

# The Show Must Go On: The Presentation of Self during Interpersonal Conflict on Facebook

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the presentation of self on Facebook by looking at user perceptions and behavior in times of conflict. Through semi-structured interviews with Facebook users, we examined users' perceptions of Facebook as a front stage for social performance as well as the context of conflicts that they experience on Facebook. The findings show that interviewees experience conflicts when they encounter unexpected behaviors from peers that disturb their "performances" on Facebook. Violated norms activate different coping mechanisms, and interviewees often considered the goal of self-presentation when adopting coping mechanisms during online conflicts. We also found that transitions in life situations were related to the heightened concerns of self-presentation. Our study sheds light on the nature of conflicts occurring on Facebook and contributes to our understanding of a user's decision-making process in pursuing the dual goals of impression management and interpersonal relationship maintenance.

## Keywords

Impression management, Social Networking Sites, Facebook, Interpersonal conflict.

## INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites (SNSs) have emerged as a dominant platform for interpersonal interaction and communication. In SNSs, people construct their own profiles, connect to other people, and traverse the profiles and stories of those connections in the online community (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social networking sites such as Facebook are increasingly popular platforms where social interactions play out in the presence of one's network. Social behaviors such as friendship, relationship building, information seeking, and peer judgment develop in these SNSs just as they do in face-to-face interaction (Ahn, 2011; Ahn, 2012; Lampe et al., 2012; Walther et al., 2008).

Interpersonal conflict is inevitable in human relationships, and researchers have long been interested in understanding how computer-mediated contexts interact with conflict (Carnevale & Probst, 1997). In prior work, researchers have studied this by examining how people behave differently as

a result of anonymity and they have also explored behaviors in online communities such as flaming, hostile behavior, and uninhibited expression as negative results of depersonalized contexts (Kiesler et al., 1984; Lea et al., 1992; Rheingold, 1993; Parks & Floyd, 1996). SNSs offer a unique online context where people share personal information through profiles and networked information feeds (e.g. walls and News Feeds etc.). Just as conflicts occur in everyday, offline life, they also occur in mediated environments. In this study, we were interested in examining how conflicts occur within the particular affordances of the information and technological environment of Facebook.

In the following paper we first describe a theoretical framework of performance explicated by Goffman (1959) to explain the performance aspects of social interactions on Facebook. Second, we introduce our qualitative research process and provide descriptive information about the participants. Finally, we present the findings of the study highlighting the context of conflicts on Facebook, and the behaviors that Facebook members utilized when dealing with conflicts to accomplish their goals of self-presentation.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Facebook can be regarded as a type of information grounds where individuals gather together to network and socialize, but the main avenue of this interaction is through the sharing of information (Fisher, Naumer, Durrance, Stromski, & Christiansen, 2005). On Facebook, personal information is shared through a user's profile, which consists of a "wall" (or most recently, a "Timeline") where a user posts his or her daily status and friends leave messages to the user (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). Social information is broadcasted to other "Friends" through a "News Feed", and a user can adjust their privacy settings to designate to whom they want to broadcast these interactions.

Sharing personal information is a way of maintaining interpersonal relationship, and this process sometimes involves strategic self-disclosure for impression management (Derlega et al, 1993; Tong et al., 2008). Facebook allows users to disclose information about themselves, and users selectively disclose personal information in order to influence others –Friends– to form positive impressions toward them (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Walther, 2007). Visibility of Facebook encourages

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users to engage in this strategic disclosure by utilizing information sharing features such as the News Feed that broadcasts updated postings and status changes to Friends.

This information shared on Facebook shapes others' impression of the person, and also serves as sources through which people (i.e., Friends) determine how to interact with the person within the site. Interpersonal relationships require people to interpret each other's behavior and develop expectations and norms of interaction (Jones, 1986). Diverse sources from offline interaction and information on Facebook provide the basis for expectation formation, and individuals may develop different norms depending on the existing relationship, personal interaction with the person, or their motivations for using Facebook. A person might feel conflict when a person's information or their interaction on Facebook is not consistent with their expectations or their expectations of normative behaviors.

This study aims to understand the nature of conflicts on Facebook with a particular examination into the initiation, escalation, and resolution of conflicts within this networked environment. We pay particular attention to aspects of relationship development and how this plays out within the affordances of the Facebook platform.

