Behind the Screens: A Study Investigating the Influence of Social Media on Self-Presentation, Self-Perceptions, and Perceptions of Others at McMaster University

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Abstract

This study explores the multifaceted impact of social media on students' self-presentation, self-perceptions, and perceptions of others. The study investigates these impacts through a mixed-methods approach using an online survey of McMaster University students. The results show that students often curate their online personas to meet social norms and expectations, leading to discrepancies between their online and offline identities. This curation, driven by a desire for social validation and fear of negative judgment, heightens self-consciousness and alters self-perceptions. Additionally, the study found that exposure to idealized representations of peers exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and competitiveness, impacting students' mental well-being and social interactions. These findings highlight the need for greater awareness and educational initiatives to encourage healthier social media use among students. This research enriches the literature on digital identity formation and underscores the intricate relationship between social media use and psychological well-being.

Introduction

The ubiquitous influence of social media platforms has reinvented how we perceive ourselves and others. Social media allows users to carefully curate their identities online, controlling the image they present to others. With each individual able to create an online persona, users can present a filtered, idealized version of themselves. With popular platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X (formerly known as Twitter), users can interact with others whom they may not know in real life, judging them solely on their social media profile. As a result, the line between the physical and digital worlds can become blurred, leading to potential harm, such as comparison and the need to curate a likeable online identity. This harmful culture of aesthetics has infected the internet and the lives of those who consume social media. Individuals feel the need to show a specific persona and lifestyle online for others to see and crave validation from it. With the hyper-glamorized online world, individuals are comparing their real lives to the filtered lives of those they interact with online. Our research examined the influence of social media on undergraduate students' perceptions of themselves and others and its impact on their

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interactions. Our data collection took place from November 2023 to February 2024 using an anonymous online survey. We surveyed undergraduate students from McMaster University aged 18 and older.

Purpose of Research

Social media use is inevitable in today's society and has fundamentally changed how people interact and present themselves online. Among university students, social media can significantly influence identity formation, friendships, and self-esteem. Therefore, our purpose for conducting this study was to understand the complexities that intertwine social media, society, and psychology, as well as their effects on individuals and relationships. Through our research, we wanted to understand the dynamics of social media, how this affects university students' perception of themselves and their peers, and the authenticity of online personas.

Overview of Paper

Within this paper, we provide a literature review which discusses previous research related to our study and some areas wherein research is lacking. We then identify the fundamental theories used to guide our research, including Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Goffman's Dramaturgy, Brewer's Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, and Swann's Self-Verification Theory. Next, we provide our methodology, which describes how we conducted our research. This includes recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. Here, we also address ethical and methodological concerns and how we ensured proper ethics throughout our research collection. Following our methodology, we present the results of our research with charts, graphs, and figures. We then present our research analysis, discussing the results and linking them to major social psychological theories and previous literature. Lastly, we encapsulate the content of our research findings and offer some final reflections.

Literature Review

In today's revolutionized era, social media has become integral in shaping how we present ourselves and perceive others. With the vast available platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, X, Instagram, etcetera, individuals are exposed to microtrends and aesthetics promoted through these platforms, creating a one-dimensional conforming culture. Our literature review investigated the multifaceted repercussions of social media on self-presentation and the implications of the perceptions we form of others. The easy accessibility and availability of such platforms give individuals ample opportunities to share a developed perception of their own identity, inadvertently feeding into the cycle of conformity. Simultaneously, these platforms provide individuals with a window to observe and compare the lives of other users, reinforcing their negative thoughts and feelings about themselves. Self-presentation and perception of others from the social media angle have been thoroughly examined as subjects of interest. As mentioned earlier, social media platforms are vastly accessible and available, allowing individuals ample opportunities to curate their online identities. Goffman's (1959) work on impression management has set the foundation for understanding how self-presentation and identity formation are influenced on social media platforms.

Identity Formation (the way we present ourselves)

In analyzing the repercussions of social media platforms on individuals, a prevalent recurring theme pertained to the influence on the intricate process of identity development. This process encompassed the nuanced dynamics through which individuals curate their external self-presentation and influence their self-perception concerning this constructed image. The research gathered on this topic looked into the roles self-esteem, clarity of self-concept, self-monitoring and social anxiety play in our identity formation (Fullwood et al., 2020), the "false Facebook-self" (Gil-Or et al., 2018, p.1), along with the role feedback such as likes and comments play in identity formation (Bracket-Bojmel et al., 2015), the role social media platforms play in image management (Lalancette & Reynauld, 2017), the potential implications of when your beliefs and values associated with your identity is threatened (Vraga, 2014), the outcomes tied to self-expression in the context of building rapport, and connections to enhance mutual understanding (Bargh & Fitzmons, 2002), the driving forces behind individuals adopting inauthentic personas on social media platforms (Mun & Kim, 2021), lastly, the factors that shape an individuals' behaviour on pan-entertainment mobile live broadcast platforms (Zhang & Pan, 2023).

The study by Fullwood et al., (2020) explored to what extent an individual's self-esteem, clarity of self-concept, tendency for self-monitoring, and social anxiety predict different ways people present themselves online. This study further emphasized the complex nature of online self-presentation behaviours in correlation to distinct personality variables (Fullwood et al., 2020). A cross-sectional survey was conducted online that involved participants from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The participants ranged from 18-72, with 405 completed surveys (Fullwood et al., 2020). The results indicated that individuals with higher clarity regarding self-concept and self-monitoring were likelier to showcase a singular, consistent self, online and offline.

Furthermore, young adults with more significant social anxiety presented an idealized self-image online. This discovery was relevant to our study, as it implied that individuals characterized by heightened insecurity or limited self-awareness are more inclined to partake in activities such as crafting an idealized online self-image. They do so to manage their perception of themselves, thereby cultivating a more regulated and orchestrated identity. Additionally, participants with higher social anxiety and lower self-esteem preferred online communication over in-person interactions (Fullwood et al., 2020). On the other hand, adults who lacked explicit self-concept withheld lower self-esteem and engaged in minimal self-monitoring demonstrated more interest in presenting multiple versions of themselves online. Some limitations within this study indicated that the sample can only partially be generalized as most of the participants were women. The study needed more inclusivity, as men and older adults were overlooked (Fullwood et al., 2020).

Gil-Or et al., (2018) discussed the phenomenon classified as the "false Facebook self." The research delved into how using Facebook and other social media platforms may encourage individuals to portray themselves falsely, potentially leading to reduced well-being and psychological issues. The study employed an online survey completed by 258 participants, including 183 females, 62 males and 13 individuals whose gender was not identified. The study's findings suggested that, on average, Facebook users tend to believe that their online persona differs from their true selves (Gil-Or et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the research also proposed that Facebook offers positive social rewards to people who experience challenges in social interactions by allowing them to craft a deceptive online identity (Gil-Or et al., 2018). Therefore, it plays an essential role in understanding how social media influences the construction of one's identity, as it shows that people tend to tailor their online image to project a particular self-concept. The social rewards further reinforced the act of creating tailored online identities, perhaps normalizing it. A notable limitation of this study is the potential influence of social desirability bias. The study acknowledged that participants may have been more inclined to present themselves in ways they believed would be acceptable and socially desirable to the researchers, mainly because the data was collected through an online questionnaire (Gil-Or et al., 2018).

This analysis by Lalancette and Reynauld (2017) focused on the effects and implications of image management on social media using Justin Trudeau's, the Prime Minister of Canada, Instagram account. The researchers employed a methodological approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative analyses to scrutinize the content of Trudeau's Instagram feed. Their examination concentrated on diverse aspects, including the portrayal of his leadership style, the integration of his personal life into his posts, and how these elements are strategically leveraged to reinforce the values and principles of the Liberal Party. Their study highlighted how Instagram can be a valuable tool for individuals to present a particular curated image of themselves. For example, Lalancette & Reynauld (2017) found that Trudeau has strategically utilized Instagram to present himself as a youthful and positive politician, further suggesting that the social media platform has helped Trudeau build and maintain his image as a polished and professional politician, enhancing his credibility, likability, and his overall appeal to a broader audience. Social media platforms can redefine public standards for evaluating individuals, especially politicians and their performance (Lalancette & Reynauld, 2017). From this study, it is essential to realize how social media can be a platform for individuals to shape their identities and influence how we perceive ourselves and others. By providing us with an accessible platform to curate our images and public personas intentionally, we are essentially controlling the narrative and perception of others.

Vraga (2014) expanded upon prior research by examining the potential implications on individuals when their foundational political identity is threatened. They adopted a classic dissonance paradigm by getting their participants to write a "counter-attitudinal essay… to a political context by manipulating the topic of the essay to advocat[e] membership in the opposing political party" (Vraga, 2014, p. 487). The study emphasized the role of political conflict and dissonance in shaping political attitudes and behaviours, particularly in the context of party affiliations (Vraga, 2014). The author suggested that party affiliation is a deep-rooted identity; therefore, any inconsistencies in the form of actions or beliefs against the party will result in dissonance and can be problematic for the individual (Vraga, 2014). This is an interesting concept presented as it indicates that due to individuals' deep affiliation with their political parties, they may need to present themselves consistently with their party's beliefs and values on social media. This can influence their self-presentation strategies and potentially lead to a portrayal that aligns directly with their party's ideals. The findings showed that Republicans experienced more dissonance and a more vital need for congruent political information than Democrats. The Democrats showcased different responses, experiencing less dissonance (Vraga, 2014).

A significant drawback of this study was the use of an only-student sample. Vraga (2014) highlighted how students tend to be more "malleable" in their political beliefs, implying that their political attitudes may not be as firmly established (Vraga, 2014). This flexibility in their beliefs might have influenced how individuals responded to the essay-writing task. Consequently, the findings may not universally apply to older and more mature populations.

When primarily focusing on the study's political implications, valuable insights regarding how cognitive dissonance influences perceptions in non-political contexts may be overlooked. Lastly, the study's inherent limitations restricted its ability to conduct a more thorough investigation and draw definitive conclusions.

Bracket-Bojmel et al.'s (2015) study investigated the connections between individuals' motivations for self-presentation, their online activities on Facebook, and the feedback they received, such as likes and comments. The research used users' last three Facebook status updates; their sample consisted of 156 undergraduate students (Bracket-Bojmel et al., 2015). They found that individuals motivated by performance goals tended to adopt enhancement motives and participate in self-promotion (Bracket-Bojmel et al., 2015). Individuals posted online to receive acceptance and promote an idealized version of themselves. They also identified that for optimal audience reactions, individuals were willing to participate in derogation, belittling or criticizing someone online to reduce their self-worth and reputation (Bracket-Bojmel et al., 2015). These findings indicated that individuals use online platforms as an outlet to feed their self-esteem. A three-step model was mentioned within the study, in which the researchers compare motivation and behaviours and how they affect the audience (Bracket-Bojmel et al., 2015). However, a limitation was that the meaning behind the audience's feedback was not clearly described. The article mentions "liking"; however, we could not entirely assess how or what the concept of a "like" means on Facebook (Bracket-Bojmel et al., 2015). For example, is it equivalent to liking something in the real world? Or is it simply a gesture of respect?

