

# Conflicts and Facework in Online Discussions

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the relation between conflict and the outcomes of online discussions, the moderating effect of facework behaviors on the relation between conflict and online discussion outcomes, the effect of gender in this relation, and in the moderating effect of facework behaviors. During a two-week period, participants (149) in groups of three to four members used an online discussion board to discuss topics commonly controversial. The results indicate that conflict influenced the outcomes of online discussions; facework behaviors moderated the relation between conflict and outcomes; and gender influenced the choice of facework behaviors each member adopted during discussions.

## Keywords

Collaborative Learning, Online Learning, Online Discussion Outcomes, Conflict, Satisfaction, Face Loss, Face, Facework Behaviors, Gender.

## INTRODUCTION

Discussion is an important form of human communication; one that is essential for collaboration, cooperation, and learning. Online discussions are commonplace in learning environments and discussion boards are a central component of online learning (Levine, 2007). Online discussions allow students to read each other's ideas, share their own ideas, and collaboratively expand and deepen their mutual understanding of the topic under discussion (Gunawardena, 1998).

An important aspect of interrelations among participants in a discussion is conflict. Conflict is defined as "the awareness by the parties involved of discrepancies, incompatible wishes, or irreconcilable desires" (Jehn & Mannix, 2001, p. 238, cr. Boulding, 1963). Studies on the influence of conflict on team performance show mixed results. The influence of relationship conflict, or the awareness of interpersonal incompatibilities (Jehn, 1995), on team performance is mostly negative (Jehn, 1997; De Jong, Schalk, & Curseu, 2008; De Dreu & Weingart, 2002; Jehn, 1995; and Shah & Jehn, 1993). Task conflict, or awareness of differences among group members about the task to be performed (Jehn, 1995), and process conflict, or the awareness of the controversies that show up about how task accomplishment will proceed (Jehn & Mannix, 2001), do not show a clear positive or negative influence on team performance (De Jong, Theune & Hofs, 2008; Souren & Sumati, 2010; Jehn & Chadwick, 1997; De Dreu & Weingart, 2002; Hinds & Mortensen, 2005). Given these findings, we posit that conflict influences the outcomes of online discussions but the direction and strength of the influence is not clear.

Evidence exist of the benefits of online discussions in online learning, the impact of conflict arising during discussions in the learning process, and the consequences of the choice of facework behaviors exhibited in social interactions, this study further investigates the relation between conflict and the outcomes of online discussions, face loss and satisfaction. Also, the study explores the moderating effect of facework behaviors on the relation between conflict and online discussion outcomes; and the effect of gender in this relation.

## BACKGROUND

An important aspect of discussions, face-to-face or online, is the concept of face--"the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). Face is the image of an individual, or a group, that society sees and evaluates based on cultural norms and values (Ting-Toomey, 1988). Individuals bring face into every social encounter, including into online discussions. In online as in face-to-face discussions, face can be threatened by incompatibilities among participants, disagreements about which tasks to perform, and

controversies about how to perform those tasks. In addition, in online discussions, face can also be threaten by misunderstandings that result from the limited set of cues allowed by the online medium; written text versus verbal and visual cues.

Individuals manage their face through facework behaviors--"the communicative strategies one uses to enact self-face and to uphold, support, or challenge another person's face" (Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Masumoto, & Takai, 2000, p. 398). Facework behaviors can be used to resolve, exacerbate, and avoid a conflict or to threaten or protect one's image.

The vulnerability of face is evident since face can be threatened in a number of ways. During negotiations between individuals or among groups, if the face of one is threatened their behavior is likely to shift from cooperation to competition. This shift reduces the possibility for agreement and/or increases the possibility of reaching a less-cooperative agreement (White et al., 2004).

The study of the variables that are conducive to face loss is important because face loss has direct consequences on incipient and continuing interpersonal interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kam & Bond, 2008); in negotiation between individuals and among groups; and in learning and knowledge sharing. Kam and Bond (2008) found that emotions and relation among groups of individuals deteriorates as face loss occur. The effect of face loss is greater especially among culturally diverse groups (i.e., Chinese and American cultures).

