
Is Breaking Up Hard To Do? Managing Relationship Boundaries On Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

The purpose of our research is to direct more attention to two relationship privacy boundary strategies: **connection avoidance** (i.e., rejecting friend/follower requests) and **connection termination** (i.e., removing existing friends/followers). A survey study was conducted with 222 college students that examined how participants regulated these boundaries with others versus how they perceived others who regulated these boundaries with them ("self" vs. "other") on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Participants reported using relationship avoidance and termination strategies more than they perceived others using these strategies against them. Overall, there were minimal impacts reported in terms of relationship changes due to others avoiding and terminating relationships. Site affordances partially explain these results, as none of the sites currently notify users when a friend request is denied or an existing friendship is severed.

Author Keywords

Social networking sites; affordances; relationship management; privacy.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces (Computer-supported cooperative work)

Research Hypotheses
H1: Social media users are more likely to be aware of their own <i>connection avoidance</i> behaviors than that of others.
H2: Social media users are more likely to perceive a relational impact from <i>connection avoidance</i> behaviors of others than of themselves.
H3: Social media users are more likely to be aware of their own <i>connection termination</i> behaviors than that of others.
H4: Social media users are more likely to <i>avoid</i> new connections than they are to <i>terminate</i> existing ones.

Table 1: Research Hypotheses

Introduction

Research on the topic of social media and privacy often frames privacy as a process of interpersonal boundary regulation [4] where individuals must choose what information is appropriate to disclose to others within one's social network [3]. Less research has focused on networked privacy in broader terms, such as how we manage our relational boundaries with others [7] through the affordances provided by social media platforms. Some research has studied the reasons why people unfriend others on Facebook; both online (e.g., inappropriate or polarizing posts) and offline factors (e.g., changes in the relationship) played a critical role in these decisions [5]. Other research has spoken to the negative emotional impact of online avoidance and ostracism [6]. When rejection occurs in interpersonal relationships [2], there is a facilitator ("rejector") and a recipient ("rejected") involved. The recipients tend to feel more upset that the relationship ended. We explore this relationship dynamic of "self" versus "other" in more depth within social networking site contexts.

Methods

Research Overview

Online relationships and boundaries management among social media users is a topic of interest within the GROUP community. Forte et al. [1] examined the strength of potentially "awkward" relationships that can occur between high school students and adults on social media sites and found that such relational ties could be beneficial to both parties. Similarly, our work examines another type of awkward social networking site interaction; specifically, we examined users' **connection avoidance** (i.e., rejecting friend/follower requests) and **connection termination** (i.e., removing existing friends/followers) strategies.

Web-based Survey Design

We distributed a web-survey that examined users' experience using three popular social networking sites: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Two relationship *avoidance* ("ever turned down a friend/follower request") and *termination* ("ever removed/unfollowed someone as a friend/follower") questions were asked from the vantage point of *self* ("Have you") and *other* ("Has someone"). For the *connection avoidance* questions, we followed up on whether participants felt these actions changed their underlying relationships. Questions were repeated for each social networking platform. Measures solicited a "yes/no" response.

Research Hypotheses

To understand how participants' relationship boundary management behaviors differed from their perceptions of the relational boundary management behaviors of others, as well as the perceived impact on their relationships, four initial hypotheses were established, which are outlined in **Table 1**. We conducted the McNemar's statistical test for paired categorical data to test our hypotheses. **Table 2** shows the relative percentages of "yes" for each question and platform.

Results

Participants

The participants were college students recruited from Clemson University. The final sample (N=222) included 86 males and 136 females, ranging in age from 18 to 28 years ($M=20.23$, $SD=1.70$). **H1** was supported for all platforms. On Facebook ($X^2(df = 1, p < 0.01) = 73.11$), Twitter ($X^2(df = 1, p < 0.01) = 7.2$), and Instagram ($X^2(df = 1, p < 0.01) = 19.32$), participants reported using connection avoidance strategies (i.e., rejecting a request) significantly more often than they reported others using this strategy towards them.

	Connection Avoidance (Rejecting a Request)		Relationship Change (Avoidance)		Connection Termination (Removing Connection)	
	Self	Other	Self	Other	Self	Other
Facebook	97%	59%	7%	5%	94%	82%
Twitter	50%	38%	4%	3%	72%	64%
Instagram	54%	33%	4%	3%	60%	48%

Table 2: Percentage of "Yes" Responses to Survey Questions

However, the difference in perceptions between self and other for relational change due to these connection avoidance behaviors was negligible (**H2**, Unsupported), likely because reports of change were relatively low overall (ranging between 3%-7% of participants stating the avoidance behaviors caused a relational impact).

For **H3**, we found that participants significantly reported using connection termination (i.e., removing a friend/follower) more themselves than they experienced being unfriended or unfollowed by others on Facebook ($X^2(df = 1, p < 0.01) = 17.63$), Twitter ($X^2(df = 1, p = 0.01) = 6.26$), and Instagram ($X^2(df = 1, p < 0.01) = 12.03$). For **H4**, McNemar's test revealed a statistical significance for Twitter ($X^2(df = 1, p < 0.01) = 24.50$), but in the opposite direction than expected. Twitter users were more likely to terminate an existing relationship (i.e., unfollow someone) than to reject a request from a potential follower. This is consistent with the platform's affordances, which by default, Twitter accounts are public and allow anyone to follow another user. In order to approve followers, one has to change their privacy settings to private. **Table 3** provides an overall summary of the findings for each hypothesis.

Discussion

Key Research Findings

The key finding from this research is that social networking site users reported using connection avoidance and termination strategies significantly more often than they perceived others using these strategies to create relationship boundaries with them. This suggests that users had a higher level of awareness of their own relationship management strategies than that of others. These results can potentially be explained by the transparency and affordances provided within the social media platforms. In all cases, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram do not notify users when their request for a relationship connection is rejected or when an existing relationship is terminated. This lack of transparency made it difficult for social media users to know when others erect boundaries to put distance between themselves and that user. As a result, however, we believe that this helped explain why we did not see a significant difference for Hypothesis 2. Because users were not as aware of relationship boundaries created by others, they were less likely to perceive a negative relational impact.

Hypothesis Results
H1, Supported: Connection Avoidance, Self > Others
H2, Not Supported: Connection Avoidance, Relational Impact, Self < Others
H3, Supported: Connection Termination, Self > Others
H4, Not Supported: Connection Avoidance > Connection Termination

Table 3: Summary of Findings

Limitations and Future Research

We cannot definitively know whether participants' perceptions were accurate. Future research should consider finding feasible ways to reassess our findings using behavioral data. It would also be interesting to use an experimental design to test whether increased transparency of relationship boundary strategies taken by others (e.g., knowing that someone unfriended me versus me unfriending them) would significantly and negatively impact online and offline relationships. However, the ethicality of such an experiment is questionable because the intervention could potentially cause relational harm.

Conclusion

Similar to face-to-face relationships, relational ties and boundaries can also occur in social media relationships. Activities of connection avoidance and termination respectively play a role when establishing boundaries amongst social media users. Even though connection avoidance behavior is found to be prevalent, there is no indication that this particular activity influences changes to personal relationships (especially negative changes). It is also important to note that certain affordances of a social media site could play a key role in the user's decision to avoid or terminate a relationship. As future work, one aspect that remains to be examined is the correlation between connection termination and the possible relationship changes that this particular action can warrant.

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