Political Expression on Facebook in a Context of Conflict: Dilemmas and Coping Strategies of Jewish-Israeli Youth

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Abstract
Social media, and Facebook in particular, embody a complex and challenging context for impression management, particularly when it comes to political expression. The Israeli case presents a unique context in which to examine these questions as Jewish-Israeli youth are embedded in a divided society involved in the protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict. A thematic content analysis of 15 in-depth interviews with Israeli-Jewish students who are regular Facebook users revealed distinct dilemmas. Jewish-Israeli youth are highly motivated to discuss politics on Facebook, while also aware of social risks involved in such discussion. Thus, they adopt unique coping strategies in which political expression is an integral part in the delicate act of impression management. This research extends our understanding of Facebook as a platform for expressing political content in divided societies, characterized by considerable internal and external conflict as well as high levels of political involvement.

Keywords
Facebook, impression management, computer-mediated communication, heterogeneous audiences, protracted conflicts, Israeli–Palestinian conflict, political expression

The increasing popularity of social network sites in recent years has brought with it a remodeling of many processes of interpersonal communication (Anderson, Fagan, Woodnutt, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012). Specifically, the overwhelming popularity of Facebook and its unique affordances and constraints as a platform have shaped many aspects of people’s communication practices online. Processes of displaying one’s identity, which have traditionally taken place in private and non-mediated spheres, have become institutionalized and mediated through Facebook’s interface (Enli & Thumim, 2012) and are further complicated by the heterogeneous and often unknowable audience (Marwick, 2011). As a result, users have adopted new strategies and practices of impression and interaction management on this social media platform (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011; Kuo, Tseng, Tseng, & Lin, 2013).

Challenges of impression and interaction management become especially urgent and complex when it comes to using Facebook as a platform for political expression, often seen as divisive or inflammatory. Much work has investigated the relations between social media and political participation (for a meta-analysis, see Boulianne, 2015), with recent attention focusing on social media, and Facebook in particular, as an avenue for political expression and talk (Jang, Lee, & Park, 2014). Youth political expression on Facebook has been examined in the US context, where youth generally chose a strategy of political avoidance (Thorson, Vraga, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2015). In this article, we examine youth political expression and impression management on Facebook in Israel, as a unique context of a society embedded in internal and external conflict, but also one that upholds speech norms that value vibrant political discussion. Examining varying cultural contexts helps parse out which characteristics of political expression on Facebook are culturally dependent and which are a more globally shared outcome of the technological and social affordances and constraints of the Facebook platform.

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Impression Management on Facebook: Challenges and Strategies

Social network sites such as Facebook have spurred interest in how new communication technologies reform the process of self-presentation (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011). Facebook users perceive the platform as multifunctional and use it in order to achieve varied goals: maintaining social ties, gaining and reinforcing social capital, keeping up to date with old and new friends, organizing social events, dating, and so on (Anderson et al., 2012). As a result, social network sites such as Facebook collapse multiple audiences into one single context (Marwick, 2011), a unified category of “Facebook friends.” Furthermore, the audience on Facebook is often obscured. Many users can hardly remember whom they listed as friends and cognitively cannot conceive of them all simultaneously (boyd, 2008; Ellison & boyd, 2013).

These characteristics of the Facebook platform present an interesting challenge to the process of impression management, as described by Erwin Goffman (1959). According to Goffman, the natural tendency to pursue social acceptance motivates people to match their impression management to their audience. Impression management is shaped by our perception of both the audience and the situation: different groups and different situations direct us toward different norms of behavior. On Facebook, however, this practice encounters difficulty given the heterogeneity of the audiences’ norms and expectations: the appropriate self-presentation in front of work colleagues may not appeal to close friends or family and vice versa. Due to the divergence of motivations and audiences, users find it hard to select and maintain strategic impression management (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011; Joinson, 2008; Sleeper et al., 2013).

In addition to the multiple motivations and heterogeneous audiences, Facebook presents an additional challenge: users lack monopoly over their own impression management. Facebook friends are not merely an audience; they also participate in shaping one’s image. The information attached to one’s Facebook profile contains both data they provided and the comments, images, and “likes” provided by others, which may not stand in line with the impression the user wishes to maintain for themselves. Finally, the users’ actions and interactions with others also provide identity cues that may validate or violate their presented identity (Anderson et al., 2012). As a result, the Facebook profile is a dialectic arena in which others may affirm or oppose one’s self-presentation (boyd, 2008; Ellison & boyd, 2013), creating a complex space for conducting impression management.

