Just Being Themselves?

Goals and Strategies for Self-Presentation on Facebook

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Abstract

Self-presentation is an essential component of behavior on social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and MySpace. Although previous studies have examined self-presentation in face to face situations, or have investigated aspects of online self-presentation, no research project has yet looked into self-presentation specifically on Facebook from the user’s perspective. This exploratory study attempts to fill that gap by examining the goals and strategies for self-presentation on Facebook. Focus groups held among college students revealed the following three major goals: Creating an authentic self-presentation, constructing a presentation that is current, positive, and professional, and controlling information. Two minor goals were receiving recognition and presenting oneself as socially literate. The study also revealed the following strategies used to realize these goals: Selecting and editing publicized content, monitoring content posted by others, and using feedback to negotiate one’s self-presentation.
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Goals and Strategies for Self-Presentation on Facebook

Writing blogs, maintaining a personal website, or creating a page on one of the social networking sites: The Internet has opened up a variety of new avenues for people to present themselves to the world. Online self-presentation has hit such a critical mass in many Western countries, that without a presence online, it is tempting to think that one does not to exist at all. Therefore, at the risk of being a “nobody,” the act of self-presentation online has become of great concern in many people’s everyday lives. Before the arrival of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and MySpace, managing people’s impressions of oneself was mainly restricted to face to face interaction. Today, impression management is an integrated part of one’s behavior on social networking sites.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an understanding of how Facebook users negotiate and present themselves through behavior on the social networking site. Although ample research has focused on self-presentation in face to face situations, literature on self-presentation through SNSs is still limited. This study thus aims to provide further clarity into the practice of self-presentation on Facebook; does it mimic norms of social behavior existing in the real world, or does it create new ways to present the self to acquaintances and friends?

Using Facebook: A Brief Overview

Facebook is a social networking site (SNS) developed in 2004. Originally created to provide Harvard University students a place where they could keep in touch with their classmates, it is now a global networking site that everybody can join. When people join Facebook, they create their own profile, a page where they can detail their personal history, what they enjoy doing, and other information about themselves. Every profile also includes a wall, a space for its owner to post comments and provide a status update. A status update is a short text description of a user’s status answering the question, “What’s on your mind?”
Updates and other wall postings are automatically distributed to every friend’s newsfeed, the first page that every Facebook user sees after log-in. Each time a friend changes their status, posts new pictures, completes a quiz, or almost any other Facebook activity, a notification of this will show on one’s newsfeed.

Once on Facebook, a user can then find and contact friends and allow them access to his or her wall. These friends can use this wall to post comments, give gifts, and react to a message on the wall. Viewers may react to Facebook messages in one of two ways: they can click the “like” link or leave a comment. These reactions will then be published on the poster’s wall and on the newsfeed of everyone in the poster’s friend network. Facebook users may also send private messages to their friends within the network, and these messages function very much like typical email, focused around an inbox system, and can be sent to individuals or groups.

Facebook is, in essence, a private network. Unlike some of its competitors, such as MySpace, profiles are not automatically public. People can control the extent to which they want other people to see their information, and unless someone is a member of Facebook, it is not possible to see much content on even the most public profiles (Facebook, 2009).

Self-Presentation: Face to Face Impression Management

Before exploring self-presentation on Facebook, we will first look at existing research on self-presentation in face to face situations, as this is a foundation for understanding impression management on social network sites.

Self-presentation, or impression management, can be best described as an individual’s attempt to control or influence how they are perceived by others. Why do people engage in self-presentation? Three distinct reasons for engaging in self-presentation can be distinguished from existing literature: Identity development, enhancing self-esteem, and gaining social rewards (Baumeister, 1982b; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Gaining social
approval appears to be a major factor in self-presentation since effective impression management allows individuals to associate themselves with positive actions while disassociating themselves from negative actions (Iedema & Poppe, 2001).

According to Leary and Kowalski (1990), self-presentation can be best described as a two-step process which consists of impression motivation and impression construction. Impression motivation is determined by one’s goals related to one’s image, the value of those goals, and the level of discrepancy between one’s real and desired images. Impression construction, on the other hand, is the active alteration or presentation of behavior and self-description intended to meet those goals. This impression construction takes the form of strategies used by the individual.


