



Full length article

## Reactions to other-generated face threats on Facebook and their relational consequences

Donghee Yvette Wohn<sup>a,\*</sup>, Erin L. Spottswood<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> New Jersey Institute of Technology, University Heights, GITC 5100, Newark, NJ 07103, USA<sup>b</sup> Portland State University, University Center Building, 520 SW Harrison Street, Suite 440, Portland, OR 97201, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Impression management refers to an individual's deliberate efforts to cultivate a particular image. Sometimes impression management occurs in reaction to a face threat—an incident or behavior that could create an impression inconsistent with one's desired self-image. On social network sites (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 other-generated content. While there has been much documentation of face threats occurring in the context of SNSs and how people react to them, we know very little about the relational consequences of carrying out a particular reaction. This paper reports on a survey ( $N = 150$ ) of adult Facebook users examining how certain reactive strategies and the severity of the face threat affect perceived changes in closeness between the victim and offender.

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### 1. Introduction

It was Spring Break, and Mindy,<sup>1</sup> a 20-year old college student, had some embarrassing photos taken of her passed out, drunk, on the ground. She was upset when her friend uploaded the photos against her wishes. “I messaged my friend to take down the photo, but she did not proceed to do so because the photo had garnered many Likes,” she recalled.

Mindy was a victim of a face threat—a situation that occurs when a person's desired image (i.e., “face”) is challenged or undermined (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Goffman, 1967). Face threats can be generated by the self (e.g., falling) or others (e.g., being tripped by another) (Cupach & Metts, 1994) and can lead to feelings such as embarrassment, self-consciousness, and awkwardness (Miller, 1992). When face threats are caused by others, the person creating the awkward situation—in the case of Mindy, her friend who uploaded the photo—is the offender.

The increase of social network site (SNS) use for day-to-day communication raises new questions about how people experience and react to face threats on SNSs to alleviate undesirable

situations, or “save” face. Face threats may make people particularly vulnerable on these sites because the characteristics of these networked environments makes content more persistent, accessible, searchable, and shareable than in face-to-face contexts (Boyd, 2010). In today's society where online presence often plays a role in shaping people's reputations and opportunities (e.g., Guitton, 2014; Preston, 2011; Wang et al., 2011), effective handling of potentially embarrassing or awkward acts has become a necessary skill or literacy (Davies, 2012).

SNS affordances such as persistence and scalability take control away from the victim who is trying to save face. Scalability refers to how many can see or view a piece of content while persistence refers to the endurance of a piece of content that is shared on a SNS (Boyd, 2010). The perceived scalability and persistence is higher on SNSs than face-to-face situations or other media (e.g., phone, text message) due to these sites' technical properties. As a result, embarrassing content that is shared on SNSs may be perceived as especially face threatening. It could also be that in comparison to face threats occurring in face-to-face situations, those occurring on SNSs cause more anxiety, as victims of such threats often have poor awareness of the audience for the threatening content (Litt, 2012).

While there are a number of actions that an individual can take in response to a face threat that is other-generated, taking those actions may risk provoking the offender; the person who generated

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [wohn@njit.edu](mailto:wohn@njit.edu) (D.Y. Wohn), [spot@pdx.edu](mailto:spot@pdx.edu) (E.L. Spottswood).<sup>1</sup> All participants have been randomly assigned a gender-consistent name.

the face threat (Goffman, 1967). Saving one's own face to manage self-presentation with a wider audience can thus come at the expense of damaging an interpersonal relationship (Bevan, Pfyl, & Barclay, 2012; Peña & Brody, 2014). In the paper that follows, we use quantitative and open-response survey data to examine how particular reactions affect the victim's relationship with the offender.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Reacting to face threats

Impression management refers to the ways people try to control how others perceive them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Researchers have also described this process as “self-presentation” and “face management” (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Goffman, 1967). Much of this work stems from Goffman's (1959) classic conceptualization of self-presentation, and in social contexts focuses on how people enact relationship norms to protect their own image as well as others' (Goffman, 1967). Such norms range from protecting each other's privacy to not publicly critiquing others (Argyle & Henderson, 1984). While people typically enact and behave seamlessly according to these norms, a person's desired image may sometimes be challenged.