Last, the likelihood of face loss impacts learning processes and knowledge sharing. If face loss is likely to occur individuals may be unwilling to entertain differing opinions or unlikely to ask questions to learn something they do not know. Tong & Mitra (2009) found that, within the same culture, older group members were unwilling to entertain the opinions of younger members for fearing face loss and junior employees did not ask questions for fearing being perceived as weak.

### **Face Negotiation Theory**

Face negotiation theory explains the relation of conflict and face (Ting-Toomay, 1988). Face represents the public self-image or social image presented to others (Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Masumoto, Yokochi, Pan, & Wilcox, 2001; Brown & Levinson, 1987) and is brought by individuals into social encounters (Deutsch, 1961; Goffman, 1955). For Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998), face is the claimed sense of a favorable social self-worth and/or projected other-worth in social interactions.

Face is a vulnerable resource that represents an individual's claimed sense of positive image in the context of social interaction (Oetzel et al., 2000). During social interactions and when people focus on substantive issues conflict occurs and face is threatened. Face may be lost, saved, or protected, and every person may want to present and protect his/her own public images (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967; Ting-Toomey, 1988). When conflict occurs, face is covertly negotiated in most cases.

### **Facework Behaviors**

Public self-image is negotiated through facework behaviors. According to Oetzel et al. (2007), facework behaviors can be adopted during conflicts with such purposes as to resolve, exacerbate, or avoid conflict; to protect a person's image; to challenge another person's positions; or to manage shared social identity. Oetzel et al. (2001) identified 11 facework behaviors (Figure 1).

Type	Facework Behaviors
<b>Aggression:</b>	Insulting, hurting, or ridiculing another, telling the other that he/she is wrong or stupid.
<b>Problem Solve:</b>	Attempting to resolve a conflict through compromising or integrating viewpoints.
<b>Third Party:</b>	Involving an outside person to help to resolve the conflict.
<b>Apologize:</b>	Admitting that one made a mistake during the conflict and telling the other about it.
<b>Defend:</b>	Defending one's position without giving in.
<b>Respect:</b>	Showing sensitivity, being attentive, and listening to the other person.
<b>Pretend:</b>	Pretending the there is no conflict or that one is not upset or hurt by what has happened.
<b>Remain Calm:</b>	Trying to keep one's composure, stay calm, and unemotional during a conflict.
<b>Give In:</b>	Accommodating the other person and letting them win during the conflict.
<b>Express Emotions:</b>	Expressing how one is feeling without defending or attacking the other.
<b>Private Discussion:</b>	Refusing to talk about the problem in public.

**Figure 1. Facework Behaviors**

Facework behaviors are categorized in three groups (facework strategies):

*Integrating facework* deals with the resolution of conflict and the preservation of the relationship (maintain self-face and other-face) (Oetzel et al., 2000). This category includes the ‘private discussion’, ‘apologize’, ‘problem solve’, ‘remain calm’, ‘respect’, and ‘express emotions’ behaviors.

*Avoiding facework* focuses on maintaining the relationship by not directly dealing with the conflict (maintain the face of the other person) (Oetzel et al., 2000). This category includes the ‘third party’, ‘pretend’, and ‘give in’ behaviors.

*Dominating facework* refers to presenting a believable image with the idea to win the conflict (maintain oneself) (Oetzel et al., 2000). This category includes the ‘aggression’, ‘defend’, and ‘express emotions’ behaviors.

The behavior ‘express emotions’ is associated to the *dominating* and *integrating* facework strategies.

The concepts of face and facework help to determine the interests of individuals and the content of their messages in terms of a specific behavioral presence (Rogan and Hammer, 1994).

### The Influence of Gender on Teams

Gender plays a role in the nature of teams. Rodelberg and Rumery (1996) observed that team decision quality increases as the number of men increases in the team. Pelled (1996) found that teams with members from both genders display more relationship conflicts than teams that did not include both genders. Wood, Polek, and Aiken (1985) suggested that males generate more solutions to tasks where idea generation is required, while females generate better solutions to tasks where team consensus is required. Deeter-Schmetz, Kennedy, and Ramsey (2002) reported that gender mix influences team performance and that teams with members from the same gender are more effective than teams that include both genders. In essence, gender influences the interaction between members in a team.

