Impression Curation: Reacting to Other-Generated Face Threats on Facebook

Donghee Yvette Wohn[1]

Jeremy Birnholtz[1]

Jeff Hancock[2]

Eden Litt[1]

Erin Spottswood[2]

[1]Northwestern University
[2]Cornell University

Corresponding Author:

Donghee Yvette Wohn
2240 Campus Drive. Rm 2115
Evanston, IL 60208
wohn@northwestern.edu

Abstract

In social network sites such as Facebook, others sometimes post content of oneself that is inconsistent with one's self-image. Based on survey data (*N*=150) of adult Facebook users, we examine how this group of users respond and react to face-threatening content about them that was posted by others on Facebook. To describe these behaviors of interest, we introduce the term "*impression curation*" to refer to the reactive management of content about oneself posted by others on social network sites such as Facebook. We examine four impression curation strategies, and draw on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to make some preliminary inferences about how and why these users chose to respond to such content in particular ways. We found that impression curation is a complex process requiring attention to both individuals' self-presentation *and* interpersonal goals.

Keywords: impression management, social media, Facebook, face threat, impression curation

Impression Curation: Reacting to Other-generated Face Threats on Facebook

People have long held self-presentation concerns as they interact with others across a range of contexts and seek to behave and share information with others in a manner that is likely to result in positive impressions and strong relationships (Goffman, 1959, 1967; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Frequently, however, people are not in complete control over how they appear to others, as when, for example, others share embarrassing stories about their past behavior (e.g., Baumeister, 1982; Cupach & Metts, 1994; Goffman 1967). These situations are magnified and multiplied by social media and other technologies that enable instant sharing of information with large and diverse audiences. Research has repeatedly shown that social media users regret sharing content they themselves have posted (Madden, 2012; Sleeper et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2011) in addition to being upset with others who have shared embarrassing and/or awkward content about them (Litt et al., 2014; Smock, 2010).

Despite numerous studies documenting the occurrence of threats to people's desired self-presentation (face threats), we know little about how people respond to these situations. While research on face-to-face situations has described some response strategies (e.g., Cupach & Metts, 1994; Schlenker, 1980), the details of these strategies and rationales for them are likely to differ online as content is likely to be more widely available, persistent and potentially harmful to their future reputation more broadly (boyd, 2010; Preston, 2011).

In the paper that follows, we use survey data to examine how people react to face-threatening content about them that was posted by others on Facebook. We describe the specific strategies used, and draw on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to make some preliminary inferences about how and why people choose to respond to such content in particular ways. To describe these behaviors of interest, we introduce the term "*impression curation*" to

refer to the reactive management of content about oneself posted by others on social network sites such as Facebook.

Background

Impression Management and Face Threats

Impression management refers to the ways in which people try to control how others perceive them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Researchers have used many terms to describe this process, including "self-presentation" and "face management" (Cupach & Metts, 1994). We draw on this notion of "face" in our discussion below. While many have emphasized the "self" in impression management, impression management is a "collective endeavor" that can be managed both by an individual and by third parties (Litt et al., 2014).

Research on impression management stems from Goffman's (1959) classic sociological conceptualization of self-presentation, and focuses on how people enact relationship norms linked with self-respect and considerateness to help simultaneously protect their own face as well as others' (Goffman, 1967). Such norms range from respecting one another's privacy to refraining from publicly critiquing another (Argyle & Henderson, 1984; Argyle, Henderson, & Furnham, 1985). While people typically enact and behave seamlessly according to these norms, a person's face, or desired image, may sometimes be called into question. A face-threatening act is verbal or non-verbal communication that challenges a person's desired image (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Goffman, 1967). Face threats can be brought on by the self (e.g., tripping on a sidewalk), as well as by others (e.g., tripping another person or telling an embarrassing story) (Cupach & Metts, 1994) and can cause uncomfortable emotions leading people to feel embarrassed, self-conscious, awkward, and uncomfortable (Miller, 1992).

While there are decades of research on the sociological and psychological aspects of face, the increase of social network site use for day-to-day communication raises many new questions. Social network sites can affect impression management in the wake of face-threatening acts by rendering such embarrassing moments more persistent, accessible, searchable, and shareable than face-to-face episodes (boyd, 2010). In today's society where online presence can play a role in shaping reputation and opportunity (e.g., Preston, 2011; Wang et al., 2011), and where such presence is often public and accessible, effective handling of potentially face-threatening acts has become a necessary skill or literacy (Davies, 2012). This may be particularly true when it comes to managing the potential effects of other-generated face threats. Sometimes what others post can be even more important than what people say about themselves, as it may be deemed more credible (Walther, Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009; Walther & Parks, 2002).

Few studies have focused specifically on face-threatening scenarios on social network sites. However, there is evidence that users experience embarrassment in this context (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2008; Litt et al., 2014; Madden & Smith, 2010; Wang et al., 2011). Users engage in a variety of strategies to protect themselves from face-threatening acts, including using privacy settings, blocking people, removing content, and others (e.g., Litt, 2013; Madden & Smith, 2010; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012; Raynes-Goldie, 2010; Rui & Stefanone, 2013, Smock, 2010). Moreover, recent work described the types of face threats people experience on Facebook and how the experience of these face threats was affected by attributes of the situation, relationship with the person posting the content and the individual's skills (Litt et al., 2014). That study did not, however, focus on steps participants took to address the threatening scenarios.

Impression Curation

When it comes to impression management, people can engage in proactive or reactive strategies. Proactive strategies aim to avoid threats in the first place, such by posting only positively framed content and behaving in a manner congruent with their ideal self; while reactive strategies occur in response to a face threat that has already occurred and one must repair or take steps to avoid potential reputation damage. Much of the impression management literature focuses on proactive strategies, but fewer studies have focused on the reactive ones (Rui & Stefanone, 2013).

