Every post you make, every pic you take, I’ll be watching you: Behind social spheres on Facebook

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Abstract

The problem of conflicting social spheres occurs when communications are simultaneously visible to multiple audiences within a social network, as commonly occurs on social network sites (SNS). In this environment users may suffer from social anxiety as they worry that communications seen as negative by certain audiences may be shared with those same groups. This issue rests on four assumptions: (1) that a social network encompasses a variety of social spheres, (2) that users believe they are being watched by these spheres, (3) that the social spheres differ in the norms, standards and expectations they hold about an individual and (4) that users largely do not employ measures to separate communications to different spheres. The present research aims to provide evidence for these assumptions. Self-discrepancy theory (SDT) [1] is used as a lens to view social norms, and as a novel way of understanding social spheres. Moreover, the research investigates any link between the magnitude of ought self-discrepancies and the social anxiety felt between relational dyads. An online survey with 313 participants offers strong support for these assumptions and provides evidence of a significant association between the magnitude of negative ought-other discrepancies and anxiety within dyads. This evidence strengthens the argument that SNS can cause anxiety and tension in social relations.

1. Introduction

In recent years SNS have become increasingly prevalent, ingrained deeply in the daily practices of many internet users. They function to maintain connections amongst people by providing a vast array of possibilities for self-presentation and managing a multiplicity of social contacts. However, although SNS undoubtedly offer a number of benefits to their users, as they become ubiquitous within society it is becoming increasingly apparent that they can also cause tension. Binder et al. [2] found that this tension was caused when highly visible communication aimed at friends from certain social spheres was consumed beyond those targeted, since others may view information suitable for some spheres negatively. Thus negative tension can develop from positive interactions due to overlapping social spheres in SNS. For example, imagine if that a friend posts a politically incorrect joke on a user’s wall, which in turn causes tension between the user and a senior family member. Such situations can be particularly problematic when they go further, affecting the whole “triadic” structure [2] as the family member may develop a dislike for the friend, causing the friend to have reciprocal feelings. The creation of tension by SNS in this way is known as the problem of conflicting social spheres [2].

This problem rests on four key assumptions: 1) that users have a diverse social network that encompasses a number of different social spheres, 2) that users believe their online communications are viewed by a number of spheres, 3) that these spheres differ in the social norms, standards and expectations they hold about the user and 4) that measures used for segregating information flows between spheres are largely underutilized. The first aim of the present study is to build upon the existing research in this area [2, 3] by not just examining evidence of network diversity but also by looking at whether or not users regularly view and believe they are viewed by a variety of social spheres simultaneously. Uniquely, self-discrepancy theory (SDT) [1] will be used to conceptualize the norms, standards and expectations of differing social spheres.

Applying SDT further in this context, the present study aims to address the link between self-discrepancies and cognitive dissonance. SDT asserts that when individuals are discrepant from their ought self-guides (which in this case is who they perceive others think they ‘ought’ to be) and these discrepancies become active, then they will suffer from anxiety. Thus when users believe their projected online selves are not consistent with the standards of their multiple audiences, they should feel anxious. It is crucial that this relationship be investigated within the context of SNS, as presenting to a variety of social spheres is
likely to increase the possibility of feeling anxious. Hence if assumption (3) is true, i.e. that different spheres have multiple and sometimes-conflicting standards, then the probability of one’s presentation matching the expectations of others will diminish in line with an increasing number of those others.

To examine this connection, users’ perceived levels of discrepancy were used to predict the number of social spheres that they have felt social anxiety over. Subsequently this investigation will help strengthen the argument, put forward by Binder et al [2], that conflicting social spheres cause tension, and it will be the first exploration into cognitive dissonance resulting from presentation towards multiple audiences online.

2. Related Literature

Boyd and Ellison [4] define SNS as arenas in which a user can present themself, articulate a list of friends, traverse that list of friends and view their profiles. These lists of friends interlink and build up huge social networks, which are facilitated and sustained by the sites. Facebook is the most popular of these sites boasting a highly diverse user base consisting of people of all ages from all over the world [5]. It has more than 500 million active users, 50 percent of whom log on daily and 700 billion minutes are spent by users on the site every month [5]. It is for these reasons that Facebook has been chosen as the focus of this study.