Taking this challenge into account, the Facebook platform offers several tools designated to allow the user to better control their impression management. For example, Facebook allows the users to set visibility settings of posts to friends-only or even to specific groups or individuals among the friends list. The user can thus strategically share content to specific audience segments (Enli & Thumim, 2012; Sleeper et al., 2013), supposedly enabling to overcome the challenge of heterogeneous audience. But users rarely use these tools—Consumer Reports Magazine (2012) found that almost 13 million of Facebook users in America had never set, or did not know about, Facebook’s privacy tools, and 28% shared all or almost all of their wall posts with an audience beyond their friends. Moreover, many characteristics of “networked publics”—including persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability—may cause unintended leaks of information that was set as private (boyd, 2007).

When considering impression management on Facebook, it is important to bear in mind cultural differences. Since the majority of research in this domain has been conducted in the United States, more is known about American norms than about other segments of the global Facebook user population (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). Most of the research does not pay attention to cultural and social norms that are specific to certain social groups, pointing at a theoretical vacuum. The Israeli case, as a society with differing norms about patterns of communication, accepted speech norms and boundaries of social expression (Katriel, 1986, 2012) illuminates new aspects regarding impression management on Facebook—ones that are particularly salient in regards to political expression.

Facebook as a Platform for Political Expression

Impression management on Facebook becomes an especially complex and contradictory task when it comes to using the platform for political expression. The role of social media in encouraging political learning, political mobilization, and political conversation has been at the center of a host of studies (e.g. Bond et al., 2012; Fernandes, Giurcanu, Bowers, & Neely, 2010). Recently, scholars have pointed to the importance of investigating the nature of the unique Facebook context for expressing political content and conducting political discussion (Jang et al., 2014; Thorson et al., 2015; Vraga, Thorson, Kliger-Vilenchik, & Gee, 2015).

Characteristics of the Facebook platform, as previously discussed, make it a distinct place for political expression. The affordances of the platform, including the interaction with hundreds of Facebook friends simultaneously and the possibility of further sharing and amplifying of messages, allow users to convey information to a vast audience and potentially raise social awareness (Kuo et al., 2013). The potential of a heterogeneous audience—due to the fact that Facebook friends are a collection from various walks of life—means that the message may actually reach those whose opinions differ from our own, a rarity in most face-to-face social circles (Mutz, 2006). Yet, the potential use of Facebook as a channel for political expression and discussion is tempered by some of the impression management challenges described before. Posts that express political views on Facebook may result in heated debates, offended
audiences, and even damaged relationships (Dvir-Gvirsman, Tzfati, & Menchen-Trevino, 2014; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, in press; Thorson et al., 2015). Users’ desire to be seen in a favorable light may discourage their expression of honest political views, when these may not coincide with the perceived common views on the network (Hampton et al., 2014). Sleeper et al. (2013) found that a main reason for self-censoring content is the wish to avoid argument or discussion. These challenges of conducting political discussion on Facebook may aggravate during times of high-intensity political conflict, in which controversy and disagreement rise, while tolerance and acceptance decline (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004).

A recent study explored political expression on Facebook in the context of the 2012 US presidential election (Thorson et al., 2015). American youth aged 18–29 years were interviewed, exhibiting a set of shared norms and expectations regarding political expression on Facebook. Most of these interviewees did not appreciate political content on Facebook and identified such content as “rants” with the aim of provoking drama. These young people chose several strategies to mitigate politics on the site, including avoiding posting political content, posting only neutral content, or using humor (e.g. posting of funny memes). The youths’ resistance stemmed not only from the political content itself but also from an aversion to an impolite or offensive style (Papacharissi, 2004). Hampton et al. (2014) similarly found regarding political content on Facebook that their sample of Americans preferred neutrality in order to avoid undesired conflicts.

**The Israeli Context**

The vast majority of research on youth and political expression on Facebook has focused on the US context that is generally characterized by low youth involvement in politics (CIRCLE, 2014) and a hesitance toward political discussion (Eliasoph, 1998). Yet, to what extent do specific social and cultural characteristics shape young people’s impression management work on Facebook, specifically as it relates to political expression?

