"All My People Right Here, Right Now": Management of Group Co-Presence on a Social Networking Site

Airi Lampinen
Helsinki Institute for Information Technology HIIT
Helsinki University of Technology TKK
Finland

Sakari Tamminen
Helsinki Institute for Information Technology HIIT
Helsinki University of Technology TKK
Finland

Antti Oulasvirta
Helsinki Institute for Information Technology HIIT
Helsinki University of Technology TKK
Finland

ABSTRACT

A mundane but theoretically interesting and practically relevant situation presents itself on social networking sites: the co-presence of multiple groups important to an individual. This primarily qualitative study concentrates on the point of view of individual SNS users and their perspectives on multiple group affiliations. After charting the perceived multiplicity of groups on the social networking site Facebook, we investigated the relevance of multiple groups to the users and the effect of group co-presence on psychological identification processes. Users deal with group co-presence by managing the situation to prevent anticipated conflictive and identity-threatening situations. Their behavioral strategies consist of dividing the platform into separate spaces, using suitable channels of communication, and performing self-censorship. Mental strategies include both the creation of more inclusive in-group identities and the reciprocity of trusting other users and being responsible. In addition to giving further evidence of the existence of group co-presence on SNSs, the study sheds light on the management of the phenomenon. Management of group co-presence should be supported, since otherwise users may feel the urge to resort to defensive strategies of social identity protection such as ceasing to use SNSs altogether or, less dramatically, limit their use according to "the least common denominator". Hence, the phenomenon merits the attention of researchers, developers, and designers alike.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.m. Information Interfaces and Presentation: Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Human Factors

Keywords

Social networking, computer-mediated communication, social networking site, groups, group co-presence

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1. INTRODUCTION

From everyday experience it seems obvious that individuals are members of multiple groups. In addition to belonging to a work community, one may well be an active member of both a soccer team and a golf club. The lists of contacts maintained on social networking sites (SNSs) typically consist of people associated with different aspects of an individual's life, such as the ones mentioned above. The idea of multiple group memberships and group co-presence may seem the stuff of common sense but in a SNS context it becomes remarkably interesting as many groups relevant to an individual are present simultaneously – usually by visually mediated means. Dramatizing a little, the situation can seem like the Oasis song: 'All my people right here, right now'.

Our article is an attempt to open a path for understanding such co-presence by addressing the processes by which users perceive, categorize, identify themselves with, and manage their identification with the multiple groups present. The study takes a primarily qualitative approach to the relevance of different groups, their co-presence on the social networking site Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) and to the means individuals use to manage this phenomenon.

Social networking sites are gaining ground rapidly. They have been defined as online locations where a user can create a profile and build a personal network that connects him or her to other users [16] or as Web-based services that allow individuals to construct public or semi-public profiles within a bounded system, articulate a list of users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system [4]. While these definitions have shortcomings, they address a real and significant phenomenon.

According to the statistics presented on the site itself [10], Facebook has more than 90 million active users worldwide and over 55,000 regional, work-related, collegiate, and high school networks. These figures clearly show that online social networking has become a large-scale phenomenon.

On SNSs, such as Facebook, the co-presence of multiple groups relevant to an individual becomes salient in an unprecedented way. We define *group co-presence* as a situation in which many groups important to an individual are simultaneously present in one context and their presence is salient for the individual. On Facebook, this means, for example, that the news feed includes items concerning many groups or their members. Additional examples include the members of one's personal network being able to view the actions in which he or she engages on the site,

location and mood, and writing "wall posts" in a public forum, on an analogy to graffiti. The membership of multiple explicit groups is visible in the user's profile, both to him- or herself and to others.

To understand the phenomenon and its consequences, we propose a four-step analysis. First, a framework consisting of both SNS and social psychological research is established. As we adopt a group perspective on SNSs, special attention is paid to defining the concept of "group" in relation to social identity. Secondly, the real world scale of the phenomenon is initially charted – that is, how many groups, on average, do the individuals perceive to be present on the site? Thirdly, the individuals' understanding of the situation is essential. Is the co-presence of multiple groups salient for them? Do they perceive tensions or difficulties arising from it? Finally, the fourth, concluding step is to determine how individuals manage the situation dealing with the co-presence of multiple groups and the problems this possibly poses for them.

In the presented study we conducted online observations and face-to-face on-site interviews of two groups of active Facebook users, eliciting data on their group memberships on the site and their perceptions of the co-presence of groups. Our results give further evidence that social networking sites form a context for social interaction in which groups that in face-to-face interactions belong to different contexts are present simultaneously (the phenomenon has been hinted at in previous work). Users of the site are, to a varying extent, aware of this co-presence and manage it when they judge this to be necessary. To render the situation bearable and ensure that it remains so, users make it less problematic by switching from applying fine group distinctions to utilizing more inclusive categories. For example, a user may treat his/her entire personal network as a unified category even when he/she recognizes that it in fact consists of different groups. Secondly, individuals deal with co-presence by preventing the occurrence of anticipated tensions or conflictive situations, through the use of both active and seemingly more passive mental strategies such as self-censorship, deliberate choices between public and private communication channels and relying on the goodwill and discretion of other users.

2. RELATED RESEARCH ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

The field of research into social networking sites, while relatively new to emerge, is expanding rapidly. boyd and Ellison's [4] introductory article considers the definition and history of SNSs, and research topics associated with them. The authors cite impression management and friendship performance, networks and their structure, online/offline connections, and privacy issues as the most important general research themes in the field so far. In this section of the paper, we discuss previous studies relevant to the focus of this article: the group co-presence phenomenon.

