

Saving Face on Facebook: Impression Management as Motivation to Use Social Networks

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Use of social networks is ubiquitous. We contend that a catalyst for using social networks is defining and communicating one's identity to others. We build and justify a model that predicts motivations to use a social network in terms of users' perceptions of autonomy in using the social network, and their perceived control over their identity communication. We additionally model and justify the effects of perceived social benefits and need for self-esteem on the use of social networks. This unique model provides an interesting lens through which the phenomenon of social networks use can be examined. The completion of the proposed study should provide unique and interesting insights that inform our understanding of the phenomenon of social network use.

Keywords

Impression management, social media, social psychology, identity.

Introduction

Social networks have exploded in popularity in the last decade, with an estimated 73 percent of adults in the US now using a social network (Pew Research Center 2013) and Facebook.com boasting over 1.2 billion active users (Kiss 2014). As previously "unconnected" technologies are increasingly integrated into social networks, users are increasingly asked to represent themselves to the rest of the virtual world.

Because participation in these networks implicitly requires users to establish a sort of "virtual identity"—a virtual representation of themselves including pictures, usernames or pseudonyms, textual descriptions of themselves or their interests, etc.—individuals with whom a user interacts must interpret this identity and draw conclusions about the user. Whether the interpretations accurately represent the user's desired image depends partially on the amount of control the user has over how his/her identity is communicated to others, and the extent to which the network supports impression management activities.

Though the growing popularity of social networks has instigated an explosion of new and interesting research (Ganley and Lampe 2009; Khan and Jarvenpaa 2010; Krasnova et al. 2010; Lu and Hsiao 2010; Posey et al. 2010), few of these studies have explored use of these networks as fulfilling users' need for impression management. These networks constitute an important avenue through which impression management can occur, and little is yet known about what motivates users to use these networks to engage in impression management. The research question guiding this research, then, is *what factors influence a user's motivation to use social networks in the context of impression management?*

To investigate this question, we leverage recent information systems (IS) research exploring a new paradigm for designing effective systems (Jung et al. 2010; Zhang 2008a; Zhang 2008b). This new paradigm is based on the notion that people use information systems to fulfill various psychological, cognitive, social, and emotional needs. Two specific needs, specifically a need for autonomy and a need to represent the self, are the focus of this research. In particular, examining how social networks fulfill the user's need to create and represent the self via technology is our primary goal.

Related Literature

In the context of system design, psychological needs can be grouped into two broad categories (Zhang 2008a): the need to control your own interaction with a system (autonomy), and the need to define and create the self (self-identity). Autonomy, defined as “the need to experience choice in the initiation and regulation of behavior” (Reeve 2005, p. 106), has been included in various forms in several prominent theories in IS literature. Need for self-identity, or “one’s need for defining and representing the self” (Zhang 2008a, p. 146), has received substantially less attention. This is particularly surprising when we consider the rise in popularity of various social networks through which users are implicitly required to define and represent themselves to others with whom they interact.

Autonomy in IS Research

Several theories with aspects relating to autonomy bear mentioning. A steady stream of IS research has examined interactivity in various IS contexts (Burgoon et al. 1999; Chen and Yen 2004; Jiang et al. 2010; Liu 2003; Lowry et al. 2009). Though definitions vary (Lowry et al. 2009), most researchers define interactivity similar to “the degree to which users of a medium can influence the form and content of a mediated environment” (Steuer 1992, p. 80), and generally include, among other things, *choice* or *control* as an antecedent to the interactivity of a medium. Choice refers to one’s influence over a given interaction (Ha and James 1998; Lowry et al. 2009), and has obvious relevance to a study of autonomy. In online contexts, control is operationalized as the extent to which users can manage their browsing experience, with many options for navigation or the ability to view the content as they choose (Ghose and Wenyu 1998; Ha and James 1998; Jiang et al. 2010). In the context of computer-mediated communication, control is exemplified by the ability to submit text anonymously (Chen and Yen 2004) or to interrupt or be spontaneous during communication (Zack 1993). While interactivity, with its choice/control aspect, has been a topic of great interest to IS scholars, it is a complex construct that is poorly understood and lacks a clear definition (Jiang et al. 2010; Lowry et al. 2009). Furthermore, control has been examined primarily as a subconstruct of interactivity, with little attention paid to its direct effects on users’ motivations to use an information system in order to fulfill psychological needs.