### Conflicts

Conflict plays an important role in learning and occurs in any team (Petraglia, 1998). Three types of conflicts occur in their interactions:

*Relationship conflict* refers to the awareness of interpersonal incompatibilities, which includes such affective components as feeling tension, friction, animosity, and annoyance among members of the group (Jehn, 1995). The connection between relationship conflict and team performance is mostly negative (Jehn, 1997; De Jong et al., 2008; De Dreu & Weingart, 2002).

*Task conflict* refers to the awareness of the differences among group members in terms of viewpoints and opinions about the tasks being or to be performed (Jehn, 1995). Studies found positive and negative influence of task conflict on online discussions.

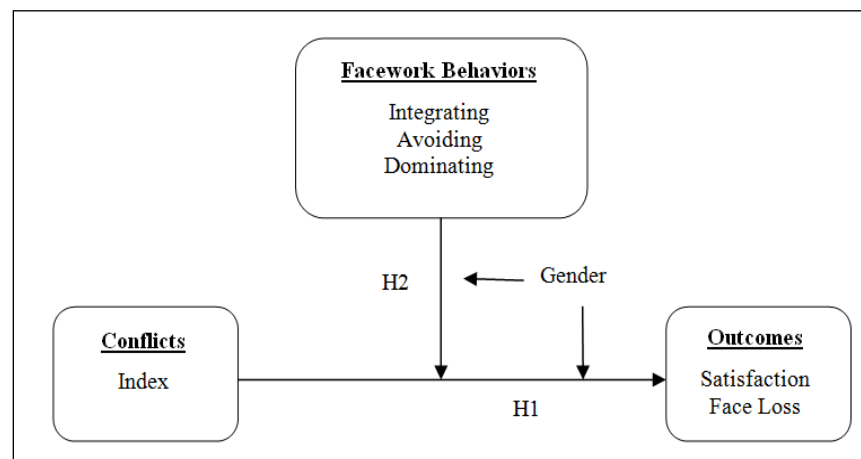
*Process conflict* refers to the controversies that arise in deciding such issues as how tasks are to be performed (Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

### Outcomes of Online Discussions

Three outcomes of online discussion are the focus of this study, satisfaction, team cohesion, and face loss. These outcomes are explored in relation to conflict and facework behaviors. Satisfaction has been frequently studied as an outcome of virtual teams (Powell, Piccoli & Ives, 2004; Martins, Gilson & Maynard, 2004, and Webster & Staples, 2006). Two types of satisfaction are considered, outcome satisfaction and process satisfaction. Face loss or the deterioration of one's social image (Kam & Bond, 2008), is considered given that when conflict arises face is threatened and negotiated through facework behaviors. Team cohesion is an important aspect that arises in the interaction of individuals in virtual teams (Powell et al., 2004; Martins et al., 2004; Webster and Staples, 2006) and is related to satisfaction (De Dreu & Weingart, 2002), thus for simplicity they were combined in this study.

### RESEARCH MODEL

This study analyses the influence of conflict on two outcomes of online discussions, satisfaction and face loss, the moderating effects of facework on the relation between conflict and outcomes, and the moderating effect of gender on the relation between conflict and outcomes and on the moderating effect of the choice of facework behaviors exhibited when conflict arises during online discussions (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Research Model**

From the research model, the following hypotheses are tested:

**H1:** Conflict influences the performance of participants in online discussion teams.

**H1.1:** Gender moderates the relation between conflict and the performance of participants in online discussion teams.

**H2:** Facework behaviors moderate the relation between conflict and the outcomes of online discussion teams.

**H2.1:** Gender moderates the moderating effect of facework behaviors on the relation between conflict and the outcomes of online discussion teams.

**METHODOLOGY**

One hundred and forty nine (149) undergraduate students participated in this study, 84 males (57 percent) and 65 females (43 percent). The age range of participants went from 19 to 38 years old (Mean = 22.97).