While scholars consider impression "repair" as a part of impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), it is important – particularly in the social media context—to distinguish between reacting to potential reputation damage resulting from one's own mistake or poor judgment, and reacting to the potential harm from content posted by another person. We thus define "impression curation" as reactive measures taken by an individual to counter or alleviate the potential negative effects of other-generated content that is inconsistent with one's ideal self-image. This may include, for example, removing, altering, or providing explanations for other-generated posts. Note that in this paper we use the term "post" to refer to any action on Facebook (our social network site of interest) that generates content. This can include writing a status update or comment, clicking the "like" icon, sharing media (e.g., photos, videos), and tagging photos. The person who generated the post will be referred to as the "poster."

This distinction between proactive impression management and reactive curation of impression-affecting posts matters for two reasons. First, content on social media sites is archival, so one's ability to curate others' posts effectively will affect not just immediate impressions, but potential future interactions as well. Thus, people must respond to posts in a way that will

alleviate embarrassment in the moment and with the hope that future impressions will also not be

affected. Second, introducing the poster into the situation complicates matters, in that one's

relationship with the poster must also be managed in addressing the face-threatening post. This

means that, unlike impression management processes that largely focus on how individuals

select aspects of themselves to display to a larger audience, curation must be carried out in a

relationally sensitive manner. We explore how impression curation takes place and why people

select particular strategies.

We first identify impression curation strategies available in the social network context

and then discuss individual and contextual attributes that relate to how people select among

strategies. We base this characterization roughly on face restoration or repair strategies identified

in prior work on face-to-face communication (Cupach & Metts, 1994).

Subtractive strategies. Subtractive strategies refer to actions that attempt to remove the

face-threatening content. In face-to-face interactions, people may use nonverbal behavior to

correct a face-threatening situation, such as washing out a stain after someone spills a drink on

another. Online, a similar notion of removal could be applied to the removal of content or one's

visible connections to it, such as untagging oneself in a post. Evidence suggests that people use

this strategy online regularly (e.g., Madden & Smith, 2010; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012; Rui &

Stefanone, 2013).

Explanatory strategies. Sometimes embarrassed individuals apologize and/or offer

accounts or excuses to help save face (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Schlenker, 1980). Excuses can

help mitigate perceived intentions (e.g., "I didn't do it on purpose!") while accounts aim to

legitimize or justify behavior (e.g., "My professor asked if I would do it."). People may also use

humor to deflect face-threatening situations by diffusing tension or redirecting attention (Cupach

& Metts, 1994). On Facebook, individuals may try to provide further information, justification, or make light of the face threat severity by commenting directly in response to the content.

Avoidance strategies. Another strategy is for a person to simply avoid or ignore the situation, by taking no action. People typically ignore face-threats that are minor, often because actions may bring more attention to the situation, leading to additional possible face threats (Cupach & Metts, 1994) or possibly infringing on the norm of considerateness of another's face (Cupach & Metts, 1990; Goffman, 1967). Avoidance strategies, moreover, may be even more useful on Facebook because an algorithm often determines content visibility(i.e., the newsfeed) and additional repair comments or activity may deem the post as algorithmically important and inadvertently draw even more attention (Bucher, 2012; Litt et al., 2014).

Addressive strategies. In light of sensitivity around the content, the individual may address the poster directly to express dissatisfaction or otherwise say how they feel, without explicitly requesting a specific response (e.g., "I wish you hadn't posted that. It embarrassed me in front of my parents"). This strategy, while in reaction to an existing face threat, could serve to prevent future face threats. While this strategy has not, to the best of our knowledge, been explicitly described in prior work, we expect that it would be useful to communicate with the poster in hopes of avoiding future issues.

What Influences Curation Strategy?

To understand how and why people select particular curation strategies, we explore how both individual and contextual factors relate to this process.

Individual influences on curation. Just as individual-level variables affect how people experience face threats on social network sites (Litt et al., 2014), we expect that these factors will also influence response to these threats. We focus on two personality traits: self-monitoring and

embarrassability. Self-monitoring refers to an individual's concerns about their self-image and adherence towards social norms (Snyder, 1974). High self-monitors tend to conform to societal and audience expectations (Snyder, 1974; Turnley & Bolino, 2001). High self-monitors could reasonably respond either, for example, by using a subtractive strategy, because they tend to be aware of what is appropriate in a given context; or by adjusting or reframing via a explanatory strategy as they might adjust their behavior in a face-to-face encounter.

Embarrassability describes the degree to which people experience and interpret face threats (Modigliani, 1968). People who are more easily embarrassed are more likely to perceive an event as more severely face-threatening than those who are less embarrassable (Miller, 1992). Theoretically, those who are more embarrassable might seek to take immediate subtractive or explanatory action to correct a face threat, but they might also wish to fade into the background via an avoidance strategy and not draw more attention.

Personality may influence an individual's desire to curate their impression in a certain way, but actions that require interaction with the system cannot take place without the requisite technological skills (Hargittai & Litt, 2013). Internet skills and more specifically, Facebook skills, may influence people's curation strategies (boyd & Hargittai, 2010). We therefore included these skill variables as controls in our statistical analyses, and looked for evidence of their influence in our qualitative data.

RQ1: How do individual-level traits relate to people's choice of curation strategy in response to a face-threatening post on Facebook

Contextual influences on curation. Within the context of a given face-threatening post, there are attributes of both the content of the post and the individual's relationship with the poster that likely influence curation strategy.