The Israeli society constitutes an interesting case in point. As a society embedded in the ongoing, intractable, protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011), this society in general, and youth in particular, are characterized by high levels of political involvement and by the centrality of political attitudes to identities, identifications, and self-presentation (Hammack, 2011; Rosenberg & Maoz, 2012). This society is further characterized by different speech norms, where directness and “talking straight” are preferred modes of communication (Katriel, 1986, 2012) and where discussing politics is more than socially acceptable—it is highly valued.

At the same time, the reality of external and internal conflict that characterizes the Israeli society situates a vast amount of political issues as highly divisive, along the major demarcation line of doves (those that support conflict resolution based on compromise with Palestinians) and hawks (who generally oppose this) (Maoz, 2006; Rosenberg & Maoz, 2012). This deep penetration of politics into almost every area of Israeli life, and the related potential divisive impact of political content, makes the challenges of impression and interaction management on Facebook especially acute. Facebook is a central arena for interaction in Israel, home of the heaviest Internet users in the world, who spend more time on Facebook than any other nation (Karniel & Lavie-Dinur, 2012; McHugh, 2011). Of particular relevance to this study, John and Dvir-Gvirsman (in press) found that in the Israeli context of heightened conflict, discussing politics on a platform such as Facebook—with heterogeneous and unknowable audiences—can be a risky endeavor, causing confrontation and personal repercussions.

Against this backdrop, studying Jewish-Israeli youth’s use of Facebook can expand our understanding of impression management on social media in societies in conflict, particularly as it relates to political expression. This study points at the characteristics that are shared among Facebook users in many global contexts, as well as ones that are more culturally and politically specific.

**Method**

**Participants**

The research was conducted in 2014, at a period of relative calm in the general context of conflict in Israel. A public call for interviewees was posted on the Facebook account of the first author, asking her own Facebook network to share the post widely. This technique followed the logic of snowball sampling, approaching several interviewees and using their social connections in order to reach a larger pool of potential participants (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

The research sample includes fifteen 23- to 29-year-old Jewish-Israeli interviewees (seven females and eight males, \(M_{age} = 26.7, \text{ standard deviation (SD) } = 1.7\)), all of whom described themselves as active Facebook users, visiting Facebook daily, posting and sharing information regularly, and interacting with 300–1,500 Facebook friends. All the interviewees are secular undergraduate or graduate students residing in central Israel, most are Israeli-born, and three immigrated from the former-USSR at an early age. Participants were not explicitly asked for their political views, but based on the examples they provided in interview, seemed to skew left.

**The Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the interviewees, generally in their local cafés or at their homes. The interviews followed a semi-structured
Interview guide, while interviewees were encouraged to share ideas, experiences, and examples regarding impression management on Facebook, helping us to elicit new perspectives for understanding the subject at hand (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). Our focus was on activity conducted on the respondent’s own Facebook profile—which we perceive as the central site for impression management negotiation, that is most visible and salient to the respondent’s social network. Interviews were conducted in Hebrew and lasted 45–100 min. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees and fully transcribed for analysis.

Analysis of the Interviews

The analysis was based on the grounded theory approach, focusing on the production of meanings and concepts used by social actors in real settings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Our aim was to understand the phenomenon as our respondents understand it. To borrow from Geertz (1983), we tried to figure out “what the devil they think they are up to” (p. 56).

Grounded theory begins with “open coding” of interview transcripts, in order to identify central ideas in the data, represented as concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through iterative coding, we grouped concepts together into categories, which provided the structure for the following analysis. Within different categories, sub-categories were identified, to provide further clarification and specification (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101). Finally, we connected the emerging themes and categories to concepts and questions emerging from the literature. For example, while they did not necessarily use the term, we found that our interviewees put elaborate thought into impression management on Facebook, and thus, this theoretical concept was a highly relevant one to contemplate their behavior.

Findings

Impression Management on Facebook: Between the Personal and the Political

In line with previous research (Joinson, 2008; DeAndrea & Walther, 2011), our findings indicate that our interviewees hold multiple and sometimes conflicting motivations for using Facebook. The personal and social motivations and needs of being liked, gaining or maintaining popularity, and managing interactions, on one hand, often clash with a motivation toward political expression through Facebook, on the other hand.