Research has uncovered that one’s self-presentation is not consistent across different situations. When dealing with strangers, people are likely to use a presentation that enhances their image and places them in favorable light, while switching to a more modest image when presenting themselves to friends. Additionally, when presenting oneself to strangers, one is forced to engage in a far more active self-presentation approach (Tice et al., 1995, 2005; Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005). This may pose challenges for Facebook users, whose often seemingly private behavior and communication on the site is simultaneously exposed to
variety of audiences, ranging from close friends and family to relative strangers who have nonetheless been added as “friends.”

Additionally, authenticity is an important component of self-presentation. Individuals feel pressure to present themselves in a way that is consistent with their existing reputation or what is already known about them (Baumeister, 1982a, 2009b). Doherty and Schlenker (1991) found that respondents who are primarily concerned with their social image are more likely to behave in a way that corresponds with their public identity rather than to focus on positive self-presentation. On a related note, research found that people with high self-esteem were better able to engage in self-enhancement techniques like drawing attention away from negative aspects of their image, and toward compensatory positive areas than people with low self-esteem (Baumeister, 1982a).

Furthermore, individuals who base their behavior on their “true” interests and values, i.e., who possess high autonomy, are less likely to consciously use a lot of self-presentation strategies than people who are more inclined to give into social pressure, i.e., people with high control orientations. The latter were more likely to engage in strategies for improving the self-image, and in more aggressive tactics (Lewis & Neighbors, 2005). This finding is interesting when compared to Baumeister (1982b), who claimed that keeping one’s audience satisfied is an important aspect of impression management. In fact, the social rewards received through self-presentation are obtained by “pleasing the audience” through the use of these strategies, which also contribute to the development of self-image (pp. 3-4).

In summary, the primary concerns of self-presentation in face to face situations are: Strategies, audience type, authenticity, and autonomy.

*Self-Presentation: Impression Management in Computer-Mediated Communication*

Although some research has focused on what people do with Facebook, i.e., what needs the social networking site serves (e.g. Joinson, 2008; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield,
2006; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2008), only a little research has focused on the goals and strategies of self-presentation on SNSs.

As far self-presentation through computer-mediated communication (CMC) in general, several research projects looked at the goals and strategies employed by the users and how they differ from face to face interaction. One interesting finding is that self-presentation through CMC alters how one utilizes non-verbal cues as a presentation strategy. According to Walther (2007), CMC offers fewer opportunities for nonverbal communication, and thus relies more on “language and content cues” (p. 2539). Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006) found that even though face to face nonverbal cues were not available, users in online dating sites attended to other subtle cues that did translate to the textual CMC environment.

Controlling one’s self-presentation has also been addressed in various studies directed towards CMC. Walther (2007) uncovered that presenting oneself through online communication allows the user more control over their presentation, through selection, editing, as well as the lack of nonverbal cues and synchronous interaction. The user is thus better able to control the information about them, and the manner in which their interactions, and thus self-presentation, is interpreted by others. This finding was corroborated by Ellison et al.’s 2006 study into online dating, where respondents indicated that searching for a partner online gave them more control over self-presentation and interaction.

Furthermore, research into CMC (Ellison et al., 2006) also found that when users presented themselves in an online dating site, one of their goals would be to create an “ideal self” (pp. 425-426). This goal was achieved by balancing self-promotion and an accurate image.

Self-disclosure is a behavior that is essential to self-presentation, and can be defined as the process of revealing previously unknown information to create bonds and develop trust. CMC has been demonstrated to foster increased self-disclosure (Joinson, 2001).
More recent studies have looked specifically at self-presentation on Facebook. Several of the studies focused on social connections, which are an outcome of self-presentation. Self-presentation is apparently tied to social capital (i.e., the benefits one receives from social relationships) (Lin, 1999), and Facebook is used to enhance or maintain social connections (Zywica & Danowski, 2008). In addition, Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe (2008) showed that besides maintaining and strengthening off-line relationships, Facebook also helps to strengthen weak social ties. On a related note, Pearson (2009) discusses the strength of social ties while describing self-presentation on Facebook as a performance, where the challenge for the user lies in negotiating both the public “stage” and the private “backstage,” both of which are an essential part of the Facebook space. This performance, according to Pearson, either creates strong or weak ties with the various audience members, which, according to Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco (2005) can consist of both friends and strangers. The notion of performance is also touched on by Zhao, Gasmuch, and Martin (2008), albeit in a slightly different shape. They noted that Facebook users tend to “project a self that is socially desirable” (p. 1827) by emphasizing their popularity, thoughtfulness, and well-roundedness (p. 1828). Thus, Facebook users will consciously alter their presentation to appeal to as many people as possible.

