

## **“I got really offended by it:” College Student Views of Inappropriate Facebook Posts and what they did in Response**

**Loreen Wolfer, PhD**  
Dept of Sociology  
University of Scranton  
Scranton  
PA 18510

### **Abstract**

*Studies generally examine what types of material adolescents post on Facebook; little research examines the reactions of others to those posts. Focus groups of college students found that many felt that negative comments about social issues, such as race and gay marriage, or purposely embarrassing or being mean to an individual were the most inappropriate types of posts that they have seen on Facebook. Sexually explicated posts were mentioned by a few students. Most students admitted to seeing sexual posts; however, they were still more offended by other material. College student reactions mostly aligned along the extremes of either ignoring the post or unfriending the individual. Students who frequently ignored the posts did so because, while offensive, they found the posts entertaining or because they only considered the person to be a “Facebook friend”. Comments sanctioning offensive posts were generally reserved for “real friends”. Implications for Facebook socialization are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Facebook, college students, socialization

### **1. Introduction and Literature Review**

Figuring out who you are and what you stand for is a hallmark of adolescence; and, adolescents desperately want to fit in with their peers. Adolescents rely on the behaviors of their peers to identify what is normative for their cohort, to experiment with possible social identities for adulthood, and to figure out how to “fit in” (Maddock and Glanz, 2005; Williams & Merten, 2009; Brechwald & Prinsetin, 2011). This is an inherently social process that involves validation and consequences from others (Erikson, 1968; James, et al., 2010). With the proliferation of social media sites, adolescents are increasingly shaping their beliefs and identity based on information available on-line, as well as off-line. One study finds that more than 80% of teens and young adults in the United States use Facebook (Brenner, 2012); and, another found that the median number of Facebook friends for college students is approximately 300, with the number of friends for some students exceeding 1,000 (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2011). Therefore, adolescents today are faced with more possible avenues of social input than adolescents even 30 years ago.

Because electronic communication reaches such an extensive and wide audience, adolescents have to decide what aspects of their personality to share, and therefore develop, in an increasingly public forum. Furthermore, on sites such as Facebook, adolescents are “friends” with multiple people of different levels of personal closeness; yet, whenever they post something, it automatically is shared with all these people as if they were equally important to the discloser (Brandtzæg, Lüders, Skjetne, 2010). Consequently, comments that are aimed at a few may essentially be read by hundreds, which blurs the distinction between mass and interpersonal communication, where one misstep can have very profound social, personal, and professional consequences (Mesch & Talmud, 2006; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Walther et al., 2008).

One benefit of on-line social networks is the presence of time. Marwick (2012) notes that people who participate in mediated communities are highly aware that they are being watched. According to Marwick, people self-monitor what they disclose online in order to maintain a balance between privacy and publicity. Because sharing on social media sites like Facebook and MySpace does not need to be immediate, as it is in face-to-face interaction, adolescents have time to reflect and consciously choose the specific aspects of their identities that they want others to see (Krasnova et al, 2010; James et al., 2010).

Adolescents consciously think about the impressions they want to make to peers on these media sites (Martinez Alemán & Wartman, 2009; Birmbaum, 2013); therefore, they spend a lot of time managing their profiles to provide the impression of themselves that they desire (Reich, 2010; Birmbaum, 2013).

According to Brandtzæg, Lüders, Skjetne (2010) Facebook users are also concerned about sharing too much personal information because they felt that doing so may strain existing social networks and that they may be viewed negatively by others. Consequently, they strive to only share information that is not too private or personal. Studies of analogous avenues for public self-disclosure, such as intimate information shared in talk shows, support this by finding that sharing of intimacies in such a large public venue is frequently seen as inappropriate (Orrego, et al., 2000). Talk shows, consequently, have become negatively associated with marginalized groups and inappropriate behavior as their means of “entertainment”. Given this, one has to wonder why adolescents post some of the things they do on Facebook, such as naked pictures, disclosed underage drinking, and admitted drug use, especially knowing that what may be normative to their Facebook peers may not be normative to others on Facebook, such as parents or potential employers and may be viewed negatively by these groups (Peluchette & Karl, 2010; Birmbaum, 2013).

From a symbolic interactionist framework, adolescents rely on the symbolic meanings of their interaction with others, especially peers, to develop their identity. This involves interpretation of positive and negative symbolic feedback, such as language, gestures, and expressions, from others (Blumer, 1969). Positive feedback from others who are important to an individual will cause behavior to be repeated, negative feedback may cause the individual to re-evaluate his or her interpretation of that symbol and possibly change behavior as a result. The more important the people in the interaction are to each other, the stronger the influence of their symbolic reaction to each other. With regards to Facebook socialization, most studies focus on the motivation of the discloser to reveal private information; little research exists regarding people’s reactions to the information being disclosed. According to symbolic interactionism, peer negative sanctions for inappropriate Facebook posts will help an adolescent realize when he / she has crossed the normative line for behavior or expression.