Bargh & Fitzsimons (2002) conducted a research study showcasing the importance of consequences associated with self-expression when establishing liking, rapport, and bonds to gain understanding with other people. This study involved three experiments labelled experiment 1, experiment 2, and experiment 3. The initial study conducted a detailed investigation into how an individual's true self-concept becomes more readily accessible and engaged during online interactions with a new acquaintance (Bargh & Fitzsimons, 2002). After a filler task, the participants were paired up with another participant, in which they either interacted through an online platform or face-to-face in a lab room (Bargh & Fitzsimons, 2002). This interaction was either 5 or 15 minutes; the varying time lengths were meant to assess how the quantitative differences in the length of conversation can influence the quality of communication between the internet or face-to-face conditions (Bargh & Fitzsimons, 2002). Experiment 2 was very similar to Experiment 1, except the time participants interacted was not varied, no interaction took place, and lastly, a control group was added of participants who were unaware of any subsequent interaction (Bargh & Fitzsimons, 2002). Finally, in experiment 3, the researchers tested the hypothesis that suggested that individuals would better express their true selves online and be accepted by their interaction partner than participants who had face-to-face interactions (Bargh & Fitzsimons, 2002). Results indicated that

participants were more likely to project their ideal qualities in a partner on those they initially met and liked over the Internet (Bargh & Fitzsimons, 2002).

In addition, results suggested a significant correlation between liking and the extent to which an individual's description of an ideal close friend matches their description of an ideal partner over the internet. However, no correlation was found between such measures for individuals participants met and interacted with face-to-face (Bargh & Fitzsimons, 2002). These findings played a significant role in our research. Individuals may be more inclined to present themselves in an idealized manner when initiating interactions on the Internet, particularly when they initially like the person. This was vital for understanding the dynamics of self-presentation on social media, as it implied that people might be motivated to craft an online persona that aligns with their perceived ideal qualities, especially when there is initial attraction or interest. While there lacks a correlation between liking and the projections of ideal attributes in face-to-face interactions, this implies that social media plays a unique role in self-presentation and perceptions, allowing individuals to put out their ideal qualities that may not be replicated in face-to-face encounters. The distinct dynamics between online and face-to-face interactions further highlighted the platform-specific aspects of these effects.

Mun & Kim (2021) investigated what motivates individuals to rely on lying self-presentation on various social media platforms, such as Instagram, and explored the potential consequences of such actions. Lying culture exists as individuals present themselves in an idealized way to be accepted and validated online. People tend to lie regarding physical features, age, background and interests (Mun & Kim, 2021). The study highlighted the motivators behind lying online, such as the need for approval and impression management. This produced outcomes like depression, perceived popularity and individuals taking part in deleting behaviour on Instagram (Mun & Kim, 2021). This research was conducted through online surveys with 215 participants aged 20 to 39 in Korea. A quota sampling method was utilized to create a sample targeting Instagram users. The results illustrated that individuals who reported higher levels of lying in their self-presentation on social media have a strong need for approval (Mun & Kim, 2021). As a result, this had a positive impact on depression, perceived popularity, and deleting behavior among this group of people (Mun & Kim, 2021). Interestingly, although lying, self-presentation, and depression are correlated, perceived popularity appears to act as a mental defence mechanism against depression, nearly neutralizing its negative effects (Mun & Kim, 2021).

The findings revealed Individuals with a pronounced desire for approval tend to exhibit elevated levels of dishonesty in their self-representation, indicating that social media platforms can incentivize specific individuals to present themselves in a more favourable or socially acceptable manner (Mun & Kim, 2021). This was crucial for understanding the effects of social media on self-presentation, as it highlighted how the need for approval can influence the authenticity of self-representation. Within this study, a limitation was the significance of recognizing functions such as online profiles, posting pictures and comments, liking content, and leaving comments, and how they are employed for deceptive self-presentation on social network services (SNS) (Mun & Kim, 2021). SNS providers have the capability to strategically assign extra technical resources to specific areas where deceptive self-presentation behaviors are prevalent (Mun & Kim, 2021).

Zhang & Pan (2023) examined factors influencing individuals' behaviours on pan-entertainment mobile live broadcasted platforms. It showed how users' discontinuous usage is influenced by cognitive dissonance and self-efficacy (Zhang & Pan, 2023). The methodology of this study consisted of a two-part questionnaire, resulting in 425 samples (Zhang & Pan, 2023). From these responses, 340 valid results of the research indicated that excessive information, overwhelming number of services, and user addiction can lead to adverse and distressing emotions towards social media, ultimately influencing how users intend to utilize it (Zhang & Pan, 2023). Self-efficacy showed moderate cognitive dissonance, as increased confidence and self-assurance allow individuals to challenge their negative feelings (Zhang & Pan, 2023). The study's outcomes highlighted the critical role of excessive information, overwhelming number of services, and user addiction in generating negative emotions toward social media, which, in turn, can shape self-presentation dynamics (Zhang & Pan, 2023). When individuals experience negative feelings due to social media use, they may adapt their online personas to address or mitigate these emotions, influencing their digital identities (Zhang & Pan, 2023). These findings are especially relevant as they indicated that negative emotions can deter users from engaging with social media, potentially leading to adjustments in how they present themselves online. Users may opt for more selective or comfort-mitigating self-presentation strategies in response to these emotions.

A limitation mentioned was that other potential factors not examined in this study could impact discontinuous usage intentions (Zhang & Pan, 2023). Future research can analyze how these factors affect cognitive dissonance and self-efficacy (Zhang & Pan, 2023). The methodology of this study involved using a cross-sectional survey design, relying on a single source of data. This approach is limited in its ability to determine or analyze changes in usage over time (Zhang & Pan, 2023). The study suggested using a longitudinal research design to gain more insight (Zhang & Pan, 2023). Another limitation mentioned was the need for more generalizability, as the participants of this sample solely comprised the Chinese population (Zhang & Pan, 2023).

How we interact with others (online and in-person)

As we progressed in our research, the second most frequently recurring theme we encountered pertains to the examination of how both our personal and others' social media presences influence our interactions, whether in the digital sphere or through face-to-face encounters. The research gathered here explored the interplay between self-presentations of others on social media platforms and the welfare of viewers' (Fan et al., 2019); in contrast, we also delved into how users' presence and engagement on social media can affect their well-being (Jeong et al., 2019) and the determinants that prompt individuals to participate in self-disclosure or self-representation on social media platforms (Schlosser, 2020).

Fan et al., (2019) researched how sharing behaviour online, specifically others' self-presentations, through social media platforms impacts viewers' subjective well-being. Self-disclosure involves self-presentation, where individuals convey their identities through both verbal and non-verbal methods to project a specific image of themselves (Fan et al., 2019). The study mentioned that this act is a "conscious process" intended to control impressions in which individuals establish, alter, or maintain a specific image of themselves in front of others (Fan et al., 2019). The research was conducted in a

laboratory setting using 120 undergraduate students (Fan et al., 2019). Participants were from a university in Shanghai, China and were randomly divided into two groups of 60, comprising 72% females and 28% males (Fan et al., 2019). In the first group of participants, there was a clear relationship between both self-presentation and subjective well-being. Fan et al. (2019) discovered that viewing others' self-presentations on social media can lead to increased feelings of relative deprivation and decreased subjective well-being of the viewer. This is because of the tendency for people to make upward social comparisons. However, the negative impact can be lessened by an individual's general self-efficacy. The study suggests that individuals who engage in self-presentation on social media may experience adverse effects on their well-being. These effects can influence how they perceive others online. Those struggling with feelings of relative deprivation and reduced well-being may project these sentiments onto others, potentially leading to more critical or envious perceptions. Social media platforms commonly cultivate a comparison climate where individuals present their idealized selves. This revelation underscored the likelihood that this comparative context may influence how others are perceived. Suppose individuals sense that their well-being suffers due to self-presentation; they may be more inclined to perceive others as more accomplished, content, or cheerful, contributing to a distorted view of others on social media.

Some limitations within this research included the respondents were solely from China, while the research topic on social media and self-presentation mainly originated in Western research (Fan et al., 2019). Secondly, respondents were young adults who relied on social media for interpersonal communication. Thus, the results are not generalizable to the population. Next, this study heavily investigated one specific app, WeChat, a popular communication app in China, limiting the full scope of how individuals interact on other platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and Pinterest (Fan et al., 2019). The results were acquired through self-reported data, indicating that the results are subject to common variance. As the sample was undergraduate students at a business school, demographic factors, like age and gender, may negatively impact the results. Lastly, researchers conducting this study manipulated others' self-presentation to elicit responses from participants, resulting in a loss of integrity (Fan et al., 2019).

Dutot (2020) explored the correlation between dependency on social media and the impacts on life satisfaction. This article delved into social media's 'dark side,' specifically social media addictions, fear of missing out, and narcissism on self-esteem. This study used quantitative methods through a self-reported survey with 260 participants (Dutot, 2020). The results of this study indicated that fear of missing out acts as a negative inhibitor of self-esteem, resulting in dissatisfaction in one's life (Dutot, 2020). A fear of missing out was seen to have a more substantial impact on women's self-esteem, while men were more likely to be dissatisfied with their lives.

Similarly, social media addiction was concluded to be more of a feminine phenomenon than a masculine phenomenon (Dutot, 2020). Moreover, no link was found between addiction and self-esteem; the more individuals spent time online, the better the life satisfaction for that group was (Dutot, 2020). Narcissism and self-esteem also did not correlate, as individuals seek validation from their group rather than others online (Dutot, 2020). The observation that social media addiction appears to be more prevalent among women than men was a significant finding. It implied that gender-related factors could affect how individuals engage with social media and perceive others. Equally important

was the absence of a link between addiction and self-esteem, suggesting that the time spent online might not necessarily harm self-esteem. A similarly significant finding was the lack of correlation between narcissism and self-esteem. This implied that, on social media, individuals seek validation primarily from their groups rather than relying on external sources for validation. This insight held implications for understanding how individuals perceive and interact with others on social media, where group dynamics and validation assume a pivotal role. A limitation observed in this study included self-reporting bias. Participants may alter their answers when doing the survey to cater their social media usage to the researchers' expectations to avoid feeling judged (Dutot, 2020). In addition, self-esteem was measured as a concrete variable; however, it failed to acknowledge that this trait varies with time and stages in life. Thus, evaluating the impacts on self-esteem needs to be done through a longitudinal study to identify fundamental changes (Dutot, 2020).

