# TO CORRECT AND PROTECT: EXTENDING THE MASSPERSONAL COMMUNICATION MODEL TO SOCIAL MEDIA DISAGREEMENTS

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
North Dakota State University
of Agriculture and Applied Science

By

Samantha Jo Murine Archer

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major Department:
Communication

March 2024

Fargo, North Dakota

# North Dakota State University
Graduate School

**Title**

TO CORRECT AND PROTECT: EXTENDING THE MASSPERSONAL COMMUNICATION MODEL TO SOCIAL MEDIA DISAGREEMENTS

**By**

Samantha Jo Murine Archer

The Supervisory Committee certifies that this ***disquisition*** complies with North Dakota State University's regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Dr. Carrie Anne Platt
Chair

Dr. David Westerman

Dr. Stephenson Beck

Dr. Pamela Emanuelson

Approved:

04/10/24
Date

Dr. Stephenson Beck
Department Chair

## ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I explore experiences of disagreements on Facebook with strong ties through a theoretical lens of the Masspersonal Communication Model. The goal of this dissertation is to (a) understand how perceptions of personalization and accessibility influence disagreement decisions on Facebook with strong ties and (b) how relationships with the sender impact the decision to engage. I employ semi-structured, in-depth interviews (n = 27) to assess why people engage in disagreements, their motivations for engagement, and the impact of these interactions on their relationship with their strong ties. In doing so, I propose the personalization-accessibility model of online disagreements to identify motivational types influencing participants' decisions to engage in social media disagreements. Findings reveal that the interplay of accessibility and personalization perceptions influence the decision to engage in disagreements, especially for the need to correct misinformation and protect marginalized groups from harmful rhetoric. Relationships with strong ties played a role in disagreeing, though participants were more concerned about advocating and informing than preserving their relationship. The implications of this study stress the importance of developing and promoting the use of relationship-conscious social media and identifying the risks that social media disagreements pose to our personal relationships and democracy.


Keywords: *Masspersonal Communication Model; disagreements; Facebook; context collapse; relationships; misinformation*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To say getting to this moment was a challenge would be an understatement. I have never experienced such a tribulating and challenging yet rewarding and fulfilling endeavor. I am truly humbled to be here today, and I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the many people who assisted me in this journey of becoming.

First and foremost, I extend my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Carrie Anne Platt, whose expertise, understanding, and patience were critical to my success in this degree and dissertation. Your willingness to give your time generously, listen empathetically, and teach compassionately are traits that I hope to carry forward to my students and advisees. I attribute my successes to your encouragement and effort. I would not have been able to complete this with you.

I am also immensely grateful to my committee members, Dr. David Westerman, Dr. Stephenson Beck, and Dr. Pamela Emanuelson, for their valuable insights and suggestions during the planning and development of this dissertation project. Your perspectives and expertise were instrumental in the successful completion of my degree.

I want to thank my loving husband, Ryan, for the countless hours sacrificed to make this a reality. You gave up countless evenings and weekends to support me through this journey. You dealt with my late-night anxieties, brainstorming sessions, one (sometimes two) coffee runs per day, and many, many more things that took a special degree of patience. I admire your ability to remain generous and supportive, even in the toughest and especially turbulent times. I would not be where I am today without your unwavering support. I love you.

Thank you to all the family and friends who supported me from a distance. Mom, Dad, Stef, Tyler, Roxi, Beau, Bud, and Bailey – thank you for showing grace, being supportive, and providing a listening ear in this process. I appreciate and love you all.

Lastly, thank you to those in the Communication Department at NDSU, including all graduate students, faculty, and Kelly Paynter. I admire your dedication to this field. A special thank you to those special friends who made this such a rewarding experience and listened, assisted, and learned with me. Kyle, Colt, Sara, Olivia, Maranda, Ryan (not OG), and many others – thank you for being part of this experience and for your support along the way.

## DEDICATION

To my loving husband – for all those late nights, coffee runs, and brainstorming sessions.

We made it!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

## LIST OF TABLES

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MPCM.....Masspersonal Communication Model

SPT.....Social Penetration Theory

# INTRODUCTION

## Background

Social media platforms like Facebook aim to facilitate connections between people. Facebook is an interactive communication technology that enables people to establish and maintain relationships with close and distant acquaintances. However, not all interactions on this platform promote connectedness. Although young adults view arguments as interpersonally incompetent or inappropriate for social media (Mascheroni & Murru, 2017), these interactions remain common on social media platforms. Because mediated forms of communication play a critical role in maintaining our relationships, especially as young people turn more heavily to mediated forms of communication (Hall, 2020), this research study aims to understand better why people engage in disagreements with strong ties online.

Current research has primarily focused on avoidance as a primary method to deal with disagreement online (Rui et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020). As a form of avoidance, self-censorship, or the censoring of sharing one's opinions online, has prevailed as the primary area of interest in online disagreement research (Rui et al., 2020). The degree to which people are concerned with preserving interpersonal relationships may inform whether they are willing to engage in disagreements (Kearney, 2017; Pennington & Winfrey, 2021). However, engagement in disagreements online certainly exists, and the people we argue with tend to be those that we perceive to be closest and most similar, relationally and politically (Morey et al., 2012).

Research suggests that we are more likely to have disagreements with our close friends and family, who are strong ties, than with strangers or acquaintances, who are weak ties (Morey et al., 2012). Disagreements where political incongruence or opinion differences are present have become a focal point in social media research. Because informal political discussions tend to

occur with strong ties (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Mutz, 2006) and because people have reported severe relationship outcomes as a result of engaging in disagreements on social media (Cionea et al., 2017), this study extends beyond self-censorship to better understand the motivations and decision-making processes of those who do choose to engage in disagreements with strong ties on social media. Of particular concern will be considerations given to the personalization and accessibility of disagreements on social media using the Masspersonal Communication Model as a guiding framework.

## Entry Point

The Masspersonal Communication Model (MPCM) is a theoretical framework for better understanding interpersonal interactions that take place on mass communication platforms based on two dimensions: accessibility (the degree to which a message is accessible) and personalization (the degree to which the message is perceived as personal) (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). The MPCM is a useful theoretical lens because it helps identify that disagreements, while inherently personalized in face-to-face literature, may be complicated by accessibility or the degree to which both known or unknown audiences have or can obtain access to the disagreement. It is important to understand why perceptions of personalization and accessibility are factors in social media disagreements, even among strong ties.

## Argument and Significance

In this study, I aim to understand better why people engage in disagreements on Facebook through the theoretical lens of the Masspersonal Communication Model. In doing so, this project will contribute to a better understanding of the following:

a) how perceptions of personalization and accessibility of messages impact or inform disagreement-related decisions and

b) how relationships with strong ties influence the decision to engage in social media disagreements.

In this project, I focus on mediated disagreements between strong ties, along with what prompts people to disagree in highly accessible spaces, such as Facebook posts and comments. In doing so, I aim to enhance our understanding of mediated disagreements and the potential relational risks of engaging in disagreements with strong ties on social media. A qualitative analysis aims to bridge the divide between mass and interpersonal communication, focusing on a thematic analysis of these interactions. Such insights will empower conflict and social media researchers to understand further the motivations for engagement, relational considerations, and subsequent outcomes of engaging in disagreements with strong ties on social media.

## Organization of Study

The remaining chapters are as follows. Chapter two will cover current literature, starting with the current state of literature on political disagreements on social media, followed by a thorough review of the Masspersonal Communication Model (MPCM), the impacts of the audience, and context collapse. Finally, the literature review will address the relational factors when analyzing disagreements with strong ties on social media. Chapter three discusses the proposed methods to collect and analyze data in this study. Chapter four covers the results of this study, and chapter five discusses the empirical, theoretical, and practical contributions of this study in addition to limitations and directions for future research.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Political Disagreements on Social Media

### Defining Conflict Versus Disagreement

Pondy (1967) defines conflict as a (a) dynamic interaction taking place between (b) two or more parties based on (c) a shared perception of interpersonal incompatibility that is always (d) informed by previous interactions. While conflict has been defined in many ways across prior literature, the defining elements of conflict remain steady, including interdependent parties, a perception of incompatibility, and an interaction (Thomas, 1988). These definitions of conflict were developed on face-to-face interactions, as are most definitions of conflict in interpersonal literature (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018).

Although these are valuable guiding points for understanding how conflict unfolds, mediating these interactions over technology, especially in the presence of networked audiences, may complicate how we understand these experiences. While prior literature predominantly employs the term conflict to describe interpersonal incompatibility, the term *disagreements* has emerged as a more prevalent descriptor in social media literature. This study will employ the term disagreement in place of conflict to adapt to social media literature's nomenclature. Political disagreement, or a focus on opinion differences and political incongruences, has become a particular focus in social media disagreement literature.

### Political Disagreements on Social Media

Barnage (2017) defines political disagreement as "the perception of difference resulting from an encounter with an individual or entity in a setting in which it is possible to interact via communication" (pg. 303). Empirical research has revealed that homogeneity characterizes our everyday political discussions, real or perceived, and that informal political discussions tend to

occur with strong ties (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Mutz, 2006). Our social networks comprise strong ties (e.g., close friends and family) and weak ties (e.g., strangers and acquaintances). Although we share political views with our strong ties, we may also disagree with them more frequently than with our weak ties (Morey et al., 2012). Our tendency to see people as similar to us may promote rather than detract from engagement in political disagreement. However, empirical research has established that engagement outcomes are not always positive.

Young adults view arguments as interpersonally incompetent or inappropriate for social media, especially political disagreements (Mascheroni & Murru, 2017), even though these interactions have become increasingly common. Cionea et al. (2017) found that people often argue about public topics like politics, social movements, and the economy. While most participants reported little relational outcomes, nearly 20% of respondents reported severe relational outcomes because of arguing on social media. Understanding these interactions can illuminate the potential relational risks in our increasingly digital social relationships.

Fox and Moreland (2015) conducted focus group studies of adult Facebook users about the stress they experience on social media. Respondents reported that the visibility and accessibility afforded by technology caused significant stress, often resulting in seeing things about other people they would prefer not to see. Baym and boyd's (2012) conceptualization of socially mediated publicness and the heterogeneity of our social networks point out the degree of accessibility our messages have online and how this can contribute to the experience of disagreements by exposing us to this behavior. The affordances of technology that allow for visibility and accessibility, coupled with the socially mediated publicness of our social networks, can contribute to the experience of disagreements on social media by exposing us to behavior that may cause significant stress.

## Operationalization of Disagreement

Disagreements on social media pose unique challenges due to the nature of written messages, accessibility, and visibility. Disagreements on social media are increasingly common despite being viewed as inappropriate by some individuals. This study focuses on disagreements among strong ties, particularly in politically charged discussions where divergence in views is prevalent. Thus, I operationalize disagreement as a communication interaction between two or more interactants where (a) political incongruence or opinion indifference is present and (b) there is a back-and-forth exchange of messages in public, private, or both. In this study, I aim to assess how perceptions of accessibility and personalization impact experiences of disagreements using the Masspersonal Communication Model (MPCM). Therefore, the MPCM will be used as a guiding framework for better understanding disagreements with strong ties on social media.

## Masspersonal Communication Model (MPCM)

In recent years, the rise of social media has revolutionized how individuals communicate, making it possible to use mass communication tools for interpersonal reasons, leading to the emergence of a new form of communication called masspersonal communication. Walther and Valkenburg (2017) identified a merging of mass and interpersonal communication through technology, stating that (a) individuals are actively integrating technology use for both personal and mass reasons and (b) this integration is transforming our understanding of how both interpersonal communication and mass communication are conducted. The Masspersonal Communication Model aims to explain how individuals use technology to create and maintain personal relationships within a mass media context (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018).

The MPMC was proposed by O'Sullivan and Carr (2018) to overcome the "false dichotomy" between interpersonal and mass communication. Mass communication is a one-way,

mediated method of communicating messages to a large, undifferentiated audience. On the other hand, interpersonal communication is a two-way, non-mediated communication interaction shared with a personally known audience. MPMC transcends both mass and interpersonal distinctions by recognizing that:

a) mass communication can be used for interpersonal communication purposes,
b) interpersonal communication can be used for mass communication purposes and
c) mass and interpersonal communication can happen simultaneously.

O'Sullivan and Carr (2018) distinguish mass, interpersonal, and masspersonal communication on two axes: perceived personalization and accessibility of the message.

**Perceived Personalization**

The MPCM differentiates between mass communication and interpersonal communication based on the level of perceived personalization. Personalization refers to "the degree to which receivers perceive a message reflects their distinctiveness as individuals differentiated by their interests, history, relationship network, and so on" (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018, p. 1166). Messages high in personalization in the MPMC model are examples of interpersonal communication, such as personal letters, text messages, and phone calls. However, messages that are low in personalization refer to mass messages. Traditional mass communication messages tend to be low in personalization, as these messages are sent to a vast, unknown audience. For example, listserv emails, advertisements, or broadcast television are examples of less personalization.

Social media tend to blur the lines of personalization as messages are posted with high accessibility but to a relatively large, accessible audience. The masspersonal quadrant of the MPMC recognizes Facebook posts, likes, and comments as highly personalized messages,

although also highly accessible (accessibility). In bridging the accessibility and personalization axes, this paper identifies disagreements on social media as masspersonal, or Quadrant III of the MPCM, because both perceived accessibility of the message and personalization of these interactions are high.

The interest of personalization in this study is two-fold: (a) disagreements with strong ties are fundamentally personalized, given the presence of a close relationship, and (b) the degree to which a receiver will perceive a message as personalized may be enhanced for this reason. However, the potential for heterogeneity of networks complicates this typification. Per O'Sullivan and Carr (2018), "while message creators can shape the intended degree of personalization as they compose a message, judgments about actual degrees of personalization are made by those who access (receive) the message" (p. 1166). When there is political disagreement among strong ties, it could be helpful to measure personalization, especially in instances of masspersonal messages on highly accessible platforms like Facebook.

**Perceived Accessibility**

The accessibility dimension of MPMC refers to "the degree of perceived accessibility to a particular message at any particular time" (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018, p. 1165). Accessibility of a message in previous literature existed on two continuums: mass or interpersonal. Mass communication is a one-way, technologically mediated message often given to a large, potentially unknown audience (McQuail, 2010). Interpersonal communication is a personal, two-way form of communication with a known recipient, typically not involving mediation. Posting on social media presents a challenge to this dichotomy. When posting on social media, depending on a person's settings, the accessibility of that message can be quite substantial, whether it be to that person's friend list or shared beyond this list, making the post both mass (a

technologically mediated message given to a large audience) and interpersonal (a personal message).

Accessibility of a message relates to a masspersonal meta construct proposed by Walther (2017) of audience. Contemporary uses of media exploit our traditional understandings of mass media as one-way messages and to a large, unknown audience: "The construct of audience, rather than source, may now have more bearing on whether a message's intent, function, and articulation is more mass or interpersonal in nature" (Walther, 2017, p. 563). Because an audience is frequently perceived, our perception may not align with the intended audience (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018).

