Interpersonal Boundary Regulation within Online Social Networks

Pamela Wisniewski
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
pjkarr@uncc.edu

Dissertation Advisors: Drs. Heather Richter-Lipford and David C. Wilson

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION COLLOQUIUM EXTENDED ABSTRACT

ABSTRACT

The popularity of Online Social Networks (OSN's) is still on the rise even though we have started to realize that connection comes with a cost. Interpersonal boundaries positively impact the way we interact with others, but they are often overlooked within online social networks which can lead to negative consequences. This research investigates ways to balance the benefits and tradeoffs of OSN's through an examination of interpersonal boundary regulation. Understanding the process of interpersonal boundary development in the context of OSN's will help inform both users and designers how to best negotiate boundaries to enhance interpersonal connection without sacrificing self within OSN's.

KEYWORDS: Interpersonal boundary regulation, online social networks, networked privacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Neilson Media, Americans spend over a quarter of our time online engaged in social networking activities [6]. Interestingly, we have developed social norms within OSN's such as "hyperfriending" [2] where only 25% of our online connections represent true friendship [9]. Hyperfriending alone may not threaten interpersonal boundaries, but friend-based privacy and interaction management within OSN's is faulty because a "friend" is no longer necessarily a real friend. Therefore, more people are being let into our inner-circles virtually than in real life, thereby making boundary violations inevitable. The eleven OSN users we interviewed recounted numerous negative experiences including peer pressure, threats, lover spats, sexual advances, spam, trolling, "flame wars," privacy breaches, complaints, ridicule, and other "online drama" that resulted in feelings of disappointment, hurt, mistrust, and fear. Almost all the interpersonal problems encountered by the OSN users in our studies can be attributed to some sort of failure in interpersonal boundary regulation. Technology aside, boundary regulation is a difficult process for any of us to master. The interpersonal boundary development process within OSN's is even less well understood, as we are just now developing social norms that shape our online interactions with others. This research focuses on ways to balance the benefits and tradeoffs of OSN's through an examination of interpersonal boundary regulation.

2. MOTIVATION AND RELATED WORK

Social psychology argues that interpersonal boundaries are vital to both personal well-being and relational development [4]. Boundaries are important because they help us define self, give us protection (physically and emotionally), help us manage our personal resources, and forge deeper relationships. According to Altman's classic work *The Environment and Social Behavior*, "interpersonal boundary regulation" is the key to maintaining appropriate levels of interaction within one's social environment [1]. However, Altman's work was specific to the context of the physical environment. The tangibility yet lack of physicality of OSN's changes the overall dynamics of the boundary regulation process.

Most HCI researchers have diverged from Altman's definition of privacy, an "interpersonal event" enmeshed in relationships for regulating one's interactions with others [1]. Petronio's theory of Communication Privacy Management (CPM) [7] was based on Altman's idea of boundary regulation being a dialectical process [1]. However, CPM focuses solely on the ownership and disclosure of private information [7]. OSN research primarily studies privacy from the perspective of

information disclosure and reputation management [2][8]. However, interactional privacy becomes increasingly important as we share experiences, not just information within our OSN's.

3. RESEARCH GOALS

Therefore, we are focusing on interpersonal boundaries which involve both *information privacy* and *social interactions* between OSN users. Early research focused less on interactions and more on information because the Internet was originally launched as the Information Highway. Now, we are leaning heavily towards Web 2.0 technologies which have come to represent a subset of web-based services that encourage social interactions and collaboration between users [5]. Therefore, we are reviving Altman's interactional definition of privacy [1]. We plan to use mixed methods to deeply understand interpersonal boundary regulation within OSN's. First, we are using qualitative methods to better understand the interpersonal boundary mechanisms that are relevant to OSN users. The lack of familiar boundary mechanisms largely contributes to the difficulties OSN users have in maintaining their boundaries. Therefore, understanding the variety of different boundary mechanisms pertinent to OSN's is the first step to developing a model of boundary regulation within OSN's. Our second research goal is to develop a combined process-level and conceptual model for interpersonal boundary regulation within OSN's and empirically validate various relationships through quantitative methods.

