

## **The self in online communities: protecting and promoting the ego**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Prior research has emphasized the value of social networks in bringing a community of people together to develop and enhance friendships in a digital space. Social networks can serve as a type of online consumption community when the group of consumers share an interest in a specific consumption activity. In our study, we focus on gamers engaging in the activity of play as a source of entertainment. This community interacts in both offline and online spaces, though our focus is on the online interactions. Social networks add another dimension to relationships that exist offline, providing network members with a tool for connecting and self-presentation online. This research utilizes 18 in-depth interviews to explore the tools that members use to craft a desired social self in the online communal space. Our research suggests that social networks create an environment where community members will engage in ego maintenance strategies to present and preserve their desired social self. We identify three primary motivations underlying the desire to protect the ego: a need for respect, a need to feel secure, and a need for acceptance. To manage these motivations, community members employ both self-protecting and self-promoting strategies through various self-regulation techniques.

**Keywords:** Self-concept, online community, ego maintenance, self-promotion, consumer behavior

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“Through pride we are ever deceiving ourselves. But deep down below the surface of the average conscience a still, small voice says to us, something is out of tune.”  
— C.G. Jung

## INTRODUCTION

With the emergence and rapid growth of social networking, consumption communities have the tools to convene in both offline and online spaces. This research examines online interactions within a consumption community via social networking. In social networks, the self is continually on display, and popular peer-to-peer platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat evoke a constant self-monitoring among community members, particularly with community members who regularly interact in offline venues. The preoccupation with self-presentation in an online consumption community is the focus this study. An online consumption community is a group of consumers who share a common interest in a specific consumption activity and convene online to connect, share knowledge, collaborate, and support one another.

This study is conducted within the context of Facebook, as it is the largest social networking site, with world-wide usage at more than 2.25 billion monthly active members (Facebook 2018). Research shows at least 75% of adults who use the Internet are using social media sites (Stephen and Galak 2010; Urstadt 2008). Social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, have historically attracted more than 90% of young adults and teens and represent over a quarter of all Internet traffic (Trusov, Bodapati, and Bucklin 2010). An important functionality of social networking sites is that they allow consumption communities to easily form online to embellish offline interactions. Individual members within the online community have the ability to filter and manage their self-presentation.

This study examines the activities of gamers engaging in play through social networking. While these community members may engage in other online activities with individuals who share different interests, this research is focused on the interactions within a specific consumption context. The online communal element creates a heightened sense of self-presentation evaluation where members feel like their self-image is continually on display and subject to judgments within the community.

Research suggests that the self has multiple dimensions (Rosenberg 1979), and according to Sirgy (1982) there are three main distinctions: the actual self, the ideal self and the social self. The actual self is how a person perceives herself; the ideal self is how a person would like to perceive herself; and the social self refers to how a person presents herself to others. In this paper we focus on the management of the social self within the context of an online consumption community maintained through the regular usage of Facebook. Social media fosters a context where every comment, photograph, or shared artifact is evaluated by others and these social platforms exemplify a personal reflection of the ideals and character that make up the individual. Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) find that an individual's behavior is directed by the desire to protect and enhance the self. Moreover, an individual's motivations to protect versus promote her ego can directly influence the type of self-regulation employed (Higgins 2002).

Research has shown that self-regulation is a critical component of self-presentation, in that one must select the appropriate image and then convey it in a given context (Leary and Kowalski 1990; Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco 2005). Successful self-regulation allows individuals to maintain ego balance through positive reinforcement of behaviors well accepted by others while obfuscating behaviors that may be less desirable. Although social networking

sites like Facebook were created using an others-centric model premised upon the notion of building and maintaining relationships (Wohn et al. 2011), recent research shows that social networking sites more closely resemble an ego-centric model that bolsters the self (Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten 2006). Simply put, the ego-centric model says "Look at me. Look up to me" whereas the others-centric model says "Look at her. Look at him. Let's be friends." Increasingly, the focus of social networking usage is shifting from interacting with others to presenting a desired social self.

The purpose of the present research is to extend our knowledge of the self-concept by examining ego maintenance as a form of conspicuous self-presentation within an online consumption community, where every element is chosen for its symbolic reflection of the member. This research is guided by three overarching research questions: 1) Are online consumption community members experiencing ego maintenance concerns? 2) What strategies do members employ to maintain the ego? and 3) How do such behaviors affect the member's social self-concept?

In the following sections, the literature on social networks, self-presentation, and impression management is reviewed, followed by a discussion of the method, which uses the tenants of narrative research as a form of qualitative inquiry (Belk 1988; Spiggle 1994). The goal of the depth interviews is to attain first-person narratives regarding the decision processes that inform self-presentation choices. The transcript analysis provides insights to the social influences and social norms that guide presentation of the self in the context of an online consumption community. Next, the findings are presented and discussed in terms of societal and cultural implications. We conclude with a summary of marketing implications and future research directions.

## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

### Ego Maintenance

The ego is a reflexive mental construct (McCannell 2002). According to Freud and Lacan, the ego is part of one's identity and its singular drive is to keep itself whole; consequently, the ego's greatest fear is dismemberment or dissolution (Freud 1952; Lacan 1988). When the ego is threatened, its imbalance is what gives meaning to anti-social behaviors such as paranoia, envy, or greed. In fact, people engage in self-regulated thinking almost constantly, even when they are not dealing with a situation or problem for which self-relevant thought is needed (Leary and Tangney 2011). The pervasive nature of online consumption communities, fostered via social networking platforms such as Facebook, generates considerable self-thought with regard to the image being projected, even when the individual is not online.

Self-regulation has been conceptualized in previous literature as one's ability to alter the self's responses to attain an end goal (Baumeister and Vohs 2007; Heatherton and Baumeister 1996; Higgins 1997; Leary and Kowalski 1990; Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco 2005). Through self-regulation, a member of an online consumption community can carefully construct and convey an image to many diverse members simultaneously to successfully meet varied expectations. In a social network context, members self-regulate to craft an appropriate image by sharing desirable pieces of information (e.g., announcement of a job promotion) while withholding other, less desirable information (e.g., unflattering pictures) (Berg and Derlega 1987; Kelly and McKillop 1996). The crafting of self-presentation is used to regulate one's self-

esteem in two ways. Reinforcing behaviors, such as compliments, “Likes”, and praise from the viewing audience bolster the ego; in contrast, members may feel they fail to meet their audience’s expectations when such gestures are not received or when shared items are met with criticism, thus unbalancing the ego (Leary and Kowalski 1990; Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten 2006). Social network members frequently monitor and modify the images they portray to others in their network to maintain ego balance.

