# Impression Management on Facebook and Twitter: Where Are People More Likely to Share Positivity or Negativity with Their Audiences?

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Social media allows for people to present themselves to others however they choose. This article examines the impression management people engage in on Facebook and Twitter, specifically. Previous studies and personally conducted surveys and interviews administered within a first-year university student population were analyzed. Based on the results, this article argues that impression management is a true phenomenon and that each website creates its own type of user interactions based on various factors. This study further contributes to our knowledge of impression management in the online world and the idea that what people share with their online audience does not always accurately reflect their true selves.

Digital technology is unavoidable in much of today's world, and it is shaping how people interact with literacy. In this digital age people read the daily news online, use tablets to read books instead of paperbacks, send text messages instead of handwritten letters, and spend a lot of their reading time on social media sites. There has been strong curiosity about literacy and social media, in particular, especially as social media becomes increasingly prevalent. According to *The New York Times*, "Now that first impressions are often made in cyberspace, not face-to-face, people are not only strategizing about how to virtually convey who they are, but also grappling with how to craft an e-version of themselves that appeals to multiple audiences"(Rosenbloom). With so many people engaging in social media, its users are left with various audiences to interact with, which may influence how they present themselves.

Numerous researchers have found that typically users do, in fact, manage their impressions on social media. According to communication experts Younbo Jung, Hayeon Song, and Peter Vorderer, impression management, or self-presentation, can be defined as managing how one presents his or herself to others in a desirable way, due to social evaluation and how the impression that others have influence one's social behavior (1627). This idea of impression management on social media sites has been the topic of many in-depth studies, as well as the broader topic behind my own personal research. In looking at why people blog and read others' blogs in the first place, Jung, Song, and Vorderer discovered that impression management was one of two main psychological causes, and that "personal blogs have successfully provided users with a virtual space where they strategically construct their desired identities" (1632), which is applicable to various other types of social media as well.

This idea of strategically constructing desired identities can also be found in people's postings on Twitter, for example. Researchers Olivier Toubia and Andrew T. Stephen found that image-related utility, which assumes that users are motivated by others' perceptions and is influenced by the number of "followers," was the larger factor in peoples' postings, meaning people who contribute to Twitter often times do so due to image-related causes (368–369). When looking at social media

in general terms, communication researchers also found similar evidence of impression management. According to Jian Raymond Rui and Michael A. Stefanone, people who based their self-esteem on how they are judged on social media tactically managed their wall posts and tagged photos (1286). Through studies such as these, it is evident that impression-management exists and is even a common behavior.

It is also apparent that people manage their impressions to appear in a "positive" light at times. In an examination of self-presentation on Facebook, researchers Bazarova, Taft, Choi, and Cosley discovered that in most of the study's participants, status updates contained less negative emotion words than did wall posts and private messages, and that when concern with self-presentation increased, so did the use of positive emotion words in statuses (133). Status updates are shared with the entire audience, so people made fewer negative posts, but were more negative—possibly more honest in their thoughts—when they were able to choose their audience, illustrating that people are careful regarding what they share with their audience as a whole.

Similarly, Baiyun Chen and Justin Marcus discovered that culture and personality play a role in impression management as well. In their study of college students' self-presentation on Facebook, members of collectivist cultures posted more to please their audiences than those of individualist cultures, and extroverts shared more about themselves than introverts (2091). While Chen and Marcus focused on collectivist and individualistic cultures, Natalie Pennington, a graduate student at Kansas State University, looked at the digital native culture. She analyzed the managing and posting of images, finding that her participants each had conflicting online identities. She even concluded that these conflicting identities, likely due to posting for various audiences, depict the Digital Native generation as a "no consequences" generation, caring more about appearances than other factors.

