

# CIFellows 2020-2021

Computing Innovation Fellows

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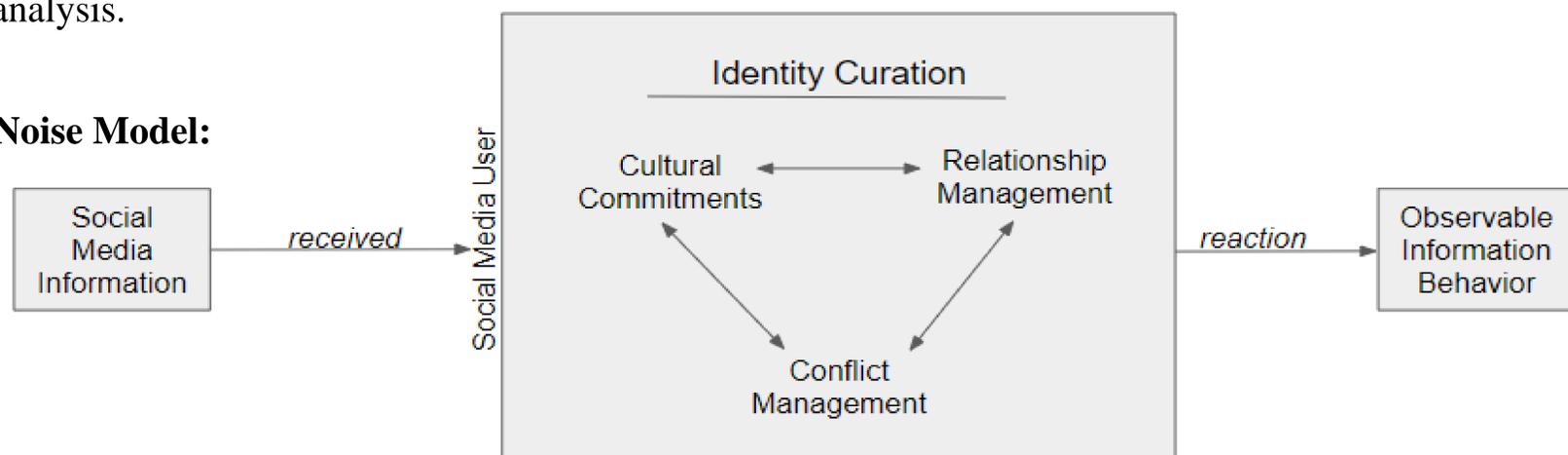
## SOCIAL NOISE: THE INFLUENCE OF OBSERVERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA INFORMATION BEHAVIOR

**Purpose:** This research introduces the concept of social noise, the impact of audiences on social media behavior.

**Methods:** I performed qualitative research informed by ethnographic methods. After introducing participants to the study and obtaining their consent, I observed them as they reacted to informational posts found on their Facebook feed. I followed up with a semi-structured interview, asking about their motivations for the observed behavior. I analyzed data from the observation notes, recordings, and transcripts of the interviews using thematic analysis.

**Implications:** This work introduces a potential new model for the Information Science field, extending Shannon's Mathematical Theory of Communication to include social media. As individual users become more aware of these influences, they may be less likely to believe mis- or disinformation and pass it along to others. Researchers, businesses, and other organizations need to recognize that observable information behavior on social media platforms is not necessarily an accurate representation of a person's true beliefs or intentions.

### Social Noise Model:



**Results:** Social noise includes four constructs:

- Identity curation
- Relationship management
- Cultural commitments
- Conflict management

Identity curation serves as a mediating influence over the other three constructs, which were mutually shaping. Being aware of observation by others directly impacts social media users' information behavior. Individuals make assumptions about information based on who posted it or ignore information as a way of avoiding conflict. Awareness of observation by others can also spur more interaction with posts, as users support posts by valued friends, even if they might be ambivalent about the information being shared in these posts.

**Limitations:** Participants resided in a specific geographic location in the U.S. which limits the generalizability of the findings. Individual demographic information for participants was not assessed. Social noise may appear differently in relation to politics or controversial topics.

**Conclusion:** Observation of individual information behavior by other members of the social network is the most unique feature of social media information behavior, and the influence of this observation is not reflected in current information behavior models. A person's desire to project a positive image on social media, build and maintain relationships, manage conflict with others, and speak out on issues they hold dear all contribute to how that user chooses to engage with information on these platforms.