### **Social Relationships: Self Presentation and Performance**

How an individual presents themselves to others is a major element of social interaction. Often a person will present themselves in ways to please others, seek positive impressions, and develop positive self-image (Baumeister, 1982; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). Goffman (1959) provides a helpful framework to think of the individual as an actor who performs particular aspects of themselves for an audience of others. The term *performance* refers to an individual's activities that are designed to deliver certain information of self to a set of observers—an audience—(Goffman, 1959). Performances are enacted in a “front stage,” where an actor strategically selects or omits personal information to guide the impression that other people make of him or her. An audience plays a crucial role in the performance, and an actor steps out of the character that he or she has performed in the back stage, where an audience does not exist. In the backstage, an actor stops the performance for impression management, engages in informal communication with people who assisted his or her performance, or reflects and refines his or her own performance.

On Facebook, information is broadcasted to Friends through a News Feed, and this visibility encourages users to selectively disclose information in order to deliver an ideal image of self that they want to be perceived by others and at the same time, they believe socially acceptable (Zhao et al., 2008). Applying the idea of performance to Facebook, friends on Facebook can be viewed as the audience with whom an actor wants to maintain a continuing, positive relationship, and thus, an actor might be careful not to present unattractive situations that may negatively affect

their impressions and relationships with others (Tong et al., 2008; Walther et al., 2008). The profile wall provides a front stage upon which a user can try to attract Friends using a designed performance. Facebook features such as Messages and Groups, or personal channels (e.g. mobile phone and offline communication) can be utilized by users to have private communication, or backstage interaction, without interrupting performances staged on the public wall.

Users often try to avoid making any unwanted impression on his or her audience and sometimes decide to avoid controversial topics in order to prevent any unexpected consequences (Sleeper et al., 2013). Despite users' efforts to avoid engaging in socially unattractive situations, approximately 30% of adults report that they experience conflicts in SNSs. These conflicts sometimes involve arguments and ending of friendships (Rainie et al., 2012). On Facebook, people might manipulate social attention to harm others (Marwick & boyd, 2011), while others sometimes stand back and try not to involve themselves in a problematic situation that may reflect badly on them (Rainie et al., 2012). A bad reputation or unwanted announcements of negative situations are examples of what people may try to avoid on Facebook. If someone perceives conflicts that may potentially harm his or her own impression on Facebook, the person may try to resolve it covertly without damaging their reputations or their relationships with the interrupter who brought the conflict.

Much is known about conflicts in online communities. Factors such as nonverbal interaction, anonymity, and speed of information sharing can influence the initiation, escalation, and resolution of conflicts in online communities (Kiesler et al., 1984; Lea et al., 1992; Rheingold, 1993; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Lee, 2005). Researchers who have studied flaming—an aggressive expression of strong emotions (Lee, 2005)—in online communities found that the lack of social presence due to anonymity affects users to express themselves more strongly and engage in less inhibited behaviors to unknown users (Kiesler et al., 1984; Lee, 2005). Also, the nature of online interactions such as text-oriented communication, the persistent nature of content, and lack of nonverbal cues can enhance misinterpretation and possibly conflict during interactions due to anonymity (Carnevale & Probst, 1997; Walther et al., 2008), and allows users to ruminate on these interactions, which may lead to negative emotions (Friedman & Currall, 2003).

Facebook shares certain characteristics to these earlier observations of online interaction, but the existing relationship between users and lack of anonymity make Facebook distinguished from online communities (Zhao et al., 2008). Conflicts that occur on Facebook would not be the same as the flaming that happens between unknown users, and still need to be studied. Few studies have made connections between affordances of SNSs and interpersonal conflict. Marwick and boyd (2011) examined teen culture

labeled as drama, which is characterized by interpersonal conflicts that are performed in front of engaged audiences. They suggested that visibility played out in conflicts in the networked publics sphere such as Facebook, and teens took advantage of this visibility in order to acquire desired outcomes –popularity, attention, status, or entertainment– by publicizing interpersonal conflicts. Visibility is not a distinctive characteristic of Facebook or other SNSs, but the lack of anonymity allows people to associate the publicized information to the person and to engage in conflicts that

their friends are involved in.

