

'Friendly' privacy concerns on Facebook?

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In recent years, social network sites such as Facebook have become hugely popular platforms that provide users with various features to facilitate social connectivity, information sharing and relationship development. However, the highly interactive nature of communication and data exchange on those sites has led to an increasing number of privacy concerns by users. Researchers at Penn State's College of Information Sciences and Technology (IST) are studying interpersonal privacy issues on social network sites through the use of a particular feature—Friendship Pages on Facebook.

"I hope our research could extend users' understanding and increase their awareness of interpersonal [privacy](#) on social network sites," said Pan Shi, a Ph.D. student at the College of IST.

Shi, who is working as a [software engineer](#) at [Google](#), recently received a Best Paper Honorable Mention at the ACM SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in [Computing Systems](#), the premier international conference on human-computer interaction. Shi collaborated with Dr. Heng Xu, an associate professor at the College of IST, and Dr. Yunan Chen, an assistant professor at the University of California, Irvine, on the paper, "Using Contextual Integrity to Examine Interpersonal [Information](#) Boundary on Social Network Sites."

"My research is to investigate interpersonal privacy management in a collective environment, more specifically, in social network sites," Shi said.

In October 2010, Facebook introduced the Friendship Page, which aggregated two friends' social interactions, including wall posts, common tagged photos, comments they share, things they both like, events they attended together, and mutual friend lists.

"Facebook's rationale is to provide a convenient place for friends to view their interactions with specified others, which makes the friendship more like a story," Shi said.

Shi, Xu and Chen conducted a qualitative analysis of user comments posted on Facebook's official blog in response to its release of Friendship Pages. The researchers downloaded a total of 1,463 comments users made on the topic of Friendship Pages between Oct. 28, 2010 and Jan. 14, 2011 using an application programming interface (API) provided by Facebook. The findings of the analysis indicate that violations or changes of contexts, actors, attributes and transmission principles in context-relative information norms could result in users' interpersonal privacy concerns.

Besides voicing their explicit concerns on privacy, the researchers reported, users directly expressed their emotional reactions by describing the feature as "creepy, scary, disgusting or invasive." In addition, many users expressed their intentions to leave Facebook, deactivate accounts, delete profiles, and use less frequently.

While a number of Facebook features raise privacy issues, Shi said, the launching of the Facebook Friendship Page introduced a unique set of concerns.

"Dr. Xu and I noticed this feature very soon after the launching of Friendship Pages in late 2010," she said. "This feature grabs our attention because it posited privacy concerns to a different level compared with other features on Facebook."

"In the privacy literature, the traditional privacy goals have focused on limiting information disclosure, controlling information flow, or restricting data access," said Xu, who leads the Privacy Assurance Lab (PAL), an interdisciplinary research group working on a diverse set of projects related to understanding and assuring information privacy. "This research shows that privacy goals in social media move beyond binary decisions to withhold or disclose information at the individual level and should be considered as an interactional and dynamic process that involves the cooperation of others' privacy needs or goals in the social relationship."

According to Shi, the invention of contextual information by individual viewers in the Friendship Pages could possibly lead to misinterpretations about interpersonal relationships, which extends privacy concerns. When examining a short conversation between two friends on a Friendship Page, viewers often have to invent contextual information for appropriate interpretation.

"For other type of information disclosed on Facebook, it is more likely to be information about an individual or an independent matter about an individual," Shi said. "However, for Friendship Pages, information disclosed here involves two parties with their interaction history. Therefore, misinterpretations could lead to more interpersonal privacy implications."

Although the Friendship Page did not reveal any new information, the researchers wrote, its new activity of chronicling the history of social interactions between two friends widely triggered users' privacy concerns. Users indicated their concerns on potential misperceptions of information flows with comments such as "...the extraction and condensation [of information] can cast the comments and posts in a different light from what I intended."

"Aggregating interpersonal information on a single and accessible page could result in synergies that can potentially reveal more details about a person and his or her social ties in new and unexpected ways," the researchers wrote.

While the Facebook Friend Page is still in existence, Shi said, "It is hard to say how users react to it now because Facebook seems to close the comments on this feature in their official blog since June 2012." Since then, Facebook has made a lot of changes on this feature in terms of the manner to access it in its new interface Timeline.

The qualitative analysis of users' comments on the launch of the Friendship Page on Facebook provides preliminary insights in understanding users' interpersonal [privacy concerns](#), the researchers wrote. The next step of the research, Shi said, would be to "focus on the design of privacy control features towards Friendship Pages to help users control the visibility of friendship information with a focus on supporting contextual understanding." In addition, the research has "straightforward and practical significance for re-designing existing privacy enhancing features or privacy settings on [Facebook](#)."

"Our research is a first step towards understanding privacy behavioral archetypes that exist in social media," Xu said. "We hope our understanding on patterns of interpersonal privacy needs can potentially identify design interventions for improved privacy experience."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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