A second framework, flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre 1989), also has aspects relating to users’ autonomy in systems design and use. In communication and technology interaction contexts, flow is a user’s perception that an interaction with a given medium is playful and exploratory (Trevino and Webster 1992). This theory has been applied to several IS contexts, most notably the online context (Arnold et al. 2008; Chin-Lung and Hsi-Peng 2004; Guo and Poole 2009; Korzaan 2003; Koufaris 2002). One primary construct from the flow framework is perceived control, or a user’s perception that he or she has control over the computer interaction (Webster et al. 1993). Again, this construct is clearly related to autonomy, but has been studied as a subconstruct of a larger concept. Little work has been done to singularly examine autonomy as a predictor of motivations to use an information system in the context of fulfilling the user’s psychological needs.

Note that we distinguish here between one’s need for *autonomy*, or the need to feel a sense of choice or control over an interaction, and one’s need for *self-efficacy*, usually defined as one’s belief in one’s ability to succeed in specific situations. The latter, while certainly conceptually related to (or perhaps even a precursor of) autonomy as we have defined it, departs from our goal of understanding the higher-level psychological needs being serviced by users’ interaction with social networks. IS theorists have aggressively pursued understanding of users’ feelings of (computer) self-efficacy and their effectiveness in predicting various systems-use outcomes (Compeau and Higgins 1995; Marakas et al. 1998; Thatcher and Perrewe 2002). Extensive research has also been performed regarding *perceived ease of use*, a construct from the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis 1989) defined as “the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of effort” (p. 320). Venkatesh (2000) proposed, among other things, elements of control as antecedents to perceived ease of use. In this context, control was separated into internal control (computer self-efficacy), or a user’s ability to effectively use a system, and external control, or facilitating conditions encouraging a user’s self-efficacy. Both of these aspects of control contribute to the idea that a user will not find a system easy to use unless he or she perceives him or herself as able to use the system. A key distinction here is that we focus not on a user’s perception that he

or she will be able to effectively use the system, but instead on the user's perception that he or she has control or choice during the interaction.

In summary, concepts relating to autonomy have surfaced in several prominent IS theories. This stems from the fact that most interactions with a system require the user to have some feeling of ability or control in order for the user to have a positive experience. The necessity of control over one's actions has thus been an accepted part of IS theories for years. In this research, however, the concept of control is reframed and examined as a psychological motivator in the form of autonomy. Together with defining the self, these two psychological needs are theorized to produce increases in user motivation to use a system.

Identity Communication in IS Research

IS researchers have paid less attention to the notion of "defining the self," as suggested by Zhang (2008a). This notion implies that individuals have a psychological need to both create and present their version of "self" to others. In social networks, this presentation of self becomes particularly salient. Though social networks continue to be used extensively, relatively little work has been done to understand this important phenomenon. There are several related topics that have received attention, however. Several researchers have acknowledged the personal home page as an effective form of self-presentation (Döring 2002; Schau and Gilly 2003; Wynn and Katz 1997). Avatars are an obvious self-representation method in technology-mediated environments, and there has been some limited research on avatars in the context of identity communication (e.g., Messinger et al. 2008; Nowak and Rauh 2005).

One area that has received several references to identity communication is online communities. Blanchard and Markus (2004) highlight identity communication features such as signatures as important in explaining online community participation. Shin and Kim (2010) found self-presentation in several online communities to significantly predict knowledge contribution. Most notably, Ma and Agarwal (2007) introduced the concept of identity verification to the online communities literature. They term this construct *perceived identity verification*, and define it as "perceived confirmation from other community members of a focal person's belief about his identities" (p. 46). Their final model includes three specific artifacts of the online community that support identity verification—virtual copresence, self-presentation, and deep profiling. The online community's ability to facilitate these activities is therefore related to users' feelings that their identities are known and understood by others in the online community. This verification was shown to significantly impact both satisfaction and knowledge contribution.

The research on online communities is particularly relevant to our present topic. These previous researchers have shown some of the positive outcomes that result from users being enabled to communicate their "self" to other users in technology-mediated environments. What have not been effectively explored, however, are the motivations that cause a user to *want* to manage impressions and express an identity to others. In other words, why do a technology's impression management capabilities matter to users? This gap in the IS literature leaves unexplored several individual-level characteristics (e.g., self-esteem) that may impact the extent to which impression management capabilities are important to users.

