

# “Communication privacy management of students in Latvia”

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## SECTION 3. General issues in management

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### Communication privacy management of students in Latvia

#### Abstract

The lack of communication privacy boundaries among students and the fault of self-disclosure are two main reasons for unforeseen distress, broken relationships and trust, vulnerability and conflicts in universities. Based on S. Petronio's theory of communication privacy management this research investigates the interaction of domestic students and foreign students in Latvia with their peers in order to set up privacy and disclosure boundaries that do not violate peer privacy, especially in a sensitive multicultural context. In fact, the presence of private information and the willingness to disclose it is often confronted with numerous privacy dilemmas and issues regarding their secureness, especially in universities where peers are young with different cultural backgrounds. This article analyzes the privacy management skills of locals and foreigners and reveals how security of information is managed between them stemming from social penetration and communication privacy management theory. Privacy management is significant in facing the dilemma of communication privacy and facilitates solving already existing problems of privacy among students.

**Keywords:** communication, communication privacy, communication management, communication skills, social penetration, social choice, students.

**JEL Classification:** D710.

#### Introduction

The significance of privacy and the capacity to manage it has been widely discussed in contemporary studies, but at the same time privacy is a concept in disarray because of the fast changing world. The definitions of privacy differ according to the field from "the right to get alone" (Warren, Brandeis, 1890, p. 195) to "the right to control of access to personal information" (Moor, 1989, p. 57). Nowadays social networking on the Internet steps into a field with high level of privacy risks (Metzger, 2007, p. 337). Blogging disclosures have become an important aspect of communication (Child, Pearson, Petronio, 2009, p. 2079). According to Barnard-Wills and Ashenden online privacy is a politicized issue, with impacts upon freedom, life changes, and distribution of resources, political communication, deliberation and knowledge (Barnard-Wills, Ashenden, 2015, p. 142). Although people regularly use social networks, most of the time they have to communicate face to face like in the early days of humankind. Privacy is still necessary not only for money making but also for the conduct of ordinary human affairs to facilitate social interaction. Today communication privacy management varies and is becoming wider in the sense of mutual understanding. To lose control of one's privacy is the same as to lose control of one's life and one's dignity. Authors suppose that the base for privacy management is knowledge and skills of communication and cross-cultural awareness, especially in the current situation of Latvia where it is necessary to establish a mutual understanding between hosts and the increasing

number of immigrants many of whom are young people. There were almost 6000 foreign students in Latvia in 2014 (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2015). If we as inhabitants of the globe do not acquire an awareness of our mutual differences, knowledge of basic cultural variables, the skills to communicate effectively across boundaries and the will to do so, our world will be the worse for it (Hofstede, Pedersen, Hofstede, 2002, p. 18). In general, the number of foreign students in Latvia is not large, but it has a tendency to increase gradually. Despite the negative perception of immigration among locals it obviously generates an economic circulation, enriches culture, and provides new experience, competition and diversity. Therefore universities are interested in increasing the number of foreign students. As the present research concentrates on the management of communication privacy boundaries of peers from different countries, the common or distinguished understanding of privacy and private information is a very crucial point. Despite the fact that the principle of diversity has always been the core idea of European integration and unity, cross-cultural misunderstanding is a much-underestimated cause of trouble. Thence, awareness of communication among peers is a considerable issue in universities, particularly to avoid misunderstandings and distrust.

#### 1. Theory

The complexity of the disclosure process is one of the main reasons for errors in communication privacy management. Disclosure of any kind is a complex matter, especially in cases when people do not anticipate the potential impact of negative information. The social penetration theory (further as SPT) proposes that during the relationship developing process interpersonal communication