Only a few researchers have examined people’s reactions to negative or highly intimate posts on Facebook, but they all found that people reading these posts viewed those writing the posts negatively (Bazarova, 2012; Goodmom et al., 2014). Goodmom et al. (2014) studied people’s judgments about individuals based on the perceived professionalism of posts and they found that there is a cost of even a small amount of negative content on Facebook walls. Even the appearance of such content caused others to perceive that individual more negatively.

Bazarova (2012) found that high intimacy disclosures were deemed less appropriate in public settings like a wall post than in more private settings such as personal messaging. Bazarova also found that these postings negatively affected the receiver’s view of the discloser. In other words, receivers did not like disclosers who posted intimate issues in public as much as they liked disclosers who reserved these posting to more private venues. Even Bazarova’s study, however, did not address specific aspects of posts or sharing that those students found distasteful, nor did the study address receiver’s actions towards disclosers who posted negatively perceived disclosures. In line with symbolic interactionism, if the feedback to students who post inappropriate material is positive, then they may feel more confident about integrating these versions into their offline identities (Blumer, 1969; Stern, 2007). If the feedback is negative, then they may choose to revise their identities.

This study is an early attempt to fill this gap in the literature with a qualitative exploration of what late adolescents, namely college students, consider to be inappropriate depictions on Facebook. This study also examines what, if anything, college students do to sanction their peers who post this information. There is much research suggesting that adolescents use social media as a form of socialization, learning appropriate and inappropriate behavior through the feedback of others (Petronio, 2002; Maddock & Glanz, 2005). Adolescents today are very aware that others can view the material that they post on social media like Facebook, yet there are conflicting interests between the desire for peer acceptance, the need to experiment with new identities, and the concern over non-peer approval of material that is posted on Facebook.

## **2. Methods**

Students were offered extra credit to participate in a focus group study of what college students deem to be inappropriate Facebook wall posts and why at a small private liberal arts college in a mid-Atlantic state. Focus group discussions were organized into two broad research questions.

The research questions are:

1. What types of posts on Facebook walls do students feel are inappropriate and why?
2. When students see these inappropriate posts, what do they do and why?

Seven focus groups of 6-8 students each were conducted. Each focus group lasted approximately 45 – 70 minutes. All focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. This research utilizes open coding where descriptive labels were written for every reference to grieving on Facebook. Recurring references, words, and messages were then coded into themes. All student identities for quotes are protected by pseudonyms.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 General Description**

A total of forty-six students participated in the focus group discussions. All of the students have used Facebook at some time in the past 18 months. Most of the students (87%, n=40) were currently using Facebook at the time of the study; and, most of those students (90%, n=36) used Facebook at least once a day. The students not currently using Facebook (n=6) had stopped within the last 12-18 months due to job hunting, thinking it was “stupid”, or a potential conflict with a university paid position (e.g. Resident Assistant). The students were evenly mixed between males and females (23 students each); and, although two students did not answer the question about academic year, the majority of students were juniors or seniors (81.8%, n=36).

#### **3.2 Research Question 1**

As shown in Table 1, one sees that there is variety in what students identified as the “most” inappropriate post that they have seen on Facebook. One student could not decide between two posts, therefore the total is slightly higher than the sample size. Their descriptions that led to the thematic organization involved both comments and photographs people posted, although the majority of instances focused on comments. The answers fit eight themes, with four of them being very prominent (Table 1). The most common theme revolved around “Social Issues”. Slightly more than a quarter (29.8%), noted that negative comments about various social issues, such as race, gay marriage and animal rights, were “offensive” on Facebook. The majority of these comments focused on race and gay marriage issues.

The second inappropriate theme, which was noted by 21.3% of the students, involved personal attacks against specific people. These included mean comments about someone’s personal appearance, comments or photos aimed to embarrass a specific individual, and posting lies about a specific individual.

Vague negative political references and sexually explicit content tied as a third more commonly cited “most inappropriate post” seen on Facebook (12.8%, each theme). The politically negative comments included a post someone saw negatively “trashing” a veteran, negative comments about the military in general, and negative comments about the President. The sexually explicit posts involved naked pictures and explicit descriptions of people’s sexual behaviors. As a side note, most of the students admitted to seeing naked photos on Facebook; but, it is interesting that a relatively low percent (12.8%) identified them as the “most” inappropriate post that they have seen. In fact, most students seemed rather desensitized to these posts. For example, in response to a student who mentioned naked photos as the most offensive post that she saw, two other students commented:

Nancy: I see a lot of naked photos as well, but I also see a lot of rants about political beliefs and [those] kinda bothered me.