To review, we have investigated previous literature that has examined two of the psychological needs proposed by (Zhang 2008a), namely the need for autonomy and the need to define and create the self. We leverage Zhang's design principles to help answer our research question regarding whether a network's impression management capabilities will affect user motivations to use a social network. Before building and justifying a research model, however, we provide background information on identity and identity communication through technology.

Impression Management – Identity Communication via Technology

Theories regarding identity are numerous and well established. Identity is defined as "the individual's self-appraisal of a variety of attributes along the dimensions of physical and cognitive abilities, personal traits and motives, and the multiplicity of social roles including worker, family member, and community citizen" (Whitbourne and Connolly 1999, p. 28). This definition implies that identity consists of both personal and social aspects, or the self and the "social self" (Brewer 1991). Thus, an identity is one's

mental model of himself both in terms of who he is (i.e., characteristics that make him unique or identifiable) and to which groups he belongs (e.g., cultural, religious or familial affiliations).

Once an identity is formed, an individual desires to communicate or present that identity to others in order to provide an impression consistent with the individual's goals. Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory underscores this point, arguing that in any social setting, individuals are in a constant state of impression management, desiring to convey and manage an "act" for others. Goffman also argues that this impression management takes place in both direct interactions and, important for our purposes, mediated interactions (Goffman 1967).

Self-presentation in technology-mediated situations has several unique nuances that bear mentioning. First, consistent with Social Presence Theory (Short et al. 1976), technology-mediated communication lacks many cues present in non-mediated communication, restricting the communicator in his/her social influence. When the "actor" is not physically present with his/her audience, it is more difficult (or often impossible) to perceive and respond to nonverbal cues to ensure the desired impression. Thus, impression management via technology (e.g., a social network) can be less effective than in person. On the other hand, following the logic of Media Synchronicity Theory (MST; Dennis et al. 2008), some aspects of technology might be beneficial to impression management. Two key antecedents in MST, rehearsability and reprocessability, both relate to asynchronous communication (which describes most technology-mediated self-presentation), wherein sender and receiver are able to think carefully about, and fully process, messages being communicated. Thus, impression management through technologies may also be more effective in some cases. In both situations, it is evident that it is particularly crucial for users to be able to control the presentation of their identity information to others—i.e., to feel that they are *able* to engage in impression management.

Another issue associated with impression management via technology is the relative permanence of technology-mediated identity information. Ma and Agarwal (2007, p. 51) refer to "deep profiling" in online communities, referring to the recording capabilities of most social networks, where past interaction activity, personal information, and other data are recorded long-term and accessible to other members of the community. As found by Ma and Agarwal, this stored information can be useful in building cohesion in an online community. But such capabilities are also problematic in terms of self-presentation. For example, users of Facebook can upload pictures and "tag" their friends, after which that picture is associated with the tagged user's profile, available for future viewers to see and interpret. Depending on the content of the picture, the user may or may not feel that it represents his/her desired identity. User profiles on online social networks have been found to directly influence others' perceptions of them (Bohnert and Ross 2010). This is less of an issue in face-to-face impression management, in which an individual's identity information is less permanent (restricted to memory of past direct interactions or hear-say from others who have had direct interaction with the individual). Control of identity-related information, current or past, is thus crucial in technology-mediated environments.

In addition, identity information often has broader reach in technology-mediated environments. In face-to-face impression management, an individual is generally perfectly aware of who he/she is communicating with regarding his/her identity (i.e., the people in the immediate vicinity). In technology-mediated identity communication, the individual is unaware of who will see and interpret identity information. This presents specific problems, for example, when online social networks are used to screen candidates for professional job openings. Recruiters may interpret college students' social networking profiles in ways unintended by the students (Bohnert and Ross 2010). Again, allowing users control over identity communication (i.e., the ability to engage in impression management) should be an important precursor to users' motivation and willingness to engage with a social network. This capability is the focus of the hypotheses within the research model introduced in the section that follows.

In summary, a substantial amount of IS research has validated users' need for autonomy in using social networks. Minimal IS research has focused on users' needs regarding the communication of identity via technology. There exists a need to better understand the importance of impression management capabilities in determining whether users are willing and motivated to use social networks. We thus develop a research model and propose specific hypotheses in the next section to explain users' social network-use motivation in the context of impression management.