### **Social Networks as a Form of Online Consumption Community**

Social networks can serve as virtual communing spaces for consumption communities. Consumption communities consist of a group of consumers who share an interest in a particular consumption activity. Social networks allow members to display their own personality and uniqueness to others in the community through pictures, comments, activities, and associations (Schau and Gilly 2003; Trusov, Bodapati, and Bucklin 2010). In essence, community members have the ability to continuously self-present without the temporal and geographical limitations of the non-digital world, providing consumption communities another tool for engaging and interacting with one another. In comparison, personal websites and blogs are widely used to provide a ‘slice of life’ to audiences who find interest in the author’s perspective. Because the audience isn’t necessarily known to the author, the author may enjoy a sense of anonymity and share activities or stories without the concern of disappointing those who know her in real life.

In contrast, social networks consist of members crafting personal images to be displayed and updated for other members in the community. Communities of this nature are designed to be a digital extension of one’s real life activities. For instance, access to the social network must be granted by members in offline contexts, thereby creating a more intimate and personalized community. Within the context of the community, an individual may emphasize a certain aspect of her life, share a more comprehensive and personalized image, and receive immediate feedback from other members.

In this study, we consider a social networking site to be a form of online consumption community according to the following criteria: (1) the community is comprised of a list of members with whom they participate in a common consumption activity, (2) community members share knowledge, collaborate, and support each other via a widely used, publicly available portal, and (3) community members consume and produce member generated content (Boyd and Ellison 2008; Trusov, Bodapati, and Bucklin 2010). Members often carefully select personal information for display to cast themselves in a particular light to portray a desired image to their community, while avoiding or minimizing topics that may be considered controversial or less flattering. As an example, politically motivated messages may be met with comments of agreement or support from one member while also being viewed as inflammatory by another member. Though some members may not see an issue with discussing controversial positions in an open forum, other members find controversy to be unsettling, and thus avoid discussing issues that divide the audience.

Research shows that an important motivation for engaging in social networking sites is self-construal, and that the culture of the community plays a significant role in influencing the communication of psychological attributes, individuating information, and the quantity of self-descriptive expression (DeAndrea, Shaw, and Levine 2010; Jang Hyun, Min-Sun, and Yoonjae 2010). In addition, research shows that a vast majority of relationships in a social network also exist in an offline capacity (Jenkins-Guarnieri, Wright, and Hudiburgh 2012; Wohn et al. 2011).

While some members may participate in a social network to enrich offline relationships, others use social networks to learn something new, build relationships with brands, and/or otherwise be entertained (McCann 2010). The types of online activities available for members to engage in are extensive, and the value of social networks derived by consumers is equally as diverse. Thus, community members may participate in a number of non-related online communities through the same social network portal.

### **Self-Presentation and the Social Self**

Membership in online consumption communities can represent diverse subgroups within a member's offline affiliations, including family, high school friends, college fraternity members, business associates, church members, and even fellow hobby enthusiasts to name a few. Prior research by Kozinets et al. (2010) suggests that a member's credibility is lost when an individual does not remain true to her values. And while one's core values may remain stable across relationships; these values may be emphasized differently depending on the context of the relationship. Effective self-regulation allows individuals to integrate into a group by emphasizing the characteristics that are relevant to the role the individual plays in that group. When different offline affiliations merge together into one communal context (e.g., Facebook), individuals have a propensity to experience internal conflict due to the inability to satisfy the disparate expectations of members simultaneously (Biddle 1986). Goffman (1963; p. 138) suggests that such "discrepancies between virtual and actual identity ... give rise to the need for tension management ... and information control". As such, individuals tend to present different facets of themselves in different settings. These facets are often referred to as identities (Goffman 1959).

Identity has been conceptualized as the tension between how a person identifies herself as an individual and how she associates with others in affiliative relationships (Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993; Schau and Gilly 2003). Individual identity has been studied in the psychology literature as self-concept, conceptualized as the perception one has of herself and the sum of all unique characteristics she possesses (Sirgy 1982). In contrast, affiliative identities have been emphasized in sociological literature and refer to the roles that one assumes while interacting with differing audiences (Belk 1988; Goffman 1959; Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993). James (1925) suggests that we have as many different social selves as we do distinct groups of individuals we interact with. Social identities are used to guide our interactions with others and assist in determining the salient personality characteristics that are acceptable for a given situation.

Self-presentation is an integral component of oneself used to display a public identity to others (Baumeister 1982; Goffman 1959). Personality characteristics remain stable over time, though an audience often influences the choice of characteristics manifested. When interacting with others, individuals engage in complex intraself negotiations to select an appropriate role to play for a given audience. These various roles do not exist in a vacuum; individuals are capable of playing multiple roles simultaneously (e.g. Arnett, German, and Hunt 2003). However, some roles can explicitly conflict with one another such that meeting the core expectations of one role will require falling short of the core expectations of another role (e.g. Heide and Wathne 2006; Price and Arnould 1999). For example, to be a dedicated employee may require one to remain at work later than normal working hours, though this may distinctly conflict with being a dedicated and dependable parent.



Identity salience is an important part of understanding how individuals negotiate role conflict. Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) suggest that while individuals enact multiple identities, all identities are not of equal importance. Identities are placed in a hierarchical order, such that when role conflict emerges, the more important identity will guide selection of the role. Individuals may also use various self-regulating strategies to present distinct identities to different groups, and when “role and audience segregation is well managed, [the individual] can quite handily sustain different selves” (Goffman 1963; p. 63).