Harriet: Besides the usual promiscuous photos....

These women used the terms “a lot” or “usual”, and these terms are typical of what many students mentioned when asked a follow-up question about naked pictures later in the focus groups. The observation that most of the other students who acknowledge seeing a high frequency of sexual material on Facebook identified a different behavior as “the most inappropriate” that they have seen, suggests that many students are desensitized to these depictions of sexuality.

The fact that everyone was able to identify a post that they felt was “inappropriate” and the observation that, at least with the first four themes, that there is multiple identifications suggest that there are some at least loose norms for appropriateness on Facebook. What symbolic interactionist theory is most interested in, however, is what students do when they see these posts.

### 3.3 Research Question 2

Table 1 also has information for the most common student reactions in general (column percents) and for each theme (row percents). Overall, students generally illustrated two extreme behaviors – they either ignored the post (40.4% of all reactions) or they unfriended the individual (31.9%) of all reactions.

When asked why they simply ignored posts, even though they found the post to be the “most” inappropriate that they have seen, students usually provided one of two reasons. The main reason students ignored inappropriate posts was because they found them entertaining, in a “ridiculous” way. For example:

Carter: Because I find it entertaining ....I do that with a lot of people. I don't talk to them. They just post ridiculous stuff that's entertaining

Karen: It is just trade and stock in people's lives I guess. Entertainment when I am bored.

The second reason drew attention to a distinction between “real friends” and “Facebook friends”. Students frequently ignored inappropriate material from people that they did not perceive as “real” friends or people with whom they did not frequently interact. They reserved commenting to inappropriate posts for people with whom they felt that they had a more substantial relationship.

Debbie: I only really know her from high school so we never really liked talked.

Alice: If I know the person very well I will say something against [it]....I am not friends with them so I ignored it

Libby: I got really offended by it...[and] was very close to writing something, but I didn't know him.

Comments like these prompted a follow-up question asking why students were “friends” with people on Facebook that they claim to not have a real connection with outside of Facebook. Their responses are what introduced the distinction between “real friends” and “Facebook friends”.

Alice: [We are] Facebook friends, not social friends.

Sam: So in reality there's friends, the people you actually have face to face human interaction with and some of them might be friends with you on Facebook. But there's also, almost cultural, “yeah that's my friend on Facebook” friend. So it's a difference

The two most common overall responses, to ignore comments or unfriend the individual, will have little socialization effects because the offending individual does not really know someone disagrees with his or her post in either situation. The offending individual can interpret no comment on Facebook as general support. Similarly, when unfriending someone on Facebook, the person unfriended is not notified of the change in friend status and would only learn of the unfriending when looking for specific individuals' names in their friend list. With 300 or more Facebook friends, one less friend is not likely to be noticed. Consequently, with both of these reactions, the offending individual will not know someone interpreted the post negatively, will not notice a negative sanction, and therefore it not likely to consider any behavior change.

The most direct negative sanction would be a comment to a Facebook wall. However, as shown in Table 1, this only happened 12.8% of all the reactions. Regardless of the nature of the inappropriate behavior, students were generally more likely to ignore or unfriend than any other action.

Sanctioning comments are more likely to be made when “real friends” are also “Facebook friends”, thereby suggesting either more investment in the person to want to help that individual realize potential behavior that is inappropriate or they are more comfortable sharing disagreement with someone with whom they have a more concrete social connection. While this distinction is interesting, the reason for it is beyond the scope of this study.

### **3. Discussion**

Adolescence is a widely recognized time of peer socialization and adolescents spend a lot of time on social network sites like Facebook (Martinez Alemán & Wartman, 2009). Facebook allows adolescents time to create the online identity that they want others to see (James et al., 2010; Kransanova, et al., 2010; Reich, 2010) and approve (Birnbaum, 2013). However, Facebook involves an extensive social network with people from different groups (such as peers and family) and different degrees of social connectedness. According to symbolic interactionism, adolescents interpret the symbols of their peers to determine which behavior is and is not appropriate for their cohort. With the prevalence of social media communication, this interaction and exchange of symbols is increasingly occurring in social media networks, like Facebook.