Several various studies revealed the importance of the Facebook profile in self-presentation (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007). The profile not only helps users find friends, but the looks and behavior of one’s friends in wall postings can also affect how other users think about the profile owner (Lampe et al., 2007; Walther et al., 2008). In an earlier study, Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten (2006) showed that adolescent self-esteem is in fact enhanced by positive feedback on their profiles, which can in turn enhance their sense of well-being. These findings raise the question whether Facebook users are aware of the role played by their profile, and if this influences how they self-present on that same profile.
Two additional studies focused specifically on self-disclosure and information control, both strategies for self-presentation. Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais (2009) found that Facebook users are more likely to disclose information on Facebook than they are in real life, but that these same users still showed concern about controlling who can see their information. Their study revealed that Facebook users who experience a need for popularity are more likely to disclose information about themselves than people who do not share this need. However, Christofides et al. also found that there is a link between self-esteem, trust, and information control; i.e., people with high self-esteem and low trust were more likely to control their information, that is to say, utilize the privacy settings offered by Facebook to safeguard their personal information. This finding is interesting because by restricting access to their information, individuals also limit their ability to self-present, yet this does not seem to matter as much to people with high self-esteem and low trust. Christofides et al. speculated that those with higher self-esteem apparently feel less of a need to disclose information to gain popularity, and therefore focus on controlling their identity, and presenting themselves to a “chosen circle”, while users with low self-esteem, instead, want to share their presentation with as many people as possible (pp. 343-344). In a different study, Tufekci (2008) found that a need for privacy was not reflected by a decreased disclosure of information. Instead, SNS users who felt a need for privacy used the privacy settings to restrict access to their personal information.

Previous studies that investigated self-presentation on Facebook have all restricted themselves to one or a few aspects of self-presentation. Boyd (2008) investigated teenagers on SNSs in general, and found that regarding self-presentation, young users were aware of multiple audiences (friends and strangers), but targeted their behavior towards their friends and tried to control their self-presentation through privacy controls and misinformation tactics (pp. 143-151). In addition, the study’s respondents discussed the importance of their profiles...
being authentic and positive. Boyd also argued that the user’s social connections play an important role in self-presentation online (p. 136). The only study that looked at self-presentation as a whole on Facebook specifically (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008) was limited by the fact that its methods centered on a content analysis of user profiles, which, in an earlier incarnation of the SNS, was its primary emphasis. However, on today’s Facebook, the process of negotiating one’s self-presentation has become fairly fluid. The static profile no longer seems to be the primary tool to present oneself, as communication on Facebook has become more dynamic, immediate, and status and wall oriented. Messages in the form of wall postings and status updates give Facebook users ample opportunity to tweak and negotiate their presentation of self on a daily, hourly, or even more frequent basis. Therefore, if one wants to gain a deeper understanding of how self-presentation works, one needs to talk to the users themselves and investigate which goals and strategies they claim to employ in their Facebook usage. Thus, this exploratory study will examine the goals and strategies used by a small sample of Facebook users to negotiate their self-presentation through the various activities offered by Facebook. This leads us to pose the following research question:

RQ: What are the goals and strategies that people use in self-presentation on Facebook?