moves from relatively shallow, non-intimate levels to deeper, more intimate ones. The theory was formulated by psychologists Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor in 1973 to provide an understanding of the closeness between two individuals and still is being discussed (Altman, Taylor, 1973). The process of social penetration occurs primarily through self-disclosure, and closeness develops, if participants proceed in a gradual and orderly fashion from superficial to intimate levels of exchange as a function of both immediate and forecast outcomes. Altman and Taylor believe that only by opening oneself to another person and becoming vulnerable can a close relationship develop. Vulnerability can be expressed in a variety of ways, including the giving of anything which is considered to be a personal possession. Self-disclosure and closeness is the point where privacy emerges. For example the lack of being able to keep disclosed information safe could put the initial owner of the information in shame or discomfort, or even in danger. Therefore the setting of boundaries for private information and overcoming the willingness to disclose it is significantly important. The next relevant theory to SPT is communication privacy management (further as CPM). CPM maps out the different ways people handle private information and discern why they make the choices they do (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, Margulis, 1993). Unlike earlier perspectives on disclosure, communication privacy management makes the communicative process the central feature by taking into account both the recipient and the discloser (Petronio, Reiersen, 2009). CPM helps us to solve everyday problems; understand how and why we reveal and conceal private information. It proposes that people manage the flow of private information in relationships by constructing both personal and collective boundaries around private information they own. These metaphorically constructed boundaries allow people to identify who has control over the information, who does and does not have access to it, and how the information within the boundaries should or should not be protected from those outside the boundary (Petronio, Reiersen, 2009, p. 368). Individuals make judgments about who has access to private information and the chance to become a co-owner by using privacy rules and who can manage the flow of information. When necessary, sanctions are established for any infringement or violation of privacy. Privacy rules are based on criteria people use, such as gender, culture, context, motivation and risk/benefit (Petronio, 2002, p. 25). Individuals establish and enact rules that are idiosyncratic to their personal privacy boundaries because they are the sole owners of the information. These personal

privacy rules are used to control the permeability of the boundary (Allen, Walker, Coopman, Hart, 2007, p. 174). In order to establish practice that will enable all members to control access to the information and protect the information cooperatively, the privacy rules must be negotiated all the time and shared according to the latest face to face or distant agreement. There is a great need to understand the privacy in a clear and comprehensive manner (Solove, 2008, p. 8). For instance, researchers have studied topic avoidance and the role of the reluctant confidant within friendship (Afifi, 2003), privacy management on Facebook (Waters, Ackerman, 2011) and explaining privacy turbulence erupting from emotions (McLaren, Steuber, 2013) or spousal discrepancies in disclosures about infertility (Steuber, Solomon, 2012). CPM provides a frame for the interface of privacy and disclosure and it encourages thinking about the conditions of both revealing and concealing information.

## 2. Comparison

Altman and Taylor's social penetration theory focuses on self-disclosure as the primary way to develop close relationships with a person you have shared this information. Although Petronio agrees on it, openness is only one part of the story. There is also a desire for privacy, willingness to get comfort and put a part of problem on the shoulders of other people. Petronio developed her theory as communication boundary management theory (Petronio, 1991, p. 311) and renamed it as communication privacy management in 2002, because she considered CPM as a systematic method necessary to be followed by people inexperienced in communication. Altman and Taylor describe the process of self-disclosure as social penetration in which each communicator reveals layers of personal depth. Social penetration theory conceptualizes relational growth in terms of the process of sharing information as relationships develop and withholding information as relationships decline. In fact, the setting of privacy boundaries among peers in universities is not a linear process. Peers already have established relationships and the starting point of investigation is their further privacy dilemma. Namely, communication privacy management is a more functional theory for the present research. Besides that, there are two unexplained gaps in communication privacy management. Firstly, the values of the co-owner and, secondly, how quickly trust can be lost when privacy rules are breached. CPM doesn't offer insight on how to conduct those issues. Therefore, the theory should be expanded to

suggest how common values can make CPM more effective and how the factor of time can influence negotiations about mutual boundaries and settle the turbulence that occurs after collective privacy boundaries are violated (Steuber, Solomon, 2008, p. 834). Privacy boundaries can range from thin and porous filters to thick, impenetrable barriers that shield deep, dark secrets. But whenever we share a portion of information with someone, we are reshaping a privacy boundary. People with all kinds of relational connections are linked into privacy boundaries or isolated from information (Petronio, 2014). In communication CPM has been used primarily by researchers of interpersonal, family and health communication. Petronio, Helft and Child in the study done for better understanding the process of disclosing medical errors to patients, note that there are circumstances where privacy boundary regulation managing the information follows a somewhat different pattern. When treating patients, clinicians tend to consider health information about the patient as primarily being held in their care. As such, clinicians make judgments about when to tell patients about test results, they consider how to frame the information in ways that are fitting to the needs of the patient, and serve in a stewardship role as co-owners (Petronio, Helft, Child, 2013, p. 176). However, as other disciplines show us, CPM can be used to understand privacy issues in media, business and economics. The authors are interested in exploring the ways how people regulate their privacy in voluntary relationships like being peers in universities which tends to have more lenient rules that guide relationships in the family.

