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If the Mask Fits: Psychological Correlates with Online Self-Presentation Experimentation in Adults

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Abstract

Online self-presentation refers to the ways in which individuals share aspects of the self to portray a particular image. Being online presents opportunities for individuals to experiment with different versions of the self as part of identity development but also to manage how others perceive them. Research has shown that personality can influence online self-presentation behaviors, but these studies have mainly focused on internal characteristics, and more research is needed exploring the relational facets of personality. This study aims to investigate the extent to which an individual's self-concept clarity, self-monitoring tendency, self-esteem, and social anxiety predict different presentations of the online self. A cross-sectional online survey was conducted with 405 adult participants from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Results show that individuals with higher self-concept clarity and self-monitoring are more likely to present a single consistent online and offline self. Younger adults and those with greater social anxiety are more likely to present idealized self-images online, and participants with higher social anxiety and lower self-esteem are more likely to prefer online, rather than offline, communication. Findings are broadly consistent with the literature, and suggest the need for more systematic investigation into a variety of personality variables that take into account the relational nature of identity formation and impression management. This research emphasizes the multifaceted nature of online self-presentation behaviors, and the ways in which they are differentially influenced by personality variables.

Keywords: impression management, self-presentation, social anxiety, self-concept clarity, self-monitoring

Introduction

Cyberspace offers unique opportunities for individuals to experiment with self-presentation.¹ In many online spaces, individuals can be more deliberate in how they present themselves to others, for example, intentionally posting certain content, editing existing information so that it is “just right” or deleting content that shows them unfavorably.² This notion of malleable and audience-driven self-presentation aligns with Goffman's dramaturgical analogy of impression management, which argues that an awareness of being evaluated by others prompts different types of tailored performances to project desirable self-images. The “actor” will wear the “mask” most appropriate to the communication context they find themselves in.³ Different online audiences and contexts may also require careful curating of the self, so individuals can mould their self-presentation to fit in to any online context they wish.⁴ Thus, the nature of cyberspace not only allows for considerable flexibility in impression management^{5–7} but also provides opportunities to achieve optimal self-presentation through its various affordances, for example, asynchronicity and anonymity.^{8,9}

Despite these opportunities, not all who go online take advantage of them. For the most part, the self that individuals present online deviates little from their offline self.^{6,10–14} For those who do experiment with different forms of self-presentation, personality is said to play an important role.^{5,15,16} Previous studies have found that self-concept clarity, or the degree to which individuals feel their self-concept is “clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable” (Campbell et al.^{17(p141)}), is a significant predictor of online self-presentation experimentation in both adolescents¹¹ and young adults.¹⁸ In adolescents, lower self-concept clarity is associated with a preference for presenting the self online, more idealized online self-presentations, and more diverse self-presentations across multiple online platforms.¹¹ Those with higher self-concept clarity, however, tend to display an online self that is more consistent with their offline self.¹¹ The authors argue that these forms of self-presentation may be an act of self-discovery,¹¹ consistent with observations that adolescents perceive social media and other online spaces as “tools” to experiment with different self-presentations.¹⁹

Although much research into identity formation has focused on adolescence, a period characterized by self-discovery,²⁰ self-presentation concerns do nonetheless extend beyond adolescence and are also important in adulthood.²¹ Evidence suggests that adults are prone to explore and manipulate their online self-presentation,⁶ with lower self-concept clarity again predictive of more diverse self-presentations.¹⁸ However, in adults, higher self-concept clarity did not predict a consistent online and offline self.¹⁸ While it is argued that this may be due to differences in online behaviors of “digital natives,” online self-presentation may also be related to other rational

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facets of personality such as self-monitoring, self-esteem, and social anxiety. Some individuals may use the online world in a compensatory manner to express a side of the self, which they feel less capable of expressing offline.²