Jeong et al., (2019) investigated how social media presence and participation can impact users' well-being. Social media platforms contain opposing views and conflicting perspectives, increasing the likelihood of users experiencing cognitive dissonance (Jeong et al., 2019). The methodology used for this study was a questionnaire with 425 participants, in which users reported having an uncomfortable psychological state due to the increased exposure to heterogeneous opinions (Jeong et al., 2019). Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that individuals engage in strategic acts to relieve discomfort and uneasiness (Jeong et al., 2019). They may choose to share selective information, unfollow people who hold opposing views, skip posts of dissimilar views or limit interactions with certain people (Jeong et al., 2019). A limitation mentioned was that Facebook was the only platform used for this study, therefore questioning its generalizability to other platforms and users (Jeong et al., 2019). For future research, it was recommended that other platforms be studied to understand further how constant exposure to information and dissimilar opinions can affect the psychological states and behaviours of others (Jeong et al., 2019). There should be a focus on additional control variables which can cause cognitive dissonance among social media users, such as political or social views (Jeong et al., 2019). It would also be beneficial to examine the consequences of increased availability of fake news or false information (Jeong et al., 2019).

Schlosser (2020) examined which factors influence an individual's self-disclosure or self-presentation within social media platforms. The study highlighted five distinct characteristics of online and in-person communication, "anonymity, reduced information richness, asynchronicity, multiple audiences, and audience feedback" (Schlosser, 2020). This review found that anonymity is not conducive to just one, as online platforms provide a private sphere where individuals can freely express themselves and a space to conceal their identity (Schlosser, 2020). Asynchronicity provided more significant opportunities for self-presentation due to the controlled nature of online communication, allowing users to easily present an idealized version of themselves (Schlosser, 2020). Social media has multiple audiences with opposing views, making it challenging to keep a particular impression. This can push individuals to avoid discussing social or other heated discussions to remain neutral within these populations (Schlosser, 2020). Users maintained their impression by acting per the expectations of the group they were interacting with (Schlosser, 2020). Notably, anonymity on digital platforms does not

merely confine self-expression; instead, it indicates that individuals can navigate a delicate equilibrium between freely expressing themselves and concealing their identity. This dual nature of online spaces was fundamental in comprehending how people construct their personas on social media.

Additionally, the acknowledgement of asynchronicity in online communication as a conduit for controlled self-presentation holds significance. It highlighted how individuals can adeptly fashion idealized versions of themselves digitally, potentially influencing how they are perceived. In essence, social media platforms serve as spaces where individuals can curate and highlight the most favourable facets of their identity, thus potentially shaping others' perceptions of them (Schlosser, 2020). Furthermore, the study highlighted the complexity of managing one's digital identity when confronted with diverse audiences holding opposing views. This complexity often led individuals to adopt a more neutral or non-confrontational stance to maintain a coherent online image (Schlosser, 2020). Moreover, the findings stressed the paramount role of group dynamics in shaping online impressions. Users frequently conform their behaviour to align with the expectations of the online groups they engage with, implying that others' perceptions can be substantially influenced by the norms and values prevalent within these virtual communities (Schlosser, 2020). Further research is needed to investigate additional factors influencing self-disclosure and self-presentation within online spheres (Schlosser, 2020).

Most research did not consider how age and generational factors influence identity formations, as most samples did not consist of older adults. Each age group, teenagers, and seniors presented themselves differently in person and online due to different stages of identity formation and understanding social situations. Research should investigate how social media can impact users at different stages of life to gain further insight into how self-presentation can impact their self-identity. Most of the research focused on short-term impacts; however, there was a growing need for longitudinal studies to examine how maintaining an idealized persona online for several years can positively or negatively impact an individual's self-identity and relationships. Future research must consider the ethical implications of false self-presentation within online platforms and how individuals perceive and navigate through these fabricated identities.

Theoretical Frameworks

Dramaturgy

Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework parallels everyday social interactions and the theatre. This sociological lens analyzes human nature within their social worlds (Goffman, 1959). Goffman (1959) describes individuals as actors with performative roles within their social interactions. Through impression management, individuals create, portray, and maintain a particular perception in front of their audience (Goffman, 1959). They may use settings, scripts, nonverbal communication, costumes, and other props to help reinforce their image (Goffman, 1959). The actor may play various roles within their social world, each a mirror to the expectations within their audience. This is a conscious or unconscious effort to be socially liked or accepted based on societal norms or expectations (Goffman, 1959).

Goffman (1959) uses the front and backstage to explain how individuals switch roles depending on the situation. The front stage is where individuals are in front of an audience, referring to the public or the people the individual is performing for (Goffman,

1959). While in front of an audience, the actor engages in impression management, continuing to act and behave following their role and the expectations of that group (Goffman, 1959). Societal expectations and norms make up the script, which guides an actor's actions and behaviours when engaging in social settings. These patterns are socially acceptable and provide individuals with a structured strategy to rely on (Goffman, 1959). Backstage, they are no longer required to display an idealized version of themselves; instead, they can engage with their private and authentic self (Goffman, 1959).

In addition, Goffman (1972) refers to an individual's self-image in the audience's eyes as "face." He explains that to maintain or enhance their image, individuals must engage appropriately and acceptably to maintain or enhance their image and perception (Goffman, 1972). Actors strategically choose an image that reflects highly favoured traits to build connections and rapport with others, such as polite, professional, empathetic, trendy or intellectual (Goffman, 1972). An individual may choose to uphold a "positive face," indicating their desire to be liked, admired, and accepted by others, or a "negative face," denoting their preference for autonomy, independence and freedom (Goffman, 1972).

Another concept within this framework is civil inattention, which refers to individuals acknowledging each other's presence while maintaining personal boundaries and privacy in a public setting (Goffman, 1959). This allows them to avoid invading each other's space and attracting or giving unwanted attention. These interactions include subtleties such as brief eye contact, a nod, or gesturing "hello" from afar (Goffman, 1959). This unspoken norm maintains the balance of social practices and decorum when engaging in shared spaces (Goffman, 1959).

Furthermore, Goffman (1959) explains interaction rituals, suggesting that all social interactions are predictable due to predetermined expectations and patterns. This allows for social cohesion, order and understanding among members of society as they can navigate social situations more efficiently (Goffman, 1959). Goffman (1959) also addressed the stigma surrounding individuals who deviate from societal norms and expectations. These individuals are subjected to social rejection, discrimination, and disapproval from others (Goffman, 1959). Our study used a dramaturgical framework to analyze how individuals engage in impression management techniques on social media— focusing on how selective sharing, filtering, and false presentation in online interactions shape self-perceptions and the perception of others. Individuals are actors on social media, presenting content to gain approval and acceptance from their audience. Individuals find validation through their number of followers, likes, comments, and shares, exemplifying how actors maintain a positive face within such platforms. Selective sharing allows them to filter their content, attempting to conceal their true identities backstage.

Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance theory is a classical theory in cognitive psychology proposed by American social psychologist Festinger in 1957 (Festinger, 1957). This theory, based on Gestalt psychology, looks at the psychological phenomenon of cognitive dissonance, which occurs when a person holds conflicting beliefs or attitudes, leading to a sense of discomfort (Festinger, 1957). It suggests cognitive and behavioural inconsistencies produce dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Individuals tend to cope with this discomfort by

engaging in "discrepancy reduction," which assists them in achieving cognitive consistency (Festinger, 1957). Three general methods of discrepancy reduction include the altering of pre-existing beliefs, the adding of new beliefs, or reducing the importance of existing beliefs (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance is the mental discomfort that occurs when beliefs, values, or attitudes conflict (Festinger, 1957).

Cognitive dissonance theory was related to our study due to the psychological conflict of self-presentation, confirmation bias, and social comparison. Many people choose only to share the highlights of their lives on social media, which can cause shame or dissonance when their daily lives do not match what they share on social media. This can lead to dissonance between their online and offline identities, causing them to use discrepancy reduction methods.

Additionally, individuals tend to interact with information and groups in which their ideas and values align. Seeing conflicting arguments on social media may cause a sense of dissonance within individuals, resulting in changes in the perception of those making/ sharing these arguments. Lastly, seeing others share their accomplishments, bodies, relationships, and overall life highlights can lead to cognitive dissonance and make individuals feel insecure or inferior, leading to confusion and making individuals uncomfortable with their reality and what they see online since they struggle to process it accurately. Our study used cognitive dissonance to explore selective sharing, conflicting beliefs/ values in online interactions, and social comparison. Our questions allowed us to understand further participants' views on themselves, others and social media and analyze the impacts of social media on our self-presentation, perceptions, and the perception of others.

Optimal Distinctiveness Theory

Optimal distinctiveness theory is a social psychological theory coined by Marilyn Brewer (Brewer, 2007). The theory states that humans will choose social identities to satisfy two needs: the desire for group affiliation and personal distinctiveness (Brewer, 2007). Individuals define themselves differently depending on their social groups (Brewer, 2007). They do this to have a sense of belonging and avoid social isolation, but they still want to stand out within that group (Brewer, 2007). When individuals want to feel included in a particular group, their self-concept alters to fit that group (Brewer, 2007). Sometimes, an individual may switch from one group to another that feels more fitting (Brewer, 2007).

Self-stereotyping is one way an individual may act to feel like they fit into a group, leading to adjusting behaviours and actions to align with the norms and expectations of the group (Brewer, 2007). To those who may belong to a stigmatized or disadvantaged group, correlating to that group may lower self-esteem; however, having a solid group identity can help to improve an individual's self-esteem (Brewer, 2007). People also strive to maintain group distinctiveness, sometimes excluding others to enhance the group members' feelings of inclusion (Brewer, 2007). Newer group members are more likely to conform to the overall group in fear of rejection (Brewer, 2007).

In our study, applying optimal distinctiveness theory has helped us understand the mechanisms surrounding the construction of online personas to garner social desirability (e.g., by following trends) while appearing unique. In this sense, individuals want to have a sense of belonging within online communities to avoid social exclusion. However, they will strive to maintain a distinct identity rather than blend in too much. There are many

subgroups online that individuals identify with, and they may behave in specific ways to show that they belong to that group.