In researching self-presentation, privacy, and trust on SNSs, boyd [2] has noted that, even at the simplest levels, people often do not want certain groups of friends to be able to reach out and connect with their other groups of friends. Furthermore, according to her interpretation [3], users are aware that in their everyday activity the information they present depends on the audience. She outlines the main problems of social networking sites as revealing one's most intimate relations alongside acquaintances, familiar strangers, and past associates and as having to present oneself consistently across connections from these various facets of one's life [2].

Donath and boyd [9] describe how, in the physical world, time and space are used to keep incompatible aspects of our lives separate. Furthermore, they state that, by making all of one's connections visible to all others, social networking sites remove the privacy barriers that people maintain between different aspects of their lives. This description comes close to our understanding of what we term the group co-presence phenomenon. However, we wish to draw attention not merely to privacy, reputation, self-presentation, and different roles so much as to the management of one's social identities. Social identities are created through group memberships, to which all processes above relate and to which they act as a condition of possibility.

Gross and Acquisti [1],[12] describe online social networks as both vaster and looser than their offline counterparts. This complexity and varied consistency of social networks is a key element of group co-presence. In their discussion of privacy and information revelation in an SNS context, these authors show how users freely and publicly provide personal information, sometimes even to complete strangers. However, the simultaneous revealing of personal information to both distant acquaintances and one's most intimate friends is not the kernel of the problem tackled in this article. We aim at acknowledging the social complexity not only in hierarchies of proximity but also in situations where the question is simply about different groups which the individual may consider equally close to him-/herself.

DiMicco and Millen [8] state that, as the use of social networking sites becomes increasingly common, the types of social relationships managed on these sites become more numerous and diverse. Investigating Facebook profiles of young adults in transition from student to professional life, they outline the situation as one of managing different social networks through just one system. They state that multiple user profiles and multilevel access controls could help users to manage their online identities, without unintended leakage between corporate and social personae.

Hewitt and Forte [14] address a similar topic in their discussion of identity management and student/faculty relationships on Facebook. According to them, it appears that part of many users' experience on SNSs is a perceived loss of control over performance as they address broad, unknown audiences that may include peers, supervisors, subordinates, parents, professors, and mentors.

While the aforementioned studies have addressed topics closely related to group co-presence, remarkably little has been written about the nature and role of groups on SNSs. Also, to our knowledge, the SNS literature has explicitly addressed neither inter-group relations nor group identifications as related to them. We will concentrate in this article on group identifications and the individual's perspective on group co-presence. Claiming that the concept "group" is indispensable for understanding the dynamics of social networks, we discuss possible conceptualizations of groups in both theoretical and empirical terms. Inter-group relations are beyond the scope of this study. We aim at enhancing understanding of SNS phenomena by relating our work to a wider social-psychological context. In this paper, we apply the social identity approach for this purpose.

3. THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON MULTIPLE GROUPS

We approach the significance of groups from the point of view of an individual and consider that group identification is the most important element defining a group in any given social setting. Furthermore, we argue that in naturalistic settings there is nothing extraordinary in the fact that all individuals belong to, and hence possibly identify with, multiple groups. The most explicit case in point today may be the identification phenomena witnessed on social networking sites. In the following sections we will discuss the definitions of groups and group identification proposed in social identity approach and address social psychological literature on multiple group memberships. Similar topics have been addressed in sociological literature that, however, is beyond our scope.

3.1 Groups and Group Identification

The relationship between individuals and groups, especially in terms of identification, has been studied extensively within a certain family of socio-psychological theories. Here, groups and the phenomena related to them are frequently studied and discussed in terms of group identity; see, for example, the work of Brown [6]. The central theory in this tradition is social identity theory (SIT), or the social identity approach, as it is often called in reference to the wider framework that has evolved around it [22], incorporating a large body of theoretical and empirical research on groups and group identification. Most modern empirical investigations of how identification with groups happens use a variant of the theory. This is why we wish to discuss how the phenomena related to multiple group memberships can be understood in relation to it. We claim that, although SIT does theoretically incorporate the possibility of understanding multiple group memberships, and indeed embraces it, corresponding empirical studies are scarce. Online communities, where memberships of multiple groups are visually represented simultaneously to the users, provide interesting possibilities for empirical investigation of the phenomenon.

The starting point in SIT is the definition of a group. According to the theory, groups can be addressed either from an individual's or a group's perspective. In other words, groups can be approached by questioning the "internal" and "external" criteria for their existence. From the "internal" perspective, the central question is of any given individual's recognition of and identification with a group. According to Tajfel [21], the description of what group identification is may include one to three components: a cognitive, an evaluative, and an emotional component. The cognitive component refers to the individual's knowledge that he or she belongs to a group. The evaluative component contains the positive or negative value connotation that the notion of the group and/or one's membership in it may have. Finally, the emotional component refers to the possibility of the cognitive and evaluative aspects of the group and one's membership being accompanied by emotions directed towards one's own group and towards other groups that stand in certain relations to it. From the internal perspective, then, group identification is defined as "an individual's knowledge that he belongs to a certain social group together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership" [21]. Importantly, the maintenance of social identities is seen as a means towards positive self-esteem.