Researchers have been able to make strong observations about impression management and how it is influenced by various factors, but there is still much to be discovered in this field. Despite these robust observations, few researchers have compared impression management on Facebook and Twitter directly, especially at the college level. This led me to my own research questions: Are people, particularly first-year students attending my university, more likely to share positive or negative life events on particular social media sites, particularly when comparing Facebook and Twitter? If so, is it due to audience? I expected to find that people would be more comfortable posting freely on Twitter, due to a more casual audience type than on Facebook. I discovered that not only was impression management evident, but Twitter and Facebook each have their own unique audience types, and how people post on each site in regard to positivity and negativity is different.

## Methods

To address my research questions, I chose to use surveys and personal interviews, which I administered within the first-year student population at my university. In accordance with University of Central Florida's policy for research conducted in first-year writing classes, survey respondents and interviewees were informed of the scope of my project and signed informed consent forms. I posted my survey of eight questions to an official Facebook group comprised of close to six thousand first-year students. I used this method because while it only reached those that were members of this group, the actual participants would be randomly reached within this population, reaching out through social media guaranteed Facebook use, and gathering my information from this source would be sufficient in providing me with the type of data I needed. I also knew that I would get enough responses from students to be able to draw conclusions from the data. I collected twenty-four sets of survey data via this Facebook group, plus an additional three sets of survey results from my three follow-up interviews, providing me with twenty-seven in total. These twenty-seven surveys addressed the following questions:

1.        Who is your typical audience (your "followers") on Twitter? Check all that apply.
    i   Answer choices included: friends, family, coworkers, classmates, strangers, other (please specify)
2. Who is your typical audience (your "friends") on Facebook? Check all that apply.
    i   Answer choices included: friends, family, coworkers, classmates, strangers, other (please specify)
3. Are you concerned with how people perceive you based on your online social media postings? Why or why not?
4. If you lost your job, where would you be more inclined to post about it in any manner? Why?
    i   Answer choices included: Twitter, Facebook, both, neither
5. If you entered into a new relationship you were very excited about, where would you be more inclined to post about it in any manner? Why?
    i   Answer choices included: Twitter, Facebook, both, neither
6. In your opinion, would you say you post more about positive or negative events/thoughts/etc. on Twitter?
7. In your opinion, would you say you post more about positive or negative events/thoughts/etc. on Facebook?
8. Have you ever started to type a status, post a photo, etc. on Facebook or Twitter, but decided not to post it? If so, is it due to what others might think?

I began each of the three interviews with the same survey I posted to the Facebook group, providing me with the three additional sets of survey data, before moving into the actual interview questions. Through the interviews, I was able to get more explanation as to why people post various things on social media, and I was able to look at examples of their posts first-hand. The participants classified their last ten posts on Twitter and Facebook as of the day of the interview as positive, negative, or neutral, in their own opinion. I went back to their social media sites at a later time and also classified their postings as positive, negative, or neutral, as an outside observer. Since how people view positivity and negativity can be slightly different, I did so to see if our classifications were similar or not, and if their perceptions of their postings matched how their audiences may be perceiving them. I conducted these interviews in locations that were convenient for the participant, such as quiet areas in the student union. They took place over the course of a week, and each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes. The questions addressed in the interview were as follows:

1. What do you typically use Twitter for?
2. What do you typically use Facebook for?
3. Have you ever untagged yourself from a post, such as a status, wall post, or photo? Please explain.
4. Think about a time something negative, whether large or small, happened in your life. Did you post about it on social media, and if so, on which sites?
5. As of today's date, look through your last ten posts on Twitter, and your last ten posts of Facebook and classify them as either positive, negative, or neutral, to the best of your ability.

Some of the limitations to my methods included some lack of randomization in classifying posts and possible bias on the participants' end. The lack of randomization in classifying posts stemmed from the fact that by looking at the ten most recent posts it was random, but not as much as it could have been if there was some way for me to randomly select posts throughout the participants' entire social media history. This would have been difficult to fix since the participants had such high activity and possibly years of use. With regard to bias, people may not have wanted

to admit they post negatively. Typically, people engage in self-serving bias, in which they view themselves more favorably than they view others, so they may not have even realized it if they are sharing any negativity. This was a limitation that was difficult to control. Nonetheless, the fact that the results are completely anonymous and are not attached to the participants in this final document should help reduce that potential bias.