Facebook profiles are central sites for self-presentation. Previous research claims that since users desire social acceptance, they manage their self-presentation on the platform in the most favorable way possible, portraying an idealized self through their online activities (Farquhar, 2012). According to Utz, Tanis, and Vermeulen (2012), “need for popularity” is a predictor for a wide range of actions on social networks. In line with this, our interviewees expressed a motivation to gain as many “likes” as possible, as an indicator of popularity. Idan states,

I pay attention to where I receive more likes and I try to balance between posts that are “likeable” to posts that contain an important message I want to spread.

Interviewees discussed adjusting the contents that they post in order to receive positive feedback—to do so, they may rephrase a message or replace its content entirely. This notion that, as we will see below, is especially relevant to political expression on Facebook, follows Goffman’s classic assertion that the wish to gain social acceptance shapes acts of impression management. Not only do users attempt to gain positive feedback, they also commonly delete posts that failed to yield likes since this may be perceived as a self-presentation breach.

Social capital may also reflect on popularity. The amount of Facebook friends may be regarded as a socio-metric barometer that determines social judgment about Facebook users (Lee, Moore, Park, & Park, 2012), leading users to generally seek more Facebook friends. At the same time, having a large audience comes with a downside: it exacerbates impression management challenges as multiple audiences may demand differing and sometimes contradicting impression management tactics (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011). Adding many Facebook friends may also jeopardize privacy and intimacy. Accordingly, Uri chooses to moderate his friend list in order to avoid self-presentation breaches. He insisted on declining his grandmother’s friend request although his mother urged him to accept her, as he felt this would limit his self-expression:

I can’t discuss my political views with her, I don’t want her to see me shirtless in my photos . . . I can’t find a reason to accept her friend request.

By declining his grandmother’s friend request, Uri seeks to control his audience. Yet, although the interviewees are aware of moderating their friend lists as an effective instrument for impression management, most of them still add people from different backgrounds as friends, among them complete strangers, in order to achieve popularity and perceived influence. Since moderating the friend list proves itself as contradicting certain motivations for Facebook use, users may alternatively restrict the visibility of certain contents to certain people (Enli & Thumim, 2012). Yet, as earlier discussed, restricting access to certain content via Facebook privacy tools does not assure that the content would not leak and reach undesired audiences (boyd, 2007). Correspondingly, some sophisticated users act under the assumption that anything posted on Facebook will eventually be available for a general audience. Ziv explains,
I used to set different privacy settings to my content, but I figured out it doesn’t really matter and I stopped using these tools after a friend of mine, who is an influential person in Israel, posted a political post to “friends only” and someone print-screened it and it leaked and caused a lot of trouble . . . I would rather believe it is public in the first place.

So far, our findings have explored impression management goals and practices in general, which generally align with findings from the US context. These set the stage for our focus on political expression in the unique Israeli context. Our findings indicate that interviewees meticulously choose what information to share and how to present themselves to their audience to address the personal–political dilemma and try to meet the challenge of expressing political contents while maintaining their social relations.

Motivations for Political Posting: From Self-Expression to Discussion and Persuasion

In the US context, recent work found students devising complex strategies to effectively “avoid politics” (Eliasoph, 1998), including self-censorship, neutrality, and use of humor (Thorson et al., 2015). For Israeli interviewees, political expression took a much more central stage, as a vehicle for voicing opinions, receiving updates on the political realm, and creating an image of themselves as knowledgeable, opinionated participants in political life.

Several interviewees saw Facebook as an instrument for spreading their political opinions, as a form of self-expression or venting, but one that closely takes into account the imagined audience. Danny says,

I express myself, I feel like I have a means for venting things, thoughts about all sort of things—from politics to something I’ve seen on TV, and I feel I want to express myself and let people read. According to the feedback I get, my insights are interesting enough so I can continue sharing them.

For some, the awareness of the audience is key, and the maintenance of the Facebook persona is seen as a form of curation. This is the case of Idan, who carefully balances his political expressions with a light, humorous side to keep his “subscribers” happy:

I post once a day. If I’d post more frequently it can be draining . . . I’ve created a somewhat flat character, with two faces. The first is a rather radical political left wing supporter and the second is humorous, and I’m trying to keep a balance between the two. It resembles an opinion column in a way, short and concise, but it is a perpetual column in your own newspaper. There are subscribers and they decide whether to see it or not. That is why I cautiously choose what to post and what not to post.