Content. Content-related factors include how severe a face threat is perceived to be, the amount of elapsed time since the posting, and attributes of the perceived audience, such as the number of people believed to see a post and the range of contexts (i.e., work, school, social groups, etc.) from which they are known (boyd, 2010; Marder, Joinson, & Shankar, 2012). It may also be the case that connection with potentially face-threatening content or individuals is still seen to be valuable, despite possible threats to reputation among certain contacts (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010). We asked:

> *RQ2: How do content-related attributes relate to people's curation strategies in response to face-threatening posts on Facebook?*

Audience. In social network sites, people from a variety of contexts are by default collapsed into one (boyd, 2010), which means that users are interacting in spaces with audiences to which they might normally show different faces. It could be that different characteristics of the perceived audience contribute to what kind of curation strategy people choose:

> *RQ3: How do audience-related attributes relate to people's curation strategies in response to face-threatening posts on Facebook?*

Relationship factors. One's perceived relationship with the poster may also influence curation strategy choice, as management of content posted by others can affect relationship quality or even the poster's impression of the individual. Certain actions such as content removal, or even contact removal (i.e., "unfriending"), can be face-threatening in their own right (Bevan, Pfyl, & Barclay, 2012). That is, though technical solutions such as deleting content via subtractive strategies may help alleviate embarrassment, some individuals may not use these strategies because they do not wish to risk offending the poster (Besmer & Lipford, 2009). We focus on two attributes: perceived closeness and perceived intentionality of the face threat.

Perceived closeness with the poster or transgressor has been shown to influence the frequency and intensity of face-threatening encounters (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012; Petronio, Olson, & Dollar, 1989). Face-to-face studies have found that embarrassing predicament frequency tends to be lower in close relationships presumably because close contacts tend to know what would upset the other and they tend to have more concern for each other's well-being (Mills & Clark, 1982), including on social network sites like Facebook (Bryant & Marmo, 2012).

Whether or not a people perceive a face threat as deliberate stands to affect both how people experience the threat and whether or not they are inclined to respond in a relationally sensitive way (Goffman, 1967; Cupach & Metts, 1994). When people believe the poster intended to embarrass them, they tend to perceive the face threat as more severe (Litt et al., 2014) and they may also be less concerned about responding in a relationally sensitive way:

> *RQ4: How do perceived closeness to poster and perceived intentionality of the face threat affect people's choice of curation strategies in response to face-threatening posts on Facebook?*

Methods

We recruited Facebook users through paper flyers posted in a large city in the Midwestern U.S., an online recruitment system in a large university in the northeast U.S., and advertisements on Craigslist. The recruitment material directed participants to an anonymous online survey and after completion they were compensated with a $5 gift card. The survey first asked participants to recall and describe (in an open-response item) a specific incident on Facebook in which they felt awkward, embarrassed, or uncomfortable; and to describe their response to this incident (in a second open-response item). They then answered questions about the incident, how they reacted to the incident, their general Facebook use, and demographics,

Participants

A total of 165 people completed the survey. However, 15 cases were eliminated due to extensive missing data or because they did not answer questions related to face threats. Thus 150 cases were included in the final analyses. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 85 (*M*= 25, *SD*= 9.17) but strongly skewed towards younger participants; 61% were undergraduate students. There were more female (74%) participants than male.

Measures

Reactions. Participants were given a list of actions (see Table 1) taken in response to the face threat and asked to mark a checkbox for each one they had performed. Actions were then grouped into the four strategies outlined above. If a participant reported engaging in at least one action for a strategy, it was coded "yes." If not, it was coded "no."

(Insert Table 1 here)

Individual-level factors.

Personality. *Self-monitoring* (*M*= 3.68, *SD*= 0.51, Cronbach's α= .80) was a 13-item scale by Lennox and Wolfe (1984) and used a 5-point Likert scale ("strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). To measure *embarrassability* (*M*= 3.07, *SD*= 0.64, Cronbach's α= .79) we used a modified version of Modigliani's (1968) scale. It contained 12 statements (see Appendix) describing embarrassing scenarios (e.g., tripping and falling in public).

Technological skills. *Internet skills* (*M*= 3.38, *SD*= 0.91, Cronbach's α= .87) was a six-item scale by Hargittai and Hsieh (2012) in which participants indicate familiarity terms such as PDFs and Wikis (1=no understanding to 5 = full understanding). For *Facebook skills* (*M*= 4.40, *SD*= 0.81, Cronbach's α= .94), participants indicated their understanding (using the same

responses as Internet skills) of eight Facebook activities such as posting and removing content, and untagging oneself from photos (Litt et al., 2014).

Contextual factors.

Content-related factors. *Face threat severity* (*M*= 3.90, *SD*= 0.69) assessed the degree to which participants felt the content made them uncomfortable (Litt et al., 2014). Participants rated 7 items (see Appendix A) on a 5-point Likert-type scale anchored by 1="strongly disagree" and 5="strongly agree" (Cronbach's α= .80). *Time since post* was a measure of how long it had been since the face-threatening situation occurred.

Perceived Audience. Perceived *audience size* and *audience diversity* were measured by asking participants the number of people who the participant thought, saw the post. Response choices were "a couple," "a dozen," "dozens," "hundreds," and "thousands." For audience diversity, participants were asked, "Do your Facebook friends include any of the following groups? Check ALL that apply," with choices of work, social, school, family, etc. More groups indicated more diversity, with a range of zero to 10 (*M*= 6.26, *SD*= 1.74).

Relational factors. *Closeness to the poster* (*M*= 3.38, *SD*= 1.23) indicated the strength (5-point scale; 1= "no relationship at all" and 5= "very close") of the relationship between the participant and the poster before the post. *Intentionality (M*= 2.65, *SD*= 1.0, Cronbach's α = .81) was an average of five items asking about the extent to which the participant perceived the poster to have deliberate negative intentions (Litt et al., 2014). Items such as "his/her actions were insensitive" were rated on a five-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Results

For each set of curation strategies, we first used binary logistic regression models to examine how personality, content, audience, and relationship factors predicted strategy choice.