When it comes to impression management, people can engage in proactive or reactive strategies (for review, see Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008). Proactive strategies aim to avoid threats before they happen while reactive strategies occur in response to a face threat that has already occurred. Reactive strategies, however, have some element of proactivity because the individual is taking steps to avoid potential reputation damage (Bolino et al., 2008; Cupach & Metts, 1992). Here, we focus on the measures taken by individuals to counter or alleviate the potential negative effects of other-generated face threatening content posted on Facebook. We use the term “post” to refer to any action on Facebook that generates content that is visible to people beyond the person who generated it. This can include writing a status update or comment, clicking the “like” icon, sharing media (e.g., photos, videos), and tagging photos.

### 2.2. Reactive strategies to minimize face threat

Scholars have identified eight reactions to face threats in face-to-face communication: avoidance, escape, excuses, justification, apologies, humor, physical remediation, and aggression (Cupach & Metts, 1992; Metts & Cupach, 1989). Drawing on traditional face threat literature as well as those identified in the context of SNSs (e.g., Brody & Pena, 2013; Chen & Abedin, 2014; Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Smock, 2010), we identified four general higher-order categories of reactive strategies that make sense in the context of SNSs, then mapped individual Facebook-specific actions onto the broader categories. The four strategies that can be employed in response to face threatening posts on Facebook are: disengagement, redirection, subtraction, and addressive strategies.

*Disengagement strategies* are those in which the face threatening situation is ignored or otherwise not attended to. In the context of Facebook this could mean leaving the face threatening content alone because comments intended to repair or otherwise respond to the threat may actually cause the algorithm to render the original post more visible (Litt et al., 2014). An extreme form of disengagement is escape (Metts & Cupach, 1989), which in this case could involve avoiding Facebook use altogether.

*Redirective strategies* include engagement with the face threatening content by the victim of the threat, in which he or she apologizes, offers excuses, or makes a joke to redirect attention and

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 by explaining the circumstances of questionable content (Smock, 2010). Wang et al. (2011) found that Facebook users were apologizing and making excuses for self-posted content that offended others in their network; we could easily imagine the same being applied to other-generated content.

Humor can deflect face threatening situations by diffusing tension or redirecting attention (Cupach & Metts, 1994). On Facebook, individuals may try to make light of the face threat by commenting directly in response to the content (Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Smock, 2010).

*Subtractive strategies* include removing information that the individual does not want others to see. In face-to-face situations, this involves removing the face threatening artifact, such as washing out a stain after someone spills a drink on another. On Facebook, the same idea applies to the removal (i.e., subtraction) of content or one's visible connections to it, such as untagging (e.g., Dhir, Kaur, Lonka, & Nieminen, 2016; Lang & Barton, 2015; Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Smock, 2010; Strano & Wattai, 2012), deletion of unwanted posts (e.g., Raynes-Goldie, 2010; Young & Quan-Haase, 2013), and in extreme cases, asking Facebook to take it down (e.g., Wang et al., 2011). For example, when users add content to Facebook, they can “tag” others, in their posts, which indicates that the tagged individual is associated with that content (i.e., they are in the picture, part of the group, etc.). When one is tagged on Facebook, one's Facebook connections can view that content, even if a third party has posted it. While Facebook has, in more recent years, implemented privacy settings that limit who can see tagged materials by third parties, there is still a large element of uncontrollability by the person being tagged.

Several studies have examined why people try to remove undesirable content posted by others; typically photos posted by other users (Lang & Barton, 2015; Strano & Wattai, 2012).

Lang and Barton (2015) found that Facebook users frequently remove a tagged photo of themselves on Facebook in order to preserve their face or identity on the site. Moreover, Strano and Wattai (2012) found that one of the prevailing reasons why users untag themselves from a photograph because the photos were unattractive or misrepresented something about their character, or they wanted to be dissociated from other people in the photo or suppress a behavior that was accurate but that they did not want others to see.

*Addressive strategies* involve confronting the offender about the face threatening content to let them know one's feelings about it. These strategies are different from redirective strategies because they involve interaction only with the offender, whereas redirective strategies are intended for the entire actual or potential audience for the face threatening post. In the context of Facebook, the addressive strategy could take place within Facebook or outside of Facebook.