With regard to the "external" perspective, Tajfel [21] differentiates between two types of criteria that do not originate from the self-identification processes described above. First, there are the objective criteria used by naïve outside observers who do not possess sufficient knowledge of the culture they evaluate. The other form of external criteria are those consistently used in relation to a selected group by other groups in any multi-group social organization. Simply put, the consensus on "who is who" is often shared by the group and by the surrounding groups by which and from which the group is perceived as distinct. Individual members of distinct groups usually have a shared perception of these group boundaries: the division into "in-group" and "out-group." The internal and external criteria defining a group are, thus, intimately related.

In this study, groups are defined via both internal and the latter kind of external criteria. For the internal perspective, the general agreement is that self-categorization, one's awareness of belonging to a certain social category, functions as the basis for group identification. Following Haslam's [13] definition of social identification, we use the concept of group identification to mean "a relatively enduring state that reflects an individual's readiness to define him- or herself as a member of a particular social group." From the external perspective we consider the group and its boundaries as a shared perception of the existence of various groups. Of note here, however, is that in this paper (a) the significance of groups is approached from the point of view of an individual and (b) group identification is the most important element defining a group in any given social setting.

3.2 Multiple Group Memberships

The idea that individuals belong to many groups is embedded in the very foundation of the social identity approach. Continuing from an often-cited definition of social identity (that is, the aforementioned internal perspective on group identification), Tajfel [20] argues that it is evident that, in all complex societies, an individual belongs to a large number of social groups, the importance of which varies. In experimental settings, however, social identities have been treated as if they were mutually exclusive, with the assumption that only one in-group identification and one in-group v. out-group distinction is salient at a time. Interestingly enough, the idea of multiple group memberships, found within the original definition outlining the social identity approach, received little attention in the decades of research following it. The common in-group identity model [11] can be seen as a counterexample, but it, too, uses a clear distinction between groups as a starting point.

Skevington and Baker [18] argue that the concept of one group membership coupled with one clearly defined social identity was born mainly out of the experimental methodology used by the social identity researchers leading to simplifications of group phenomena in order to operationalize them effectively. This has resulted in an underlying, and commonly shared, assumption that the co-existence of multiple group identifications is problematic and leads to conflictive situations. In contrast, Skevington and Baker, following Tajfel, claim that the definition of social identity already includes a reference to multiple groups [18]. People have as many loyalties as they have group memberships. Even if these loyalties are often contradictory, people usually cope with the conflicts by switching the hierarchical positions of their identities as a function of the situation at hand or via rationalization; by

accepting some degree of contradiction among their identities (see also [15]).

New research is now challenging the idea of antagonistic memberships and has started studying the effects of multiple simultaneous social identities as well as their inclusiveness [5]. Roccas and Brewer [17] have addressed the issue as social identity complexity. Overall, there is growing interest in studying multiple group realities.

We argue that in naturalistic settings there is nothing extraordinary in the fact that all individuals belong to, and hence possibly identify with, multiple groups. For example, social networking sites provide technological conditions enabling the visual–digital co-presence of multiple groups (a) to which an individual performatively belongs (by manifesting his or her belongingness to others) and (b) with which he or she cognitively identifies.

In addressing the significance of groups in our case, it is necessary to understand what follows from this co-presence of groups with which individuals identify (the internal condition of a group) and as members of which they are visible to others (the external condition of a group). Given that this is the focus of the present study, special attention is given to the context-dependence of multiplicity of groups and the elements enabling group co-presence.

On social networking sites such as Facebook many groups are simultaneously present in a quite mundane setting. This setting resonates with Skevington and Baker's [18] argument that studying multiple identities is not simply a matter of deciding why, and in which social situation, a particular social identification should be salient, as opposed to another. According to them, it is more a matter of understanding how multiple group memberships evolve and coexist at the same time, and how individuals assign meaning to them as parts of larger society [18]. Our analysis depicts group co-presence occurring on Facebook. With our empirical material, presented below, we analyze how multiple group identification is managed and maintained on Facebook. These management activities are seen as a means for managing one's social identity.

4. METHOD

The main purpose of the present study is to understand the extent of group co-presence as well as to investigate the users' perspective on this and, especially, the management activities that emerge. Our study incorporated both online observations and face-to-face on-site interviews. Online observations were necessary for enumerating the explicit groups of each participant and served as a basis for analyzing the interviews.

We utilized a small but focused sample and built several views and categorizations of the material. Two groups of highly active Facebook users were studied; the first consisted of employees of a large IT company, and the second was made up of medical students. By choosing two groups instead of one, we aimed for diversity in the data. Selecting active users was a deliberate choice based on our assumption that group identification is more likely to occur among active users.

Our approach to analysis could be characterized as theory-bound. A link can be drawn to the more recent developments of grounded theory [19] that admit the usefulness of prior research and theories in interpreting research material and in contributing to scientific discussion. In this study, the theoretical concepts preceded the gathering of research material, but the material directed the empirical analysis and interpretation. In other words, the theory preceding the gathering of empirical data did not dictate the categories used to describe the data. The categories of coping strategies that we present below are a good example – they were not part of the original theories of group identification. The relationship between theoretical and empirical elements can be best described as iterative, feeding into one another.

4.1 Participants

The final set of participants consisted of 20 Facebook users, all of whom were observed online and 10 of whom were interviewed afterwards: 10 medical students ("Students") and 10 employees of an enterprise ("Employees").