2.1 Self Presentation

Facebook like many online platforms provides an arena for self-presentation or similarly ‘impression management’, which Leary and Kowalski [6] define as

“the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them. Because the impressions people make on others have implications for how others perceive, evaluate, and treat them” (p. 34)

Whether someone is managing their image on or offline, their actions have high social importance as they determine how that person is defined and subsequently treated by others [7]. Self-presentation is carried out using all the tools available (verbal and non-verbal) [8] e.g. the language used, the clothes worn, the drink held and even the choice of, partner, each contributing to a desired image of a person based on the expectations of others. Hence in a job interview one would wear a suit and speak professionally as this is congruent with the perceived expectations of the employer.

Facebook offers users multiple tools with which to present themselves. These basically consist of personal information, photos, videos, wall posts, applications, likes, groups joined and status updates. Through the eyes of Goffman [8], personal information, wall posts and status updates approximate to a written form of his verbal communication whilst the rest are non-verbal. In addition, Sibona and Walczak [9] found that users are acutely self aware that they are engaging with online tools for self-presentation. Zhao et al [10] assert that members used these tools to present “hoped-for possible selves” which differ from the “real selves” they show in offline interactions. The Facebook ‘self’ is not just a creation of the individual, it is co-created with other members, either directly through tagged photos, wall-posts or comments, or indirectly by just being visible on their friend list. Back et al [11] assert that because of this co-creation, idealized selves are difficult to create, showing that on Facebook, users tend to communicate images consistent with their real personalities.

These personas are open to ‘feedback’, as discussed by Gilly and Schau [12], which can be likened to the reaction of the audience portrayed by Goffman [8]. Feedback may occur online through Facebook itself or through other media such as text messages, or given that many SNS relationships are anchored, even face-to-face. In all circumstances of self-presentation, when individuals predict they will be, or actually are, unsuccessful at meeting the expectations of their audience, they will feel socially anxious [13].

2.2 Social Anxiety

Schlenker and Leary [13] define social anxiety as the “anxiety resulting from the prospect or presence of interpersonal evaluation in real or imagined social situations”. Where anxiety “is a cognitive and affective response characterized by apprehension about an impending, potentially negative outcome that one thinks one is unable to avert” [13]. Apprehension may be conscious or unconscious, and the possible threat may be actual or imaginary [14]. By social situations, Schlenker and Leary [13] mean situations in which individuals are, or may become, the focus of the attentions of others, as for example when they are giving a speech, engaged in conversation or having their profile viewed on Facebook. Given that such situations allow for the possibility of evaluation by others, they may lead to feelings of social anxiety when the individual imagines the situation or when they are actually taking part in it.
It is this prospect of interpersonal evaluation, and everything it entails, that distinguishes social anxiety from other forms of anxiety [13]. If self-presentation standards are met or exceeded, then the individual will feel satisfied, but if their self-presentation falls below expectations, they will experience a feeling of dissatisfaction. Such dissonant feelings will increase in line with the discrepancy between the standard they hope to meet and their evaluation of the other’s reaction. They will also increase with greater importance of the goal to which the discrepancy is related [13]. Presenting within SNS gives rise to a novel and pressing issue for its users. This is because the selves they create are likely to be simultaneously performing to, and with, a range of other audiences with differing expectations.

2.3 Multiple social spheres

SNS present a novel arena for self-presentation; one in which multiple audiences are simultaneously able to watch performances, 24 hours a day. These audiences may include friends, acquaintances, family members, colleagues, bosses, relational partners, university staff and religious stakeholders, who together will hold heterogeneous expectations of the users performance. This circumstance is known as group co-presence “a situation in which many groups important to an individual are simultaneously present in one context and their presence is salient for the individual” [15]. Meeting the expectations of one audience is a challenge, but multiple audiences make this increasingly difficult. When there are a number of audiences, all with different expectations, then satisfying all expectations simultaneously is very difficult, if not impossible (where expectations conflict). This is known as the multiple audience problem, which has been reported to constrain behaviour based on particular audiences [16-18]. There are two broad strategies people adopt when faced with multiple audiences, parallel to the popular notion of ‘flight or flee’.