Predictors of Response Strategy

  Subtractive strategies. About 64% of participants reported using at least one subtractive strategy: untagging themselves, asking the poster to remove the content, removing it themselves, or reporting the post to Facebook . Of the participants who did use subtractive strategies, 63% used two or more of the options listed. A logistic regression (Table 2, Model 1) indicated that perceived intentionality of the poster, perceived closeness with the poster, Internet skill, and embarrassability all positively increased the likelihood of subtractive strategy usage.

  Explanatory strategies. About 30% of participants said that they engaged in an online explanatory strategy, which varied from trying to make light of the situation through jokes and trying to change the subject to sincere apologies. The logistic regression was not significant, nor were any of the predictors (Table 2, Model 2).

  Avoidance strategies. Only 28.7% of participants reported that they ignored the post in order to avoid drawing attention to it. The logistic regression (Table 2, Model 3) was significant and revealed that perceived audience size was positively associated with the likelihood of ignoring the post, while closeness with the poster was a significant negative predictor.

  Addressive strategies. Half of participants said that they told the person who posted the face-threatening content that the content bothered them. Those who did tell the poster used a variety of communication methods. Talking in person (34.6%), texting (32.0%), and private chatting via Facebook (29.3%) were the most popular methods of telling the poster how they felt. Fewer participants made phone calls (13.3%), commented on the post (9.3%), chatted online (4.0%), or used email (1.3%). In the open-ended responses, some of the reasons that participants gave for *not* talking about the content with the poster were not wanting to "make a big deal," "start unnecessary conflict," "create drama," or "hurt the feelings" of the poster. The logistic

regression was significant, revealing that the closer the participant was to the poster, the more

likely they were to tell them that they felt uncomfortable (Table 2, Model 4). The more unkind

the participant thought the poster was, the more likely he or she was to tell the poster. Finally,

the longer the elapsed time since the post, the less likely the participant was to tell the poster.

Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Data

An analysis of the open-ended responses revealed that the quantitative results produced

an incomplete portrait of impression curation. First, the four impression curation strategies were

not mutually exclusive, with some individuals reacting with multiple strategies. For example,

one 26-year-old man discussed how he was tagged in a picture of himself drunkenly kissing a

girl at a party. He used a subtractive strategy and untagged himself because he "did not want to

hurt the feelings" of another girl he wanted to date. In addition, he contacted the poster in

attempt to avoid the future similar postings: "I said that I would eventually be applying for jobs,

and didn't want photos of me in intimate situations or parties online."

Second, the severity of the face threat also seemed to influence how many actions the

participant took. For example, a 22-year old woman said she untagged herself from a photo, but

didn't ask her friend to take it down because she "didn't feel it was that important."

Third, there were examples that did not clearly fit into any one strategy. The following

example illustrates how a participant tried to "bury" the embarrassing content by adding more

content. This could be seen as a subtractive strategy, as the participant is trying to prevent the

content from being seen, but does not involve actual deletion of the content:

….when I was pregnant, I wanted to keep it a secret. My ex-fiancee posted multiple

pictures of me with my pregnant belly on Facebook and tagged me in them. People began

posting shocked comments. Because I did not have Internet access, my sister tagged me a lot of pictures to hide the ones that my fiancee had posted. (Female, 22)

Finally, there were also cases where participants removed a post not because it was an immediate face threat to themselves, but because the content might negatively affect impressions of a group with which they identified. For example, one woman described:

One of my friends from back home posted a comment on my wall that most people would view as racist. I come from a suburb of Los Angeles that is primarily Asian-American, so I don't want to give people here the impression that the people from my area are ignorant in any way. I removed the post from my wall immediately because I have friends who are a part of that racial group. (Female, 22)

In a similar example, a military veteran was concerned for the reputation of veterans, and immediately asked the poster to take down content:

I guess the most awkward situation occurred when people I was in the military with, stationed in Guantanamo bay, began posting old pictures of myself and friends during drunken nights of partying. Of course, none of us were 21 at the time, and most importantly, I did not want those pictures to be reflective or indicative of what being in the military is actually like or that people will begin to wonder about how much honor and recognition we receive although there is quite a bit of debauchery. (Female, 24)

To provide a rich picture of impression curation, we synthesize across quantitative and qualitative results to address each of our research questions.

RQ1: Influence of Individual Factors. Our first research question asked about individual-level influences on choice of curation strategy. Participants who scored higher on the embarrassability scale were more likely to use a subtractive strategy (Model 5, Table 2). For

example, a 23-year old woman who scored high on the embarrassability scale, discovered that her friend had posted pictures from a trip to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. "There was one particularly embarrassing photo of me when I was really drunk," she said, "I immediately texted my friend who uploaded the picture to take it down."

Neither self-monitoring nor embarrassability was statistically related with any of the other strategies. This could be because we were only examining one incident. It could also be that other personality traits, such as shyness, are related to using avoidance strategies. For example, one 28-year old woman was very embarrassed when a friend posted about her unemployment. "I did nothing, but I was very depressed," she said.

Those with higher Internet skills were more likely to use a subtractive strategy (Table 2, Model 1) but not any other strategy. Facebook skills were not statistically significant in any of the models, but in two cases, participants reported in their free-response answers that they were unable to take the action they wanted because they did not have the necessary skills:

I have a picture that was recently tagged to me on Facbeook. Unfortunately it is an unattractive picture where I am picking food out of my teeth. I tried to untag the picture, but could not figure out how to do such. (Female, 22)

Also, while Facebook skills were not statistically associated with the likelihood of using any strategy, experiencing face threats on Facebook subsequently meant a few participants were more aware of or more likely to use Facebook privacy functions , such as this man:

There have been a number of times when I was tagged in embarrassing or otherwise unflattering photos. One extreme situation occurred during my junior year of high school when I joined the swim team. I, like all the other swimmers, was required to wear a Speedo, which showed off my amazingly white thighs. I immediately untagged myself

and asked my friend to remove the photo altogether. Since then I've enabled the security

setting that requires my approval before any tags of me are displayed publicly. (Male, 20)

Not understanding how Facebook newsfeed algorithms work also led to some unfortunate

circumstances. In a case of a strategy gone bad, one participant went to a water park with her

friends and was embarrassed when bikini photos were posted on Facebook. She asked the friend

to remove the photos by commenting on them, inadvertently attracting more attention to the

photos. "The new Facebook makes it so that all comments and pictures pop up on the newsfeed

for everyone to see. It was really embarrassing," she recalled.