In online consumption communities fostered via social networking sites like Facebook, enacting the appropriate identity can prove much more challenging. As a member’s network size, interests, and relationship diversity increases, the ability to minimize undesirable qualities while simultaneously emphasizing desirable (and possibly contradictory) qualities becomes quite daunting. However, the consequences of displaying behaviors deemed unacceptable by a subset of the member’s online consumption community are substantial when the member’s online- and offline-world collide. The present research seeks to understand the drivers of ego-maintenance strategies employed by members as well as the techniques used to manage various roles simultaneously in a social network.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To explore ego maintenance concerns and strategies employed to maintain the ego in online consumption communities, in-depth interviews were conducted with a heavy usage segment of Facebook participants—social network gamers. Using a case study approach, the online consumption community is bounded by gamers interacting with other gamers through virtual play via Facebook. Community members are united through the consumption of games.

Members interact in online contexts. Interviews were conducted via purposive sampling before and during fieldwork, and throughout post field coding and further analysis, we immersed ourselves in the literature that addresses self-presentation, self-regulation, the social self, and the ego. Following the description of our data collection process, we discuss the analytical procedures undertaken to develop themes related to impression management concerns as well as the solutions employed to alleviate these concerns.

### **In-Depth Interviews**

We investigated heavy users of Facebook to better understand the types of stress that online consumption community members may experience. Using in-depth interviews, we garnered depth and intimacy in our understanding of the types of stresses that heavy social network users encounter, and the importance of social network usage to their overall identity. Social network gamers often spend more than an hour per day playing games within the context of Facebook, and the communal membership of this member segment can include both known and unknown individuals (Wohn et al. 2011). Here, we focus on gaming with other known individuals. With the growing use of games in social networking sites, this is an appropriate context within which to study the ego maintenance strategies employed by individuals.

Eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted with social network gamers who play Farmville together. Interviews were initially solicited by posting a request to the Wall of the first author’s Facebook account. Friends of the author as well as study participants also posted a participation request to their own Wall to generate additional participants. The participants were

male and female with a mean age of 42. Participants were geographically dispersed, with a majority from the United States. Table 1 (appendix) provides a brief description of participants' backgrounds. We followed a semi-structured guide, beginning with questions related to self-presentation as well as the participant's concerns regarding consequences of online community involvement. Interviews then proceeded to a discussion of strategies used by the participants to maintain, restore, or bolster the ego. Interviews were informal in nature and characterized by a conversational quality in which the discussions were largely driven by the participants. As participant narratives revealed self-presentational examples, the authors probed further to gain a better understanding of the underlying concerns.

## **Analysis**

Our analysis of verbatim interview transcripts involved an iterative, part-to-whole strategy in which we aimed at developing a holistic understanding of the member's experience on social networking sites (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Aided by Atlas.ti software, we used prior theories to guide our analysis of the interviews. Each phase served as a means for further developing our thematic categories, allowing the researchers to identify a holistic relationship among the meanings and categories participants used to describe their behaviors. We began by developing codes for emergent themes, which later merged into broader, more general categories of information (Spiggle 1994). Throughout the data reduction process, we continued to examine existing categories in light of new data. The analysis was hermeneutic and iterative, and evolved using a constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Following Burawoy's (1991) suggestion to utilize existing bodies of literature in search of theories to explain behavior, the data analysis process involved an iterative analysis between the data and existing theorization on self-presentation, self-regulation, and the ego.

## **FINDINGS**

Addressing the first research question, our findings suggest that gamers do indeed experience difficulties in managing the tension between the various members within the community. These self-presentation tensions highlight the need for effective strategies to maintain ego balance. Protecting the ego by maintaining or raising self-esteem is widely regarded as a fundamental goal that guides social behavior (Baumeister, Heatherton, and Tice 1993; Mehdizadeh 2010). To maintain a balanced ego, community members employ two categories of self-regulation behaviors: self-promotion and self-protection. Our results revealed a greater use of ego-protecting behaviors than ego-promoting behaviors, illustrative of the importance of guarding oneself against ego threats from others in the community. Our findings first review the protective strategies employed by members, followed by an exploration of the promotional strategies.

### **Ego Maintenance Strategies**

Although our study examined a distinct online consumption community, revealing several ego maintenance strategies employed by members. Skeels and Grudin (2009) found that individuals are concerned with how information shared in a social network can influence or affect workplace success and happiness, and this study extends their work by describing the

various ego maintenance tensions individuals experience (both work and non-work related) and identifying their responses to these tensions. Participants highlighted a desire to balance three ego-maintaining motivations within their online consumption community context: the need to be respected, the need to feel secure, and the need to be accepted.

Need to be respected:

Though Facebook is primarily designed as a leisure site, its benefits include being able to interact with different types of people through a single platform. Of the many types of relationships that one encounters in daily life, two—those of family origin and those of work affiliation—often result in incompatible role demands, even when the individual has a strong desire to be respected in both contexts. Social networking sites such as Facebook have blurred the lines between roles inasmuch as individuals often develop friendships that may cross boundaries once separated by physical space and time. For example, an overlap of friend and gamer roles can result in internal conflict to maintain respect. Maggie describes one such incident:

I'm friends with my advisor on Facebook, so I don't care, cause he is younger and my advisor. But one of the other PhD students may judge me for playing games instead of working on research. That is why I don't post all of the game related items on my news feed. I don't want them to know how often I play. I am not friends with him, but I figure if he requests, he'd see the posts out there. And because Facebook's privacy policy changes frequently, I'm careful because I know he's friends with my advisor... I have a couple of judgmental friends. I'll see their post in the News Feed about how much they hate seeing all of the game posts. People who don't play think it's fine to vent on Facebook about the game posts, even though they post about every single thing they do.... Still, I try to monitor how much I post so I don't annoy my friends that don't play games. (Maggie, 30)

When the professional self and personal selves collide in a single social network, individuals can feel conflicted in how to satisfy the needs of both selves. If an individual is confronted by others for playing a role that was not expected or desired by an audience member, the confrontation can affect self-esteem, even if comments do not result in negative repercussions. Participants' desire to be respected in both a personal and professional context can create a tension in determining how to protect the ego when each role requires a different set of behaviors.