Firstly, akin with Goffman’s [8] notion of audience segregation, people may ‘flee’ these difficult situations by separating their audience. The idea of this being that by keeping “different targets away from one another, people can avoid the awkwardness of trying to present disparate images of themselves to two or more targets simultaneously.” [19]. To segregate audiences, performers hold back presentation until undesired audiences are not present, or they manoeuvre themselves into an area to which this audience has no access [8]. Alternatively, they may wish to take ‘time out’, allowing them to perform to a desired audience alone [17].

Sometimes audience segregation is simply not possible, as all audiences remain in view of the performance at all times. Under these circumstances performers may adopt a second strategy of ‘fight’. These strategies, which Fleming et al [17] found individuals to be reasonably successful at, involve conveying different messages to different audiences simultaneously. Tactics employed include, whispering, gesturing, communicating the constraint, encrypting messages [16] and referring to bits of knowledge held only by both the individual and a particular audience [20].

Within SNS users must present a “verifiable, singular identity” which is nearly impossible to cater to specific audiences [21]. Audience segregation opportunities, or the first line of defense [16], do exist to an extent. Examples of this are 1) privacy settings such as the listing function which allows users to list ‘friends’ into self-defined groups such as work and family, and customize their privacy measures (e.g. visible and interaction content) to these groups individually, 2) multiple profiles and 3) creating ‘fakesters’ to obscure real identities [3, 22]. However, such strategies for segregation are widely underutilized. Furthermore, ‘fight’ strategies, the second line of defense are arguably weaker still. The reason for this is that SNS, as compared with offline situations, lessen the ability of users to convey different messages to multiple audiences simultaneously. This is because the use of strategies such as whispering, gestures, and hidden cues are difficult to enact within the predominantly written communications that these sites offer [23-26]. Furthermore, hidden cues such as the use of sarcasm, will be more difficult to interpret through online communications [23, 24]. The use of photographs as part of self-presentation also hinders the opportunity for covert communications, as it is difficult to convey subtle messages through them. Thus, although such strategies suggested by Fleming [16] will exist in these settings, they will be harder to deploy due to the presentational constraints afforded by the sites.

In this environment of singular, less flexible presentations, users’ strategies have been found to “create a lowest-common denominator effect, as individuals only post things they believe their broadest group of acquaintances will find non-offensive” [22]. Hence users of Twitter have been found to conceal information, refrain altogether from certain topics of conversation, and balance strategically targeted tweets with personal information [22]. This defensive strategy is congruent with the finding of Binder et al [2] in their investigation into the problem of conflicting social
spheres. They found that when content which is meant for one social sphere becomes visible to another, then this may result in relational tension within the network. Moreover, they showed that this tension was most likely to occur within family ties, and found little evidence for it amongst work colleagues. A study of IBM employees however, found that managing profiles to control visibility to work related friends could also cause problems [3]. What is useful to note here is that although users may endeavour to censor information in order to avoid tension with audiences, this strategy is unlikely to be internalized into the decisions of others to contribute through wall posts, tagged photos etc. Hence work by Houghton & Joinson [27] has shown that these second party contributions pose a greater risk of harm than disclosure by users themselves. From this literature the current study proposes an increased likelihood that users will not be able to meet all of the expectations of their audiences simultaneously and therefore that self-presentation on SNS results in an increased chance of social anxiety.

2.4 Self-discrepancy Theory (SDT)

In the present study, we use SDT to guide our investigations [1]. SDT asserts that individuals compare themselves (actual selves) to the norms, standards and expectations of internalized ‘self-guides’. Self-guides are either ‘ideal selves’ or ‘ought selves’ that the individuals themselves, or significant others, think they should be. Accordingly, knowing the attributes of these ‘ought selves’ will show the personal standards of the individual or significant other they are linked to. SDT further links discrepancies with cognitive dissonance. In particular, discrepancies from the ought guides represent the presence of a negative outcome, which leads to feelings of agitation and anxiety, which within this context is social anxiety [28]. When an individual feels socially anxious they will then enter into a self-regulatory feedback loop aiming to reduce the discrepancy and associated dissonance.

