

Interpersonal Communication, Self-Disclosure and Privacy Boundaries in Social Media

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Abstract

The development of digital media has transformed the landscape of interpersonal communication through the emergence of various social media platforms. This has encouraged individuals for self-disclosure while still striving to manage their privacy boundaries. This study aims to analyze the self-disclosure activities and privacy boundary management within the context of online interpersonal communication. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, online observation, and documentation involving active digital platform users, selected via purposive sampling. The findings indicate that online self-disclosure is driven by the online disinhibition effect to satisfy psychological needs for social support and relationship maintenance. However, the fluidity of digital spaces triggers the phenomenon of context collapse, blurring the boundaries between public and private audiences, that increasing the risk of interpersonal conflict and the misuse of digital footprints. Drawing on Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory, users navigate this dialectical dilemma by applying fluid privacy rules. When information is leaked by others, individuals experience privacy turbulence, manifested as a loss of trust and social anxiety. As a defensive and self-protective strategy, users simultaneously adopt behavioral and technical adaptations, such as conscious content filtering or self-censorship, periodic digital footprint removal or digital cleaning, the use of audience-limiting features e.g., close friends, and the creation of alternative accounts second accounts. Self-disclosure in interpersonal communication is a voluntary act of sharing personal information to build trust and intimacy with others. However, this process requires clear privacy boundaries to control the extent to which sensitive information is disclosed, in order to avoid the risk of data misuse or privacy violations.

Keywords: *Self-disclosure, Privacy Boundaries, Online Interpersonal Communication, Communication Privacy Management Theory, Mediated-Communication.*

A. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital media has transformed the landscape of interpersonal communication through the emergence of various social media platforms. It facilitates individuals build, maintain, and cultivate social relationships (Mubarok, 2022). This has encouraged individuals for self-disclosure because there are no longer factors that hinder human connection (Craft & Garcia, 2016; Hansen et al., 2011), while still striving to manage their privacy boundaries.

Digital media provides individuals with a broader platform to share information about themselves ranging from thoughts, feelings, and daily activities to deeply personal aspects of their lives (Tania & Nurdin, 2021). The unique nature of digital spaces introduces a new dimension to the process of self-disclosure. Self-

disclosure stands out as a crucial factor determining the sustainability of a relationship (Fantini & Tamba, 2020).

The tendency for online communication to lack physical cues, a concept known as the cues-filtered-out perspective often triggers the online disinhibition effect (Afifah, 2023). This phenomenon emboldens individuals, making them feel more open and less anxious about sharing personal details than they would in face-to-face conversations. Personal information flows rapidly and extensively across the virtual world (Nurhaliza et al., 2023). Such openness is often viewed as a primary bridge for fostering emotional intimacy and mutual trust among interacting parties.

While this ease and boldness in self-disclosure facilitate connection, they also present significant challenges regarding privacy boundaries. Although digital spaces offer freedom of expression, the internet's inherent characteristics, permanence, searchability, and ease of duplication, make it difficult to retract information once it has been shared (Yunita, 2019). Individuals often face a dilemma between the desire to be recognized and accepted within online social circles and the need to shield their personal spheres from unwanted access (Safitri et al., 2021).

Issues arise when the boundaries between public and private domains become increasingly blurred in social media. Social media users often fail to realize that information intended for personal consumption or a small group can easily become accessible to a much wider audience, a phenomenon known as context collapse (Kurniawan & Irwansyah, 2021). This lack of clear boundaries creates new vulnerabilities, where sensitive information risks being misused, potentially triggering interpersonal conflicts or even compromising the user's real-world personal safety (Akbar & Faryanyah, 2018).

Managing privacy boundaries has become a crucial skill in online interpersonal communication. Individuals must exercise strong self-regulation in determining what information is appropriate to share (Purnomo, 2023), to whom it is directed, and when it is appropriate to withdraw or keep matters private. Such management is not merely about concealing information, rather it concerns how individuals maintain control over their data ownership and personal identity amidst the ongoing wave of digitalization (Budisiwi, 2022).

A dialectical tension between the desire for openness and the need for privacy persists whenever individuals interact online. This dynamic is fluid and constantly shifting, contingent upon the situational context, the level of relational closeness, and each individual's perception of risk (Martha & Permanasari, 2022). A failure to balance these factors can lead to communication turbulence that damages the interpersonal relationships being cultivated (Netti, 2021).

