

## **COVERING YOUR FACE ON FACEBOOK**

### *Managing identity through untagging and deletion*

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**Abstract.** This paper describes the ways in which Facebook users manage their online identities through untagging and deleting photos to make sure images are interpreted in a desirable way. Using data collected from an online survey and thirty in-depth interviews with American adult Facebook users, the authors argue that identity management can best be understood as the combination of constructive and destructive practices through which users control not only their self-presentation (projection), but also the statements others make about them (suppression).

### **1. Facebook Images and Impression Management**

Facebook images, including profile pictures and photo albums, are one means through which users present a favorable image of themselves to other users. Indeed, existing research on the use of photographs on social networking sites demonstrates that users are deliberate about the choices they make when presenting themselves online (e.g., Siibak, 2009; Author, 2008; Ellison, 2006). As Siibak (2009) argues, the posted images most often convey an "ideal self" (the self one would like to be) or the "ought self" (the self one believes one should be in order to be accepted by other users). These findings corroborate Goffman's (1959) claim that people strategically "perform" identities that they believe others will approve.

Goffman (1959) argues that our self-presentations are made up of those impressions we "give" through explicit verbal communication (like that which might be offered on Facebook user's "Info" page) and implicit expressions "given off" through visual appearance. Facebook profile images can be seen as a form of "implicit" identity construction (Zhao et. al, 2008) in which users display personal characteristics through images. Zhao et. al.'s (2008) content analysis of Facebook accounts shows that users rely heavily on implicit modes of self-presentation in this venue, with an average of 88.4 photos per account.

Although existing research shows that users will emphasize positive images of themselves online, the nonymous nature of networking sites like Facebook limits the extent to which users can fabricate identity (Zhao et. al. 2008; Ellison et. al., 2007; Zarghooni, 2007). Studies of online dating sites show that users reconcile the tension between their need to portray an accurate as well as a desirable vision of themselves by

constructing an idealized or “hoped for” self-presentation (Ellison et. al., 2006; Yurchisin et. al., 2005).

While Goffman’s theory of impression management is often used by those who study Facebook, Zarghooni (2007) argues that the online environment necessitates certain revisions to our understanding of how impression management is deployed since Facebook technology opens up new possibilities for self-presentation. For example, Reese et. al. (2007) argue that Facebook offers the opportunity to display new types of image-enhancing information such as the size of one’s social network.

Another way that online networks may impact impression management is through the integration of social groups that were traditionally separated by space and time. Since impression management stems from a desire for approval, the self-presentation strategies we employ are dependent on our understanding of the social values of the group we hope to impress. We often try on different persona in order to test whether they will be accepted by others. Attempts to impress several different groups by using divergent self-presentation strategies (Zarghooni, 2007), will be thwarted unless we can isolate one group from the other and avoid cross-pollination. Online environments complicate the process of separating different audiences from each other, since images are often posted to a broad audience of “friends” that includes schoolmates, colleagues, family, and employers. On the other hand, Facebook’s privacy settings allow a certain level of control over who sees what, although users are more aware than they are in real life that they are being blocked from viewing some presentations.

While efforts to manage self-presentation may have a significant impact on one’s overall reputation, much of our image is shaped by what others communicate about us in various social situations (Craik, 2009). As Mazer et. al (2007) point out, while a Facebook user may meticulously manage their self-presentation through text and images they post themselves, other users may post images or wall messages that undermine or destroy the image the user has attempted to cultivate. In support of this idea, Walther et. al. (2008) find that the attractiveness of Facebook users is impacted by the attractiveness of their friend’s photos and the valence of the postings on their wall.

In contrast to face-to-face interaction, however, Facebook offers new impression management tools that enable users to not only project a desirable image, but to suppress the images that others circulate about them. Untagging and deleting allow Facebook users to limit the circulation of undesirable messages about themselves. In order to explore the use of these impression management tools, this paper draws on examples from two data sources: (1) unpublished data from a question on an online survey one of the authors conducted in 2008<sup>1</sup> (author name, 2008) and (2) thirty in-depth interviews with American Facebook users in three age groups (18-25, 26-31 and 31+). The interview guide is attached as an appendix. Our goal in this paper is to describe different types of suppression activities and speculate on how these activities point toward a modification of impression management theory in social networking environments.

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<sup>1</sup> The question asked: “Have you ever removed a “tag” identifying you on a photograph posted by another Facebook user? If yes, why did you remove the tag?”

