

The Use of Public Electronic Forums to Manage Conflict among Female Peers: An  
Explorative Study

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored how female college students manage conflict on public electronic forums such as social media. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve female college students to investigate the process of using social media to manage conflict with peers. Data were analyzed using grounded theory analysis and the following three categories emerged: motivation, third party involvement, and remorse/regret.

Participants reported a range of motivations for choosing social media to manage their conflict along with the implications that accompanied this decision. Study limitations, directions for future research, and clinical implications are discussed.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This study explored the process of using public electronic forums such as social media to manage conflict. For the purposes of this study, twelve female college students were interviewed about their experiences managing conflict with another female friend on a public electronic forum. Participants discussed conflict that initially began in person, but was later managed on forums such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. Results indicated that participants most frequently chose indirect conflict management strategies on social media. For many this was to keep the conflict contained and from becoming a bigger issue. A pattern of remorse was present among participants as many reported that a face-to-face conversation would have been a more effective conflict management strategy. This topic is of great importance to clinicians as it provides insight into this process and invites conversations regarding vulnerability and conflict management in general.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### **The Problem and its Setting**

Over the past decade, public electronic forums such as social networking sites have added a new dimension to how individuals relate to one another and to how we understand interpersonal relationships. Social media has presented users with new possibilities for self-expression that are not possible in face-to-face interactions (Pettigrew, 2009). Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat have provided a new platform for users to communicate with others through sharing photos, videos, and messages, both privately and publically. Because of these new communication possibilities, public electronic forums also open the door for new ways to manage conflict. Peer conflict is defined as “mutual opposition between two or more people” and can vary from minor disputes that are easily solved to major arguments that are more difficult to manage (Noakes & Rinaldi, 2006, p.881). This study explored how female college students are using public electronic forums to manage conflict among peers.

Perry and Werner-Wilson (2011) cite two significant differences between face-to-face interactions and computer mediated interactions. The first difference is that face-to-face interactions contain social cues such as body language, facial expression, and voice inflection. The second difference is that there is often a delay in responding to messages in computer-mediated interactions. A lack of social cues and longer response time can increase the odds of conflict and misunderstanding between the parties involved (Byron, 2008). These differences are important as computer-mediated communication can be lacking emotion that is important in relationship development. It could also be possible

that emotion is relayed but is misunderstood by the recipient. While public electronic forums can be responsible for creating conflict due to a lack of social cues, it may also exacerbate existing conflict. This distinction is important, as this study was limited to conflict that began in person, but transitioned to being managed on a public electronic forum rather than conflict that began as a result of a misunderstanding on one of these forums.

Frisby and Westerman (2010) found that one's conflict resolution style determines one's choice to use technology or face-to-face communication to manage relational conflict. Using technology may be a strategy to avoid conflict or a difficult face-to-face confrontation. Those who lack conflict resolution skills may also employ the use of technology. Perry and Werner Wilson (2011) found when situations become too emotionally charged, individuals are more likely to communicate through technology than face-to-face and Sprecher, Zimmerman, and Abrahams (2010) point to the use of technology to end a relationship as an avoidance strategy. Because research suggests a relationship between conflict avoidance and the use of technology (Perry & Werner Wilson, 2011; Sprecher et al., 2010), it is important to further explore the different ways public electronic forums are being used in the conflict management process. Possible examples of ways that conflict is managed on public electronic forums include, but are not limited to, "unfriending" or "unfollowing" (deleting a friend from your friend list), posting feelings surrounding a conflict on a friend's profile, passively posting emotions surrounding conflict on one's own profile, or refraining from commenting or "liking" a friend's post.

Conflict avoidance is one of five conflict styles identified by Kilmann and Thomas (1977). Different conflict styles exist due to different intentions that individuals may have. These intentions are measured by levels of assertiveness and cooperativeness. Assertiveness is defined as “attempting to satisfy one’s own concern” (Thomas, Thomas, & Schaubhut, 2008, p.149) while cooperativeness is defined as “attempting to satisfy the other’s concern” (Thomas et al., 2008, p.149). A meta-analysis on gender and conflict styles by Holt and Devore (2005) found that women are more likely to have compromising styles (moderate levels of assertiveness and cooperativeness) and men are more likely to have competing styles (high levels of assertiveness, low levels of cooperativeness). Women are also more likely to have avoiding or accommodating styles, which are both characterized by low levels of assertiveness (Thomas et al., 2008). This could make women more likely to use social media outlets to express conflict rather than face-to-face communication to manage conflict. Because of these gender differences and because women are likely to spend more time on Facebook (one of the most popular social networking sites) and to have more Facebook friends, this study focused specifically on women (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009 ; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009).

Though this study explores conflict management that has occurred on a variety of public electronic forums, the background given on these forums will focus primarily on Facebook as this forum has been in existence the longest, (since 2004) making the literature on this forum the most extensive. Facebook also has more users than other leading social networking sites. As of September 2015, Facebook had 1.55 billion active monthly users and had an average of 894 million active daily users (Facebook, 2015). In

comparison, Instagram had 400 million monthly active users (Facebook, 2015) and Twitter had 320 million monthly active users (Twitter, 2015) as of September 2015. This study hopes to add to the body of literature that is still developing on newer forms of social media.

As one of the most popular social networking sites, Facebook allows users to communicate one another through a personal profile page and to share photos and messages with their “Facebook Friends”. Facebook was created in early 2004 and was initially exclusive to students at Harvard University. Over time Facebook expanded to other college students, followed by high school students in September 2005, and eventually to the general public by the end of 2006 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Facebook continues to be widely used by college students and because of its popularity, Facebook has become an area of great interest to researchers (Clayton, Nagurney, & Smith, 2013).

Hew (2011) found that college students reported a range of motivations for using Facebook. Some of these motivations include meeting new people, maintaining existing relationships, expressing oneself, and passing time. Students reported maintaining existing friendships, as opposed to forging new friendships, as their strongest motivation for communicating via Facebook (Hew, 2011). Social networking sites such as Facebook can be helpful to young adults as they make the transition to college (Yang & Brown, 2013). This transition often requires students to reorganize their social network as they balance maintaining both current and new friendships. Yang and Brown (2013) suggest that Facebook may be helpful through the process of “(re)structuring college students interpersonal relationships”(p.404). Junco (2012a, b) found “in studies sampling more than 1,500 college students have reported that in a typical day, college students checked

Facebook, the leading social networking site, more than five times on average and spent more than 100 minutes on it” (as cited in Yang & Brown, 2013, p.404).

Facebook’s mission statement is “to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (Facebook, 2015). To help members achieve this connection, Facebook features such as status updates and photo uploads encourage some degree of self-disclosure (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014). Though each member determines their extent of self-disclosure, Facebook encourages communication by asking members “what’s on your mind?” when they log on to the website. As “one of the most popular means of communication in North America” (Ross et al., 2009, p.579) this computer mediated self-disclosure plays an important role in how conflict is expressed among peers.

Social networking sites help individuals communicate more easily and feel more connected to friends and family regardless of physical distance. With a click of a button, users are able to see what is happening in their “friends” lives through pictures, status updates, and correspondence with others. However, certain aspects of communication such as facial expression, tone, body language, sarcasm, and intent can be lost when communicating through social media, increasing the likelihood for misunderstanding during conflict. While communication through text message or email is perhaps just as likely to lead to misunderstanding, communication through social networking sites is more public. In a study by Fox, Osborn, and Warber (2014), participants in focus groups reported that changing a relationship status to “it’s complicated” on Facebook (which would be a public way to express conflict) was inappropriate, and that couples should deal with their relationship problems privately. Unless privacy settings have been altered,

activity on these public forums are typically able to be seen by “friends” or “followers” on each respective forum. Because of the public nature of social media, it presents a wide range of possibilities for sending messages, directly and indirectly, while experiencing conflict.