Need to be secure:

Prior social network research has suggested that members' networks consist of homogenous groups of individuals with regard to many socio-demographic, behavioral, and intrapersonal characteristics (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Van den Bulte and Wuyts 2007), a premise that drives the Facebook recommendation algorithms suggesting new Friend connections. These friend suggestions may be useful in finding friends of old and reconnecting online. Friend suggestions can also result in a member receiving a Friend request from individuals who share some commonalities, although participants acknowledge these similarities do not always warrant inclusion in the member's online community. For instance, when asked why some friend requests were denied, Ken described his logic:

Mainly, they were people I knew very little and I did not want them to have access to all of my personal information available to my "friends" on Facebook.... I will pretty much



accept anyone I know, or is a mutual friend of someone I trust. It all depends on how comfortable I feel sharing my thoughts and personal information with them. (Ken, 35)

Security concerns were especially heightened for many female participants. Women who live alone are highly cognizant of the dangers associated with oversharing in Facebook. Lacy (29) expressed concerns about allowing unknown individuals to view her pictures, activities, and personal information: “My Facebook network is limited mostly to friends, because of wariness of predators. Plus, because my husband is in the military, I have to be careful.” With the growing prevalence of Facebook, participants suggest Facebook usage creates vulnerability to predators. For this reason, many participants were highly sensitive to accepting friend requests from distant acquaintances and unknown individuals.

#### Need to be Accepted:

Many participants revealed that their online community includes individuals they’d rather not have in their network, though they refrain from removing the individual due to a concern about hurting their feelings. In discussing this topic, participants shared personal instances of being removed from a Friend’s social network and relayed a sense of hurt or dismay at their expulsion; these feelings were primarily cited as a reason they choose not to remove an individual without a justifiable reason. Martha (59) shared a poignant personal experience where she was removed by someone she knew:

Ah, it was somebody I was dating. We were friends and then he suddenly decided he didn’t want anybody on his Facebook, but just the family. So then he decided to re-friend me, and I said, forget this.

When later asked whether she had contemplated removing someone from her network, emotions related to her own removal experience weighed heavily on her decision:

Well, gee, I think about it, and then I think, um that’s kinda rude, what happened to me... And so for the moment I don’t converse with them and then, I um, don’t see what they’re doing by hiding their posts from my own news feed, because I don’t care what’s happening with them. (Martha, 59).

When asked about denying friend requests or removing a previously accepted friend, participants expressed concerns about being perceived as “rude” or “mean”. These perceptions by individuals in offline settings often override the participants’ desire to remove someone from their social network.

However, individual’s reactions to close friends are likely to be quite different than those with distant friends or acquaintances. Tolerance for certain behaviors across the two groups may vary considerably. Participants noted a tendency to be more tolerant regarding close friends’ comments, postings, and activities, overlooking items they would not find acceptable from other network members. Tolerance seemed to vary the greatest between family and others in the network among the topics of explicit language, sexuality, religion, and politics. For example, Lisa explains how political division within her husband’s family caused him to close his Facebook account altogether:

My husband used to have a Facebook account. In his family, all of the women are Republican and all of the men are Democrats. He was always bickering back and forth with his sisters about politics on Facebook. Finally, he got so mad at them that he closed his account. (Lisa, 61)

Interviewees acknowledged that they try to be true to themselves, but they also try to be mindful and respectful of others in their community who may not share the same views. They also noted

that community members are typically allowed to remain in their network unless the person behaves in an unacceptable manner. Such a perspective helps community members to reciprocate feelings of acceptance.

## **EGO MAINTENANCE TECHNIQUES FRAMEWORK**

The motivational underpinnings discussed in the previous section lead members to self-regulate through prevention-focused and promotion-focused behaviors. According to Higgins (2002), prevention-focused behaviors are focused on the presence or absence of negative outcomes, and often manifest as concerns regarding safety, protection, and responsibility. In contrast, promotion-focused behaviors are focused on the presence or absence of positive outcomes, advancement, aspirations, and accomplishments. In the following sections, we explicate the various strategies employed by online community members to present a cohesive self to their online community. Figure 1 (appendix) summarizes our proposed ego maintenance techniques framework.

Role conflict is conceptualized as the concurrent appearance of two or more incompatible expectations for the behavior of a person, and is an unavoidable, stressful outcome of social interactions (Biddle 1986). Conflicting expectations and tension result in individuals enacting self-regulation behaviors to reduce this stress (Freud 1920/1952; Goffman 1963). At any given time, a person has specific concerns and interests that guide self-regulation behaviors. An individual's choice to enact a particular behavior is driven by the person's desire to maintain a balanced ego—putting forth a self-presentation that the community would find believable while also managing to present the best possible social self.

When role conflict emerges in the context of a social network, our findings revealed that participants use two primary self-regulation strategies in maintaining ego balance: self-protection and self-promotion. These strategies are not mutually exclusive, and individuals often use a combination of preventive and promoting behaviors in tandem to present the best social self to the community (Higgins 2002). We discuss the promotion and prevention strategies in more detail in the following sections.

### **Ego Maintenance as a form of Self Protection**

Ego protection is regarded as a fundamental goal that guides social behavior (Baumeister, Heatherton, and Tice 1993). In an online consumption community where an individual has multiple audiences, that individual is more likely to enact ego-protective behaviors to maintain credibility across all community members. Online community members attempt to minimize negative outcomes by employing several self-regulation techniques to protect the ego. Two categories of self-regulating behaviors emerged from our data analysis: structural solutions and self-censoring. Each category is comprised of multiple strategies which we discuss further below.

#### **Structural Solutions:**

Participants in both groups conceded that the growing prevalence of Facebook has led them to more carefully manage their participation in online communities. As social networks have grown in popularity, participants have implemented several rules to guide decisions related to accepting friend requests and managing the types of relationships that are present in their

online community. This research found the primary motivation for participants' changing communal management rules is related to their concern about how information is shared among members (e.g., information that could impact others' opinions of them). Informants discussed three primary structural solutions: network partitioning, maintaining multiple accounts, and utilization of the Facebook grouping function.