In response to RQ1, therefore, we see that embarrassability and Internet skills were

positively associated with choosing a subtractive curation strategy, but that there were few other

individual-level traits that were statistically related to strategy choice. In the open-ended

responses, however, we saw people who wanted to delete content, but did not have the skills; as

well as those who had taken significant measures to better control their privacy.

RQ2: Influence of Contextual Factors. Our second research question asked about the

influence of contextual factors related to content and the relationship with the poster on how

people chose curation strategies. The content that participants rated as high in face threat severity

ranged from unflattering photos to disclosure of illegal behavior and private medical information.

Examining participants' descriptions of how they felt about posts they rated as "5" (the

maximum value) on the face threat severity scale, participants used strong terms such as "harsh

and abrasive sense of humor," "feel humiliated," and "rage didn't come close to how I felt."

The regression results revealed that those who experienced a face threat more severely

were more likely to use a subtractive curation strategy. One woman rated her experience with a

"5" on the face threat severity scale and used all three subtractive strategies to remove the

content stating, "My ex told in detail about a sexual experience we had and asked people their

personal opinion about the encounter. I told him to fuck off and don't ever screw with me again."

Some face threats that were particularly upsetting to participants contained factually

incorrect content:

Just last week a male friend of mine wrote on my Wall that he was my boyfriend.

However, I am straight and I was upset that he would insinuate that I was gay on

Facebook, seeing as I am "interested in" women on Facebook and have had girlfriends. I

told him to take the post down because it was a lie and made me look bad. (Male, 22)

Several participants also used the term "Facebook hacked," meaning someone else gained

access to the participant's Facebook account and posted embarrassing content as if it was being

posted by the participant. In these situations, participants had to engage in explanatory strategies

to clarify the situation, since other people would likely perceive that the participant was the one

producing the content. For example, one man described how he was hacked by some friends

while he was in the bathroom:

While I was gone, they only did one thing, and that was to comment on a photo of my

friend and his mom. The comment just read "MILF." I quickly told my friend I was

sorry and that it was someone else who had done it. I also apologized later when I saw

him, and things blew over really quickly. (Male, 23)

The longer it has been since the face-threatening content was posted, the less likely the

individual was to tell the poster how uncomfortable he or she felt (Table 2, Model 4).

RQ3: Perceived audience. Our third research question asked how considerations around

audience affect curation strategy. Participants who had larger perceived audience size were more

likely to use avoidance strategies, i.e., ignoring the post (Table 2, Model 3). This may be because they already feel like any damage had already been done.

In general, participants seemed to be more worried more about audiences from professional contexts than those from personal contexts, with the exception of romantic relations. When asked which groups of people they were worried might have seen the post (in which they could check all that applied, so percentages do not add to 100%), participants were most worried about bosses (89.3%), followed by significant others or romantic partners (86.7%), teachers (83.3%), potential employers (80%), coworkers (76%), strangers (74.7%), classmates (70.7%), acquaintances (68%), family (62.7%), and friends (54%). Audience diversity did not have any statistically significant relationship with participants' choice of strategy. However, this may have been because people were more concerned about specific individuals or groups of people. In other words, seemingly innocuous content may be considered a threat for a particular audience.

For example, this woman wanted to avoid Joe, a male friend who was a regular casual sexual partner, so when he asked her about her plans on Saturday, she told him that she would be staying in and working:

> I originally did intend to stay in, but ended up going out around midnight after getting work done, for my friend's birthday. My going out really was a spontaneous decision. But one of my other friends who I was out with posted the photo to Facebook while we were at the bar, and tagged all of us celebrators in the photo. A few minutes later, I get a Facebook Chat message on my phone from Joe, saying "Productivity, eh?" After that, he texted me, and when I didn't respond to that, called me several times, which I ignored. Later, this turned into a very uncomfortable in-person confrontation. (Female, 22)

While the above examples showed participants being concerned about a specific individual, there were also cases where face threats arose due to the clashing norms of different groups of people within one's Facebook network. In this example, a man described how he reacted to an embarrassing photo that he did not want his family or members of his church to see:

> A friend of mine posted a picture of me that had been taken on a night when I was very drunk. I had come out of the bar and tripped over the curb. I fell into a bush and my pants got ripped right across my butt. And to make things worse, I was wearing bikini briefs that were way too tight and no one was ever supposed to see. Of course, she tagged me in the photo and since I was recovering all weekend and not on my computer, every one of my friends saw it and had a really big laugh at my expense. I freaked out because I didn't want my family to see the picture. So I went and tried to figure out how to set my profile so that nobody could see pics I was tagged in. Then I emailed my friend and asked her to please take the picture down. (Male, 32)

RQ4: Relationship with poster. Our final research question was concerned with how the relationship to the poster affected curation strategies. The regressions revealed that having a closer relationship with the poster increased subtractive and addressive strategies (Table 2). A closer relationship also meant that the participant was less likely to ignore the face-threatening content. This was also the case for the perceived negative intentionality of the poster.