The Employees worked for the same large IT company. Their tasks varied, but all had an educational background in business and technology. The Students ranged from first- to sixth-year students.

Both samples were balanced for gender, containing five females and five males. All of the participants were young adults, their ages ranging from 20 to 31 years. The age range of our participants is well represented in the demographics of Facebook users. According to a recent media study, the 18-to-34 age group covers about 40 percent of Facebook users [7]. The participants were rewarded with movie tickets for their participation in the study.

The participants were recruited in October–December 2007. The student participants were selected from the Facebook group comprising students in the Faculty of Medicine in question by using Facebook's feature of browsing a group to view profiles. They were then contacted either by a private message on Facebook or by e-mail. In the enterprise sample, the procedure was closer to snowball sampling, wherein a group is recruited with the help of a first person who begins the process of recruitment within the group.

Only one of the students interviewed reported being an active user of another SNS, MySpace. Furthermore, one interviewed student reported having had previous experience of this nature with another SNS. He had used it moderately some years ago and abandoned it long before starting to use Facebook. Interestingly, all members of the Employee group used LinkedIn, though the degree of activity varied. None of them reported using or having used any other social networking sites.

All interviewees reported using Facebook daily or almost daily. The reported use was somewhat less intensive among the employees. Two of them explained that they mainly use the site in their quiet moments at work and only seldom at home. Two others reported that they visit the site equally often at work and at home. The fifth person also used Facebook both at work and at home but stressed that use of Facebook is most relevant to him when he is traveling on business and, thus, away from home. In the Students sample, the site was most often visited from home, even though all but one of the interviewees mentioned visiting the site at least once in a while at the university, too. None of the participants studied had used Facebook via the mobile interface; many had not even known of its existence.

4.2 Online observations

The observations of Facebook use in the present study were made solely online. This makes their scope limited because the observations can cover only the public traces that users leave behind on the site. One of the researchers introduced herself to each of the participants first via e-mail or a private message on Facebook and afterwards asked to add her as a Facebook "friend" to enable making observations. We report on these indices in the next section.

4.3 Interviews

The key material for the study consists of 10 individual interviews that were conducted by one of the researchers. The interviewees formed a subset of the online observation sample. Five participants from each sample were interviewed – all in all, four females and six males. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Finnish. The quotations presented in this paper are translations.

Interviews were semi-structured. They started with a brief collection of background information such as the interviewee's age, educational and professional history, and previous experiences of SNSs. This was followed by descriptions of use of Facebook that enabled seeing whether the participants would spontaneously discuss groups and, if so, in what terms. Sections related to the interviewees' personal network and group memberships formed the core of the interview. Further on, questions on how the interviewee uses Facebook in communication included topics such as wall posts, private messages, and photos. In the final portion of the interviews, privacy settings, and possible social tensions and conflicts related to the site were discussed. In this section, by the end of the interview, the simultaneous presence of multiple groups was brought explicitly into the discussion.

The interviews were carried out in front of a computer screen so that the interviewees could use Facebook during the interview to demonstrate their descriptions and to explain their profile. A video camera recorded the screen output and interactions on the computer. In all interviews, the participants' Facebook front pages (containing most recent remarks) and profile pages were used as background for the discussion. Additionally, relevant network and group pages, friend listings, and security settings were visited as necessary. In discussion of each participant's personal network, the Friend Wheel application (created by Thomas Fletcher) was used to stimulate the discussion. This application illustrates in a circle all friends a person has on Facebook. All explicit connections (friendships) are visualized via a connecting line between the dots representing the people in question.

4.4 Ethical Code

The interviewees were informed of the voluntary nature of participation in the study and of their right to skip any questions they might find disturbing without needing to explain why. Their right to discontinue participation at any point, should they wish to do so, was explicated. All research material has been treated as confidential and with anonymity. The quotes and examples from the research material presented in the analysis are presented without identifying characteristics, but the research participants' age, their gender, and the sample to which the person in question belongs are mentioned in order to provide useful contextual information.

4.5 Limitations

Several limitations must be discussed. First of all, our online observation method does not capture interactions that take place via other media. We have no concrete evidence of whether participants tackled the multiplicity problem via other media. Secondly, in order to study the implications of group co-presence more fully, one would also need a sample of Facebook dropouts and very passive users. By defining a scope excluding "unsuccessful" users, we limit our view to those who either have solved the problems related to group co-presence or do not suffer from them. As the results will show, the group co-presence phenomenon is real for highly active users as well, but they have found ways of managing it.

5. RESULTS

In our empirical investigation, we distinguished between implicit and explicit groups. Both types of groups are important on the site, and they overlap significantly. However, in general in our study, implicit groups turned out to be more important to the participants than explicit ones. All participants were to some degree aware of the multiplicity of groups on the site, but they had experienced few group-level tensions. We conclude that the co-presence of multiple groups does indeed occur and that users are somewhat aware of it. Furthermore, the seemingly unproblematic nature of group co-presence is, at least partially, explained by the use of managing strategies that prevent problems.

5.1 Explicit Groups

Explicit groups are visible in the user interface of the site. The category consists of groups defined in the user interface. Facebook distinguishes between networks, groups, and causes. Groups have a home page on Facebook on which it is possible, for example, to view members of the group and post messages, photos, and videos. The significance given to explicit groups varied. Facebook itself presents networks as a means to learn more about the people who work, live, or study near the user and causes as a way to organize people for collective action. In most of the groups examined, relatively little activity took place. The deeper significance of groups lies in the possibility of building and maintaining both social and personal identities. Networks, groups and causes (in the sense Facebook gives to these terms) and their signification to the users will be described below.