Messages low in accessibility refer to interpersonal messages, such as face-to-face interactions or phone calls. Messages with high accessibility are usually intended for mass audiences, such as those found in broadcast media, including news programs or articles. Meeting in the middle, the masspersonal quadrant identifies Facebook posts, likes, and comments as highly accessible and personalized communication, transcending the mass-interpersonal dichotomy. Posts and comments on social media sites like Facebook are considered highly accessible. The perceived audience is often vast and potentially limitless, given features like sharing or retweeting. While an affordance of social media is the opportunity for self-disclosure and self-presentation (Schlosser, 2020), the accessibility of a message may add complication to the sender's post, resulting in misunderstandings and potential disagreements.

At the heart of MPCM lies the concept of audience. Users can never be certain who sees their message, whether the intended audience is receiving it or unintended parties not considered during the message-creation process (Walther, 2017). Context collapse becomes an inherent issue when messages exceed the bounds of the intended audience or extend beyond known social

networks (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Hall, 2020). The degree to which context collapse may impact a user's message is greater in more porous networks (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). Replicability (the degree to which a message can be copied and shared with a larger network) and searchability (the degree to which a message is accessible through searching) can add to the degree to which context collapse exists (Baym, 2015; Walther, 2017) and increase the potential for disagreement.

The interest of accessibility in this study is two-fold: (a) disagreements that take place on social media are fundamentally accessible, both by strong ties and weak ties, depending on one's social network, and (b) the degree to which a sender understands the accessibility of their network may impact disagreement-related decisions or relational consequences.

### *Audience*

Conflict is a highly personal interpersonal interaction contingent upon both parties perceiving the conflict (Pondy, 1967). While remaining highly personalized, accessibility complicates online disagreements. Disagreements may be shared between two people and be viewed by an intended, unintended, or imagined audience. Social media have affordances like visibility and accessibility that can bolster or hinder our relationships. The degree to which we are knowledgeable about these affordances and the porousness of our network (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014) may shape how we approach disagreements online.

According to Baym (2015), technology offers an affordance for reaching diverse audiences through communication. Nevertheless, reach can harness potentially adverse outcomes in political disagreements. Fox and Moreland (2015) conducted focus groups of young adult Facebook users and found that accessibility can cause tension within networks when people are exposed to information they do not want to see. Vraga et al.'s (2015) conception of the "dances

of networked publics" relates to this, as it describes the heterogeneity of networks described by Mascheroni and Murru (2017) as "dangerous" when engaging in political talk on Facebook. Participants' reluctance to engage in political discussions is influenced by their perception of who has access to information, potential audiences, and the hostility of their network. As we continue to explore the dynamics of disagreement interactions on social media, the insights provided by Baym (2015), Fox and Moreland (2015), Vraga et al. (2015), Mascheroni and Murru (2017) illustrate the complex relationship between technological affordances, audience reach, and perceptions of accessibility that can lead to tension and disagreement online between relational contacts.

### *Context Collapse*

We communicate ourselves into being on social media (Hall, 2020), and often we do this for the intended audience of friends or family (Baym et al., 2007; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Nevertheless, social media sites like Facebook collapse a vast and often differentiated audience into one. As self-presenting individuals, people must meet their expectations and the myriad of people they are connected to. This is referred to as context collapse, complicated by accessibility and visibility by both intended and unintended audiences. Reach, searchability, and replicability (Baym, 2015) are all affordances of technology. However, they can come with hefty interpersonal consequences, especially when our messages are meeting people who embrace our position and those who disagree with us. This is where the role of technology, namely social media, becomes problematic, considering relational disagreements.

Hall (2020) shared a personal experience in which he shared a political post to present information, to which he later came back to a comment war between two friends (unknown to each other) and ultimately was unfriended by one. This is an example of context collision, where

users post messages without realizing the conflicting nature of the information or the interpersonal impacts that may arise. Further, individuals may post with the intention of context collusion, which Davis and Jurgenson (2014) define as the intentional collapsing of context. This study investigates how context collapse impacts disagreements online and the degree to which the intentionality of the message impacts perceived relational outcomes. Disagreements are guided by our feelings of relational closeness to others, which mediated forms of communication can complicate.

### MPMC Summary

The Masspersonal Communication Model (MPCM) explains how technology creates and maintains personal relationships within a mass communication context. MPMC recognizes that individuals can use mass communication technologies for interpersonal communication purposes and vice versa and that mass and interpersonal communication can happen simultaneously. This paper focuses on perceptions of personalization and accessibility to better understand why people engage in disagreements with strong ties on Facebook. In this paper, I identify disagreements on Facebook as masspersonal communication because the perceived accessibility and personalization of these interactions tend to be high. To better understand people's perceptions of personalization and accessibility and its impact on disagreements taking place with strong ties on Facebook, I propose the following research question:

> RQ1: How do perceptions of message personalization and accessibility influence the decision to engage in a Facebook disagreement with a strong tie?

## Relationships

The prevalence of disagreements in online settings highlights the importance of understanding the role of relationships in our communication choices on digital platforms.

Theories in interpersonal communication typically emphasize the relationship between communicators and the significance of dyadic message exchange, with face-to-face communication considered the interpersonal gold standard (Knapp & Daly, 2011). As digital communication becomes more widespread, it is increasingly important to recognize the importance of relationships in online communication (Venter, 2019). The MPCM provides a framework for better understanding interactant goals in their uses of communication channels. This section will explore the relational contexts that aid in better understanding the perceived relational impacts and outcomes of disagreements on Facebook.

**Relationships & Social Media**

In earlier explorations of relational quality and media use, Baym et al. (2007) explored factors that impact peoples' interpersonal use of technology, such as the amount of use, sex, and relationship type. Media use was mainly associated with relationships with friends and family. However, a person's amount of technology use was not associated with perceptions of relational closeness. In simpler terms, the level of technology used does not determine the closeness of a relationship but rather the level of interpersonal closeness outside of technology. In the same vein, while we may assume that the quantity of communication characterizes closeness, previous research has ascertained that we experience tension between our desire to be connected and autonomous (Baym, 2015; Hall, 2020). Sometimes, too much connection can lead to outcomes of digital stress, in which we feel that technology is inhibiting, not promoting, relational closeness (Hall, 2020).

Hall (2020) argues that our communication use has much more to do with the connections we are attempting to maintain than the use of the technology itself. Hall describes tensions we encounter on social media, one of which is connecting versus people watching. Our

technology use is inherently relational, whether we are scrolling mindlessly and passively observing the lives of others or engaging in purposeful, mediated, synchronous communication with a loved one. However, the degree to which we experience closeness can be complicated by how we self-present, the heterogeneity of our audience, and the degree to which we are aware of our socially mediated publicness (Baym & boyd, 2012). Likewise, these things can also contribute to our experience of disagreements on social media platforms.

Metaconstructs, such as relationships and temporality, are beneficial contexts to consider when assessing the utility of masspersonal theory in social media disagreements. These factors help determine the interpersonal impacts of disagreements on social media. Relationships are inherent to interpersonal communication, and our communication patterns often differ because of our relationship with another person. Walther (2017) emphasizes the overarching importance of relationships in evaluating masspersonal effects. The nature of our relationships with others influences how we frame our messages and how recipients react to them. The impressions others have of us (appealing or unappealing) and the evaluations made of us (credible or uncredible; trustworthy or untrustworthy) are often inferred from others' conceptions of who we are (Walther, 2017).

Temporal expectations, similar to in-person interactions, guide messaging norms online. Whether or not individuals anticipate future interactions with others impacts how those individuals interact with each other online (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). According to Walther (2017), "temporal frames affect how people get to know and like each other online, even from the inception of online interactions" (p. 565). A post or message's temporal frame or experience may affect how individuals interpret or engage with said message. French and Bazarova (2017) found that network characteristics vary from platform to platform and impact our anticipation of

interaction with others. The more diverse a network, the greater our anticipation of interaction is, as the likelihood of someone finding our post or message relevant increases. However, this interaction may not always be positive. Different platforms may lead to negative interactions (i.e. when Facebook sends notifications about a response from a person outside of one's network). Interactions could turn into disagreements on social media through context collapse surrounding self-disclosure (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

### Relationships Summary

The increasing prevalence of mediated communication requires a better understanding of how relationships impact our disagreement-related choices online. The MPCM provides a practical framework for analyzing interactant goals and decision-making in disagreements on social media. The closeness of a relationship is not solely determined by the frequency of technology use but also by the quality of interpersonal bonds formed outside of digital platforms. Thus, it is vital to factor in relational contexts when evaluating the effects of disagreements on social media. To explore the impact of social media disagreements on relationships, I propose the following research question:

> RQ2: How does the nature of participants' relationship to the sender impact their motivation to engage in a disagreement?

## Future Opportunities

Social networking sites have complicated our theoretical understanding of disagreements, as the boundaries of message personalization and accessibility are often blurred. Conflict has traditionally been considered a situation involving two or more individuals interacting in person. Current research has embraced avoidance (e.g., self-censorship) as a method to deal with disagreements online, especially regarding political disagreements (Wu et al., 2020; Rui et al.,

2020). However, methods of dealing with disagreements outside of self-censorship and avoidance have become increasingly common on social media. Further, when we choose to express disagreement, we often do it with our strong ties rather than our weak ties (Morey et al., 2012), especially when it comes to opinion differences or political incongruence. While face-to-face literature often portrays disagreements as inherently personal, the complexity increases in digital settings due to accessibility. Thus, I will employ O'Sullivan and Carr's (2018) Masspersonal Communication Model to understand better how perceptions of personalization and accessibility impact the decision to engage in disagreements with strong ties and how the nature of the relationship shapes this motivation.

# METHOD

In this study, I aim to (a) examine the influence of perceived accessibility and personalization on motivations to engage in disagreements with a strong tie on Facebook and (b) better understand the role of strong ties in disagreement decisions based on the sender relationship. I utilized a qualitative approach to capture the depth and complexity of these experiences. The intricacy of these interactions necessitated the qualitative methodological choice of this dissertation. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were employed to understand this nuanced disagreement process. In this chapter, I discuss the research process utilized and the methods employed to accomplish the study goals.

## Qualitative Research

Given the intricate nature of relationship roles and the nuances in decision-making and motivational factors for engaging in disagreements on social media, qualitative methods, particularly semi-structured, in-depth interviews emerged as a suitable approach (Saldaña, 2016). This method fostered the ability to assess individual values and beliefs surrounding this experience, an underappreciated approach in prior literature. In addition, interviewing methodology allowed for the ability to assess the "mental maps" of participants regarding how and why they choose to engage in disagreements with strong ties on social media (Luker, 2008), something that quantitative methodologies are inadequately suited to do. A qualitative approach allowed for a deep exploration of participants' experiences, feelings, and thoughts, offering rich insight into how perceptions shape their understandings of accessibility and personalization in deciding to engage in online disagreements with strong ties.

### Semi-Structured, In-Depth Interviews

This study employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews, a qualitative method characterized by open-ended questions. Participants guided the interview process based on their experiences and perceptions. The semi-structured interview approach allowed for a deeper, more personalized look into each participant's experience, guided by what parts of the disagreement process were most notable and impactful to them.

## Participants and Procedures

### Demographics

Participants ($n$ = 27) were recruited from a mid-sized Midwestern university research listserv and the researcher's personal social media pages. Participants self-reported their ethnicity as White ($n$ = 20; 74%), Asian ($n$ = 5; 19%), Black/African America ($n$ = 1; 4%), American Indian or Alaska Native ($n$ = 1; 4%); gender as female ($n$ = 13; 48%), male ($n$ = 10; 37%), non-binary ($n$ = 3; 11%), and prefer not to say ($n$ = 1; 4%); political affiliation as democrat ($n$ = 12; 44%), other ($n$ = 8; 30%), independent ($n$ = 4; 15%), and republican ($n$ = 3; 11%); and ranged in age from 19 to 65 (median age 32.52). "Other" affiliations were predominantly left-leaning political ideologies.

Inclusion criteria indicated that participants must be previous or active Facebook users with experience engaging in disagreements with strong ties on Facebook. A first round of data collection defined characteristics of a disagreement on Facebook as a public interaction through posts or comments with a perceived strong tie where an opinion difference and political incongruence were present. Interactions had to include back-and-forth communication. Inclusion criteria did not include interactions with weak ties, passive interactions (i.e., avoidance, liking, reacting), or private online communication (i.e., Messenger). However, interactions on private

channels were allowed in a second round of data collection and after analysis of the first round data. Collecting diverse viewpoints and perspectives on private-channel disagreements assisted in verifying the existing data on public disagreements.

**Procedures**

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, through the researcher's personal Facebook and Instagram pages, and by posting to permissible Facebook groups, and convenience sampling using a university research listserv. IRB approval was obtained (#0004916) in October of 2023. A research announcement called for participation from active or previous social media users who have engaged in a public political disagreement with close family or friends on Facebook. Mid-study, the IRB protocol was updated to include a research incentive of a drawing to win a $50 Amazon gift card to gain more participants. In the research announcement, participants were provided a Calendly link to sign up for a time to participate in a semi-structured, in-depth interview conducted via Zoom. Interviews were audio-recorded. Rev AI was used in addition to Zoom to transcribe the interview, with corrections made post-transcription. Interviews totaled approximately 1,603 minutes, or 26.72 hours, and averaged 59.37 minutes each. Approximately 446 pages of transcripts were transcribed and analyzed in this data set.

The interview protocol consisted of 12 questions divided into five sections: general Facebook engagement, nature of disagreement, resolution and aftermath, decision-making, and looking ahead (see Appendix A). Questions ascended in difficulty, starting with general questions about participants' use of Facebook, like: Why do you choose to use Facebook as a social platform? Transitioning to disagreements they have engaged in and their impact on their relationship to strong ties, these questions aimed to understand their perceptions of accessibility and personalization in relation to the disagreement. For instance, participants were asked

questions like: What was the topic of the disagreement? What motivated you to engage? How did the public nature of the disagreement impact your decision to disagree?

## Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in several cycles, utilizing first- and second-round coding procedures. Coding procedures are necessary for accurately organizing and interpreting data across participants (Saldaña, 2016). Guiding definitions of perceived accessibility and personalization were adopted from O'Sullivan and Carr's (2018) Masspersonal Communication Model and used throughout the coding process. Accessibility is defined as "the degree of perceived accessibility to a particular message at any particular time" (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018, p. 1165). Personalization refers to "the degree to which a person perceives a message reflects their distinctiveness as individuals differentiated by their interests, history, relationship network, and so on" (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018, p. 1166). First-level coding involved structural coding, which categorizes data on pre-defined theoretical constructs, and in-vivo coding. Second-round coding involved thematic analysis to identify patterns across participants, which will be discussed in turn.