Individuals can internalize a number of discrepancies at any one time, but the chance that one will induce dissonance receiving self-regulatory priority, will be dependent on its availability and accessibility [29]. Higgins [1] assumed the availability of a discrepancy to depend on 1) the extent to which the attributes of two conflicting selves deviate for a particular individual and 2) the number of mismatches compared to matches, where a match is when a personal attribute (e.g. intelligence, physical attractiveness) is perceived to meet the level desired by a self guide. Hence the greater the number of mismatches and the larger the mismatch (magnitude), the more available the discrepancy is. Magnitude of discrepancies is also positively correlated with the intensity of discomfort caused once it has become activated [1]. However activation of an available discrepancy will depend on its accessibility. Accessibility of a discrepancy depends on three factors: 1) time that has elapsed since the construct was last activated, 2) general frequency of activation and 3) the ‘meaning’ it has to the person compared to the properties of the stimulus experience. Hence, only if the stored construct is applicable will it be called upon for interpretation of an event (Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977).

The present research will use SDT in two ways. First, to examine the horizontal discrepancies between ought/other guides of different multiple audiences in order to uncover differences in the standards of those audiences. Second, to examine vertical discrepancies (between user’s actual self and their guides) to predict the number of cases of dyadic relational anxiety. Through these novel applications of SDT the study will fulfill the following aims;

Aim 1: To empirically substantiate the factors underlying the problem of multiple audiences online, which are crucial to linking presentation to such audiences with social anxiety.

R1: Do users of online social networks befriend multiple social spheres?

R2: Do users view the profiles of other members from different social spheres and perceive that those members in turn view their own profiles?

R3: Do norms, expectations and standards differ across users’ self-guides?

R4: Are privacy settings for segregating audiences largely underutilized?

R5: Is the magnitude of discrepancies linked with cases of social anxiety on FB?

Please note that this study provides no data concerning discrepancy activation. Although this is a limitation, it will not affect the validity of the data as it is based on situations of anxiety that have already occurred and thus we can assume prior activation of discrepancies. This issue will be expanded upon later.
3. Methodology

A total number of 546 participants were recruited via Facebook. The sample was obtained through snowballing the researcher’s own Facebook contacts and University groups called “Overheard at..... University library”. Of the 546 that started the survey, only 313 will be used in the data set for this study as those were the ones who completed all the measures required. The sample comprized of 69.6% females, and 84% individuals who were in full time education. The average age of the sample was 21.67 years old.

Audience diversity was measured using a method similar to the grouping strategy used in previous studies [30]. Social spheres were adapted to suit a predominately student population. Participants responded ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the question ‘Do you have someone from this group as a friend?’ across 17 spheres: friends I know offline, friends of friends, strangers I have met online, friends I met on a night out, siblings, parents, extended family members, relationship partners, ex-relationship partners, ex-relationship partners’ new partners, brief sexual partners, employers, colleagues, clients, teachers/lecturers, resident tutors, and friends from religious groups. The measure of audience diversity was calculated by summating all the groups the respondents had selected; if they selected all 17 spheres this would imply maximum diversity. Who they viewed and who they perceived viewed them at least once every two weeks was measured based on participants’ responses to the same 17 categories and summated to create a ‘viewed’ and a ‘viewed by’ score.

Furthermore, participants were asked to indicate which of the 17 groups had caused them anxiety over content posted on Facebook. These responses were combined to give a total number of anxiety dyads for each individual, which was used as a measure of anxiety caused.

Participants completed an adapted version of the Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ) [31]. This is a measure of the self-concept where 10 attributes (intelligence, social skills and competences, artistic and/or musical ability, athletic ability, physical attractiveness, leadership skills, common sense, emotional stability, sense of humor and discipline) are scored on a 10-point scale in comparison to peers (see [9]). An additional five items were added to the scale to measure negative behaviors likely to cause anxiety (amount smoked, alcohol consumed, level of sexual impulsivity, recklessness on a night out and use of bad language). After completing the measure for the self as it actually is (actual self), and as they think they ought to be (ought self), participants also completed the same items for how they ‘ought to be’ according to three self-guides: their parents / guardians, employer (or potential employer) and romantic partner (or potential partner). The same items and scale were used for each self-guide.

Participants were also asked if they used the sites’ privacy settings to group contacts in order to manage the disclosure and spread of information.

4. Results

R1: Do users of online social networks befriend multiple social spheres?

The results show that users have a diverse portfolio of friends. Respondents on average befriended people from 7.30 different social spheres (SD = 2.42). This is illustrated in more detail in Table 1 and Figure 1.