Given this urgency, gaining a deep understanding of how individuals navigate openness and confidentiality in the virtual world is crucial. The phenomenon of self-disclosure, intertwined as it is with privacy management in digital spaces, requires comprehensive analysis to provide a complete picture of modern communication behavior patterns. In light of this context, the research entitled "Interpersonal

Communication, Self-Disclosure and Privacy Boundaries in Social Media” is essential to undertake.

B. METHOD

This study takes a qualitative descriptive research method for the purpose of conducting an in-depth investigation of the subjective experiences of individuals with regard to self-disclosure and the management of privacy boundaries in the social media. The participants of the study were chosen through purposive sampling techniques based on a set of criteria that included such as being active users of digital platforms, engaging in frequent interpersonal interactions, and having previously experienced with self-disclosure and online privacy management. The primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews that focused on the self-disclosure and privacy boundaries management in social media. The secondary data were gained through online observation and the examination of pertinent digital archival records.

The interactive model that was established by Miles et al. (2014) was utilized to evaluate all of the data that was collected. This model is comprised of three primary stages, data reduction to select important and relevant information, data presentation in narrative text form, and the drawing of objective conclusions. Source triangulation was utilized in order to guaranty the validity and reliability of the findings. This was accomplished by comparing the outcomes of interviews with several informants and cross-referencing them with the observed behavioral reality that occurred in the online space. This method ensures that a full examination of self-disclosure and privacy boundaries on interpersonal communication in social media.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Self-Disclosure in Online Interactions

Research findings indicate that the phenomenon of self-disclosure in digital spaces no longer follows a linear or conventional path. It has evolved into a highly dynamic, fluid, and situational communication process. Individuals possess full control and a broad platform to construct the identities they wish to present to the outside world. The rapid, instantaneous nature of social media enables users to share a wide range of personal information, from casual daily activities to deeply emotional outpourings (Sarhan et al., 2023).

This widespread openness in the online space is heavily influenced by the psychological phenomenon known as the online disinhibition effect (Schouten, 2007). When interacting from behind a screen, individuals perceive an emotional and physical distance from their conversation partners due to the lack of direct nonverbal cues, known as cues-filtered-out. The absence of direct eye contact, facial expressions, and audible vocal intonation in the digital world, whether consciously or unconsciously, breaks down barriers of social anxiety. Individuals feel far bolder and more open, experiencing less anxiety or embarrassment when revealing secrets or their vulnerable sides compared to face-to-face interactions.

The motivation behind this high level of online self-disclosure is largely rooted in the psychological need for social support (Mouakket, 2019). When facing life pressures or emotional conflicts, individuals often use digital platforms as an outlet for catharsis or a space to unburden their minds. By posting status updates or sending messages in chat rooms, they hope to receive quick responses, such as sympathy, advice, or simply emotional validation, from their social networks. The speed of feedback in the virtual world provides instant psychological gratification, reinforcing the tendency to continue engaging in such openness in the future.

Beyond the search for support, self-disclosure is also driven by the motive of maintaining interpersonal relationships. Amid the hustle and bustle of real-world activities, online communication serves as a vital bridge for maintaining intimacy with close associates, such as friends, family, and romantic partners (Walther & Lee, 2014). By regularly sharing personal details, ranging from real-time locations and activity photos to personal opinions, informants feel that they can sustain a sense of closeness and engagement in others' lives, and vice versa. This openness is tacitly understood as a sign that an interpersonal relationship remains strong.

However, field findings reveal significant structural challenges underlying this convenience, specifically the phenomenon known as context collapse. In digital spaces, the boundaries between the intended audience such as a circle of close friends and the actual audience, such as colleagues, extended family, or even the general public, often blur or vanish entirely. When users post information, individuals consider private or casual, that content risks being consumed by other audience groups with different values and social expectations (Gil-Lopez et al., 2018).

This blurring of audience boundaries frequently triggers serious interpersonal misunderstandings among informants. Personal information shared without appropriate contextual filtering is often misinterpreted by others, leading to unilateral judgment, gossip, or even open conflict in real-life relationships. Informants reported instances where jokes or grievances posted for peers were seen by older family members or professional colleagues, resulting in reprimands or damage to their personal reputations (Vitak, 2012).

The fundamental characteristics of internet technology, permanence, searchability, and replicability, significantly amplify the social risks associated with online self-disclosure (Kneidinger, 2014). Once personal information is transmitted or uploaded to the digital space, it leaves a digital footprint that is extremely difficult to erase completely. Although users may have the option to delete posts, they lack control over an audience that might have taken screenshots or redistributed the information to other platforms without the original owner's consent.