### First-Round Coding

Structural coding was used to break down participant data into smaller pieces for first-round coding, guided by the Masspersonal Communication Model (MPCM). Thus, interview data was broken down into categories like decision to engage in disagreement, perception of personalization, perception of accessibility, and relationship outcomes. In-vivo coding was also used as a first-round coding procedure following structural coding. As this study observed disagreements from an emic perspective, in-vivo coding captures the language and terminology

used by participants who have experienced disagreements with strong ties online (Saldaña, 2016).

### Second-Round Coding

Thematic analysis was used as a second-round coding method, as it was particularly helpful in identifying patterns across participants to identify themes. This coding system was used strategically for its ability to integrate "research questions, goals, conceptual framework, and literature review" as part of the analysis process (Saldaña, 2016). Second-round coding helped identify patterns related to perceptions of accessibility, personalization, and relationships, with codes like *correct and protect* and *disrupting echo chambers* that arose in the data. Data analysis happened in several rounds before stable themes arose.

### Method Summary

Qualitative methods were used to collect and analyze interview data for this study. Twenty-seven participants shared their experiences engaging in disagreements with strong ties on Facebook. The collected data were analyzed using first- and second-round coding methods to analyze the pre-established research questions developed with the Masspersonal Communication Model in mind. Reflexivity was used as a tool to ensure data was analyzed with clarity and integrity. Next, Chapter 4 will discuss the results of these analyses.

# RESULTS

Results are presented from findings derived from qualitative analysis conducted using the Masspersonal Communication Model (MPCM) as a guiding framework. This theory was employed to unravel the intricacies surrounding individuals' motivation to engage in disagreements with strong ties on Facebook and the factors impacting this decision-making process. The primary objectives of this research paper were to shed light on the motivations underpinning disagreements with strong ties on Facebook, to explore the influence of message personalization and accessibility on decision-making in disagreement contexts, and to examine the perceived relational impacts and outcomes of social media disagreements.

## Deciding to Engage in Disagreements

This study sought to understand why people disagree with strong ties on Facebook. Analyses reveal a nuanced understanding among participants regarding the public nature of the platform and the personalized aspects inferred from disagreements. This complexity and their relationship with the sender influence their decision to engage in a Facebook disagreement with a strong tie. For most participants, disagreements with strong ties revolved around political incongruence or differences in social values. That is, 24 of 27 (88.89%) participants cited disagreements with strong ties that were political, religious, or social in nature. Participants cited several disagreement types ranging from COVID-19 and the 2016/2020 presidential elections to transgender activism and LGBTQ+ rights. The remaining three of the 27 participants (11.11%) engaged with information that mentioned them directly (e.g., direct references or name called) or indirectly (e.g., sub-tweeting), perceiving high personalization (personal).

Multiple participants expressed relational consequences after having engaged in disagreements with a strong tie. In this study, nine of 27 (33.33%) participants expressed

moderate to severe relationship (e.g., relational strife or longstanding indifferences) outcomes resulting from these disagreements, with 11 of 27 (40.74%) experiencing total relationship dissolution or termination. The remaining seven participants (26.2%) reported mild relational repercussions or none at all. While their relationship with the sender often fueled their desire to engage in a disagreement (for example, seeing a strong tie post an ill-informed political post was more likely to garner engagement compared to a weak tie), their relationship to the sender was only one of multiple factors that motivated participants to engage.

By and large, participants were compelled to engage in disagreements based on their perceptions of the personalization and accessibility of something posted by a strong tie. Notably, most of the reported online disagreements were characterized by a "counter-punch" dynamic, where responses by participants were reactionary in nature, often propelled by posts or comments they perceived as provocative or contentious. This was particularly noted in strong-tie interactions where political incongruence was present. To be discussed further in Chapter 5, this is a sign of the evolving use of social media shifting away from relational maintenance and towards information sharing and social impact and advocacy.

This chapter will assess perceptions of accessibility and personalization, conjoined with their understanding of their relationship with the sender, using the Masspersonal Communication Model as the guiding framework. In doing so, I propose the *personalization-accessibility model of online disagreements* as a theoretical extension of MPCM to describe how these perceptions influence participants' desires to engage in disagreements with strong ties. First, this chapter will discuss independently perceptions of personalization, accessibility, and the relationship in foregrounding the model.

## Perceptions of Personalization

The decision to engage in a disagreement depended on the degree to which participants perceived a post was personalized. Generally, personalization refers to the degree to which a message reflects an individual's distinctiveness, particularly based on interests, history, and relationships (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). Personalization exists on a continuum of low to high (see Table 1). Perceptions of high personalization were present when a participant perceived direct (i.e., name called) or indirect (i.e., sub-tweeting; posting about someone without sharing their name) personalization in a social media disagreement. Low personalization, or no direct or indirect personalization perceived, was not well represented in this sample due to inclusion criteria.

**Table 1.** Examples of Personalization.

| Degrees of Personalization | Low (Impersonal) | Medium (Projected) | High (Personal) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Examples | Posts with no direct mention or perceived personalization. | Posts by strong or weak ties like family, friends, or acquaintances. | Posts by strong ties like family or friends, or posts that directly mention strong tie. |
| | | Posts with no direct mention and personalized indirectly. | Posts with perceived (e.g., sub-tweeting) or real direct mention and personalized. |
| Topic | Trolling | Political or Social Incongruence | Opinion or Familial Difference |
| No. of Participants | 1 (3.7%) | 23 (85.19%) | 3 (11.11%) |

This study extends a nuanced understanding of *projected personalization,* a medium personalization that does not rely on direct or indirect reference. Instead, this type of personalization was rooted in perceptions that the post (a) went against their political and social beliefs and (b) attacked a marginalized group of people, driving participants to disagree. For

example, a participant who experienced *projected personalization* may have seen a disparaging political post towards a marginalized group. They responded because they were concerned about protecting that group from the disparaging content.

Perceptions of personalization are significant in shaping participants' motivation to engage in a disagreement. High personalization involves a perceived, identifiable link between participants and the post they are interacting with. On the other hand, projected personalization, which was most referenced among participants, presents a novel way of understanding why participants engage in disagreements: Participants can perceive a message or post as relevant to themselves, even without direct personalization. In addition, as perceptions of personalization increased, so did the potential for information to be viewed as hurtful, whether towards themselves or marginalized groups. As this study continues with *perceptions of accessibility*, it is important to note that perceptions of personalization and accessibility are deeply intertwined perceptions that inform participants' willingness to engage in disagreements.

## Perceptions of Accessibility

Accessibility is an important factor in participants' decision to engage in disagreements with strong ties, both in their hypothetical understanding of a message's reach and their actual observation of the people engaging in the disagreement. Accessibility refers to the degree to which an individual understands the degree of access to their message at any given time (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). This study contributes a refined insight into how perceptions of accessibility exist on a continuum of low (intended) to high (imagined) and particularly how medium (observable) perceptions impact online disagreements (see Table 2).

*The observable audience* represents the audience that participants were quantifiably able to assess when engaging in their disagreement; in other words, the other commenters on the post

they engaged with – typically family, friends, or people of a collapsed audience. Context collapse, or multiple audiences collapsed into one (Baym & boyd, 2012) was an issue for participants. We construct our messages for a perceived or *imagined audience* – the mental conceptualization of the audience we are communicating with. We often cannot know precisely who can access the messages we send at any given time. Participants described the *imagined audience* as unknown, unobservable, and vast, often arising in political and social disagreements with strong ties.

**Table 2.** Examples of Accessibility.

| Degrees of Accessibility | Low (Intended Audience) | Medium (Observable Audience) | High (Imagined Audience) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Examples | Conversations that take place in private. | Perceptions of known audience who have access to a post or comment. | Perceptions of unknown audience who may have access to a post or comment. |
| | Audience is known and communication is direct and private. | Actual, observable audience on the post or comments. | Unobservable, vast, or unlimited audience could have access to a post. |
| | Private message, phone call, etc. | Family, friends, commenters. | Society, marginalized groups, lurkers. |

Collectively, perceptions of accessibility played an essential part in participants' decision to engage in disagreements with strong ties on Facebook. It is worth noting that participants often had a fluid understanding of accessibility and did not strictly adhere to one perception of accessibility. Participants often shifted between concerns of the *observable* and the *imagined audience* or conceptualized them concurrently when choosing to engage in disagreements. In some instances, participants used their perceptions of accessibility to justify moving disagreements to private spaces. Paired with personalization, these perceptions were highly influential in the decision to engage in disagreements.

## Relationships with Strong Ties

This study extends an alternate means of assessing disagreements online in addition to perceptions of personalization and accessibility: the role of the relationship to the sender as a motivating factor to engage and how relationships impact the unfolding of disagreements. Participants often wrestled with the impacts of these relationships, especially in whether to respond in highly or lowly accessible spaces. In instances with strong ties, there is a pronounced desire to influence or change the opinion of the poster. Participants characterized strong ties as personal, long-term connections with family and friends, and the strength of connection with the strong tie correlated with participants' desire to preserve the relationship and to approach the disagreement with more consideration and care.

In addressing antisemitic posts by a family member on Facebook, one participant described that her relationship with her strong tie and his family drove her desire to engage:

> It hurts me that he is unwilling to understand his own grandkids culture and perspective. And I feel like if he would say those things to me, he might say some of them to them. So from just a very simple perspective of I don't want my kids around that kind of speech.

However, when participants were asked to juxtapose the motivation to engage with strong versus weak ties, they'd often resort to ignoring, muting, blocking, or unfriending: "If it was someone that I didn't know, I probably wouldn't have said anything," or "I'd unfriend them or block." Another participant remarked:

> If it had been a weak tie, I don't think I would've given two craps. I think I would've just been, 'Whatever! Another person mad at me on the internet.' But because it was someone that I was close to that chose to respond like that, I was like, 'Whoa!'

This statement identifies the emotional weight and significance of disagreements amongst strong ties, indicating the differences in how participants would respond between strong and weak ties. Disagreements with strong ties often elicited a stronger adverse reaction, propelling the need to engage with the information to do right by them or others (relating to *correct and* protect, which will be discussed in a later section). The ability to hastily unfriend or disregard weak ties solidifies the importance of relationships in deciding to engage: as the strength of a tie increases, the stronger the desire to engage in the disagreement.

One participant distinguished engaging with a weak versus a strong tie, stating: "I think the big difference is that there's a lot more at stake for me with [my uncle] than there is someone I don't know. I'm going to theoretically see [my uncle] again and care what he thinks again." This participant emphasizes the long-term implications and often ongoing nature of connections with strong ties, adding a relational layer of complication for deciding to disagree. Despite this potential for relational risk, deciding to disagree was motivated by participants' desire to change their strong tie's opinions. As another participant remarked,

> I do, at some level, care what this other person thinks because this is someone close to me and I want them to, for whatever reason, care about this thing like I do or have an informed decision – whatever it is. And I think that definitely has an impact [on my decision to engage in a disagreement] because they can see better where I'm coming from because they know me.

This quote highlights a strong intrinsic value in correcting information within close relationships, driving this participant to influence their strong tie's perspective. In bringing perceptions of accessibility, personalization, and relationships together, I propose *the personalization-accessibility model of online disagreements* to understand better these experiences.

## The Personalization-Accessibility Model of Online Disagreements

Deciding to disagree with a strong tie on social media is complex and motivated by intertwining perceptions of accessibility and personalization. Utilizing concepts related to the Masspersonal Communication Model, *the personalization-accessibility model of online disagreements* presents a nuanced understanding of motivations that shape an individual's decision to engage on a model of two axes: perceptions of accessibility and perceptions of personalization from low to high (see Figure 1). By positioning online disagreements within this framework, this study contributes theoretically to existing discourse on online disagreements, addressing how these perceptions play a pivotal role in the decision to disagree. This model serves as a framework for dissecting experiences with disagreements online, moving beyond self-censorship to pinpoint the intersections of where accessibility and personalization inform a person's desire to engage in a disagreement. As such, the remaining results will be structured to reflect this framework.

### Organization of Model

The remaining results will be broken down by types of motivations to engage in disagreements based on the axes of high to low perceptions of accessibility and personalization. Following this model, the following codes were assigned based on the level of perceived personalization:

1. Low Personalization = Impersonal
2. Medium Personalization = Projected
3. High Personalization = Personal

The following codes were assigned to perceptions of accessibility:

1. Low Accessibility = Intended Audience

2. Medium Accessibility = Observable Audience
3. High Accessibility = Imagined Audience

Based on these codes about accessibility and personalization, the following types were created and displayed based on relevance within participant data (i.e., the larger circle equates to larger participant contribution) (see Figure 1):

1. Type I: Projected-Imagined (Medium Personalization – High Accessibility)
2. Type II: Projected-Observable (Medium Personalization – Medium Accessibility)
3. Type III: Personal-Imagined (High Personalization – High Accessibility)
4. Type IV: Impersonal-Observable (Low Personalization – Medium Accessibility)

Types are represented by circles, varying in size depending on the representation of participants. In the model, types are positioned relative to their placement on the axes of personalization and accessibility. This chapter will focus on Types I, II, and III, as these motivational types were most prevalent in the data. The less represented motivational type (Type IV) will be discussed in Chapter 5.

**Type I: Projected-Imagined Motivation (Medium Personalization-High Accessibility)**

Motivations to engage in disagreements on Facebook manifest in a variety of multifaceted factors, and each motivation represents a distinct facet of these interactions. This study contributes greatly to the *projected-imagined* type, which describes motivations rooted in projected personalization and high accessibility. Figure 2 showcases the *projected-imagined* motivational type on the middle axis of personalization and high on the accessibility axis. Shaped by this motivation, participants were propelled to engage in disagreements out of the prospect of (a) the potential groups or identities that had access to seemingly hurtful or false information (*Anyone Can See*) and (b) the resulting need to both offer support to afflicted groups

and correct false information (*Correct and Protect*). The concept of the imagined audience looms large, as the desire to address the original sender usually came second to addressing the discourse to impact a broader audience. Next, this section will explore *anyone can see*, which uniquely positions the influence of the imagined audience on deciding to engage.