Often Facebook friends are extensions of offline relationships, creating a situation of context collapse (boyd, 2008; Hogan, 2010; Vitak, 2012). The concept of context collapse describes a situation in Facebook, where Facebook friends from diverse contexts, which normally may be separate in one’s life, are all present in the same space on the online platform. Facebook has characteristics of mediated communication, but the presence of an offline relationship changes user behaviors and perceptions. For

Name	Gender	Status	Characteristics
Anne	F	Junior	Anne keeps up with people from abroad or her old school, and shares links with her close friends. She felt a conflict with her friend while discussing personal tastes on Facebook.
Alice	F	Graduate	Alice uses Facebook for social connections. She had a conflict with her good friend while discussing a political topic. Alice also uses Twitter for her main SNS.
Cathy	F	Graduate	Cathy keeps in touch with past and current friends on Facebook, and also keeps track of her kid’s page. She experienced a real-life conflict with her family members due to her posting on Facebook. Cathy also uses Twitter.
Chris	M	Junior	Chris keeps in touch with old friends through Facebook. He felt a conflict when he saw a person attack his friend while discussing a political topic.
Dave	M	Graduate	Dave communicates with close friends via Facebook. He felt a conflict with his past friend who made a posting in an inappropriate manner.
Jamie	F	Freshman	Jamie uses Facebook to be connected to old friends and acquaintances. She felt a conflict with her friend when her friend kept bothering and teasing her personal tastes, and it escalated to the extent that they ended their relationship.
Jake	M	Graduate	Jake shares photos and information through Facebook. He observed his two close friends involved in a real-life conflict and their behaviors on Facebook have changed. Jake also uses Google + and Twitter.
Joey	M	Graduate	Joey keeps in touch with people through Facebook. He felt a conflict with close friends’ opinions when discussing a political topic. Joey also uses Twitter.
John	M	Junior	John shares information with his closest friends on Facebook. He had not experienced conflicts, but observed a conflict between two acquaintances. John also uses Google + and online forums.
Justin	M	Graduate	Justin uses Facebook for being connected with people. He experienced a conflict when he argued about the opposing stance of his past good friend.
Laura	F	Senior	Laura stays connected to old friends and gathers people’s opinions on different topics. She experienced a conflict when her past close friend left negative comments on her postings about her religious belief. Laura also uses Twitter and online forums.
Mark	M	Graduate	Mark keeps in touch with social connections through Facebook. He felt a conflict when his old friend left a negative comment to his posting. Mark also uses Twitter.
Michelle	F	Sophomore	Michelle uses Facebook group to exchange educational resources with class friends. She felt a conflict with her close friend who brought up a personal topic on Facebook.
Peter	M	Graduate	Peter uses Facebook to stay in connected with old friends. He experienced that a discussion was transforming into a conflict because of one person. Peter also uses Google +.
Steve	M	Graduate	Steve keeps in touch with people through Facebook. He observed his close friend and other friends had a conflict while discussing a political issue.
Tim	M	Graduate	Tim uses Facebook to stay in touch with old friends. He experienced conflicts when his friends posted demeaning remarks about the religion that he believes in.

**Table 1: Characteristics of the Participants**

instance, the presence of people who are in hierarchical relationships (e.g., parents, boss, or parents) or in less-intimate relationships (e.g., acquaintances) in a network could affect a person in perceiving conflicts and determining what interactions to undertake under collapsed contexts, and also prevents the exchange of uninhibited expressions with non-anonymous counterparts. This research study aims to understand the nature of conflicts and the decision-making process of Facebook users within such contexts. Our specific research questions in this paper are:

1. When do individuals experience conflicts on Facebook?
2. What are the individuals' thought processes in perceiving and dealing with conflicts?

This study also explores both latent conflicts and manifest conflicts to understand the cycle from the birth to the resolution of conflicts (Dahrendorf, 1958). Here, latent conflict is the state of perceiving different goals and intentions of counterparts such as tensions, disputes, contests, and competitions, while manifest conflict is the state of heated arguments, clashes, and insults that develop behavioral and affective states.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the different perceptions and behaviors related to interpersonal conflicts on Facebook. Sixteen participants were recruited via advertisement –through Facebook, university classrooms, and personal contact– during the spring semester of 2012. Six undergraduate and ten graduate students at East Coast universities participated in the study. As the goal of the interview was to examine the nature of conflicts within specific platform (i.e., Facebook), those participants who are currently using Facebook were invited to participate in the interview.

Before the interview, the researchers contacted participants and asked them to review their own Facebook pages and News Feeds to collect one or more examples of conflict that they experienced. A 30-minute semi-structured interview asked participants about three general areas: 1) their general online activities (e.g., What kind of online sites and communities are you involved with?), 2) Facebook activities and perceptions (e.g., What are the purpose of your using Facebook?), and 3) the episodes and contexts of conflict including why they perceived the episode as a conflict, and how they responded to the situation (e.g., If the conflict was resolved, were you satisfied with the way how it was resolved?). After the completion of the interview, participants received \$10 gift cards for their participation.

Interviews were recorded with each interviewee's written permission and transcribed for analysis. Themes and key findings were marked during an open coding process. As each interview was coded, recurring themes and findings

were merged into analytic memos that linked the participant responses to elements of our conceptual framework: Front-Stage Performance, Audience roles, and Backstage processes.

