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# To Post, Or Not To Post? Exploring Adjunct Faculty And Staff Social Media Use Among Collapsed Audiences

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**Abstract**

This study examines the tension experienced by higher education professionals between self-presentation practices and self-withdrawal behaviors on social networking sites (SNS). Specifically, the study focuses on the role of 'context collapse' (mixed audiences) on SNSs as it relates to self-withdrawal tendencies. For the purposes of this study, self-withdraw is defined as the feeling of wanting to pull away or detach from an SNS community, through reducing (or eliminating altogether) public disclosures, or by withholding certain information (depth, breadth, or specific topics). Through in-depth interviews with adjunct faculty and staff within higher education, this study specifically explores their self-presentation on social media among a collapsed audience, as well as their practices, challenges and strategies used on Facebook and Twitter. Further, audience management techniques will also be investigated, including creating multiple accounts within a single SNS, and using separate SNSs to engage with different audiences.

**Author Keywords**

Social networking sites (SNS); self-presentation; context collapse; imagined audiences; privacy; self-withdraw; audience management; adjunct faculty; higher education

## **ACM Classification Keywords**

J.4: SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES; K.7.4: Professional Ethics

## **Introduction**

Social media is a commonly used tool to stay connected with others. However, with it still being relatively new, wide-scale guidelines or best practices have yet to be established. With various social circles blending on social media, this can lead to social media mishaps resulting in the loss of one's job, or, potentially, their entire professional career.

## **Background**

As Erving Goffman [4] details in *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, people portray themselves differently among different audiences, or social groups. In interpersonal interactions, we have clear social contexts in which we respond and behave accordingly with others. However, social media, or social networking services (SNS), are often spaces where various social circles converge. This concept has been coined "context collapse" by Marwick & boyd [8], and has been a central research area for other studies involving social media [5; 9; 12; 15]. In addition to using SNS platforms in different ways to connect with different audiences, or owning multiple accounts on one platform, users also rely on mental conceptualizations of specific audiences (social groups) when posting content. While many scholars credit Anderson's [1] germinal concept of "imagined communities", today's scholars refer to this phenomenon on SNSs as "imagined audiences" [2; 6; 7].

Some researchers have taken these concepts of context collapse and imagined audiences, and applied them to

SNS use in higher education. However, much of the existing research focuses on student SNS use [14], and faculty SNS use [12; 13], usually in relation to incorporating social media into the academic curriculum. However, this study will expand existing literature by focusing on adjunct faculty and staff members' social media practices.

## **Rationale**

Beyond personal reasons, faculty and staff use SNSs for multiple professional reasons, including: connecting with thought-leaders in their field or discipline; aiming to become a thought-leader in a respective field or discipline; sharing and promoting research; sharing and promoting work-related events, programs or activities; establishing a professional identity; connecting with other professionals in their field or discipline; connecting with students and/or former students (alumni); among others. However, such aforementioned activities do not always mix well with personal-related activities within the same space.

With careers potentially on the line, it has become increasingly important to evaluate self-presentation, self-withdrawal [3], and audience management techniques on SNSs among university adjunct faculty and staff. With no protection from academic freedom, both of these groups of employees experience a similar level of threat to their employment from behavior occurring on their *personal* social media accounts.

## **Research Questions**

After reviewing the literature, the following research questions are proposed:

1. How do higher education professionals mediate their presentation of self among mixed audiences on social networking sites (SNS)?

2. Do faculty and staff face different or similar challenges and concerns when posting on SNSs?
3. Does context collapse lead to feelings and behaviors of self-withdraw among faculty and staff?

### **Research Methods**

All research participants will complete an online Pre-Survey, which is expected to take no more than ten minutes to complete. At the beginning of the Pre-Survey is an Information Sheet, which participants will be asked to read and agree to participate in the study by selecting "Yes" or "No". This brief Pre-Survey will collect participant background information, and also general SNS use, including which platforms the prospective participant currently uses, the frequency of use for each platform, and how long he or she has been using each platform. The Pre-Survey also captures information about their current position and if they currently work with alumni or students, and how frequently. This information, along with SNS platform usage data, will be used to determine participant eligibility.

Once the Pre-Survey and Information Sheet are completed, the researcher will directly email the participant to schedule an interview lasting no more than 1.5 hours in length at a location that is convenient for him or her (e.g. in a private conference or meeting room at their institution/campus). At the beginning of the interview, participants are reminded that the data collected is kept anonymous and that participation is voluntary so they can choose to quit at any time. During the interview, participants will be asked questions in relation to how they use Facebook or Twitter, who they connect with and avoid connecting with on these SNS platforms, what type of content they will, and will not, generate on each platform, and how they perceive their digital public persona. Finally, at the end of the interview, participants will be asked to login

to either Facebook or Twitter to identify example posts in response to three different prompts relating to who they were thinking of (professional/work-related; personal; and *both* personal and professional/work-related) when they posted. Participants are alerted at the beginning of this section that screenshots of these posts will be taken. Screenshots are also mentioned in the Introductory Recruitment Email before participants agree to participate.

### **Proposed Analysis**

The data from interviews will be analyzed using qualitative methods. First, audio-recordings of interviews will be transcribed as each interview is completed. Then, the data will be analyzed by looking for emergent thematic trends across all interviews. In addition, response trends and patterns will be compared between the two different cohorts (adjunct faculty and staff) to determine if there are any differences, or not. A series of sequential readings of the interviews will occur, looking for salient issues that arise in the interviews about the participants' use of social media, and their concerns about social media use. The analyses will be conducted to capture the voices and behaviors of the participants, and their thoughts about social media use as members of higher education.

### **Significance**

As a whole, an increasing amount of daily personal and professional life takes place online. However, considering that social media is still relatively new, there have not yet been clear guidelines or wide-reaching best practices established. This is especially visible in light of many higher education professionals losing their jobs, and sometimes their entire academic careers, in response to something they posted on their

personal social media accounts [10]. Therefore, with blurred personal and professional boundaries on SNSs and no clear guidelines, it is important to explore how faculty and staff are navigating such nuanced digital spaces among collapsed mixed audiences.

With much of the existing research focusing on self-disclosure behavior on SNSs [e.g 5; 11; 12; 14], this study seeks to help fill a gap in literature by expanding the concept of self-withdraw, especially among collapsed audiences. In this study, self-withdrawal is defined as the feeling of wanting to pull away or detach from an SNS community, through reducing (or eliminating altogether) public disclosures, or by withholding certain information (depth, breadth, or specific topics). Self-withdraw is an umbrella term that may include multiple forms of an individual retracting oneself and their public disclosures from a SNS, including self-censorship, as just one example.

In addition, this study will include an exploration of staff social media use, as well as adjunct faculty. These two groups have not garnered as much attention in recent studies in relation to context collapse and self-presentation. Plus, they experience similar levels of possible threats to employment for social media behavior, in comparison to tenured faculty. Therefore, this study will aim to contribute to filling gaps in literature by focusing on staff, adjunct faculty, and the concept of self-withdraw.

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