Consequently, focus groups of college students were conducted to examine two broad research questions regarding perceived inappropriate Facebook posts. The first question focused on what types of posts college students considered the “most inappropriate” that they have seen on Facebook. Focus group discussion suggests that college students are the least tolerant of Facebook posts that take unpopular stances on social issues such as race and gay marriage. They also find attacks against aimed at embarrassing or being purposefully mean to specific individuals as the “most inappropriate”. Other themes, which were not as strongly expressed, involved political commentary (not about a social issue) and the viewing or discussion of sexually explicit material. An interesting side observation emerged that many students noted that they saw sexually explicit material on Facebook, yet they did not identify that as the “most inappropriate” post that they have seen. In fact, it almost appeared that many of these students were somewhat desensitized by sexually explicit material online. Given the relatively casual attitude towards sex among college students, as indicated by the common practice of “hook-ups” and “friend with benefit relationships” by this age group (Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Bisson & Levine, 2007; Owen & Fincham, 2011), perhaps this finding is not unusual.

The second research question asked what students did to sanction the individuals who posted offending material. Generally, the responses were at two extremes: ignoring the post all together or unfriending the individual. When asked why the students remained friends with someone who posted something that offended them, many people commented that while they found the post they noted to be the “most inappropriate”, they also found it entertaining, so they did not comment or unfriend the individual. This is analogous to the entertainment value people find in sordid public behavior noted by Orrego and colleagues (2000). We seem to live in a society where inappropriate behavior has become entertaining, not something to be discouraged.

Another common reason for keeping these offending individuals as friends, but not sanctioning them in some other way such as a negative wall response, was because the person who posted the offending material was not a “real friend”, but only a “Facebook friend”. This implies a weaker social connection with these people. In fact the individual does not even merit an attempt to be socialized into the norms of the group, but instead serves as an object of (negative) entertainment. This indirectly supports Bazarova’s (2012) and Goodmom et al.’s (2014) findings that negative posts are associated with a negative view of the person doing the posting as “ridiculous” or stupid.

Many of the students who did react with comments to a negative post made it clear that the people they were commenting to were “real friends”, not just “Facebook friends”. It appears that when students felt invested with an individual as a “real friend”, they were more concerned with helping that friend’s socialization to group norms (Stern, 2007). The distinction between “real friends” and “Facebook friends” may also relate to symbolic interactionism. Contrary to what symbolic interactionism would suggest, the majority of student reactions to inappropriate posts will have no socializing effect on the person doing the posting because the person posting is not likely to even know that their post is perceived negatively. They will receive no feedback from the viewer that might cause them to reinterpret the symbolic meaning of their actions. However, for “real friends”, the symbolic feedback is more direct and, therefore, may be more likely to result in peer socialization. This, however, is just a tentative explanation that needs further examination with a future study.

This focus group study gave some initial insight as to what college students found to be really offensive on Facebook. Also, this is one of the first studies to examine specifically how college students react to offensive Facebook posts and raised the distinction between “real friends” and “Facebook friends” among late adolescents. Despite the initial information gained regarding adolescent reaction to peer posts, there are some limitations to this study.

First, this was a focus group design with a non-representative sample at one university. Future research on a larger, more diverse population may shed more light on the perceived Facebook norms and possible socializing reactions among college students. Second, these focus groups were based on student-defined issues and therefore did not delve more deeply into whether the socialization process may vary by the nature of the offensive material or by other factors such as where information was posted (a wall versus a private communication) or the relationship between the person posting and the person reading the post (a “real friend” or “Facebook friend”).

Future research may benefit from exploring how that friend definition affects on-line socialization. Last, future research might benefit from exploring why adolescents treat “real friends” differently from “Facebook friends” regarding responses to inappropriate on-line behavior.

### 5. Table 1

<b>Table 1: Descriptive Findings of Themes and College Student Reactions</b>						
<b>Theme</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Reaction</b>				
	<b>% (N)*</b>	<b>(Percents are calculated with respect to the row)</b>				
		Ignore	Comment	Unfriend Person	Delete post	Report
Social Issues	29.8% (14)	28.6% (4)	21.4% (3)	35.7% (5)	14.3% (2)	
Mean / Embarrassing comments directed to a known individual	21.3% (10)	50% (5)	30% (3)	10% (1)		10% (1)
Political / Government commentary	12.8% (6)	16.3% (9)		66.7% (4)		16.7% (1)
Sexually explicit content	12.8% (6)	66.7% (4)			33.3% (2)	
Negative comments about a dead person	10.6% (5)	20% (1)		60% (3)		20% (1)
Non-sexual personal issues	10.6% (5)	80% (4)		20% (1)		
Offensive language	2.1% (1)			100% 9 (1)		
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>40.4% (19)</b>	<b>12.8% (6)</b>	<b>31.9% (15)</b>	<b>8.5% (4)</b>	<b>6.4% (3)</b>

\* One student could not decide between two instances, therefore the total is 47 instead of 46.

