

Interactional Privacy within Online Social Networks: A Interpersonal Boundary Regulation Approach

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to Facebook's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, privacy is no longer the social norm: "People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people" (Matyszczyk 2010). Yet despite our propensity to share, comedian Jimmy Kimmel declared November 17, 2010 "National Unfriend Day" (Kitchen 2010) as a backlash against Facebook. His stance was that, "friendship is a sacred thing, and I believe Facebook is cheapening it." Some social scientists agree and have described SNS relationships as "brief and tangential" characterized with "ambient intimacy" (Hesse 2010) where we are surrounded indirectly by friends but lack true connection. Although online sharing may be the new social norm, disclosure does not equate to intimacy. In some cases, sharing too much can be detrimental to relationships (Petronio 2002). In fact, social psychology argues that interpersonal boundaries which regulate how much we share of ourselves with others are vital to both personal well-being and relational development (Katherine 1991).

My research explores interpersonal boundary regulation as a way to balance the tradeoffs between the benefits and drawbacks individuals experience with Online Social Networks (OSNs). 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. My goal is to identify boundary regulation mechanisms that are relevant to SNSs and create a model of interpersonal boundary regulation within online social networks. Through the examination of both personal and technological strategies for boundary regulation, we will be able to find ways to enhance these processes and improve the design of OSN interfaces.

2. MOTIVATION AND RELATED WORK

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are specific web-based instances of OSNs. For instance, Facebook and MySpace are two distinctly separate SNS environments, but they are both OSNs. SNSs are defined with the following characteristics: 1) a public or semi-public profile 2) an explicit way to connect with others and 3) a means of traversing this connection-based network (boyd and Ellison 2007). Therefore, not all social media such as blogs, message boards, and instant messaging are considered SNSs. A confirmed benefit of online social networking is increasing social capital, the intrinsic value of participating in social exchanges, through giving emotional support, access to new information and people (Ellison, Steinfield et al. 2010), camaraderie, a sense of social identity, and more.

According to Altman's seminal work *The Environment and Social Behavior*, "interpersonal boundary regulation" is the key to maintaining appropriate levels of interaction within one's social environment. He views boundary regulation as a dialectal process where we dynamically change our desire for social interaction and thus must continually negotiate our boundaries with others. The primary mechanisms of interpersonal control used to negotiate boundaries in Altman's model were personal space, territory, verbal behavior, and nonverbal behavior. However, Altman's work was specific to the context of the physical environment, and many of these mechanisms no longer apply to environments like Facebook. The tangibility yet lack of physicality of SNSs changes the overall dynamics of the boundary regulation process. Similarly, many boundary mechanisms that have been developed within SNSs are often not behaviors we see in the physical world.

3. CURRENT RESULTS

Most social networking research has narrowed Altman's definition of boundary regulation to focus specifically on information privacy. However, within SNSs we not only regulate the information we share with others, we also manage numerous interpersonal interactions. Therefore, it is vital that we better understand how we navigate those interpersonal boundaries as well. Therefore, my research focuses on interpersonal boundaries which involve *information privacy* and *interactional privacy* between OSN users. Information

privacy is related to the disclosure of private information whereas interactional privacy manages the level of access we give others to ourselves through social interactions. I use mixed methods to deeply understand these phenomena. In Study 1, three qualitative approaches were combined to derive five primary boundary strategies employed within SNSs. First, I reviewed literature from three main areas: interpersonal boundaries, online social networking, and boundary regulation within social media. Second, I performed an interface analysis of five popular SNSs (Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Hi5, and Ning) to compare and contrast options present for interpersonal boundary regulation. Third, I employed semi-structured interviews of actual SNS users. I have collected interview data from 11 participants, 6 females and 5 males.

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 (Altman 1975). The SNS interpersonal boundary mechanisms I uncovered are network, territorial, disclosure, relational, and interactional boundaries (Wisniewski, Richter-Lipford et al. 2011).

My second research goal is to develop a combined process-level and conceptual model for interpersonal boundary regulation within SNSs and empirically validate various relationships in the model through quantitative methods. Based on an extensive literature review and these findings, Figure 1 represents my initial interpersonal boundary regulation model for SNSs (Wisniewski 2011).

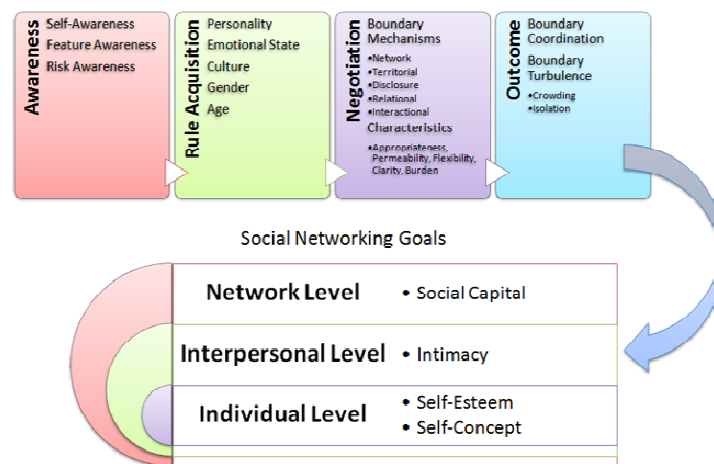


Figure 1. Interpersonal Boundary Regulation Process

4. DISSERTATION STATUS AND PLANS

I have conducted 11 preliminary interviews for Study 1, and my goal is to interview a total of 20 participants before finalizing the results. Thus far, I have created a preliminary theoretical model and am formulating hypotheses, operationalizing measures, and designing user studies to test my model. I plan to defend my dissertation proposal May 5, 2011; after proposal, I will complete two additional studies based on my model. Study 2 will be a survey to assess how self-awareness, feature-awareness, and risk awareness along with burden impact how individuals employ different boundary mechanisms within SNSs. Feature-awareness refers to the knowledge of SNS interface controls to manage privacy levels while burden deals with how difficult it is to use these controls. Risk awareness involves understanding potential negative consequences of boundary violations. Study 3 will examine the impact of boundary turbulence on online social networking outcomes such as self-esteem, self-concept, intimacy, and social capital. Social capital is the intrinsic value an individual receives from being part of an online community. We believe that negative experiences within SNSs result in lower levels of social capital and that improved boundary regulation can reduce these negative experiences.

5. EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

Online social networking has become ubiquitous as hundreds of millions of users share and interact online at home and in the workplace. Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) studies the underlying impact technology has on our society. Therefore, an in-depth, theoretical understanding of the interpersonal boundary regulation process in this new context is a necessary step toward knowledge creation in HCI. A clear taxonomy of different types of boundary regulation strategies helps us comprehend SNS user behaviors. A model of interpersonal boundary regulation within online social networks will establish the important steps and factors that comprise the boundary regulation process. This overall understanding will help us better support SNS users and create interfaces that promote an enhanced level of personal well-being and social capital within SNSs. In summary, achieving these goals will help enable the HCI community to transform online social networking interactions that are often superficial into a deeper level of human interaction.

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