**Measures**

To measure the variables, items from existing instruments were used. Tables 1 through 6 list the nature and definition of each variable, the source of each instrument used, the number of items used, and the reliability scores for each item. Minor changes were made to adapt items to this study. The measure of satisfaction is expressed as an index calculated combining items for outcome satisfaction, process satisfaction, and team cohesion. The measure of conflict is expressed as an index calculated using the three types of conflict, relationship, task, and process (Table 5). The number of items to measure facework behaviors was reduced from the original 63 items 33 (Table 6). Last, gender (moderator variable) is included as an item in the final instrument.

<b>Dependent Variable</b>		
<b>Outcome satisfaction: participants' degree of satisfaction with the results of the team's work</b>		
Number of Items	Reliabilities Scores	
	Liu, Magjuka, and Lee (2008)	This study
4	.72	.90

**Table 1. Outcome Satisfaction**

<b>Dependent Variable</b>		
<b>Process satisfaction: the perceived satisfaction with general group functioning</b>		
Number of Items	Reliabilities Scores	
	Strijbos, Martens, Jochems, and Boers (2007)	This study
6	.71	.80

**Table 2. Process Satisfaction**

<b>Dependent Variable</b>		
<b>Face loss: the deterioration of one's social image (Kam and Bond, 2008).</b>		
Number of Items	Reliabilities Scores	
	Hui and Bond (2009)	This study
5	.82	.90

**Table 3. Face Loss**

<b>Dependent Variable</b>		
<b>Team cohesion: perceived level of group cohesion.</b>		
Number of Items	Reliabilities Scores	
	Strijbos, Martens, Jochems, and Boers (2007)	This study
10	.90	.98

**Table 4. Team Cohesion**

<b>Independent Variable</b>			
<b>Conflict: awareness of interpersonal incompatibilities (Jehn, 1995).</b>			
Type	Number of Items	Reliabilities Scores	
		Jehn and Mannix (2001)	This study
Relationship Conflict	3	.94	.83
Task Conflict	3	.94	.80
Process Conflict	3	.93	.82

**Table 5. Types of Conflicts**

<b>Moderator Variable</b>			
<b>Facework behaviors: communicative strategies one uses to enact self-face and to uphold, support, or challenge another person's face.</b>			
Strategy	Number of Items	Reliabilities Scores	
		Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001)	This study
Remain calm	3	.68	.59
Apologize	3	.82	.85
Private Discussion	3	.64	.63
Third Party	3	.81	.78
Defend	3	.82	.71
Aggression	3	.89	.90
Give in	3	.69	.62
Pretend	3	.75	.74
Express Emotions	3	.70	.76
Respect	3	.79	.76
Problem Solve	3	.89	.81

**Table 6. Facework Behaviors**

## Procedure

Study participants used an online discussion board to discuss a controversial topic. The topics selected for discussion were chosen for their likelihood of generating conflicts among discussion participants. Participants were randomly assigned to groups and were informed on the steps necessary to perform the assignment. Prior to the start of the discussion, participants received training on the concepts of face, conflict, and facework behaviors.

The discussion took place during a two-week period. After the period, only the survey and posts from participants who made at least 10 posts to the discussion board and who completed the survey were considered for analysis. Stepwise regressions were calculated to estimate the relation between the independent and dependent variables and the moderating effects.

## RESULTS

Results for the relation between conflict and two outcomes of online discussion, satisfaction and face loss, and the moderating effect of gender and facework behaviors in this relation are presented.

### Conflict, Satisfaction and the Effect of Gender

Conflict and gender together account for 12 percent of the variance in satisfaction; the higher the conflict index, the lower the satisfaction (Table 7). For females, conflict accounts for 21 percent of the variance in satisfaction; the higher the conflict index, the lower the satisfaction of females (Table 8). For males, the relation between conflict and satisfaction is not significant. A partial correlation between conflict and satisfaction, keeping face loss constant, indicates that, for females, the relation between conflict and satisfaction is significant,  $r = -.32$ ,  $p < .05$ , but, for males, the relation is not significant.