## **FINDINGS**

Facebook was the most dominant social media platform of this sample group, and only one interviewee used Twitter as her main social media tool. Participants accessed Facebook at least once a day. Eight participants also had accounts for other social media sites (5 on Twitter, 2 on Google+, 1 on both platforms), and two of them also used online forums.

### **RQ1. When did participants experience conflicts on Facebook?**

As summarized in Table 1, the interviewees considered Facebook as a tool for keeping in touch with old and new friends. Facebook allowed them to be connected with old friends who live far away. Photos and status updates were sources of information for them to keep updated with the news and whereabouts of their friends. They could compare current information against the memory of their friends, and sometimes they found opinions or attitudes held by their friends that previous communications did not cover.

We found that conflicts sometimes arose when issues of religion or politics appeared through Facebook activities. For example, Laura had a heated conversation with her friends due to her postings about her religious beliefs. She was pilloried by one of her old friends for her beliefs, and other friends who share the same religious beliefs as Laura joined the conversation to defend her stance. Laura admitted to the flammability of the religion-related topic, but she also thought that she had a right to post about the religion that she was "living in" on her Facebook wall. Another interviewee, Tim (graduate), also felt conflicts within his mind while reading a posting of his closest friend that made a sweeping denunciation of religious believers. Although he thought the posting was aggressive and against his own religion, he hesitated in involving himself in a conversation about religious topics, even with close friends.

When interviewees were asked about their experience regarding religious or political discussions, they generally expressed a strong reluctance to religious discussions, but political issues were often posted and conversed on Facebook. We learned from some participants that political postings or discussions were common activities on Facebook and those discussions did not necessarily result in flaming or conflicts. Peter (graduate) is an example of a person who posts openly about political topics on Facebook, and he occasionally had been involved in civil discussions about political topics. Other interviewees, Joey (graduate) and Steve (graduate), also observed or were involved in political discussions that were mostly an exchange of articulated ideas. Interviewees attributed asynchronous discourse to a more productive argument because it allowed time for them to back off from the intense discussion and also to gather backup information for their arguments. Conflicts typically arose when someone

broke the rule of normative conversation such as civil manners.

Interviewees often experienced conflicts when confronted with inappropriate manners in online conversation. Cathy (graduate), for example, saw that one of her friends had repeatedly posted messages that she considered negative and unpleasant, and unfriended him on Facebook. Jamie (freshman) observed that a deceptive posting of a friend caused an angry audience to leave sarcastic comments. Michelle (sophomore) found that her close friend had left a posting, which she considered too personal to reveal on Facebook, and felt a latent conflict. All these interviewees demonstrate how breaking a ground rule or social norm for Facebook communication could initiate conflicts. It seems simple to avoid conflicts on Facebook; share acceptable topics in an acceptable manner. However, what is socially acceptable is culturally negotiated, and Facebook as a platform of context collapse may be a space where conflicts in social norms occur.

The presence of an audience (i.e., others in the network) highlights the tenuous negotiation of social norms that can occur in the collapsed context of Facebook. One participant, Laura, described a situation where her friend left a comment on one of her Facebook posts. Her network perceived this person as an aggressive attacker and responded angrily and collectively against this person. Laura noted:

“It’s because they don’t understand her, they were kind of attacking her. I know this girl, I know who she is, and she is not a bad person at all. I love her but they were just there because of what they believe in. But she’s not the kind of person they were trying to attack.” (Laura, senior)

Although Laura understood what this friend was trying to say, an upset audience was involved in and made an interaction between two friends escalate into a big conflict.

Participants had different purposes for using Facebook, and held a different concept about appropriateness on the platform. Thus, interviewees showed a different level of tolerance toward the same posting. For example, Tim believed that freedom of speech applied to each user’s own wall and did not interrupt other people’s walls with his own view. Conversely, Cathy felt that several random postings by her friend were unacceptable for her and took actions (i.e., unfriending the person) to resolve her displeasure. These examples show a stark difference among the social norms that each person holds, which influences how a person thinks and behaves in a certain interaction setting and in evaluating the interactions of other people.

## **RQ2. What were the participants’ thought processes in perceiving and dealing with conflicts?**

In interviews with participants, we also observed that different individuals had diverse ways of conceptualizing and dealing with the conflicts they experienced on Facebook.