Self-Verification Theory

William Swann's self-verification theory states that individuals seek consistency between how they perceive themselves and how they wish to be perceived by others (Swann, 2007). For example, if individuals view themselves as highly intelligent, they will strive for others to see them that way (Swann, 2007). Individuals strive to maintain this image of themselves in their minds and will act in ways that maintain it (Swann, 2007). With this, individuals also strive to hear affirmative feedback that aligns with their self-image (Swann, 2007). Individuals may use identity cues so that others can see them in a self-verifying manner (Swann, 2007). For example, individuals may dress a certain way to signal affiliation with a particular group (Swann, 2007). Despite the pursuit of a stable self-view, changes in self-perception can still occur, often during significant life changes (e.g., growing up, changing careers, etc.) or when an individual decides to change (Swann, 2007).

Concerning our research, self-verification theory can help us understand individuals' desire for a stable self-concept, particularly online. For instance, individuals who perceive themselves as attractive want others to share this view, often reflected in their social media profiles. Individuals may also categorize themselves to align with a particular group online to control others' perceptions of them. This could be done by following trends or withholding certain aspects of their identity in fear of judgment. By doing this, however, the individual constrains individual expression, hindering authenticity.

Methodology

Growing up surrounded by social media and seeing and experiencing its impacts on ourselves and our peers, we decided to investigate the impacts of social media on self-presentation, self-perceptions and perceptions of others. Our overarching research questions were: What impact, if any, does social media have on how individuals present themselves? What impact, if any, does social media have on our perceptions of others? Our findings will be understood using the theories of optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 2007), dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959), self-verification theory (Swann, 2007) and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). In the present study, we conducted quantitative and qualitative research to assess the relationships between social media, perceptions of others, self-perceptions, and self-presentation. Using a cross-sectional design, the study utilized an anonymous survey to collect data and assess our research questions. The survey was conducted on LimeSurvey, the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB) approved platform for anonymous online surveys. The questionnaire asked participants to complete six demographic questions and 20 questions for data analysis (see Appendix A). We looked for information on self-perceptions, self-esteem, pressure to curate idealized images, and the impact of social media on various aspects of life. Four questions were open-ended short answers, four were closed-end short answers on ethnicity, gender identity, sexual identity, and place of birth and 18 were multiple choice. Using both methods, we gathered semi-generalizable data on our desired population and in-depth information about participants' experiences with social media. In the later stage of data analysis, Jamovi and Microsoft Excel were used to interpret our results through statistical

analysis and coding of qualitative data. This section will outline our research process, ethical considerations, foreseeable challenges, plans for data analysis and our research process timeline. The research was approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB#: 0327) (Appendix B). Our research did not pose participants more risk than what is experienced in their day-to-day lives.

Procedure
The research process began in September 2023 and ended in late March 2024. We created our research team in early September and generated research questions relevant to perceptions of others, self-perceptions, and self-presentation. During September, our team met weekly to brainstorm theories and present ideas, research methods, and previous literature related to our areas of interest. Although a wide variety of literature exists on social media and its impacts on individuals, we found that literature on the impact of social media on our perceptions of others needed to be expanded. With this gap, the team saw an opportunity to contribute to the literature on social media and its impacts on individual's perceptions of others, self-perceptions, and self-presentation. From here, we created open-ended (qualitative data) and closed-ended (quantitative data) questions for our survey (Appendix A). Questions in the survey were constructed to help us gain insight into student experiences and opinions surrounding social media and self-presentation, as well as self-perceptions and perceptions of others as influenced by social media. We created our online anonymous survey on LimeSurvey, a platform approved by the McMaster Ethics Research Board. We received ethics approval on November 8th, 2023, and our survey went live on November 9th, 2023. Once the survey was live, we began our recruitment process. At this stage, we contacted various groups, clubs, and societies at McMaster – see Appendix C – to ask them to advertise our survey on social media or by email using our letter of information (Appendix D) and approved recruitment scripts (Appendix E, Appendix F, and Appendix G). These groups, clubs, and societies may also have been sent any of the following media: a physical poster (Appendix H), a social media story (Appendix I) and a post for social media (Appendix J). On January 22nd, 2024, we submitted a Change Request Form (Appendix K) to contact more MSU groups, clubs, and societies. Our participants were McMaster undergraduate students at least 18 years of age in any program which encountered our survey link. Participants completed the study in any location before the survey closed on February 16th, 2024, at 11:59 p.m. When participants accessed the survey link, they first viewed the letter of information (Appendix D), which contained information about the study, risks, benefits, and resources for the Student Wellness Center (Appendix L). After reading the letter of information (Appendix D) and providing us with their implied consent by clicking "Yes, I agree to participate in this study," participants gained access to survey questions. Participants then could work through the survey questions, not having to answer all questions if they did not feel comfortable and pressed submit upon reaching the end. Data was collected using LimeSurvey. Our survey was active from November 9th, 2023, until February 16th, 2024.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are crucial throughout the research process. Before commencing any research involving participants, we took the necessary steps to identify, assess, and eliminate any potential risks that could be avoided. This included a thorough review of our research protocols, participant safety measures, and ethical considerations to ensure the well-being of all those involved. First, we ensured that all participant data collected was anonymous and confidential. All data gathered from participants was stored on password-protected devices, communication about results and data remained within closed quarters, and participants remained anonymous at every point of the process. Upon the conclusion of our research, all stored participant data was deleted on April 30th, 2024. Our research did not present risks exceeding those typically encountered in daily life.

After considering anonymity and confidentiality, psychological and social risks existed in the study. Due to our research topic, participants were required to self-reflect on topics such as self-esteem, self-perceptions, and how they perceive others. This could cause psychological distress to participants by invoking unpleasant feelings, memories, or negative thoughts. With this in mind, we generated our survey questions to be as low-risk as possible. Although we did not expect our questions to cause participants psychological distress, there is always a risk. Psychological risks associated with our research were worth considering during the process, as they may have violated ethics protocols, skewed our data, or caused a reduction in participant response rates. These may all have taken away from the integrity of the study. If our questions were too personal for participants, they could have been reluctant to respond, resulting in holes in our data set and conclusions. Considering this, we developed our questions to not expose participants to more risk than what is experienced in their day-to-day lives. Our questions only asked what was required for data analysis. We also reminded participants that they could stop the survey at any time if they felt uncomfortable during the process. They had zero obligation to complete the survey once they began. Participants could also skip any question they did not wish to answer. Most of the questions skipped were demographic questions, particularly the question asking what their sexual orientation was, and the short answer open-ended questions. All other questions had almost perfect response rates. Lastly, in our letter of information and the final page of the survey, we provided support resources for the Student Wellness Centre (Appendix K).

Furthering our discussion on ethical considerations, a social risk existed in which there was a possibility of comprising participant anonymity due to the survey format. As participants could complete the survey in any location of their choosing, it could have resulted in the survey being completed in a public place where those in close physical proximity may have observed answers. To negate this risk, while participants could complete the survey at a time and place of their choosing, we encouraged them to do it in a private place where others could not see them completing the survey or their answers. During recruitment, participants were informed not to interact with any postings or respond to any email regarding the survey, which may have compromised their anonymity.

We, as researchers, were also at the time McMaster students, adding an additional ethical consideration: conflict of interest. At the beginning of our research, in our ethics application, all researchers indicated a conflict of interest with participants, as they were our peers. One group member also indicated two other conflicts of interest, being a

member of the club COPE: A Student Mental Health Initiative and having family attending McMaster in the undergraduate student population. In January 2024, a new conflict of interest arose as one group member became a TA within the Social Psychology Program. To mitigate these conflicts, group members were assigned to contact particular MSU groups, societies, and clubs where they had no specific conflict. This was done to reduce the risk that anyone associated with the research team would impact the study. In addition to conflicts of interest, each student researcher had something to gain from this interest. Aside from gaining knowledge and insight, we also completed a mandatory program requirement at the conclusion of our research. With this, we each had an additional conflict of interest and had to be cautious not to manipulate data to support our research questions or hypotheses. Conflicts of interest reminded us as researchers to remain objective and impartial throughout our research process. These points conclude our ethical considerations, bringing us to foreseeable challenges in our research.

Foreseeable Challenges

This section identifies foreseeable challenges in our research and the steps taken to ensure our research remains valid and reliable. Our study was conducted through participant self-reporting, which can cause numerous issues in our research's data collection and analysis phases. Individuals often portray themselves more favourably, potentially overreporting positive behaviours and experiences while downplaying negative ones, referring to the social disability bias. This bias has the potential to skew research results significantly, presenting a misleading depiction of how individuals utilize and are influenced by social media. This is consistent in previous literature; for instance, a study done by Neuberger (2016) explored the duration individuals dedicated to seeking information online and whether individuals exaggerate information-seeking activities. A challenge observed in this study was social desirability bias, as it held the power to influence results significantly through inaccuracies in the data. Since the study was a self-reported survey, individuals may have answered based on how they wanted to be perceived rather than by inputting accurate information that reflects their online habits (Neuberger, 2016).

Addressing this challenge required the implementation of strategies that minimize the chances of social desirability bias. Strategies included ensuring anonymity and confidentiality in data collection, while also employing careful questioning techniques and multiple data sources. This approach reduced the likelihood of individuals providing false information, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the survey data. This precautionary measure was taken to maintain the research findings' integrity and minimize the impact of biases on participant responses.

Additionally, we used convenience sampling to recruit our participants, which can lead to sampling bias and limited diversity. Nielsen et al., (2017) shared that there is persistent sampling bias in developmental psychology, and our dependence on convenience sampling can limit the diversity in our samples. Most researchers collect data from WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) populations and our study was conducted at McMaster University, which also has a WEIRD population (Nielsen et al., 2017). Additionally, 95.5% of our participants were under 25, leaving only 4.5% of our participants to be over 25 years old. Therefore, we had limited input from anyone over 25, and our results could not be generalized to those over 25.

Researchers need to acknowledge this as a concern to avoid demographic-specific findings being generalized and misattributed to other individuals (Nielsen et al., 2017). Ultimately, this can lead to broader implications for the reliability of research and academia. To minimize any sampling bias, we reached out to a wide variety of groups on campus and ensured we had posters in every building so every student had a chance to see and potentially participate in our research. After completing our research, we made the demographic of our study very clear and reiterated that these findings might not be able to be generalized beyond our demographic.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection on LimeSurvey began on November 9th, 2023 and was completed on February 16th, 2024, at 11:59 pm. At that time, responses were exported from LimeSurvey into an OMV file to be imported into Jamovi. Analysis of quantitative results was conducted using the statistical software Jamovi. Qualitative results were exported from Jamovi into a Microsoft Excel chart for more accessible analysis and were coded using a thematic approach. The survey asked participants to complete six demographic questions and 20 questions for data analysis (Appendix A). Participants answered our closed-ended survey questions based on the answer choices provided for each question. These ranged from "Yes" and "No" to "I carefully curate and present an idealized version of myself." Our open-ended qualitative questions allowed participants to give detailed insight into their experiences with social media. Four of our demographic questions, when asking about ethnic identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and place of birth, were open-ended to allow participants not to be refined by the answer choices we provided and knowing we were drawing participants from a diverse population.