R2: Do users view the profiles of other members from different social spheres and perceive that those members in turn view their own profiles?

On average, participants reported that they viewed the profiles of people from 3.34 spheres (SD = 1.82), and believed they were viewed by friends from 3.68 social spheres (SD = 2.05). Furthermore social spheres that respondents viewed largely mirrored the groups they thought viewed them, hence the creation of a difference variable (Views you –– You View) yielded an average of 0.35 (SD = 1.171). See below in Table 1 and Figure 1.

R3: Do norms, expectations and standards differ across users self-guides?

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the differences in norms, standards and expectations of the self-guides as perceived by the users. The Huynh-Feldt correction was applied giving ε >0.75 throughout. The results revealed a significant difference between the ought self-guides (ought/self, ought/partner, ought/employer, ought/guardian) across all 10 original attributes and the 5 added. Tests of between subjects differences revealed significant differences (all ps <.001 unless otherwise shown) for: Intelligence, F(3.72,1160.03) = 64.05, Social skills and competences, F(3.305,1031.30) = 114.17, Artistic and/or musical ability, F(3.685,1149.84) = 67.19, Athletic ability F(3.449,1076.11) =126.50, Physical attractiveness, F(3.763,1174.13) =125.09, Leadership skills, F(3.651,1139.09) =110.56, Common sense,
F(3.52,1099.39), Emotional stability, F(3.02,942.07) =108.00, Sense of humor, F(3.54,1104.25) =54.85, Discipline, F(3.16,985.91) =142.60, Recklessness on a night out, F(3.55,110.7.40) =116.09, Use of bad language, F(3.50,1090.95) =191.78, Alcohol drunk F(3.69,1151.27) =117.629, Amount smoked, F(3.21,1002.80) =17.18, and Sexual impulsivity, F(3.733,1164.57) =194.74, The nature of these discrepancies is shown in Figures 2-4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Befriended</th>
<th>You view</th>
<th>View you</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends known offline</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>94.9</td>
<td>95.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends of friends</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strangers met online</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People on a night out</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>80.4</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended family</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship partners</td>
<td>56.6</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-partners</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex’s new partners</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brief-sexual partners</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers/lecturers</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident tutors</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious group friends</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Friending, viewing and being viewed by different social spheres (N=311).

Figure 1: Number of different groups friended, viewed, and perceived to be viewed by.

Figure 2. Ought discrepancies from the actual/self for the first 5 positive attributes.

Figure 3. Ought discrepancies from the actual/self for the second 5 positive attributes.

Figure 4. Ought discrepancies from the actual/self for the 5 negative attributes.

(Please note when interpreting, that the scale for the negative attributes has been inverted. Hence the higher the number the greater the perceived discrepancy)

R4: Are privacy settings used to segregate audiences largely underutilized?
There was little evidence of use of groupings to manage these varied spheres. Only 32.6% of the sample reported using this feature of the site.

**R5: Is the magnitude of discrepancies linked with cases of social anxiety?**

A number of multiple regressions were conducted to test how the size of discrepancies between actual and ought selves predicts total cases of dyadic relational anxiety. In each case gender and age were added to the regression as control variables. For each ought/other guide the scores for the 10 positive and 5 negative attributes were averaged. These mean scores (IVs) were regressed against the total cases of dyadic anxiety reported by the participant (DV).

It is crucial to bear in mind that when interpreting the mean for the positive attributes, the higher the number above 0, the more discrepant the individual, and with the negative attributes, the lower the number below 0, also the more discrepant the individual. Table 2 provides the results of this analysis.

The results show that magnitude of positive discrepancies does not have a significant effect on total cases of anxiety felt between the relational dyads. However the size of negative discrepancies had a significant effect for all three self-guides with p>.001, albeit with relatively low R2 suggesting a number of other sources of variance in predicting social network site related anxiety. The coefficients for these negative guides were also all negative which supports the hypothesis that users who believe they are more discrepant are more likely to feel anxiety linked with multiple relational dyads.

**5. Discussion**

In answer to the research questions posed, users of Facebook reported a diverse set of social spheres linked to their profile as ‘friends’. Although users friended many spheres, the number of groups they viewed, and expected to be viewed by, consisted of a subset comprising approximately half the average number of spheres friended. Interestingly, the groups viewed by respondents largely mirrored the groups they thought viewed them, which raises questions concerning perceived reciprocity of mutual surveillance.