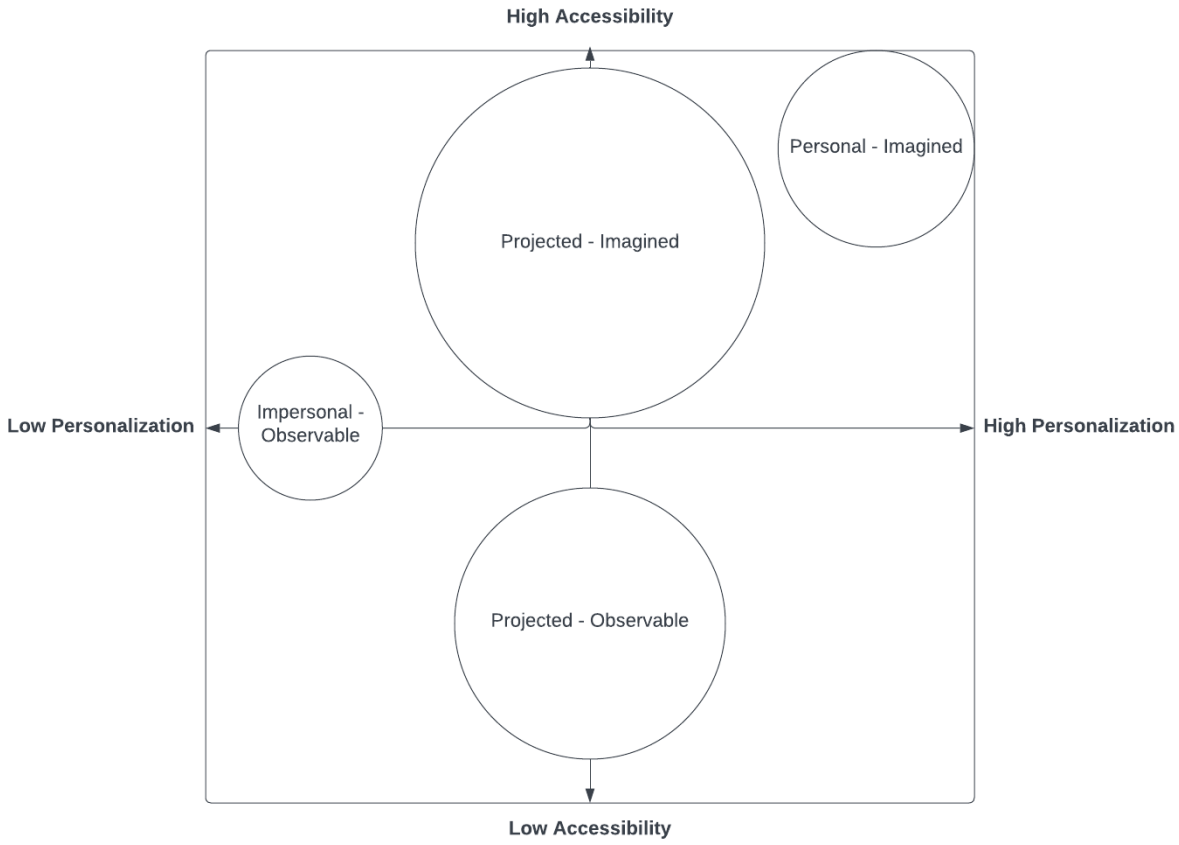


**Figure 1.** Personalization-Accessibility Model of Online Disagreements.

### *Anyone Can See*

Participants expressed concerns over who had access to messages that they disagreed with. *Anyone Can See* underscores the unease that participants feel resulting from the realization that a large, potentially unknown audience has access to information that they disagree with: an

imagined audience. Concerns about the imagined audience were often situated in contexts of projected personalization, where participants encountered information being shared that they disagreed with for typically political or social incongruence. For occasions of projected personalization and perceptions of high accessibility, concerns of accessibility lay more in the potential for others to see than concern for self.

For example, one participant described her decision to engage for the imagined audience, as she "wanted other people to see [her] speaking up for the community." Especially when responding to disagreements on social activism or political incongruences, the idea of accessibility by an imagined audience was imperative to address, especially if no one else was. Often, participants thought about the imagined audience and anticipated the people that would potentially lurk or scroll past: "I had thought that there's potential that [family and friends would] see it, but I also know that there are lurkers, too, who partly are just scrolling." In essence, participants are driven by a dual purpose: to directly consider the potential for high accessibility, advocate for others, and mitigate the potential negative impact on lurkers or audiences who may be silently observing the spreading discourse. One participant commented, "There are probably others that are seeing this." The imagined audience was cited in political disagreements because of a concern for large breadths of people (e.g., society in general, marginalized groups) having access to sometimes misleading information and hurtful commentary.

In discussion of how the imagined audience impacted their desire to engage in a disagreement with a family member's homophobic post, one participant remarked:

> ...being an ally for folks that are either directly affected by things she's saying or just knowing that if there's other people that are wondering or uninformed or don't have an

> opinion at all – to see more than one perspective, especially when it's something that's wrong.

This quote demonstrates the complex intertwining of projected personalization and accessibility and how these concepts shape participant desires to engage in disagreement on Facebook. This participant projected personalization onto the message and was concerned with the imagined audience—the people who may have access to the disparaging post (i.e., the LGBTQ+ community).

The possibility of the imagined audience accessing misinformation or information they thought could harm others was a driver for engagement. Out of concern for the accessibility of political misinformation shared about immigration, one participant questioned, "We don't know the general consensus of: Do people really believe all these things that [the poster] said?" For one participant, the idea that *anyone could see* was enough to eventually break off ties with the original poster, both online and in person. In this instance, the unease of access to the message was used purposefully: "I said it [on the Facebook post] on purpose because I wanted his whole audience to hear me say, 'I'm done with this.'" Although this participant admitted it was "not enjoyable to call someone out and engage that way," their convictions stood in front of the relationship to the poster and instead valued the imagined audience.

The decision to engage in a disagreement while also needing to balance being "respectful" was cited by another participant. In deciding to address his aunt's religious and anti-LGBTQ+ posts on Facebook, this participant grappled with the need to address hurtful comments and concurrently maintain his relationship with this aunt:

> I want her to know that she has more of an audience kind of not everyone's going to agree with her, and I want her to know that without outwardly saying it and trying to be

respectful with it... What she posts is not always going to be received well by people. And I want her to know that she can be called out for things, I guess, and that her audience is a bit wider.

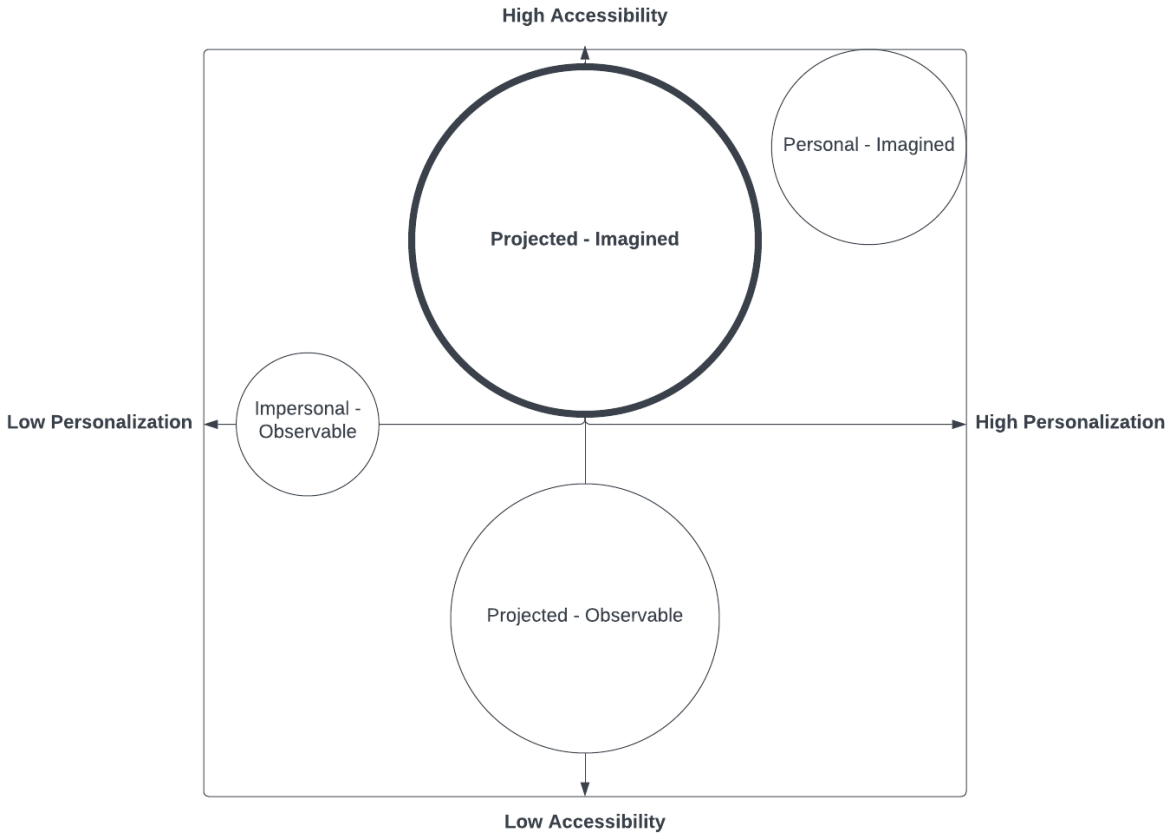


**Figure 2.** Type I: Projected-Imagined Motivational Type

The participant described a triad of concerns when making the choice to engage: (a) acknowledging that *anyone can see,* (b) maintaining respect towards their close contact, and (c) correcting information that is otherwise incorrect or hateful in nature. Even though the nature of the information shared had no direct connection to the participant, judgments about the

information and the potential access by an exhaustive *imagined audience* warranted the need to respond.

For participants experiencing direct personalization from disagreements, their need to engage stemmed from an inner sense of vulnerability. One participant described an experience she had with family expressing negative comments about her body modification choices and the experience of vulnerability due to perceptions of the imagined audience:

> You don't have the comfort of your own home. It's not private, and when you're arguing, you're already vulnerable. And then for everyone who wants to be able to look at that and see it happening... It's scary.

This quote demonstrates how perceptions of high accessibility impact participants' desire to engage in a disagreement. In this instance, although the disagreement had already occurred publicly, the participant reflected on feelings of hurt and vulnerability resulting from the interaction, directly citing the audience of potential people who could have observed.

High perceived personalization paired with high perceptions of accessibility certainly enhance feelings of hurt, with one participant drawing clear connections between the two: "I think it's just the fact that it's so public and anyone can access it is part of the reason it hurts so much, and it doesn't go away unless I delete that post." When the disagreement is seen as highly accessible, and personalization is direct, participants are more likely to engage in the disagreement but also more likely to express hurt feelings because of these interactions. Themes of shame or embarrassment enhanced this vulnerability, especially as they pertained to the imagined audience, making them feel exposed.

Participants compared the experience of *anyone can see* to experiences of disagreement in face-to-face public spaces. Akin to the imagined audience online, participants discussed the

fear of not knowing who can access the disagreement, relating passive interactions such as likes or reactions online to eye contact from others in face-to-face interactions:

> Arguing on Facebook is like having a family disagreement in the middle of the Walmart, but you've got people who will not make eye contact. It felt like all of those likes and hearts were people making eye contact in that argument. And that's not really something I'm super comfortable with.

Ultimately, this perception of accessibility pushed this participant to not want to engage at all, as the sense of the imagined audience created too much discomfort.

Similarly, another participant related getting into a disagreement on Facebook to getting "into a verbal argument in a crowded mall." This, contrasted with a private setting, such as a person's apartment, was fundamentally distinct because of the potential visibility by others: "There's something different about having everyone else around you and knowing that you're in a public space and having people be able to see you, that just makes it that you feel more vulnerable." Participants likened engaging in disagreements online to contentious encounters in public, face-to-face spaces. In understanding how perceptions of accessibility influence motivations to engage, it is imperative to consider how perceptions of the imagined audience contribute to feelings of vulnerability and, often, more hurtful interactions. The unpredictability of who can witness the interaction and the potential for passive reactions from others underscored participants' heightened sense of vulnerability, contrasted sharply with relatively private settings.

The plausibility of an infinite amount of people having access to either (a) information that was better served in a private channel and/or (b) information that does not align with the convictions of the receiver plays a critical role in a person's decision to engage in a disagreement

with a strong tie on Facebook. For four participants, this led to moving their conversations to a more private, personal space like Messenger, text message, or phone call, which will be discussed in a later section. Thus, the concept that *anyone can see* can serve as a motivator to keep disagreements in public spaces or, if respect within the relationship is favored, move to private spaces. Understanding that participants can exist on a continuum between these motivations and goals is also noteworthy. Participants falling into the *projected-imagined* motivational type felt the need to support, stand up for, or protect their imagined audience: *correct and protect.*

***Correct and Protect***

This in-vivo code represents participant motivations to *correct information* and *protect others* as the guiding rationale for engaging in disagreements with strong ties on Facebook. This code represents participants' nuanced decisions when disagreeing with others in public spaces. The need to correct and protect was a concern in 24 of 27 (88.89%) participants, with concerns of personalization and accessibility driving this motivation. The motivation to *correct and protect* was especially connected to participants' perception of accessibility, as concern for others and the need to correct information increased as the perception of accessibility was greater. One participant described this succinctly as she discussed calling out an aunt for her inappropriate comments on the LGBTQ+ community on Facebook posts: "My responses were both to correct the misinformation and, hopefully, somebody else reading maybe would take a look at that and not further spread that." This quote describes the duality of participants' responses in addressing misinformation and hurtful content in public digital spaces. It also involves protective intentions; the desire to *correct and protec*t was common amongst people of the *projected-imagined* motivational type.

Participants aiming to "correct and protect" were not strictly motivated by the need to win an argument. Instead, they say the opportunity to correct information is an inherent obligation to do right by the audience, which could potentially access that information. As one participant put it: "I think the biggest thing is I try to argue against misinformation or disinformation because the truth is the only thing that we have as a weapon against lies, for lack of a better term." Correction is not only about immediate rectification but also preventing the spread of false information to a larger audience. Driven by this motivation, participants describe their responsibility to prevent the proliferation of misinformation. For example, when asked what motivates her to engage in disagreements with her family, a participant said, "Truth. The fight for truth," followed by:

> Disinformation is spreading so rapidly, and it's furthering these divides. It's making these relationships worse. It's making these communications worse. It's making politics worse. It's making quality of life worse because you can hit the share button and there's no damn filter on there – 'No, are you sure you want to share this?'

Like many other participants, the motivation to correct misinformation is multifaceted, as the quote above parses out. For some, correction is not only to proactively limit the spread of misinformation but serves the potential to protect others as well.

In addition to corrective motivations for engagement, participants also expressed protective motivations that focused on more social or ethical implications. Participants expressed concerns about the "bigoted" and "tone-deaf" nature of the posts they interacted with, sharing concern for how certain groups could be negatively impacted by the discourse they were engaging with. One participant described engaging with content, moving beyond factual accuracy and into moral and ethical implications surrounding certain groups of people:

> I mean, even gay marriage or even just "people are born as boys or girls" or things like that... There were homophobic things, there were racist things – Mexicans are stealing our jobs. There were just some very flagrant, blatantly offensive things.

In making the decision to respond to their strong tie on topics of this nature, this participant exemplifies how perceptions of personalization do not have to call on the participant directly. Similarly, another participant discussed disagreeing with a family member who made crude comments about people in leadership: "[Strong tie] was judging people in leadership solely based on physical or social characteristics and not necessarily things that they had done." These examples show how perceptions of personalization do not need to be direct but can be projected through concerns for marginalized groups.