Timeline for Data Collection and Analysis

Task	Start Date	End Date
Proposal & Ethics Application	September 6th, 2023	Initial End Date: October 19th, 2023 Ethics Approved On: November 8th, 2023 Change amendment form submitted: January 22nd, 2024
Participant Recruitment	November 9th, 2023	February 16th, 2024, at 11:59 pm
Data Collection	November 9th, 2023	February 16th, 2024 at 11:59 pm
Data Analysis	February 17th, 2024	March 2024
Poster Creation	February 2024	Completed: March 4th, 2024 Date of Poster Presentation: March 20th, 2024
Final Paper	September 6th, 2023	March 28th, 2024

Data Deletion	———————————	April 30th, 2024 (or when told to by Dr. Clancy)

Summary

In summary, we considered numerous factors in creating our research design and planning our research process. First was ethics, where we looked at numerous risks and found countermeasures to optimize our research the best we could, including looking at our conflicts of interest that may affect data collection and analysis. We also took into consideration challenges, such as participant social desirability bias. Throughout our research, we collected responses from 90 undergraduate students at McMaster University who were 18 or older. We began recruitment in November 2023 and concluded data collection on February 16th, 2024. Following data collection, we conducted statistical and thematic analyses of participant responses.

Results

We wanted to see if there were any gender differences related to the influence of social media on self-presentation, self-perceptions and perceptions of others. We had three hypotheses: social media will negatively affect how individuals present themselves. This negative effect will be stronger for females; social media will negatively affect how individuals perceive others. This effect will be less strong for males; females will post more on social media to portray a specific image to others. After data collection, we realized that how we based our survey questions on proving or disproving these would not be possible. Still, we will look specifically for gender differences across self-presentation, self-perceptions and perceptions of others. Our results are broken down into three main categories: Participant Demographics, Quantitative Results, and Qualitative Results. Participant Demographics examine participants' age, gender identity, sexual orientation and more. The section on quantitative results is further broken down into four sub-categories: results when accounting for gender identity variables, results regarding main research question one, results regarding main research question two, and results supporting both research questions. Qualitative Data is further broken down into themes from each of the four questions, with summary and direct quotations.

Participant Demographics

Data was collected from 334 participants. We removed participants who did not consent to participate (N = 244). After removing these participants, we analyzed the data of 90 undergraduate student participants. The mean age was 20.9, with a standard deviation of 1.50. As seen in Figure 1, most participants identified as female (n = 63), while 20 participants identified as male, one participant identified as gender fluid and one identified as a Trans-woman. For analysis, male, fluid, and trans-women have been combined into one category labelled "Male/Other gender identities."

Participants were asked to identify their sexual orientation or sexual identity; over three-quarters of participants identified as heterosexual (n = 60), eight identified as bisexual, three identified as gay or lesbian, two identified that they were questioning/unsure or preferred not to say. Two participants identified as asexual or queer
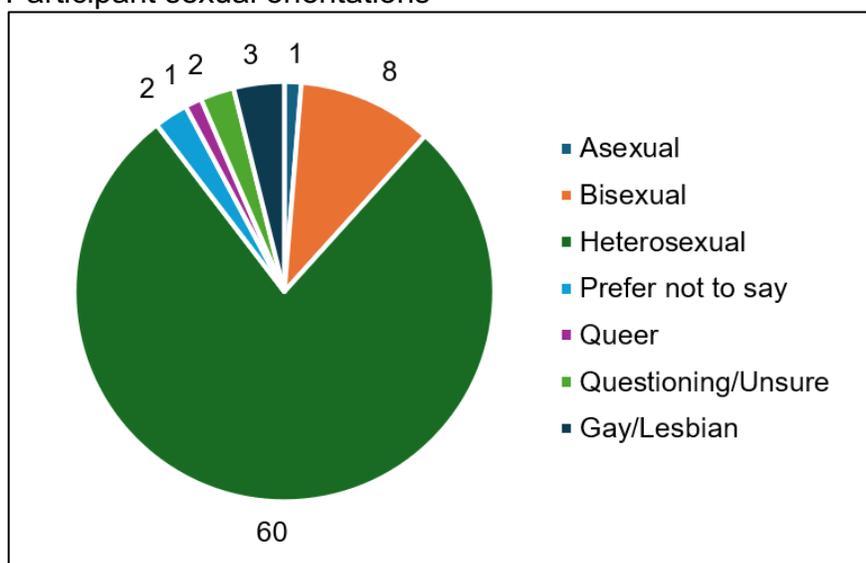
Figure 1

Participant gender identities
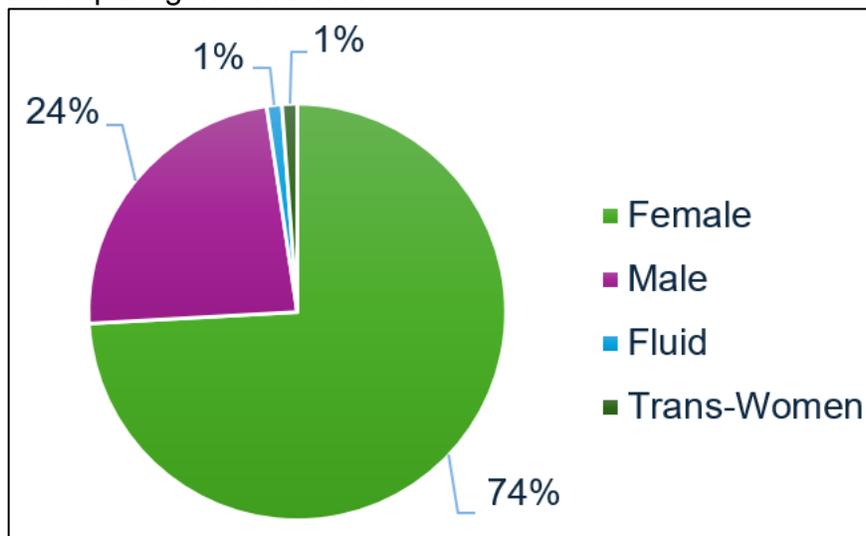
– see Figure 2. Figure 3 breaks down participants' current level at McMaster: 40.50% of participants were Level 4, 17.90% were Level 5 and Level 2, 13.1% were Level 1, and 10.7% of participants were Level 3.

When asked, "What is your place of birth?" we had 15 different response groupings combined into five larger groupings based on continental location. In Figure 4, it is shown that over half of the participants were born in North America (65.85%), 22.22% were born in Asia, 7.32% were born in Europe, and 1.22% were born in Africa or Oceania. We then asked about ethnic identity and 21 different identities were given, combined into larger groupings based on continental location. After doing so, as seen in Figure 5, almost half of the participants were of Asian descent (48.75%). In comparison, 33.75% of participants

Figure 2

Participant sexual orientations

Figure 3

Participant level at McMaster
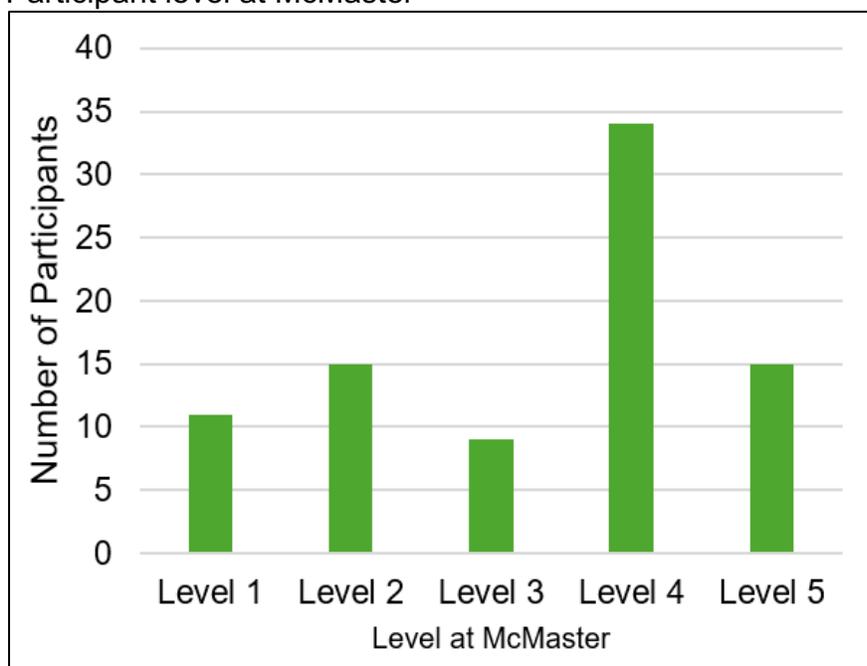
were European, 7.50% were African, 5% were ethnically mixed, and 5% identified as other ethnicities (Middle Eastern, Russian, Latinx/Hispanic).
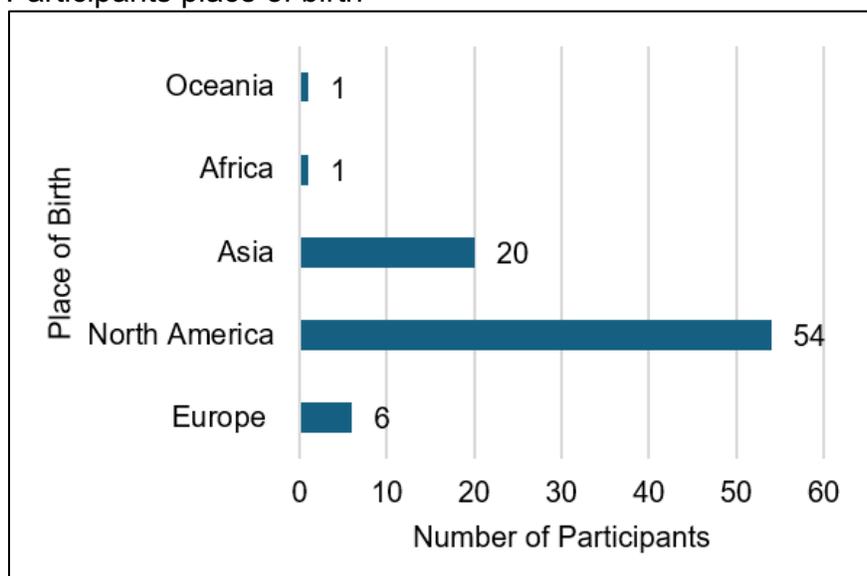
Quantitative Results
Results Upon Accounting for Gender Identity Variable
   In this section, all quantitative data questions, minus one, were analyzed against our
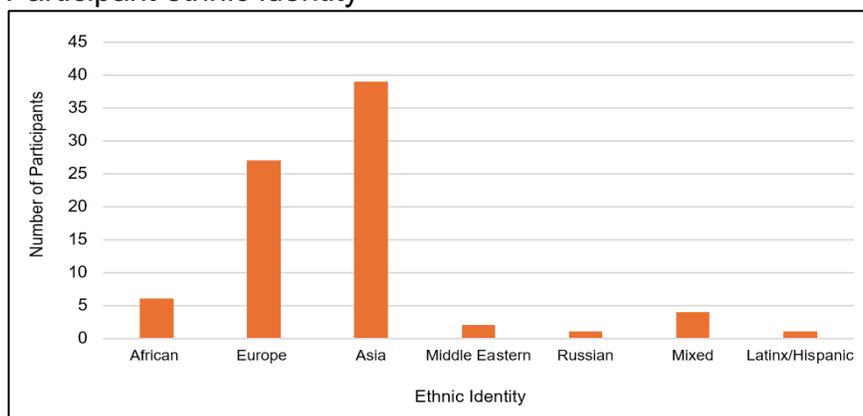
Figure 4
Participants place of birth