## 2. Suppression of images friends post on Facebook

This discussion centers on two main tools that Facebook provides for suppressing photographic images, untagging and deleting. When users post images on their Facebook page, they have the option to “tag” the photo by placing the cursor over a portion of the image, causing a list of their Facebook friends to appear. The user can then choose the name of a friend, thus labeling a person in the photograph. Users can only tag people who are part of their Facebook friend network. The notification settings on the site allow users to set up their account so that they receive email alerts, wall postings and news feed alerts when someone else has tagged a photograph of them. In addition, the photo posted by another user will appear in the “view photos of me” section of the user’s profile.

Since users can tag themselves and others in photographs that have been posted by others, the tagging function is often used as a projection tool in impression management. The users in this study report that they will tag themselves in other people’s photos for many of the same reasons that they report posting particular images of themselves, such as thinking they look attractive in a photo or liking the image a photo portrayed of their personality. Tagging yourself in an image posted by another user can seem like a particularly authentic form of projection. If the photograph is posted by another, the visual claim being made about a user seems to stem not from the user’s self-interest, but from an unbiased viewer of natural behavior. The fact that the site does not record who has added a tag to a photo allows users to project an image of themselves without drawing attention to their efforts at impression management.

While tagging may be used as a tool of projection, “untagging” may be used as a tool of suppression. Once users know that others have tagged them in a photo, they have the option to “untag” the photo, removing their name from the posting. The photograph will still appear in the original album of the person who originally posted the image, but the name label will no longer appear in association with the image and the photograph will no longer be included in the photos of me section of the user’s profile. Thus, by untagging a photo, a user does not completely eliminate an image from Facebook, but significantly reduces the number of people who will connect the image with the untagged user.

However, to ensure that other users will not see a particular image on Facebook, the image needs to be deleted from the site. While users can tag their posted photos as well as images posted by others, the site only allows users to delete photos that they have posted themselves. This means that users need to ask another user to remove their photographs if they wish completely suppress the image. While untagging can serve as a stealth form of suppression, deletion requires negotiation with another user and, thus an open acknowledgment of the suppression strategy.

### 2.1. UNTAGGING

The survey data shows that of the 423 users who answered the question about untagging, 55.6% have removed a tag from a photograph posted by another user. The reported use of untagging varied by both gender and age. While 61.6% of female respondents

reported having untagged a photo that another user had posted, only 42.3% of the male respondents reported using untagging ( $\chi^2 = 13.2$ ,  $p=.000$ ). Younger users were more likely than older users to report that they had untagged a photo posted by another user, with 66.4% of 18 to 21-year-olds, 57.4% of 22 to 30-year-olds, and 14.5% of those 31 years and older answering yes to this question ( $\chi^2 = 53.1$ ,  $p=.000$ ). This age data corroborates reports we gathered in the in-depth interviews that older users were not even aware of the option to untag a photo on Facebook.

Sometimes people will untag a photo in order to correct misidentification:

*The photo was not actually of me. The person posting had falsely identified another person as me because we looked similar.*

In other instances, users will untag duplicates of similar photographs, as when a large group of friends is at an amusement park and everyone gets a picture of the group in front of the same attraction. When all of the friends then post virtually the same photographs, users will report that the duplication is “pointless” and untag all but one of the images. Likewise, users will sometimes remove a tag if the photograph does not show a recognizable image of them:

*Sometimes people tag me and I untag myself. If it's the back of my head or like, it will be from a top view and you only see the side of my face. That's pointless.*

*I was barely visible in the picture (so I didn't see any point in my being tagged).*

Finally, the tagging function of Facebook is sometimes used to play practical jokes and users may choose to remove those tags, as articulated by this survey respondent:

*Because it wasn't me. My friend was trying to play a joke on me by tagging me as a man with eyes on the side of his head like an iguana.*

However, using untagging to correct mistakes is not a particularly compelling example of impression management. More interesting are the examples of users untagging photos based on their evaluation of the photo content and how other viewers may respond to that content. In these instances, users cite their motivation as being to (1) suppress an unattractive physical depiction, (2) avoid misrepresentation, (3) hide their actions from disapproval or (4) dissociate from a particular social group. Each of these motivations is described below.

### *2.1.1. Physically Unattractive Images*

Many users reported that they would untag a photo because they didn't like how they looked physically. Many explanations were vague references to not “looking good” and many were specific references to looking “fat”. The use of suppression to privilege attractiveness is not surprising in light of the evidence that ideal images of attractiveness also drive projection choices users make in posting profile images (e.g. Siibak, 2009; Author, 2008). In addition, the survey data showed that 65.2% of women as opposed to only 34.0% of men cited their physical appearance as a reason for untagging a photo ( $\chi^2 = 15.7$ ,  $p=.000$ ), again reflecting previous research showing that female projection practices are more likely to be driven by concerns with appearing attractive (e.g. Siibak,

2009; Author, 2008). This was the only reason for untagging that showed a difference according to gender.