Awareness of the risks regarding data misuse and digital security threats triggers considerable anxiety among informants. Some have personally experienced or witnessed instances of cyberstalking or the use of personal information to psychologically harm individuals (doxing). This threatening reality gradually alters the informants' perceptions, leading them to realize that the digital space, initially

perceived as comfortable and liberating, is actually an environment fraught with social and privacy vulnerabilities (Walther & Lee, 2014).

The level of relationship closeness and perceived trust remain the primary filters informants use before deciding to engage in deep self-disclosure. Before sharing highly sensitive information, individuals conduct a social assessment regarding the credibility of their online interlocutors. In-depth disclosures are reserved for communication circles with a proven track record of discretion, thereby minimizing the potential for betrayal or information leaks (McGloin, 2014). This phenomenon demonstrates that online self-disclosure is no longer merely a spontaneous, aimless act, but rather a deliberate process of message management (Sarhan et al., 2023).

Today's digital media users are compelled to become more strategic and selective communicators. They must skillfully distinguish between information safe for public consumption, often as part of impression management, and information that requires strict isolation for private use or sharing within a very limited circle. Ultimately, the dynamics of self-disclosure in online interpersonal communication are inextricably linked to a calculation weighing the social benefits gained against the lurking risks to privacy. On one hand, individuals cannot shake the desire to open up in order to gain intimacy, recognition, and social support in the virtual world. On the other hand, they are haunted by the reality that excessive openness can shatter the safe boundaries of their own personal lives.

This dialectical tension that renders online self-disclosure behavior highly volatile and challenges conventional communication theories. The sharing of information in the digital space does not necessarily correlate directly with improved relationship quality (Pollmann & Crockett, 2021) rather, it requires careful navigation. Self-disclosure in interpersonal communication is a voluntary act of sharing personal information to build trust and intimacy with others in interpersonal relationships.

2. Managing Privacy Boundaries and Self-Protection Strategies

In response to the excessive practice of self-disclosure in digital space, the management of privacy boundaries serves as a crucial factor for users to maintain control over their personal life (Heo, 2011). The findings indicate that individuals do not view privacy as static but it perceived as a space with constantly shifting boundaries. Whenever users interact via digital media, they act as the rightful owners of their personal information, holding the authority to decide who may access and view that information and who must remain outside those boundaries.

This process of boundary setting aligns with Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory. This theory posits that when individuals share personal information with others, they effectively draw those individuals into a circle of co-ownership. In online interpersonal communication, informants actively formulate clear privacy rules before disclosing information about themselves. These rules are typically based on various factors, such as motivational considerations, cultural background, the interaction context, and a calculated assessment of the ratio between potential social risks and relational benefits (Taddei & Contena, 2013).

However, the application of privacy rules in the virtual world often falls short of the ideal, given the nature of digital platforms, which are open to multiple interpretations and vulnerable to manipulation (Kneidinger, 2014). Research findings reveal that informants frequently experience what is known as privacy turbulence. This condition arises when mutually agreed-upon privacy boundaries are breached by another party, whether intentionally or inadvertently. A common example cited by informants involves close friends forwarding private messages or sharing screenshots of confidential conversations with other groups without prior permission.

Such privacy turbulence entails significant psychological and relational consequences for the informants who fall victim to these breaches. Such boundary violations not only trigger feelings of disappointment, anger, and a loss of trust but often lead to deep rifts in real-world interpersonal relationships. When personal information spreads beyond one's control, victims tend to experience social anxiety and a sense that their safe space has been invaded (Gil-Lopez et al., 2018; Vitak, 2012). This traumatic experience compels individuals to re-evaluate their communication norms and drastically tighten their privacy boundaries.

As a means of self-evaluation and protection against digital threats, users employ various defensive strategies that combine behavioral adjustments with the use of platform-specific technical features. Currently, the most popular technical strategy among informants is the use of audience segmentation features, such as Instagram's close Friends or WhatsApp's status audience restrictions. These features allow users to categorize their followers into different tiers of social proximity. This enables them to express themselves freely and authentically while keeping the content shielded from the general audience or the public at large.

Beyond audience restriction features, a common phenomenon observed in the field is the widespread use of alternative accounts, known as "second accounts" or finstas. Informants deliberately create these secondary accounts under pseudonyms, allowing access only to a select few individuals whose trustworthiness in keeping secrets has been proven. The primary account or first account is used to cultivate a normative, professional public image, whereas the second account serves as an intimate space for catharsis, free from social judgment (Beam et al., 2018; Gil-Lopez et al., 2018). This separation of identities stands as clear evidence of how users adapt to the risks of context collapse on social media.