## Results

### Surveys

As displayed in Table 1, the first two survey questions, "Who is your typical audience (your 'followers') on Twitter?" and "Who is your typical audience (your 'friends') on Facebook?" addressed audience types. The *Socialnomics* website states that Facebook is based more on offline relationships and connects people to family, friends, coworkers and acquaintances, while Twitter is based less on personal relationships and more on keeping up with trending topics (Aedy). I wanted to see if this would be reflected in my participants' social media accounts, so that I could later analyze the data to determine any impression management based on audience. My participants tended to have more family and coworkers as "friends" on Facebook than as "followers" on Twitter, and they had more strangers as "followers" on Twitter than as "friends" on Facebook.

### Table 1: Audience Types (Questions One and Two of Survey)

| Site | Friends | Family | Coworkers | Classmates | Strangers |
|------|---------|--------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| Twitter | 26/27 96.3% | 7/27 26% | 2/27 7.4% | 17/27 63% | 16/27 59.3% |
| Facebook | 27/27 100% | 26/27 96.3% | 10/27 37% | 18/27 66.7% | 3/27 11.1% |

When asked the third survey question, "Are you concerned with how people perceive you based on your online social media postings? Why or why not," sixteen participants (59.3%) said no, and eleven (40.7%) said yes. While the fifteen responses varied as to why, there were several typical responses. The typical "no" was because the participant is not concerned with what others think of him or her, and the typical "yes" was because he or she does not want to post anything that would hurt others or him/herself in the future. A few participants answered "yes" or "no," but when asked to explain, they said they really saw both sides. For instance, one survey participant stated, "Both yes and no. I'm not afraid to be myself on social media, but I try not to post things that could hurt me in the future."

Like question three, survey question eight also addressed concern over what others think, but focused on such concerns in a less direct manner. Participants were asked, "Have you ever started to type a status, post a photo, etc. on Facebook or Twitter, but decided not to post it? If so, is it due what others might think?" Fifteen participants (55.6%) answered "yes," four participants (14.8%) answered "no," while five participants (18.5%) answered "depends," and three participants (11.1%) answered that the situation did not apply to them. This question yielded potentially conflicting results when compared to question three, which will be addressed in the discussion section of this article.

Tying back to the study by Bazarova, et al. regarding positivity and negativity on Facebook, questions four and five addressed a positive event and a negative event and whether or not the participant would post about it and, if so, where he or she would post. When asked, "If you lost your job, where would you be more inclined to post about it in any manner? Why?" as the negative

event, seven participants said they would post about it on Twitter, one said Facebook, two said both sites, and seventeen said neither. When asked, "If you entered into a new relationship you were very excited about, where would you be more inclined to post about it in any manner? Why?" as the positive event, five participants said they would post about it on Twitter, fourteen said Facebook, three said both sites, and five said neither. Most answered "Facebook." More participants would post solely about the negative event on Twitter than on Facebook, 25.9% compared to 3.7%, and more participants would post solely about the positive event on Facebook than on Twitter, 51.9% compared to 18.5%.

Questions six and seven addressed how the participants perceive themselves to post on Facebook and Twitter, whether positively or negatively. In regard to posting on Twitter, twelve (44.4%) said they post more positive, six (22.2%) said more negative, and nine (33.3%) said equally negative and positive events/thoughts/etc. In regard to posting on Facebook, twenty-two (81.5%) said they post more positive, zero said more negative, and five (19%) said equally negative and positive events/thoughts/etc. More people said they post negatively or equally negatively and positively on Twitter than on Facebook.

### Interviews

Interview participants said they use Twitter to vent, share thoughts or funny occurrences, or simply to retweet others' posting about topics of interest. They use Facebook to keep people up to date with their lives and communicate with certain people. They tended not to untag themselves from posts, although one participant said she would untag herself from a photo if she did not like how she looked, but not for any other reason. The first two participants said that when negative events happen, they may post about them on Twitter. Participant one stated, "Usually when anything bad happens, I'll just post about it on Twitter, but try to be funny about it so it doesn't come off too negatively," but the third participant said he probably would not post about it on social media at all.

