

What factors affect the way youth present themselves on social media? Self-presentation strategies' approach

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Abstract: Creating an impressive online persona has become a crucial aspect of people's digital lives, especially in the realm of social media. The digital landscape has reshaped the way young individuals navigate self-expression and identity formation, with social media platforms serving as the canvas for their self-presentation. In the realm of youth culture, crafting an online persona has become an integral part of shaping relationships, building communities, and establishing personal brands. From curated Instagram feeds to witty Twitter banter, the ways in which young people present themselves on social media offer insights into their values, aspirations, and sense of self. This article explores the literature of the complex world of self-presentation on social media among youth, exploring its relationship with other factors such as digital environment dynamics and demographic characteristics.

Keywords: self-presentation, self-presentation strategies, social media, youth

Introduction

Creating an impressive online persona has become a crucial aspect of people's digital lives, especially in the realm of social media. The digital landscape has reshaped the way young individuals navigate self-expression and identity formation, with social media platforms serving as the canvas for their self-presentation. In the realm of youth culture, crafting an online persona has become an integral part of shaping relationships, building communities, and establishing personal brands. From curated Instagram feeds to witty Twitter banter, the ways in which young people present themselves on social media offer insights into their values, aspirations, and sense of self.

The concept of self-presentation has been used to evoke images of social competitiveness and deception, with people exaggeratedly

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seeking social position and acceptance while hiding their actual identities (Statista Research Department, 2022). Various studies on self-representation have endorsed this limit view (Schlenker & Wowra, 2003, p. 871); however, over the last quarter century, research has supported the idea that self-presentation is a pervasive factor of social activity and could be regarded as the goal-directed activity of controlling information to influence the other impressions formed by an audience about oneself. This idea does not insist that people should be consciously aware of the goal used to build this representation. Hence, the activity does not have to be deceptive (Schlenker & Wowra 2003, 871).

The users of digital environments create multiple identities through digital appropriation and manipulation of text, images, icons, and hyperlinks (Nguyen & Alexander, 1996). These “digital selves” are related to one another or to the identities of real life (Ahmed 2022; Gauntlett 2000; Turkle 1996; Wynn and Katz 1997). The communication technologies help them to convey their image in idealistic ways through moderating and optimizing their digital content carefully by selecting or editing it before its exposure. In addition, social media platforms offer a number of features for ideal self-presentation, such as providing interactive contact with the masses (Ahmed 2022), which guarantees giving them immediate impressions of their virtual appearance, and thus enables them to modify this appearance in a positive manner (Hjetland et al. 2022).

Self-presentation could be identified as “an individual's process in managing others’ impressions in everyday life and their abilities in changing people’s views according to how they want to be seen, perceived, and evaluated by others” (Terry, Sweeny & Shepperd 2007). In addition, self-representation is a combination of processes or activities in which people represent themselves, and this representing of self can be divided into three subgroups: (1) depicting oneself to oneself, (2) depicting oneself to others, and (3) evaluating oneself according to one’s own standards (Thagard & Wood 2015, 2-3). However, the model of self-representation we will be focusing on in this study is the second one: depicting oneself to others.

This article explores the literature of the complex world of self-presentation on social media among youth, exploring its relationship with other factors such as digital environment dynamics and demographic characteristics.

Self-presentation

Goffman's Dramaturgy Theory (1959) posits that individuals are primarily driven by the goal of projecting an idealized self-image that conforms to societal norms and expectations during self-presentation endeavors. Central to this premise is the strategic control of information disclosure to craft a desired impression on the audience (Balelah 2020; Leary and Kowalski 1990). Within the framework of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model, the fundamental objective of self-presentation lies in portraying an idealized persona to elicit a favorable impression from the observers. Furthermore, Leary (1996) defines self-presentation as the deliberate or subconscious process through which individuals communicate specific character traits or identities to shape perceptions during social interactions. This process of self-presentation assumes significance in the management of personal impressions when individuals strive to attain specific objectives and foster relationships (Mishra & Basu 2014) as outlined by Leary (1996).

Dominick (1999) characterizes self-presentation as the conscious effort individuals exert to regulate the impressions formed about them by others. Goffman's (1959) metaphorical dramatization of social interactions portrays individuals as "performers" who convey tailored impressions to their "audience" by accentuating select personal attributes while obscuring others (Stanger et al. 2017). The objective of the performer is to present an image consistent with their intended objectives to the audience (Goffman 1959). Notably, the theories of self-presentation and Goffman's dramaturgical approach were originally conceived within traditional face-to-face communication contexts before the advent of widespread online interaction.

However, these theories have since been adapted and extended to encompass online communication environments and various interactional scenarios (Dominick 1999; Papacharissi 2002; Kane 2008).