Figure 5

Participant ethnic identity

created gender identity variable.

When asked how frequently they use social media platforms to curate and present a particular image or identity to others, participant breakdown is the following: 11 (12.9%) said always, 8 (9.4%) said never, 22 (25.9%) said often, 16 (18.8%) said rarely, and 28 (32.9%) said sometimes. When responses were divided by gender, as seen in Figure 6, there was no statistical significance ($p > .05$). Meaning there were no gender differences in how often participants used social media as a platform to curate and present a particular image or identity of themselves to others, X^2 (4[df]) = 1.56, $p = .82$.

Table 1
Gender and how often participants used social media to curate and present a specific image or identity to others

How often do you use social media platforms to curate and present a certain image or identity to others?	Gender Identity		Total
	Female	Male/Other gender identities (% of Male/Other Identities or % of Total Participants)	
Always	7 (8.2%)	4 (4.7%)	11 (12.9%)
Never	6 (7.1%)	2 (2.4%)	8 (9.4%)
Often	18 (21.2%)	4 (4.7%)	22 (25.9%)
Rarely	11 (12.9%)	5 (5.9%)	16 (18.8%)
Sometimes	21 (24.7%)	7 (8.2%)	28 (32.9%)
Total	63 (74.1%)	22 (25.9%)	85 (100%)
All percentages shown are percent of total participants			

In response to question 2, "Do you feel pressured to maintain a certain image on social media due to societal expectations or peer influence?" Of the participants, 52 (61.2%) said yes, while 33 (38.8%) said no. As seen in Table 2, when responses to Question 2 were divided by gender, there was no difference in gender response, X^2 (1[df]) = 1.56, p = .21. The percentage of responses from both genders for each answer were close in proximity. There is no statistical significance (p > .05).

Table 2
Pressure to maintain a particular image on social media due to societal expectations or peer influence vs. Gender

Do you feel pressured to maintain a certain image on social media due to societal expectations or peer influence?	Gender		Total
	Female	Male/Other gender identities	Total
Yes	41 (48.2%)	11 (12.9%)	52 (61.2%)
No	22 (25.9%)	11 (12.9%)	33 (38.8%)
Total	63 (74.1%)	22 (25.9%)	85 (100%)
All percentages shown are percent of total participants			

Participants, when asked how they would describe the impact of social media on their self-esteem and self-perceptions, 25 (29.4%) said negatively, 52 (61.2%) were neutral, 8 (9.4%) answered they were unsure, and 2 (2.4%) said positively. When responses were broken down by gender identity, there was no statistical significance (*p* > .05). Table 3 shows both gender identities had equal impact from social media on their self-esteem and self-perceptions, X^2 (3[df]) = 6.47, *p* = .091.

Table 3
Gender vs. Impact of social media on participant self-esteem and self-perceptions

How would you describe the impact of social media on your self-esteem and self-perception?	Gender		Total
	Female	Male/Other gender identities	Total
Negative	20 (23.5%)	5 (5.9%)	25 (29.4%)
Neutral	40 (47.1%)	12 (14.1%)	52 (61.2%

Not too sure	2 (2.4%)	4 (4.7%)	8 (9.4%)
Positive	1 (1.2%)	1 (1.2%)	2 (2.4%)
Total	63 (74.1%)	22 (25.9%)	85 (100%)
All percentages shown are percent of total participants			

To gauge how much time participants spend on social media, they were asked to indicate from one of four choices (a few times a week, multiple times a day, once a day or rarely). In Figure 6, before accounting for the gender variable, 3 participants said a few times a week, 79 said multiple times a day, two said once a day, and one said rarely. After accounting for the gender identity variable, there was no gender identity difference in response; both gender categories had equal social media usage, X^2 (3[df]) = 6.47, p = .091. This finding was statistically insignificant (p > .05).

Participants were asked how they perceive their behaviour on social media in terms of self-presentation. Before accounting for gender, 32 (38.1%) of participants said they carefully curate and present an idealized version of themselves, 36 (42.9%) said they do not pay much attention to how they present themselves on social media, 10 (11.9%) said they share a mix of both positive and negative aspects of their life, and 6 (7.1%) responded other. After accounting for the gender identity variable (Table 4), the p-value was statistically insignificant (p > .05). Indicating there were no gender differences, female and male/other identities had similar perceptions of their behaviour on social media, X^2 (3[df]) = 4.13, p = .247.

In Figure 7, participants were asked how social media influences their self-esteem (n = 85). Accounting for gender identity resulted in statistical significance p = .04. Showing that female and male/other gender identities stated that social media affected their self-esteem differently, X^2 (3[df]) = 8.30, p = .04. Looking at participant response options, 24

Figure 6
Social Media Use Frequency Accounting for Gender Identity
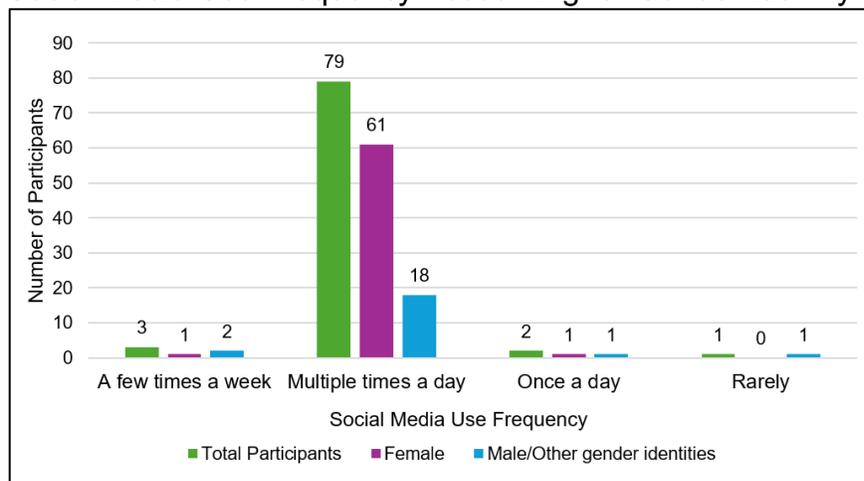
Table 4

Perceptions of own behaviour on social media in terms of self-presentation accounting for Gender Identity

How do you perceive your own behaviour on social media in terms of self-presentation?	Gender		Total
	Female	Male/Other gender identities	
I carefully curate and present an idealized version of myself.	26 (31%)	6 (7.1%)	32 (38.1%)
I don't pay much attention to how I present myself on social media.	24 (28.6%)	12 (14.3%)	36 (42.9%)
I share a mix of both positive and negative aspects of my life.	7 (8.3%)	3 (3.6%)	10 (11.9)
Other	6 (7.1%)	0 (0%)	6 (7.1%)
Total	63 (75%)	21 (25%)	84 (100%)
All percentages shown are percent of total participants			

(38%) of female participants indicated social media harmed their self-esteem compared to only 5 (22.7%) of male/other identity participants.

Figure 7

Social Media Influence on Self-Esteem Accounting for Gender Identity
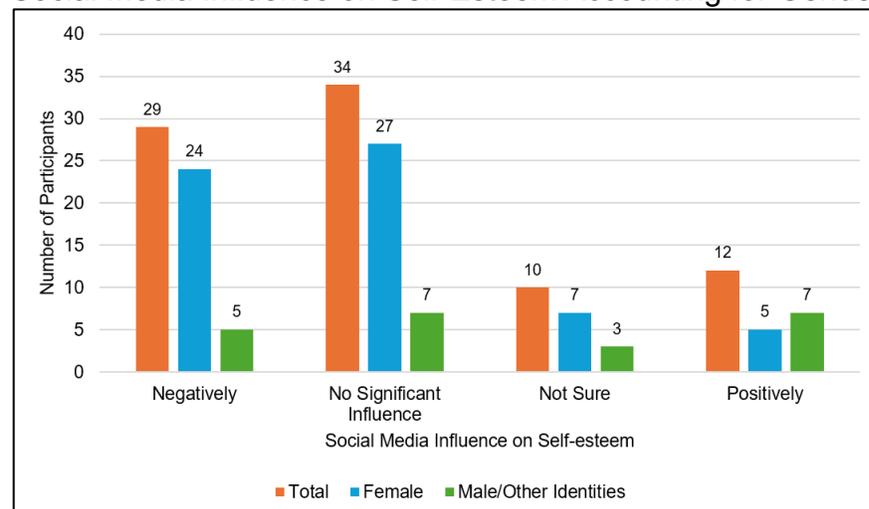
Participants were asked if social media platforms should provide more tools and resources to promote authentic self-presentation. No significant association was found when breaking down responses by gender, X^2 (2[df]) = 2.54, p = .28. Question 11 of the survey was "Have you ever unfollowed or blocked someone on social media due to their self-presentation or content?" with response options as "No," "Occasionally" and "Yes." Before accounting for gender, 15 (17.6%) of participants said "No," 6 (7.1%) said "Occasionally," and 64 (75.3%) said "Yes." This was a significant finding (p = .04). Indicating that there was a difference in response between females and males/other identities, X^2 (2[df]) = 6.67, p = .04. Figure 8 graphically shows the difference.