The most common mechanism for managing information is to partition different relationships into specialized online communities (i.e. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter). Most participants acknowledge restricting access for certain types of relationships, with the most prevalent qualifier for inclusion in a community being the strength of the offline relationship. For example, Ken (35) feels that while it is not in his interests to be Friends with employees or management, he will allow these individuals to connect with him in LinkedIn, noting that LinkedIn is not used to share personal information. Ken noted that his strict policy against having work relationships online have led to some uncomfortable conversations with those who have been denied access. However, because he consistently implements his policy across all work relationships, his co-workers are accepting of his choices. Ken's self-driven policy is based on negative past experiences:

As a manager, I was supposed to report anything I saw on any social network where an employee made a post that could be "embarrassing" to the company. I did not agree with this policy, so I never actually reported anything. I did, however, have to fire two employees because others reported [comments on social media] to my district manager. I don't remember the exact posts, but one of them was just an innocent post about having a bad day at work and did not even specifically mention [his employer]. I was told that it was enough because he had [the firm] listed as his employer in his Facebook profile. (Ken, 29)

Though individuals develop personalized rules for acceptable online behavior, external entities such as employers may place additional burdens on an individual who seeks to maintain a relationship with colleagues outside the workplace. As a result, individuals are resorting to a partitioning of friendships in the online space to meet the expectations of the employer while simultaneously maintaining an external relationship with colleagues.

Online community members sometimes choose to maintain separate social media accounts to segregate the types of relationships they have. For example, Jeremy began a second Facebook account dedicated solely to his church congregation members and family. Jeremy justified his choice:

It's not that I'm two completely different people between the two accounts, but sometimes I just want to interact with my family and close friends. If my congregation member sees me online, they may ask me a question or want me to give them advice.

And that takes away from my ability to enjoy my personal time online. (Jeremy, 55)

As is often the case, Jeremy maintained this dual account status for a short time before he found the duplicated account too much to manage on an ongoing basis. Participants acknowledge that a single account facilitates keeping all relationships updated on important events, although the single account creates a challenge in determining which information should be shared with the entire community. Other participants acknowledge that they avoid sharing important thoughts or events as they are concerned about the repercussions of sharing the information with a broader audience.

Participants who played games heavily were often willing to allow unknown individuals to join their network. These participants often cited the use of a heuristic to determine the

relationship quality of the requestor. For instance, the strength or value of a common Friends could help to determine the likely quality of the unknown individual. Racquel describes her rationale:

I look at the friends we have in common when I'm considering whether to let the person be a part of my network. If the friend we have in common is a good game neighbor, then I give the unknown person the benefit of the doubt. If the friend we have in common isn't a good neighbor, then I won't accept the request. I don't need any more dead-beat neighbors! I need neighbors who play the game regularly so we can both benefit.  
(Racquel, 29)

Heuristics such as this can help members to quickly determine how to respond to a Friend request, though Samantha discusses an experience in which her assessment heuristic did not lead to a desirable outcome:

I had this one neighbor that was snagging *MY* friends. I didn't know her— I accepted her because she's a friend of a good Farmville neighbor. She went to my Friend list on my wall, went from A to Z, and sent out a Friend Request to each one of them. Now, to me, I think that was kind of rude... I felt violated. That was my personal information. So, now, none of my friends can see my Friend list unless they're also that person's friend, too.  
(Samantha, 44)

Samantha's experience highlights the differing social protocols that exist in a social network, even between similar friends. Profound protocol violations often result in a re-evaluation of relationship value for all members of the network.

To address the issues encountered regarding portraying different facets of oneself to different groups, Facebook (and other social networks) introduced a function that allows members to create groups and communicate privately with each group in a similar manner to having conversations in real life. Participants widely reported a desire to share certain aspects of themselves with targeted audiences without others knowing to protect their desired social self. For example, Racquel uses the group function to create a support group to help her cope with her son's illness:

I don't necessarily want to share my son's medical challenges and personal triumphs with everyone, so I created a group of really close friends and family that I can share things with. They are my support group on bad days and my cheering camp on good days.  
(Racquel 29)

This grouping function is not fully trusted by many community members (Skeels and Grudin 2009) and is not a widely known feature in Facebook. Moreover, some participants cited trust concerns related to Facebook settings that as a reason for limiting access to his or her personal social network. Valerie (34) restricts her social network post visibility to those who are friends, citing, "I don't want anyone to be able to see things about me or my family if I don't know them". Facebook security concerns have been a growing concern since the social network giant's debut in 2006 (Edelson 2018).

#### Self-Censoring:

The second category of ego protection behaviors we observed is self-censorship. Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco (2005) suggest that individuals may moderate extreme attitudes on sensitive issues to make a better impression. In this vein, members do not attempt to boastfully present themselves to others so much as they attempt to keep information private that may be viewed as confrontational or negative. Informants noted that they try to be more moderate in an

online communal context when compared to face-to-face communal interactions (e.g., church, office), due to the diverse audience to which they communicate online. Our research uncovered three self-censoring mechanisms: restricting personal information, censoring posting behaviors, and censoring connections with brands.

Participants often cope with this audience variability by limiting personal information shared or by restricting religious and political posts to comments that are less inflammatory. Opal (61), “hates Facebook,” and refuses to fill out a profile. Opal admits that she joined the network solely to play games with her daughter and friends. Other participants restrict personal information available to the public at large by securing their profile to only users who have been accepted as friends.