Self-presentation in online environments

In the realm of social media platforms, feedback manifests through various forms, including likes, comments, and indicators of endorsement or dissent, such as content sharing ("retweets") or declines in follower counts. To prompt more favourable reactions, individuals often resort to strategic self-presentation techniques (Ahmed 2022), such as modifying or removing content that fails to

garner the desired level of approval (Nesi 2018). This action, driven by the pursuit of affirmative feedback, is commonly referred to as feedback-seeking or status-seeking on social media and has been linked to adverse outcomes like depressive symptoms (Nesi & Prinstein 2015), diminished self-contentment, and reduced well-being (Jarman et al. 2021).

The inclination towards feedback-seeking behaviour can lead individuals to portray themselves on social media in manners incongruent with their real-life persona or physical attributes (Ahmed 2022). Instances of inauthentic self-presentation online have been correlated with heightened levels of social anxiety and diminished self-esteem (Twomey and O'Reilly 2017). In the pursuit of cultivating an ideal self-image to secure desired rewards, individuals frequently resort to a range of self-presentation strategies, including ingratiation, intimidation, self-promotion, exemplification, and supplication (Jones & Pittman 1982). These strategies were originally formulated for in-person interactions and have been adapted for online self-impression management within the sphere of social media (Papacharissi 2002; Kane 2008).

Self-presentation strategies

As discussed, there are several self-presentation strategies categorizations. Jones and Pittman (1982, 233) delineated strategic self-presentation as behaviours driven by motives to enhance power, aimed at influencing others' perceptions of the actor's inherent traits. Moreover, they identified self-presentation strategies as proactive measures undertaken by individuals to shape a desired image or provoke specific responses from others. These strategies were organized into five common tactics utilized in public contexts to attain specific social objectives: ingratiation, intimidation, self-promotion, exemplification, and supplication (Jones & Pittman 1982).

Initially intended to expound on face-to-face interactions, Jones and Pittman's (1982) strategic concepts have since been adapted and expanded to explicate deliberate self-presentation in online and diverse communication contexts. Subsequently, Dominick (1999) provided a breakdown of the strategies as follows:

- 1) **Ingratiation:** This approach entails pleasing others through humor, familiar gestures, and agreeable actions with the aim of fostering likability. Ingratiation is characterized by positive remarks

about others, self-criticism, humility, and humor (Jones & Pittman 1982, 648).

2) Self-promotion: Individuals employing self-promotion endeavor to portray themselves as competent and skilled, emphasizing their abilities, accomplishments, and qualifications to garner respect. Cultural variations influence the prevalence of self-promotion, with modesty being esteemed more in East Asian cultures than in Western cultures (Hofstede 1980).

3) Intimidation: This strategy is rooted in the desire for power, manifesting through threats, displays of anger, and the projection of potential harm. By adopting intimidation tactics, individuals seek to wield influence by instilling fear rather than cultivating a positive image.

4) Exemplification: Seeking to be perceived as morally superior, this tactic involves adherence to high ethical standards, ideological commitment, self-sacrifice, and disciplined conduct. Exemplification encompasses behaviours illustrating moral virtues and commitments, such as philanthropy, religious beliefs, and adherence to ethical principles.

5) Supplication: Individuals employing supplication project a sense of weakness or helplessness to elicit aid from others, employing requests for assistance and self-deprecation. Unlike other strategies emphasizing self-promotion, supplication centers on highlighting vulnerability to solicit support.

According to numerous studies, ingratiation appears as one of the most used self-presentation strategies by social media users (Chu & Choi 2010; Cheng, Pan & Ni 2019; Huang 2014). While other studies found that “self-promotion” (i.e., competence strategy) was one of the most used strategies (Jung, Youn & McClung 2007; Chu & Choi 2010; Boz & Guan 2017). Other research suggests that supplication and intimidation are the less used strategies (Bolino & Turnley 2001).

The relationship between self-representation and different factors

Cultural identities and audience demographics significantly influence individuals’ adoption of self-presentation strategies, underlining the importance of cultural context in shaping idealized values and behaviours.

Demographic factors

An investigation into self-presentation has unveiled a connection between demographic variables—such as age, gender, family socioeconomic status, and field of study—and the nuances of projecting oneself (Chen 2010; Hargittai 2007; Lewis, Kaufman & Christakis 2008; Michikyan et al. 2014). Consequently, these variables hold significant importance within the scope of this research. Gender norms play a noticeable role in influencing techniques of self-disclosure and expression in online settings, as substantiated by existing literature (Haferkamp et al. 2012; Lee et al. 1999; Manago et al. 2008; Mehdizadeh 2010; Strano 2008).

Noteworthy variations exist in online self-presentation strategies between genders, where males tend towards intimidation while females exhibit greater tendencies towards self-promotion, ingratiation, and supplication (Boz & Guan 2017, 28). Studies emphasize gender disparities in the adoption of self-presentation strategies, as evidenced by the research of Boz and Guan (2017), highlighting males' inclination towards ingratiation, self-promotion, and supplication in contrast to females.