5.1.1 Networks

All of the participants belonged to at least one network, but the relevance of these networks for the interviewees turned out to be limited. Of the 20 people observed, 15 belonged to two networks, typically to a country-focused network and to either a university or an enterprise network. Four participants belonged to only one network and one to three networks. All networks in the sample are biographical in that they present a tangible aspect of one's life: country of residence, university, or employer. This is characteristic of networks on Facebook in general.

None of the interviewees visited or actively posted on the home page(s) of their network(s). Active use of a network home page is, however, by no means a necessary condition for identifying oneself as a member of a network or attaining a positive social identity. As one of the employees explained, instead of providing practical functionality, being a member of certain networks was important for indicating to others who he is: "*[B]ut I don't know – for me it describes more what others can see, like where I work or*

what I'm interested in; it describes me" (male employee, 25). Additionally, many interviewees had not been fully aware of their membership in a network before the interview, so that self-categorization as a member of a network could not have taken place on the site. Often, network membership seemed to have been an aspect of the technical protocol for joining Facebook.

5.1.2 Groups

Membership in explicit Facebook groups turned out to be, in both qualitative and quantitative terms, more important for the participants than membership in networks was. In total, 120 Facebook groups were found in the sample (there was overlap between participants; the material comprises 134 instances of group membership). All but one of the participants had joined at least one Facebook group. Participants differed in their level of selectivity regarding group affiliations. Two of the participants were members of 17 groups. In more than half of the cases, the participant belonged to five groups or fewer.

The groups can be viewed on a continuum from tangible to intangible and differ in the permanence and voluntariness of membership. Some of the groups had a concrete reference point such as a school or city as their basis. They were related to aspects of one's life history, such as educational and professional affiliations. Secondly, there were groups based on a shared interest of their members. Some of them were groups dedicated to hobby organizations and leisure activities; others brought together fans of, for example, bands or sports teams. There were also groups consisting of a small number of people who formed a circle of friends. Thirdly, there were groups explicitly present only on Facebook. These groups were mainly used to declare, for instance, one's interests, opinions, and sense of humor.

Groups were used for self-presentation both in terms of showing affiliation with certain social categories or institutions and as a way of presenting one's personal characteristics and areas of interest: "*As I said, some quite craz- some of them are maybe some kind of statements, and others are ones in which I have belonged, like my old high school, some alumni networks from my student times... And then, there are some that can't really be categorized. Some of them I find funny, ones that tell others something about me*" (male employee, 31). In a link to social identity theory, the groups are, hence, seen as serving the performance of both social and personal identities, with this article focusing on the former.

5.1.3 Causes

The third empirical form of explicit groups, causes, emerged from the research material. Causes were visible in the profiles of the participants and, more importantly, the participants spontaneously brought them up in interviews. Causes share similarities with the third category of Facebook groups presented above: both are about making a statement. Causes were typically aimed at increasing awareness and/or at fundraising. However, none of the participants had made donations. They had adopted specific causes because they agreed with the ideas supported. It could be interpreted that the causes served a self-presentational aspect. Eight of the 20 participants had joined at least one cause.

5.2 Implicit Groups

Every Facebook user has a personal network that consists of the people with whom he or she has established an explicit friendship connection. People from different contexts are included in these networks and individuals mentally divide them into subgroups. They make sense of the diversity of their social network by categorizing others and themselves on the basis of such group memberships. At the time of the study, these distinctions within "friend lists" or "personal networks," as they are called in this study, could not be explicitly divided into groups, and intra-group boundaries were not supported by Facebook's technology. Later, features that enable better group-level control have been introduced.

Following our analysis on the user perspective to group differentiation, we conceptualize implicit groups as different categories in one's personal network which the user currently is or has formerly been a member of: as former school classes, work teams, relatives, hobby-based groups and such. Also, wider social categories, such as gender, ethnicity, and age, fall into this category. While these categories are beyond the scope of this study, it should not be taken to imply that they would be unimportant on social networking sites.

The sample showed remarkable variation in the size of the personal networks of the participants (ranging from 33 to 287 friends). The interview material revealed that the participants differed in their selectivity when adding friends. There was a high level of consistency between the personal networks on Facebook and the general social networks of the interviewees. None of the interviewees had in their personal networks people they knew only through Facebook. One of the interviewees expressed her doubts about such contacts in the following manner: "*I don't think so. I think that'd be somehow suspicious. If it were a man, I would be right away 'No, no,' as in 'What is he trying to do, hit on me?' And I have so many friends that somehow it feels that even otherwise I don't want more friends, let alone such virtual ones*" (female employee, 26).

For the interviewees, Facebook functioned as another way of staying in touch with friends and acquaintances and organizing one's social life. In addition to personal networks consisting of people familiar from other contexts, the most relevant groups on Facebook were ones with their origin in offline contexts.

All interviewees grouped their personal networks into multiple categories, often even before they were asked to describe their personal networks. Most commonly these categories included old classmates, college friends, colleagues, friends from a hobby group, and sometimes relatives. The analysis reveals a significant overlap between implicit and explicit categories. For example, groups related to studying or working were often present both as an explicit group and as an implicit group. A participant mentioned the following categories both while presenting his profile and his explicit groups and again, later on in the interview, when speaking of his personal network. Talking about the combination of his group memberships, he stated, "*It is pretty strongly related to what I have experienced as important in my own life. Then there are these groups that are linked to my life. School things: elementary school, middle school, high school, and university. So there is a group of its own for each of them*" (male student, 23).