Moderation concerns also influences members’ decisions to ‘like’ or comment on others’ posts. Racquel (29) admits she has wanted to ‘Like’ a Friend’s post but chose not to to avoid conflict or scrutiny from others in their network. Penelope consciously monitors her self-presentation online. As a young adult, she is concerned about how future employers may feel about her online activities:

People would always be able to click on the comment you made and it could mislead them, and not give the best impression of me. I know how people sometimes take things the wrong way on Facebook. And sometimes [people viewing my profile] may consider me for something like graduate school or a job, so I just self-limit. (Penelope, 22)

The pervasive nature of social networks has led many individuals to critically evaluate the consequences of posting information in a digital space. Other participants restrict posts due to concerns of offending others. Daniel shared his policy:

Anything I post is fit for general audiences. One should always assume that anything posted privately has the potential to be made public. (Similar to “the gun is always loaded” safety precaution... Mostly I like to follow general rules of civility in public places and I’m less concerned about “offending” someone than I am about disgusting them. Also, I try to be careful not to alienate someone I like, but with whom I don’t necessarily agree, for instance topics involving religious or political discussions. (Daniel, 47)

Interestingly, censorship is not limited to comments and images that are shared online; the stigma attached to social network gaming has also led many participants to censor their behaviors (Goffman 1963). Maggie shares her approach to managing her game related posts:

I will post game stuff in the evenings when I play. But, I go out to my wall before bed every night and remove all of the posts that I’ve made. Neighbors can only get the stuff for a day anyway, and I don’t want those posts to sit on my wall forever. (Maggie, 30)

While gamers may enjoy playing with others online, many participants share a concern of how these gaming behaviors may be viewed by non-community members. The collision of multiple communities of different emphasis (e.g. professional, gaming) within a single social network often results in additional concerns over how to manage the ego when relationships outside the community become aware of activities within the community.

Finally, participants expressed concerns regarding connecting with certain brands. Tisha (55) is concerned about how information collected through applications (e.g. games) may be used, stating:

I use AMEX for my business, but I don’t need to see advertising to remind me I’m a customer. And, my friends don’t need to know which credit cards I like or use—that’s



too much information to share... you have to share your information, and my concern is where that information is ferreted out to, and how it's used. (Tisha, 55)

Concerns over the security and privacy of personal information drives many participants' information sharing decisions. As individuals become associated with a diverse number of online consumption communities in a single online portal, managing the tension between the expectations of various audiences becomes a greater challenge. For example, behaviors that are desirable to the gaming community may elicit scrutiny or skepticism from non-gamers who are able to view the behaviors. The collision of participants' offline and online selves is shaping the information that is shared online and the rules that are employed to manage online and offline identities. Indeed, participants are conflicted in balancing information sharing with privacy needs, resulting in ego maintenance concerns while trying to present a desired social self that is acceptable to a broadened social network.

### **Ego Maintenance as a Form of Self Promotion**

Tice et al. (1995) found that individuals tend to self-present in a more boastful manner with strangers and a more modest manner with friends, due to friends' knowledge of prior accomplishments and skills. Schlenker (1980) posits that self-presentation is a constant trade-off between favorability and plausibility, an issue that is only exacerbated in a social networking context when multiple communities with differing relationships are present in a single space. Participants noted two categories of self-promoting behaviors that are used to manage the tensions associated with impression management in a social network: affirmation and affiliation.

#### **Affirmation:**

Affirmation refers to behavioral or cognitive events that bolster the perceived integrity of the self (Schmeichel and Vohs 2009; Steel 1988). Data analysis revealed that community members post information using presentational techniques in order to bolster the self and be viewed in the most positive light using three primary mechanisms: altruism, mavenism, and schadenfreudism. Beginning with altruism, gamers felt that it was important to be a 'good neighbor', and this desire was responsible for many of the gamers' behaviors within the gaming community. Although the activity of helping a neighbor is outwardly altruistic, gamers also want to ensure that their neighbors are aware of the activities they perform. Carlie explains her neighborly activities:

I try to be a good neighbor to my game friends—I want my neighbors to know I care about them. I also make it a point to thank the neighbors that come over to my farm and help out. There are worthless neighbors out there that are only in the game for themselves. But, I'm not like that and I want my neighbors to know that I'm here to help them, too. (Carlie, 32)

Helping behaviors are a critical component of social network games, as these behaviors help all players to progress. Through signage or comments drawing attention to their helping behaviors, participants can subtly call attention to their altruistic efforts.

Informants also find value in utilizing online communities as a means to promote themselves as experts. According to Feick and Price (1987), a market maven initiates discussions with and responds to information requests from other consumers. Games embedded in a social network allow participants to display limited edition items and share collectibles with friends to demonstrate expertise among gamers and friends. As such, other gamers are able to easily

identify experts. Many gamers suggest that they serve as both a maven and a student, eager to learn from other mavens. Samantha discusses her experience:

I have this one guy, this kid, he's from a foreign country. He asked me to get him neighbors because he needed neighbors. And he was playing at the time. So I sent out suggestions. That's what Farmville is all about; you help neighbors and your neighbors help you... I've gone to Tom. Like, when I saw him doing all of the foals. I sent him a chat and asked him how he was making all the foals. And he told me how to do it. If I know someone is on that has something mastered, I'll go to that person. Whether it be Tom, Ellen, Terry. Whoever has the talent, I'll go to that person. People come to me and ask me questions, and I try to help them. That's what it's all about. Learning how to play Farmville. (Samantha, 44)

Gamers find value in assisting other gamers in learning tips and tricks to become better. These gestures can also position the individual as a topical expert, which in turn can serve to bolster the individual's ego and status within the community.

Finally, participants acknowledge that online communities such as Facebook allow them to inconspicuously locate and view unconnected others, and such activities can lead to feelings of *schadenfreude*, defined as the "pleasure at the misfortune of others" (Heider 1958). Van Dijk et al. (2011) found that misfortunes of others provide an opportunity to enhance or protect one's own ego. Schmeichel and Vohs (2009) suggest that ego threats tend to elicit reflexive, self-enhancing tendencies that are thought to stem from motivations to view the self more positively, and such responses can range from minor attitudinal changes to blatant out-group derogation. Several participants acknowledged reviewing unconnected individuals' social network pages to learn more about their current events. However, participants also volunteer concern about how others will view them. Tisha expressed hesitancy in accepting non-gaming friends into her network:

I've not gotten anyone to start playing. Part of it has to do with the fact that I don't like to tell that many people that I play. And, I'm hesitant to accept friend requests, because 95% of my news feed is [game] related. My opinion of Facebook is that it is a very narcissistic system... I have to admit if I accept a new friend that I play Farmville, because it's going to show up in their game feed like crazy. So then I have to tell them how to block Farmville. (Tisha, 55)

Participants expressed concerns about how others might perceive their gaming habits, though it was clear that the individual would view other participants' pages with the same scrutiny that made them feel uncomfortable.