### 3. Main problem

The presence of private information and the willingness to disclose is often confronted with numerous dilemmas and questions of confidence. There are many ways how a person can be harmed by the revelation of sensitive private information, most of all, university students in Latvia who are at the advancement stage of relationship and trust building. The determination of what is and what is not confidential always is not as simple as it seems. The unreliable disclosure of private information can be the reason for vulnerability, despair, and conflicts. The revelation of such information can leave the subjects vulnerable to many abuses. This research concentrates on the determination of communication privacy management skills of peers in universities in Latvia to investigate the difference of privacy boundaries between local and foreign students, males and females by testing the CPM criteria and principles. A "peer" according to the Cambridge English Dictionary is defined as a

person who is the same age or has the same social position or the same abilities as other people in a group (Cambridge Dictionaries, 2015). The questions of research are the following: what is the level of CPM of students in Latvia and how do these skills differ among students? Hypothesis: The level of CPM of local students is higher than the level of CPM of foreign students.

### 4. Methodology

The quantitative method of data gathering with questionnaires was used to collect data from 250 students of Turība University and Riga Technical University in Latvia. These universities were selected as institutions with the largest number of enrolled students in the study year 2014/2015 in Latvia. Turība University was chosen from the rank of private universities and Riga Technical University from the rank of state universities. Furthermore both universities have the highest number of foreign students from CIS countries compared to other state or private universities in Latvia. In period of two months 250 questionnaires were distributed among participants and 210 of them were collected back. 40 questionnaires were missing. Only 204 of the questionnaires were properly completed and accepted as eligible for the research. 77% of the respondents are female, the average age of respondents is 23. Half of the respondents (50%) are Latvian students and the other half are foreign students. The five principles and five criteria of communication privacy management theory were tested in the Latvian context: principles namely, (1) own information, (2) permeability, (3) insider/outsider, (4) privacy rules, (5) turbulence, and likewise the five criteria namely, (1) gender, (2) culture, (3) context, (4) motivation and (5) risk/benefit. In order to measure the influence of these elements, a total of 20 questions were asked with two questions for each element. The questions aimed to ascertain the level of communication privacy management skills of students by weighting the responses using weighted average, mean and mode which gave a precise picture of the CPM skills of the respondents. Likert's scale was used to measure attitudes by asking people to respond to a series of statements about a topic, in terms of the extent to which they agree with them, and thus tap into the cognitive and affective components of attitudes. Authors related each of the four choices with a numerical value which determines the level of communication privacy management skills of the respondent which is represented as an index. Questions were designed in a way that the least acceptable and least valuable (the lower level of CPM skill) answer according to the CPM theory was placed as the first choice "strongly disagrees" and had a value of (0); likewise the most preferable answer showing the highest CPM skills was "strongly agree" (1). Later on,

the data were processed according to the following formula:  $\text{Index} = \frac{x_1+x_2+x_3+x_4}{\text{number of } x}$ . The results are attributed to one of the three groups according to levels of CPM skills which is called high if the answer is from 0.66 to 1, medium if answer is above 0.33, and low if the answer is below 0.33. Additionally, average, mean and mode were calculated for all groups. The data were compared among the following categories: male/female, long-term students (being in Latvia more than one semester)/short-term students (being in Latvia less than one semester), local/foreigner, peers up to 5/peers more than 5, which are designed according to the hypothesis that the following categories differ from one another.

### 5. Findings

The data show that the CPM index of all participants in total is 0.63, which means medium, nearly to be called high. Likewise, as it is presented in the table below the index of locals aligns with the indexes of females and respondents who have more than five peers. Concerning the CPM theory principles and criteria the most highly rated criterion which matched among respondents is “motivation” while the most highly rated principle is “ownership”. The lowest rated criterion is “context” while the lowest rated principle is “privacy rules”. The CPM theory criteria are rated in different categories as you may see in tables below.