### 2.1.2. *Misrepresentation*

Some users reported untagging a photo because they felt the photo told an untrue story about their character. Underlying these explanations is an understanding that photographs carry multiple interpretations, yet also have evidentiary force. So, for examples, these users explain their untagging choices in terms of why the image misrepresents who they “really” are:

*Because it had me by alcohol and I do not drink, so I did not want people to get the wrong impression.*

*Because it [the photo] wasn't a good depiction of who I was. It made me look drunk and I wasn't.*

*[My] friend posted a picture of me along with 15 other people trying to fit in one hot tub. The situation had not been inappropriate, but the picture made it look like it had been.*

Notice that in these explanations, the users see their actions themselves as being unproblematic. Instead, they find the photographs to be faulty. Thus, suppressing these images seems to be interpreted as an instance of correcting misinformation rather than hiding information or deceiving other users.

Sometimes these acts of suppression are aimed at particular viewers whom the user knows will misinterpret the photograph. For example, one male user told a story about his girlfriend getting angry about a photograph in which he and a group of other girls had fallen in a pile on the floor. When the image was posted on Facebook, his girlfriend interpreted the image as being some sort of sexual scene. The male user says he learned from that episode to untag photos of things that “look more incriminating” than they are, because it is “just going to cause unneeded conflict.”

### 2.1.3. *Hiding Actions from Disapproval*

Guernsey (2008) reports in a *New York Times* article that college users engage in a Sunday “ritual” in which they untag the partying photographs posted from the night before. Our data supports her claim that users suppress accurate depictions (as opposed to misrepresentations) that they do not want others to see:

*I had a tagged picture in which I was holding an alcoholic beverage. I didn't want those pictures to be overly public.*

Notice that this user is not denying that he drinks (as in the misrepresentation examples), but he is suppressing the photo because he thinks some others may disapprove of the fact that he does drink. Often users have very specific audiences in mind when they suppress part of their identity. Many young users talk about untagging photos so that potential employers, professors or parents can not see them. On the other hand, professors tend to suppress the same types of images from their students:

*I thought I looked silly and didn't want other people to see the photo. Now that I teach I want to make sure that none of my students see ridiculous photos of me.*

*I am a grad student and have students as "friends" on my Facebook account. Some things they just don't need to see - like me with a giant beer in my hands celebrating Oktoberfest.*

In general, it seems that suppression is often aimed at managing one's impression to people of a different age or social standing. We have gathered few examples of users suppressing images specifically from peers, except from romantic partners in an effort to avoid jealousy, as in the example above.

One final note is that usually users are basing their evaluations of what content will provoke disapproval on prior experience. The boyfriend in the example above, for instance, makes suppression choices based on prior conflicts with his girlfriend. However, sometimes the rules of disapproval are more formally codified, as in the example below in which an athlete refers to an explicit college policy about what athletes are allowed to post on Facebook:

*Because there was alcohol in the background - can not have any alcohol, or red cups, in pictures if you are an athlete.*

In this case, the social sanctions for posting an image that invokes disapproval are clear: suspension from the sports team. In other instances, users may expect a fight with a romantic partner or the loss of a job opportunity if they do not suppress inappropriate images.

#### *2.1.4. Dissociation from Social Group*

A fourth reason that users cite for suppressing images is to disassociate themselves with people whom they once had a friendship or some other social connection:

*There were certain people I no longer wished to be affiliated with at one point.*

*[My] ex-girlfriend tagged an awkward photo of homecoming in high school on my profile - something my current girlfriend could see.*

In both of these cases, users were worried that their reputation would be damaged by depicting an association with certain individuals. This emphasizes the point that impression management is not only about controlling the dissemination of who you are, but also who you know.

Finally, there is some evidence, with younger users at least, that untagging is a Facebook social norm:

*[When asked if he untags photos of himself] No, but I've really thought about it.*

*No I haven't [untagged myself]. I should have but haven't.*

*I've also untagged pictures with alcohol in them, though I haven't done that for a while, maybe I should do that right now...*

In all of these quotes, there is an implication that untagging is an acceptable, even desirable thing to do. While suppression could be seen as a deceptive activity, it doesn't seem to be interpreted that way by most Facebook users.