#### Affiliation:

Goffman (1963; p.113) notes that "the nature of an individual ... is generated by the nature of his group affiliations." Individuals often make known tangential connections with positive sources because they understand that observers make judgments about such connections (e.g., the team is a winner, therefore the fan is also a winner; Cialdini 1976). Escalas and Bettman (2003) posit that self-enhancement needs lead to forming connections with brands associated with aspirational groups. Further, these connections are common and easily established in online spaces (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012; Kozinets et al. 2010; Schau and Gilly 2003). Research suggests these associations can lead to greater self-esteem, serving a social purpose by reflecting social ties to family, community, and cultural groups (Escalas and Bettman

2003; Keller 1993; Reingen et al. 1984). The present study suggests three primary sources for affiliative self-promotion: corporate brands, sports teams, and inspirational organizations.

Industry research has found that social network members often connect with brands to receive advance news, deals, and learn more about the company (McCann 2010). McCann's findings also suggest that members enjoy associating with institutions and brands they think would like to support. Lindsey provides a contrasting example:

I'm careful about the brands that I connect to on Facebook. There are some brands that I love, like Victoria's Secret, but I not everyone needs to know that about me. Some information is for me and my husband only. But, I don't mind others knowing that I like a local sandwich shop. What's the harm in letting others know it's a good place to eat? (Lindsey, 49)

Participants acknowledged the importance of supporting local community brands. Brands with a strong value proposition (e.g. coupons) were also likely to overcome an individual's skepticism in connecting with the firm in the social space. Aspirational brands were most frequently cited as acceptable to connect with; everyday use brands were often avoided, as they offered no associative value to the individual.

In addition to brands, many participants self-reported sports teams as an association they were very likely to make in an online community context. Cialdini (1976) has suggested that such team associations lead to "reflected glory", resulting in a sense of self-promotion through affiliation. Individuals often associate themselves with a team when the individual possesses a high degree of fan loyalty to her community (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, and Exler 2008). Such behaviors provide a conspicuous reminder that she is associated with a prestigious team.

Though sports teams were the most frequently cited affiliation category, other members find value in other types of associations, particularly inspirational organizations. Several participants acknowledged they connect with their religious organization to remain up-to-date on church-related news and remain inspired throughout the week. Valerie summarizes her philosophy on connecting with her church:

I go to church every time the doors are open, but being connected through Facebook gives me real-time information about members of the congregation, activities that the church is involved in, and even inspirational quotes. I like logging on to Facebook and seeing a message from our pastor. Sometimes, I even share the pastor's message on my Wall for others to see. (Valerie, 34, Gamer)

Religious affiliation can be used to exemplify a desired lifestyle; sharing behavior serves a dual purpose—allowing others to be inspired, as well as serving as a notification to those in the connected community that she is a devoted church participant. Both activities reinforce the ego by demonstrating a commitment to their religious firm.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Online consumption communities are a primary driver of the social network experience; users access social networks to engage with others who share common interests and bonds. In this study, we examine a specific consumption community that engages in social networking to remain connected in both offline and online contexts. Self-presentation tensions are evident as members strive to maintain a social self that blends their offline and online personas. The blending of these personas is confounded by the differing expectations of the multiple audiences that exist in a single platform. Prior social network literature suggests the homophily principle—

a theory that posits individuals surround themselves with an audience of similar characteristics (Van den Bulte and Wuyts 2008). Whereas role fulfillment in offline communities is often guided by the audience at hand, convergence of different audiences on a single social networking platform can prove quite challenging for, even the savviest social network member. Our research offers new insights to the existing literature in three areas. First, the findings illustrate that both preventive and promotive strategies are used by individuals to maintain ego balance. Second, the research describes how online consumption communities have led individuals to more closely examine their behaviors to construct a desired social self. Finally, the findings show that online interactivity within a community of known members requires continuous thought toward intentional self-presentation, particularly when the members are associated professionally. This result provides support for recent research by Taylor and Strutton (2016) that showed that envy and narcissism led to stronger desires for self-promotion online.

Prior literature has suggested that self-regulatory behaviors are enacted as promotion-focused or prevention-focused (Higgins 1997). The results suggest that members of online communities employ both promotional and preventive self-regulating behaviors to manage their self-presentation; each of our participants cited instances of utilizing both types of behaviors in tandem to present a desired social self to their audience, thereby maintaining ego balance. This tandem approach is resulting from an individual's desire to present the best possible social self while also being true to the offline personality characteristics in which the member is known. Community members that strongly identify with a certain community in a social network may choose to tailor their online persona and network to nurture the social self they seek to project to others. Positive reinforcement behaviors (e.g. likes) from audience members serve to bolster the member's ego and reinforce the self-concept.

Online consumption community members employ several strategies to maintain a desired social self while also presenting a digital autobiography to fit the varying expectations of the online consumption community. Affiliation and affirmation type behaviors are used to bolster the ego and associate oneself with topics that reflect or highlight certain characteristics of the individual. In contrast, when individuals sense conflict in trying to meet the differing expectations of multiple audiences, members employ structural or censoring solutions to regain ego balance and protect the self-concept.

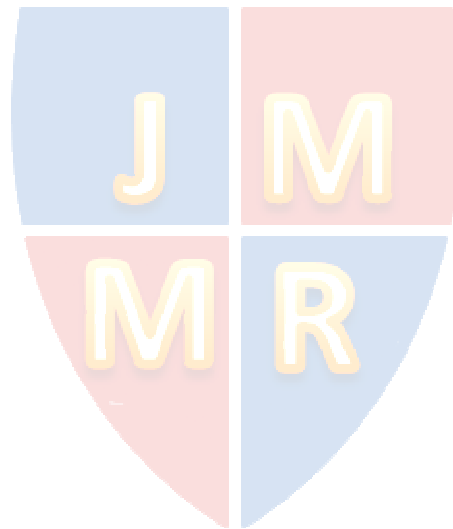
The widespread influence of social networks has also influenced members' choice of activities online. Social network games were initially introduced to allow members to engage with one another (Facebook 2012). Our findings suggest that online consumption community members are likely to utilize self-regulating behaviors to a greater extent when the negative repercussions of the "wrong" impression have greater consequences. Such instances increase members' preoccupation with self-presentation via social networking sites like Facebook (Downey 2010; Lim 2012; Protalinski 2012; Swanson 2010). As a result, ego maintenance concerns are inevitably shaping communal behaviors and interactions as members utilize a tandem approach (promotion and prevention) in presenting a desired social self that is acceptable to a range of audiences.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The present research was conducted in a specific context—gamers. The context was chosen based on a prevalence of popular press associated with social network usage by this member group. Other segments may elicit additional self-presentational concerns and

opportunities. The present research focused on social network member's perception of others' expectations within an online consumption community. The members knew each other in an offline context.