Topics of LGBTQ+ rights, racism, xenophobia, and antisemitism were commonly referenced amongst participants that aligned with the *projected-imagined* motivational type. An enduring presence of offensive and harmful language on social media was commonly referenced in passages associated with this type, and participants often felt the need to publicly express intolerance for this discourse – specifically for the need to create supportive environments for others. As one participant who responded to an anti-LGBTQ+ post remarked, "If I'm putting correct information out there, and if I'm hopefully making just one person feel safe in what I affirm and firmly believe, then I've done my duty. I feel good about that."

When participants expressed disagreement, particularly in instances of political or social incongruence, the motivation to protect arose as a type of moral obligation to stand up for individuals potentially exposed to hateful or exclusionary rhetoric. One participant seeking to combat misperceptions within the Christian religion stated: "If someone was going to see my comment and think, 'Oh, not every Christian is bad or divisive or mean or condemning,' that's

what I wanted to be a voice for." In anticipation of an imagined audience, this participant was driven to combat a potentially negative perception of Christianity, dually addressing misperceptions and promoting a cleaner image for that religious group. Although participants often acknowledged that they did not expect to change the original poster's opinion, many remarked a similar sentiment: "I didn't think it was okay to sit by and let everyone think that it was okay to continue that kind of behavior." The imagined audience played a critical role in participants' desire to engage in disagreements. However, it had much less to do with addressing the original poster or the strong tie than addressing content shared with a potentially infinite, unknown audience.

One participant described her time combatting alt-right misinformation posted by her father, citing the need to minimize the impact of the spread of misinformation for her conception of the imagined audience: lurkers. Fueled by influencing "someone like I was a few years ago, that's kind of in the middle of change, but they aren't that confident in their positions yet," she stated:

> It's not only the other people on the side that are engaging in the conversation that I'm thinking about, but the people that are scrolling by that maybe stop and don't comment. Because I am definitely a Facebook lurker most of the time. I think about all of the other lurkers of the world that scroll by and don't comment, whether it be because maybe they aren't super politically engaged but they have a little bit of interest.

Speaking up in response to information that participants disagreed with was not merely an opportunity to discuss opinion incongruence with their strong tie, nor was it purely to self-present to a sympathetic audience. Instead, participants prioritized speaking up for the imagined audience over their relationship to their strong tie.

In responding to political or social disagreements, participants were motivated to advocate for the lurkers or the imagined audience for whom they wanted to show support. The imagined audience was often conceptualized around minority identities and topics of social activism, such as Native American rights, Black Lives Matter, or the LGBTQ+ movement. For one participant speaking up to anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric from a family member, fostering a connection with the LGBTQ+ community through commenting was imperative:

> I hope that if this pops up on their page, they see my support for them and they know they're not alone, too. And it's trying to defend those things so that if anybody who comes across this post does align with whatever's being disparaged, they know that there's at least one person who feels the way they feel or aligns with them.

Similarly, another participant strategically responded to their father's misinformation about transgender athletes, highlighting an obligation to stand up for people who otherwise did not have a voice in the conversation. While they acknowledge that their father is "probably someone who has maybe never interacted with a transgender person before, and he's probably not friends with anyone who's transgender on Facebook," they felt it was their obligation to stand up and ensure their position was seen and heard by a potential, imagined audience:

> There's the potential of no one holding that identity to be able to stand up for themselves and that kind of thing. And so, if there's no one there to do that, I would feel obligated to stand up for them when there's no one else to do it.

The choice to engage in a disagreement with a strong tie is strategic, often to ensure that the lurking, potential, vast imagined audience knows that dissenting voices exist in that network. Engagement has less to do with changing the opinions of the original poster, typically the strong tie, than it has to do with ensuring others have space to feel respected and safe on social

networking sites. Participants described this underlying driver for engagement as an "obligation," feeling "compelled," or a sense of "duty." One participant said, "A failure to respond or point out these inaccuracies is letting false information spread." Whether this feeling was rooted in concern for the spread of misinformation, for safeguarding others, or both, this inherent obligation is a noteworthy precursor for engaging in disagreements with strong ties on social media. Further, if participants did not respond, they felt a sense of guilt or even "complicit" in allowing these messages to occur.

For instance, in a disagreement about transphobia on Facebook, one participant described his decision to engage with his aunt as "twofold":

> I have transgender friends, and I knew that the thing that this aunt was saying was transphobic, and that just really rubbed me the wrong way. And then the other thing that I was thinking about was silence. Inaction is, in and of itself, an action. My thought was that not saying anything is also kind of complicit in a way that made me feel gross. And I was like, well if I have to say something, I have to say something.

This participant displayed dual motivation to engage: a sense of moral obligation to confront transphobia and a fear that silence could be constructed as complicity. Ultimately, this led them to act and engage in the disagreement, despite complicating their relationship with the original poster. Another participant discussing access to transgender transition care with her uncle described a similar conviction:

> Silence is violence. If you're not speaking about the things that are important to you and the things you see that are messed up, you're complicit when they continue to happen. And so, for many of my friends who really care [about transgender rights], it was like,

there's no choice. I have to [respond/comment]. When I see someone saying shit, I have to call them out on it.

Considered more broadly, conceptions of the audience also drove participants' sense of obligation to engage. One participant cited obligation in that they felt, "If I don't share this perspective, I don't know that anyone else would make sure that they saw it." This participant communicated a perception of the imagined audience lacking support, allies, or others willing to speak up. Collectively, these accounts reveal participants' ethical and social commitments:

> I don't know that I would say that I think it's my job, but I will say that with my privilege and not being affected by a lot of things, I should [...] be supportive of people who are directly experiencing that—to be an advocate.

For this participant, projected personalization was felt as a need to support and advocate for marginalized voices. Akin to the passage above, participants encountering political disagreement often cited feeling obligated or compelled to respond. This could be to correct misinformation, advocate for marginalized voices, or stand up for other close connections.

Another participant discussed their experience addressing a strong tie who shared disparaging content about the Native American community:

> I'm not Native American, and so my connection is just those that I know who have expressed these different values and pains and opinions and experiences. Everything that I'm talking about is based on what they have experienced and gone through, and I want to help bring a voice to them. So, the childhood friend that commented on it and was like, 'If I were a Native American, I'd be proud,' or whatever... Well... You saying that takes their voice away or doesn't think about what they might actually be going through.

In this example, projected personalization rests in the relationship that this participant shares within that minority group, expressing a threshold of people they can "speak up" for: people they know and care for. Thus, participants' relationships with minority groups may be a driving force of projected personalization. On the other hand, relationships with the person posting problematic content also shaped how participants chose to engage with strong ties, sometimes pushing them to private spaces and away from the potential challenges the imagined audience poses.

### *From Imagined Audience to Private Channel*

The decision to engage in disagreements publicly versus privately was a strategic relational choice. Although most participants ($n$ = 23; 85%) reported engaging in strictly public disagreements, four participants discussed their rationale for switching from public and private spaces when disagreeing with strong ties. Opting to transition disagreements to a private space from public served as an indicator of caring and closeness in relationships. This was often a deliberate choice to preserve the dignity of the original poster, especially with strong ties. One participant commented on a disagreement with her grandma about alt-right political messages, citing caring as the reason for transitioning the conversation to a private space:

> Even when I was posting publicly, I was trying to do it in a respectful way, but of course, tone gets lost. So, when I was messaging grandma privately, it was like I was trying to make sure she knew that I did still love her, care about her, respect her, but that I was very, very concerned about these things that she was saying on social media and reporting to believe.

This participant represents a decision to both comment publicly for the sake of advocating and reach out privately out of concern for the relationship. The participant demonstrated a strategic

intention to maintain respect while addressing contentious issues, identifying the limitations of public discourse and the ability to accurately express oneself emotionally, as private channels lead to a sense of more personal communication despite still being text-based.

On the other hand, another participant could exchange public interaction for a private conversation, mainly to prevent the embarrassment of the strong tie and to not "publicly shame" them:

> I don't want to kind of embarrass them. They could feel embarrassed if they kind of get proven wrong or they just don't like the answer. So, I think it also deescalates it a little bit because then they're not trying to prove themselves in a more public platform. [...]

This participant explained that they will purposefully privately message people to inform or educate, with the sole intention of helping their strong tie better understand certain information. It is important to note that the original recruitment of this study contained only one participant that engaged in a private channel for the disagreement in addition to public. The recruitment strategy was updated mid-study to see how personalization and accessibility influenced people who moved their disagreement to a private channel.

**Type I: Projected-Imagined Motivation Summary**

The projected-imagined motivational type is characterized by projected, or medium, personalization and high accessibility. Participants revealed, especially in political and social incongruence, that they are motivated to engage in disagreements that curb the potential to spread misinformation or harm, especially concerning minority groups and identities. Encapsulated by the code *anyone can see* and the resulting need to *correct and protect*, this motivational type explains how perceptions of accessibility and personalization underpin a sense

of moral obligation to engage in disagreements. Next, this study will explore motivations of projected personalization with medium, or *observable,* accessibility.

**Type II: Projected-Observable Motivation (Medium Personalization –Medium Accessibility)**

Exploring what motivates individuals to engage in disagreements online, the second most prominent motivational type was fueled by medium personalization and accessibility: *projected-observable motivation* (see Figure 3). This motivational type exists in the middle axes of personalization and accessibility; participants perceived their audience to be smaller and more visible and their communication to be more direct with the people engaging in the post. This motivational type marks a strategic intention to disrupt *echo chambers*, a network of observable interactants with what the participant perceived as homogenous, reinforced opinions. Participants described how context collapse impacted their decision to engage in disagreements, fueled by a similar need to *correct and protect, as* described in Type I. First, this section will describe participant experiences with *disrupting echo chambers.*

***Disrupting Echo Chambers***

Participants described disagreements existant in a larger challenge imposed by social media: online environments that frequently become echo chambers, or spaces that reinforce like-minded perspectives that significantly shape online discourse. One participant described like-minded family members "ganging up" on her when she would share her political opinions, citing the repercussions of *disrupting echo chambers*:

> And the thing that was crazy about it to me was that all of my cousins and everyone in my family basically agreed with each other. And so oftentimes it was like four-five-six people ganging up on me and me trying to defend six different positions at once.

Several participants referenced concepts like “like-mindedness” or “bubbles” to describe their perceptions of echo chambers. One participant offered insight into their assumptions about the motivations behind the post of their strong tie, stating: “I think her thought was, well, everybody in my bubble’s going to agree with this sort of thing. So, post it! Everybody’s going to like it.”

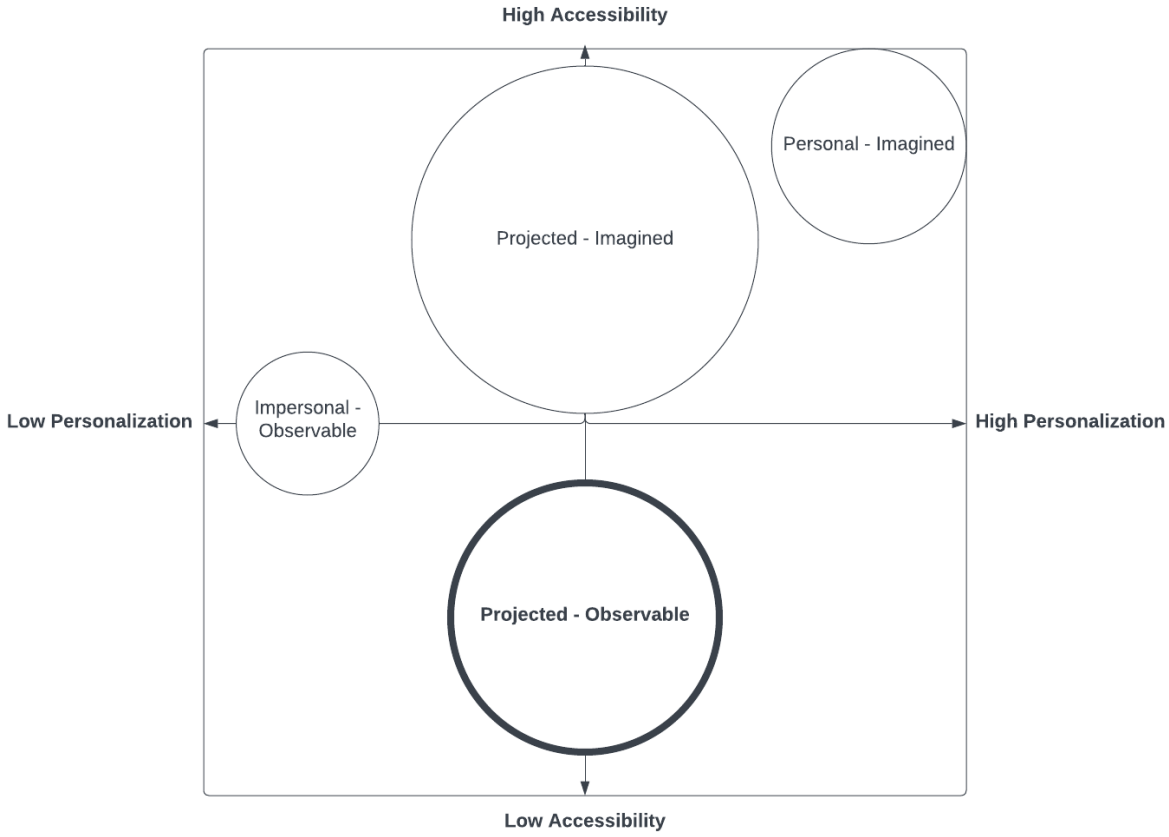


**Figure 3.** Type II: Projected-Observable Motivational Type

Similarly, another participant shared, “I think he was posting to elicit validation from people who are like-minded.” When asked why she thought that her strong tie posts their political opinions in public spaces, one participant replied:

> I think the encouragement of the other people that he knew already, he knew he had this base of people who were agreeing with everything. [...] 'Hey guys, look what's happening to me over here!'

Like the participant above, those *disrupting echo chambers* were influenced by the people they observed, the information their strong tie was sharing, and their desire to correct information and protect people from harmful rhetoric.

Thus, awareness of echo chambers was not passive in nature. In fact, this observation often catalyzed participants to intervene when they disagreed with the post or comment: to *correct and protect*. In most cases, this took the form of projected personalization on political or social topics. One participant described an interaction regarding Jewish hate speech within her family, stating:

> [The original poster] was just talking to an audience of people who agreed. And I really felt compelled to let him know that not everybody in his circle agreed with him or thought that it was okay to say terrible things all the time: very hateful things.

An inner sense of obligation highlighted in the passage above is an impetus for engaging in disagreements. That is, if participants saw a great deal of agreement on a post surrounding a sentiment they disagreed with, their motivation impacted both by (a) the *observed audience* and (b) their desire for *disrupting the echo chamber*. For others, this was directly related to a participant's sense of obligation to *correct and protect*. Explained by a participant addressing anti-trans messages posted by a family member on Facebook, they stated:

> If I hadn't said anything, then the post would just be this anti-trans message and everybody agreeing with it, and that would be it. So, it would kind of look like everybody

> agrees with this sentiment. So, the thought went, if I said something, then at least it would make it look like that's not the case.