The public nature of these forums is of interest in the study as each social media user has a distinct “audience” for their online activity. While many forms of social media provide the option to communicate privately, a great deal of self-disclosure and communication is shared publically. Kim and Ahn (2013) conducted a study on the self-presentation of college students during conflict on Facebook and found that the public nature of this forum played an important role in conflict management.

### **Significance**

This study is of increasing importance as Facebook and other social networking sites grow in popularity and as the “digital divide” narrows (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011; Sheldon, 2008). Of Facebook’s 1.55 billion monthly active users (as of September 2015), 1.39 billion are mobile users (Facebook, 2015). Though Facebook was founded in the United States, its popularity has since spread globally and “approximately 83.5% of [Facebook’s] daily active users are outside the US and Canada” (Facebook, 2015). Given that such a large population is choosing to connect with others through social networking sites and that most of this population is connecting on these forums on a mobile device, it is almost to be expected that social networking sites are impacting peer relationships (Fox et al., 2014).

Facebook use has become particularly prevalent among college students. Smith and Caruso (2010) found that “90% of college students use SNSs [Social Networking

Sites], and 97% of those are everyday users of Facebook” (as cited by Park & Lee, 2014, p. 602). Means of communication have expanded and evolved over time, and many of these options no longer require face-to-face communication. Whether directly or indirectly, messages are being sent and received by the choices we make when engaged in conflict on public electronic forums. Given the high volume at which college students communicate through social media, it could be argued that conflict is just as likely to occur on this public platform than in person. With this shift in communication norms, it has perhaps never been more important to understand this process of conflict management that is not only text-based, but also public. This study may be a launching point to better understand the different ways that college women manage conflict on social media, and will hopefully open the door to study different populations as well. A better understanding of this topic could inform clinical practice by giving therapists a greater understanding of potential helpful and harmful ways of managing conflict on public electronic forums.

### **Rationale**

The vast majority of research on public electronic forums has been studied quantitatively. Conducting interviews allowed individuals to speak in depth about their experiences of managing conflict on public electronic forums and led to a greater understanding of how conflict is carried out on these forums. Interviews were appropriate to gain a clearer understanding of the numerous ways that conflict may manifest on public electronic forums as well as how the public nature of these forums affect conflict management. The use of qualitative methodology to explore these issues was appropriate as it begins to fill this gap in the literature and allowed participants to provide detailed

descriptions of ways they have used public electronic forums to manage conflict in a peer relationship.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that was used in this study is grounded theory. Grounded theory is unique in that its intent is to create a theory rather than using an existing theory to guide a study (Creswell, 2013). Developed in 1967 by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, grounded theory is used in qualitative research to describe a process or action shared by a group of people. Grounded theory suggests that theories are “grounded” in the data from study participants and are used to describe social processes in a way that are sometimes limited by other theories. For this study, the process of using Facebook to manage conflict was explored as the researcher followed the steps of this process by interviewing participants (Creswell, 2013).

“Grounded theory helps us to see things as they are, not as we preconceive them to be” (Glaser, 2014, p.48). Glaser (2014) stresses that grounded theory requires the researcher to be open-minded and to avoid entering the research process with any preconceived ideas. Being open-minded should be distinguished from entering the research with little information on the topic. Glaser and Strauss intended for the researcher to possess theoretical sensitivity that would enable them to better understand the collected data (Ng & Hase, 2008). Much like other theories employed in qualitative research, memos and field notes are important components of grounded theory. During data collection, the researcher constantly compares data from participants as a theory evolves (Creswell, 2013; Glaser, 2014; Ng & Hase, 2008).



**Purpose of the Study**

Though there has been a great deal of research conducted regarding social networking sites at large, there is currently a gap in the literature regarding the impact that social networking sites have on conflict management. The purpose of this study was to better understand the process that unfolds when conflict is conducted on public electronic forums such as social media and why female college students are choosing this outlet to manage conflict. Though research is still emerging to explore how online and offline relationships differ in characteristics, formation, and resolution (Sibona, 2014), this study aimed to be a launching point to better understand these differences and the possible implications for using a public electronic forum to manage conflict.

**Research Question**

1. How (and why?) do female college students use public electronic forums to manage conflict with peers?

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conflict Styles

According to Thomas et al. (2008), “conflict involves a situation in which people’s concerns [...] appear to be incompatible” (p.149). Experiencing conflict is unavoidable and we all adopt different strategies to manage these situations. Over the years, researchers have identified several different frameworks to define and to better understand conflict styles. Some of the most popular conflict style terminology comes from the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) developed in the mid 1970’s (Shell, 2001). The TKI consists of five styles differing in levels of cooperativeness and assertiveness. A high level of cooperativeness is characterized by attempts to satisfy another’s concern and a high level of assertiveness is characterized by attempts to satisfy one’s own concern. The five styles are 1) competing (high assertiveness, low cooperativeness), 2) collaborating (high assertiveness, high cooperativeness), 3) compromising (moderate levels of assertiveness and cooperativeness), 4) avoiding (low assertiveness, low cooperativeness) and 5) accommodating (low assertiveness, high cooperativeness) (Thomas et al., 2008).

It is important to note that there is no “ideal” conflict style. Which conflict style is most effective can differ by situation or culture (Holt & DeVore, 2005). Shell (2001) expands upon these conflict styles by discussing the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of each style. Those with an accommodating conflict style are sensitive to the needs of others and are likely to find it satisfying to help others with their problems. The downside of this style is that there may be a greater potential for these individuals to be taken advantage of by those who are more competitive. Someone with a

compromising style may be described as reasonable and relationship-friendly. “When time is short or when stakes are small, a marked disposition toward compromise can be a virtue” and they “tend to be satisfied with an outcome as long as it is supported by *any* face-saving reason” (Shell, 2001, p.167). However, high compromisers can make concessions too quickly out of a desire to finish the negotiating process. Those with an avoiding style tend to sidestep confrontation and can be perceived as tactful and diplomatic as they “[permit] groups to function in the face of dysfunctional, hard-to-resolve interpersonal differences” (Shell, 2001, p.168). Professional diplomats, military officers, and surgeons are often conflict avoidant. A weakness is that opportunities to negotiate are often missed and sometimes conflict can worsen when avoided. High collaborators enjoy the negotiation process and involving everyone in solving tough issues. Corporate lawyers and development executives are likely to have a collaborating style. Their negotiation skills are sometimes problematic because they have a tendency to turn simple situations into more complicated ones when it is not necessary. Lastly, a competing style is similar to a collaborating style in that competitors also enjoy negotiating. High competitors often see negotiations as a game to win and thrive under high stakes and limited time. Because they tend to see negotiations as win or lose situations, they can sometimes dominate negotiations, which can be difficult in relationships (Shell, 2001).

A meta-analysis by Laursen, Finkelstein, and Betts (2001) reviewed literature on conflict resolution strategies among different developmental stages. This review identified that different conflict resolution strategies are employed by different age groups. Young adults display low levels of coercion and high levels of negotiation.

Adolescents are more likely to use negotiation as a conflict resolution strategy, but use disengagement and coercion equally. Children are likely to resolve disputes with coercion, and are unlikely to practice disengagement. The literature suggests that negotiation and disengagement strategies become more prevalent over the course of one's life as coercion strategies diminish. Because the likelihood of disengagement increases over the lifespan along with negotiation, it is possible that "improvements in conflict resolution skills also may include learning to walk away from a dispute" (p.442). The strategies to resolve actual conflict differ from hypothetical conflict situations. Actual conflicts are most likely to be resolved by coercion and are least likely to be resolved by disengagement. In contrast, hypothetical conflicts are often resolved by negotiation and least often by coercion.