The results of their self-classification of their ten most recent posts on each site show that the third participant is an outlier when compared to the other two. Participants one and two showed that while these ten postings on Twitter did not vary much numerically in positivity versus negativity, they varied a lot when compared to Facebook. Facebook tended to have almost all positive postings. My own classifications of these posts were extremely similar, in fact almost identical, more precisely. When classifying their ten most recent posts on Facebook and Twitter themselves, the results, out of ten posts, are indicated in in Table 2.

**Table 2: Self-classifications of Posts (Question Five of Survey)**

| Twitter | Positive | Negative | Neutral |
|---|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | 3 | 3 | 4 |
| Participant 2 | 5 | 4 | 1 |
| Participant 3 | 10 | 0 | 0 |
| **Facebook** | | | |
| Participant 1 | 8 | 0 | 2 |
| Participant 2 | 9 | 0 | 1 |
| Participant 3 | 9 | 1 | 0 |

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**Discussion**

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The findings of this study fortify the theories from numerous other impression management studies, in that significant evidence of impression management was found. Not only was impression management evident showing that people care about how they are perceived online, but I discovered that Twitter and Facebook each have their own unique audience types. Similarly, how people post on each site, positively or negatively, is very different. These findings imply that what people see about others on social media may be strategically planned, whether consciously or somewhat unconsciously. It is important to be aware of these results, as people choose which social media to interact on and with whom.

## Concern with Perception

Like the research mentioned in my literature review, I also discovered through my participants that people care about how others perceive them online. Based on the robust findings of impression management research discussed previously, I anticipated a trend in which people engage in a good deal of impression management on Facebook and Twitter. When asked directly, "Are you concerned with how people perceive you based on your online social media postings?" 59.3% of participants said "no," and 40.7% said "yes." This is close to a 6:4 ratio, so there was a definite distinction. More people claimed to not care about what others think of them based on what they post online, but when asked less directly with the question, "Have you ever started to type a status, post a photo, etc. on Facebook or Twitter, but decided not to post it? If so, is it due what others might think?" 55.6% of participants answered "yes." 59.3% of participants claimed not to care about others' perceptions in the previous question, but in the later questions 55.6% admitted that they chose not to post something due to what other may think. Only 14.8% said "no," that is not why they did not post; 18.5% said it "depends;" and 11.1% said they had never even been in that situation. There is a contradiction between the results of the two questions. In the earlier question, only 40.7% said they were concerned with how people perceive them on social media, but in the later question, 55.6% said they did not post something due to what people would think. Because the earlier question was more direct, people could easily provide an answer to appear a certain way for the study, but in the later question they were probably more honest. This leads me to believe that people may want to appear like they do not care about others' perceptions of them based on social media postings, but that they probably really do care.

## Audience Types

I found that my hypothesis about audience types on each site was accurate. I hypothesized that Twitter users would tend to have an audience of more friends and strangers than family members and coworkers, and that due to this, people would post more negatively on Twitter than on Facebook because they might be more comfortable being open and honest with the audience. People might be more careful about what they post when family and coworkers can see it than when it is mostly friends and strangers because of harsher judgment or because people could possibly get into trouble if their postings were seen by particular people. These ideas can be reflected in the comments of some of my participants. For instance, one survey participant stated, "Facebook is more of a photo outlet than anything for me. Twitter is where I express my opinions/feelings." It is likely that this person shares photos of positive life events on Facebook, while he or she speaks true thoughts through Twitter. Another participant stated, "[Twitter is] more casual; Facebook is more for family," showing a level of comfort in sharing on Twitter that may not exist on Facebook, due to audience type. Steve Aedy, one of *Socialnomics'* journalists, stated, "Facebook users connect with friends, family, colleagues and other acquaintances," and the results directly support this idea.