Supplication, as a self-presentation strategy, diverges from others by leveraging expressions of need and vulnerability to garner assistance, contrasting with conventional approaches emphasizing self-enhancement and positive self-representation. Notably, supplication is perceived as a less favoured tactic as it may engender perceptions of powerlessness, weakness, and subservience during self-presentation, thus receiving less scholarly attention compared to other strategies.

Psychological factors

Paulhus et al. (2013) stated that the match between self-presentation tactics and context could lead to positive consequences. From the view of the social norms, people have a responsibility to help those who cannot help themselves; supplication self-presentation could still be worked in the online context (Cheng, Pan & Ni 2019, 8).

However, supplication strategy is unlikely to be more effective than other strategies. Using supplication tactics often have negative consequences such as decreased self-esteem and supplicants more likely to suffer from mental issues, isolation, and sadness (Gove, Hughes, & Geerkin 1980). Supplicants try to persuade other people of their weakness and needs by exaggerating their lack of competence or

extending appreciation to the other assistance that could help them to attain their goals (Jones & Pittman 1982).

Ubaradka, Fathima & Batra (2023) investigated the networking between narcissism, self-esteem and perfectionistic self-presentation among Facebook and Instagram users. Their study was conducted on 578 Indian students who belonged to the age range of 18-24 years. The result showed that perfectionistic self-presentation was predicted by self-esteem, narcissism, and intense usage of Instagram. The result also disclosed the current trend that Instagram is a major online platform where perfectionistic self-presentation is portrayed to recover the destroyed self-esteem.

Social and cultural factors

Taber's (2023) research sought to investigate the dynamics of self-presentation within social media contexts. The study entailed a comparative analysis of individuals' offline personalities juxtaposed with their self-presentations on prevalent platforms such as Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram.

By employing a combination of personality assessments and in-depth interviews, the study established discernible variations between the online and offline self-presentations of individuals. Notably, substantial disparities in self-presentation across distinct social media platforms were observed, potentially attributed to the prevailing social norms and the varying audience compositions on each platform, characterized by a more intimate and restricted audience on platforms like Finsta compared to a larger and more diverse audience on Instagram.

The research conducted by Boz and Guan (2017) delves into the self-presentation strategies exhibited by adolescents in Turkey (N=406), shedding light on how these adolescents employ specific strategies within their cultural context. Through the utilization of the Revised Self-Presentation Scale to categorize adolescents' profiles based on self-presentation strategies, the study revealed that exemplification emerged as the most prevalent strategy, closely followed by ingratiation.

Limited scholarly attention has been given to the correlation between online self-presentation strategies and various attributes. For instance, Cheng, Pan & Ni (2019) examined how self-determination orientations influence the utilization of online self-presentation strategies among social networking site users, analyzing 374 WeChat

users aged 18 to 22 through self-report measures of the General Causality Orientations Scale and the Online Interpersonal Communication Strategies Scale. Results indicated a positive correlation between self-determination orientation and certain self-presentation strategies.

Examining how individuals tailor their self-presentation on social media platforms to close friends versus distant acquaintances based on psychological motivations, Zheng, Duff, Vargas & Yao (2020) uncovered differences in content sharing and interaction patterns. Notably, individuals may engage with content or advertisements differently depending on their perceived audience circle, impacting the nature of shared information based on the audience's proximity.

Furthermore, the exploratory study by Hjetland et al. (2022) delved into the facets of young adults' self-presentation on social media in contrast to their tendencies towards upward social comparison. By assessing potential links between self-presentation, socio-demographic factors, lifestyle choices, and personality traits, the study, which involved a sample of senior high school pupils in Norway (N=2023), classified participants into low, intermediate, and high focus self-presentation groups. Regression analyses revealed associations between these groups and various covariates, indicating correlations such as higher extraversion, lower emotional stability, increased alcohol consumption, and experimentation with tobacco being linked to membership in the high-focus self-presentation group.

Social Media usage

The existing body of literature concerning social media usage underscores the potential impacts of users' engagement patterns on their experiences.

However, a predominant focus of these studies lies within controlled experimental settings wherein researchers observe participants. Within this literature, social media usage behaviours are typically categorized into active and passive modalities. Verduyn et al. (2017, 281) delineate active social media usage as encompassing interactive online actions that facilitate direct user-to-user engagements, such as liking, commenting, messaging, and other forms of direct interaction. In contrast, passive usage is commonly characterized as the act of passive consumption or observation without direct engagement with others (Trifiro and Gerson 2019, 1).

Conclusion

The formation of self-concept and the strategies used to present oneself are deeply intertwined with several factors related to individuals' mental status, demographic aspects, social environment and the way they use social media.

The review of literature indicates that various factors, including psychological status, demographic characteristics, social norms and social media usage, can affect the formation and management of youth's self-presentation strategies on social media. These factors are highly possible to have relationships with the way youth present themselves, and this implies a requirement for more empirical current studies to examine these relationships.

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