

Social media face threats affect relationships; communication helps

February 16 2016

Impression management refers to an individual's deliberate efforts to control or influence other people's perceptions. Sometimes impression management occurs in reaction to face threats: unfavorable incidents that undercut a person's ability to cultivate and maintain a desirable self-image on social networking sites (SNSs).

SNSs such as Facebook, where content can be shared widely and is often persistent, studies have repeatedly shown that people are vulnerable to face threats resulting from things that others post.

Grounded in theory, D. Yvette Wohn, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the information systems department at NJIT's College of Computing Sciences, explores the relationship between humans and technology using fundamental research tactics.

Wohn collaborated with Portland State University assistant professor Erin Spottswood, Ph.D., to co-write the article "Reactions to other-generated face threats on Facebook and their relational consequences," which is published in the April 2016 issue of *Computers in Human Behavior*, a scholarly journal dedicated to examining the use of computers from a psychological perspective.

While there has been much documentation of face threats occurring in the context of SNSs and how people react to them, there's very little known about the relational consequences of carrying out a particular reaction.

This paper reports on a survey of 150 adult Facebook users examining what type of strategies people engage in to deal with face-threatening content on social media.

"Social networking sites are so pervasive in our everyday lives and a platform on which others can judge you based on the content that you post," says Wohn, who, last summer, was named a recipient of the 2015 Yahoo Faculty Research and Engagement Program Award for her sustainability research in human computer interaction. "Unfortunately, even if you put a lot of thought into what you post, you can't control what others post about you."

Wohn and Spottswood began the research to better understand how people deal with face threats using computer-mediated communication and how their response affects their relationship with the person who created the uncomfortable situation.

"We found that people who tried to remove or justify embarrassing content actually experienced a decline in their relationship with the offender," says Wohn. "It may be important for people to know that trying to engage in [impression management](#) may also come at the expense of a personal relationship."

While face threats also happen in person, social media content is easily shareable with a large number of people and much more likely to go viral. This is cause for concern, as "people are connected to a lot of different people on [social media](#), so what may be suitable for one group to see may not be OK for others," she says.

The authors found that even after taking into consideration the severity of the face threat, trying to redirect attention from the offensive content, or trying to get rid of it, was associated with a decline in closeness between the victim and offender. Frequently communicating with the

offender, however, made it less likely for the victim to experience reduction in closeness.

"The people in our study gave us some horrific anecdotes," reveals Wohn. "I think it's important for people to think twice before they post something that contains information about someone else, because you may put them in a very difficult situation."

More information: Donghee Yvette Wohn et al. Reactions to other-generated face threats on Facebook and their relational consequences, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2015.12.021](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.12.021)

Provided by New Jersey Institute of Technology

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