This participant also foregrounds another implication of engaging in disagreements: context collapse. Participants often engage in mediated environments to, intentionally or unintentionally, level a multitude of audiences into one. Often, a flattening of audiences is problematic because of the inability to control who receives what information. For the participant above, collapsing context was intentional (*context collapse*) in an effort to showcase a political or social stance they otherwise saw as neglected on the post.

One participant described their decision to engage in context collusion as it pertained to addressing right-leaning political messages posted by a high school friend. When deciding to disagree, this participant called directly on the need to disrupt echo chambers and intentionally address an *observable audience*:

> Again, in rural Minnesota, my point of view might be a rare one. Other people might be more scared to share [their opinions that go against the culture]. So, just at least putting that forward, making sure it's not an echo chamber in that way.

This statement provides insight into the decision to express minority, dissenting viewpoints in online environments that diverge from the norm of the network. This participant's decision to share their opinion – *disrupting echo chambers* – was a strategic intervention against an echo chamber. Many participants desire to share diversity in thought, shape the broader discourse, and promote more critical thinking. The accessibility of the *observable audience* is central to this motivation. When choosing to engage in disagreements, *context collapse* is a strategic tool.

### *Context Collapse*

An intentional collapsing of audiences, or context collapse, was utilized by participants for purposefully *disrupting echo chambers*, to create the opportunity for engaging with opposing viewpoints – also known as context collusions (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). For instance, one participant stated, "It was very intentional to respond in that space. [...] I said it there on purpose because I wanted his whole audience to hear me say, 'I'm done with this.'" In addition to the family member she disagreed with, this participant lamented that "other people started trying to debate me as well in the comments," even after she decided to disengage. Experiencing context collapse was not uncommon amongst participants, and this often drove their desire to engage in disagreements even more. On the other hand, the observable audience also served a functional role in standing up to hateful messages or misinformation. By purposefully merging themselves into a social circle and expressing a dissenting point of view, participants willingly opened themselves to disagreement, often serving the need to *correct and protect*.

### *Correct and Protect*

Context collusion was a purposeful act to expose the *observable audience* to dissenting opinions. It was especially common amongst participants who *projected personalization* in political or social messages, often with the motivation to *correct and protect*. "I did that very intentionally for the things I felt the very strongest about," a participant remarked while discussing her decision to respond to hate speech publicly. She continued by connecting her motivation, *correct and protect*:

> I felt, like, as a bystander, I was complicit in all the things he was saying and nobody was saying – 'actually, that's bad information' or 'that's wrong' or 'that's a very hateful thing

> to say.' I still feel really strongly that it needed to be responded to there, so that other people knew there was some dissent. It wasn't all people in the world agreeing.

This quote captures *disrupting the echo chamber* in addition to the underlying ethical dilemma faced by participants in disagreements online – their implicit role in limiting the spread of hate or misinformation in online spaces. Silence is not only seen as a passive act but as an active contribution to the program by reinforcing complicity. Serving as a motivation to engage in disagreements, a shared sense of feeling "no choice" and asserting the need to "call them out" on harmful narratives was common amongst participants, especially as it pertained to the need to curb the spread of misinformation on social media.

Acknowledging the rapid spread of misinformation online, participants often felt responsible for intervening in disagreements where inaccurate or false information was being spread. The intention behind the motivation to correct information was positive in nature, though not always taken or respected as such. The desire to impart knowledge, promote changes in mindset, or foster understanding were compelling motivations for participants to engage in disagreements with strong ties on Facebook. For instance, one participant described her motivation to address political propaganda shared by her father on Facebook:

> I mean, not really harass, but kind of to harass him into not being a propagandist anymore. [...] I think my motivation is kind of some of the same things that I evaluate whenever deciding if I want to engage with someone: How harmful is it that they're saying? Can I be productive if I engage?

This participant demonstrated particular concern for dismantling harmful rhetoric but also did so with careful consideration for remaining productive in disagreement. This demonstrates that the

motivation to engage is not solely based in a desire to self-disclose but is rooted in the need to rectify inaccuracies that are being spread online in a civil, democratic manner.

Another participant addressed anti-transgender sentiments on Facebook from his father, stating that his motivation was "challenging him on [his thoughts on transgender athletes] and kind of trying to pick his brain on why he thought that way." Often, expressing disagreement is not for disagreement's sake: it is an effort to challenge a close tie's understanding of information, often to do right by the close tie (regardless of the eventual relational outcome). When asked why he decided to engage in a disagreement to influence the opinions of this father, he responded:

> I had an opposing viewpoint. I think there are a lot more factors that come into play than what some people think about when it comes to situations like this. So, I was very much of the opinion that – no, [transgender athletes playing on teams that align with their identity] is fine. And if you take into all these considerations and stuff, it's really not the big deal that a lot of people are making it out to be.

This participant's *projected-observed* motivation to engage combines personal conviction in transgender rights and the desire to influence their strong tie's opinions. Unlike *projected-imagined,* this motivational type underpins the importance of doing right by the close tie (*observed audience*), even though they risk potential relational friction to promote alternate viewpoints.

***Type II: Projected-Observed Motivation Summary***

The projected-observed motivational type is characterized by medium personalization (*projected*) and medium accessibility (*observable audience*). Like Type I, participants express motivation to curb the spread of misinformation or harm, yet the audience of concern is a more

visible, observable audience than an infinite, imagined one. Participants were focused on *disrupting echo chambers,* citing a similar need to *correct and protect*. This underscores a complex interplay between personal relationships and social values, where contentious topics must be carefully considered for both the *observed* and *imagined audiences*. Engaging in this motivational type illustrates how participants' perceptions of accessibility impact their perceived role in fostering social change in their online network. Transitioning away from projected personalization, the following type will briefly discuss participant experiences with high personalization: the *personal-imagined* motivational type (Type III).

**Type III: Personal-Imagined Motivation (High Personalization-High Accessibility)**

Participants motivated by perceptions of high personalization and accessibility fall into the *personal-imagined* motivational type, or Type III. This type underscores experiences where participants perceived a direct, *personal* connection to the content shared, like being mentioned by name or sub-tweeted. As shown in Figure 4, this type is notably smaller than those of the *projected personalization* type, and this is because few participants discussed this motivational type in this sample. While this section is smaller in comparison, it also illuminates how perceptions of accessibility play a significant role in disagreements, regardless of the degree of personalization.

Participants experiencing the *personal-imagined* motivational type engaged in disagreements because of perceived personal connection to the material posted. Perceptions of accessibility – the *imagined audience*, or a vast, unknown amount of people that could have access to the material at any given time – added complication to these interactions. For example, one participant described a highly personalized disagreement where family members made personal attacks based on her body alterations. However, she also remarked on the high

accessibility: “It’s one thing to get into an argument with family. It’s another thing for that to be broadcast onto the internet where anyone could look at it and see.” Of motivational types in this study, the relational implications of this type were often more substantial because of the highly personalized *and* highly accessible nature of the interaction.

One participant described high personalization in a disagreement where their strong tie personally attacked them after having exposed their personal, past life information publicly: “Then, the original poster started saying all kinds of things about me and was trying to tear down my character and credibility and personhood.” It is important to note that personalization was *perceived* in that participants either directly knew the content was about them or they could infer it was (i.e., sub-tweeting). For example, one participant recounted an incident of sub-tweeting, where the participant believed a post targeted her and her family. The disagreement stemmed from the strong tie’s allusion to cultural norms. Because the norms did not align with her family’s practices, the post felt personally and directly attacking the participant’s clothing choices:

> So, I felt kind of personally attacked because I wear pants. I mean, I wear skirts, I wear miniskirts, and I felt like [the post] was [about] me. [The strong tie] was literally talking about [me], but not necessarily calling me out. And you had people commenting, saying, ‘Oh, this kind of people do not make good wives, moms. This kind of people are going to go to hell.’ I felt really bad because this is somebody that knew my siblings, she knew my parents. We grew up in a very small community, so everyone knows everyone.

Although this participant was not mentioned directly, personalization was made by being sub-tweeted about clothing choices. This example underscores the profound emotional impact that social media disagreements can carry, especially when intertwined with highly accessible

audiences. These experiences, unlike *projected personalization,* were more likely to elicit feelings of betrayal, isolation, and embarrassment for two reasons: first, because they perceived that the strong tie should have done better by them and, second, because the information was shared in a highly accessible space with the potential for others to connect the information to them. Thus, the accessibility of the disagreement serves as a source of personal vulnerability, showcasing the complex entwining of personalization and accessibility.

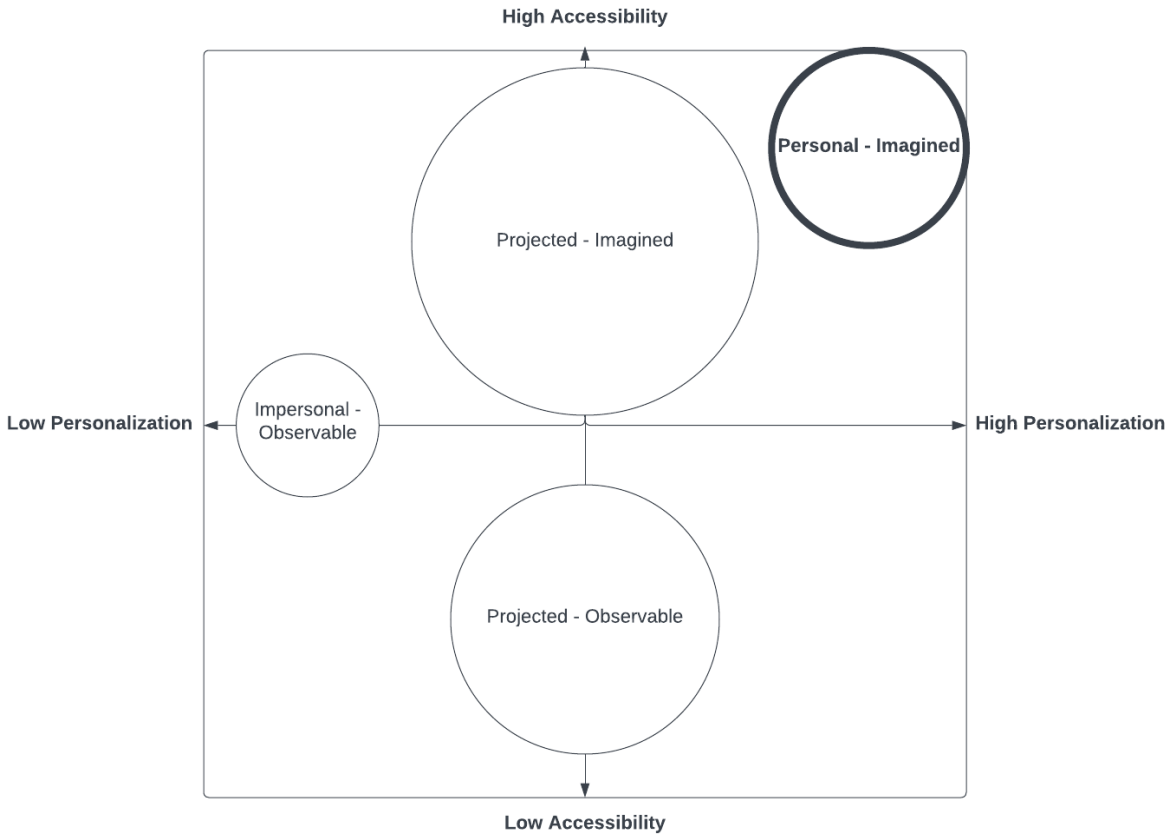


**Figure 4.** Type III: Personal-Imagined Motivational Type

Another participant described the feeling of being vulnerable after a close family member exposed details of their upbringing without their permission for a large, unknown audience to observe on a Facebook post:

> I described it as I feel like I'm hemorrhaging. I am bleeding out in front of everyone, and it made me feel really helpless. And I hate that feeling. That feeling makes me very angry – this person doesn't get to have that power over me.

A feeling of "hemorrhaging" or "bleeding out" in front of an *imagined audience* conveys how losing control of *personal* narratives can create an immense amount of distrust and relational strife between participants and their strong ties. The resulting feelings of betrayal and hurt pushed all participants ($n$ = 3; 11.11%) in this motivational type to terminate their relationships with their strong ties. One participant reflected on her final message to her father-in-law, remarking on the hurt felt from the disagreement:

> 'Hey, just so you know, I am unfriending you now because I can't talk to you about these topics anymore. They are painful and hurtful, and I think you don't understand what being Jewish is or the fact that your grandkids are Jewish. So good luck.'

Because of the deeply personal nature of the disagreement being so accessible to others, all participants of this motivational type experienced significant relational changes, resulting in the termination of their relationships to their strong ties. The act of unfriending was for an explicit reason. That justification existed in the deeply personal toll paired with broken boundaries, where disagreements perhaps meant for more personal spaces existed in highly accessible places. These perceptions necessitated the termination of these ties.

### Type III: Personal-Imagined Motivation Summary

Participants who experienced the *personal-imagined* motivational type offer insight into the impact of strong ties on perceptions of personalization and accessibility, notably resulting in more hurtful and relationally impactful interactions. The emotional ramifications of these interactions are amplified, most obviously by perceptions of personalization, but also by accessibility and perceptions of who can access the disagreement. This results in interactions that participants described as more vulnerable, resulting in a greater chance for relational turbulence or termination. This reveals a complex entwining of perceived personalization and accessibility in online disagreements of this nature, emphasizing that the strength of tie paired with these perceptions can critically impact relationships maintained in online spaces. Next, Chapter 5 will discuss these results rooted in current literature, discuss the motivational Type IV, propose limitations, and extend opportunities for future research.

# DISCUSSION

In an article by the Pew Research Center in August of 2020, approximately 7 in 10 Americans reported "stressful and frustrating" encounters with political discussions, particularly with people they disagreed with. Concurrently, the number of people who found these engagements "interesting and informative" dropped from 35% to 26% since 2016 (Anderson & Auxier, 2020). These statistics echo participants' experiences in the current study, who described their complex decision-making process for engaging in Facebook disagreements with strong ties. This study utilizes the Masspersonal Model of Communication as a guiding framework to assess participants' decision to engage in Facebook disagreements. This dissertation aims to (a) understand how perceptions of personalization and accessibility influence the decision to engage in Facebook disagreements and (b) examine how relationships with the sender impact participants' motivation to engage.

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings, specifically perceptions of message personalization and accessibility and the role of relationships in social media disagreements. I will also discuss empirical, theoretical, and practical implications, limitations, and future research.

## Perceptions of Message Personalization and Accessibility

The first research question asked, "How do perceptions of message personalization and accessibility influence the decision to engage in a Facebook disagreement with a strong tie?" Participants grappled with a complex interplay between perceived personalization and accessibility when disagreeing. The discussion will cover *perceptions of personalization* and *perceptions of accessibility,* forming participants' motivations to *correct and protect* others.

First, I will discuss perceptions of personalization, as direct or indirect personalization must be present for a participant to be inclined to engage in a disagreement.