Theory Development and Research Model

Our research model, shown in Figure 1, merges concepts from two streams of research. First, the two psychological needs proposed by Zhang (2008b) are instantiated as perceived control of the system interaction and perceived control of identity communication. These are hypothesized as directly and positively impacting users' motivation to use social networks. Next, we discuss and incorporate determinants of impression management behavior as additional predictors of users' motivation to use social networks, under the assumption that all use of these networks constitutes some form of impression management behavior. The result is a concise and original model that is tailored to the unique motivations present in social computing.

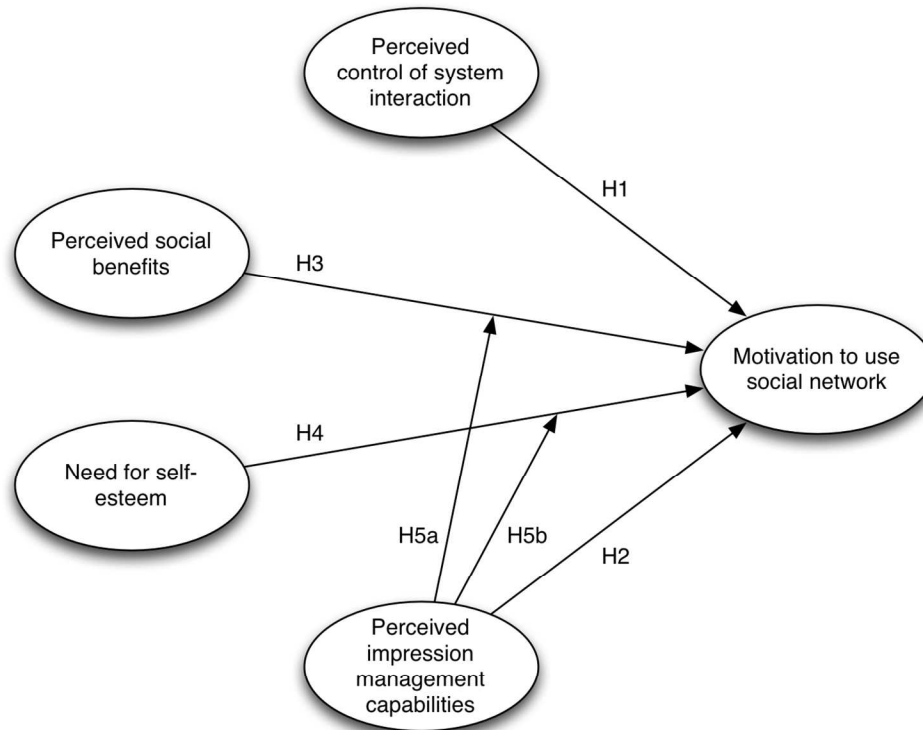


Figure 1 - Research Model

Instantiating Autonomy – Perceived Control

Autonomy is most effectively discussed in the context of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, and the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations is rooted in self-determination theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan 1985). SDT places extrinsic and intrinsic motivation along a continuum of self-determination, with extrinsic motivation being the least self-determined motivation, and intrinsic motivation being the most purely self-determined form of motivation. It is at the most self-determined end of the spectrum where interest/enjoyment serve as the primary motivators (Ryan and Deci 2000)¹. Reeve (2005) notes

¹ Ryan and Deci (2000) indicate that there are four degrees of extrinsic motivation, each with an increasing degree of self-determination. In addition, they characterize “amotivation” at the extreme low end of the self-determination continuum, representing a total lack of motivation (i.e., apathy). For brevity, we focus solely on the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation as informed by SDT.

that “the amount of self-determination within any motivational state has a substantial effect on what people feel, think, and do” (p. 153). It follows that intrinsic motivation, as the most self-determined type, is the most powerful motivator. Thus, the more autonomy or control a user feels in his or her interaction with the social network, the more (intrinsically) motivated the user will be to use that social network.

Although impression management capabilities are the primary focus of this research, we include in our model an element of autonomy, as has been included in previous IS research. As reviewed, there has been ample research that establishes the positive effects of users’ perceptions of autonomy or control over their interactions with a social network. Theories of interactivity (Burgoon et al. 1999) in the form of *choice*, flow (Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre 1989) in the form of *control*, and TAM (Davis 1989) in the form of *perceived ease of use*, incorporate this concept in their predictions of use or acceptance of an IS. We include a similar construct in our model in order to completely leverage Zhang’s (2008a) design principle regarding psychological needs, which include both autonomy and defining the self. Accordingly, we first hypothesize:

H1: A user’s perceived control of their interaction with a social network will positively affect the user’s motivations to use the social network.