	B	SE B	$\beta$
Step 1			
Constant	7.61	.17	
Sex	.55	.26	.18*
Step 2			
Constant	8.75	.33	
Sex	.52	.25	.17*
Conflict	-.53	.13	-.32**

Note:  $R^2 = .029$  for Step 1,  $\Delta R^2 = .095$  for Step 2 (\* $\rho < .05$ , \*\* $\rho < .01$ )

**Table 7. Dependent Variable: Satisfaction. Both Genders**

	B	SE B	$\beta$
Constant	9.50	.37	
Conflict	-.63	.16	-.46*

Note:  $R^2 = .21$  (\* $\rho < .01$ )

**Table 8. Dependent Variable: Satisfaction. Females**

**Conflict and Face Loss and the Effect of Gender**

Conflict accounts for 15 percent of the variance in face loss; the higher the conflict index, the greater the face loss (Table 9). For males, conflict accounts for 11 percent of the variance in face loss (Table 10). For females, conflict accounts for 20 percent of the variance in face loss; for either of the gender, the higher the conflict index, the greater the face loss (Table 11). A partial correlation between conflict and face loss, keeping satisfaction constant, indicates that, for males and for females, the relation between conflict and face loss is significant,  $r = .30$ ,  $p < .05$  and  $r = .30$ ,  $p < .05$  respectively.

	B	SE B	$\beta$
Constant	.79	.17	
Conflict	.37	.07	.38

Note:  $R^2 = .15$  (\* $\rho < .01$ )

**Table 9. Dependent Variable: Face Loss. Both Genders**

	B	SE B	$\beta$
Constant	.89	.24	
Conflict	.31	.10	.32

Note:  $R^2 = .11$  (\* $\rho < .01$ )

**Table 10. Dependent Variable: Face Loss. Males**

	B	SE B	B
Constant	.71	.26	
Conflict	.43	.11	.45

Note:  $R^2 = .20$  (\*  $p < .01$ )

**Table 11. Dependent Variable: Face Loss. Females**

**Effect of Facework Behaviors**

To assess the moderating effect of facework behaviors on the relation between conflict and outcomes, three cross-products between conflict and facework strategies were calculated, Conflict×Avoiding, Conflict×Integrating, and Conflict×Dominating. To reduce the multicollinearity effect, variables were centered (Field, 2009).

**Integrating Facework Behaviors and Satisfaction**

Conflict and *integrating* facework behaviors account for 16 percent of the variance in satisfaction for males and females; the lower the conflict index and the higher the presence of *integrating* facework behaviors, the higher the satisfaction for both males and females, and for females, satisfaction is higher than for males (Table 12).

	B	SE B	B
Constant	6.39	1.03	
Sex (0: Male; 1: Female)	.42	.24	.14**
Conflict	-.46	.13	-.28*
Integrating	.66	.27	.19**

Note:  $R^2 = .16$  (\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ )

**Table 12. Moderator Effect. Dependent Variable: Satisfaction. Both Genders**

**Dominating Facework Behaviors and Face Loss**

Conflict and *dominating* facework behaviors account for 18 percent of variance in face loss for males and females; the higher the conflict index and the higher the presence of *dominating* facework behaviors, the higher the face loss (Table 13).

	B	SE B	B
Constant	-.29	.50	
Conflict	.36	.07	.37*
Dominating	.41	.18	.18**

Note:  $R^2 = .18$  (\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ )

**Table 13. Moderator Effect: Dependent Variable: Face Loss. Both Genders**

**Dominating Behaviors and Satisfaction**

*Dominating* facework behaviors account for 12 percent of the variance in satisfaction for males (Table 14).