**Perceptions of Personalization**

O'Sullivan and Carr (2018) describe personalization as "the degree to which receivers perceive a message reflects their distinctiveness as individuals differentiated by their interests, history, relationship network, and so on" (p. 1166). Personalization exists on a continuum from high messages made personal to the receiver (interpersonal communication) to low messages that reflect scant knowledge of the receiver (impersonal communication). Interpersonal conflict is an "interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities" (Rahim, 2003, p. 370). Among participants, as increases in perceived personalization coincided with disagreements, so did the motivation to engage. These experiences help shed light on how interpersonal definitions of disagreements extend to online spaces, as online disagreements are a personalized, interactive process propelled by perceptions of incompatibility.

Participants who expressed *high personalization* or *personal* communication described interactions in which they were directly or indirectly mentioned. Sub-tweeting is an example of indirect mention. Previous research has established sub-tweeting as when social media is used to talk about another person behind their back (Edwards & Harris, 2016). Participants in this study described sub-tweeting as a feeling of being alluded to without being directly mentioned. On the other hand, participants expressed high personalization as being directly identified by name. Thus, personalization was more straightforward to judge, even if the sender's intentions remained unknown (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). Like face-to-face disagreements, participants were attuned to engaging in social media disagreements when personalization was present,

whether *projected* or high. In particular, this study contributes *projected personalization* as a medium grade of personalization, defined as a message that reflects a receiver's distinctiveness as an individual differentiated by their values and beliefs but does not contain information tailored to the individual.

Message personalization, as noted by Bazarova (2012), is grounded in disclosure personalism, suggesting that the reception of a message is dependent on whether a receiver perceives that message as tailored to them. Message personalization is not solely up to the message's sender; instead, the receivers make actual judgments about personalization (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). Misinterpretations may lead to a divergence between the sender's intention and the receiver's interpretations, sometimes resulting in disagreements. Bazarova noted the need to understand better how other-related information shapes the context in which messages are judged and interpreted. This study contributes a nuanced perspective of *projected personalization*, demonstrating that personalization can be interpreted through other-related information. Messages can be perceived as personalized both in the absence of direct mention and if the message is perceived as disparaging towards a marginalized group, going against their political or social values.

At the lower end of personalization, *impersonal,* are messages that "reflect scant or nonexistent knowledge of the recipient(s)" (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018, p. 1166). During disagreements, one participant described engaging in behaviors with the intention of trolling, referred to as Type IV: *Impersonal-Observable* motivational type. As a type of antisocial behavior, trolling describes people's tendency to engage in snarky remarks or bully-type online behavior that stems from innate and situational factors (Cheng et al., 2017). Trolls often engage in impersonal attacks or provocations not tailored to their characteristics or knowledge. While

the participant intended the comments to be humorous, their strong tie unfriended them, fracturing a once-strong connection. This participant's experience clarified how judgments of a message rest in the hands of the receiver (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018) and how perceptions of disclosures can impact relationship outcomes (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Relationship issues resulting from posting without considering the impact on the receiver can be mitigated through more intentional use of social media.

**Perceptions of Accessibility**

The degree to which people perceive a message as accessible at any given time is called *perceived accessibility* in the MPCM (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). Participants expressed both medium (*observable audience*) and high (*imagined audience*) perceptions of accessibility concerning the disagreements they engaged in, as well as how they intentionally or unintentionally used their perception of the audience to engage in Facebook disagreements (*context collapse*). However, perceptions of accessibility and personalization were not mutually exclusive: as perceptions of accessibility and personalization increased together, so did the tendency to engage in a disagreement. This points to the complex intertwining of accessibility and personalization perceptions when deciding to disagree.

Although disagreements are highly personal (Pondy, 1967), disagreements on social media add a layer of complication by also being highly accessible. Litt (2012) defines *imagined audience* as individuals' mental conceptualization of whom they communicate with. Participants who discussed high accessibility referenced an *imagined audience*, describing it as a vast, unknowable audience while still ascribing to mentally conceptualized details of who they are (e.g., marginalized groups). Of concern to participants in this study was who they were communicating with and who could potentially have access to false or disparaging information

they disagreed with, acknowledging the potential negative implications of technology in providing access to diverse audiences (Baym, 2015).

Although participants expressed communicating to an intended audience (*observed audience*) (Baym et al., 2007; Marwick & boyd, 2011), their intention with the reach and visibility of their disagreement was often directed at the imagined audience of people who could potentially encounter the disagreement. In other words, perceptions of accessibility influenced engagement out of concern for the imagined audience rather than the strong tie. Previous research states that we act as if our audience is bounded, although it has the potential to be limitless (Marwick & boyd, 2011). This study extends a perspective on perceptions of accessibility on Facebook, situating a reality in which vast, not bounded, audiences motivate engagement in social media disagreements.

This study's results also expand upon context collapse: the collapsing of multiple audiences into one (Baym & boyd, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). Participants acknowledged a collapsing of contexts as they discussed divergent and cross-cutting political interactions on Facebook, and many chose to disagree publicly because of their awareness of collapsed audiences. Davis and Jurgenson (2014) distinguish two types of context collapse: collision, the unintentional merging of audiences, and collusion, the intentional merging of audiences. This study enhances our understanding of how accessibility influences the decision to disagree: intentionally merging audiences (context collusion) to foster more accurate narratives about social groups and rectify misinformation. These findings are consistent with prior literature, which found that individuals valued information exchange and political advocacy despite the potential risks associated with disagreements (Vraga et al., 2015).

However, if risks associated with accessibility were too high (e.g., relational risk with a strong tie), some participants purposefully moved the public disagreement to a private space. A small portion of participants ($n$ = 4; 14.81%) expressed concerns that the accessibility of the disagreement could cause embarrassment or make the strong tie feel like they were called out in front of a large audience. This aligns with prior research, which has shown that message personalization and relational intimacy can be impacted depending on the platform of disclosure (Bazarova, 2012). Participants in this study anticipated relational risk and the potential for misinterpretation of message personalization when deciding to move disagreements to less accessible, private channels.

**Correcting Misinformation and Protecting Others**

In answering research question one, perceptions of accessibility and personalization played a pivotal role in whether to engage in Facebook disagreements with strong ties. However, the underlying motivation to engage in a disagreement resulted from participants' resounding desire to *correct and protect* – the need to correct misinformation, to protect the imagined audience, or both simultaneously.

Social media is often perceived as a funnel for misinformation or fake news, especially as it pertains to health issues (Vraga & Bode, 2017; Wang et al., 2019). A study by Lawson et al. (2023) found that fake news causes political polarization, encourages malicious behaviors, and provokes group division (Lawson et al., 2023). Participants regularly indicated that misinformation is divisive, disparaging, and damaging to society. In anticipation of this, they resorted to disagreeing behaviors to mitigate these issues – with accessibility concerns central to their motivation to engage. The imagined audience most readily drove participants' desire to mitigate the spread of misinformation.

Additionally, the need to correct misinformation or protect others may stem from a sense of tribalism. This study aids in comprehending the reasons people engage in disagreements, either to counter misinformation or to protect marginalized groups. Participants expressed the need to correct misinformation and protect groups of people who cannot defend themselves against disparaging discourse. Consistent with tribalism research, participants tended to promote their coalition's interest, especially regarding group cohesion or other moral intentions. Clark et al. (2019) noted the tribal belief that "liberal bias in favor of disadvantaged groups might help increase equality" (p. 590). Most participants had left-leaning political ideologies and expressed a strong sense of "moral obligation" and "duty" to engage in disagreements for this reason, with some expressing feeling "complicit" if they did not respond. Participants generally believed "silence is violence," particularly in the *projected-imagined* motivational type. Perceptions of high accessibility paired with projected personalization created environments where participants felt they were doing wrong by themselves, their social groups, and marginalized groups if they did not engage. Thus, *disrupting echo chambers* was more than just disagreeing for disagreements' sake; it supported a larger social agenda. Thus, participants tended to favor their coalition more than their relationship to the strong tie, accepting the inevitable relational risk.

## Relationships with Strong Ties

Research question two asked, "How does the nature of participants' relationship to the sender impact their motivation to engage in a disagreement?" For people with limited opportunities for face-to-face interactions and strong ties, social media can be used as a purposeful tool to maintain those bonds (Abel et al., 2021). When asked, almost all participants acknowledged that their reason for joining a social networking site like Facebook was to connect with friends and family they do not regularly see. However, the evolving use of social media

away from relationship maintenance and towards information-seeking, news consumption, and social advocacy was noted across interviews; Facebook is not the relationship maintenance tool it once was. Disagreements that resulted in moderate to significant relationship changes or outcomes occurred for most participants ($n$ = 21; 77.78%), who cited experiences ranging from personal indifference to relationship dissolution on *and* off Facebook. Generally, participants were driven more by perceptions of accessibility and projected personalization to engage in disagreements than their desire to promote change within the strong tie, often at the expense of the relationship to their strong tie.

Multiple participants expressed moderate to severe relational outcomes due to engaging in disagreements with a strong tie. Three participants acknowledged that engaging in debate was a central part of their connection, and these participants were less likely to express relationship issues because of engaging in disagreements. Although the strength of the relationship with the sender varied across participants, those who experienced projected personalization were less considerate of relationship maintenance when deciding to engage. Another factor influencing participants' decision to disagree was how often they were subject to the information they disagreed with. Social media like Facebook allow us to see information otherwise inaccessible offline (Leonardi & Treem, 2012). Visibility to information was a notable affordance of accessibility that worked against users, subjecting them to material they disagreed with. This, along with other theoretical implications, will be discussed next.

## Theoretical Implications

### Social Penetration Theory

This study contributes to better understanding how typically interpersonal disclosures on masspersonal channels can complicate relationships. Self-disclosure is a vital part of the

relationship development and maintenance process, both face-to-face (Altman & Taylor, 1973) and online (Craig & Wright, 2012). Social Penetration Theory (SPT) is an interpersonal theory that defines relationship development as a process of increasing breadth and depth of self-disclosure. The more individuals self-disclose, the greater opportunity people have to develop closeness in a relationship (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Previous research has applied SPT in mediated contexts, citing its utility in assessing relational maintenance and closeness (Mason & Carr, 2021). Although exposure to a higher volume of communication has been correlated with stronger tie connections (Pennington, 2020), participants in this study expressed dissenting testimony. This speaks to the need to assess information-specific disclosures. Because disclosures on social media are complicated by accessibility, people may not think about their audience and the implication of over-sharing to particular ties.

Altman and Taylor (1973) also identified that disclosures made too quickly in the relationship development process can stunt relationship growth or even terminate a relationship. Participants indicated that increased self-disclosure from strong ties, specifically concerning exposure to political incongruence, resulted in relationship maintenance issues or dissolution. This is consistent with previous research on social media and relational maintenance; Fox and Moreland (2015) found that the persistence of access to information was, for most participants, too contentious, resulting in relationship changes or even dissolution. Thus, participants in this study may have experienced context collapse or a discrepancy in who their strong ties are writing messages for and who receives them (Vitak, 2012). This complicated the relationship development process by quickening the penetration of relationship layers too quickly, leading to significant relationship repercussions (Pennington, 2020) among participants in this study. Although relational dissolution was not the focus of this study, participant accounts demonstrate

how engaging in online disagreements with strong ties can lead to significant and long-lasting relationship damage.

**Masspersonal Communication Model**

Facebook has been described as a glass house in which anyone can participate socially and see interactions unfold (Papacharissi, 2009); one of the well-known affordances of social media is the concurrent facilitation of highly personalized and accessible messages (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). In this study, these perceptions of personalization and accessibility highly influence participants' decision to engage in Facebook disagreements with strong ties. As perceptions of personalization and accessibility increased, so did the desire to disagree. Additionally, when participants encountered misinformation that was projected as personal and seen as highly accessible, especially when it potentially affected marginalized groups, a sense of tribalism propelled motivation to disagree: a deeply felt need to correct the misinformation and support these groups.

This study expands upon MPCM's accessibility and personalization dimensions by offering a nuanced perspective on how these dimensions can influence highly personal interactions, such as disagreements with strong ties. This study presents *projected personalization* as an alternate means of assessing disagreements on masspersonal platforms, especially when political incongruence, opinion difference, or misinformation is present. Adding to the continuum of personalization in the MPCM expands upon current understandings of personalization and how it can be inferred by suggesting that personalization can occur in other-centric disclosures. Adding to the study of communication technology, this research adds to the conversation on user behavior to inform the design of relationship-conscious platforms beyond social media disagreements.

## Practical Implications

Results from this study are significant for researchers, developers, and individuals navigating the complex landscape of online disagreements. One of the primary contributions of this study is *projected personalization*, which contributes to the understanding of why people disagree on online platforms. Unlike popular opinion, people do not just disagree for the sake of disagreeing; deeply held political and social values guide a rationalized process to engage in a disagreement. By understanding this, users and researchers can become more adept at understanding why disagreements occur and whether engaging publicly or privately is appropriate. Social media researchers can better assess strategies for disagreement management that dually protect relationships and promote constructive dialogue on masspersonal platforms to "reform social media so that it becomes less socially corrosive" (Haidt, 2023). By recognizing the potential for significant relationship outcomes, developers can use this information to design more relationship-conscious technologies and promote positive engagement.

For users, insights from this study underscore the importance of utilizing masspersonal platforms more intentionally. By recognizing the "counter-punch" nature of many online disagreements, users can develop strategies to engage more deliberately in disagreements. Results from this study indicate the value of using private rather public channels, as messaging apps or other one-on-one forms of communication could be a more productive space for engaging in disagreement. Users should consider how the publicness of disagreements may exacerbate conflict, especially as disagreements become more personalized and accessible to others. Although correcting misinformation is important, how and where users attempt to do so has the potential to limit harmful interactions. As social media users collectively carve a path

forward to promoting a positive online environment, it is imperative that we utilize this technology to encourage empathy and perspective-taking – not just to correct information.

This study also underscores the importance of developing media literacy. Nearly 72% of Americans say media literacy skills are essential in the face of mis- and disinformation (Boston University, n.d.). With disinformation campaigns primarily targeting underrepresented communities, media literacy holds promise in promoting informed decisions in contentious political and social times (Amazeen et al., 2024). The ability of people to assess information, identify reliable sources, and make informed decisions is critical to a healthy democracy (Odongo, 2023). In educating users on the impact of what, where, and why of the information they share on social media, we can foster online environments that encourage critical thinking, empathy, and inclusivity.

Lastly, this study offers practical implications for promoting democratic interactions and relationship connectedness on social media. Haidt (2022) discussed three forces that shape a thriving democracy: "social capital (extensive social networks with high levels of trust), strong intuitions, and shared stories." Social media has weakened all these forces over time, especially in the contentious political periods following 2009. Rather than promoting relational connections, users have become more accustomed to performing. The changing landscape and difficulty in promoting connections on social media have moved us away from maintaining ties to engaging in more personal broadcasting (Haidt, 2022). Thus, media literacy and the concern for democracy extend into mis- and disinformation and the need to re-assess the implications that these interactions have on our relationships and, in turn, our democracy. A degrading social network lacking trust, shared stories, and the elements of communication that connect us necessitates changes in how we engage with social media and for what reasons.