Conflict resolution also varies among different kinds of relationships. Negotiation is more common among romantic partners, friends, and acquaintances, while disengagement is least common among these groups. In general, negotiation is most common among all peer relationships except for sibling relationships. Siblings are more likely to employ disengagement strategies in adolescence, but are more likely to employ negotiation strategies in early adulthood. While siblings are most likely to resolve conflict by negotiation, they were more likely to use coercion than disengagement. Studies explored by Laursen et al. (2001) indicated "age-related increases in negotiation are accompanied by a decline in coercion in all relationships except those with siblings" (p.441)

### **Gender, Culture, and Conflict Styles**

While some of the literature on gender differences among conflict styles is inconclusive, a meta-analysis by Holt and Devore (2005) found that in individualistic cultures, females are more likely to have compromising conflict style while men are more likely to have a competing conflict style. These findings are consistent with a study conducted by Thomas et al., (2008) as they found that men are more likely to have a competing style, women are significantly more likely to have a compromising, avoiding, or accommodating style, and women and men are equally likely to have a collaborating style. Wachter (1999) also supports these findings as he reported that men prefer face-to-face communication for conflict because this enabled them to engage in a dominating style, and they least preferred computer-mediated communication.

The gender differences that exist among conflict styles reflect the differences in the ways that men and women are socialized. For example, women are taught to define their identity within the context of relationships, which could be related to their likelihood to use accommodating strategies to manage conflict. On the other hand, men are socialized to be more assertive and independent, which could explain why men are more likely to have a competing conflict style (Brahnam, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier, & Chin, 2005).

Because gender differences exist due to socialization, it is understandable that gender differences vary among culture. As diversity increases in the United States, it has become even more important to understand cultural differences. When compared, individualistic cultures are likely to have a greater concern for one's self in conflict and prefer more assertive methods. Collectivistic cultures are more likely to use methods such as withdrawing and compromising to manage conflict (Holt & DeVore, 2005).

Differences have also been identified among ethnic minorities in the United States. African American males tend to use less assertive conflict styles when compared to European Americans. Interestingly, the same does not hold true for African American females. They are actually more likely than African American males and European Americans in general to possess a competing conflict style (Holt & DeVore, 2005). Results on the Latin American's conflict styles contradicted the norms of collectivistic culture. Latin Americans were less likely than European Americans to have avoidant and accommodating styles (Holt & DeVore, 2005).

### **Conflict and Technology**

Advances in technology have led to a significant increase in computer-mediated communication (Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008). Text messages, e-mails, and social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter have become common communication tools. While some studies found that text-based communication was less satisfying than face-to-face communication due to lack of social cues and ambiguity, other studies found participants' experiences with face-to-face communication and text-based communication were similar.

Derks et al. (2008) discussed the role of emotion in computer-mediated communication and expanded on some of the positive aspects of this kind of communication. While some may argue that emotion is most successfully conveyed in person, this may not always be the case. The growth and success of online therapy are evidence that emotion can be communicated over the internet. Online dating and online support groups are further examples that point to the success of emotion being successfully conveyed through computer-mediated communication. Communicating in

this way may be particularly helpful to those who struggle with anxiety and find face-to-face encounters to be difficult and to those with restricted mobility (Derks et al., 2008). This is not to say that every encounter through this medium is successful, but these examples illustrate that it is possible to form meaningful and even intimate relationships through computer mediated communication. Ultimately, Derks et al. (2008) reports “CMC seems to reinforce rather than reduce the communication of emotions” (p.773).

While computer mediated communication may be appropriate in some settings, it is not without its disadvantages. Computer mediated communication lacks non-verbal cues and increases the likelihood for misunderstanding (Byron, 2008). A non-verbal cue can change how an individual receives a message. The difference between receiving a message with a smile and a frown significantly alters how one may receive it, and this lack of non-verbal information leads much to interpretation. Many may find it difficult to form a first impression of someone through text-based communication without the ability to see the other’s appearance and hear their voice (Walther, 2007). In addition, humor is also cited as being commonly misunderstood through text-communication (Derks et al., 2008). Derks et al. (2008) also discuss the importance of bodily contact to express emotion. Both positive contact such as touching or embracing, and negative contact such as hitting are only possible in face-to-face communication. In some situations, words alone may be an insufficient way to convey all the emotional information desired. According to Lee and Wagner (2002), non-verbal cues minimize or maximize emotion expression (as cited by Derks et al., 2008).

Along these lines, Friedman and Currall (2003) argued that communicating by email could escalate conflict due to a lack of social cues. However, they acknowledge

that not all electronic communication ends in escalated conflict and that this conflict can be effectively managed with appropriate conflict resolution skills. Along with conflict resolution skills, research has identified other ways that managing conflict online may be helpful. For some, opting to manage conflict through computer mediated communication provided them more time to be thoughtful about their responses, and therefore helped to de-escalate conflict. By choosing computer mediated communication, users are given the opportunity to edit and re-write their messages before the recipient has an opportunity to read them and having longer response time can keep situations from becoming too emotionally charged (Madell & Muncer, 2007; Walther, 2007). Madell and Muncer held focus groups with undergraduate students and participants reported that they were motivated to use computer-mediated communication in social interactions because it provided a sense of control. For these reasons, Coyne et al. (2011) argued that text-based communication has the potential to be less intense than face-to-face interactions.

### **College Students and Facebook**

As indicated previously, the literature is currently limited in regards to newer forms of social media. However, since Facebook has been in existence for the longest amount of time and has been researched more extensively, this literature review will focus on Facebook as it is possible that these findings could possibly be applied to other public electronic forums as well.

Facebook was established in 2004 and is now the most popular website in the United States (Sibona, 2014). Like other social networking sites, Facebook was designed to foster social interaction. Each member is given a personal profile and it given the option to share pictures and personal information about themselves. Users can connect



with friends on Facebook and communicate publically or privately. Facebook makes keeping up with friends easy through a “newsfeed”. When users log on, they are able to see recent photos and status updates from their Facebook friends all on one page through their newsfeed (Pempek et al., 2009). This is important to note in terms of managing conflict on Facebook because when something is posted, your Facebook friends do not necessarily have to seek out your post. It is likely to appear in their newsfeed.

In a study by Pempek et al. (2009), 92 undergraduate students were asked about their motivations for using Facebook. The three top responses were “communicating with friends”, “looking at or posting photos” and “entertainment (to pass time, to fight boredom, to procrastinate, etc.)” (Pempek, 2009, p.231). As far as their daily activity on Facebook, participants reported more reading and observing activity than direct interaction. Furthermore, a majority of students reported that they felt that Facebook had a “somewhat positive” impact on their social lives and a “somewhat negative” impact on their academic studies. Sheldon (2008) found similar results in Facebook motives among 172 college students. Participants reported using Facebook to pass time and to maintain relationships by sending messages or posting on a friend’s wall.

Fox et al. (2014) ran focus groups with college students to better understand the role that Facebook plays in the struggles of romantic relationship. Participants revealed “Facebook influences the way people experience and enact various discursive struggles in their romantic relationships” (Fox et al., 2014, p.533). Participants voiced frustration, feeling a lack of control over their personal information. They felt that in some ways Facebook made their relationship less private because other Facebook friends can track changes in their relationship. They also discussed how Facebook can become a source of

jealousy as they can monitor their partner's profile and see their photos and interactions with others. Overall the participants expressed that Facebook had negative effects on their relationship. However, despite these complaints 46 of the 47 participants reported that they currently maintain a profile on Facebook. This recent study illustrates the ongoing struggle of many Facebook users. Members enjoy using Facebook for the benefits of information-seeking and positive feedback, but the cost is dealing with the frustrations and jealousy it creates (Fox et al., 2014).