	B	SE B	B
Constant	3.29	1.33	
Dominating	1.28	.39	.34*

Note:  $R^2 = .12$  (\*  $p < .01$ )

**Table 14. Moderator Effect. Dependent Variable: Satisfaction. Males**

**Conflict×Avoiding and Satisfaction**

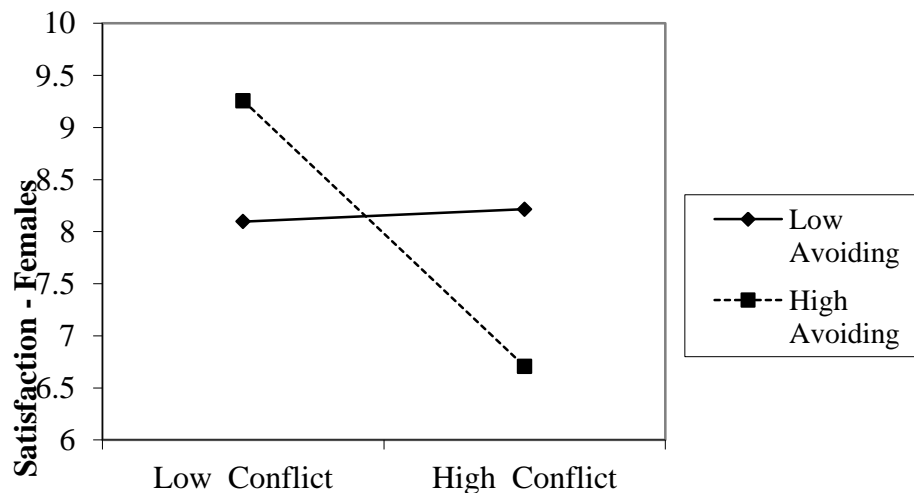
Conflict and the interaction Conflict×Avoiding predict satisfaction for females; the higher the conflict index the lower the satisfaction and the higher the interaction Conflict×Avoiding the lower the satisfaction for females (Table 15). The more conflict within a team, the lower the satisfaction for females. The interaction Conflict×Avoiding has a negative value (-.67), which suggest that the more females adopt *avoiding* facework behaviors, the lower the satisfaction for these females. In high conflict situations when females adopt *avoiding* facework behaviors their satisfaction is lower.

	B	SE B	B
Constant	9.38	.35	
Conflict	-.61	.15	-.44*
ConflictXAvoiding	-.67	.25	-.26**

Note:  $R^2 = .29$  (\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ )

**Table 15. Moderator Effect. Dependent Variable: Satisfaction. Females**

Figure 3 shows the effect of the level of the *avoiding* facework behaviors on the relations between conflict and satisfaction for females. Females adopting high levels of *avoiding* facework behaviors in high conflict situations have lower satisfaction, while females adopting lower levels of avoiding facework behaviors in high conflict situations have higher satisfaction.



**Figure 3. Interaction effect of level of the avoiding facework category on the relationship between conflict level and satisfaction for females.**

**Conflict×Integrating and Face Loss for Males**

Three variables predict face loss for males, namely conflict, the *integrating* facework behaviors category, and the interaction Conflict×Dominating, which account for 21% of the variance of face loss for males; the higher the conflict index in a team, the higher the face loss in males (Tables 16). The more males adopt *integrating* facework behaviors, the higher their face

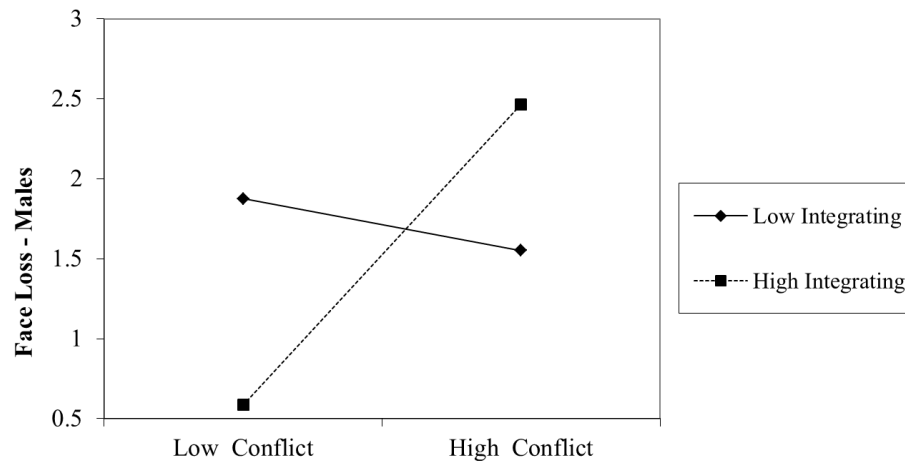
loss. The interaction  $\text{Conflicts} \times \text{Integrating}$  has a positive value (.15), which suggests that males adopting higher levels of *integrating* facework behaviors in high conflict situations have higher levels of face loss.