In addition to strategies relying on technological features, informants also tighten privacy through self-initiated modifications to their communication behavior, specifically through self-censorship or the conscious filtering of content. Before hitting the upload button or sending a message, users now engage in more deliberate cognitive reflection regarding the long-term implications of the information involved. They consciously refrain from sharing overly sensitive details, such as real-time locations, financial data, family issues, or excessive emotional venting. This form of self-restraint is considered the most effective first line of defense.

Another self-protection measure routinely practiced by modern digital users is the periodic removal of their digital footprint, often referred to as digital cleaning.

Many informants actively remove their digital history by deleting old posts, untagging themselves from photos shared by others, and clearing out old chat messages. These actions are driven by the awareness that an individual's perceptions, values, and relationships evolve over time. Such deletions ensure that past information is not misused in the future to damage their current reputation or interpersonal relationships.

Online interpersonal communication also compels individuals to adopt strict screening strategies when dealing with new external interactions (Tang & Hew, 2020). Informants report that they are being far more selective about accepting friend or follow requests, showing no hesitation in ignoring or rejecting accounts that appear unfamiliar or suspicious. If an account begins to exhibit disruptive behavior, such as sending spam messages or posting unpleasant comments, users promptly take decisive action, ranging from muting and restricting access to permanently blocking the account.

This entire phenomenon of privacy management reflects the fact that privacy boundaries in the online space are no longer managed solely on an individual basis but are, in fact, collective in nature. When two or more people engage in online interpersonal communication, they share a mutual responsibility for upholding those privacy boundaries (Duan & Feng, 2022). A failure by any party to maintain confidentiality compromises the entire security system that has been established. Negotiating the boundaries of what may or may not be shared with the public has become a topic increasingly discussed in explicit terms among interacting parties.

This flexibility in opening and closing the gates of privacy reflects a maturing level of digital literacy within modern society. Users no longer view technology as an entity that dictates their behavior, instead they seek to harness technology to serve their need for security. By combining the savvy use of platform security features with the maturity to filter messages, individuals strive to create a balanced online communication ecosystem, one where social need are met without sacrificing privacy (Pollmann & Crockett, 2021).

The findings also confirm that online privacy management is an active, continuous, and never-ending process for every user. As platform algorithms evolve and new features emerge, threats to privacy will inevitably mutate. This dynamic requires individuals to remain vigilant and adaptive in updating their self-protection strategies to avoid falling victim to the very information openness they practice in the digital space.

Striking a balance between self-disclosure and privacy management is key to avoid the risk of data misuse or privacy violations. Individuals who successfully navigate their privacy boundaries tend to enjoy online interpersonal relationships that are healthier, more stable, and less prone to conflict (Taddei & Contena, 2013). Those who neglect boundary management risk becoming trapped in a cycle of digital anxiety and exhausting relational turbulence. Thus, the ability to manage privacy boundaries is no longer merely an option but an essential competency for anyone choosing to live and interact in the digital age.

D. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that self-disclosure in online interpersonal communication is highly dynamic and situational, significantly driven by the online disinhibition effect. The absence of direct physical cues in digital spaces lowers psychological barriers, making users feel bolder and more comfortable sharing personal information to seek social support and maintain relationships. However, this freedom of expression gives rise to a major structural challenge known as context collapse, where the boundaries between intended and actual audiences blur, thereby increasing the risk of misunderstandings, relational conflicts, and the misuse of permanent digital footprints.

Faced with these vulnerabilities, users do not manage privacy rigidly or withdraw completely instead, they actively apply fluid, constantly negotiated privacy rules based on Communication Privacy Management principles. When these information boundaries are breached by others, individuals experience privacy turbulence, characterized by a loss of trust and social anxiety. Such traumatic experiences regarding information leaks compel users to conduct deep evaluations and fortify their safe space defenses to avoid falling victim to the consequences of their own openness.

As a form of adaptation and self-protection within the digital ecosystem, users employ a dual-defense strategy that combines behavioral modification with technical savvy. These strategies range from strict content filtering or self-censorship and periodic digital footprint cleanup to the use of platform segmentation features, such as Close Friends lists, and the creation of alternative or second accounts. Ultimately, successfully building healthy interpersonal relationships in the modern era is no longer determined by the extent of self-disclosure, but rather by an individual's adaptive ability to balance openness with robust privacy boundary management mechanisms to avoid the risk of data misuse or privacy violations.

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