The centrality of implicit groups can be illustrated by the explanation given by one student when asked about the frequency of interaction and keeping in touch via Facebook with the members of the explicit group of his department. What was relevant for the interviewee was not whether a friend had joined

the explicit group for a certain category but whether he or she was perceived as belonging to the category in general: "*Well, with friends I do. But I never know whether they necessarily belong to this group or not. So those who are my own friends... with them I tend to stay in touch, one way or another*" (male student, 21).

Personal networks facilitated the maintenance of group identification with groups that had some importance for the individual outside the SNS context. In the case of implicit groups, the preexistence of identification as a member of certain categories was even more pronounced than with explicit groups. This result does not undermine the importance of a social networking site in maintaining and reinforcing group identification. In conclusion, in the second step of our analysis, all participants were members of at least some explicit and implicit groups, while the number and types of these memberships varied.

5.3 Co-Presence of Multiple Groups

5.3.1 Multiplicity of groups

The analysis presented above stands as further evidence of the multiplicity of groups on Facebook. This finding is consistent with previous studies of user's networks on Facebook. Overall, implicit groups, firmly connected to social life also beyond the site were more significant to the participants than explicit groups. However, the remarkable overlap between explicit and implicit groups should not be ignored. When presenting both their explicit and implicit group memberships, the participants brought up multiple groups. Furthermore, when asked directly, none of the participants rejected the notion of group co-presence. While the participants were aware of the co-presence of multiple groups and their membership in them, they did not, in general, consider the co-presence very problematic.

The multiplicity of groups on the site is both temporal and spatial. *Temporal multiplicity* means that groups from different stages of the individual's life are present on the site. Past meets present as one's old classmates stand alongside current colleagues. By *spatial multiplicity* we refer to the fact that the site brings together people important to the user who might live nearby and those in a different city or even in a different country and who, thus, might not be present in the face-to-face interactions of everyday life. Above all, the key notion is that, on the site, groups that traditionally belong to different contexts are now present and visually presented in one context, in parallel with one another.

5.3.2 Perceived tensions

The focus of the study was on group co-presence and its consequences in the maintenance of diverse social identities. Concerning perceived tensions, we were especially interested in social tensions due to or related to group co-presence. Overall, few such tensions were reported. The participants mainly mentioned security issues and a fear of revealing something private or shameful about themselves, for example, to their bosses or less well-known acquaintances.

The social tensions were often related to individual persons, typically from former intimate relationships, with whom the participants did not wish to be in contact anymore: "*Sure, there is one ex-girlfriend; in fact, it just occurred to me that I could go and block her from there [via the privacy settings] – but, otherwise, if you leave out this one person among all the millions of people in the world, everyone else is quite welcome to browse. That doesn't bother me*" (male employee, 25).

Nine of the interviewees reported not having thus far personally faced any tensions due to group co-presence. When asked directly, seven said that they could not even imagine what such problems could be and how they could come about in their personal networks. Acknowledgement and anticipation of tensions was, however, evident in other parts of the interviews. One student interviewed reported having thought about what might happen because people from so many different contexts are on Facebook: "*I did indeed think at some point about what happens when there is a little from all situations, all old acquaintances, indeed, who don't necessarily even, like, belong to one's life at all, so I wondered 'Will that cause some trouble?' but no, there has been nothing like that after all*" (female student, 24).

From the research material it seems that the co-presence of multiple groups to which one belongs can be unproblematic. The following account illustrates how tensions in a network were not seen as probable, because the different groups were seen as having non-conflicting relations. When asked whether he could imagine tensions due to group co-presence, one of the participants gave the following response: "*I don't really know. I can't imagine, since they are not in any way... they have no reason for mutual hostility – I don't, like, belong to two rival gangs, and I don't see any reason that there could be any kind of problem*" (male student, 20). Another interviewee stated that there were no incongruities to settle in the image that different groups have of her. While not contesting the existence of multiple group memberships, she seemed to claim that, in her case, the different social identities fit harmoniously together.

5.4 Managing Group Co-Presence

We claim that the reason why group co-presence seems so unproblematic is partially the fact that it is *made* unproblematic. We found that the participants had at their disposition strategies to manage the situation and could, hence, prevent tensions and conflicting situations. According to our analysis, participants used these strategies not only to protect their reputation and privacy but also to maintain their diverse social identities.

The participants prevented anticipated tensions due to group co-presence, in order to avoid actualization of either individual- or group-level tensions on the site. We claim that these proactive, preventive actions were the key reason for so few tensions being perceived amid conditions that could potentially cause a great deal of social trouble. Six preventive strategies emerged from the interview material. As Table 1 indicates, three of them were active behavioral strategies while the other three are best described as mental approaches to the situation on Facebook.

Table 1. Overview of Group Co-Presence Management Strategies.