## 2.2. DELETION

As discussed above, untagging offers somewhat limited suppression of images, since the photographs are still posted on Facebook and other users may chance upon an undesirable depiction. In some instances, this chance seems too great and users desire for the photo to be completely deleted from the site. As mentioned above, users can only delete images they have posted themselves and, therefore, must ask their friends to delete undesirable images on their pages. Only a few participants mentioned having asked a friend to delete a photograph, as in this example:

*If I look fat or it's a bad angle I'll untag it. There have been a few pictures where I'm drunk that I had my friends remove the picture completely.*

It is not clear from the data collected how often deletion requests are made between friends or whether such requests are awkward to make. In future data collection efforts we will need to ask more specific questions about deletion practices in order to better understand these suppression practices.

## 3. Suppression of your own projection

While the section above addressed user efforts to suppress the visual statements others make of them, sometimes suppression involves undoing a user's prior act of projection by untagging or deleting an image he or she previously posted. There are several reasons why users might rethink their earlier self-presentation.

First, comments made by others may cause a user to take down a profile image. For example, one interviewee talks about how her dad will express his displeasure over her profile image:

*He [dad] actually will be very simple and just put on my wall 'Let's fix this.'*

In one instance this user's father disapproved of her profile image because it looked too tough and like she "was up to no good." Other times he has urged her to take down images with alcohol. The user reported that she does not necessarily delete the images from her page completely, but she will take them down as her profile image.

The one time the same user completely deleted a profile image from her page is described in the passage below:

*It was a picture that a friend of mine had tagged me in and it was at a party. I think it was a girlfriend of mine's 22nd birthday or something and I had a cup in my hand, a red solo cup and the more I thought about it and once I started doing interviews and stuff I was like "I don't really know if that's really what I want them to see when they open up my profile. It's like 'Hi, I'm an alcoholic, please hire me.'"*

Here we see that a shifting understanding of audience prompted the user to delete a photograph she had previously captured from her friend's page and posted as her profile image. This is a common story for young users as they reach the end of college and desire the approval of a different social group.

While many users will simply untag a photograph if they want to disassociate with former friends or romantic partners, some relationships are severed more severely by deleting photos from a profile. For example:

*[I deleted the photo]...because I didn't want him [ex-boyfriend] to think I was stuck on him.*

*I went there [the location in the photo] with my girlfriend at the time...and those pictures were taken out [deleted]...Main reason was because it took a while for her to get over it...so I kind of severed it [the relationship] so she wouldn't get any ideas.*

In both of these examples, the users want to send a very clear message to their former romantic partners that the relationship is over. What is interesting about how they describe their motivations is that they seem to frame their decisions as direct messages to their ex-partners, not as public statements about their dissociation from their past relationships. If this is the case, this type of deletion may not fall under the umbrella of impression management through suppression. However, more data is needed before a sound conclusion can be reached.

While untagging and deletion are tools that Facebook users may employ to suppress content from *all* other users, privacy settings can be used to block categories of users (by setting it to "friends only" or "only me") or even particular users from seeing photographic content (by entering the names of specific people you do not want to see your photographs). For example, Guernsey (2008) relates that one woman excluded the "supervisor from her internship who 'friended' her but is many years her senior" from viewing her photos (p. 2). Utz and Kramer (2009) have recently demonstrated in their study of two European SNS, Hyves and StudiVZ, that users may be beginning to use the privacy controls on social networking sites more aggressively than previous studies suggested. Often, this type of self-suppression happens at the time of the projection, rather than as an after-thought as in the examples above.

Our interview participants would sometimes spontaneously explained their projection choices by first clarifying their privacy settings in order to make clear to whom they were projecting a particular image. However, other users, when asked about their privacy settings either did not remember and had to check, or asked the researcher to show them how privacy levels could be set (the latter was mostly older users). In addition to restricting access to the photographs that they post themselves, Facebook users have the ability to restrict access to tagged photographs posted by others. While we did not collect data specifically about privacy settings for tagged photos, this seems like an obvious topic for future research in order to help us understand the differences between self-suppression and the suppression of others.

#### 4. A culture of suppression

When we look at the suppression activities of Facebook users in conjunction with what we already know about projection practices from previous research, a culture of impression management begins to emerge. While self-presentation is part of all human interaction, social networking sites codify and encourage deliberate impression management in a way that everyday interactions do not. The very structure of a Facebook page encourages an idealized and normative vision of self that is wrapped in a colorful display of popularity and consumerism.