Self-monitoring is closely linked to self-presentation^{22–24} and involves regulating one's behavior to present oneself favorably to others.²³ High self-monitors adapt their self-presentation in relation to social and situation cues for the sake of creating and maintaining desired, or perceived to be desired, public appearances.²⁵ Low self-monitors however tend to present more accurate versions of the self, conveying authentic attitudes, values, and beliefs.²³ On social media sites, high self-monitoring predicts risky online behavior (e.g., posting sexually provocative images), arguably because this behavior is deemed the “norm” on such sites. High self-monitors may present themselves as “cool” due to their desire to receive favorable reactions.²⁶ Research also suggests that there are potentially numerous negative personal outcomes for those who self-monitor more abundantly, including being more sensitive to social pressures and making poorer impression formation decisions, which may ultimately impact their own and others' well-being (e.g., see Kudret et al.,²⁷ for a review).

People's fundamental “need for self-esteem” (Schlenker^{28(p88)}) and their desire to maintain or increase a positive view of themselves may also be related to self-presentation. People with low self-esteem tend to have neutral, ambivalent, or conflicting views of themselves.²⁹ They tend to be cautious in their self-presentation, unwilling to risk presenting themselves in ways that may contradict how they think others perceive them.³⁰ Thus, they would avoid making unfavorable impressions rather than trying, and risk failing, to make favorable impressions.¹⁶ For instance, when individuals are faced with a situation that poses an interpersonal risk (e.g., embarrassment or rejection), low self-esteem individuals prefer to communicate through email than face to face due to the greater level of control over self-presentation it affords.³¹ In contrast, high self-esteem individuals are less concerned about occasionally making unfavorable impressions, because they feel more accepted by others, and are thus more likely to take self-presentation risks.¹⁶

On social media, people with low self-esteem are more likely to engage in false or inauthentic self-presentation,^{6,32} while higher self-esteem is associated with authentic self-presentation.³² False self-presentation may not necessarily be an act of deception however, but may also reflect exploration of the self, trying out different personas or presenting multiple selves.⁶ Conversely, Krämer and Winter³³ found no effect of self-esteem on self-presentation on social media. Thus, more research is needed to explore the relationship between online self-presentation experimentation and self-esteem.

Closely related to self-esteem and self-presentation is social anxiety. People who are socially anxious tend to be uncertain about making positive impressions on others.¹⁶ Social anxiety has been found to be positively related to self-presentation on Facebook,³⁴ with inauthentic self-presentation consistently associated with high social anxiety.³² People who experience social anxiety frequently demonstrate a preference for online, compared with face-to-face, communication^{35,36} due to the increased control, and opportunities for self-presentation online.^{2,33}

Previous studies have demonstrated that self-concept clarity is an important predictor of online self-presentation experimentation.^{11,18} However, the roles that other related aspects of personality have on online self-presentation experimentation have not been fully considered alongside self-concept clarity, and are important for understanding the ways in which cyberspace is used in identity formation. Therefore, the primary aim of this study was to test whether self-concept clarity, self-monitoring, self-esteem, and social anxiety can predict various types of online self-presentation behaviors in adults. The following predictions were made:

H1: Idealized online self-presentation will be associated with lower self-concept clarity, higher self-monitoring, and higher social anxiety.

H2: More diverse online self-presentations will be associated with lower self-concept clarity and lower self-esteem.

H3: A more consistent presentation of the self between offline and online will be associated with higher self-concept clarity and higher self-esteem.

H4: A preference for presenting the self online will be associated with lower self-concept clarity, higher social anxiety, and lower self-esteem.

Method

Participants

An opportunity sample of four hundred five participants (340 female, 63 male, 2 transgender) were recruited into the study. The study was advertised on the participant pools of each of the host institutions in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as being promoted on social media (e.g., Twitter) by researchers at each institution. Participants ranged from 18 to 72 years old ($M = 23.29$ years, $SD = 8.31$).