Group Co-Presence Management Strategies	
Behavioral Strategies	Dividing the platform into separate spaces
	Choosing a public or private communication channel
	Self-censoring potentially problematic content
Mental Strategies	Creating more inclusive in-group identities
	Trusting
	Being responsible

A common strategy for preventing negative consequences of group co-presence was to limit it *by dividing the platform into separate spaces*. This was done, for example, by making the home pages of groups closed so that only members of the groups were capable of retrieving the page and accessing its contents. As one interviewee in the student sample explained, publishing photos on the site was less of a problem, since the pictures were available only to members of the group associated with his department. According to him, the members understood the context in which the photos were published. He explained, "*[O]n the other hand, in the background is that the group for our department is closed, so pictures there of me can be seen only by students in our department. Then, of course, in the background there surely comes something like the students at our department maybe understand the context in which those photos are put there*" (male student, 23).

The possibility of dividing the platform into separate spaces can be seen as calling into question the central notion of co-presence of multiple groups. However, we claim that such separating actions are better conceived of as one strategy for managing group co-presence. When the situation is approached from the point of view of an individual user, the key point is that the co-presence is apparent for him or her even when its details are not public to everyone on the site.

Another central aspect of the management of co-presence was the *choice of a suitable communication channel* for use in specific situations. The possibility of sending private messages rather than posting on public "walls" seemed to give the users a feeling of agency. Another option at their disposal was to remain in touch via channels beyond Facebook, such as e-mail or telephone. Interviewees commonly used both of these options. The liberty for such choices guarantees the possibility of shifting potentially controversial or problematic communications from the socially shared realm to a more private and exclusive one.

The third strategy we identified was *self-censorship*. If the content of a message was deemed potentially problematic, the participants often seemed to solve the situation simply by not communicating – at least not on Facebook. In particular, participants who kept their profile open to the entire Facebook community emphasized that they did not communicate anything they thought someone should not see: "*I have tried to put there quite little information that I think I don't want to be told about me. So I have left that completely out of there*" (male student, 21).

The other three strategies were mental, less active approaches that facilitated coping with the situation: creating more inclusive in-group identities, trusting and being responsible. Trusting and being responsible were closely related to one another.

Trusting relies on the presumption of the goodwill and discretion of others. Additionally, accepting the limits of ones control, as well as of the risks involved in joining the site, was deemed helpful. According to some of the interviewees, it is better not to worry about the information given on the site, to approach the situation calmly, and not to take Facebook too seriously. One interviewee explained his point of view and acceptance of the risks inherent in joining the site in the following manner: *"[N]o, I haven't thought about it that much. I think it's all the same. Let them go, like anyone. It is like a consciously taken risk that one goes here. So the information will spread, but I have accepted it and that's it, and the only way I control this is that I don't invite everyone, like not all people one could invite there. I don't stress about it*" (male employee, 27).

Also, the importance of *being responsible* was underlined. Users cannot have full control over the material related to them on the site. This is because not only they themselves but also others may post something on the site. On the other hand, they may influence the others in this way, too. Because of this perceived interdependence of the users, discretion was used to secure the privacy of both oneself and of others. However, such responsibility may be of limited help, since one may not be able to take all relevant aspects of the other's social network into account.

Finally, we state that *creating a common, more inclusive in-group identity* can be a strategy to facilitate the co-presence of multiple groups. This analysis is supported by the key ideas of the common ingroup identity model [11]. To achieve more inclusiveness, boundary making is necessary. We refer here to potential group boundaries as an ndividual's mental concepts, not as defined in the user interface of Facebook. It is important to note nonetheless that the interface influenced the practical options the participants had available and, thus, their understanding of the situation. We claim that conceptualization of groups on a level that dismisses the finer inter-group distinctions might make the situation easier to deal with for the individual.

The first case to discuss is one that conceptualizes all members of Facebook as one in group. Some participants preferred to keep their profile open and freely accessible to everyone on the site (the default option on Facebook). However, this did not mean that the user would communicate everything freely and publicly. No one in the sample was entirely open and carefree in his or her use of the site. On the contrary, many interviewees who had adopted the practical option of keeping their profile accessible to all members expressed that they only said things on the site that they felt they could tell everyone and anyone: "*I am in such things quite loose, so I have thought that I put there only things that everyone may see. No, I don't know; somehow I'm not interested – let them see what I put there. I don't then put there anything that I don't want*" (female employee, 26). When the fine distinctions between groups were disregarded, the content shared on the site was consciously limited in scope and depth. Thus, more accurately, there was an active, ongoing boundary making process between oneself and the others on the site.

Some participants adopted more restrictive group boundaries. Their strategy was to treat their entire personal network as an in-group, excluding all other Facebook users. In practice, this was done by limiting the privacy settings so that the user's profile was accessible only to Facebook friends the user had personally chosen and accepted as members of his or her personal network: "*No, I don't have enemies, I suppose, or, even if I had- Yes, yes, indeed, that's the point: I control completely who- what they see there. It is not a problem for me*" (male employee, 31). One of the employees aptly described himself as the filter of his network: "*[Q]uite freely, I am then myself the filter if someone approaches me, so I accept or don't accept*" (male employee, 27). In this second case, the control over who was accepted in one's network was cited to explain why the social situation on the site was unproblematic. The members of one's personal network were trusted and were not seen as in a conflicting relation to one another, even when they belonged to different groups.

In contrast to the aforementioned, there were also some indications of restoring the group boundaries within one's personal network. One of the students explained that she avoided using inside jokes related to her studies in her status updates, because others might not understand them. This option was mainly implemented by using discretion in deciding what and how to communicate on the site. At the time of the study, Facebook did not offer any sophisticated means to manage the fine distinctions in one's personal network. However, the participants did not merely passively accept the options offered to them in the user interface. This was most evident in the case of restoring the subcategories in one's personal network and taking them into consideration by considering what and via which channel to communicate.