Kim and Ahn (2013) also discuss some of the costs and benefits of Facebook use as they explored college students' presentation of self during conflict on Facebook. Participants in this study reported that Facebook was their "most dominant social media platform" (p.4) and they accessed this platform daily. Consistent with the research of Fox et al. (2014) and Sheldon (2008), participants identified information seeking and the ability to stay connected with friends as motivational factors for Facebook use. The findings of this study attribute inappropriate manners and deviation of normative conversation as the source of many of the conflicts experienced by participants. Conflicts were more likely to occur with close friends rather than strangers or acquaintances and controversial topics were often avoided to minimize the likelihood of conflict. Participants reported that others' perceptions were significant in their decision making process when managing conflict and this study found that "conflicts worked against managing positive impressions in public." (p.9).

Ross et al. (2009) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the link between personality traits and Facebook use. Participants who identified as highly extraverted reported membership in more groups, but did not necessarily have more Facebook friends

or spend more time online. It could be inferred that extraverted individuals do not substitute internet use for face-to-face interactions (Amiel, & Sargent, 2004). Those reported to be open to experiences were the most sociable on Facebook, but had the least knowledge about computer mediated communication. Highly neurotic participants reported that their favorite Facebook feature was “the wall”, and those who reported low levels of neuroticism cited photo sharing to be their favorite feature. Results also showed that agreeable individuals did not necessarily have higher levels of online activity and conscientious individuals did not necessarily have lower levels of online activity (Ross et al., 2009).

Though not specific to college students, a similar study by Hollenbaugh and Ferris (2014) explored the relationship between personality type and self-disclosure on Facebook. Exhibitionism and relationship maintenance were found to be the two motives that were direct predictors of amount of self-disclosure. Personality traits related to the greatest amount of self-disclosure were low levels of conscientiousness, low levels of agreeableness, and high levels of openness. In addition, highly extraverted participants reported disclosing the most personal information. When users have more openness and lower levels of self-esteem and neuroticism, they post about a wider variety of topics.

### **Attachment and Technology**

As technology continues to be a greater part of everyday life, research has explored how attachment styles inform technology use. Marshall, Bejanyan, Di Castro and Lee (2013) found a relationship between attachment styles and Facebook activity. It seems that an anxious attachment style is positively correlated with Facebook jealousy and surveillance in romantic relationships. Participants reported that this behavior was

partly because they did not trust their partners. It is likely that those with an anxious attachment style may perceive ambiguous cues on Facebook as threatening, making them angry with their partner. This kind of response could decrease their partner's commitment, thus creating a negative interaction cycle. On the other hand, an avoidant attachment style was negatively correlated with jealousy and surveillance on Facebook. The researchers conclude that if partners feel secure in their relationship, they are less likely to interpret ambiguous information as threatening to the relationship (Marshall et al., 2013).

Fleuriet, Cole, and Guerrero (2014) echo this idea by explaining that attachment styles influence our verbal and non-verbal behavior and act as a filter by which we interpret information from others. "For example, a preoccupied person who already has a fear of abandonment may interpret a Facebook post by a potential rival as more threatening than a secure person would" (p. 435). Those with a secure attachment are more likely to decode ambiguous messages correctly (Noller, 2005). Results from a study by Fleurit et al. (2014) showed that those with high levels of preoccupied attachment were more likely to experience negative emotion following a potentially jealousy-inducing post on Facebook. This could be because those with a preoccupied attachment style often feel unworthy in relationships and require more validation than other attachment styles. As dismissives are more likely to avoid close relationships and downplay threats to their relationship, they reported low levels of jealousy and negative emotion.

Past research has shed light on conflict styles, the differences in face-to-face and computer-mediated interactions, and even what our personality says about our Facebook

use, but the use of public electronic forums to manage conflict has yet to be explored. The research indicates that some may have difficulty expressing emotion through text-based communication, while others may prefer it (Derks et al., 2008). Each type of communication carries its own set of advantages and disadvantages, which could suggest a wide array of experiences for managing conflict on public electronic forums. While social media has maintained its popularity among college students, Fox et al. (2014) reports that many struggle with costs and benefits of using a public electronic forum such as Facebook to manage their relationships. This study will build upon this existing knowledge of social media use, conflict, and relationships, as it explores the process of managing conflict on public electronic forums.

### CHAPTER III: METHODS

#### **Design**

This study explored research questions through qualitative semi-structured interview questions. A qualitative approach was most congruent with the aim of this study, which was to explore the ways public electronic forums are used to manage conflict among female college students. Exploring these issues qualitatively strove to empower participants as they shared their stories and to shed light on the meaning that participants draw from their experiences (Creswell, 2013). Interview questions prompted participants to reflect upon the process of using a public electronic forum to manage conflict and how the levels of privacy on these forums affected the way the conflict unfolded.

#### **Participants**

For this study, the researcher recruited sixteen female college students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, who have used a public electronic forum in some capacity to manage conflict with a female friend in the past three years. Conflict with female family members was excluded as this study explored peer conflict as opposed to family conflict. This particular population was chosen because research has found that this group displays higher levels of Facebook use when compared to other groups (Muise, et al., 2009 ; Pempek et al., 2009; Smith & Caruso, 2010). Data was limited to instances that began in person and have occurred in the past three years for the sake of relevance, clarity, and accuracy. Though sixteen participants were interviewed, four participants discussed conflicts that occurred during high school. To more accurately capture the experience of college students, these four interviews were excluded in the final results

and analysis of this study. Twelve participants was an appropriate sample as a sample of this size was large enough to reach saturation and to provide sufficient data on this topic.

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board at Virginia Tech, participants were recruited at the University of Georgia during the fall 2015 semester by contacting a known professor who is supportive of this line of research. After obtaining permission from the professor, the primary researcher briefly spoke to selected classes to explain the purpose and criteria of the present study. Potential participants were provided with the researcher's contact information for further questions and to arrange interview times for individuals who met the criteria and were willing to participate in the present study. University of Georgia students who elected to participate in this study were offered 10 extra credit points toward their total course points for participating in this study; students from the same class who elected not to participate in the study were offered an alternative assignment for the same amount of extra credit.

### **Procedures**

Participants expressed interest by contacting the researcher via phone or email. The researcher then scheduled interviews with students who met the necessary criteria and had time available while the researcher was on campus conducting interviews. Face-to-face interviews were conducted by the researcher in a soundproof study room on the University of Georgia campus to ensure confidentiality. In addition, using the same study room on campus reduced extraneous data variability that can be caused by using different interview locations. Standardizing the location helped control for that type of variability. The researcher reviewed with the participant the informed consent form (Appendix A) necessary to participate in this study and make clear the risks and benefits of the study.

Each participant was required to sign one copy of the consent form which was held in confidence by the researcher, and the participant also received a signed copy to retain for her own purpose. Participants completed a written demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) before completing the oral interview. Interviews lasted 30 minutes – 1 hour.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted to establish trust and rapport between the researcher and participant, and to obtain more extensive data from participants such as body language, appearance, and other nonverbal communication. The researcher kept a journal to track participants' nonverbal communication, as well as the researcher's thoughts, questions, and biases related to the study. This study excluded interviews by phone or Skype in an effort to obtain richer data and to maintain data consistency.

### **Instruments**

Face-to-face interviews were semi-structured and questions focused on gaining a more in depth understanding of the process of using a public electronic forum to manage conflict. Before beginning the interview, participants were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire to obtain relevant background information.

### **Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about a time you used a public electronic forum such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter to manage a conflict with a friend (not romantic partner).  
For example some people may post quotes or post photos without that person.  
What happened for you?
2. When did this happen?
3. How did this conflict begin?
4. What were you hoping to communicate by (insert behavior)?