### *The brave, the careful, and the inconsistent*

Some users, which we termed *the brave*, did not bother to censor their postings and comments. Context collapse did not necessarily cause them to compromise or abridge their opinions due to the presence of others. Alice (part-time graduate) was a person who did not feel constrained by her audiences in openly expressing her opinions on Facebook. She was fully aware of the presence of other people, and sometimes, her postings were designed to call out responses from other people. For her, Facebook was a place for social processes like sharing helpful information or discussable topics.

Other participants took advantage of the affordance that Facebook postings are persistently visible to elicit responses from their network. Some interviewees manipulated the visibility of information with the intention of drawing public attention. For example, Mark (graduate) stated:

“It’s really fun to be the devil’s advocate and say something like [different from friends’ opinions]. I have a lot of liberal friends, and I have a lot of conservative friends, and so, it’s always very funny. When you start to comment, they all get it on it. It’s just very interesting.” (Mark, graduate)

Mark sometimes used Facebook as a platform for observing opposing views on controversial topics by provoking his friends. These activities sometimes entailed conflicts that may harm an audience’s impression of the friend, but participants decided to risk negative outcomes. Mark took risks by being involved in conflicts with his friends for his entertainment, and by talking with his friends about controversial topics.

Most interviewees used Facebook for socializing with past and current friends, and building relationship with friends. Due to their purpose of using Facebook, they chose to stay away from topical issues or provocative discussions, and we name them *the careful*. Users come up with strategies to deal with the context collapse of their audiences in presenting their performances on Facebook. One of the common strategies was using privacy settings in order to avoid unnecessary crossover of information beyond designated audiences. Some interviewees were well aware of privacy settings (e.g., friend list, blocking, unfriending) on Facebook, and Laura, for example, kept herself updated with the privacy-related news from Facebook. Despite this understanding, some users did not have confidence about these changeable settings offered by the company, and came up with self-controlling approaches. Jamie notes:

“I feel like I tried to be more neutral about stuff on Facebook 'cause I don’t really want someone getting mad at me on whatever something I post.” (Jamie, freshman)

Like Jamie, some interviewees censored information that might lead to trouble and conflicts before posting on Facebook. Jamie attempted to minimize the probability of

irritating any of her audiences. She did not actually experience conflicts before, but her observation of other people's conflicts caused her to behave in a way that reduced the chances of engaging in her own conflicts. Other interviewees controlled their fronts by reducing the number of postings. Dave (graduate), for instance, found himself decreasing the number of his postings on Facebook after an unexpected conflict with his friend. Interviewees who are fearful about potential conflicts applied this strategy of sterilizing their own postings.

Under certain circumstances, the careful take risks of potential conflicts by acting like the brave, and the brave become cautious about their performance and behave as the careful. We termed these examples as *the inconsistent*. The inconsistent had several reasons for their changing behavior. One participant, Dave said:

"I wrote it to make people to think, 'what is he writing?' because I don't tend to write much [on Facebook]. So if I write something, it might spark [questions]. Somebody might go like 'what are you writing?' and it gives me the opportunity like 'oh, this is what's happening in my country.'" (Dave, graduate)

Here Dave, typically one of the careful, used his rare posting pattern to attract people's attention to topics that he considered important. Although he took care to avoid misinterpretation by others about his posting on personal topics, he risked the possibility of engaging in conflicts with other people, so that he could inform as many people as possible to non-personal topics (such as current events) that he felt required people's attention.

Sometimes, intrapersonal conflicts that arose within the self made individuals transform into the careful. Intrapersonal conflicts of interviewees occurred when they decided to change their performances on Facebook over time. For example, some interviewees deleted previous postings and comments to avoid any inconsistencies between upcoming performances and previous performances. Steve describes this behavior stating:

"Well, I didn't go through and deleted all from like, my entire history, cause as I talked, I don't have that much time. [It was] like the first few pages. I went through and deleted it. Just because, I didn't want people associating that with me. I want to look professional." (Steve, graduate)

A graduate student, Steve, recollected the time when he wanted to deliver impressions like "professional" and "employable" to others in general. He was applying to jobs and graduate schools, and took out inappropriate postings (e.g., swear words) that could work against the current impression that he wanted to give. Steve was worried about any new potential friends or random users picking up a wrong impression of him due to his previous postings, so he deleted several of his most current postings.

During his second year at law school, another participant Joey also started thinking about his future career and

decided to stop posting political opinions that he used to like to talk about on Facebook. Laura, who was becoming a senior soon, already got a job offer from a firm, and she was also becoming cautious about her postings in order to avoid false impressions both of herself and the firm at which she got hired.