However, at the same time, emerging social norms about Facebook usage also reveal a value system that respects the individual's right to their own personal identity and the right to manage it as they please. Multiple users report that they or their friends have stopped tagging other people in the photos they post, opting instead to send out a message that says "I have put up a new album, take a look and tag yourself if you choose." While suppression could be negatively portrayed as the deliberate denial of the "truth," Facebook users seem to have a more nuanced understanding of the nature and importance of truth as it relates to identity.

More research is needed, however, in order to better understand the social norms in the Facebook environment. For example, we need data to help us understand the reactions of users if someone untags or asks them to delete a photo they have posted. One survey respondent wrote:

*I am actually a firm believer in NOT untagging photos, but I have untagged one in my life. It was an embarrassing photo because I was taking pictures on my Mac while on the toilet, and one of my friends made a comment saying "hey, you're in your bathroom right now!" and for some reason I did not want people to know that. Almost all of my friends untag unflattering pictures of them, and I yell at them. I say, "that's how you looked once, it got documented, get over it." Half the time, it's all in their head that they look bad.*

This is the only evidence we collected that there might be a backlash for untagging a photograph, however, we did not specifically ask about how people feel when others untag, so conclusions about the prevalence of this attitude would be premature. The quote provides an interesting example in that the user admits to breaking her own rule in certain circumstances, suggesting that it might be productive to further explore whether any social stigma exists for users who untag or delete "too much" or who have excessively strict privacy settings.

It would also be interesting to explore whether users have different standards for images that they would not post themselves (projection) versus images they would untag or ask a friend to take down (suppression). As opposed to avoidance of projection, suppression practices involve a degree of negotiation with others and a semi-public admission of evidence removal, since users can rarely untag or request deletion of images before anyone has seen them. It is possible that the knowledge that others will be aware of a user's suppression may shift the boundaries of what gets suppressed versus what is simply not projected.

Understanding how identity is defined and managed on social networking sites is central to understanding the culture negotiated by users of these sites. We need to start

looking at impression management not only as a set of projection choices, but also a system of suppression of self and others. A key question should be how users understand their own right and ability to shape not only their own identity, but the identity of others online.

### Acknowledgements

This research project was funded by a Faculty Research Grant from Bridgewater College, Bridgewater, VA, USA.

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### Appendix – Interview Guide

*Go over the consent form with the participant and ask them to sign it.  
Ask the participant to open their Facebook profile page.*

1. Tell me about this profile image.
  - a. What do you personally think about when you look at this photo?
2. How long have you had it up?
3. What prompted you to choose this image?
4. How do you think other people on Facebook react to this image?
  - a. Has anyone commented on the image?
5. In general, what makes a “good” profile image?
  - a. Are there types of profile images that you dislike?
6. What things do you think about when choosing a profile image?
  - a. Do you imagine anyone in particular looking at the images you choose?

*Ask the participant to open their profile album (if they haven't already in response to one of the earlier questions). Write the number of images they have in that album on the questionnaire.*

7. Let's just look through some of these and maybe you could tell me why you chose each of these images or what you think is interesting about some of them.
8. Do you ever look at your profile album – if so how often and why?
9. Have you ever deleted an image from your profile album – if so, why?
10. Have you changed your approach to posting profile images over time?

*Ask the participant to go to the part of the page where their photo albums are posted. Write the number of albums they have posted on the questionnaire.  
If they do not have any albums, ask them why they do not have albums and whether they have ever had any albums that they deleted. Then, skip to question # 21b.*

11. Why do you have these albums?

12. What may occur in your life to make you decide you want to make a Facebook album?
  - a. How do you decide what photos are grouped together in an album?
  - b. Does each album have similar content or does it vary?
  - c. Approximately how many photos does each album contain?
13. What are the privacy settings on your photo album(s) (only friends, everyone, friends of friends)? Why?
14. How long will you keep an album up on facebook? Why?
15. Have you ever deleted an album or certain pictures within an album?
  - a. What caused you to do this?
16. What kind of editing do you do to your photos in an album(s) (cropping, color change, adding text, etc.)?
  - a. How often do you edit photos?
  - b. Why do you edit photos?
17. How do you pick which photo you want as your “album cover”?
18. How do you come up with a title for your album(s)?
19. How do you write captions for your photos?
  - a. What are you trying to do with the writing (inform, be funny, etc.)?
20. Do you “tag” people in your album(s)?
  - a. How often?
  - b. Do you ever request to be tagged in someone else’s photo album? Why?
  - c. Do you ever “untag” yourself from someone else’s photo album? Why?
21. Do you ever you leave a comment on someone else’s photo album(s)?
  - a. Under what circumstances?