In some cases, however, addressive strategies did not necessarily improve impression curation. Seventeen participants who told the poster how uncomfortable they felt reported that the content was still on Facebook because the poster refused to remove it; and three of those said they were no longer Facebook friends with the poster as a result. As one man recalled:

One time I was out with a friend of mine drinking, and there was a really hot girl at the [place] where we were having the drinks. I was trying to talk to her, but I was really drunk! I ended up puking all over her, and even on myself! I saw my friend, and I made him promise not tell anyone. The next day I heard he put some comments on Facebook about what happened. I called him up, and he laughed at me. I felt like a fool! I have not talked to him, or even seen him ever since, and I deleted him as a friend on Facebook. (Male, 20)

Removal of content to please a certain group of people sometimes came at the expense of the participant's relationship with the poster(s). Here, one man describes how an action taken to please one group in his Facebook network led to disgruntlement in another group:

As president of a Christian fellowship, generally my Facebook behavior is very restrained and should set an appropriate example for the members of my fellowship. Occasionally my non-Christian high school friends will post inappropriate comments on my photos or posts such as "boobs," or other profanities, which they mean in good fun and is their way of expressing care for me, however [it] can be often misinterpreted by others. The situation is further complicated when I delete their comments, to which I have to face inquiries about how I'm embarrassed by them, not really their friends, think I'm better than them, etc. (Male, 22)

Some posters were also displeased because they felt that the content was their own digital property. The woman above who was tagged in unflattering water park images asked her friend to remove them, and this was upsetting to the friend. "She [the poster] was irritated with me because they were her pictures, she thought they were fine," the participant said.

Discussion

While prior literature has referred to variables such as personality, audience, and content and face threats, our quantitative results suggest that in the context of social media, people's relationships with the poster played a large role in selection among curation strategies, as those variables were statistically significant factors in all three of the valid models. One potential explanation for this is that factors such as personality, audience, and content are less important to strategy choice in the context of social media. However, despite the difference in affordances between social media and face-to-face, it is unlikely that factors found to be important in face-to-face research are completely irrelevant online. This then brings us to an alternative explanation: it could be that online face threats vary so much in their content and context that it is difficult to generalize across scenarios. For example, we did not find any statistically significant relationship between usage of a particular strategy and the personality trait self-monitoring. However, Smock (2010) asked about impression management activities on Facebook in general, and found that self-monitoring was significantly related to frequency of using subtractive strategies. The large standard errors on variables that were insignificant but had relatively high beta weights (>.4) also suggests that examining individual scenarios, rather than aggregate behavioral patterns such as frequency, bring more attention to the interpersonal factors at play in the specific incident.

Of note, none of the models predicting explanatory strategies were significant. This may be because not enough participants used explanatory strategies, or because there were many different explanatory strategies used so they are not adequately captured by a unidimensional measure. Further investigation into the complexity of explanatory strategies is warranted.

Why little effect of individual-level variables?

The lack of effects for self-monitoring could be because we were asking about which strategies users actually used instead of which strategies they chose not to use. Self-monitoring is

rooted in the desire to be perceived as socially adept. High self-monitors are motivated to adhere

to social norms and refrain from behaving in ways that are deemed socially inappropriate.

Perhaps high self-monitors feel that certain curation strategies are less normative than others

(e.g., untagging themselves in an embarrassing photo may be more normative than requesting

that Facebook remove the embarrassing photo from the site). As a result, self-monitoring may

better predict which curation strategies are not normative. Future research should examine the

norms that surround Facebook curation strategies to uncover how self-monitoring influences

impression curation on Facebook.

The fact that Internet skills positively predicted the use of certain curation strategies but

Facebook skills did not predict curation strategies may seem paradoxical at first. It makes more

intuitive sense, however, if we assume highly skilled Internet users are better acquainted with

online face management strategies in general. In addition, higher Internet skills may indicate a

user's desire and ability to learn how they can effectively manage and curate their identity online.

If this is the case, while highly skilled Internet users may not have known prior to the incident

how to successfully curate their face on Facebook, they may have taken it upon themselves to

learn how to effectively curate their face after the incident because they have had successful

experiences learning other curation strategies elsewhere online (e.g., email, MySpace, Flickr,

etc.). Future research should examine how users acquire site-specific skills to see how and when

these skills are learned, and if there are ways to teach new and experienced users how they can

successfully curate their face on Facebook as well as other social media sites.

Imagined versus actual audience

Where audience size was positively related to using avoidance strategies, audience

diversity was not a significant predictor of any of the curation strategies. This implies that use of

any given strategy may only come to realization when a user becomes aware of their

unanticipated but actual audience versus their imagined audience. Imagined audience is a term

that refers to the perceived audience for a social media post (Litt, 2012). Facebook users are

unable to tell exactly which users may see their posts and when; as a result they may sometimes

be surprised to find that unintended individuals have seen content posted with another audience

in mind (i.e., "imagined"). Complicating matters further, when a user's Facebook friend posts

embarrassing content about them publicly on the site, they have even less information about the

possible audience for the post. It is unlikely that the poster is able to accurately imagine the

audience for the post, thus creating significant potential for exactly the sort of face threats

observed here.

Future research should explore the extent to which people consider how their posts may affect

their other Facebook contacts and if there are ways to remind them of the possible reactions,

positive and negative, that their contacts may have in response to their posts (Wang et al., 2011).