We found that the views a person holds about Facebook are related to how he/she deals with potential conflicts. Participants who thought of Facebook as a place for social processes were actively involved in interactions, even on controversial topics, and sometimes they did this on purpose to attract more attentions from their friends. However, interviewees who managed their impressions on Facebook deliberated on their postings/comments to present a desirable image and to avoid potential conflicts.

#### *Skills or informants: Conflicts with close friends*

Audiences on Facebook are composed of people who have different levels of closeness with one another. The level of closeness might influence audiences in determining to what extent they interact with an actor. Mark and Steve felt that conversation between not-so-close friends or acquaintances are not likely to be "passionate". For example, Mark used casually positive communication (e.g., haha, that's cool, lol) in order to maintain social contact with not-so-close friends, while energetic interactions like arguing or discussing were avoided. It was an interesting finding that the counterparts of conflicts were usually close friends of the interviewees.

As close friends sometimes can make an association between a Facebook activity and its actual context or hidden meaning, they sometimes reveal the information that the actor wants to hide. Jamie was doubtful about the honesty of a posting by a not-so-close friend, and comments by this person's close friends confirmed Jamie's suspicion that the posting was deceiving. Mark made fun of his close friend in public, who intentionally untagged himself in a picture in order to maintain his image. In these examples, close friends provided information about the actor to other audiences, and interrupted the actor's performance.

Some interviewees reported episodes of conflicts with their close friends as a result of a gap between what was observed on Facebook and what they know about their friends in real life. For example, one interviewee stated:

"I had a good friend who I was a friend of in high school. He made this comment on Facebook about [a social issue]. And he was kind of citing like [positions on the topic]. And he, I don't know, his viewpoint surprised me a lot. Cause I thought I knew him? But apparently, this is very extreme point of view in my opinion? So I started arguing him about like, you know..." (Justin, graduate)

Justin was surprised when he happened to read an extremely radical posting about a social issue by his past good friend, even though he thought his friend held a different viewpoint. He made a comment to the posting in an effort to understand where this extreme viewpoint came

from, but this just resulted in a conflict between him and his friends, and other joining audiences (i.e., friends of his friend's). The presence of an active audience only exacerbated his frustration with this experience.

Audiences took important roles in Facebook activities as some interviewees reported that they experienced escalation of conflicts due to the participation of other friends. Chris' (junior) following statement shows that close friends sometimes joined a discussion to get their friends out of trouble even if they did not have same stance as their friend.

"I think, if they [his friends] were being attacked, and I agreed with the person attacking them but I didn't know them, a strange scenario. I, still would be stepping inside and 'okay, you might think that, but don't be rude about it, don't attack them.' Even if I don't agree with my friend, I still want my friends not to be attacked." (Chris, junior)

Thus, close friends sometimes willingly assisted an actor's performances on Facebook, even in cases where they did not have the same perspectives as the actor. Each friend read and interpreted the interaction that an actor was involved in, from his/her own perspectives, and decided whether to involve themselves in the discussion in order to protect the actor.

Sometimes, however, misinterpretation by close friends about the conversation occurred due to the lack of information about the context of the conversation (i.e., conversation partners and underlying meanings of the conversation). As mentioned above, Laura's friends ardently attacked a disrupter to defend her, whether the actor wanted this protection or not, and escalated the interaction to a conflict.

#### *Coping mechanisms; backstage processes for deciding on further performances*

Interviewees were often involved in conflicts with close friends and the way they dealt with Facebook conflicts affected their real-life relationships. Steve observed a conflict of two of his friends and described their relationship:

"They are still friends in real life. They just blocked each other on Facebook, so they don't need to deal with each other's political [opinion]." (Steve, graduate)

Like Steve's friends did, other interviewees also mentioned 'blocking' as an option because they could keep the online connections while hiding unpleasant information, whereas 'unfriending' could cause an uneasy situation in real life because they could notice the changed online relationship. Interestingly, one of the interviewees Cathy, said that:

"[My good friend] has a friend who posts vitriolic racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, really awful stuff, anti-Obama, referring to the president in very derogatory racist terms as well as the first lady. And, I finally posted [name], I'm sorry. You're not contributing productively to the conversation, I'm blocking you" (Cathy, part-time graduate)

She informed the person in public before actually blocking him, whereas other interviewees implied that blocking or unfriending did not occur openly.

On whose wall the conflict happened, also influenced interviewees' decisions about future reactions. For example, Mark considered his audiences when responding to a posting by a friend on his wall that ridiculed him. The posting made him worry about the impact of the visibility of performances on Facebook, and he decided to suppress his feeling toward the disrupter. This was to meet the audience's expectation that Mark would not get angry. In addition, actors actively managed their own walls by manipulating previous performances. Michelle took off a posting by a friend from her wall. Jamie observed that a friend deleted their own comments that were jeered at by audiences. These activities of managing one's wall are linked to the desire to deliver an ideal impression to others.