Materials

The survey consisted of 73 questions asking participants about their sex, age, tendency for self-monitoring, self-esteem, social anxiety, self-concept clarity, and presentation of online self. *The Self-Concept Clarity Scale*¹⁷ is a 12-item scale that assesses consistency, stability, and confidence of self-beliefs and is rated on a 5-point Likert scale (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). Sample items include the following: “My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another” and “Even if I wanted to, I don’t think I could tell someone what I’m really like.” A mean score is calculated from the 12 items, and higher scores indicate a more consistent and stable self-concept. The scale has high reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.86$).^{17,37}

The 15-item *Interaction Anxiousness Scale*³⁸ measures an individual’s social anxiety, and is reported to have high reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.87$ – 0.89).^{37,38} Items are rated on a 5-point scale (“not at all characteristic of me” to “extremely characteristic of me”). Sample items include the following: “I wish I had more confidence in social situations” and “I often feel nervous even in casual get-togethers.” A mean score is calculated from the 15 items, and higher scores indicate a higher level of social anxiety.

*The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale*³⁹ consists of 10 items that provide an overall evaluation of one’s perceived worth or value, and is rated on a 4-point scale (“strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”). Sample items include the following: “I certainly feel useless at times” and “I wish I could have more respect for myself.” A total score is obtained by summing the 10 items, and higher scores indicate higher level of self-esteem. The scale has high reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.77$).^{37,39}

*The Self-Monitoring Scale*⁴⁰ consists of 13 items, rated on a 6-point Likert scale (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”), that measure an individual’s tendency to modify how they are perceived by others. Sample items include the following: “I am often able to read people’s true emotions correctly through their eyes” and “When I feel that the image I am portraying isn’t working, I can readily change it to something that does.” A mean score is calculated from the 13 items. High self-monitors modify their behavior more in relation to situational cues and have higher scores on this scale. The scale has high reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.75$).^{37,40}

The Presentation of Online Self Scale (POSS)¹¹ contains 21 items rated on a 5-point scale (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) and measures different types of online self-presentation behaviors. The scale includes the following four factors: (1) Ideal Self, which measures the extent to which individuals present an idealized version of the self while online (e.g., “I can show my best qualities online”); (2) Multiple Selves, which measures the extent to which individuals present multiple versions of the self across different online platforms (e.g., “I enjoy acting out different identities online”); (3) Consistent Self, which measures the extent to which individuals present an online self that is consistent with their offline self-presentation (e.g., “I feel my personality online is the real me”); and (4) Online Presentation Preference, which measures the extent to which individuals prefer to present themselves online (e.g., “I prefer being online than offline”). Each of the four factors is calculated taking the mean score for the associated items. The scale has moderate-to-high reliability with Cronbach’s α scores of 0.86 for Ideal Self, 0.85 for Multiple Selves, 0.62 for Consistent Self, and 0.72 for Online Presentation Preference. Reliability scores in this study were also acceptable to good: Ideal Self (0.80), Multiple Selves (0.86), Consistent Self (0.65), and Online Presentation Preference (0.65).^{11,37}

Procedure

Upon recruitment participants were provided with a link to the online study, hosted on Qualtrics. After gaining informed consent and providing demographic information, participants were asked to complete the assessment measures described above. Participants were debriefed with regard to the aims of the study upon completion and provided with contact details for the researchers. The study received ethical clearance from the Department of Psychology’s ethics committee at the University of Wolverhampton, UK.

Results

Correlations

See Table 1 for bivariate correlations (Pearson) between all of the variables of interest in the study. All variables were significantly intercorrelated, except for age with consistent self and ideal self with self-monitoring.

Four 2-stage hierarchical regression analyses were conducted with ideal self, multiple selves, consistent self, and online presentation preference as the separate dependent variables. To control for age, this variable was entered on its own at stage one. Self-concept clarity, self-monitoring, self-esteem, and social anxiety were introduced at stage two.