Managing Face vs. Managing Relationships

While closeness positively predicted that a user would address the poster to try and have

embarrassing content removed from Facebook, there were cases where, according to participants,

the poster claimed the right to post content as they saw fit, resulting in the continued

embarrassment of some of our participants. Participants also were taking into consideration how

close they were with the poster in deciding their impression curation strategy selection. This

speaks to the difficulty some users have with effectively curating their face on Facebook; when a

Facebook contact claims they have the right to post content that embarrasses them, what recourse

does a user have to remove the content? The expectation that a contact would preserve and

uphold their positive face in public (Goffman, 1959) should extend to Facebook, but the notion

of content "rights" implies that users may have different norms and expectations that govern

their public interactions on a social media site. Perhaps users are more concerned with the extent

to which the content they post on the site facilitates their own face goals more than whether their

posts embarrass their Facebook contacts. It is unclear whether this notion of "rights" is specific

to Facebook, or cascaded into other online and offline environments. However, it is possible that

Facebook users post according to how they want to be perceived first and according to how they

think their Facebook contacts want to be perceived second (if at all). Future research may want

to further delve into how users may forsake their interpersonal relationship goals for their

personal identity or face goals, potentially risking their relationships for the sake of gaining more

positive impressions.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study; while we recruited Facebook users broadly,

the recruitment locations biased respondents towards younger adults. As social media usage

norms may vary by age, results should be interpreted within the boundaries of our sample. The

study was confined to people generally telling us why they chose to do what they did, but they

said little about why they decided not to do what they did not do. Also, as mentioned in the

discussion, the strategies that participants discussed were based on a single incident, confining

our understanding of their actions to a specific situation. Examining strategies across several

different face-threatening scenarios may provide a more holistic view of how people react.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

</div>

In this paper, we introduced the notion of impression curation and examined four curation

strategies that people used in response to face-threatening content posted by others on Facebook.

Individual factors such as personality and technology skills, as well as contextual factors such as

the severity of the content, perceived audience, and relationship with the poster, all played

different roles in influencing which strategy participants used. While scholars have long focused

on how individuals manage their own impressions, our study highlights that impression curation

is a complex, collective process in which people must balance both their self-presentation *and*

interpersonal goals.

References

Argyle, M., & Henderson, M. (1984). The rules of friendship. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 1*, 211-237. doi: 10.1177/0265407584012005

Argyle, M., Henderson, M., & Furnham, A. (1985). The rules of social relationships. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 24*, 125-139. doi: 10.1111/j.2044-8309.1985.tb00671.x

Baumeister, R. F. (1982). Self-esteem, self-presentation, and future interaction: A dilemma of reputation. *Journal of Personality, 50*, 29-45. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6494.1982.tb00743.x

Bevan, J. L., Pfyl, J., & Barclay, B. (2012). Negative emotional and cognitive responses to being unfriended on Facebook: An exploratory study. *Computers in Human Behavior, 28*, 1458-1464. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2012.03.008

boyd, d. (2010). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *Networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites*. New York, NY: Routledge.

boyd, d., & Hargittai, E. (2010). Facebook privacy settings: Who cares? *First Monday*, 15. doi: 10.5210%2Ffm.v15i8.3086

Cupach, W. R., & Metts, S. (1994). *Facework*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Davies, J. (2012). Facework on Facebook as a new literacy practice. *Computers & Education, 59*, 19-29. doi: 10.1016/j.compedu.2011.11.007

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays in face-to-face behavior*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Hargittai, E., & Hsieh, Y. P. (2012). Succinct survey measures of web-use skills. *Social Science Computer Review*, 30, 95-107. doi: 10.1177/0894439310397146

Hargittai, E., & Litt, E. (2013). New strategies for employment? Internet skills and online

      privacy practices during people's job search. *IEEE Security & Privacy*, 11, 38-45.

Lampe, C., Ellison, N. B., & Steinfield, C. (2008). *Changes in use and perception of Facebook.*

      In B. Begole & D. W. McDonald (Eds.), Proceedings of the 2008 ACM conference on

      Computer supported cooperative work (CSCW '08), pp. 721-730. New York, NY: ACM.

      doi: 10.1145/1460563.1460675

Leary, M. R., & Kowalski, R. M. (1990). Impression management: A literature review and two-

      component model. *Psychological Bulletin*, *107*, 34-47. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.107.1.34

Lennox, R. D., & Wolfe, R. N. (1984). Revision of the Self-Monitoring Scale. *Journal of*

      Personality and Social Psychology, *46*, 1349-1364. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.46.6.1349

Litt, E. (2012). Knock, Knock. Who's There? The Imagined Audience. *Journal of Broadcasting*

      & Electronic Media, *56*, 330-345.

Litt, E. (2013). Understanding Social Network Site Users' Privacy Tool Use. *Computers in*

      Human Behavior, 29, 1649-1656.

Litt, E., Spottswood, E. L., Birnholtz, J. P., Hancock, J. T., Smith, M. E., & Reynolds, L. (2014).

      Awkward encounters of an "other" kind: Collective self-presentation and face threat on

      facebook. In *Proceedings of the ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative*

      Work (CSCW2014).

Madden, M. (2012). Privacy management on social media sites. Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet

      & American Life Project.

Madden, M., & Smith, A. (2010). Reputation management and social media: How people

      monitor their identity and search for others online. Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet &

      American Life Project.

Marder, B., Joinson, A., & Shankar, A. (2012). *Every post you make, every pic you take, I'll be watching you: Behind social spheres on Facebook.* Paper presented at the 45th Hawaii International Conference on System Science Hawaii.

McLaughlin, C., & Vitak, J. (2012). Norm evolution and violation on Facebook. *New Media & Society, 14*, 299-315. doi: 10.1177/1461444811412712

Mendelson, A. L., & Papacharissi, Z. (2010). Look at us: Collective narcissism in college student Facebook photo galleries. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *The networked self: Identity, community and culture on social network sites* (pp. 251-273). New York, NY: Routledge.

Miller, R. S. (1992). The nature and severity of self-reported embarrassing circumstances. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 18*, 190-198. doi: 10.1177/0146167292182010

Modigliani, A. (1968). Embarrassment and embarrassability. *Sociometry, 31*, 313-326.