5. How did your efforts to manage this conflict end up on (insert public electronic forum)? Describe this process.
6. How public (in terms of privacy settings) were your efforts to manage this conflict on (insert public electronic forum)? Who determined how public it was? Did privacy levels vary and, if so, what seemed to change the levels of privacy?
7. What was the effect of using a public forum to manage a private conflict? What was helpful? What was not helpful?
8. Did this person ever reach out to you (in person)? If yes, how? What happened? How did that make you feel? If no, how did that make you feel? Did you ever reach out to them in person?
9. What would it have been like to deal with this conflict in a different way, such as a conversation over the phone or in person? What got in the way of dealing with this conflict differently?
10. Was there any resolution? What happened?
11. Having completed this interview, would you change anything about the way you handled this conflict? Why or why not?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add that would be important for me to know?

### **Analysis**

Corbin and Strauss's (1998) method of grounded theory analysis was followed for the analysis of these data. Interviews were audio recorded and then later transcribed by the primary researcher. The primary researcher began the analysis process without "a preconceived theory in mind" as "theory driven from the data is more likely to resemble

the ‘reality’ than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation” (Corbin & Strauss, 1998, p.12). After reading each transcript several times to gain a better understanding of the data, the primary researcher began open coding, which is the first phase of grounded theory analysis. During this phase, the primary researcher went line by line to identify codes that are then examined for similarities and differences to better understand the phenomenon emerging from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Codes were reviewed by a second coder and by thesis advisor, Dr. Angela Huebner, to ensure accuracy of codes. The primary researcher then began the process of axial coding. Axial coding consisted of identifying significant relationships between codes and relating smaller categories to larger categories. In the last phase, selective coding, the primary researcher selected the “core category” and systemically related it to the remaining categories that emerged.

**Credibility and trustworthiness.** Several methods were used to ensure that credibility and trustworthiness were maintained throughout this study. First, the primary researcher kept a journal to bracket personal thoughts and biases pertaining to this study’s topic throughout the duration of the research process. These memos were later used during the data analysis. Second, the primary researcher transcribed each interview and read each interview several times to become fully immersed in the data and to better understand the processes described by each participant. Lastly, a second coder and the primary researcher’s thesis advisor reviewed each phase of the analysis process to ensure the credibility of the data.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

For the purposes of this study, twelve college students were interviewed to explore the ways that conflict is managed on public electronic forums. Participants reported various experiences of conflict management on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and Pinterest. While each participant's experience was unique in its own way, certain themes and patterns did emerge as significant using Corbin and Strauss's method for grounded theory analysis. Themes have been grouped into the following three categories: motivation, third party involvement, and remorse/regret.

The three themes that emerged all function as part of the process of how conflict is managed on social media. According to grounded theory, categories emerge that are interrelated and are not meant to be linear. Grounded theory is unique in that its purpose is to describe a process of a group of people by identifying the relationships between categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). In this study, relationships emerged among the three main themes as well as their subthemes.

### **Demographics**

Twelve female college students were interviewed for the present study. Ages of participants ranged from nineteen to twenty-five years old and consisted of seven seniors, two juniors, two sophomores, and one freshman. All participants were students in the college of Family and Consumer Sciences with a majority of participants having the major of Consumer Economics, Consumer Journalism, or Human Development and Family Science. There was a lack of religious and ethnic diversity in this sample as all but one participant identified as Protestant, and all but two participants identified as Caucasian. One participant identified as Catholic and Latina, and one participant

identified as African American. Conflicts discussed by participants varied in terms of severity. Several participants reported mild conflicts about issues such as household chores or disapproval of a friend's boyfriend. For others the conflict was more severe and pertained to a difference in core values. In these instances, it was more likely that the conflict was unresolved and resulted in the end of the relationship. Additional participant demographic information can be found in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Demographics**

	<i>Age</i>	<i>Religious Affiliation</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Class Status</i>	<i>Major</i>	<i>Forum(s) on which conflict was managed</i>
<b>1</b>	22	Christianity - Protestant	White/Caucasian	Senior	Consumer Economics	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
<b>2</b>	19	Christianity - Protestant	White/Caucasian	Sophomore	Human Development and Family Science	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
<b>3</b>	19	Christianity - Protestant	African American/Black	Sophomore	Human Development and Family Science	Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest
<b>4</b>	21	Christianity - Protestant	White/Caucasian	Senior	Consumer Economics	Twitter, Instagram
<b>5</b>	21	Christianity - Protestant	White/Caucasian	Senior	Consumer Economics	Facebook
<b>6</b>	21	Christianity - Protestant	White/Caucasian	Senior	Consumer Economics	Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram
<b>7</b>	25	Christianity - Protestant	White/Caucasian	Junior	Consumer Journalism	Facebook, Instagram
<b>8</b>	20	Christianity - Protestant	White/Caucasian	Junior	Human Development and Family Science	Facebook, Instagram
<b>9</b>	21	Christianity - Protestant	White/Caucasian	Senior	Human Development and Family Science	Snapchat
<b>10</b>	23	Catholicism	Hispanic/Latino	Senior	Consumer Economics	Facebook
<b>11</b>	19	Christianity - Protestant	White/Caucasian	Freshman	Early Childhood	Snapchat

<i>12</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>Christianity - Protestant</i>	<i>White/Caucasian</i>	<i>Senior</i>	<i>Consumer Journalism</i>	<i>Facebook, Snapchat</i>
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### **Motivation**

All participants described some form of motivation for choosing to manage their conflict on social media and how they managed their conflict on social media. Strategies varied from direct methods that involved using their friend's name to more indirect methods such as refraining from "liking" their friend's posts. Participants reported several different motivations or reasons for their conflict management strategies. These include a desire to keep the conflict small; their notion that social media is an accepted and normal way to manage conflict; their notion that social media is a quick and easy way to express oneself; none reported malicious intent.

**Keeping the conflict small.** Six participants reported managing their conflict on social media rather than in person or choosing a particular social media over others to keep the conflict small. All six participants expressed concern that a conversation in person would cause the conflict to escalate and would ultimately be unhelpful. Participant eight employed indirect strategies (unliking photos) on social media to communicate disapproval of a friend's boyfriend. When asked what prevented her from having a conversation in person with her friend, Participant eight responded by saying:

Probably just like, fear of causing more of a problem...just because sometimes when you do have conflict with people [...] it doesn't work out in a good way. Sometimes people get caught up in the moment and then say things they don't mean and that kind of stuff. So we didn't want to like, hurt her because she did, you know, care about the guy. Um, so we didn't want to like, attack her.

Three of these six participants also reported that being indirect was also a method for keeping the conflict small. Participant ten posted a quote on social media to express her feelings surrounding their conflict. When asked what was helpful about using social media to manage her conflict, she stated:

I think the fact that you can like, indirectly say things or just publically announce things and your friends will see it even though you don't gear it towards them. So like for me, my intention wasn't to cause any type of like bigger conflict. It was just- I guess I was trying to come off as just kind of, what I set to be, like knowledgeable or eye opening or just you know, hear where I'm coming from type of thing.

One participant reported that her desire to keep the conflict small determined which social media site she used to manage her conflict. This participant specifically chose to send a picture through Snapchat because this form of social media was more private and her hope was that this would keep the conflict contained.

**Social norms.** Six participants reported that one of their motivations for managing conflict on social media was that it has become a common form of communication. These participants spoke of social media as playing an important role in their lives and "a daily thing". Participant six expands on this by explaining:

I wasn't processing the conflict through the social media necessarily. It was just the result of how I was feeling I guess I would say. Um...but they ended up on social media just 'cause social media's such a daily thing, like a part of my life now so that's just why it ended up there.

Five of these six participants reported that social media was not only a common form of communication for them, but they knew it was for their friend as well. These participants reported feeling confident social media would get their friend's attention and that this method is not dismissed as easily as a phone call or text message due to its public nature. Participant ten posted a quote on Facebook in hopes that her friend would see it and know how she was feeling about their conflict. She explained her logic by saying:

We just never talk through just like regular messages or phone calls or anything like that, and so I knew- 'cause she was on Facebook like everyday consistently, so that was my way of kind of like trying to reach out to her 'cause I knew she would see it being that we're friends and it'll pop up on her newsfeed and it'll just kind of like...she'd see it regardless if she wanted to or not. So yeah, that was my whole thought process on that.