## Limitations and Future Research

While expanding on our conceptualization of social media disagreements, there are limitations to this study that merit consideration. First, this study utilized self-reporting to understand both experiences with disagreements and perceptions of messages in disagreements. A reliance on self-reporting risks potential bias, and reliance on the testimony of only one perspective of the disagreement means that certain nuances and complexities may not be fully captured in the data. Further, self-selection bias could lead to a sample that is not fully representative of the general population. Given that people self-selected to participate in this study, experiences that were especially difficult or resulted in worse-than-average outcomes may be overrepresented. Since many factors influence social media disagreements, future research should consider capturing perspectives from both sides, incorporating direct observation or analysis of social media activity.

Second, the sample of this study was primarily left-leaning in their political ideologies, potentially influencing the typology of different motivations to engage in online disagreement and limiting the generalizability of the model. The strong desire to *correct and protect*, for example, is representative of left-leaning, tribalistic behaviors (Clark et al., 2019). It is possible that those with left-leaning political orientations may differ in terms of their motivation to engage in disagreement when compared to those with right-leaning political ideologies. Future research could test the generalizability of the model across the spectrum of political ideologies.

Next, this sample is primarily represented by individuals who represent the *projected-imagined* motivational type. Thus, results may only capture part of the spectrum of motivations and dynamics with other motivational types. Further, the majority of participants described experiences with public disagreements. Although the study was amended midway to include

private disagreements, these disagreements were represented less in the sample compared to public. Participants who discussed moving to private spaces valued face-saving – preserving the strong tie so as not to embarrass or make them feel "called out" in front of others. Thus, the distinction between public and private interactions is not fully explored in this study and should warrant consideration in the results. These limitations should empower future researchers to expand upon the diverse experiences of online disagreements and the multifaceted nature of these interactions – How do private and personal disagreements compare to public and personal? What empowers some individuals to move disagreements from public to private?

Cultural and channel imitations are also present in this sample. All participants were recruited from the Midwest, and cultural variances in expectations of disagreements could significantly shape how online disagreements are perceived, handled, and resolved. Thus, intercultural considerations could benefit future research: How do collectivistic cultures compare in their approach to online disagreements with strong ties versus individualistic cultures? How might specific relationship considerations differ between the Midwest and other parts of the country or world?

This study was also limited to studying only disagreements on Facebook. Although MPCM is a trans-channel theory – one that is concerned with communication activities rather than channel-specific affordance (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018), there could be channel differences concerning how and why people choose to engage in disagreements. The transferability of these findings must be further explored, especially concerning different social media platforms like X, Instagram, TikTok, and more. Thus, future research should consider whether disagreement-related topics, decisions, or motivations change between channels and whether channel-specific factors impact decisions to disagree.

Lastly, participants expressed variation in perceptions of their relationship to their strong tie, thus questioning what constitutes a strong tie. While some participants offered great details about the strength of their relationship, others regarded it as a strong tie out of obligation to family with seemingly less connection than others. The subjective nature of ties varied, potentially affecting the comparability of the results; the depth of the personal bond to the strong tie was challenging to assess subjectively. Addressing this limitation would require future researchers to establish more precise criteria for what constitutes a strong tie online. Nonetheless, the insights derived from this qualitative exploration should empower interpersonal, mass, and masspersonal researchers to delve deeper into how perceptions and relational considerations influence how individuals engage in disagreements.

## Conclusion

This study explored experiences of disagreements on Facebook with strong ties through a theoretical lens of the Masspersonal Communication Model. This study presented *the personalization-accessibility model of online disagreements* to identify motivational types influencing participants' decision to engage. Findings revealed that the interplay of accessibility and personalization perceptions influenced decisions to engage in disagreements, especially for the need to correct misinformation and protect marginalized groups from harmful rhetoric. While their relationship with the sender played a role in the decision to disagree, participants were more concerned about advocating and informing than preserving their relationship with their strong tie, resulting in relationship impacts that ranged from moderate to severe. The implications of this study stress the importance of developing and promoting the use of relationship-conscious social media, as well as identifying the risks that social media disagreements pose to our personal relationships and democracy.

## REFERENCES


Abel, S., Machin, T., & Brownlow, C. (2021). Social media, rituals, and long-distance family relationship maintenance: A mixed-methods systematic review. *New Media & Society, 23*(3), 632–654. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820958717

Altman, I., & Taylor, D. A. (1973). *Social penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Amazeen, M. A., Vasquez, R. A., Krishna, A., Ji, Y. G., Su, C. C., & Cummings, J. J. (2024). Missing voices: examining how misinformation-susceptible individuals from underrepresented communities engage, perceive, and combat science misinformation. *Science Communication*, 3-35. https://doi.org/10.1177/10755470231217536

Anderson, M., & Auxier, B. (2020, August 19). *55% of U.S. social media users say they are "worn out" by political posts and discussions*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/08/19/55-of-u-s-social-media-users-say-they-are-worn-out-by-political-posts-and-discussions/

Barnidge, M. (2017). Exposure to political disagreement in social media versus face-to-face and anonymous online settings. *Political Communication*, *34*(2), 302-321. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2016.1235639

Baym, N. K. (2015). *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*. John Wiley & Sons.

Baym, N. K., & boyd, D. (2012). Socially mediated publicness: An introduction. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *56*(3), 320-329. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.705200

Baym, N. K., Zhang, Y. B., Kunkel, A., Ledbetter, A., & Lin, M. C. (2007). Relational quality and media use in interpersonal relationships. *New Media & Society*, *9*(5), 735-752. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444807080339

Bazarova, N. N. (2012). Public intimacy: Disclosure interpretation and social judgments on Facebook. *Journal of Communication*, *62*(5), 815-832. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01664.x

Cheng, J., Bernstein, M., Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, C., & Leskovec, J. (2017, February). Anyone can become a troll: Causes of trolling behavior in online discussions. In *Proceedings Of The 2017 ACM Conference On Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing* (pp. 1217-1230). https://doi.org/10.1145/2998181.2998213

Cionea, I. A., Piercy, C. W., & Carpenter, C. J. (2017). A profile of arguing behaviors on Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *76*, 438-449. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.08.009

Clark, C. J., Liu, B. S., Winegard, B. M., & Ditto, P. H. (2019). Tribalism Is Human Nature. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 28*(6), 587–592. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721419862289

Craig, E., & Wright, K. B. (2012). Computer-mediated relational development and maintenance on Facebook®. *Communication Research Reports*, *29*(2), 119–129. https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2012.667777

Davis, J. L., & Jurgenson, N. (2014). Context collapse: Theorizing context collusions and collisions. *Information, Communication & Society*, *17*(4), 476-485. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2014.888458

Edwards, A., & Harris, C. J. (2016). To tweet or 'subtweet'?: Impacts of social networking post directness and valence on interpersonal impressions. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *63*, 304–310. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.05.050

Fox, J., & Moreland, J. J. (2015). The dark side of social networking sites: An exploration of the relational and psychological stressors associated with Facebook use and affordances. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *45*, 168-176. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.11.083

French, M., & Bazarova, N. N. (2017). Is anybody out there?: Understanding masspersonal communication through expectations for response across social media platforms. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *22*(6), 303-319. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12197

Haidt, J. (2022, September 12). *Yes, social media really is undermining democracy*. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/social-media-harm-facebook-meta-response/670975/

Haidt, J. (2023, October 30). *Why the past 10 years of American life have been uniquely stupid*. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/05/social-media-democracy-trust-babel/629369/

Hall, J. A. (2020). *Relating Through Technology: Everyday Social Interaction.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108629935

Huckfeldt, R. R., & Sprague, J. (1995). *Citizens, politics and social communication: Information and influence in an election campaign.* Cambridge University Press.

Kearney, M. W. (2017). Interpersonal goals and political uses Facebook. *Communication Research Reports*, *34*(2), 106-114. https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2016.1250069

Knapp, M. L., & Daly, J. A. (Eds.). (2011). *The SAGE Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*. Sage Publications.

Lawson, M. A., Anand, S., & Kakkar, H. (2023). Tribalism and tribulations: The social costs of not sharing fake news. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *152*(3), 611-631. https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001374

Leonardi, P. M., & Treem, J. W. (2012). Knowledge management technology as a stage for strategic self-presentation: Implications for knowledge sharing in organizations. *Information and Organization*, *22*(1), 37-59. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2129876

Litt, E. (2012). Knock, knock. Who's there? The imagined audience. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *56*(3), 330-345. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.705195

Luker, K. (2008). *Salsa dancing into the social sciences: Research in an age of info glut* (1st ed.). University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674040380

Marwick, A. E., & boyd, D. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, *13*(1), 114-133. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313

Mascheroni, G., & Murru, M. F. (2017). "I can share politics but I don't discuss it": Everyday practices of political talk on Facebook. *Social Media + Society*, *3*(4), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117747849

Mason, A. J., & Carr, C. T. (2022). Toward a theoretical framework of relational maintenance in computer-mediated communication. *Communication Theory*, *32*(2), 243-264. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaa035

McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. London: Sage Publications.

*Media literacy skills important to counter disinformation, survey says*. College of Communication. (2024, January 30). https://www.bu.edu/com/articles/media-literacy-skills-important-to-counter-disinformation-survey-says/

Morey, A. C., Eveland Jr, W. P., & Hutchens, M. J. (2012). The "who" matters: Types of interpersonal relationships and avoidance of political disagreement. *Political Communication*, *29*(1), 86-103. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2011.641070

Mutz, D. C. (2006). *Hearing the other side: Deliberative versus participatory democracy*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511617201

Odongo, W. (2023, November 11). *The impact of media and information literacy on democracy.* Medium. https://medium.com/@warrenodongo254/the-impact-of-media-and-information-literacy-on-democracy-ea1e983f266e

O'Sullivan, P. B., & Carr, C. T. (2018). Masspersonal communication: A model bridging the mass-interpersonal divide. *New Media & Society, 20*(3), 1161-1180. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816686104

Papacharissi, Z. (2009). The virtual geographies of social networks: a comparative analysis of Facebook, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld. *New Media & Society*, *11*(1-2), 199-220. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444808099577

Pennington, N. (2020). An examination of relational maintenance and dissolution through social networking sites. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *105*, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.106196

Pennington, N., & Winfrey, K. L. (2021). Engaging in political talk on Facebook: Investigating the role of interpersonal goals and cognitive engagement. *Communication Studies, 72*(1), 100-114. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2020.1819844

Pondy, L. R. (1967). Organizational conflict: Concepts and models. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 296-320. https://doi.org/10.2307/2391553

Rahim, M. A. (2003). Managing conflict in organizations. In *Construction Conflict Management and Resolution* (pp. 370-379). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203474396-38

Reis, H. T. & Shaver, P. (1988). Intimacy as an interpersonal process. In S. W. Duck (Ed.), *Handbook of Personal Relationships.* (pp. 267-389). John Wiley & Sons.

Rui, J. R., Cui, X., & Liu, Y. (2020). They are watching me: A self-presentational approach to political expression on Facebook. *Mass Communication and Society*, *23*(6), 858-884. https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2020.1740741

Saldaña, J. M. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Schlosser, A. E. (2020). Self-disclosure versus self-presentation on social media. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *31*, 1-6. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2019.06.025

Thomas, K. W. (1988). The conflict-handling modes: Toward more precise theory. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *1*(3), 430-436. https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318988001003009

Tidwell, L. C., & Walther, J. B. (2002). Computer-mediated communication effects on disclosure, impressions, and interpersonal evaluations: Getting to know one another a bit at a time. *Human Communication Research*, *28*(3), 317-348. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2002.tb00811.x

Venter, E. (2019). Challenges for meaningful interpersonal communication in a digital era. *HTS: Theological Studies*, *75*(1), 1-6. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5339

Vitak, J. (2012). The impact of context collapse and privacy on social network site disclosures. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *56*(4), 451–470. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.732140

Vraga, E. K., & Bode, L. (2017). Using expert sources to correct health misinformation in social media. *Science Communication, 39*(5), 621-645. https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547017731776

Vraga, E. K., Thorson, K., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., & Gee, E. (2015). How individual sensitivities to disagreement shape youth political expression on Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *45*, 281-289. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.12.025

Walther, J. B. (2017). The merger of mass and interpersonal communication via new media: Integrating metaconstructs. *Human Communication Research*, *43*(4), 559-572. https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12122

Walther, J. B., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2017). Merging mass and interpersonal communication via interactive communication technology: A symposium. *Human Communication Research*, *43*(4), 415-423. https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12120

Wang, Y., McKee, M., Torbica, A., & Stuckler, D. (2019). Systematic literature review on the spread of health-related misinformation on social media. *Social Science & Medicine, 240*, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112552

Wu, T. Y., Xu, X., & Atkin, D. (2020). The alternatives to being silent: Exploring opinion expression avoidance strategies for discussing politics on Facebook. *Internet Research, 30*(6), 1709-1729. https://doi.org/10.1108/intr-06-2018-0284

## APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### General Facebook Engagement Questions

1. Why do you choose to use Facebook as a social platform?
2. What does your Facebook network look like?

### Nature of Disagreement Questions

1. Prefacing the disagreement, tell me about your relationship to this person?
    a. Did you know this about the original poster before they posted it?
    b. How did you come to understand this about the poster?
2. Can you describe a disagreement you had with a strong tie (will define in protocol) on Facebook?
    a. What was the topic of the disagreement?
        i. Was the topic of the disagreement targeted to you? (Teasing out whether the post was perceived as intentional to them or to another audience.)
    b. Where did the disagreement take place?
    c. How did the disagreement start?
    d. How did the disagreement evolve?
        i. What did the sequence of posts/comments/responses look like?
3. How did you make the choice to engage in this disagreement (personalization)?
    a. Did you understand the breadth and depth of this information outside of social media?
    b. Did exposure to this information cause issues in your relationship to this person or how you perceived them? Why?

    c. What do you think about social media's ability to expose us to information we would other maybe not have seen?

4. How did the public nature of this disagreement have an impact on this interaction (accessibility)?

**Resolution and Aftermath**

1. How did the disagreement with your strong tie resolve, if at all?
    a. What are the long-term repercussions of this disagreement, if any?
2. Do online disagreements impact your offline relationship with that person? Can you provide examples?

**Decision Making Questions**

1. What motivated you to engage in this disagreement on Facebook?
2. What specific reasons or triggers prompted you to respond or continue the disagreement?
3. How do you think your relationship to this person influenced the way you engaged in the disagreement?

**Looking Forward**

1. Given your experience, how do you approach disagreements on Facebook now, especially with close ties?
2. What advice would you give to others when engaging in disagreements on Facebook with those they're close to?
3. Are there any other questions you have or things that you would like to add?