Method

Respondents

To answer the research question outlined above, we carried out focus group interviews. This technique is especially suitable for studying behavior that takes place in a group, such as interacting with one’s Facebook friends (cf. Hennink, 2007). Moreover, focus groups grant in-depth insights into what exactly people mean with certain answers since the process through which meaning and ideas are created can be witnessed while executing the interview (cf. Greenbaum, 2000).
We carried out three focus group interviews (length approximately 90 minutes; 3-6 participants) with Facebook users between the ages of 18 and 25 who were all college students. This specific group was selected because they comprise Facebook’s original target audience, and the network thus caters specifically to this population. Moreover, college students currently are the bulk of the network’s users (Smith, 2009). The focus groups were carried out in June 2009, with students at a medium-sized, public, historically black university in the Southeastern U.S.

Focus Group Protocol

Before the start of the focus group, all respondents were asked to print out their newsfeed and wall for their own reference. The focus group discussion was guided by a topic list, which covered every option for self-presentation on Facebook, namely (a) general Facebook usage (including e.g., selection of friends and reasons for using Facebook), (b) profiles (including e.g., pictures, updating, and friends’ profiles), (c) newsfeed and status updates (including e.g., commenting on updates, hiding updates, and friends’ updates and comments), (d) wall postings (including e.g., one’s own comments, friends’ comments, and reasons for deleting a wall post), and (e) the use of private messages. All focus groups were recorded and fully transcribed for analysis.

Analysis

After a close reading we split up the focus group transcripts into separate fragments according to the varying activities that make up one’s Facebook usage. By means of inductive analysis (cf. Hijmans, 1995) we constructed three categories for the roles that the Facebook user can adopt: poster, reader, and reactant. This categorization allows an answer to the question which goals and strategies for self-presentation are encompassed by the different activities that make up Facebook usage.
A fragment was deemed to refer to the Facebook user as a poster if participants mentioned taking initiative in putting something on Facebook, e.g., a status update, a picture, or information about themselves. Whenever respondents merely talked about reading and seeing materials on Facebook, the fragment was taken into the “reader” category. And if respondents discussed responding to something they saw on Facebook, e.g., a picture, a wall posting, a status update, it was counted as a fragment about the Facebook user as a reactant.

After this first categorization, each single fragment was analyzed for reference to any aspect of self-presentation (e.g., visual presentation, keeping one’s presentation up to date, or remaining honest). Fragments that appeared to refer to similar aspects were grouped together and further examined for specific, and shared, goals and strategies.

Results

When trying to identify which goals and strategies people employ when representing themselves on Facebook, we distinguished between major and minor goals. Major goals were identified as those goals that were shared by the respondents as posters, readers, and reactants, while minor goals were only discussed from two of the three perspectives. Using this analysis, three major goals emerged: (a) creating an authentic presentation, (b) creating a current, positive, and professional presentation, and (c) controlling information. Additionally, two goals regarding self-presentation can be described as minor: (d) ensuring a good presentation through association and (e) presenting oneself as socially literate. In this section, these goals and their associated strategies will be discussed in detail.

Major Goal 1: Creating an Authentic Self-Presentation

The first goal for self-presentation that was shared by poster, reader, and reactant was the creation of an authentic self-presentation. Authenticity appeared to be one of the main pillars of impression management on Facebook; as one of the respondents put it, “Nobody wants to misrepresent themselves.” (Group 2). The importance of an authentic self-
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presentation also became apparent through the various occasions where the respondents would express surprise or disapproval, or even mock people they knew on Facebook who misrepresented themselves:

D: I have a person who I know was just a geek in high school, and the next thing they’re doing, they’re on their Facebook with guns or rags or something.
E: I’ve seen that, too. It’s really… I laugh at it.
D: I laugh too. You in high school, you ain’t in no gang. (Group 2)

The respondents in this study also discussed various strategies that can be used to ensure that their self-presentation is authentic. The respondents described two of those strategies they use as posters: making sure their profile content is an accurate reflection of their interests, likes, and dislikes, and writing status updates that reflect who they are, what they are thinking, and doing at that time. As far as the status updates are concerned, this is best captured by one respondent who pointed out that he changes his status as soon as something happens to him:

I: if something happens to me then and there, especially if I’m on Facebook, then I’m going to let everyone know right then and there know how I feel. (Group 3)

Although this same respondent indicates that he will not put bad feelings on Facebook too often, for a fear of being perceived as a “sad guy,” another respondent indicated that she did not have a problem with being completely honest in her status update:

J: A few days ago, I wrote a status saying I was mad, because someone put my name in something, and I wrote a status about it, like, are you serious? Just try me. (Group 3)

This honesty can also extend to sharing emotional news, or asking for support or prayer.