	B	SE B	B
Constant	-.43	.58	
Conflict	.39	.10	.29*
Integrating	.44	.19	.22**
ConflictXIntegrating	.55	.27	.22*

Note:  $R^2 = .21$  (\*  $\rho < .01$ , \*\*  $\rho < .05$ )

**Table 16. Moderator Effect. Dependent Variable: Face Loss. Males**

Figure 4 shows the effect of higher level *integrating* facework behaviors on the relation between conflict and face loss for males. Males adopting high levels of *integrating* facework behaviors in high conflict situations have higher face loss, while males adopting lower levels of *integrating* facework behaviors in high conflict situations have lower face loss. This suggests that when in conflict, the more males adopt integrating behaviors the more they experience face loss, while the less males adopt integrating behaviors the less they experience face loss.



**Figure 4. Interaction effect of level of the integrating facework category on the relationship between conflict level and face loss for males.**

**Conflict×Avoiding and Face Loss for Females**

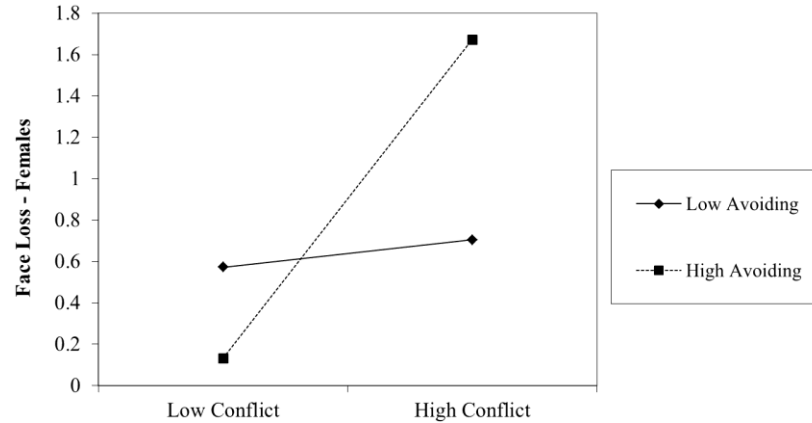
Two variables predict face loss for females, namely conflict and the interaction  $\text{Conflict} \times \text{Avoiding}$ , which account for 25% of the variance of face loss for females; the higher the conflict index in a team, the higher the face loss for females (Table 17). The more females adopt *avoiding* facework behaviors, the higher their face loss. The interaction  $\text{Conflict} \times \text{Avoiding}$  has a positive value (.35), which suggests that females adopting higher levels of *avoiding* facework behaviors in high conflict situations have higher levels of face loss.

	B	SE B	B
Constant	.77	.25	
Conflict	.42	.11	-.44*
ConflictXAvoiding	.35	.18	-.22**

Note:  $R^2 = .25$  (\*  $\rho < .01$ , \*\*  $\rho < .05$ )

**Table 17. Moderator Effect. Dependent Variable: Face Loss. Females**

Figure 5 shows the effect of the level of *avoiding* facework behaviors on the relation between conflict and face loss for females. Females adopting high levels of *avoiding* facework behaviors in high conflict situations have higher face loss, while females adopting lower levels of avoiding facework behaviors in high conflict situations have lower face loss. This suggest that when in conflict, the more females adopt avoiding behaviors, the more they experience face loss, while the less females adopt avoiding behaviors, the less they experience face loss.



**Figure 5. Interaction effect of level of the integrating facework category on the relationship between conflict level and face loss for females.**

Results for the moderating effect of facework behaviors in the relation between conflict and outcomes of online discussions indicate that facework behaviors do have effect on this relation.