Interviewees also privately attempted to interact with a counterpart in a conflict to reconcile the problematic situation and repair their relationship. Facebook conflicts affected not only to their public performance online, but also their relationship strategies offline. Dave gives an example:

"Of course, I didn't want to solve the problem and have the entire Facebook read [by others]. That makes no sense. So I emailed my friend, I messaged him, but actually, since I couldn't find it [his number], I wrote him an email... I had to manage the situation offline." (Dave, graduate)

Dave had to mobilize other interaction channels (e.g., email, mobile, and offline) in order to resolve the conflict off of Facebook because he did not want to publicize further interactions. Apologies, reasons for deleting postings/comments, and reconciliatory messages were communicated through private channels (i.e., private message on Facebook, text message, call) to deflect public attention from further interaction that can contain backstage information.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Interplay among front-stage, audiences, and backstage processes**

Affordances such as the existing relationship between users, anonymity, and visibility play a crucial role in conflicts on Facebook. Whereas researchers argued that anonymity reduces social presence and increases the possibility of conflicts in online communities (Kiesler et al., 1984; Lee, 2005), conflicts still occurred on Facebook that provides a strong sense of social presence between known users. Yet, impression management and interpersonal relationship interacted with the conflicts on Facebook, and create a unique environment of why, how, and to whom participants experience conflicts.

Our interviewees agreed that Facebook generally is not a platform for outward conflict based on their own experience and observation. The front stage is usually peaceful since

the performance is controlled according to the actor's plan, and thus, manifest conflicts are not spotted very often. An actor's socially adequate performance usually invites exchanges of supportive discourse from audiences. Often interviewees' performances were designed with an awareness of offline relationships. Public attention and interactions that potentially bring negative outcomes are not usually included in the performance. Conflict-inducing behaviors are considered unnecessary and negative interactions that may harm impression management or interpersonal relationship, unless intended by the actor.

We identified three types of actors: the brave, the careful, and the inconsistent. Facebook is a place where the brave, the careful, and the inconsistent are connected to each other, and differences in perceptions toward the same situation can cause either latent or manifest conflicts. The brave's audacious comments to a posting can bring latent conflicts to the careful or the inconsistent. Impression management practices of the inconsistent can bring conflicts within the brave's mind, and make him or her to act as an informant to express the latent conflicts. Perceptions and mental processes differed depending on the type, and the careful and the inconsistent may perceive conflicts more often, and as problematic situations.

Designing a performance on Facebook included both proactive and reactive strategies. A proactive approach relates to an actor's effort to manage his/her own wall in accordance with their ideal-self, and similar to Hogan (2010), we found that participants sterilized information for their front-stage performances on Facebook. Each interviewee usually pursued connections and relationships on Facebook, which entailed encouraging and sympathetic interactions rather than confrontations. Information for self-presentation was managed in order to avoid being engaged in any types of conflict that were not necessary to their goals. For example, some interviewees did not present opinions related to taboo topics (i.e., religion, politics) due to its high possibility of escalating into conflicts, while other interviewees contemplated the impact of their postings to others. However, conflicts sometimes occurred despite attempts to avoid it.

A reactive approach refers to a follow-up action to recover from a conflict. Conflicts on Facebook can be more problematic and complex because close friends were often involved in the conflicts. Interviewees were careful to resolve the conflicts, reassure the validity of previous performances to audiences, and stop further disruptive interactions. They tried to come up with their best strategies to maintain their relationship with the conflict counterpart and to continue their performances. Sometimes, reactive strategies involved modifying information. Intrapersonal conflicts occurred due to the changes of their ideal image, and interviewees tried to make past performances consistent with their upcoming performances by editing and removing previous information.

Audiences played various roles in an actor's public performance by assisting or disrupting the performance. Individuals might expect their audiences to emotionally support them. However, their expectancy is not always met, and people sometimes got unexpected responses from their audiences that lead to conflicts. Interestingly, past or current close friends were often mentioned as those who disrupted the interviewees' performances and brought about conflicts. Close friends were more likely than distant acquaintances to cross over the appropriate limits of revealing shared, personal information. They tried to argue with the actor like they do offline. They brought up previous performances of the actor that was discordant with their current public performance. Activities of close friends could work as testimonials or counterevidence of the claims of the actor, which influences an audience in shaping impressions of the actor (Walther et al., 2008) and judging the reliability of other activities of the actor (Goffman, 1959).