However, addressive strategies may be more difficult to carry out based on the power dynamic between the offender and victim—if the face threat came from a boss, one would be less inclined to use an addressive strategy (Brew & Cairns, 2004). Cultural norms can also affect the likelihood of using an addressive strategy (e.g., Brew & Cairns, 2004; Oetzel et al., 2001). For example, Chinese students from collectivist cultures were much less likely to confront the offender compared to Anglo-Australians of individualist cultures (Brew & Cairns, 2004).

As our strategies are derived from extant literature, our first research question aims to understand how these strategies manifest in the context of Facebook. It is important to focus on a specific context because even if the particular strategy is generalizable

across different platforms, the individual features across social media may be very different.

RQ1: How do people use reactive strategies in response to face threats that are encountered on Facebook?

### 2.3. Face threats and relational consequences

While different strategies can help alleviate some consequences of face threats, face saving actions such as content or contact removal can also be face threatening acts in and of themselves. In this case, however, these acts threaten the face of the offender rather than the victim (Bevan et al., 2012; Peña & Brody, 2014). Fox and Moreland (2015) found that friendships are sometimes negatively affected by Facebook use, inciting feelings of anxiety and tension between friends. This anxiety and tension may be instigated by friends not considering each others' face goals when posting photos of each other on the site. This is corroborated by other research has found that friends' posts some people feel uncomfortable untagging themselves from friends' photos on SNSs for fear of offending their friends (Besmer & Lipford, 2009). Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) found that college students had some Facebook photos linked to their profile that could be perceived negatively, but noted that perhaps participants felt preserving their relationship(s) was more important than potentially risking their relationship(s) by removing or untagging themselves in an embarrassing photo. Peña and Brody (2014) found that when encountering face threatening messages, people employed strategies such as hiding the content and removing people from their contact lists, but were more likely to hide content than "unfriend" to avoid relational consequences.

This literature suggests that unlike proactive impression management processes in which individuals select aspects of themselves to display to a larger audience, reactive measures must be carried out in a relationally sensitive manner. Prior studies in the context of workplace and romantic relationships found that face threats can lead to anger and subsequent damage in relationships (see Cupach & Carson, 2002). In addition, research has also found that the manner in which the victim deals with the face threat can also have an effect on the relationship with the offender. Feeney (2004) found that college students who responded to hurtful events caused by their romantic partner in an aggressive or ruminative manner were more likely to experience longer-term problems in their relationship. Feeney (2004) also found that avoidance generally increased relationship problems, but in some situations, could also decrease relationship problems if it served to prevent conflicts from escalating. It is uncertain, however, if these same dynamics apply to non-romantic relationships. We are therefore interested in how different reactive strategies affect the victim's relationship with the offender:

RQ2: Which reactive strategies are associated with negative relational consequences?

### 2.4. Severity, intentionality, and closeness

While it is uncertain how different reactive strategies will correlate with negative relational outcomes, there are several variables identified in prior literature that are important to control for. The first is *face threat severity* (Litt et al., 2014); we would expect that the greater the perceived threat, the more likely the relationship would experience negative outcomes.

H1. Greater face threat severity will be associated with a decrease in relationship closeness with the offender.

*Perceived intention* refers to whether or not people perceive a face threat as deliberate, which prior work has shown can affect how people experience the threat (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Goffman, 1967). When people believe the offender 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 reacting in a relationally sensitive way:

H2. Perceived intention will be associated with a decrease in relationship closeness with the offender.

Thirdly, we should consider how long the victim and offender knew each other, and their closeness prior to the face threat. We can make two competing arguments; on the one hand, it could be that the strength of the relationship prior to the face threat dampens any negative effects, as good friends can stand through thick and thin. On the other hand, one may feel extremely betrayed by having a close friend engage in such face threatening behavior. Negative affect from expectation violations could damage the relationship. Given the two possibilities, we wonder:

RQ3. How is the relationship with the offender prior to the face threat associated with changes in relationship closeness with the offender before and after the face threat?

## 3. Methods

Data for this study was collected as part of a larger study on Facebook and impression management involving a single survey and data set. We recruited Facebook users through paper flyers posted in a large city in the Midwest U.S., an online recruitment system at a large university in the Northeast U.S., and advertisements on Craigslist in order to get a diverse sample in terms of geographic location and occupation. 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, which we refer to here as the face threat; what type of content this face threat was associated with (e.g., comment, photo, Wall post) 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.