4. BOUNDARY MECHANISMS

To achieve our optimal level of desired interaction with others, we readjust our arsenal of boundary regulation mechanisms by increasing the number of behaviors, the intensity, or employing them in different combinations [1]. Three qualitative approaches were combined to derive five primary boundary mechanisms employed within OSN's. First, we reviewed literature from three main areas: interpersonal boundaries, online social networking, and boundary regulation within social media. Second, we performed an interface analysis of five popular Social Networking Sites (SNS's) (Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Hi5, and Ning) to compare and contrast the technological affordances present for interpersonal boundary regulation. Third, we employed semi-structured interviews of actual OSN users. Currently, we have collected interview data from 11 participants, 6 females and 5 males.

The OSN interpersonal boundary mechanisms we uncovered are network, territorial, disclosure, relational, and interactional boundaries. *Network boundaries* are mechanisms to demark separation between one's

connections or groups of connections. *Territorial boundaries* involve "use of places and objects in the environment" to personalize or mark, "ownership, possession, and occasional active defense" [1]. Most SNS's give users a personalized territory (i.e. "MySpace") to call their own but is shared with their friends. The two types of territorial boundaries we have observed are inward-facing territories and outward-facing territories. For instance, Facebook's "News Feed" versus "Wall." *Disclosure boundaries* require a coordination process between co-owners of private information [7]. OSN users were unconfident or skeptical about their SNS privacy settings. The lack of confidence in SNS privacy settings led many of the participants to manage self-disclosure boundaries by restricting the information they shared.

Relationship boundaries are formed when deciding to connect or not; however, context can manage the relationship once formed. Individuals had different levels of boundary permeability when choosing whom to friend. Those who had fairly public careers and used their social networks as an extension of their profession tended to have more open friendship boundaries. While relationship context is vital in determining appropriate relational boundaries, the majority (seven) of our participants did not manage relationship context (e.g. by creating friend groups) within their OSN's at all. As a result, SNS users' online interactions tend to be more generic and less personalized, losing an aspect of interpersonal intimacy. *Interactional boundaries* refer to how OSN users manage what friends can or cannot do within their social networks. Ultimately, an all or nothing approach was observed. Participants either failed to restrict interactions with others or they blocked them completely through actions such as disabling comments on their Facebook Wall, unfriending, or blocking. Interactional boundaries were characterized with little room for boundary negotiation.

5. FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 illustrates our interpersonal boundary regulation model for OSN's. First, the recovery literature reminds that "awareness is crucial to having healthy relationships" [9]. We refine the notion of Awareness to represent self-awareness, functionality awareness, and risk awareness. Functionality awareness deals with whether or not SNS users know how to implement boundary mechanisms while risk awareness focuses on the potential costs associated with boundary violations.

Rule Acquisition is based on how "individuals use certain criteria such as cultural expectations, gender, motivation, context of situation, and risk-benefit ratio to establish privacy rules" [7]. Therefore, individual differences and contextual factors such as these affect how one develops

boundary guidelines that drive the Negotiation process. In many cases, the Negotiation process is iterative until an acceptable outcome presents itself. Moderated by relationship context, negotiated boundary mechanisms are characterized by a permeability level (openness or closeness) as well as a level of burden (difficulty in setting the boundary). In optimal cases, boundary coordination occurs instead of boundary turbulence [7]. In less optimal cases, boundary turbulence results in either crowding or isolation [1] where an individual experiences either a violation of intrusion or a violation of distance [4].
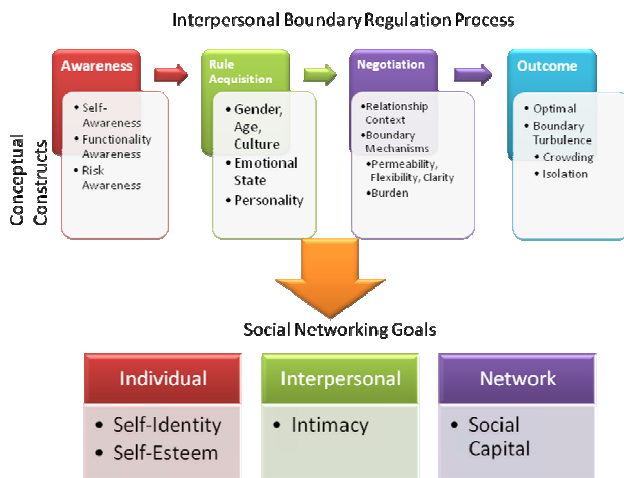