As members of a highly political society in conflict, many interviewees held firm political opinions. They experimented with using Facebook as an instrument for spreading their views and, sometimes, attempting to persuade their audience, although Amos illustrates that this does not always succeed:

I usually post funny or witty or assertive posts, though I try to avoid the latter, I don’t think anyone cares what I think . . . prior to the elections I wrote some political posts, hoping it might persuade someone.

Still, interviewees generally welcomed political expression, not only their own but also that of others. They saw Facebook as an appropriate context for politics and a valuable source for information. As Uri describes,

I usually post regarding news, politics, economics . . . every time something happens in the political arena and I want to find out about it, I don’t turn to Google, I turn to the hive-mind on Facebook.

Hence, Facebook is perceived, among other things, as a valid source for news-updates and political content. Of course, Internet users’ tendency to homophily means they will mostly be exposed to opinions similar to theirs (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2014). At the same time, the heterogeneous audience on Facebook coupled with the general perception of the site as an arena for political expression means you may be exposed to views different than yours. Respondents’ reactions to that may differ, both according to the context and to the identity of the poster. John and Dvir-Gvirsman (in press) found that in the context of the 2014 Gaza war, Jewish-Israelis judged others harshly over political statements and sometimes blocked their contents or unfriended them. This finding was echoed to a lesser extent in this study, for a time of routine, and depended on interpersonal relationships. Naama described hiding some of her friends’ posts on her wall, especially around election times:

My tolerance toward posts may vary, depending on who posted it. There are some people that I’m willing to receive anything from, but people who aren’t that close to me—I don’t want to get the information from them. I just unsubscribe from them, I don’t leave room for a doubt regarding how I will act next time. The best example is a Facebook friend of mine, who was the spokesperson of Yesha council [a regional council of settlements in the west bank], he bombarded me with opinions opposing mine and I chose not to be pluralist about that—it doesn’t suit me . . . I act this way only when people post a lot of this and promote an agenda that is way different than mine. When other people do it—I don’t mind. But all the rage about the elections lately—I got tired of it.

Uri, on the other hand, expressed interest in being exposed to a wide variety of opinions and creating a vibrant political debate:

Most of my posts are completely public. Sometimes, when I’m really certain about my ideas regarding a specific topic and I
don’t want to discuss it, I choose to make it “friends of friends only.” But generally, if I’m a left-wing supporter and my friends are too—the discussion won’t be as interesting. I prefer wider discussions, allowing more opinions to be heard. If someone I don’t know replies to a political post I posted, I write him a private message and thank him. In a way, I look forward to these kinds of interactions with people with opposing opinions. I have some friends like this and I keep them just to prove them wrong.

While impression management is often top of mind, not all posting is strategic and planned. Interviewees mentioned engaging in some political posting as a result of an emotional reaction, which they later regretted. The emotional response may not have been consistent with a strategic act of impression management, as Uri describes:

If I post a political statement, I’m willing to discuss it logically and not only emotionally. This is what characterizes my public messages. There was one time when I failed to do so and someone responded rationally to it and I reacted emotionally . . . it took me a while to understand my response was irrational.

Wang et al. (2011) claim that “hot” states, such as highly emotional states, may predict regrettable posts on Facebook. As members of a highly divisive society in the context of a protracted conflict, some of interviewees’ emotional reactions to conflict-related news fly in the face of their strategic impression management plans.

The Risks of Political Expression in a Highly Divided Society in Conflict

Notwithstanding the desirability of political content on Facebook, posting political content may raise undesired reactions. According to Jang et al. (2014), having a large number of Facebook friends increases the possibility of high divergence in political views and decreases the potential of a productive political discussion. This tendency is exacerbated in a highly divided society such as the Jewish-Israeli one. Yael describes,

At the time, I wrote something about Gilad Shalit [an Israeli soldier captured by Hamas in 2006 and released in 2011] and it raised a very big argument. My opinion is unconventional and I felt some need to express it. I wrote: I think every family member of someone in this situation would ask to release 5,000 terrorists and I think it is justified. I received many likes but also many negative comments and it got to a very ugly argument in the comments.