Only about a third of users reported that they used the privacy settings of the site to group friends into discrete spheres. This finding therefore supports the notion that users largely do not, at least at present, use the ‘first line of defense’ [16], or strategies of ‘audience segregation’ [8] put forward by the sites themselves to reconcile multiple audience problems. This does not discount however the possibility that users ‘cull’ audiences using ‘defriending’ as a technique. Lack of use of Facebook grouping functions reinforces the argument within this paper that multiple audiences may cause tension [2], and social anxiety [13], as users largely do not customize their presentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discrepancy</th>
<th>(β)</th>
<th>t value</th>
<th>p value</th>
<th>R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ought/Partner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive +</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.36</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative -</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-4.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ought/Employer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive +</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative -</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-3.99</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ought/Guardian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive +</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.57</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative -</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-3.78</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2. Linear regression output reporting the affect of discrepancy size on total cases of dyadic anxiety*

The self-guides reported by participants illustrated the potential dangers of overlapping social spheres amongst their friends. Across both positive and negative attributes there were significant discrepancies between the actual self and how the individual thought they ought to be in the eyes of three different social spheres; parents, partners and employers. Given the tendency for SNS users to broadcast information across social spheres [2], the finding that they aren’t appearing as they ought to be, could create a clear source of relational tension and anxiety in social networks.

Findings have shown that employers are perceived as having expectations significantly higher than other self-guides for several attributes. This is unsurprising, as many of these attributes, e.g. leadership and common sense, are valued traditionally in the work place.

Furthermore, we see convergence on the respondents’ ought/self, and ought/guardian. This supports the common notion that peoples’ standards
are influenced by the standards of their parents. For negative measures a clear convergence was observed between the standards of employers and parents. Together they were perceived as having the lowest tolerance with regards to these arguably ‘bad behaviors’. Again this makes sense as conventionally these stakeholders have strong standards with regards to such attributes. Partners were perceived to have high standards in relation to attractiveness and humor, again two factors desirable in a romantic context. They were also much more forgiving with regards to drinking, recklessness and use of bad language. This result is fairly predictable given that partners will be of similar age, have similar lifestyles, and arguably not to be together if their standards were too disparate. This significant finding of heterogeneous norms supports one of the main arguments of this paper, built upon the previous literature [13, 16]. This is that users presenting on SNS are more likely to feel socially anxious as it will be difficult, if not possible, to meet the expectations of all audiences simultaneously.

Discrepancy magnitude was found to be significant in predicting the total cases of dyadic anxiety for negative, but not for positive, attributes. In other words, participants who believed they were worse behaved (more negatively discrepant) in the eyes of their audience, suffered from more cases of dyadic anxiety than those who were better behaved (less negatively discrepant). This finding supports SDT’s link between availability of a discrepancy and negative effect [1]. However if this is the case, theory would predict that the magnitude of positive discrepancies should also have been significant. This study proposes two reasons why it is unsurprising that positive discrepancies were insignificant.

First, some of the positive attribute measures could be viewed as more difficult for other users to assess through the written and pictorial information online. Hence it may be more challenging for audiences to ascertain a person’s leadership skills, musical and artistic ability, compared to negative attributes involving alcohol, sex, smoking, and reckless behavior e.g. photographs of drunken misdemeanors, or posts with sexual references, may be perceived to be more explicit and less ambiguous. Thus it is probable that users will feel more anxious when they perceive discrepant communications are more overt.

Secondly, the negative attributes are traditionally ones of greater concern for certain audiences amongst whom discrepancies regarding alcohol, sex and reckless behavior are likely to be perceived as more worrying than those relating to positive attributes. This is likely to be particularly pressing for a young sample given that student lifestyles are often stereotyped with high levels of the negative attributes measured. Furthermore they are in a crucial transitional period of their life where their parents are now seeing them as young adults who will be soon be applying for jobs.

6. Conclusion

The paper has empirically substantiated the four factors that underpin the problem of conflicting social spheres within SNS. Thus it has shown that (1) a social network encompasses a variety of social spheres, (2) users believe that they are being watched by these spheres, (3) these social spheres differ in the norms, standards and expectations they hold about an individual and (4) users largely do not employ measures to separate information communication to different spheres. These results extend the previous work into this area [2, 3, 22], by providing evidence for factors that were largely left as assumptions. Thus they have created a solid empirical base for further investigations into this issue which grows with the widening user base.