Representing the Self – Identity Communication Capabilities

Individuals perceive themselves as embodying certain traits, values, abilities, and interests—in short, an identity. This identity is constructed from experiences and from reflections on those experiences (Reeve 2005). People also have a need for uniqueness (Fromkin 1970). Thus, representing the unique attributes that make up oneself is a primary goal in self-presentation (Goffman 1959).

The presentation of self via technology has been seen in a number of contexts. Personal Web pages have been labeled as an effective medium for self-expression (Döring 2002). Likewise, customizable signatures (Blanchard and Markus 2004) and self-selected avatars (Nowak and Rauh 2005) in online communities are another form of communication of the user’s identity. Another example of identity communication is the ability of a user to customize his/her profile on an online social network (e.g. select a profile picture on Facebook). These features support the user in communicating his/her identity to other users, as well as in managing that identity (i.e., engaging in impression management). Such capabilities should accordingly have a positive effect on users’ motivation to use and engage with the social network, which use is primarily an exercise in impression management. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H2: A user’s perceived control of identity communication will positively affect the user’s motivations to use a social network.

Motivations to Engage in Impression Management

Goffman (1967) suggests that impression management takes place any time a person is in the presence of others. We follow this logic and extend it to the social presence afforded by social networks, thus assuming that as users communicate information about themselves within social networks, they are implicitly engaging in impression management. Framed in this way, motivations to use a social network can be at least partially explained by traditional predictors of impression management behavior. We draw from the impression management literature to hypothesize two such effects.

First, Leary and Kowalski (1990) suggest that people may be motivated to engage in impression management in order to derive social benefits. The justification for this claim rests in the expectancy-value framework proposed by Schlenker (1980), which frames the motivation to engage in impression management as a value assessment wherein the image(s) that people tend to communicate are those that provide the biggest reward for their communication cost. Such social rewards for projecting one’s identity can include approval, friendship, assistance, power, etc. (Leary and Kowalski 1990).

In the context of social networks use, one can easily see how perceived social benefits constitute a primary motivation for use of these networks. For example, a Facebook user might carefully post a steady stream of humorous statements for his friends to view, intending to project the impression that he is funny, likable, and so on. Likewise, a user may limit his or her social networking posts to only those that imply she is a model student who constantly studies and achieves high grades in all her classes. It is quite

possible that much, if not most, of users' motivations to use a social network are derived from the perceived social benefits available to users through social network use. We thus hypothesize that:

H3: A user's perceived social benefits from using a social network will positively affect the user's motivations to use the social network.

A second motivation for impression management is that of self-esteem maintenance. Individuals are motivated to increase their self-esteem (Jones 1973; Rogers and Koch 1959; Rosenberg 1986), and such can be achieved through their perception that they have made a "good" impression on others (Schneider 1969). How does successful impression management positively impact self-esteem? There are many possible answers to this question (Darley and Goethals 1980; Filter and Gross 1975; Reis and Gruen 1976), but one particularly helpful perspective is found in existential social psychology literature.

Ernest Becker (1962; 1973), explains the relationship between self-esteem and impression management. Humans develop self-esteem as an anxiety buffer—a mechanism that insulates an individual against the fear of inevitable death. As self-esteem is bolstered, an individual feels that life has a meaning or purpose (Becker labels this "heroism"), and concerns of death are allayed sufficiently to allow the person to function as a normal, effective human being. Part of an individual achieving this heroism, however, includes projecting his identity to relevant others in order to receive validation and approval. As an identity is successfully conveyed to others, and as others approve of the identity and respond in culturally prescribed ways, self-esteem is reinforced. Thus, individuals with a need for self-esteem (including those whose self-esteem has been recently threatened in some way) should have a greater motivation to use social networks for identity communication; they will be more apt to project their identity information to others for the potential to receive approval (Schneider 1969). We thus hypothesize that:

H4: A user's need for self-esteem will positively affect the user's motivations to use a social network.