### 3.1. Participants

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

### 3.2. Measures

For the face threat reaction measures, participants were given a list of actions (see Table 1) taken in response to the face threat and asked to check all that applied. When examining the open-ended responses about participants' experiences of and reactions to face threats on Facebook to use in examples reported on below, we

**Table 1**  
Reactions to face threats on Facebook.

<b>Disengagement strategies (29%)</b>	
I ignored the post in order to avoid drawing attention to it	29%
I quit or took a break from Facebook	3%
<b>Redirective strategies (34%)</b>	
I commented on the post with humor or a joke to make light of the embarrassing post	25%
I tried to explain or justify my involvement with a comment	7%
I commented on the post with an apology about the post	3%
<b>Subtractive strategies (60%)</b>	
I removed/untagged myself from the post	55%
I asked the offender to take down the post	31%
I reported the post to Facebook	6%
<b>Addressive Strategies</b>	
I told the person who posted the awkward/embarrassing content that it bothered me	50%

Note. Participants could choose more than one reaction.

looked at all cases for each specific reaction and then selected examples that were illustrative of that reaction. For addressive actions, we also asked what method of communication they used to confront the offender.

*Face threat severity* ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = .69$ ) assessed the degree to which participants felt the content made them uncomfortable (Litt et al., 2014). Participants rated 7 items (e.g., “I felt awkward,” “I felt embarrassed,” “I felt uncomfortable”) on a 5-point Likert-type scale anchored by 1 = “strongly disagree” and 5 = “strongly agree” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .80$ ). 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.”

*Closeness to the offender* ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) indicated the strength (5-point scale; 1 = “no relationship at all” and 5 = “very close”) of the relationship between the participant and the offender before the post. *Intentionality* ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ , Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .81$ ) was an average of five items asking about the extent to which the participant perceived the offender 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.” *Relationship duration* ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) indicated how long the participant knew the offender. Response items ranged from “I don’t know this person (2.7%) to less than six months (8.7%), six months to one year (12.7%), one year to less than three years (26.7%), three to less than five years (22%), and five years or more (27.3%).” *Communication time* ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ) was a measure of how often the individual communicated with the offender prior to the face threat. Response items ranged from less than once a month (25%) to daily (27%), with the average being around once a week.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Types of reactive strategies

Our first research question inquired how people use different reactive strategies after a face threat is encountered on Facebook. We found that our participants employed a variety of reactive strategies to help mitigate and alleviate the embarrassment they experienced after a ‘friend’ posted face threatening content about them on the site.

#### 4.1.1. Disengagement

About 30% of participants reported that they used some form of disengagement. One woman, for example, was not pleased with the

content of the face threat she described, but it wasn’t severe enough to take any action:

There is a not so good old picture that my sister posted of me and my brother. My hair is unkempt and my clothes are disheveled. I didn’t do anything on or off Facebook. I just kind of sucked it up and left it alone. I know that the picture isn’t that big of a deal. Everyone has unflattering photos, but I just didn’t like it. (Betsy, 19)

However, there were also examples where the participant did perceive the content to be threatening to their self-image, but refrained from taking any action because doing so may have damaged their image in another respect:

Some high school classmates of mine posted some photos of me bare chest naked in tight shorts with two other male classmates with the same attire. One of the guys in the photo “came out of the closet” proclaiming he was gay during the college years. I felt embarrassed with the photo because some people might misinterpret it. I am not gay but I don’t want to seem homophobic demanding to take down that photo. (Daniel, 41)

#### 4.1.2. Redirective

In our sample, 34% of participants said that they used a redirective strategy, which includes excuses, humor, and justification intended to direct attention away from the negative aspects of the post. In one example, the participant shared an infographic about people who found love in different ways, which generated unexpected attention to something else:

I thought it was an adorable thing to post for Valentine’s Day but given my tumultuous, uncertain relationship with my ex-boyfriend/current best friend, it was especially awkward when he commented on it, alluding to my interest in getting back together with him. I commented in response to his comment on my post, trying to minimize his comment.” (Gwen, 23)

Some participants also used the term “Facebook hacked” in describing face threats, 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 redirective strategies to clarify the situation, since other people would likely think the participant was the one producing the content. For example, one man described how his friends pulled a prank on him and commented on a photo of his friend’s mom while he was in the bathroom. Note that his apology is redirective because it is not directed at the offender, but to the

broader audience (namely his friend) who may have seen and been offended by the post:

The comment just read “MILF.”<sup>2</sup> 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. (Jeremy, 23)

#### 4.1.3. Subtractive

Subtractive strategies were actions intended to remove face threatening content. In our sample, 64% of participants reported using at least one subtractive strategy. Of these participants, 63% used two or more of the subtractive options listed, suggesting that they were trying hard to remove the content quickly. 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 untagged himself because he “did not want to hurt the feelings” of another girl he wanted to date.