My thoughts about the types of audiences each site would have were accurate for my population. Out of the twenty-seven people who completed the survey, only seven had "followers" on Twitter that were family, while twenty-six had family members as "friends" on Facebook. On Twitter, only two had coworkers as "followers" but on Facebook, ten had coworkers as "friends." As a whole, participants had more strangers as "followers" on Twitter than as "friends" on Facebook—sixteen out of twenty-seven participants when compared to just three out of twenty-seven. These are big differences that were reflected in a small population. Knowing that these differences in audience exist, I analyzed the rest of the data to determine if the differences correlated to types of postings in any way.

**Facebook Versus Twitter: Positivity and Negativity**

There was a significant difference in how people posted on Facebook versus how they posted on Twitter. Like Bazarova and her colleagues, who concluded that people were careful about sharing positive and negative status updates, wall posts, and private messages, I found that most of my participants were careful about posting positive and negative events, as noted in survey questions four and five. More participants would post about the negative event on Twitter than on Facebook, and more participants would post about the positive event on Facebook than on Twitter. Since participants tended to use Twitter to share thoughts or sometimes even vent, and Facebook is so family-centered, it makes sense that the outcome was as such. A limitation to these results, though not very significant, is that the specific negative and positive event examples I used have different connotations for different people. Had I used different events, such as failing a test and winning the lottery, for example, maybe results would be slightly different. Even so, I do believe the trend would ultimately be similar.

The survey also indicated that more participants felt that posts about negative thoughts and events belonged on Twitter than on Facebook. Questions six and seven directly asked how the participant thought he or she posted on each site—more positive, negative, or equally positive and negative thoughts, events, etc. Six participants (22.2%) said they post more negatively on Twitter, and nine (33.3%) said equally positive and negative. While on Facebook, absolutely no participants said they post more negative things on Facebook, and only five (19%) said they post equally positive and negative things. This, too, is an astounding difference between the two social media sites. To further exhibit this trend within the study, when the interview participants classified their own postings as positive, negative, or neutral, they posted negatively more on Twitter than on Facebook. When combining the ten results of each of the three participants, Facebook had twenty-seven out of thirty posts as positive, and only one negative, while Twitter had seven negative posts and only eighteen positive posts in total.

## Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that within the first-year student population at my university, impression management takes place on both Facebook and Twitter, which is comparable to results found in prior research studies. These students tended to post more negatively on Twitter than on Facebook, which I have discovered has a strong correlation with audience type. More participants had family members and coworkers as "friends" on Facebook than on Twitter, making it less likely that they would share negative thoughts, events, and other postings on Facebook. Participants, even if they did not realize it at times, were trying to appear in different ways to different audience groups.

The findings of this study can be applicable to society as a whole, and further research can be done to see if these results hold true in other settings and with larger data pools. Both my research and the research of those prior have found that culture and personality, as well as audience type,

influence impression management, but it would be worthwhile to see if gender plays a role in whether someone posts more positively or negatively. This thought arose when I realized that the male interview participant was significantly more positive in his postings than the two female interview participants. It would be interesting to see if this would be a consistent finding in others or if it merely ties back to personality's role in impression management, as studied by Chen and Marcus.

By looking at the results of not only my study, but the previous impression management studies, it is clear that how we perceive others online is not always reality. It is easy to show others what we want to show them, such as Zilla van den Born's 2014 experiment in which she faked vacation photos from a five-week trip to Southeast Asia, fooling most of her friends and family through social media (Cooper). People typically want to appear exciting and interesting and choose the best photos of themselves to post. These types of actions, which vary on different social media sites, can create false expectations of what we should be like and can make us wonder why we are not as "happy" or "attractive" as others. While people put their best "cyber face" forward, the best way to get to really know a person's online identity would be to interact with them on multiple sites, as they post to please their multiple audiences. By "friending" someone on Facebook and "following" someone on Twitter, for instance, you will get not only the positive experiences, but possibly the more honest, and sometimes not so happy ones as well.

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