Interviewees often decided to ignore conflicts they encountered online, and if they needed to be involved, the way they dealt with conflicts was a part of their backstage performance. Although offline friendships sometimes cause debates and arguments between friends, the presence of other people on Facebook inhibits these interactions. The affordances of Facebook, such as the persistent nature of information, context collapse, and the social relationships involved, seemed to contribute to the avoidance of conflict-inducing activities.

Still, behind the outwardly peaceful environment of Facebook, interviewees constantly faced unexpected internal conflicts with friends or within themselves, and tried to resolve inward conflicts by employing diverse strategies (e.g., personal channels, taking off previous postings). When interviewees felt uncomfortable with their friends' actions, they unsubscribed from their newsfeed rather than addressing the problem. Using privacy settings and various platforms for different connections helped interviewees segregate different groups of audiences and allowed freedom for users to interact with their friends openly. Wall ownership is one factor in activating coping mechanisms. Several interviewees believed that the wall owner has the right to control interactions on his or her own wall. Interactions on a wall are persistent and can affect impression of the wall owner. A wall is a stage for an actor where his or her audience can retrieve previous performances and watch the current performance, thus actors tried to control these performances in order to manage their impressions on the audience.

In this study, the life stages of interviewees also seemed to influence the perception of conflicts and interactions with audiences. Several graduate students shared their experience about how their usage pattern has changed over time, especially when they were in a transitional period. Transitions from college to society, or to graduate school, prompted them to think about their impression as a future



worker, and revisit their own wall to manage impressions in accordance with the ideal image. Thus, interviewees acted as the inconsistent when their roles in real life were changing. A transition entails a new group of friends (e.g., colleagues) both offline and online, and impression management on Facebook becomes more important to avoid a loss of opportunities (e.g., unemployment) due to a bad impression (DiMicco & Millen, 2007).

### CONCLUSION & LIMITATIONS

The goal of this study was to understand how people dealt with interpersonal conflicts on Facebook. We interviewed Facebook users about their experiences and observations of conflicts. Using Goffman's theoretical framework, we set user's activities on Facebook as a performance and addressed how contexts of Facebook affected user behavior in the process of pursuing both impression management and interpersonal relationships.

This study has a number of limitations. The sample of this study is modest and demographically homogeneous – American young adults who are enrolled at East Coast universities– which limits the generalizability of findings. Future studies would need to address sociocultural contexts that may influence user perception and behavior.

Although the sample of interviewees was modest (16), this study offers background for understanding user's perceptions and decision-making processes when dealing with conflicts as well as several implications for future studies. We collected more than twenty episodes of conflicts from our interviewees, who provided summaries of situations and reviews from their own standpoints.

We found that users on Facebook stage a performance. They design their interactions according to their purposes of using Facebook. Interviewees often pursued interpersonal relationships through Facebook, and their performances were coordinated with the goal they wanted to achieve. Conflicts worked against managing positive impressions in public. Perceptions, decisions, and interactions with the conflict were the results of the interplay among the backstage process, audience's action, and front stage performance. An actor perceives a conflict from other people's statements or responses, makes scenarios of their own reactions, and then decides what to perform on the front stage after considering the impact of their interactions on other people's perceptions.

Among our interviewees, close, offline relationships with audiences were a crucial factor for conflicts to occur on Facebook. Non-close relationships seldom provoked conflicts in an actor's mind. Relationships also decided the volume of information exchanged, the level of activeness, and alternative communication channels being used, which made a difference in the participants' interaction with each other and the actor's backstage process.

Our study presents several questions in need of further investigation. First, future research should consider

investigating how perceptions and behaviors of users on SNSs change across life stages. Several interviewees experienced a change in the usage of Facebook when they entered a new stage of life after college graduation. Similarly, individuals would utilize SNSs to deliver a new impression and pursue new social goals across life stages. A longitudinal study or a study of people in different life stages would make an important contribution to understand how closely real-life contexts and activities on SNSs are interlinked.

Also, we suggest that future research could compare different type of SNSs to understand how different affordances create a unique context of each platform. For example, Google+ guides users to separate their friends into groups (or circles) by default and people may avoid conflicts related to the context collapse of audiences. Under a different context, users would participate in different types of social interaction and the reasons for experiencing conflicts might not be the same as the results of our study.

SNSs have become the most important platform for being connected, socializing, and sharing information in contemporary life. As social computing platforms increasingly mediate relationship development, future studies that delve into more nuanced aspects of human interaction –such as the process of conflict– will help us understand the complexities of human processes with social media.

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