Though perceived social benefits and need for self-esteem likely impact users' motivations to use social networks, these relationships should be affected by the extent to which the social network effectively supports impression management behaviors. In other words, users may perceive social benefits and the potential for increased self-esteem from using social networks, but if a particular network does not effectively enable users to manage impressions, this should reduce the extent to which these factors affect the users' motivations. As an example, consider a hypothetical Facebook-like social network that allows its users little control over what others posted to their profile or what photos the user was tagged in (i.e., they could not effectively manage the impression they were projecting). Though there might be social benefits from using the service, users would likely be hesitant to create and maintain a profile for fear that the image they desired to project would slip out of their control. Likewise, while they may have a need for self-esteem, such a social network would not present an attractive method through which to achieve self-esteem, as the reinforcing mechanisms of positive impression management would not be guaranteed. This suggests a moderating relationship wherein a network's effective impression management capabilities constitute a necessary condition for users' perceived social benefits and self-esteem maintenance activities to be realized in increased use of the social network. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H5a: Perceived impression management capabilities moderate the effect of perceived social benefits on users' motivations to use a social network, such that increasingly capable systems facilitate a stronger effect of perceived social benefits on users' motivations to use the social network.

H5b: Perceived impression management capabilities moderate the effect of need for self-esteem on users' motivations to use a social network, such that increasingly capable networks facilitate a stronger effect of need for self-esteem on users' motivations to use the social network.

Proposed Methodology

We will employ a quasi-experimental design using modern Structural Equation Modeling to examine the relationships proposed in our hypotheses. Specifically, reflective survey measures of user perceptions will be paired with a self-esteem threat experimental condition. While valid measures of (general) self-esteem have been used for decades, hypotheses 4 and 5b can be much more effectively tested with an induced

threat to self-esteem within an experimental framework. These hypotheses relate, respectively, to the effect on motivations to use a social network of a user's need for self-esteem and of the interaction between this construct and the perceived impression management capabilities of the social network. Individuals will vary in their level and need for self-esteem from day to day, and randomly assigning participants to a self-esteem threat condition will allow us to very specifically examine the effect of this construct vis-à-vis the other measured constructs.

Sample

The model will be tested with subjects recruited from undergraduate and graduate courses at a large university in the United States. Student subjects are appropriate for this context, since they are heavy users of the Internet and social media (Jones 2009). Student samples are also beneficial for experimental procedures, since they tend to be homogenous and provide maximal control over the experimental manipulations (Dennis and Valacich 2001).

Measurement

Wherever possible, measures will be adapted from prior research. Measures for motivation to use a social network will be operationalized as one's intentions towards continued use, and will be adapted from Kim et al. (2008). Measures for perceived social benefits will be adapted from Ellison et al. (2007), and those for perceived control of the interaction from Liu (2003). We will also measure and include several control variables, including Internet experience, and computer self-efficacy, as well as demographic variables such as age and gender. To aid in assessing the validity of our results, we will additionally include measures of self-esteem to provide manipulation checks for the self-esteem threat manipulation described in the next section.

Measures for perceived impression management capabilities will be developed following modern measures development and validation procedures. Prior literature on scale development procedures (MacKenzie et al. 2011) will be followed closely, including conceptual definition, measure development and refinement through pilot-testing. After initial pilot-testing, the measures will be included in this proposed study in order to cross-validate and further refine the scale.

Experimental Procedure

In a pre-survey several weeks before the experiment, we will obtain participants' consent and then, following the procedures described by Greenberg et al. (1992), ask them to complete a fake psychological assessment with a number of items appearing to quantify and categorize features of the participant's personality. In doing so, we will also collect other control and demographic variables as needed. The participants will then be scheduled to participate in the experiment. The participants will be informed that the purpose of the study is to better understand how individual personality factors help us understand why people use Facebook or other social media technologies. The participants will be randomly assigned to either a self-esteem threat or a control condition. Those in the self-esteem threat condition will be provided a negative evaluation of the psychological assessment completed as a part of the pre-survey task, while those in the control condition will be provided a neutral evaluation, again following Greenberg et al. (1992). Participants will then complete a survey that includes measures of the remaining constructs in the model.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to provide new insights into individuals' use of social networks. Specifically, we propose that a primary motivation for using social networks is to define and communicate one's identity to others. Using the motivational framework proposed by Zhang (2008a; 2008b), we build and justify a model that predicts motivations to use a social network in terms of users' perceptions of autonomy in using the social network, and their perceived control over their identity communication. We additionally model and justify the effects of two potential predictors of social network use derived from impression management

literature—perceived social benefits and need for self-esteem. This unique model provides an interesting lens through which the phenomenon of social networks use can be examined. The completion of the proposed study should provide unique and interesting insights that inform our understanding of the phenomenon of social network use.

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