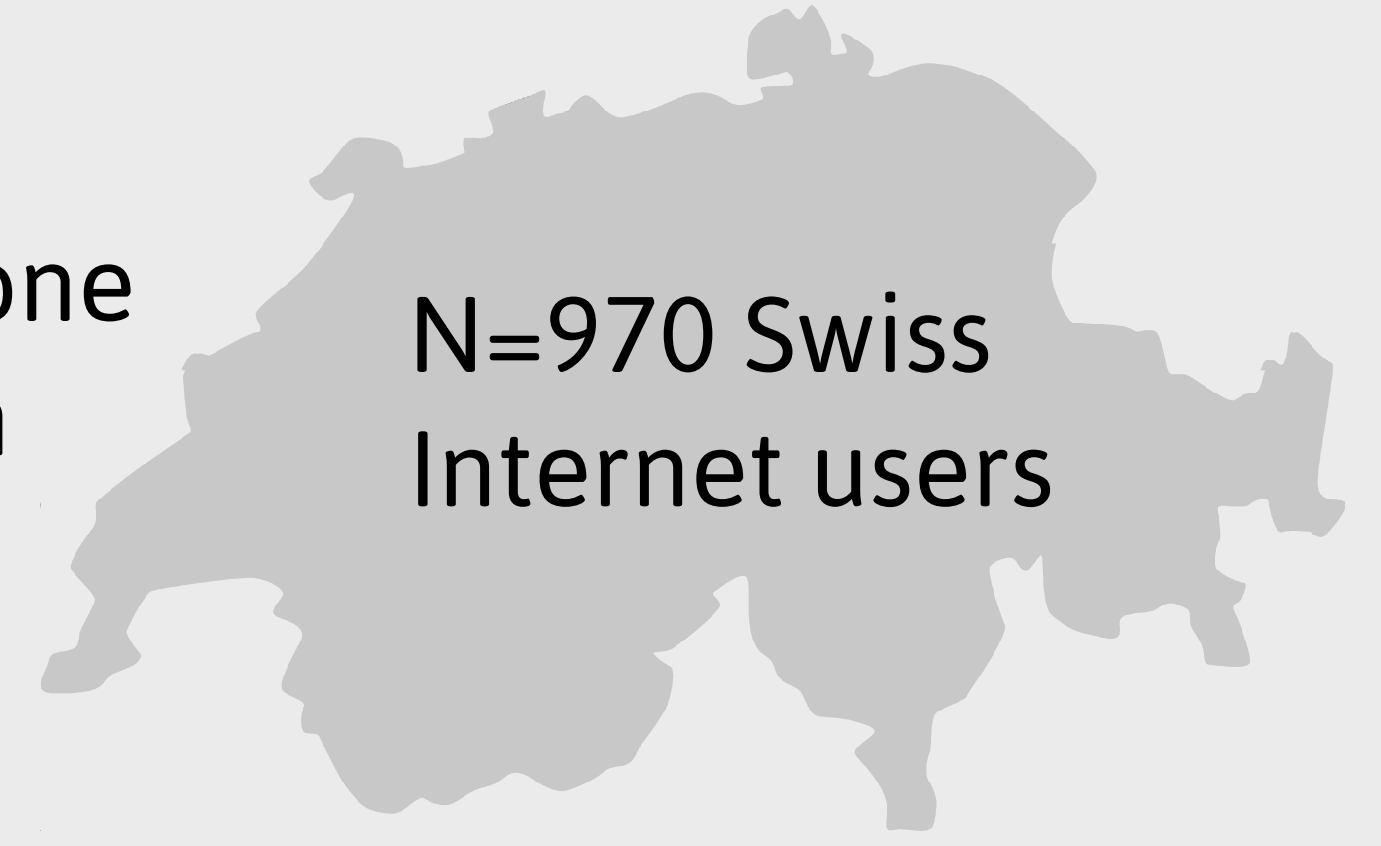
What explains Internet users' varying levels of privacy protection actions?



Methods

Data: representative telephone (landline & mobile) survey in Switzerland.