When discussing the need for an authentic self-presentation from the reader’s perspective, the respondents came up with one additional strategy, namely that everyone should post pictures that present an accurate presentation of one’s personality and looks. One respondent in the first focus group confirmed this when she discussed friends who posted
pictures of themselves drinking and partying. Although this respondent clearly stated her disapproval of such behavior, she also noted that:

   A: I think they’re just being themselves. (Group 1)

So, presenting oneself in a truthful manner is deemed more important than seeking approval of one’s peers. This notion is further underlined by some of the respondents from the other focus groups:

   K: I have one friend, and she takes a lot of pictures, and some are too revealing, (…) but the weird thing about it is that when you see her in person, she doesn’t look like these pictures. (Group 3)

They suggested that some users present an image of themselves so exaggerated or self-enhancing that it does not represent who they are in real life (cf. Sessions, 2009).

Moreover, the respondents in this study also discussed authenticity with regard to being a reactant, i.e., leaving comments on people’s pages. Several users brought up examples of where their friends would tell each other, through comments, when they thought a status update was silly, unrealistic, or somehow inappropriate. In addition, respondents mentioned that they responded to controversial statements to make their opinion heard; i.e., to ensure that they are able to re-assert what they believe in. Finally, when discussing self-presentation as reactants, the respondents also mentioned that Facebook users should ensure that all their comments are meaningful. Respondents specifically expressed their dislike of the “like” button. Several argued that if people had nothing sensible to say, they should not simply click “like” to be a part of the conversation. But the dislike for meaningless comments extends beyond the like button, as one respondent made clear:

   K: I don’t know why people write “hi.” (…) What am I supposed to write back to that? Hi? Or bye? Or something like that. (Group 3)

This example expresses a clear preference for a meaningful conversation as opposed a mere exchange of social courtesies.
Major Goal 2: Creating a Professional, Positive, and Current Self-Presentation

The second goal that was addressed from each of the three perspectives was the creation of a professional, positive, and current self-presentation. The results from this study thus indicated that the respondents were not only concerned with the authenticity of their presentation, but also with its nature.

Ensuring a current self-presentation entailed various strategies. From the perspective of the poster, one should update one’s status every day, ensure the pictures in one’s profile are up to date, and make sure that the information in one’s profile reflects one’s current situation. When discussing this aspect of one’s self-presentation from the perspective of the reactant, the respondents came to the conclusion that this is best achieved by making sure that one responds to people who write a comment one’s wall. One respondent perfectly captured this strategy when she said:

A: I always comment on just about everyone in a while…

Mod: Okay, so almost every time someone posts on your wall you comment on it?

A: Well, just to let them know that you know I am actually up here and I’m interested in what they have to say. (Group 1)

The goal to create a positive self-presentation seemed obvious to many respondents, as evidence by one participant who exclaimed, “Of course you would want a good representation of yourself!” (Group 2), and another, who explained:

B: I have this one friend from high school - and every time she is on status she is talking about somebody or “I am hating her” - she is always up in negative (…) So it goes through my head like “why are you bringing up like this negative…” basically like negatively presenting yourself, being a negative person. (Group 1)

The respondents indicated that there are two ways in which a poster can create a positive impression of themselves on Facebook: The selection of pictures that show the poster in a good light and the selection of positive and appealing profile content. One respondent summed up the first strategy as follows:
F: I want somebody to see and like, “Oh, she’s got a pretty smile,” or “oh, pretty,” or “oh…” It’s just something about a picture. The second [reason to update a profile picture] is like if you just got out of the hair salon, or you’re just about to go to a party, or just about to do something, and you know you’re looking your best, and you just have the picture. (Group 2)

The majority of the respondents indicated that they will update their picture as soon as they get a nice picture of themselves; indicating a need to look their best on Facebook. When discussing the need for nice pictures from a reader’s point of view, the respondents noted that pictures that contain nudity, illegal activities, or offensive gestures do little to aid in creating a positive image of oneself:

D: There’s some pictures I would never take. Like I would never take a picture of me flipping the bird. I mean, I would never… pictures of people flipping the bird or smoking a blunt in the profile picture, or chugging a beer (…) I mean, you want to have a positive image as your profile picture. (Group 2)

Besides the pictures on one’s profile, respondents also showed a concern with the selection of positive and appealing profile content. The content goes beyond pictures, and includes self description, groups one can join, or any other statements or associations.