While the above example was an action taken with a specific person in mind, here, a young man discusses how an embarrassing photo led to his usage of a couple subtractive strategies to avoid anyone seeing the photo:

There have been a number of times when I was tagged in embarrassing or unflattering photos. One extreme situation occurred during my junior year of high school when I joined the high school 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. (Peter, 20)

#### 4.1.4. Addressive

In light of sensitivity around the content, the individual may choose to address the offender directly to express dissatisfaction or otherwise say how they feel, without explicitly requesting a specific response. “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,” Brendan (36) recalled.

Half (50%) of participants told the offender that they were bothered by the face threat. Those who did tell the offender used a variety of communication methods. Most people chose to confront their offender in person (27%), text message (25%), or by private Facebook message/chat (23%). A few individuals made a phone call (10%), commented on the post (7%), or communicated through online chat outside of Facebook (3%) or email (1%).

In the following example, one woman’s hairstylist posted pictures of her on Facebook without her consent:

Before he put the weave in and right after we started having a few drinks and taking pics, just chilling ... then I go on Facebook like 3 days later and I have a bunch of notifications from people I know and some I don’t, commenting on a photo that I was tagged in ... I contacted the person and basically asked them why they would put up the photos without me clearing it with them. (Tamra, 29)

The addressive strategy, while in reaction to an existing face threat, could also serve to prevent future face threats. One woman whose children had access to her Facebook account, had to talk to

them after an embarrassing situation:

My daughter shared that I was 50 years old, and changed my profile picture. I really did not care that people knew it was my birthday ... I just did not want that kind of attention. I talked to my children about the fact that they had my password and login to help me manage my Facebook, NOT to change it without my permission. (Beverly, 50)

In some cases, people who used an addressive strategy to have the post removed did not achieve the desired outcome. Seventeen participants who told the offender how uncomfortable they felt reported that the content was still on Facebook because the offender refused to remove it; three individuals said they unfriended the offender. As one young man recalled:

I was out with a friend of mine drinking, and there was a really hot girl 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. (Cliff, 20)

## 4.2. Relational consequences

Our second research question was concerned with how reactions to face threats affect the relationship between the offender and victim. The open-ended responses revealed that participants were aware that certain strategies, such as addressive strategies, could create tension between themselves and the offender. In fact, some of the reasons that participants gave for *not* talking about the content with the offender were not wanting to “make a big deal,” “start unnecessary conflict,” “create drama,” or “hurt the feelings” of the offender.

Removal of content to please a certain audience sometimes came at the expense of the participant’s relationship with the offender. 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, etc. (Casey, 22)

Some offenders were also displeased because they felt that the content was their own digital property. A woman who asked her friend to untag her from an unflattering swimsuit photo described how the request upset her friend. “She [the offender] was irritated with me because they were her pictures, she thought they were fine,” the participant said.

To examine what factors were statistically predictive of negative relational consequences, we ran an Ordinary Least Squares regression with negative relational consequence as the dependent variable and the four reactive strategies as independent variables (Table 2). Control variables included face threat severity,

<sup>2</sup> According to [UrbanDictionary.com](http://UrbanDictionary.com), MILF is an acronym for “Mother I’d Like (to) Fuck”.

**Table 2**  
OLS regression explaining negative relationship consequence ( $N = 122$ ).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	$\beta$	Sig.	$\beta$	Sig.	$\beta$	Sig.
Gender	.04	.67	.03	.73	.03	.73
Age	.00	.98	-.02	.86	-.04	.63
Face threat severity	.20*	.03	.17*	.04	.16	.06
Intentionality	.31**	.001	.35***	.00	.29	.002
<i>Relationship factors</i>						
Relationship duration			-.06	.50	-.50	.58
Communication frequency			-.43***	.00	-.42***	.000
Prior closeness			.46***	.00	.41	.000
<i>Strategies</i>						
Disengagement strategy					.09	.27
Redirective strategy					.24**	.003
Subtractive strategy					.22*	.02
Addressive strategy					-.04	.68
Adjusted $R^2$	.13		.25		.31	

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . Does not include people who had no prior relationship with offender.

intentionality, the relation between victim and offender prior to the face threat, gender, and age.