Raynes-Goldie, K. (2010). Aliases, creeping, and wall cleaning: Understanding privacy in the age of Facebook. *First Monday, 15*. Retrieved from http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2775/2432

Petronio, S., Olson, C., & Dollar, N. (1989). Privacy issues in relational embarrassment: Impact on relational quality and communication satisfaction. *Communication Research Reports, 6*, 21-27. doi: 10.1080/08824098909359828

Preston, J. (2011). Social media history becomes a new job hurdle. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/21/technology/social-media-history-becomes-a-new-job-hurdle.html?pagewanted=all

Rui, J. R., & Stefanone, M. A. (2013). Strategic management of other-provided information

online: Personality and network variables. In Proceedings of 46th Hawaii International

Conference on System Sciences. IEEE Computer Society. doi:10.1109/HICSS.2013.500

Schlenker, B. R. (1980). *Impression management: The self-concept, social identity, and

interpersonal relations*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

Schneider, D. J. (1969). Tactical self-presentation after success and failure. *Journal of

Personality and Social Psychology, 13,* 262-268. doi: 10.1037/h0028280

Sleeper, M., Cranshaw, J., Kelley, P. G., Ur, B., Acquisti, A., Cranor, L. F., Sadeh, N. (2013). "I

read my Twitter the next morning and was astonished": a conversational perspective on

twitter regrets. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in

Computing Systems*, 3277-3286. New York, NY: ACM. doi: 10.1145/2470654.2466448

Smock, A. (2010, June). Self-presentation on Facebook: Managing content created by the user

and others. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication

Association. Suntec City, Singapore, June 21, 2010.

Snyder, M. (1974). Self-monitoring of expressive behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social

Psychology*, 30, 4 526-537. doi: 10.1037/h0037039

Walther, J. B., Heide, B. V. D., Hamel, L. M., & Shulman, H. C. (2009). Self-generated versus

other-generate statements and impressions using computer-mediated communication: A

test of warranting theory using Facebook. *Communication Research, 36*, 229-253. doi:

10.1177/0093650208330251

Walther, J. B., & M. Parks. (2002). *Cues filtered out, cues filtered in: computer-mediated

communication and relationships*, in M.L. Knapp, & J.A. Daly (eds.), Handbook of

Interpersonal Communication, pp. 529-563. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Wang, Y., Norcie, G., Komanduri, S., Acquisti, A., Leon, P. G., & Cranor, L. F. (2011). *I*

    regretted the minute I pressed share: A qualitative study of regrets on Facebook. In L. F.

    Cranor (Ed.), Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium on Usable Privacy and Security

    (SOUPS '11), New York, NY: ACM. doi:10.1145/2078827.2078841

Tables

Table 1. List of Reactions

	Yes	No
Subtractive strategies		
I removed/untagged myself from the post	55.3%	44.7%
I asked the poster to take down the post	31.3%	68.7%
I reported the post to Facebook	6%	94%
Explanatory strategies		
I commented on the post with humor or a joke to make light of the embarrassing post	24.7%	75.3%
I tried to explain or justify my involvement with a comment	6.7%	93.3%
I commented on the post with an apology about the post	2.7%	97.3%
Avoidance strategies		
I ignored the post in order to avoid drawing attention to it	28.%	71.3%
Addressive Strategies		
I told the person who posted the awkward/embarrassing content that it bothered me	50%	49.3%

Table 2. Binary logistic models showing likelihood of using specific curation strategies

	Subtractive strategies (Model 1)	Explanatory strategies (Model 2)	Avoidance strategies (Model 3)	Addressive strategies (Model 4)
Demographic				
Gender	.94	.20	.50	.17
Age	-.03	.02	.00	.00
Individual-level				
Internet skill	.50*	-.17	-.07	-.14
Facebook skill	-.09	.40-	.26	.14
Self-monitoring	-.59	.51	-.55	.2
Embarrassability	.73*	-.06	-.12	.32
Content-related				
Face threat severity	.86*	-.66	-.33	.59
Time since post	-.77	-.03	.54	-1.06*
Audience-related				
Audience diversity	-.04	.04	-.19	-.19
Audience size	-.37	.21	.54*	.08
Relationship-related				
Perceived closeness	.38*	.25	-.43*	.59**
Perceived intentionality	.54*	-.04	-.44	.88***
Constant	-6.03*	-3.69	2.98	-7.19
Nagelkerke R Square	.26	.12	.19	.31
Log Likelihood	155.11	154.46	153.73	159.65
Chi square (df)	30.32(12)**	12.48 (12)	20.43(12)*	37.17(12)***
Percentage predicted	69.7	75.4	73.9	69.7

Note. $^*p<.05$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{***}p<.001$

Appendix

Face Threat Severity Scale

How did the post make you feel? Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1. I felt awkward.

2. I felt embarrassed.

3. I felt uncomfortable.

4. I felt flustered.

5. I felt uneasy.

6. I felt exposed.

7. I felt it made me look bad.

Response options: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree

Embarrassability Scale

Try to imagine as vividly as possible that each of these events is happening to you. Then, state how embarrassed you would feel if the event were actually happening to you by using the scale below to describe your own reaction.

How embarrassed would you feel if…

…you watched a play where the actor forgot his lines.

…you forgot an appointment with a boss/manager or professor, and remembered it as you met him/her in the hall the next day.

…you were caught muttering to yourself by someone else when you thought you were alone.

…you tripped and fell while entering a bus full of people.

…you were at a dinner party and found out you were allergic to the main dish.

…you were unable to control your cough during a lecture or talk.

…you attended a comedy show where the comedian was not funny and no one was laughing.

…you were alone in an elevator with a boss or professor who had just given you a bad performance review.

…you were conversing in a small group, which included a blind person, when someone next to him unthinkingly made a remark about everyone being "blind as a bat".

…you noticed a public speaker left their fly unzipped while they were giving a talk or speech

…you asked someone on crutches if he had suffered from a skiing accident and he blushed and replied that, no, he was crippled by polio as a child.

…your date over-complimented you during your first time out with him/her.

Response options: I would not feel the least embarrassed, I would feel slightly embarrassed, I would feel fairly embarrassed, I would feel quite embarrassed, I would feel strongly embarrassed.