Participants were asked if they had ever taken a break from social media or considered it to reduce the pressure of self-presentation and its impact on their mental well-being. No significant association was found when breaking down responses by gender, X^2 (2[df]) = 1.20, p = .55. Participants were also asked to describe the overall influence of social media on their life in a closed-ended question. Answer choices included "A mix of positive and negative," "Mostly negative," "Mostly positive," and "No significant influence." When participant responses were broken down by gender, there were no differences in response types, X^2 (3[df]) = 4.41, p = .22. Question 16 of the survey asked, "Do you believe that social media has influenced your perceptions of other people's lives and relationships?". Overall, 3 participants (3.5%) answered no, 3 (3.5%) responded that they were not sure, and 79 (92.9%) answered yes. After dividing participant responses by gender identity, Table 5 shows no gender difference in responses, X^2 (2[df]) = 3.66, p = .16.

Contrary to Question 16, Question 17 asked participants if they felt pressure to project specific images of their relationships and personal life on social media, Figure 9. There was no statistical significance or gender differences in responses, X^2 (2[df]) = 0.98, p =.61. Participants were also asked about how often they compare their own relationships

Figure 8
Unfollowing and Blocking Other Users on Social Media Due to Their Self-Presentation and Content Accounting for Gender Identity
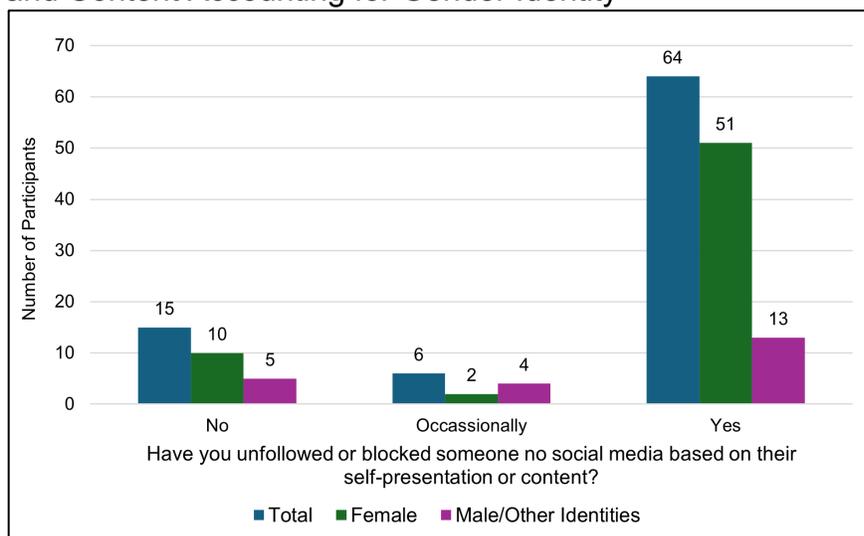
Table 5

Participants' gender and belief on whether social media has influenced their perceptions of other people's lives and relationships

| Do you believe that social media has influenced your perceptions of other people's lives and relationships?	Gender		Total
	Female	Male/Other gender identities	
No	3 (3.5%)	0 (0% or 0%)	3 (3.5%)
Not Sure	1 (1.2%)	2 (2.4%)	3 (3.5%)
Yes	59 (69.4%)	20 (23.5%)	79 (92.9%)
Total	63 (74.1%)	22 (25.9%)	85 (100%)
All percentages shown are percent of total participants			

and life experiences to what they see on social media and in another question were asked if they had ever made assumptions and judgements about someone's life or personality based on their social media posts. When accounting for gender, there was no statistical significance for either set of responses ($p > .05$).

Results Related to Research Question: What impact, if any, does social media have on how individuals present themselves?

Participants were asked: Do you feel pressured to maintain a particular image on social

Figure 9

Participants' gender differences in feelings of pressure to project a particular image of their relationships or personal life on social media
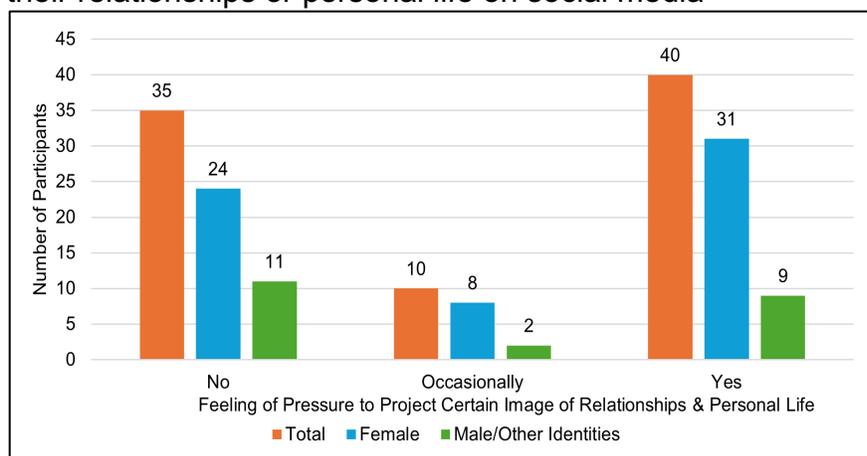
media due to societal expectations or peer influence? How do you perceive your own behaviour on social media regarding self-presentation? When responses to each question were looked at together, as in Figure 10, they were statistically significant (p = .002). This means there is a relationship between feeling pressure to maintain a certain image on social media and how participants perceive their behaviour on social media, X^2 (3 [df]) = 14.80, p = .002. Those (n = 29) who felt pressure to maintain a certain image on social media due to societal expectations also identified that they carefully curate and present an idealized version of themselves. In Table 6, a statistical analysis was conducted to observe if there was a relationship between pressure to maintain a certain image on social media and participants' ratings of the impact of social media on their lives. A statistical analysis was run, indicating a statistically significant relationship, X^2 (3 [df]) = 18.2, p = <.001. Those who answered "Yes" to feeling pressure to maintain a particular image on social media identified that social media seems to have a mix of positive and negative effects on their lives (n = 41).

Figure 10
Pressure to Maintain Certain Images on Social Media and Perception of Own Behaviour on Social Media
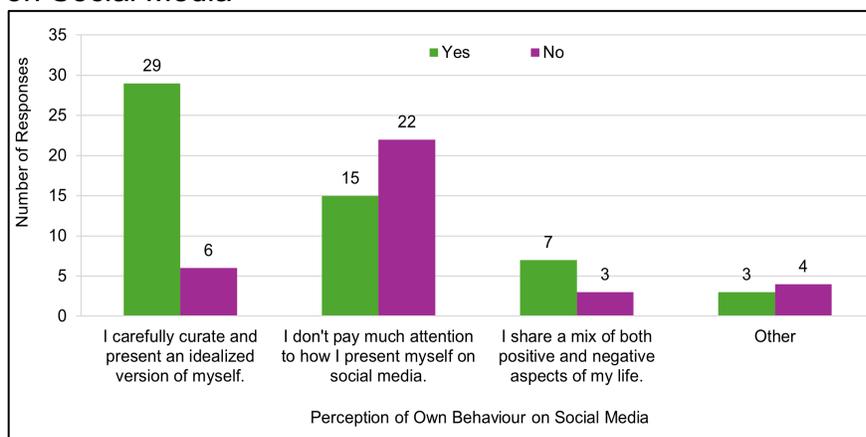
Table 6
Pressure to maintain a certain image on social media and participants' ratings of the impact of social media on their lives

|	How would you describe the overall influence of social media on your life?				
Do you feel pressured to maintain a certain image on social media due to societal expectations or peer influence?	A mix of positive and negative	Mostly negative	Mostly positive	No significant influence	Total

Yes	41 (45.6%)	3 (3.3%)	8 (8.9%)	3 (3.3%)	55 (61.1%)
No	16 (17.8%)	0 (0%)	5 (5.6%)	14 (15.6%)	35 (38.9%)
Total	57 (63.3%)	3 (3.3%)	13 (14.4%)	17 (18.9%)	90 (100%)
All percentages shown are percent of total participants					

Figure 11 shows a graphical representation of the statistically significant relationship between participants ratings of the impact of social media on their self-esteem and self-perceptions and if they feel pressure to maintain a certain image on social media due to the societal expectations and peer influence they face, X^2 (3 [df]) = 12.7, p = .005. The findings shown in Table 7, although not a statistically significant finding, look at how participants' descriptions of how social media impacts their self-esteem and self-perceptions are broken down by their actual perceived behaviour on social media surrounding self-presentation, X^2 (9 [df]) = 14.7, p = .10. It can be seen that most participants indicate either a negative or neutral description of the impact and either carefully curate and present an idealized image of themselves or do not pay much attention to how they present themselves on social media.

In two survey questions, three and eight, participants were asked to rate the impact of social media on their self-esteem and self-perceptions and just the impact on their self-esteem. Upon analysis, there was a significant relationship between the two questions, X^2 (9 [df]) = 43.7, p = <.001. Most participants indicated in both questions that social media had a neutral impact on their self-esteem and self-presentations (n = 30). A statistically significant (p = .001) finding was found in participants' responses to questions three and fourteen, looking at social media's impact on self-esteem and self-perceptions and its overall influence on participants' lives (X^2 (9 [df]) = 27.3). As shown in Table 8, over a third of participants indicated that social media had a neutral impact on their self-

Figure 11
Participants ratings of the impact of social media on their self-esteem, self-perceptions and feelings of pressure to maintain a certain image on social media
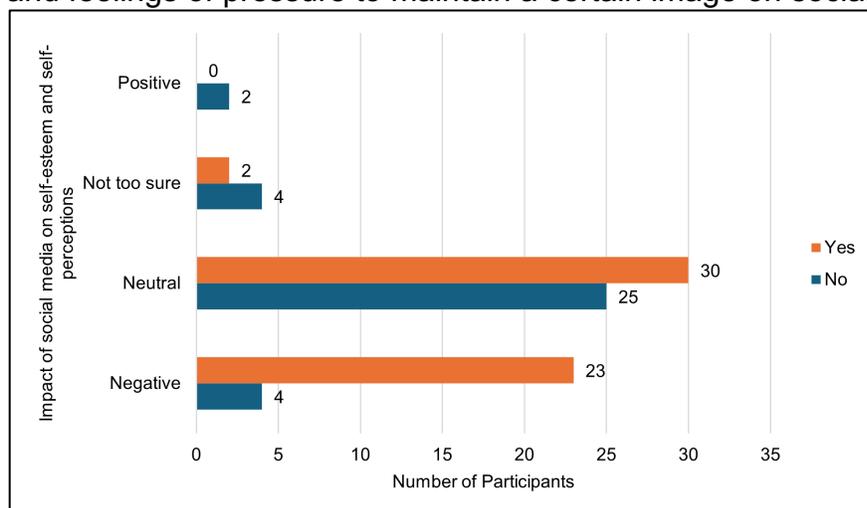
Table 7
Impact of social media on participants' self-esteem, self-perceptions and perceptions of own behaviour on social media regarding self-presentation

How would you describe the impact of social media on your self-esteem and self-perception?	How do you perceive your own behaviour on social media in terms of self-presentation?				
	I carefully curate and present an idealized version of myself.	I don't pay much attention to how I present myself on social media.	I share a mix of both positive and negative aspects of my life.	Other	Total
Negative	15 (16.9%)	10 (11.2%)	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.1%)	27 (30.3%)
Neutral	20 (22.5%)	20 (22.5%)	9 (10.1%)	5 (5.6%)	54 (60.7%)
Not too sure	0 (0%)	5 (5.6%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.1%)	6 (6.7%)
Positive	0 (0%)	2 (2.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (2.2%)
Total	35 (39.3%)	37 (41.6%)	10 (11.2%)	7 (7.9%)	89 (100)
All percentages shown are percent of total participants					

esteem and self-perceptions and had a mix of positive and negative influences on their lives (n = 30).