We used a stepwise regression to see how different content and relationship factors contributed to the model. The first model included demographic variables of gender and age, face threat severity, and ill intentionality. The model was significant  $F(4, 118) = 5.40$ ,  $p < .001$  adjusted  $R^2 = .13$ , showing that the higher the perceived face threat severity, the more likely the relationship would deteriorate. Also, if the individual thought that the offender had ill intentions, the relationship was more likely to diminish in closeness.

The second model added factors about the relationship between victim and offender prior to the face threat. The added factors significantly changed the model at a  $p < .001$  level,  $F(7, 115) = 6.92$ ,  $p < .001$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .25$ . Higher frequency of communication decreased likelihood of a worsening relationship, but how long the victim knew the offender (relationship duration) had no statistical significance. Those who were very close to the offender prior to the face threat were more likely to experience negative relationship consequences. Face threat severity and intentionality were still statistically significant coefficients.

The final model added the different strategies that the victim used. The added variables significantly improved the model at a  $p < .05$  level,  $F(11, 111) = 5.93$ ,  $p < .001$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .31$ . Engaging in a subtractive strategy and redirective strategy were both associated with decline in relationship closeness. Using an addressive or disengagement strategy did not have any statistically significant association with change in relationship closeness. Face threat severity was no longer statistically significant, but intentionality was still significantly related to relationship change.

## 5. Discussion

We began this study with questions about how people react to other-generated face threatening content on Facebook. Answers to these questions have implications both for our theoretical understanding of face threat online and for the design of future social network and interaction technologies. Our results offer several contributions.

### 5.1. Strategy choice & SNS affordances

Our results suggest that SNS users' awareness of these sites' unique affordances has an effect on how face threatening a post is

perceived, as well as affect what kinds of strategies they use to try and save their face on and off the site. The choice of a subtractive strategy as being the most prevalent of all strategies also suggests that saving face online is similar, but still distinct, from how people attempt to save face offline. This is likely a result of Facebook's unique affordances such as scalability and persistence. For example, Tamra, whose hairstylist posted unflattering photos of her, described how she felt particularly embarrassed when she went onto Facebook and had "a bunch of notifications from people I know and some I don't, commenting on a photo that I was tagged in". The explicit mention of notifications suggests she felt her face was threatened not just because others had seen the unflattering photo but particularly because several people she did and did not know had seen the photo. It was the heightened visibility of the photo, made possible by Facebook's affordances, which incited her embarrassment and urged her to take an addressive strategy with the poster.

In the case of Daniel, who felt embarrassed that people would misinterpret a photo as indicative of him being homophobic, this suggests that he was concerned that photo would be taken out of context, made possible by the persistence feature which is enabled by Facebook's affordances, that caused him to feel face threatened. What's more, this participant refrained from using any reactive strategies worried that doing so might also result in face loss. In summary, our findings suggest that users are considerate of how Facebook's affordances uniquely contribute to their experience of face threat, and their use of reactive strategies, on and off the site. However, whether or not their consideration leads to desired impression management results is unclear. For example, DeAndrea (2012) found that responding to content posted by others signals awareness of the content, making third party observers believe that the owner of the website intended to share the content. This suggests that people who use redirective strategies need to be careful about how they respond to face threatening content. Future research should further examine how users' awareness of Facebook's affordances influences how they attempt to manage and preserve their own and others' faces on the site.