Table 1. General CPM index and indexes of all groups

General	Foreigners	Locals	Male	Female	Short term	Long term	Peers up to 5	Peers more than 5
0.63	0.62	0.63	0.61	0.63	0.61	0.62	0.62	0.63

According to the table 1, all groups of indexes refer to medium CPM. However, within the level of medium, respondents who have more than five peers, local students, female students and long term foreign students have slightly higher index

comparing to all male and short term foreign students. Beside the indexes of student’s communication privacy skills the average, median and mode of the data gathered are also presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Average, mean and mode CPM results of all groups in comparison

	General	Foreigners	Locals	Male	Female	Short term	Long term	Peers up to 5	Peers more 5
Average	0.63	0.62	0.63	0.61	0.63	0.61	0.62	0.62	0.63
Median	0.63	0.61	0.63	0.61	0.63	0.61	0.63	0.61	0.63
Mode	0.65	0.65	0.58	0.65	0.58	0.65	0.63	0.6	0.63

As seen from Table 2, the average is the same with the index above and the median is also almost the same. However, the mode is quite different for certain groups. While mode for the general number of participants with all male participants, participants who are short term foreigners and all foreigners were identified as 0.65, the mode for respondents who have more than five peers and long

term foreign respondents was identified as 0.63. The next difference is participants who have up to five peers with the index 0.60.

The research indicates how much respondents agree with principles and criteria of CPM. Table 3 reflects the opinions and preferences of different groups of respondents regarding these criteria and principles.

Table 3. Ratings of principles and criteria of Communication Privacy Management of students

Group/position	Criteria		Principle	
	High	Low	High	Low
General	Motivation	Context	Ownership	Privacy rules
Female	Culture	Context	Ownership	Privacy rules
Male	Culture	Risk/benefit	Ownership	Privacy rules
Foreign	Motivation	Context	Ownership	Privacy rules
Local	Motivation	Context	Ownership	Privacy rules
Long Term	Motivation	Context	Ownership	Privacy rules
Short Term	Motivation	Context	Ownership	Privacy rules
Less than 5 peers	Motivation	Context	Ownership	Privacy rules
More than 5 peers	Motivation	Context	Ownership	Privacy rules

In general, the highest score was given to the criterion “motivation” and the lowest score was given to criterion “context”. The highest scored principle according to the respondents’ preference is “ownership” and the lowest scored principle is “privacy rules”. In fact, the criteria and principles for

all categories of respondents are the same with the only difference in criteria. While all female respondents preferred “culture” to be the most significant criterion and “context” to be the lowest one, all males prefer “culture” to be the most significant and “risk/benefit” to be the least important.

## Conclusions

This study for the first time estimates the current level of CPM skills among students from different countries in Latvia. The study demonstrates that among universal principles and criteria of CPM respondents consider the principle of “privacy rule” and criterion “context” as the least used. Both the above mentioned criterion and principle are points where privacy boundaries are weaker. Despite the small difference between the groups in their index score, all respondents correspond to a medium level of communication privacy management skills. The index of CPM of peers in universities is indicated as medium (0.63) meaning that there is a need for adequate measures to increase them. The comparison shows a slightly higher score for locals (0.63) in comparison to foreigners (0.62) which confirms the initial hypothesis that the level of CPM of local students is higher than the level of CPM of foreign students. Long term foreigners also have a slightly higher (0.62) level of CPM than short term foreign students (0.61) which shows that long term and more intercultural interaction could lead to adaptation to the local environment and

culture and can increase the level of communication privacy management. The most important CPM principle among students is “ownership” and the least important is “privacy rules”. According to this, information shared by the owner for a specific purpose could be used for a different one which would make the initial owner of information angry, even when privacy was actually intact. Theoretically a person disclosing private information sets privacy rules to be followed. In this case, if a co-owner of that information discloses and shares it with others it would mean that this person commits the offense of violating privacy in communication. Likewise, respondents in general indicated “motivation” as the most important CPM criterion and “context” as the least important, which again shows that the criterion “context” is underestimated. This underestimation of context could be the reason for mediocrity, because context is a major role player from the point of theory. For instance private information could be shared in such context as “to get support”. Generally the communication privacy management theory can be adopted as a map for students to manage their privacy boundaries.

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