Interviewees often received unexpected responses from Facebook friends as a result of posting political content. Specifically, those are more likely to stem following posts regarding extreme events that draw wide public notice, such as elections or conflict-related events such as combat or negotiations. During “Pillar of Defense,” an Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) operation in Gaza in 2012, Meirav received some surprising comments:

I wrote what I thought about this specific operation and received many comments such as “you’re in Tel-Aviv, you don’t even know what’s going on, I wish you’d get hit by a missile”—I’ve unfriended these people, they are not my Facebook friends anymore. These were friends from college—we never got to talk about politics and this is where it came out . . . someone who served with me in the army and was my commander shared my post without mentioning my name and wrote “it is shameful that an Israeli thinks this way” and they should take away my citizenship. We have about 50 common friends—they all knew she was talking about me.

Israel’s mandatory military service creates a “melting pot” of sorts for some young Israelis, who for the first time in their lives encounter peers from very different backgrounds (in terms of socioeconomic status, political views, etc.). Soldiers are given limited license to share political views, yet such differences may come to light at a later life-stage. While some interviewees may appreciate social diversification, in Meirav’s case, the context collapse led to social experience perceived as embarrassing, even painful.

The social implications of a political Facebook post may “leak out” of Facebook. On some occasions, interviewees received comments regarding their Facebook political activity off-line. Ido describes,

On a holiday dinner earlier this year, I went out for a smoke with my uncle and he said something about my Facebook profile—I didn’t even remember he’s my Facebook friend and I didn’t think he reads my posts. He told me my political opinions are too radical and later on he unfriended me as well . . . it was hard for me in the beginning, posting things about the occupation or even just mentioning this word—I was afraid of the consequences, I work in the media, it might hurt my future career. But eventually I decided it was important to me, I find it important to mention the occupation and if it’ll become a problem in the future, I will have to deal with it.

The above quote exemplifies some of boyd’s (2007) assertions about the Facebook audience as invisible so that the user is not always aware of who sees their posts. Furthermore, consistent with John and Dvir-Gvirsman’s (in press) findings, our interviewees are aware that posting political content holds risks: disappointing family members, ending friendships—specifically weak tie friendships, and even damaging future career opportunities. This risk is apparently salient not only in times of an extreme eruption of conflict but also in calmer times of routine, that are still embedded in the context of a divided society in an intractable conflict. Although the interviewees are aware of the possible risks of discussing political issues on Facebook, most of them are highly motivated to keep it up nevertheless. Despite displeasing their family members, being unfriended, and even possibly damaging their careers, they find it important to raise awareness to political and social matters that are close to their hearts. They value open discussion and are willing to pay the price.
How to Go About Posting Politics: Coping Strategies and Practices

Our interviewees are considerably motivated to express political contents on Facebook while being well aware of the risks and challenges this involves in the divisive socio-political reality they are embedded in. In contrast to the findings mentioned earlier in the general US population (Consumer Reports Magazine, 2012), the interviewees in this project were familiar with Facebook’s privacy tools and use them regularly, yet they acknowledge them as insufficient to guard them from risks and tend to adopt alternative, behavioral strategies. Consequently, they describe four main strategies for dealing with dilemmas related to posting politics: restricting access to some posts or all of them, phrasing the message vaguely or softening radical views, sharing or liking other people or pages’ content instead of articulating their own posts, and finally, using humor to diffuse political tension.

Uri, who was a commander in the army, feels he must limit the access to certain posts and avoid friending his former subordinates:

I’ve been an officer for more than three years, an honorable officer, and known for my Zionist opinions, for putting the state’s interests before mine. Back then I didn’t write anything about politics because it didn’t feel right. When I resigned and politics became part of what I do, some conflicts emerged . . . the good part is that I managed to channel it to a discussion. The problem was with my subordinates because I’m not allowed to influence them. I’m not friends with many of them—partly because of this reason—I had a certain image as a commander and I don’t want to break it because of my political opinions.