Future research could investigate the effects and role of self-monitoring within consumption communities consisting of cultural differences. For instance, the present research posits that members in high visibility positions disclose less information. Future research should investigate other antecedents that influence the amount of information disclosed in a social network context and could also investigate the importance of privacy and the concern of predators. Our participants were particularly concerned with the presence of predators in a social network. As social network popularity grows, what actions can be taken on the part of social network developers (e.g. Facebook) to alleviate members' self-presentational concerns?

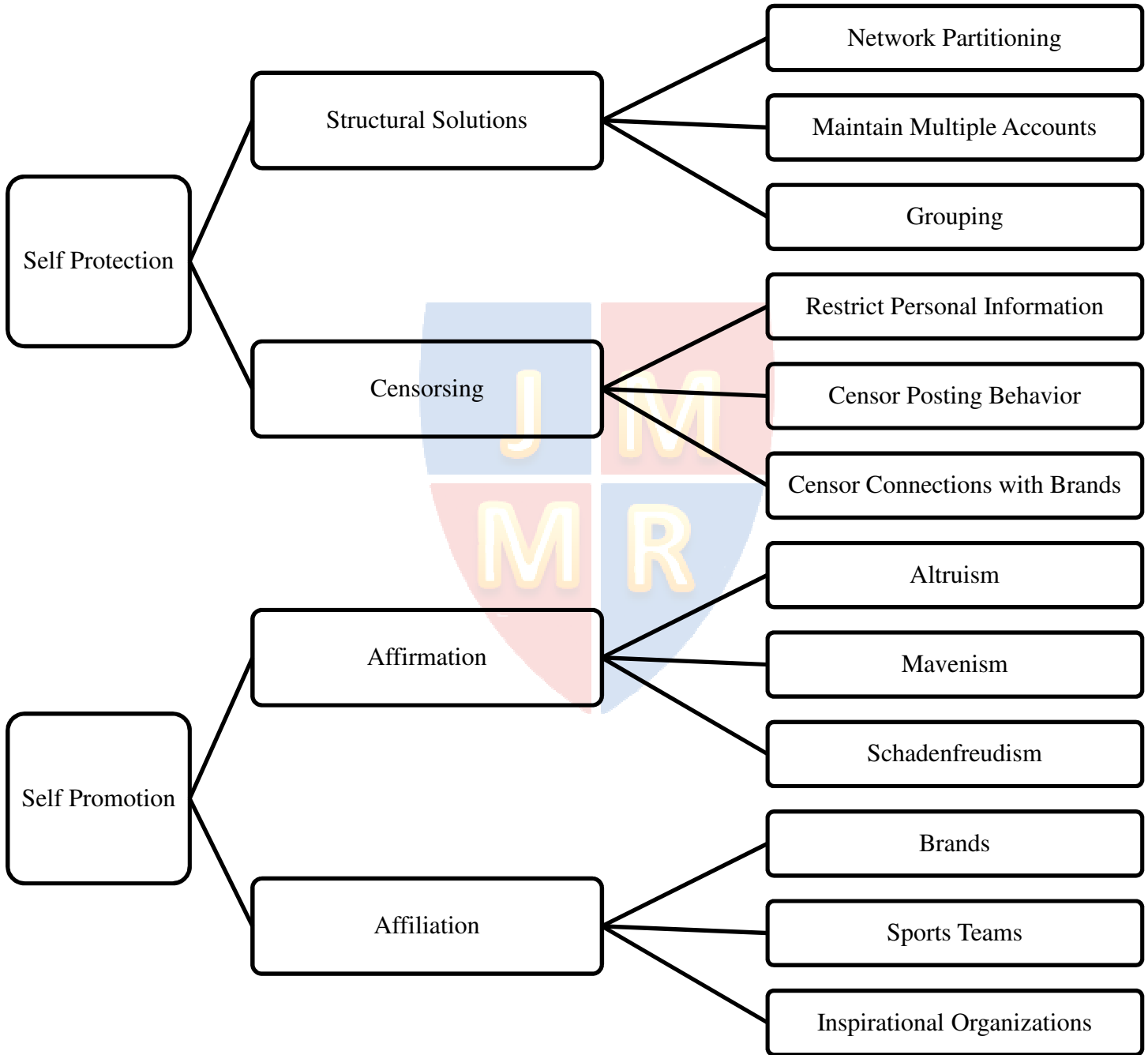




**TABLE 1: In-Depth Interview Participant Characteristics**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Residence</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Samantha	44	F	TN	Cake Decorator
James	36	M	KY	Manager
Tisha	55	F	TN	Small Business Owner
Maggie	30	F	GA	Student
Opal	57	F	OR	Retired
Jeremy	55	M	GA	Pastor
Daniel	47	M	Korea	House Husband
Sally	51	F	NJ	Meat Cutter's Union
Penelope	22	F	PA	Student
Lisa	61	F	TX	Retired
Ken	35	M	TN	Customer Service Rep
Deborah	43	F	Korea	Army Paralegal
Racquel	29	F	UK	Stay at Home Mom
Lindsey	49	F	TN	Hairdresser
Martha	59	F	CA	Teacher
Valerie	34	F	GA	Teacher
Lacy	29	F	MI	Ministry Volunteer
Carlie	32	F	GA	Cake Decorator

**FIGURE 1:**  
**Ego Maintenance Techniques – A Framework**



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