The user interface of Facebook enables distinguishing between members and non-members of a Facebook network, so such a group boundary is explicitly offered to the user. However, network as in-group was seen in the research material in only one interview. Even there, it was only referred to as an option adopted by other users. This use might have been a consequence of the technical choice given, and from our material it is impossible to say whether it was related to a mindset of treating ones network as an in group.

Basically, the participants either shared more information with fewer people or less information with more people. The logic of this tradeoff between the size of the "audience" and the amount of information shared was simple enough: If the participants shared their updates on the site with everyone, they made sure not to communicate anything that they understood to be too delicate or private. The interviewees understood preventive actions as normal monitoring of one's behavior, or as common sense.

6. DISCUSSION

The main results of our study can be summarized as three points. First, the study shows the occurrence and scale of group co-presence on Facebook. Second, the participants found group co-presence relatively unproblematic. Third, according to our analysis this seeming easiness of the situation was due to successful use of the proactive management strategies that were applied to prevent anticipated problems.

First, on SNSs, there are different kinds of groups and different ways of representing them. This article has concentrated on groups made explicit in the user interface of Facebook and on the individual users' implicit notions of groups, the latter being more important. We found that distinguishing between implicit and explicit groups is a useful approach in the investigation of group identification on Facebook and, potentially, on other social networking sites with similar functions. Implicit groups were generally accorded more importance than explicit groups. Methodologically, we point out the need to find more precise ways to measure group identification in an SNS context. This is especially crucial when it comes to implicit groups. On a social networking site, the many groups that are salient and relevant to an individual can be simultaneously present. While, as our study shows, this co-presence does not necessarily lead to the occurrence of the usual conflict situation found in studies situated in the social identity approach tradition, it is not self-evidently unproblematic.

Social identities are maintained not only in group-level interaction but also in interpersonal situations. They are an integral part of self-presentation, reputation and privacy. As shown in the chapter on research on social networking sites, the group co-presence phenomenon has been hinted at in previous work. Our aim is to contribute to this line of research by adding an explicit group co-presence perspective to the ongoing discussion. We also believe that theoretical thinking about the nature of "groups" and individual users' relation to these is long overdue in SNS literature. Defining groups more rigorously in both theoretical and empirical terms benefits the study of SNSs and social media more generally, not least in revealing interesting ways in which users must actively make or break their group memberships, and how this relates to social identity in general.

Second, the participants of this study had found ways to manage group co-presence, even on a platform that does not technically encourage such behavior. This, however, required continuous management of group identifications. In our research material, tensions perceived on Facebook were related to individual relationships within in- and out-groups or to distant threats more often than to group-level issues. However, groups were taken into account and their co-presence was managed by the strategies presented above. While some of the most active identity managers among our participants had re-established the group boundaries to create more inclusive social groups, it must be noted that even in the "care-free" cases (open user profile) active management of information sharing was consciously performed. In the former, identity management through universal personal information sharing has been already considered problematic, thus more differentiated groups have been created for the ends of more contextual sharing. In the latter, personal information was shared only in a limited way. Both cases point to the need of identity management through controlled information sharing in the face of potential privacy violation, losing of "face" and other anticipated social consequences.

Third, in addition to the creation of more inclusive in-group identities, we identified five other preventive strategies of managing group co-presence: division of the platform into separate spaces, choice of the most suitable communication channel, self-censorship, trusting, and being responsible. While the first three are active measures, the others are better understood as helpful mental strategies, or mindsets. They were used in making sense of the situation and as guidelines directing one's actions on the site. This list incorporates the strategies for dealing with group co-presence that were adopted by the participants in our study. It is not aimed to be, nor should it be considered, exhaustive. The differences of strategies for dealing with group co-presence between different sites and user groups are a topic for future research.

While the point of this discussion is not to advocate particular designs, we do encourage designers and developers to look for ways in which users could be aided with this task. Web 2.0 services might find added value in supporting management of group co-presence and the individuals' notions of implicit groups. Also, privacy is not limited to individual privacy. Groups also actively limit their information sharing to outsiders, and this perspective might give new ideas on how to organize group communication in future: the solution need not be an either-or one, or limiting communication only to in-group members, but to seek new ways of thinking about the interrelated phenomenon of social identity and group privacy.

As has been noted earlier in this paper, the participants in our study were active and fairly new Facebook users. They were

individuals who had found ways to deal with group co-presence. Hence, passive and dropout users are key populations for study in future research, in order to gain insight into their understanding of group co-presence. Does the phenomenon have a role to play in their withdrawal from the site? Do co-presence management strategies sometimes fail, and, if so, when, how, and why? As was explained in the section on methodology, this could be partially due to the fact that our sample consisted of active and relatively new users of the site. Dropouts and passive users might have had a different story to tell.

Furthermore, it seems likely that, as SNSs mature, group co-presence will become a more pressing issue – even while it remains to be seen what happens as users learn to use and understand the possibilities of SNSs more fully. If the management of group co-presence is sufficiently supported, the situation does not have to become too difficult to cope with. If, by contrast, the users are not given enough support, they may feel the urge to resort to defensive strategies of social identity protection such as ceasing to use SNSs altogether or, less dramatically, limit their use according to "the least common denominator."

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