Restricting access to content may help with the challenges of political expression on Facebook, but, as previously noted, characteristics of networked publics make it far from a foolproof strategy. Another strategy to overcome self-presentation breaches while posting political content on Facebook is softening the message in order to minimize the possibility of offending others. Danny describes his active efforts to be “politically correct”—at least online:

I will never write something racist. During “Pillar of Defense” Hamas shot a rocket towards Jerusalem and it landed on a Palestinian village. I wanted to write “these Arabs are stupid,” but I took a moment and wrote “These Hamas guys are stupid.” In my opinion, the fact that an Arab friend of mine liked it is a result of my notion of the delicacy of the situation. I try to be politically correct; I’m not politically correct in my personality but on Facebook I try to act this way.

Others, like Ziv, choose to be vague around controversial issues:

I always think about my job before posting on Facebook, so if I want to write something controversial, I’ll make it vague enough so that only the people who should understand it would understand it.

boyd and Marwick (2011) term this strategy, often used by teens online, social steganography—hiding information in plain sight by creating a message that is understandable only to those in the know. Although our interviewees want to disclose their opinions, the possibility of risking themselves or others is on their mind. By meticulously selecting words and phrases, they can manage to self-express politically while preserving their public image.

The third strategy for posting political content on Facebook while avoiding self-presentation breaches involves reacting to others’ content or sharing existing content, instead of creating it yourself. As Anna puts it,

My Facebook posts are mostly personal, you can hardly find political statements, I try to avoid it. I think it’s because of my job, I used to do it more often. I engage more by liking or sharing political content and less by writing it myself.

Our interviewees know that the control over who sees their posts is not entirely in their hands. If political content is found to be controversial or boring, users may hide it from their feed or unfriend the person who wrote it (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, in press). Two of our interviewees mentioned the use of humor to overcome this challenge. Danny said,

I think part of my success on Facebook stems from my ability to express myself well through writing. A message such as “I don’t like Bibi” [The Israeli Prime minister] is boring. The interesting part is how I phrase it. If my message is controversial, I’ll still put it out, but I’ll work harder on expressing it—writing and re-writing and editing it even after I posted it to maximize results.

The use of humor is another strategy allowing users to maintain their positive impression while expressing their political positions.

Our interviewees see Facebook as a platform with much potential for political expression, but are aware of the challenges its characteristics raise—challenges that are distinct in the context of the Israeli society. Rather than avoiding politics, interviewees are highly motivated to express themselves politically, and choose between a variety of strategies to employ the platform for political engagement, while maintaining their positive impression management.

Discussion

Using Facebook for political expression within a highly divisive society embedded in a protracted, intractable conflict generates a distinct set of dilemmas, challenges, and coping strategies.

One of the aims of this research has been to complement existing work on youth’s politics expression on Facebook, embedded mostly in the US context, with a different cultural and socio-political context. The Israeli case is uniquely situated as a telling comparison case. In contrast to the American context where political talk may often be avoided (Eliasoph,
In the divided Israeli society, politics plays a salient role in people's lives (Hammack, 2011; Maoz, 2006; Rosenberg & Maoz, 2012) and political topics are hotly debated. Moreover, Israeli society is characterized by different speech norms and different perceptions of the appropriateness of political talk.

One avenue to contextualize our research findings is through a comparison with interviews conducted with young Americans aged 15–29 years (Thorson et al., 2015). In that context, it was found that young people generally disliked seeing political content on Facebook, and associated it with obnoxious rants, just trying to rouse attention and conflict. Almost all of these interviewees could identify people in their networks who would post on politics, but this behavior was not seen in a positive light as encouraging discussion and debate, but rather as a transgression of norms. These American youth were cognizant of the Facebook context as one with heterogeneous audiences where there were possible risks to their political expression. But this was not their only inhibition to political talk—they also brought with them to the online context culturally engrained ideas that “one should not talk about politics or religion”—ideas that were exacerbated for them given the complex social context of Facebook. Based on these perceptions, these American youth employed strategies including self-censorship or an avoidance of political content, posting only neutral content or obfuscating their message using humor.

The Israeli case examined here shows a qualitatively different picture. In general, posting about politics on Facebook is seen as desirable and valued. The young people interviewed in this project were highly motivated to express themselves politically on the platform and generally valued others’ political postings. Political content on Facebook helped them learn about others’ opinions and become informed about current events, even taking the place of traditional media.

