COLETTE DONG thought she had bulletproofed her prom dress. Hours after buying the white BCBG gown, she uploaded a photo of it to Don’t Steal My Prom Dress 2010, a Facebook group for girls attending the Yorktown High School prom in Westchester on June 24.

Colette Dong, at home, poses in her BCBG prom gown. Another girl at her school bought the same dress even though Ms. Dong posted the dress on Don’t Steal My Prom Dress 2010, a Facebook group.

“The group is basically for seniors to put their dresses up and underclassmen to look, so they know what dresses not to get,” said Ms. Dong, who is 18.

But a month later, a junior from her school e-mailed to say she had bought the same dress — and didn’t intend to return it.

“I messaged back and said, ‘Why did it take you so long to tell me?’ ” recalled an incredulous Ms. Dong.

There’s a reason so many movies have been made about prom night. The hysteria, hurt feelings, cattiness and treachery are legendary — and that’s just in the weeks before the event itself. It’s precisely this drama that Don’t Steal My Dress groups on Facebook were meant to prevent.

Though no two groups are exactly alike, the rules tend to work the same way: The first girl to post a dress gets to wear it, and girls coming from other schools or younger grades are expected to defer to seniors. And no “Mean Girls” antics here: negative or unsupportive comments are generally frowned upon (at least online); enthusiastic comments (“I loveee it!”) and repeated clicks of the “like” button are encouraged.

The groups have become commonplace in recent years, specifically to avert the sort of crisis that has befallen Ms. Dong. In the age of “Who Wore It Better?” in Us magazine, there are few fashion faux pas more mortifying for a high school girl than showing up at the prom wearing the same dress as someone else (and maybe not wearing it as well).

“You’re paying how many hundreds of dollars to look nice?” said Lauren Wagner, 18, a classmate of Ms. Dong who created her school’s Don’t Steal My Dress group. “You want to look original and pretty — and you don’t want to be standing next to someone in a picture wearing the same dress.”
To girls who came of age with Facebook and “haul videos,” the groups are an intuitive extension of the social networking experience. They help relieve some of the anxiety of a night when judgments run high, while giving them a chance to “ooh” and “aah” collectively over pretty clothes.

To cultural observers, the groups are a sign of the increasing red carpetization of the prom, a tradition that didn’t always revolve around fashion.

“Brands and labels have become more important in mainstream pop culture, with ‘Project Runway’ and all these different fashion shows and the Style Channel,” said Lauren Sherman, editor of Fashionista.com. “And there’s just so much more available. Girls this season have the chance to get a Zac Posen dress at Target. If I could have gotten a Zac Posen dress at Target, I would have.”

Ms. Sherman recalled wearing a Laundry dress bought from a discount store to her prom. “At my school it wasn’t a big deal,” she said. “If two girls wore the same dress it was like, ‘Oh, let’s take a picture together.’”

The shift is not lost on the students themselves. Christine Shaffer, a senior at Glenelg High School in Glenelg, Md., started a Don’t Steal My Dress group for her school and still marvels at the expense some classmates go to.

“I know a girl who spent $700 on her dress,” said Ms. Shaffer, who is wearing a Tony Bowls floral-print gown to her prom on Saturday. “It’s really crazy. People get their hair and nails done, and prom tickets are $50 to begin with. But wearing the same dress is definitely the biggest issue.”

It is hard to know how many Don’t Steal My Dress groups exist, as most are marked private to keep out dates and other lurkers. But evidence suggests they have been around for at least a few years. Several students who created groups for this year’s proms say they got the idea from last year’s class, and a search of Facebook finds a handful of Don’t Steal My Dress sites dating back to the social networking stone age: 2007. (Facebook first opened its membership to anyone over 13 in 2006.)

The concept shows signs of evolving as well: There are now similar groups for graduations and homecomings.

For the record, Ms. Wagner of Yorktown High School plans to wear a green Bari Jay dress with gold trim. She has no reason to believe anyone else will do the same.

But Ms. Dong, it seems, will not have that luxury. That other girl with the white BCBG gown? “She said when she bought her dress she stopped looking at the group, and said she already got the dress altered and couldn’t return it,” Ms. Dong said.

She added, “My friends are flipping out like, ‘Oh my God, you have to be so mean to her, she can’t do that.’”

Ms. Dong herself was willing to forgive — up to a point. “She asked if she could come on the same bus as us,” Ms. Dong said. “The girl in charge of the bus was like, ‘No, you can’t be on our bus. Are you crazy?’”