



# Managing privacy boundaries together: Exploring individual and group privacy management strategies in Facebook



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## ABSTRACT

Most research on privacy management within the context of social network sites (SNSs) treats users as individual owners of private information. Privacy, however, is beyond individual control and is also managed on a group level. This study applies the Communication Privacy Management theory (CPM) to explore the individual and group privacy management strategies in Facebook. We present a survey completed by 900 members of a youth organization regarding their online behaviors and membership. We found that women are more likely to employ individual privacy management strategies, while men are more likely to employ group privacy management strategies. For group privacy management, we found common bond and the role an individual is attributed within the youth organization to be the strongest predictors. The results generated from this study are a first but important step to illustrate the differences and similarities between individual and group privacy management. We argue that it is necessary to further study and understand group privacy to better approach users' privacy needs.

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## 1. Introduction

Since social network sites (SNSs) began to bloom, privacy researchers have studied their impact on users' privacy. Psychological and sociological perspectives often study how the technical properties of SNSs create new dynamics and influence the privacy management of users (e.g. [boyd, 2008](#); [Litt, 2013](#); [Stutzman, Capra, & Thompson, 2011](#); [Tufekci, 2008](#); [Vitak, 2012](#)). Recently, academics and scholars have pled to broaden up the scope of privacy research by focusing on the *collective* next to the *individual* level of privacy ([boyd, 2011](#); [Lampinen, Lehtinen, Lehmuskallio, & Tamminen, 2011](#); [Parks, 2010](#); [Smith, Dinev, & Xu, 2011](#); [Xu, 2012](#)). Indeed, when information is disclosed to others, they become co-owners. Moreover, some types of information never belonged to the individual in the first place, but can be regarded as group property. In this study we have a closer look at how members of youth organizations manage this group property in Facebook. To do this, we draw on the Communication Privacy Management theory (CPM), as formulated by [Petronio \(2002\)](#). CPM treats privacy as a dialectic process, indicating that privacy is about opening and closing boundaries to others and optimizing the need of being both private and public. Following CPM, this regulation of boundaries is dependent of so-called privacy rules

or privacy management strategies. People develop both individual and group privacy management strategies. For example, in Facebook users can employ settings that limit the audience to whom the information flow is directed or, together with others, agree on what type of information can be disclosed.

Throughout this article, we further discuss the basic principles of CPM, the general patterns in how people manage group boundaries and provide an overview of different privacy management strategies used in SNSs. The overall goal of this study is to move beyond an individual-centric notion of privacy. Specifically, we focus on the privacy management strategies of members ( $n = 900$ ) of -Belgian youth organizations in Facebook. By means of hierarchical regression analyses, we determine the predictors of individual and group privacy management and its relationship with perceived privacy control.

## 2. Communication privacy management theory

### 2.1. Privacy as boundary coordination

[Petronio \(2002, p. 6\)](#) defines privacy, "as the feeling that one has the right to own private information, either personally or collectively." We manage our privacy through coordinating the boundaries of sharing certain information with particular people or groups. Indeed, she refers to *our* privacy because people have the feeling that they *own* private information and others become co-owners when the information is disclosed. People develop

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individual and group privacy management strategies or rules to coordinate disclosure behavior. As we create individual boundaries around the self, we also create group boundaries with others. Co-owners of information negotiate on privacy rules to optimize the dialectic between disclosing and withdrawing of information. When the negotiation fails privacy turbulence is likely to occur. For example, people intentionally violate the established rules or unwillingly disclose private information.

Petronio (2002) differentiates three general patterns in how people manage group boundaries: inclusive boundary coordination, intersected boundary coordination, and unified boundary coordination.

Inclusive boundary coordination refers to person A giving up privacy control to person B in order to get something in return (e.g., a patient talking about their eating habits to a doctor so the doctor can provide adequate consultation with regard to his or her health status). In intersected boundary coordination, the concealed information is perceived as comparable, and person A and B are considered as equals (e.g., two friends mutually disclosing the troubles they face at home). Unified boundary coordination is a pattern whereby everyone is in control of the private information, whilst no one really owns the information. Here, the power of person A over B or the equal sharing of information between person A and B is not the most important aspect (e.g., members of a sports club concealing that they have cheated during a game). Rather, “the body of private information typically found in this type of coordination often predates all members and new members make contributions, yet the information belongs to the body of the whole” (Petronio, 2002, p. 134). In this study we conceptualize group privacy management as coordinating unified boundaries. Individual privacy management we conceptualize as the coordination of privacy rules around the self.