Youths’ strong motivations to express themselves politically on Facebook does not mean that they do not see possible risks to such expression. To the contrary, risks to political expression are even more salient in a divisive society in a state of inner and external conflict. This fact was powerfully exhibited in the context of the 2014 Gaza war, when Israeli citizens’ political expression on Facebook led to people being publicly denounced, reprimanded by their supervisors, and even fired from their jobs. In that context, John and Dvir-Gvirsman (in press) found strong personal repercussions to political expression such as conflicts with family members and friends or unfriending.

Importantly, the findings of this project preceded the Gaza war, which brought increased public attention to the risks of online political expression in Israel. At the time of relative calm, which was the context for our interviews, people were aware of risks of posting and chose conscious strategies to mitigate them: selecting the audience, softening the language, using humor. The use of behavioral strategies to overcome the challenges of expression is thus common for both Israeli and American youth. But unlike the American students, the youth in this project did not employ these strategies to avoid politics, but rather to enable and support their political expression, in the face of the challenges and risks of such an endeavor.

In both the American and particularly the Israeli case, the privacy tools provided by Facebook are not seen as sufficient to overcome challenges around political expression given the unknown audience. In the general population of Facebook users, many users do not know about or do not use such tools (Consumer Reports Magazine, 2012). More sophisticated Facebook users know these tools, but they also know they cannot fully trust them given characteristics such as searchability and replicability (boyd, 2007). Particularly in the context of a divided society in conflict, where the price of political expression can be high, people devise behavioral strategies to keep expressing themselves politically while minimizing risks.

Making such cultural comparisons can help parse out which characteristics of political expression on Facebook are culturally dependent and which are more globally shared, arising from the affordances and constraints of the Facebook platform. One shared characteristic arising across differing cultural contexts is the awareness of the large, potentially heterogeneous audience and the sense of limited control over who sees your content. What differs from culture to culture is how the awareness of the invisible audience shapes young people’s choices around political expression. For the Jewish-Israelis in this project, these challenges did not mean that they avoided politics on Facebook, but rather that they devised careful strategies to balance political expression with positive impression management.

The Facebook context, in which the audience is potentially large, often unknown, and collapses acquaintances from different social circles, complicates Goffman’s ideas about impression management and its tailoring for specific audiences. This research further shows how general impression management challenges and practices on Facebook are intertwined with the specific practice of political expression.

The Israeli context complicates the relationship between impression management and political expression. In the US context, young Americans were trying to use Facebook in a way that would not offend anyone or arouse trouble (Thorson et al., 2015)—for them, impression management meant avoiding controversial politics. In the Israeli context, on the other hand, political expression was used as a practice in the service of impression management. The young Israelis wanted to create an impression of themselves as someone who is knowledgeable and opinionated around politics and to receive positive social feedback for having candidly expressed their views. They valued open expression and were committed to express their beliefs, even if there is a price to pay. This insistence on the value of political expression does not mean these youth bypass impression management. Rather, they
exert conscious efforts on how to best achieve their desired results of getting positive social feedback (likes, comments) for their political expression. At times, however, the tense political reality may get to them, and they express themselves emotionally in the heat of the moment and not as conscious impression management would dictate.

Despite our findings’ contribution to the understanding of online political expression of youth in a protracted conflict, this study also has certain limitations. Conducting in-depth interviews at one point in time cannot show a causal connection between interviewees’ perceptions and coping strategies and their cultural context. In order to show such relations, future research will have to employ cross-cultural experimental methods. The characteristics of the interviewees in this project are likewise a limitation—they are all Israeli-Jews, who are highly educated, and reside in central Israel. Their perceptions and attitudes regarding online political expression cannot be generalized to the whole Israeli-Jewish population and definitely not beyond it. Future research would benefit from pursuing these questions across a range of populations and cultural contexts, both in Israel and beyond. Moreover, it would be helpful to further delineate the specific contributions of demographic and attitudinal factors on respondents’ choice of Facebook political expression.

Given the central role of political expression for democracy (Dewey, 1927), we can be encouraged by young Jewish-Israelis’ strong motivation to express themselves politically on Facebook. In this highly divided, yet close-knit society, social media platforms are a site for young people to negotiate between their social goals and their political expression. In the Israeli case, the result of this negotiation is not an avoidance of political talk, but rather a fine-tuned act of impression management, in which having a prominent political voice contributes to—rather than undermines—one’s positive self-presentation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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