Table 1. Summary Statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation) and Correlational Statistics for the POSS Factors and Other Variables of Interest

	<i>Mean (SD)</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1) Consistent self	3.52 (0.685)	1.00								
(2) Ideal self	2.82 (0.648)	-0.272**	1.00							
(3) Multiple selves	1.99 (0.805)	-0.373**	0.593**	1.00						
(4) Online preference	2.39 (0.760)	-0.274**	0.493**	0.452**	1.00					
(5) Self-concept clarity	2.87 (0.659)	0.194**	-0.392**	-0.303**	-0.280**	1.00				
(6) Self-monitoring	3.66 (0.455)	0.191**	-0.064	-0.160**	-0.300**	0.123*	1.00			
(7) Self-esteem	28.43 (5.17)	0.174**	-0.318**	-0.286**	-0.346**	0.588**	0.191**	1.00		
(8) Interaction anxiety	3.04 (0.739)	-0.177**	0.365**	0.214**	0.416**	-0.450**	-0.273**	-0.438**	1.00	
(9) Age	23.29 (8.31)	-0.024	-0.239**	-0.101*	-0.146**	0.331**	0.103*	0.193**	-0.280**	1.00

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

POSS, The Presentation of Online Self Scale.

Ideal self

At stage one, age contributed significantly to the regression model ($F(1, 399) = 25.106$, $p < 0.01$) and accounted for 5.9 percent of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = 0.057$) for ideal self. Introducing self-concept clarity, self-monitoring, self-esteem, and social anxiety explained an additional 14.9 percent of the variance ($R^2 = 0.208$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.198$), and this change was significant ($F(5, 395) = 20.743$, $p < 0.01$). When all five independent variables were included at stage 2, age ($b = -0.099$, $t = -2.07$, $p < 0.05$), self-concept clarity ($b = -0.224$, $t = -3.79$, $p < 0.01$), and social anxiety ($b = 0.208$, $t = 3.89$, $p < 0.01$) were significant predictors. Younger adults, those with a less clear self-concept, and those with higher levels of social anxiety were more likely to indicate expressing an idealized version of the self online.

Multiple selves

At stage one, age contributed significantly to the regression model ($F(1, 399) = 4.509$, $p < 0.05$) and accounted for 1.1 percent of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = 0.009$) for multiple selves. Introducing the other variables explained an additional 10.8 percent of the variance ($R^2 = 0.119$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.108$), and this change was significant ($F(5, 395) = 10.702$, $p < 0.01$). When all five independent variables were included at stage 2, self-concept clarity ($b = -0.204$, $t = -3.28$, $p < 0.01$), self-monitoring ($b = -0.103$, $t = -2.08$, $p < 0.05$), and self-esteem ($b = -0.127$, $t = -2.10$, $p < 0.05$) were significant predictors. Adults with a less clear self-concept, lower self-esteem, and who engaged in less self-monitoring were more likely to indicate experimenting with the presentation of multiple selves while online.

Consistent self

At stage one, the model that included age only was non-significant for consistent self ($F(1, 399) = 0.303$, $p = 0.582$). Introducing the other variables explained an additional 8.6 percent of the variance ($R^2 = 0.087$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.076$), and this change was significant ($F(5, 395) = 7.561$, $p < 0.01$). When all five independent variables were included at stage 2, age ($b = -0.127$, $t = -2.46$, $p < 0.05$), self-concept clarity ($b = 0.160$, $t = 2.52$, $p < 0.05$), and self-monitoring ($b = 0.166$, $t = 3.31$, $p < 0.01$) were significant predictors. Younger adults, those with a clearer self-concept, and those who self-monitored more frequently were more likely to present an online self consistent with offline self-presentation.

Online presentation preference

At stage one, age contributed significantly to the regression model ($F(1, 399) = 9.413$, $p < 0.01$) and accounted for 2.3 percent of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = 0.021$) for online presentation preference. Introducing the other variables explained an additional 21.3 percent of the variance ($R^2 = 0.236$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.226$), and this change was significant ($F(5, 395) = 24.352$, $p < 0.01$). When all five independent variables were included at stage 2, self-monitoring ($b = -0.194$, $t = -4.23$, $p < 0.01$), self-esteem ($b = -0.164$, $t = -2.92$, $p < 0.01$), and social anxiety ($b = 0.267$, $t = 5.08$, $p < 0.01$) were significant predictors. Adults with lower self-esteem, higher social anxiety, and who self-monitor less frequently were more likely to indicate a preference for presenting the self online.