## 2.2. Boundary coordination in SNSs

Many researchers have studied how users manage their privacy in SNSs. Most focus on how users employ the privacy settings available in SNSs (i.e. [boyd & Hargittai, 2010](#); [Kramer-Duffield, 2010](#); [Lenhart, 2009](#); [Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008](#); [Litt, 2013](#); [Stutzman, Gross, & Acquisti, 2012](#); [Vitak, 2012](#)), such as deleting content from one’s profile ([Madden, 2012](#)) or creating separate audience groups ([Kramer-Duffield, 2010](#)). Others also study the social and mental strategies in managing privacy in SNSs. For example, [boyd and Marwick \(2011\)](#) indicate that teenagers encrypt the meaning of the disclosed information in SNSs, so that it only becomes accessible to a particular segment of their friends. They labeled the latter with the term social steganography. [Brandtzæg, Lüders, and Skjetne \(2010\)](#) suggest that users adapt their disclosure behavior through only posting information that matches the attitudes and beliefs of all audiences. The latter goes hand in hand with the common denominator approach of [Hogan \(2010\)](#), whereby users treat SNSs as a front stage and only post information that is suitable for every public.<sup>1</sup>

CPM was developed before the emergence of SNSs as a widespread communication tool. In SNSs users are not only disclosing to other people, but also to SNS providers and other third parties. [Raynes-Goldie \(2010\)](#) defines “the control of information flow about how and when personal information is shared with other people” as social privacy, and access to and processing of individually identifiable personal information by SNS providers and other third parties as institutional privacy.

Different components have been identified as reasons for users to disclose information to SNS providers and third parties, including financial rewards and personalization ([Smith et al., 2011](#); [Xu, Teo, Tan, & Agarwal, 2009](#); [Yang & Wang, 2009](#)). When disclosing information to other people, [Petronio \(2002, p. 6\)](#) indicates, “Individuals may wish to relieve a burden, gain control, enjoy self-expression, or possibly develop intimacy.” Over the years, researchers have studied why users disclose information towards other people in SNSs and especially found it be of value for bridging and bonding social capital ([Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011](#); [Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008](#); [Vitak & Ellison, 2012](#)) and presenting the self ([boyd, 2008](#); [Papacharissi, 2012](#); [Parks, 2010](#); [Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008](#)). Although users disclose information towards multiple audiences at once in SNSs, research indicates that users disclose to achieve interpersonal benefits, rather than paying heed to the harm SNS providers and other third parties might cause ([Brandtzæg et al., 2010](#); [Raynes-Goldie, 2010](#); [Tufekci, 2008](#); [Young & Quan-Haase, 2013](#)).

In this study we limit ourselves to studying individual and group privacy management with respect to other people in SNSs and do not focus on how users deal with the collection and processing of personal information by SNS providers and other third parties.

## 3. Predictors and hypotheses in the model

CPM theory outlines different decision criteria that influence the development of privacy management strategies. In this section we discuss and substantiate different criteria we included in the research model and formulate our hypotheses. A body of literature has studied the individual privacy management in SNSs. To our knowledge, the predictors of group privacy management in Facebook have not been studied so far. We differentiate between group and individual privacy management to obtain a holistic view on managing privacy boundaries. In [Appendix A](#) we give an overview of the individual privacy management strategies we measured. We include preventive, corrective, social and structural privacy management strategies.

### 3.1. Predictors of individual privacy management strategies

When people grow older their social environment expands. This makes it possible to develop a multi-layered self. It also requires being able to control multiple boundaries and information flows. CPM theory indicates that during the adolescent stage individuals begin to develop stricter privacy rules ([Petronio, 2002](#)). In adulthood the privacy rules must increase to manage privacy boundaries. [Litt \(2013\)](#) notices that while popular media often suggests that young users do not care about their online privacy, studies conclude quite the reverse: young users are stricter than older users. The research of [Brandtzæg et al. \(2010\)](#) indicate that young users are more aware of strategies to manage their privacy than adults. It also seems that young users employ different privacy management strategies. [boyd and Marwick \(2011\)](#) state that teenagers use social strategies as social steganography in managing their privacy, whilst [Quinn \(2012\)](#) mentions other privacy strategies used by mid-adults, such as not filling out profiles fully or providing false information.

CPM states that adults establish stricter privacy rules than children and adolescents ([Petronio, 2002](#)). Research on privacy management in SNSs suggests the opposite. We therefore find it difficult to specify a direction regarding the relationship between age and privacy management in SNSs. As such, our first hypothesis expects a significant difference between age and privacy management but does not specify its relationship.

<sup>1</sup> For a synthesis of the different strategies used for boundary coordination, we refer to work of [Lampinen et al. \(2011\)](#).

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