Acknowledgements: The author is thankful to the university for an internal funding grant that supported this research and to the students who participated in the focus groups.

### 6. References

- Bazarova, N. (2012). Public intimacy: Disclosure interpretation and social judgments on Facebook. *Journal of Communication*, 62(5), 815--832.
- Birnbaum, M. (2013). The fronts students use: Facebook and the standardization of self-presentations. *Journal of College Student Development*, 54(2), 155--171.
- Bisson, M. A., & Levine, T. R. (2009). Negotiating a friends with benefits relationship. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 38(1), 66-73. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10508-007-9211-2
- Blumer, H., (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Brandtzaeg, P., Lüders, M. & Skjetne, J. (2010). Too many Facebook “friends”? Content sharing and sociability versus the need for privacy in social network sites. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 26(11-12), 1006-1030.
- Brechwald, W. & Prinstein, M. (2011). Beyond homophily: A decade of advances in understanding peer influence processes. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21(1), 166-179.

- Brenner, J. (2012). Pew Internet: Social networking (full detail). Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewinternet.org/Commentary/2012/March/Pew-Internet-Social-Networking-full-detail.aspx>. Accessed June 1, 2014.
- Ellison, N., Steinfield, C. & Lampe, C. (2011). Connection strategies: Social capital implications of Facebook-enabled communication practices. *New Media & Society*, 13(6), 873-892.
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Goodman, L. B., Smith, P. L., Ivancevich, D., & Lundberg, S. (2014). Actions speak louder than personality: Effects of facebook content on personality perceptions. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 16(1), 105-119. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1509047156?accountid=28588>.
- Grello, C. M., Welsh, D. P., & Harper, M. S. (2006). No strings attached: The nature of casual sex in college students. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 43(3), 255-267. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/215277900?accountid=28588>.
- Hinduja, S. & Patchin, J. (2008). Personal information of adolescents on the Internet: A quantitative content analysis of MySpace. *Journal of Adolescence*, 31(1), 125-146.
- James, C., Davis, K., Flores, A., Francis, J.M., Pettingill, L., Rundle, M., & Gardner, H. (2010). Young people, ethics, and the new digital media. *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice*, 2(2), 215-284.
- Krasnova, H., Spiekermann, S., Koroleva, K. & Hildebrand, T. (2010). Online social networks: why we disclose. *Journal of Information Technology*, 25(2), 109-125.
- Maddock, J., & Glanz, K. (2005). The relationship of proximal normative beliefs and global subjective norms to college students' alcohol consumption. *Addictive Behaviors*, 30(2), 315-323.
- Martinez Alemán, A. & Wartman, K. (2009). *Online social networking on campus*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Marwick, A.E. (2012). The public domain: Social surveillance in everyday life. *Surveillance and Society*, 9(4), 378-393.
- Mesch, G. & Talmud, I. (2006). The quality of online and offline relationships: The role of multiplexity and duration of social relationships. *The Information Society*, 22(3), 137-148.
- Orrego, V.O., Smith, S.W., Mitchell, M.M., Johnson, A.J., Yun, K.A., & Greenberg, B. (2000). Disclosure and privacy issues on television talk shows. In S. Petronio (Ed.), *Balancing the secrets of private disclosures*. (pp. 249-259). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Owen, J., & Fincham, F. D. (2011). Effects of gender and psychosocial factors on "friends with benefits" relationships among young adults. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 40(2), 311-20. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10508-010-9611-6>
- Peluchette, J. & Karl, K. (2010). Examining students' intended image on Facebook: "What were they thinking?!" *Journal of Education for Business*, 85(1), 0-37.
- Petronio, S. (2002). *Boundaries of privacy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Reich, S. (2010). Adolescents' sense of community on Myspace and Facebook: A mixed-methods approach. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 38(6), 688-705.
- Stern, S. (2007). Producing Sites, Exploring Identities: Youth Online Authorship. In D. Buckingham (Ed.), *Youth, Identity and Digital Media* (pp. 95-117). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Walther, J., Van Der Heide, B., Kim, S., Westerman, D. & Tong, S. (2008). The role of friends' appearance and behavior on evaluations of individuals on Facebook: Are we known by the company we keep? *Human Communication Research*, 34(1), 28-49.
- Williams, A. L., & Merten, M. J. (2009). Adolescents' online social networking following the death of a peer. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24(1), 67-90.