### 5.2. Managing face versus managing relationships

We found that there is tension between managing their relationship with the offender and managing impressions to avoid consequences and reputation damage more broadly. Participants reported feeling less close to those who had posted embarrassing content about them on the site, particularly when they also reported being close to the poster. This is consistent with previous literature that posits people expect their closer friends to preserve their face in public contexts considering closer friends likely know what kinds of topics to avoid in order to preserve each other's faces (Cupach & Metts, 1994). This study's results suggest these expectations can be extended to sites such as Facebook where friends often interact in a very public space. However, participants who proceeded to use addressive strategies such as asking the content to be taken down and/or asking the poster to refrain from posting similar content in the future helped participants preserve their relationships and enlist the poster to help them meet their face goals on the site. This latter findings suggests it is important for users to reach out to their contacts when face threats occur on these sites to help them repair their face, inform others' what their face needs are, and ensure their relationship remains intact. Give that face-work is socially collaborative in contexts such as Facebook, future research should delve further into how users enlist the help of their contacts to ensure their face remains intact (and in ideal shape) on SNSs.

### 5.3. Who owns the content?

We also saw that blurred notions of intellectual property came into play; the victims felt entitled to request that content be removed because they were in it, but the offender wanted control because they perceived it to be their own property. Even when the victim asked the offender to remove the face threatening content, there were cases where the offender claimed they had the “right” to post content as they saw fit, resulting in continued embarrassment for some participants. This speaks to the difficulty some users have with effectively managing impressions 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? While there are technical ways of doing so by reporting the content to Facebook, this was a rare practice among our sample. In this way, self-presentation on Facebook can be a collective act in which there are many participants who may not have the same goals and expectations.

The expectation that a contact would preserve and uphold their positive face in public (Goffman, 1959), for example, should extend to Facebook, but people may differ in their views of what constitutes a face threat. This is particularly true on Facebook where offenders may not have a clear sense of the true audience. The notion of content “rights,” moreover, implies that users may have different norms and expectations that govern their public interactions on a SNSs site. Some users may be more concerned, for example, with the extent to which the content they post 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 if it is applied to other online and offline environments. However, it is possible that Facebook users post according to how they want to be perceived first and then potentially consider how their Facebook contacts want to be perceived. Future research can further delve into how users may forsake their interpersonal relationship goals for their personal identity or face goals on sites like Facebook, potentially risking their relationships for the sake of gaining more positive impressions. In some ways, this echoes questions about expectations for information usage in different contexts described in Nissenbaum’s (2010) influential work on privacy.

### 5.4. Limitations

There are several limitations to consider in interpreting these results. While we recruited Facebook users broadly, some of the recruitment locations biased respondents towards younger adults. As SNS usage norms may vary by age, results should be interpreted within the boundaries of our sample. Also, because the survey took place online and was asking about social media use, our sample is most likely biased toward people who are comfortable using the Internet. Participants also described only a single incident, confining our understanding of their actions to a specific situation and possibly biasing responses toward the most salient episodes. Examining strategies across several different face threatening scenarios may provide a more holistic view of how people react.

In addition, the reactive strategies that we documented in this study may stem from a deeper need to control others’ behaviors that affect an individual’s face. Future research could conceptualize the act of monitoring, editing, and deliberating content on SNSs as “curative” behaviors. While content on SNSs is persistent, it can also be retrospectively altered, which makes it distinct from ephemeral, but unchangeable face-to-face situations. This concept of “curation” as being a unique form of impression management may help us understand how specific features of SNSs can facilitate different impression management behaviors.

Another limitation is that the affordances of SNSs such as Facebook are constantly evolving and while the features described by participants are still in place as of the time of writing, their existence in the future is unclear. The results as they pertain to specific features of Facebook may not be generalizable to other social network sites or even to future versions of Facebook. Thus it is important to understand the theoretical mechanisms of the four strategies in applying the results to other domains; untagging oneself from a photo may be a feature unique to Facebook, but the strategy of content removal can be interpreted more universally.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we examined people’s use of four reactive strategies in response to other-generated face threats on the SNS Facebook. Victims of face threats on Facebook employed a range of different strategies, but some came at the expense of worsening their relationship with the offender.

While scholars have long focused on how individuals manage their own impressions via F2F contexts, our study highlights that identity construction is a complex, collaborative process generally and on SNSs more specifically. Users can be hard pressed to preserve both their face and their relationships when their “friends” post face threatening content about them on these sites. Given the relative newness of these communication technologies, it is hard to determine whether users will have to adapt to these sites’ affordances or if these sites will adapt to users’ face and relational needs. Even if the sites have some features that help users safe face, they are still inadequate. As Mindy put it: “Although I untagged myself, I know that other people can still see [the photo].”

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