Discussion

Identity formation and impression management happen at the intersection of intrapersonal characteristics and inter-personal contexts. This study was the first to explore the relationship between self-concept clarity, self-monitoring, self-esteem, and social anxiety on different types of online self-presentation behaviors. Broadly consistent with H1, the presentation of more idealized online self-images was associated with being younger, having lower self-concept clarity, and higher levels of social anxiety. Fullwood et al. argues that presenting idealized self-images may be the default self-presentation position when one is unclear on how to present the self to others,¹¹ which could explain why younger individuals with a less clear sense of self are more prone to engage in this behavior. It also makes sense that social anxiety would drive individuals to present a polished online self-image, given the likelihood of having greater concern that others will judge them harshly if they presented their “true” selves,³⁴ which may also imply that these self-presentations are inauthentic, in line with previous findings.³²

Broadly consistent with H2, more diverse self-presentations across multiple platforms were associated with lower self-concept clarity, lower self-esteem, and engaging in less self-monitoring. These findings suggest that adults who possess a less clear sense of who they are may benefit, in the same way as adolescents have been shown to, from taking opportunities to try out different self-presentations online as an act of self-discovery.¹¹ Having lower self-esteem however may also suggest that some of these individuals are catering their self-presentation

styles to different audiences in a bid for approval, perhaps because they are doubtful of being able to make the types of impressions they desire to make.^{3,16} Because low self-monitors are less concerned with what others think about them, their diverse self-presentations, although likely authentic, may represent different aspects of the self which are relevant to specific online environments, which aligns with contemporary perspectives of the self as multidimensional.⁵ Future research may benefit from more clearly unpacking the different self-presentation strategies that people use across different online platforms. It is clear that some online platforms provide affordances to users which others do not. For example, although one might choose to present him/herself anonymously on a discussion forum, that same person's Facebook profile might contain identifying information on them.⁵ As a measure of more general online behavior, the POSS could be modified in future research to test whether a platform's unique affordances interact with different self-presentation styles; that is, the presentation of an idealized self.

Although self-esteem was not found to be significant, consistent online and offline self-presentation was associated with being younger, having higher self-concept clarity, and engaging in more self-monitoring, partially supporting H3. Individuals with a more stable sense of self may convey images that are congruent with their own self-perceptions online and offline, because they are confident about who they are and expect to be accepted by others.^{11,16} That engaging in more self-monitoring was predictive of consistent self-presentation may suggest portraying more idealized self-images across both contexts due to a desire to be liked by others^{25,26}; however, further research is needed here to confirm this assertion. Broadly supporting H4, a preference for presenting the self online was associated with lower self-esteem, higher social anxiety, and engaging in less self-monitoring. A preference for being online has often been associated with individuals lacking in social skills (e.g., lower self-esteem and social anxiety), allowing them to compensate for the limitations that their offline personalities place on them.³¹ Given that low self-monitors present themselves honestly and authentically, for these individuals a preference for being online might reflect a desire to avoid the more acute consequences for upsetting others face to face.

This study explored the influence of self-concept clarity, self-monitoring, self-esteem, and social anxiety on different types of online self-presentation behaviors in adults. Its novel findings offer a more nuanced understanding of how different aspects of personality influence identity formation and self-presentation among adults, and provide further supporting evidence for the necessity to consider the processes involved in online impression management as distinct from offline self-presentation. Moreover, it highlights the need for online impression management research to consider online self-presentation as multifaceted. Given the paucity of scales measuring online self-presentation behavior, further evidence for the construct validity of the POSS (by showing the different ways in which different types of online self-presentation experimentations are affected by various personality variables) is encouraging. The study was however limited in terms of having fewer male participants and older adults, and future studies using the POSS should use more diverse groups. Given the potential for more flexible self-presentation online and the likelihood that specific personality types (e.g., Machiavellianism) may utilize the affordances of cyberspace for more antisocial means,^{41,42} future research may also wish to explore further whether any negative well-being outcomes for the self and others are associated with interacting within a space where people monitor self-presentations very differently.

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