Furthermore given that social networks are primarily arenas for self-presentation, they are inextricably linked with the possibility for social anxiety. Based on existing theory, this study asserts that the chance of suffering from social anxiety is increased by the existence of multiple expectations and it has provided an important first examination into why this is the case. Although the data had particular limitations, it widely supported the well-developed assertion within social psychology [1, 28], which increased magnitude of discrepancies leads to increased chance of cognitive dissonance. More precisely, this study showed that the magnitude of negative discrepancies predicted the spread of dyadic relational anxiety between users and their audiences.

7. Limitations

The following will provide a discussion of the limitations of this research. The measure for anxiety may be viewed as crude as it does not measure the total number of cases of anxiety but only the total dyadic anxiety reported e.g. if anxiety were felt in relation to four audience groups the score would be 4. Consequently the severity of this anxiety was also not accounted for as the measure simply asked for the binary of whether anxiety was felt or not. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the link between discrepancies and anxiety is mediated by the discrepancy becoming active. Discrepancy activation was not addressed here, although the findings are still valid as it is suggested that activation occurred as anxiety was felt. Hence discrepancy related cognitive dissonance is always
preceded by activation [1]. Although this limits the scope of contribution, the aim was not to provide a comprehensive investigation into social anxiety but simply the acknowledgement of a relationship on which to base further research.

The study may be criticized over how individuals are grouped within social spheres and the choice of three ought/other guides. Arguably siblings, parents and extended family do belong to the same social sphere and this article agrees that these critical members would normally all fall under the social sphere of ‘family’. However, as the premise of the study was differing expectations as a precursor for tension, it was decided to draw a distinction between critical members usually implicit within social spheres. This is because expectations will be heterogeneous within a given social sphere, as siblings’ standards are likely to differ from parents’ standards, as are those of colleagues from employers. Thus in assessing self-guides, this research proposes that it is vital to focus on specific critical members within a sphere, to avoid respondent confusion over who they are answering about. The three ought/other guides were selected because they represent influential dyadic relationships where tension is likely to exist for a predominately young population. Unlike Binder et al. [2], who chose to assess relational partners within the family social sphere, here it was done individually because the expectations of those partners are likely to differ significantly from those of other stakeholders within the family.

9. Implications for design

The problem of conflicting social spheres has already had an effect on SNS design, hence the development of the listing function described earlier. However this function is underutilized. A possible strategy to increase usage is twofold: First, making the settings easier to adopt by offering suggested lists based on existing network clusters uncovered through algorithms, machine learning or visualization methods to group users. Second, educating users by adding reminders of the importance of listing above their Feeds, a strategy that is already employed by Facebook in promoting user interface changes.

Additionally, we propose that users are offered an easily locatable ‘one click’ privacy tool, which when activated, locks down the information, as default to all Facebook friends, or if calibrated with the Listing function, to specific social spheres. Thus when a user thinks it likely that some online information will conflict with others’ expectations they can instantly protect themselves. For example, a graduate currently applying for jobs may wish to ‘click once for privacy’ before entering a crazy fraternity party, so as to avoid information links to employers.

8. Future research

This research has provided empirical support for the key assumptions underlying the issue of conflicting social spheres and therefore offers a strong foundation for further investigation. Given the substantive part that SNSs play in presentation in everyday life, it is now crucial that academic attention is paid towards the social anxiety that may arise from their usage. This study suggests both horizontal and vertical directions for further research.

Horizontal studies should aim to gain a better understanding of cultural differences in ought/self guides, such research becoming increasingly vital, given the rate that Facebook is disseminating across the globe. An examination of the different norms and expectations internal to social spheres is also important, e.g. how parents differ from siblings, and bosses from colleagues, as tension is likely to spread more quickly within social spheres than it does between them.

Vertical investigations require the direct examination of anxiety. There is need for comprehensive studies into 1) which types of communication, e.g. photos, posts etc., are most linked with anxiety 2) the severity of anxiety linked to different audiences and 3) how users self-regulate against the feelings of anxiety, through changing their actions online and/or offline.

10. References