**Quick and easy.** Five participants reported that using social media was a quick and easy way to express their emotions surrounding their conflict. Participants expressed that using social media was perhaps easier than talking about the issue in person because it may be a difficult conversation, or as Participant two stated, "We don't know how to approach that [subject] and we never seem to have time." Participant three explained that it was easier to unfollow her friend on social media rather than unfriending or deleting her. She stated that it was easier to avoid the situation than to discuss it. She said:

It's a lot easier to unfollow someone than to unfriend them, so it just was easier for me to do it. It was just easier. Not commenting is also an easy thing because you just...keep scrolling. So both were more convenient than actually having like

a- either respond- like making conversation that would be like, “Oh that’s not true” or saying, “Hey, can you not tag me in anything anymore?” Instead I just keep going like, “If I don’t respond maybe she wont tag me anymore.” And I just keep going, “So if I’m not liking anything maybe she won’t like, try to talk to me as much anymore.”

**No malicious intent.** Eleven participants reported that their intentions behind their conflict management were not to be hurtful or spiteful. On the contrary, these participants reported that their intentions were things such as creating distance from that friend, to communicate indifference about the conflict, or in one case even to reconcile. Participant twelve explains her intention of posting pictures with a mutual friend by saying:

I was hoping to communicate that since I was still really good friends with (other friend) that like maybe we could like eventually like find our way to forgive each other [...]. I wasn’t trying to be spiteful at all. I was just trying to like prove like we’re still friends, like we don’t have problems...like there’s no problem here.

### **Third Party Involvement**

All participants reported that a third party played some kind of role in their conflict. For some, the involvement of other individuals was intentional and in some cases the involvement of others was a result of the public nature of social media. These themes expand upon the different ways that a third party affected conflict management. Participants reported that others made the conflict bigger, their conflict was about a third party, and that others influenced how they managed their conflict.



**Involvement of others made the conflict bigger.** Eight participants reported that when or if others became involved, the conflict would become bigger. Participant one discussed how others became involved in her conflict after deleting her friend from Facebook. She said, “All my friends deleted her too. Like, because [...] none of my friends liked her either, so they- once I told them what happened, they were like, ‘Oh, I’m deleting her off Facebook.’” Participant eight reported that social media caused more problems due to the fact that others could become involved. Her example also illustrates how the public nature of social media can draw others into another individual’s conflict. She stated:

It just caused more problems because then it goes from just being the boy to being on social media where people could potentially see that there’s an issue.

Um...’cause then you bring in other people and it’s not anybody else’s situation.

**Conflict was about a third party.** Six participants reported that their conflict was about another individual. In these cases, participants did not necessarily experience conflict with a third party, but a third party did play a critical role in the development of the conflict. In four of these cases, the conflict pertained to their friend’s current or previous romantic relationship. For example, Participant eight stated:

My friend and her boyfriend were going through um...a situation and they were having problems in their relationship, and then he said very rude things to her, as well as me and all my roommates, and then she kind of went along with that and like stopped talking to us and like put us on the backburner while she put him first after he kind of like disrespected all of us. So then because of that, we went on

Instagram and unliked all of the pictures on her account that had him in it, and then just kind of...yeah.

**Conflict management strategy was influenced by others.** Eight participants reported that others in some way influenced the way they managed their conflict. Examples varied from being directly encouraged to manage the conflict online to letting concern of what others would think dictate how they managed the conflict. For example, Participant four reported that displaying conflict on social media “makes your character look bad” and she didn’t want to portray that kind of image to public, so she altered the way she managed her conflict on social media. Participant nine recalled a more direct motivation for using Snapchat from her friend. She stated, “[...] I mean with (other friend) being there physically with me and you know mouthing her opinion and whatnot, that might have influenced me as well to go ahead and snap that.”

Participant eight reported a similar situation when she and her roommates experienced conflict with their friend because of her boyfriend. She reported:

[...] we were all in my bedroom and we were just talking and hanging out and stuff...and then she had posted a picture of him, and we were like, “Okay, we’re not going to like that.” So then we went and like, looked at her pictures and we were like, “I’m just going to unlike all of them.” So then we all sat there and went through it and unliked all of them.

### **Remorse/Regret**

The third category pertains to the participants’ feelings about how the conflict was managed. Remorse and regret emerged as significant as nine participants reported some level of regret about their conflict management on social media and eight participants

expressed mixed emotions about how their conflict was managed. For example, Participant one acknowledged that what she did was extreme and if it weren't for social media, she and her friend would probably still be friends because they would have talked about their issue, but on the other hand she said, "I'm glad I did what I did because I don't think we needed each other anymore in each other's lives because we were like, toxic for each other...but I think there are better ways I could have done it." The following themes emerged pertaining to remorse and regret: social media described as immature or petty, face to face is the best method for conflict management, and changing the initial action.

**Immature/Petty.** While a number of words were used to describe conflict management on social media and social media in general, the words that were used most often were immature and petty. Participants also used words such as unhelpful, irresponsible, while others described their conflict management on social media as effective. Participant nine was one of the few participants who managed her conflict in a direct way on social media and expressed regret as she felt that she acted immaturely. She reported that her conflict was later resolved in person. She stated:

We worked it out and then I felt bad for doing it. So it wasn't helpful because I started feeling guilty about it and bad and then um...I realized that it wasn't- like it was immature, you know what I mean? It was very immature...especially with someone like one of your friends.

Similarly, Participant seven expressed concern about her response being immature or petty when she was asked if she would have changed anything about the way she managed her conflict:

I might have not posted. More so just because I personally think that like bringing up drama or stuff like that on social media is- can be sometimes petty and I didn't want to seem like- I hesitated to do it to begin with because I didn't want to come off as being immature.

**Face to face is the best method for conflict management.** Eight participants acknowledged that dealing with their conflict in person would have been the best method to handle their conflict. Participants discussed the difficulties that accompanied conflict management on social media such as ambiguity and a prolonged conflict period. When asked about the effect of using a public forum to manage a private conflict, Participant eight stated:

I actually think it had a negative effect on the situation....'cause if we would have just confronted her face to face, it would have just been more mature and probably the better thing to do, but sometimes when you're a girl you like to do immature things, so we just went and you know did that. Um...but then it just kind of dragged it out a lot longer. It added extra steps that didn't need to be done, when we could have just gone and had a conversation.

Participant six reported that her preference was for face-to-face communication because information can be misunderstood online. She stated:

Like I think a lot of things get miscommunicated over text messaging and all that kind of stuff, so I'm very big in like, if you have a conflict, talk about it in person 'cause that way you can talk and you can see the person's actions and stuff. Um...so if we had talked earlier, it would have had to be in person so that we could have miscommunicated, fought in person, and then moved on.

**Changing initial action.** For five participants, their regret led to changing how they initially handled the conflict on social media. These participants reported actions such as adding their friend back on social media after they deleted them or deleting a post that they felt was unkind. Two of these five participants changed their initial action on social media after the conflict was resolved. Participant two favorited a tweet about a friend that was potentially hurtful and later had second thoughts. She explained, “I eventually did unfavorite it because I felt like, um...I don’t know. I don’t condone social media bullying, so I felt very compelled to just go back and do that just ‘cause it’s just kind of rude.”

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

### Discussion

In recent years social media has become an increasingly dominant forum for communication. As social media continues to rise in popularity, this study explored the ways social media is used to manage conflict. The themes that emerged from the data are interrelated as they identified motivational factors for using social media to manage conflict and consequences that resulted from this kind of management. Overall, themes were interrelated as eight participants reported the involvement of a third party was a motivational factor in that other individuals directly or indirectly influenced how the conflict was managed. The involvement of a third party was also a factor associated with regret as eight participants reported that this made the conflict more public or had the potential to make the conflict more public.