Upon discussing this goal from the perspective of the reader, the respondents appeared to agree that negative and inappropriate updates and posts (e.g., posts that included curse words or offensive language), although entertaining, should not be made public on Facebook. The respondents also discussed the fact that as readers they often become annoyed with friends who constantly post meaningless updates (e.g., “I’m having breakfast right now”), or would post meaningless comments on every status update. The reason for the frustration with these empty statements is not only that they are a nuisance, but also that the respondents feel these people are hurting their own self-presentation.

K: I have a lot of friends who write a lot of craziness (…) I guess they be bored… and they write stupid questions, or… I don’t understand (…) I guess some people just like to write for attention or whatever. They’re my friends, but I don’t want that on my Facebook. (Group 3)
In all three focus groups, respondents mentioned the importance of creating a professional self-presentation. The participants pointed out that a level of professionalism is currently required on Facebook, as pointed out by one respondent:

D: The thing that keeps me from, like, putting all my pictures and stuff on Facebook would be a level of professionalism (...) And I care about my parents seeing some of them, and I care about employers seeing some of the pictures I’ve got. (Group 2)

The respondents in this study brought up two strategies that a poster could use to achieve the level of professionalism addressed above: they use Facebook in a semi-professional manner, and they monitor their wall content. Several respondents mention using Facebook for semi-professional purposes, such as casting calls for a student production, advertising events presented by one of their organizations, promoting self-made videos, podcasts, or other professional productions, thus presenting themselves as budding professionals to the world. Moreover, respondents indicated an awareness that that professors, mentors, and potential employers could read their walls, so they made sure that their wall content did not contain anything inappropriate:

B: If it is something, that um, is vicious (...) ’cause I have like family members and like younger cousins that look up to me and also, you know I am associated and when I’m trying to get a job in the future something (...) I’ll delete it. (Group 1)

**Major Goal 3: Controlling Information**

The two goals discussed above seemingly include controlling information as one of their strategies; monitoring and deleting wall posts is, for instance, an example of controlling information as a strategy. The goal that will be discussed in this section, however, refers specifically to a need to guard one’s privacy; i.e., controlling information out of a need to ensure that only certain people can view certain content.

As two respondents explained earlier, whatever one does on Facebook is one’s public face that is to say, everyone can see it. Therefore, a main objective of the posters in this study
was controlling who can see what. The importance of this need for control became especially apparent through one respondent who admitted to having two profiles; one for friends, and one for family:

F: The reason I have two pages, I don’t want my mom seeing everything. I was a freshman, and everybody goes through their little freshman phase (…) it’s not like you can out everything (…) It’s like, what I was doing in my house, I didn’t want my mom to see. I didn’t want my mom to see all that. But now, it’s like, you still don’t want everyone in your business (…). But like on the other page, I have strictly family, like I put Easter pictures and Sundays. Strictly family. My family don’t need to go with the [university] family. (Group 2)

Although none of the other respondents admitted to having two profiles, they all shared in the goal to control the information about them. In their desire to achieve this goal, they employed three strategies: restricting what they posted on their own walls, restricting what information they revealed about themselves, and utilizing Facebook’s privacy settings. As far as monitoring what they posted on their own walls, one rule of thumb that every respondent stuck to was to not publish their phone number on their wall. The respondents also indicated that they would watch what they posted because of a desire to keep some information about themselves completely private:

B: I try to keep it pretty straight to the point, because I do know there are some people that I have as friends that I don’t know but just go to my school though so I just accepted them. I don’t want them to know too much of that. (Group 1)

Besides monitoring wall content, the respondents in the study indicated that they never revealed their relationship status. The reason behind this constant monitoring is related to a desire for privacy and to minimize “drama” as much as possible:

F: Because I remember, I put up my relationship status, and I was like, “shhh.” I went one day and put it up, the next day, “Oh, who you in a relationship with?” “what’s going on?” (Group 2)

Another strategy in the battle for control over one’s information is the use of the privacy settings offered by Facebook. Some respondents indicated that they used these settings to hide
their status from people who, although they are friends, they want to keep as little informed as possible.