Figure 1. Interpersonal Boundary Regulation Process

The interpersonal boundary regulation process impacts various OSN Goals. For instance, literature supports that healthy boundaries positively affect self-identity and self-esteem [4][9][1]. At an interpersonal level, appropriate and successful boundary regulation can lead to stronger intimacy levels. Boundary regulation can improve social capital, or the value one receives from being part of a social network. A reduced number of boundary violations may result in more perceived value from online social networking. Overall, we believe that OSN interface design that better supports the complex and dialectical process of interpersonal boundary regulation will improve online social networking experiences for both individuals and communities.

6. RESEARCH STATUS

We have defined our research problem and scope as well as completed an in-depth literature review. We have conducted 11 preliminary interviews, and our goal is to interview a total of 20 participants before finalizing the boundary mechanisms pertinent to OSN's. Thus far, we have created a preliminary theoretical framework and are formulating hypotheses, operationalizing measures, and

designing user studies to test our model. The final step will be implementing these empirical studies to validate our model. Therefore, we are at a critical point in our research where input from the Doctoral Colloquium will prove invaluable to our research.

7. EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

An in-depth, theoretical understanding of the interpersonal boundary regulation process is a necessary step toward knowledge creation in the HCI online social networking research community. Determining the relationship between interpersonal boundary setting behaviors, contextual factors, and subsequent outcomes will inform design considerations and help us create interfaces that promote an enhanced level of personal well-being and social capital within OSN's. In summary, achieving these goals will enable the HCI community to transform online social networking interactions that are often superficial into a deeper level of human interaction.

BIOGRAPHIES

PAMELA WISNIEWSKI is a doctoral student and part-time faculty at UNC Charlotte. She is a member of the College of Computing and Informatics in the Software Information Systems Department's HCI Lab.

REFERENCES

[1] Altman, I. *THE ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR*. Belmont, Ca. 1975.

[2] Child, J. & Petronio, S. "Unpacking the paradoxes of privacy in CMC relationships: the challenges of blogging and relational communication on the internet." Computer Mediated Communication in Personal Relationships, 2010.

[3] Fono, D., & Raynes-Goldie, K. "Hyperfriends and Beyond: Friendship and Social Norms on LiveJournal." *Internet Research Annual.* Vol 4, 2006.

[4] Katherine, A. *BOUNDARIES: WHERE YOU END AND I BEGIN*. MJF Books, Hazelden Foundation, 1991.

[5] Maia, M., J. Almeida, and V. Almeida. "Identifying user behavior in online social networks." In Proceedings of the 1st workshop on Social network systems, 2008, pp. 1–6.

[6] Neilson Media. "What Americans Do Online: Social Media And Games Dominate Activity," 2010, Available: http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile

[7] Petronio, S. *BOUNDARIES OF PRIVACY: DIALECTICS OF DISCLOSURE*. SUNY Press, 2002.

[8] Stutzman, F. "Boundary Regulation in Social Media." Online ref. in press, 2010.

[9] Whitfield, C.L. *BOUNDARIES AND RELATIONSHIPS. KNOWING, PROTECTING, AND ENJOYING THE SELF*. Health Communications, Inc. Deerfield Beach, FL, 1993.

[10] Zinoviev, D., and Duong, V. "Toward Understanding Friendship in Online Social Networks." *International Journal of Technology, Knowledge, and Society,* Vol. 5, No. 2, 2009, pp. 1-8.