Past research suggests that young adults are more likely to use negotiation to manage conflict when compared to other age groups (Laursen et al., 2001). This is inconsistent with the findings of the present study as ten participants employed indirect methods of conflict management. Five of these eight participants displayed signs of a disengaged conflict style by trying to create distance in their relationship with their friend. For example these participants reported strategies such as deleting their friend from social media and neglecting to respond to their friend on social media to avoid the conflict or to dissolve their friendship with that person. It is possible that conflict negotiation is less likely to occur online in general and that face-to-face interactions are more conducive to this kind of conflict management. Of the seven participants who reported that their conflict was resolved, three reported that the resolution occurred in

person, one participant reported that her conflict was resolved via text message, and three participants reported that creating distance in the friendship or ending that friendship was a form of resolution. This is in line with previous research that the likelihood of disengagement increases over the lifespan as “improvements in conflict resolution skills [...] may include learning to walk away from a dispute” (Laursen et al., 2001, p.442).

Wachter (1999) found that men are less likely than women to engage in conflict through computer-mediated communication such as social media. Men are more likely to manage conflict in person as this enables them to engage in a dominating style. While many participants expressed a desire to manage their conflict in person, this study supports the findings on gender differences and conflict styles. The use of social media for conflict management seems to be in line with women’s preferred conflict style of avoidance (Thomas et al., 2008). Some participants reported that social media was a means to avoid a conversation where the outcome was uncertain or to distance themselves from the conflict in general. Compromising and accommodating are also preferred conflict styles of women, but it is possible that these styles may be more commonly employed in face-to-face interactions. Resolutions in which the friendship continued often occurred in person and seemed to be the result of collaboration or compromise.

It is noteworthy that three participants reported that their initial conflict management on social media led to a conversation in person. For these participants, social media was successful in shifting the conflict to be managed in person, which was described by eight participants as a better way to manage conflict. In these cases where social media led to a conversation in person, two participants reported that they had

regrets about the way they managed their conflict. Moreover, in the seven cases where there was a resolution, all participants expressed regret or mixed emotions about how their conflict was managed on social media. Several participants described conflict management on social media as immature and expressed concerns about how they may be perceived by others for choosing to manage their conflict in this way. Overall, eleven of the twelve participants reported some level of dissatisfaction in managing conflict on social media. The outside influence of others in conflict management is consistent with the findings of Kim and Ahn (2013) as they found that college students consider other individuals' perceptions when deciding to manage conflict online. This may be why more indirect strategies were employed, as direct strategies may have been more hurtful to the recipient, therefore leading participants to be perceived negatively. Also consistent with the research of Kim and Ahn (2013) is that Facebook emerged as the most dominant social media platform in the present study, as nine of the twelve participants reported using Facebook to manage their conflict. Lastly, all participants in the present study reported that their conflict occurred with a close friend or someone they were in close contact with rather than a more distant relationship. This is also similar to the findings of Kim and Ahn (2013).

Findings in the present study identified advantages and disadvantages to using text-based communication. As an advantage, one participant reported that communicating with her friend through private messages on Facebook provided a sense of control and made the conversation "smoother" than a face-to-face encounter might have been. This is consistent with previous research by Madell and Muncer (2007), which found that college students were motivated to use computer-mediated communication in social



situations because it provided a sense of control. As a disadvantage, one participant expressed her preference for face-to-face communication to manage conflict because things are often misinterpreted through text-based communication. This supports previous research that a lack of nonverbal cues can increase the likelihood of misunderstanding (Byron, 2008). Coyne et al., (2011) found that text-based communication has the potential to be less intense than face-to-face interactions, and this was reinforced in the present study as participants reported this as a motivational factor. Ten participants in this study preferred indirect conflict strategies on social media and six participants chose social media in an effort to keep the conflict small. Lastly, Friedman and Currall (2003) suggested that text-based communication could escalate conflict due to a lack of social cues. Overall, participants in this study seemed to attribute the involvement of a third party to conflict escalation or that the involvement of others could have caused the conflict to escalate. It's possible that if more direct methods had been employed the likelihood of conflict escalation would be greater.

Participants in the present study not only expressed frustration with conflict management on social media, but social media in general. Participants used words such as “flippant” and “negative” and reported that ambiguity on social media can create insecurity. Participants also expressed frustration about the public nature of social media. One participant stated that social media makes “relationships worse” because it prevents face-to-face interactions and because our concern about self-presentation on social media is too great. Similar concerns were expressed in previous research. Fox et al. (2014) found that users reported a lack of privacy as a disadvantage of social media and that it had negative effects on romantic relationships. Users identified information seeking as an

advantage to social media. This past study found that users struggled with the costs and benefits of using social media. The participants in the present study reported a similar struggle, but their reasons for this struggle varied somewhat from the previous research. While participants reported ambiguity and lack of privacy as disadvantages of social media, they also reported that social media was a quick and easy way to communicate with others. Despite the costs that come with using social media, participants reported that social media was not only a normal, everyday part of their life, but an important part of their life. For some, this was a reason for choosing social media to manage their conflict. They knew that it was an important part of their friend's life as well and due to the public nature of social media, it could not be dismissed as easily as a phone call or text message.

In the present study, a majority of participants opted to manage their conflict through indirect strategies. Participants reported that these strategies were employed in an effort to avoid discomfort and vulnerability. Greater emotional risk would accompany a face-to-face encounter and participants acknowledged that they would have less control over the outcome of these encounters. There was also some sense of validation in their choice to manage their conflict indirectly. Some participants reported that seeing others handle conflict indirectly on social media played a role in their decision making process. Participants were able to see this form of conflict management modeled by others on social media and were therefore presented with expectations as well. It seems that seeing others employ similar strategies normalized their own desire to manage conflict indirectly on social media.

### **Limitations**

The findings of this study were limited in several ways. The sample size for this study was modest and diversity among participants was limited. The participants in this study were recruited from two different classes at one Southeastern university, and all but one participant identified as Caucasian. There was also a lack of religious diversity as all participants identified as Catholic or Protestant. The lack of ethnic diversity in this sample could be significant as past research indicates that conflict management strategies may vary among culture (Holt & DeVore, 2005). This sample also represents a relatively small age group in that the ages of participants ranged from nineteen to twenty-five years old. Conflict can be managed on social media at any age, but because prior research suggests that age may play a significant role in conflict resolution strategies, it is important to note that social media may be used differently among different age groups (Laursen et al., 2001). A lack of diversity also exists within the forms of social media as only five forms of social media were discussed by participants in the present study.

Another limitation is that this study explored only how women use social media to manage conflict. Findings in this study were consistent with the literature on gender differences and conflict styles in that women employ more indirect conflict management strategies than men. In addition, this study was limited to female friendships. Several participants indicated that they had also managed conflict with a family member or romantic partner on social media. Conflict management strategies may vary depending on the nature of the relationship and the gender of the friend or romantic partner.

The researcher's line of questioning explored certain aspects of the conflict management process and it is possible that different questions would have elicited

different responses from participants. Participants' reflections and conclusions of their experience may have also been altered through processing their experience during the interview. For example, it's possible that a participant felt satisfied with their conflict management during the conflict, but after processing their experience they reported no longer feeling satisfied with how the conflict was managed. Moreover, results were limited in that most participants only discussed indirect conflict management strategies.