N=970 Swiss Internet users



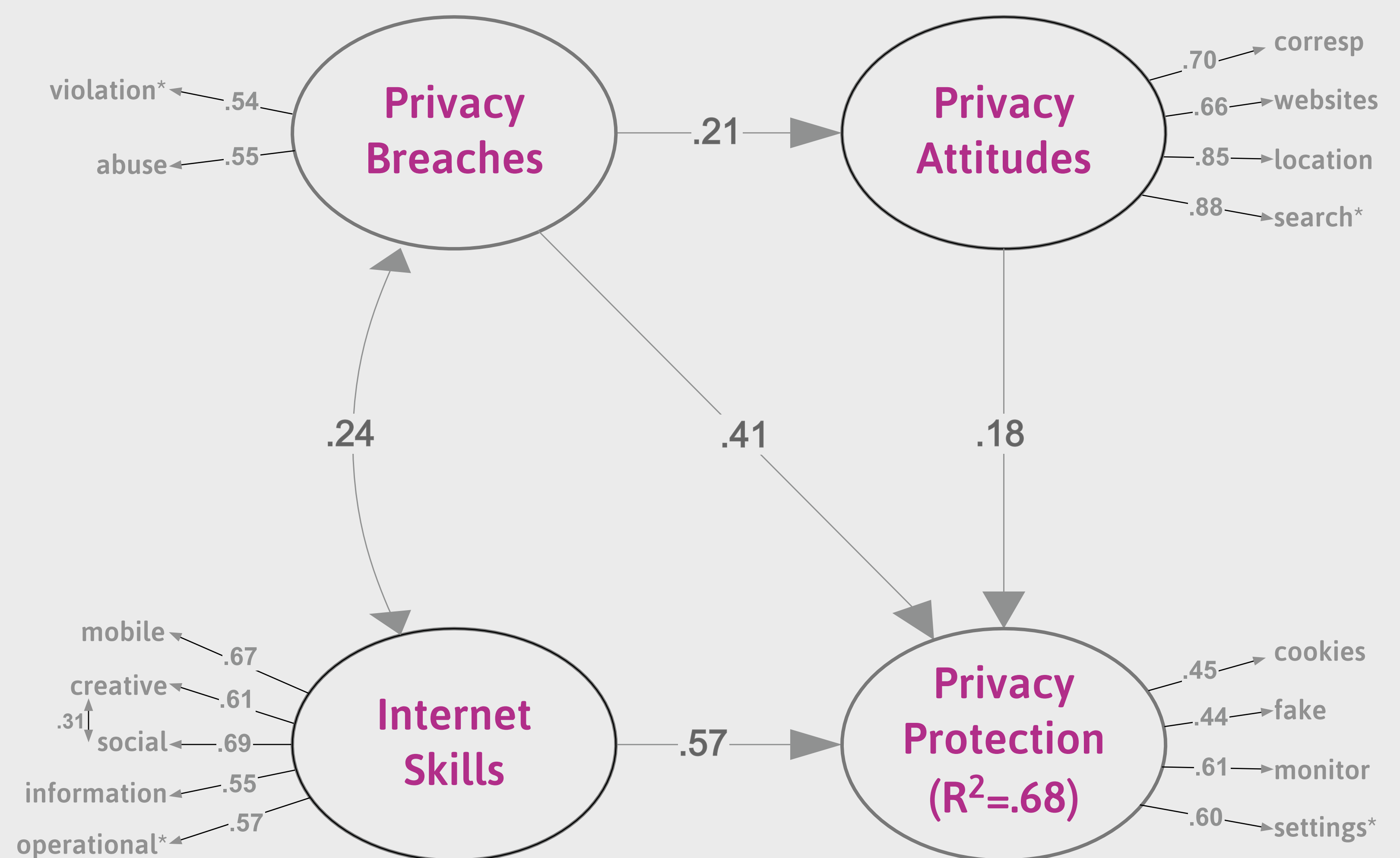
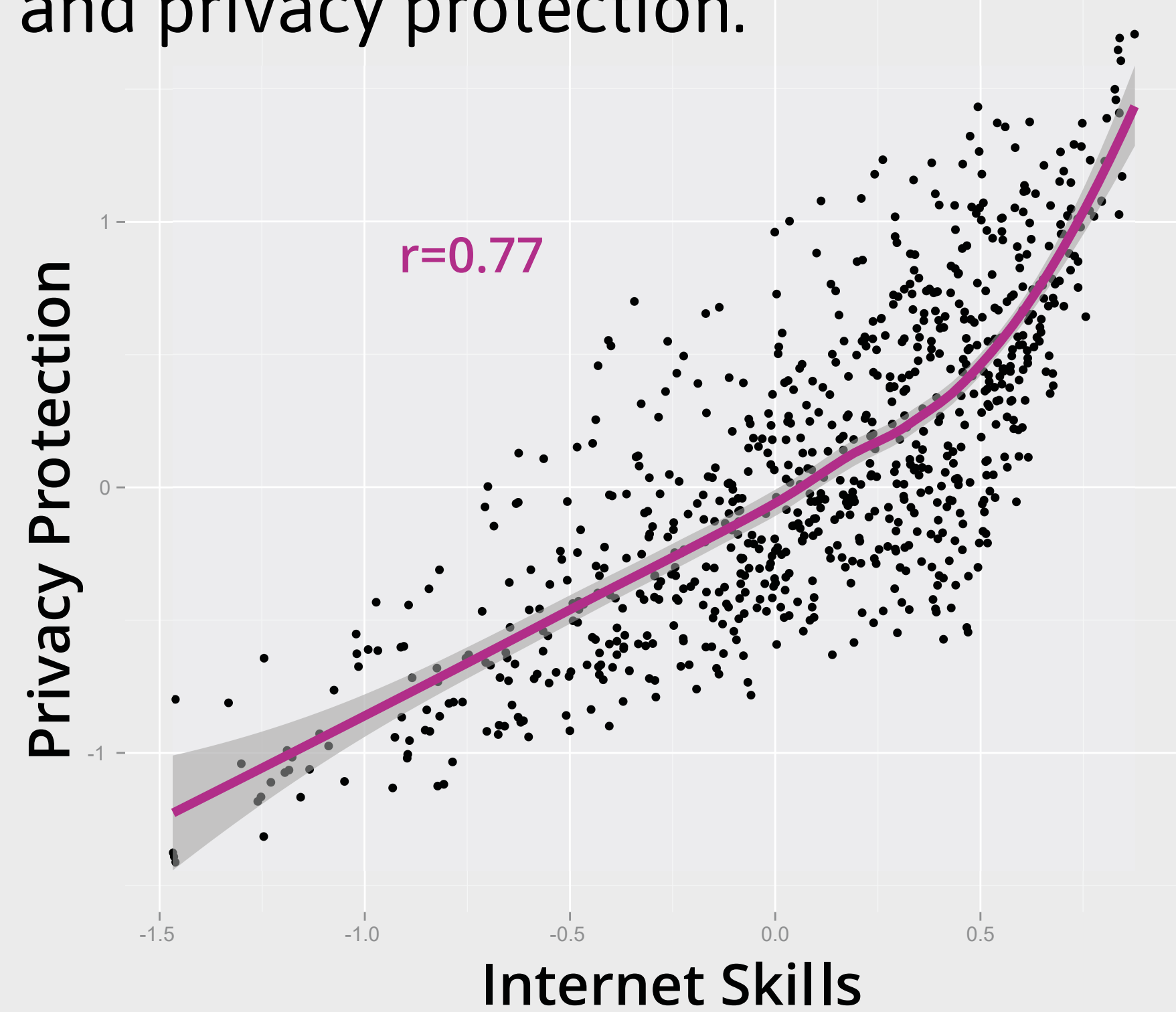
Measures: privacy breaches, privacy attitudes, privacy protection actions, and Internet skills were measured using multiple items.

Analysis: Structural equation modeling (SEM) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in R using maximum likelihood estimation.

WORLD INTERNET PROJECT

Results

General Internet skills positively predict privacy protection. Pro-privacy attitudes are also a significant but comparably weak predictor of self-protective behavior. Having experienced privacy breaches increases privacy protection directly and indirectly via privacy attitudes. Older Internet users show lower levels of skills and privacy protection.



$\chi^2=159.53$, $p<.001$, $df=84$, $\chi^2/df=1.90$
CFI=.980, TLI=.985, RMSEA=.03, SRMR=.03
*reference item, all paths $p<.001$

- Internet skills are the key predictor of actual privacy protection measures
- The need for privacy protection is often learned the hard way
- Privacy attitudes are not strongly related to actual protective behavior

Implications

Skills enable users to benefit from their Internet access and use by countering the potential harms of being online. On the flip side, digital inequalities may be exacerbated because users with low general Internet skills are ill-equipped to protect their online privacy. Public policies therefore need to ensure that universal and transferable digital skills are developed, maintained, and enhanced in the information society.



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