When discussing the need to control information from the perspective of the reader, the respondents added another three strategies. A first strategy that was brought up in two different focus groups, was laying low. One respondent pointed out that the reason why he was not as active on Facebook as he could be was

E: Because I have like, I got other people that always try to know what’s going on with me – this, that, and the other. Always trying to keep up with what’s going on with my life. I try to calm all that down by just not doing as much on it. (Group 2)

A second strategy discussed by the respondents was to control visual images on Facebook. One of the main concerns of the respondents was an activity known as “tagging,” where a friend will post a picture, and post a link (or tag) to all the people who appear in the picture, as well as any people whom that friend wants to see the picture. The picture will then appear on the walls of everyone who has been tagged. The respondents addressed the problem that one is unable to control who tags you. As one respondent explained:

F: We used to be in [local club], it’s this club down here, right? And you could be hot, your hair’s all sweated up, and someone like takes a picture, and you’d be like, like, all […] And they’ll tag you, and I’m like, “No! I don’t want that. No! Delete my name.” So I hate that, you know? I like to take my own pictures. (Group 2)

Another problem lies in the fact that when a respondent has been tagged into a picture, not only will that picture appear on their wall, but comments on the picture are viewable, too. The respondents’ main concern is that one may not always realize that one has been tagged, and so a picture can be up for days before one has the chance to remove the tag.

A final strategy to monitor and control the information about someone on Facebook is monitoring wall posts. Since the wall is people’s first impression of someone, making sure that the information there is in line with how one wants to present one’s self is very
important. However, since one cannot control what other people do, this can be a difficult feat, as pointed out by one respondent:

D: I know this dude who was sending emails back and forth with this girl, and his girl found his email address and then posted the entire email thing on his wall, and like on her wall, so everybody saw it.

(Group 2)

Obviously, this respondent was able to read the conversation, and subsequently form an opinion on the situation before his friend was able to delete this information. Interestingly, all respondents admitted to having had to delete a wall post at least once.

**Minor Goal 1: Receiving Recognition**

Feeling appreciated and receiving recognition for who one is was a goal that was raised both from the perspective of the poster, as well as from the perspective of the reader. One respondent even indicated that this is his main activity when on Facebook:

G: Oh, I just go to my profile and I just see who wrote on my wall. I go to my inbox and see who wrote me any messages (...) I just go on and see just really who thought about me. (Group 2)

The respondents in this study admitted trying to gain recognition by writing status updates that will receive attention. All three focus groups seemed to agree that the best way to get a response is to write either funny or controversial updates, e.g., “This itchin’ ain’t stopping” (Group 3). In their discussions about comments, the respondents made it clear that they want and expect feedback about how they present themselves. Simply creating a representation, without receiving any kind of response on it, is meaningless.

From the reader’s point of view, receiving recognition is equally important. At times, people will specifically ask for comments, relying on their network of friends to help them out, or simply wanting to know that their friends read their update or note, and what their thoughts are:

D: I make notes, too – you know, notes on Facebook. When you change your status, I like to know that somebody looked at it, so I’ll be like “yeah, leave a comment or whatever,” to put in your thoughts.

(Group 2)
The respondents also addressed the importance of receiving meaningful feedback; i.e., recognition is only felt if the comments they receive carry some sort of meaning. This is the main reason the respondents in this study did not care for the use of the “like” button.

*Minor Goal 2: Presenting Oneself as Socially Literate*

The desire to come across as someone who adheres to existing social norms is a goal that was mentioned both from the perspective of the poster, as well as from the perspective of the reactant. The participants appeared very concerned with appearing as a polite, courteous, and socially literate Facebook user.