### **Clinical Implications**

This study is particularly relevant for clinicians as social media continues to play an important role in the lives of many individuals. Conflict management and conflict resolution are topics frequently discussed in therapy. However as the amount of conflict on social media increases, clinicians need to be equipped to discuss these issues with clients. The findings of this study provide clinicians with a greater understanding of the process of conflict management on social media and the potential consequences associated with this form of conflict management. One of these consequences could be that others may become involved in the conflict regardless of whether or not this was intended. This study will be helpful to clinicians as it provides examples of ways that conflict is managed on social media and supports the notion that clinicians should not make the assumption that all conflict discussed by clients occurred in person. The findings of this study will also be useful in providing educational interventions for children and parents. Clinicians can increase clients' understanding of social media in general and the meaning they create when using social media during conflict.

Ten participants reported that their conflict was managed on social media because a face-to-face conversation was not effective. This is relevant in clinical work as it may

be worthwhile to explore with clients if they had a similar situation and why that conversation was ineffective. For some, social media was a second attempt to get their message across to their friend. Because regret emerged from the data as well, participants should discuss different conflict management strategies with clients if appropriate. When conflict resolution was the goal, participants often reported that a face-to-face conversation led to this resolution. Participants reported factors such as distance, miscommunication, and fear of escalating the conflict as hindering face-to-face management. It would be useful for clinicians to discuss issues surrounding vulnerability and other factors that may prevent clients from dealing with conflict in person.

### **Future Research**

As little research has been conducted on this specific topic, there lie numerous possibilities for future research in this area. Future research in this area should explore how different age groups manage conflict on social media as other age groups such as younger teenagers and older adults may employ different conflict management strategies. There was some indication in two of the interviews that were excluded from the final data analysis that an individual's stage of life may impact the conflict management process. In these two interviews, participants discussed conflict that occurred in high school and reported that their parents became involved and played a significant role in how the conflict was managed. Future research should further explore conflict within different kinds of relationships as well. While this study was limited to peer conflict, future research should consider investigating specific family relationships and romantic relationships.

This study should be replicated with a larger and more diverse sample. To achieve this goal, it would be helpful to recruit participants from different universities across the United States. Different cultures should be explored as past research indicates that conflict styles may differ among cultures. For example, collectivistic cultures are more likely to rely on high-context communication, which has a greater emphasis on non-verbal communication (Ting-Toomey, Yee-Jung, Shapiro, Garcia, Wright, & Oetzel, 2000). Because communication via social media lacks social cues and nonverbal communication, populations that rely more heavily on high-context communication would be of interest in future research. It would also be valuable to include men in future studies to further examine gender differences in conflict management. Future research should explore conflict that began on social media, rather than conflict that began in person and was subsequently managed on social media. Because social media is constantly evolving, this is an issue that should be continuously explored. Over time, new forms of social media may rise in popularity, and the functions they serve in our lives may change.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to explore the process of conflict management via public electronic forums such as social media. Participants discussed their motivations for choosing social media to manage their conflict, how the public nature of social media affected their conflict management, and the outcomes of managing their conflict in this way. Ten participants employed indirect conflict management strategies in an effort to keep the conflict contained and limit the number of people involved. Eight participants acknowledged that their conflict would have been managed more effectively in person

and nine participants expressed some level of regret in choosing to manage their conflict on social media. Feelings of remorse were often a result of intentionally or unintentionally involving others in the conflict or feeling that their method conflict management was immature. While regret was experienced by a majority of participants, participants discussed the benefits and challenges of managing conflict on social media.

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## Appendix A

**Research Informed Consent****Informed Consent for Participants  
in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects**

**Title of Project: The Use of Negotiating Conflict in Close Relationships: An Explorative Study**

**Principal Investigators:**

**Angela Huebner, Ph.D., Associate Professor/Committee Chair, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University**  
**Krista Clark, M.S. Candidate, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University**

**I. Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways that conflict is managed among peers on public electronic forums.

**II. Procedures**

You will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and an in-person interview lasting approximately one hour. In-person interviews will take place in a study room in the Miller Learning Center on the University of Georgia campus.

**III. Risks**

You may feel emotional discomfort when being interviewed about your personal experiences. The researcher will have mental health referrals available should you wish to further process thoughts or emotions that arise from the interview. Payment for service from any mental health providers to which you are referred shall be your responsibility, and shall not be covered by the researchers, nor Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

**IV. Benefits**

The answers you provide will help us learn about the process of managing conflict on public electronic forums so that clinicians may be better able to help others with that experience in the future. Talking about your experience may provide some therapeutic benefit to you. No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made as an incentive for participation in this study.

**V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality**

- All of the information provided during the interview and over-the-phone or e-mail screening is confidential.
- At no time will the researchers release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent.
- All identifying information provided during the audio-recorded interview will be removed and replaced with aliases in the typed transcript and study report. Any identifiable information will be stored separately and securely from coded data.
- All data will be kept in a locked and secured location.
- If you wish to delete any information that may violate your confidentiality, you can bring that to the researcher's attention for omission. If you do not respond by the designated date for your review, the researcher will assume that you have no changes to submit.
- The only individuals with access to the audio recording and original transcript will be the Principal Investigator and the Co-Investigator. If outside transcriber services are used, the Co-Investigator will request that the transcriber sign a confidentiality agreement.
- The audio tapes will be destroyed as soon as they have been transcribed and checked.
- Portions of your interview text may be used verbatim in the report of the project and/or in subsequent publications. No identifying information will be associated with any part of your interview that may be used.
- The Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and University of Georgia Institutional Review Boards (IRB) may view the study's data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

**VI. Compensation**

You will receive 10 extra credit points towards your total course points upon completion of a demographic questionnaire and face-to-face interview.

**VII. Freedom to Withdraw**

You do not have to participate in this research study. If you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

**VIII. Participant's Responsibilities**

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:

1. I will complete a demographic questionnaire. I will complete an in-person one-hour interview. The interview will take place in a study room in the Miller Learning Center on the University of Georgia campus.



**IX. Participant's Permission**

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent.

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Participant's Signature

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Date

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Participant's Name (please print)

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Researcher's Signature

---

Date

If you have any questions about this research study or its conduct, and research subjects' rights, and whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury to the subject, you may contact:

Angela Huebner, Ph.D

Investigator

Krista Clark, M.S. Candidate

Investigator

Dr. David M. Moore

Chair, Virginia Tech Institutional Review  
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## Appendix B

**Demographic Questionnaire**

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your race/ethnicity?

- a. African American/Black
- b. Asian/Pacific Islander
- c. White/ Caucasian
- d. Hispanic/Latino
- e. Native American/American Indian
- f. Multiracial
- g. Not listed (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

3. What is your marital status?

- a. Married
- b. Living with partner
- c. Widowed
- d. Divorced
- e. Separated
- f. Never married

4. What is your religious affiliation?

- a. Christianity - Protestant
- b. Catholicism
- c. Judaism
- d. Buddhist
- e. Islam
- f. Hindu
- g. Atheist
- h. Agnostic
- i. Not listed (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

5. What is your class status?

- a. Freshman
- b. Sophomore
- c. Junior
- d. Senior
- e. Graduate Student

6. To which college do you belong? Mark all that apply.

- a. Agricultural and Environmental Sciences
- b. Education
- c. Engineering
- d. Environment and Design
- e. Family and Consumer Sciences
- f. Pharmacy
- g. Public Health
- h. Veterinary Medicine
- i. Arts and Sciences
- j. Graduate School
- k. Journalism and Mass Communication
- l. Ecology
- m. Law
- n. Public and International Affairs
- o. Social Work

7. What is your major? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Which public electronic forums do you use? Please mark all that apply.

- a. Facebook
- b. Twitter
- c. Instagram
- d. Pinterest
- e. Linked In
- f. SnapChat
- g. Not listed (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

9. Which public electronic forums do you use most frequently?

- a. Facebook
- b. Twitter
- c. Instagram
- d. Pinterest
- e. Linked In
- f. SnapChat
- g. Not listed (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_