## ANALISIS OF RESULTS

Results for the relation between conflict and the outcomes of online discussions (H1) suggest that conflict influences the satisfaction of females but not of males, and that conflict influences the face loss of both females and males. Results for the effect of gender in the relation between conflict and outcomes (H1.1) indicate that, for females only, gender moderates the relation between conflict and satisfaction, but does not have effect on the relation between conflict and face loss. These findings suggest that conflict partially influences the outcomes of online discussions and gender (females) partially moderates the relation between conflict and outcomes.

Results for the moderating effect of facework behaviors in the relation between conflict and outcomes of online discussions suggest that facework behaviors moderate the influence between conflict in online discussion (H2) and that gender (males in the case of satisfaction and females in the case of satisfaction and face loss) moderates the moderating effect of facework behaviors of the influence between conflict on the outcomes of online discussions (H2.1).

## DISCUSSION

This study investigated the relation between conflict and two outcomes of online discussions, satisfaction and face loss. It also explored the moderating effect of facework behaviors on the relation between conflict and the outcomes on online discussions and the effect of gender in this relation. The findings are that conflict influences the outcomes of online discussions and that gender (females) moderates the relation between conflict and outcomes; that the choice of facework behaviors moderate the influence between conflict and the outcomes of online discussion; and that gender (males in the case of satisfaction and females in the case of satisfaction and face loss) moderates the effect of facework behaviors on the influence between conflict and the outcomes of online discussion. Conflict influences the outcomes of online discussions, which means that the performance and behaviors of online discussion participants in term of their face loss and their satisfaction is affected when conflict arises.

Understanding the influence of conflict on face loss is relevant to: understanding interpersonal interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kam & Bond, 2008); identifying the type of behaviors that may occurs during negation between individuals and among groups (White et al., 2004); and understanding how learning and knowledge sharing between collaborating individuals and groups may be affected (Tong & Mitra, 2009). The results of this study further clarify the relation between conflict and face loss and the facework behaviors individuals adopt in situations where their face is threatened or when they

fear face loss. Additionally, this study further clarified the relation between conflict arising in online discussions and face loss and the effect that gender has in the facework behavior exhibited by individuals when conflict arises in discussion.

The findings are especially relevant to online learning environments. Conflict influences the performance of participants in online discussions and facework behaviors vary when conflict arises between participants in online discussions. Gender influences the selection of facework behavior adopted by participants in online discussions. Given that learning occurs when collaborating students encounter conflicts, engage into argumentation, and negotiate to produce a shared solution, findings of this study are important considerations when instructors in online learning environments design online discussion assignments.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study analyzed the influence of conflict on two outcomes of online discussions, satisfaction and face loss; the moderating effects of facework behaviors on the relation between conflict and outcomes; the moderating effect that gender has on the relation between conflict and outcomes and on the moderating effect that facework behaviors have in the relation between conflict and outcomes. The results indicate that 1) conflict influence the outcomes of online discussions; 2) facework behaviors moderate the relation between conflict and the outcomes of online discussions; and 3) gender influences the facework behaviors adopted by participants when conflict arises in discussions.

Prior research indicates that conflict arising in discussions has a positive effect on learning. Thus, the findings of this study are relevant to online learning environments. According to our findings, in order to obtain the benefits of online discussions in online learning, instructors should consider fostering certain level of conflict during discussions and should monitor the facework behaviors that participants adopt during these discussions. Also, to reduce the negative effect of conflict on satisfaction, conflict arising in online discussions should be monitored and moderated. Last, on assigning students to online discussion groups, instructors should consider the effect that gender has on the behaviors adopted by participants and on their satisfaction with the discussion.

## Limitations

The limitations are: 1) data was collected in an educational setting; which limits its relevance to other settings; 2) topics selected for discussion were limited to only those deemed suitable for educational setting; and 3) the media used during discussions, an online discussion board, allowed only for communication via written text.

## Future Research

Future studies should widen the age-range of participants to determine whether age modifies the influence of conflict on the outcomes of online discussions or whether the moderating effect of facework behaviors on the relation between conflict and outcome is affected. Also, future studies should investigate the effect of male- or female-only discussions groups to corroborate the finding related to the effect of gender on the relation between conflict and outcomes.

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