One strategy that was utilized to attain this goal was wishing their friends a happy birthday. When one keeps in mind that most of the respondents in this study had somewhere between 300 and a few thousand friends, this is quite an accomplishment, and a clear indication that one tries to adhere to socially acceptable behavior. In addition, the respondents also indicated that they tried to avoid putting messages on people’s walls that could be potentially hurtful or embarrassing, and would instead send these to someone’s inbox.

As reactants, the respondents claimed to try meeting this goal by making sure they commented and responded when the situation called for it. They thank all the people who had wished them a happy birthday, and indicated that they will make an effort to post on their friends’ walls if their friends put up a new, nice picture, or if they have not been able to talk to their friends in a while. If people put up a status asking for support or feedback, the respondents indicated that they would react. The respondents all also seemed to agree that whenever someone would write on their wall, the polite thing to do is to write back:

D: I have a “It was nice seeing you – sorry it was so short.” I responded with a “good seeing you, too” and I got a “What you been up to? I see you’re still making videos.” (…) And if sometimes I’ll get a “Hey, [D].” I’ll hit you back, “Hey, how are you doing?” Stuff like that. (Group 2)

The last respondent’s remark indicates that even if a friend’s comment seems pointless, the polite thing to do is respond. Small social acts thus also play a role in self-presentation.
Discussion and Conclusion

This paper explored the self-presentation of Facebook users. Specifically, it looked at the goals and strategies for impression management from the three different roles that users play on Facebook: Poster, reader, and reactant. Although the results from this study are merely tentative, they do provide some insight into self-presentation on Facebook. First, three of the major goals for self-presentation were: presenting oneself in an authentic manner, creating a positive, current, and professional image, and controlling information about oneself. Two minor goals were receiving recognition and presenting oneself as socially literate. These two minor goals, as well as the desire to create a positive, current, and professional image are in line with findings from earlier studies (Ellison et al., 2006; Zhao et al., 2008), which suggested that respondents have to balance the need for realism and a likeability in one’s self-presentation. In addition, the fact that controlling information is one of the major goals of our respondents reveals that users, as suggested by Tice et al. (1995, 2005) and Vohs et al. (2005), do realize that different audiences require a different form of self-presentation.

Second, several strategies for reaching these goals were identified in this study. These strategies can be best summed up as selecting and editing the content one publicizes on Facebook, monitoring both visual and textual content posted by others, and the use of feedback to negotiate one’s self-presentation. The finding that respondents see keeping tabs on their friends’ behavior, both in terms of giving and receiving feedback and monitoring their postings, as an important strategy is in line with findings from earlier studies (cf. boyd, 2008; Lampe et al., 2007; Walther, et al., 2008), namely that Facebook users are aware of the impact that friends and their behavior can have on one’s self-presentation.
A final insight is the notion that self-presentation does not appear to be a static one-time creation, but instead is a constantly ongoing construction, with respondents indicating a variety of goals and strategies that were used any time they were on Facebook.

An interesting issue raised by the finding that controlling information and receiving recognition are two goals of the Facebook users in this study, is the question of whether the definitions and roles of privacy, control of information, and self-disclosure related to Facebook as identified in previous studies (see Christofedes et al., 2009, Joinson & Paine, 2007), are sufficient for explaining people’s behavior on SNSs. Although our study is merely explorative, it does seem to open up questions about whether these definitions hold up in reality. It appears, for instance, that the desire to receive recognition is almost the same as self-disclosure, i.e., revealing information to create a bond or gain popularity, but receiving recognition in this study also included surveillance activities in the form of monitoring who has been checking up on a respondent. Additionally, controlling information about oneself appears to be far more complex than merely adjusting one’s privacy settings. In short, it seems as though future studies could benefit from further investigation of these concepts.

This study is only the first step in gaining a better understanding of self-presentation on Facebook. Because this study was based on a small homogeneous sample, a future study should attempt to repeat the same methods with different and more groups of users. In addition, one of the limitations of this study is that it is based on what respondents say they do. It is possible that some of their answer are socially desirable; i.e., based on what they think they should be doing, and not on what they actually do on Facebook. Therefore a second study will compare the findings from this investigation to the profiles and walls of Facebook users to see if there are similarities in the goals and strategies used for self-presentation.
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