Participants were asked: How would you describe the impact of social media on your self-esteem and self-perception? Have you ever felt pressure to project a certain image of your relationships or personal life on social media? When an analysis was run with the responses to these questions, a statistically significant relationship was found X^2 (6 [df]) = 12.9, p = .04. The two most popular response sets were a neutral impact of social media on their self-esteem and self-presentation and feeling no pressure to project certain images of relationships and personal life on social media (n = 25) and participants indicating a neutral impact of social media on their self-esteem and self-presentation and feeling pressure to project certain images of relationships and personal life on social media (n = 23).

Two analyses were conducted to observe whether time spent on social media influenced participants' self-esteem and self-perceptions and whether they compared their relationships and life experiences to what they saw on social media. There was no statistical significance in the analysis run to see if there was a relationship between time spent on social media and social media's influence on self-esteem and self-perceptions (p = .40). While the analysis, seen in Figure 12, run on social media use frequency and if

Table 8
Impact of Social Media on participants' self-esteem, self-perceptions, and overall influence on life

How would you describe the impact of social media on your self-esteem and self-perception?	How would you describe the overall influence of social media on your life?				Total
	A mix of positive and negative	Mostly negative	Mostly positive	No significant influence	
Negative	22 (24.4%)	3 (3.3%)	2 (2.2%)	0 (0%)	27 (30%)
Neutral	30 (33.3%)	0 (0%)	11 (12.2%)	14 (15.6%)	55 (61.1%)
Not too sure	5 (5.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.1%)	6 (6.7%)
Positive	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (2.2%)	2 (2.2%)
Total	57 (63.3%)	3 (3.3%)	13 (14.4%)	17 (18.9%)	90 (100%)
All percentages shown are percent of total participants					

participants compared their relationships and life experiences to what they saw online was statistically significant (p = .03). Over 35% of participants (n = 34), who used social media multiple times a day said they occasionally compare their relationships and life experiences online.

Participants' responses to questions regarding their perceptions of their behaviour on social media and pressure to maintain a certain image of their relationships and personal life on social media were analyzed. After analysis, a statistically significant relationship was found, X^2 (6 [df]) = 23.4, p = <.001, As seen in Table 9, 24 participants indicated that they do not pay much attention to how they present themselves on social media and do not feel pressure to project a particular image of their relationships or personal lives on social media (n = 24). Also, those who carefully curate and present an idealized version of themselves on social media reported feeling pressure to project a certain image of their relationships (n = 24).

Results Related to Research Question: What impact, if any, does social media have on how individuals present themselves?
Table 10 shows the analysis summary of participants' responses to their social media use frequency and whether they have made assumptions or judgments about someone's life or personality based on what the person shares on social media. The analysis showed a statistically significant relationship between frequent social media usage and making

Figure 12

Frequency of social media use and comparing relationships or life experiences to others on social media
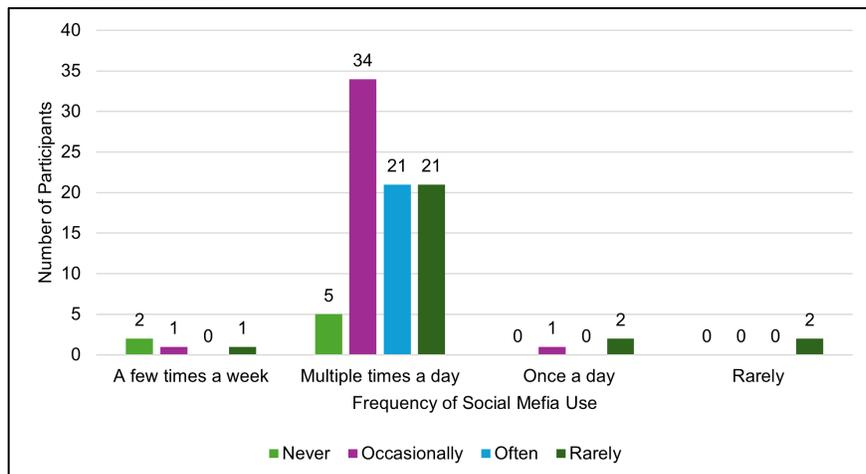
Table 9

Participants perceptions of their behaviour and pressure to project certain images of relationships on social media

	Have you ever felt pressure to project a certain image of your relationships or personal life on social media?			
How do you perceive your own behaviour on social media in terms of self-presentation?	No	Occasionally	Yes	Total
I carefully curate and present an idealized version of myself.	6 (6.7%)	5 (5.6%)	24 (27%)	35 (39.3%)
I don't pay much attention to how I present myself on social media.	24 (27%)	2 (2.2%)	11 (12.4%)	37 (41.6%)
I share a mix of both positive and negative aspects of my life.	4 (4.5%)	1 (1.1%)	5 (5.6%)	10 (11.2%)
Other	5 (5.6%)	2 (2.2%)	0 (0%)	7 (7.9%)
Total	39 (43.8%)	10 (11.2%)	40 (44.9%)	89 (100%)
All percentages shown are percent of total participants				

Table 10
Social media use frequency and making assumptions or judgments of others based on their posts

|	Have you ever made assumptions or judgments about someone's life or personality based on their social media posts?			
How frequently do you use social media platforms?	No	Occasionally	Yes	Total
A few times a week	0 (0%)	1 (1.1%)	3 (3.3%)	4 (4.4%)
Multiple times a day	5 (5.6%)	10 (11.1%)	66 (73.3%)	81 (90%)
Once a day	1 (1.1%)	0 (0%)	2 (2.2%)	3 (3.3%)
Rarely	2 (2.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (2.2%)
Total	8 (8.9%)	11 (12.2%)	0 (78.8%)	90/100
All percentages shown are percent of total participants				

assumptions or judgments about other people's lives based on what they post on their social media, X^2 (6 [df]) = 24.6, p = <.001. Of the participants who use social media multiple times a day (n = 81), 66 indicated making assumptions and judgments about others based on their social media posts.

Further investigating participants making assumptions or judgments about someone's life based on social media, we compared results to participants' responses to whether they have ever unfollowed or blocked someone on social media due to their self-presentation and content, as seen in Figure 13. This analysis proved a statistically significant relationship between unfollowing or blocking other people due to their self-presentation or content and making assumptions or judgments about someone based on their social media, X^2 (4 [df]) = 20.1, p = <.001. Over 60% of participants reported blocking or unfollowing someone and making judgments or assumptions about someone's life based on their social media posts and content (n = 58).

Figure 14 shows the responses to whether participants had ever made assumptions or judgments about someone's life or personality based on their social media content and whether participants believe that social media influenced their perceptions of other people's lives and relationships. Upon analysis, a statistically significant relationship was identified between those who make assumptions/judgments about someone on social media and if they believe social media influences their perceptions of other people's lives and relationships, X^2 (4 [df]) = 14.70, p = .005. Over 75% of all participants indicated that they make assumptions about others based on their social media posts and believe social media influences these perceptions of others (n = 69).

Figure 13

Relationship between unfollowing or blocking other people due to their self-presentation or content and making assumptions or judgments about someone based on their social media
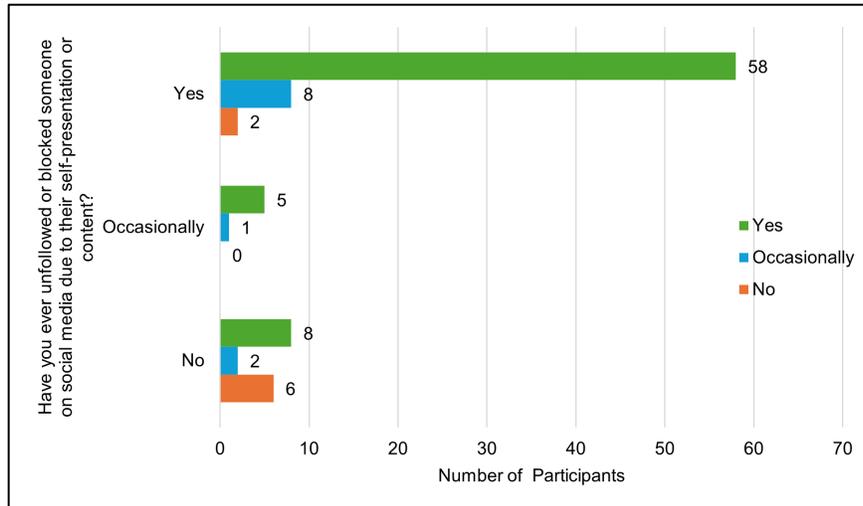

Results Related to Both Research Questions

Two statistically significant findings were found that support both research questions. The first analysis looked at participant patterns of unfollowing or blocking someone on social media and their ratings of the overall impact of social media on participants' lives. The analysis showed a statistically significant relationship between unfollowing or blocking someone on social media and the overall impact of social media on participants lives, X^2 (6 [df]) = 13.1, p = .04. As seen in Table 11, over 50% of participants indicated they have unfollowed or blocked someone on social media due to their content and that social media has a mix of both positive and negative influence on their life overall. Figure

Figure 14

Relationship of making assumptions/judgments about someone on social media and if they believe social media influences their perceptions of other people's lives and relationships
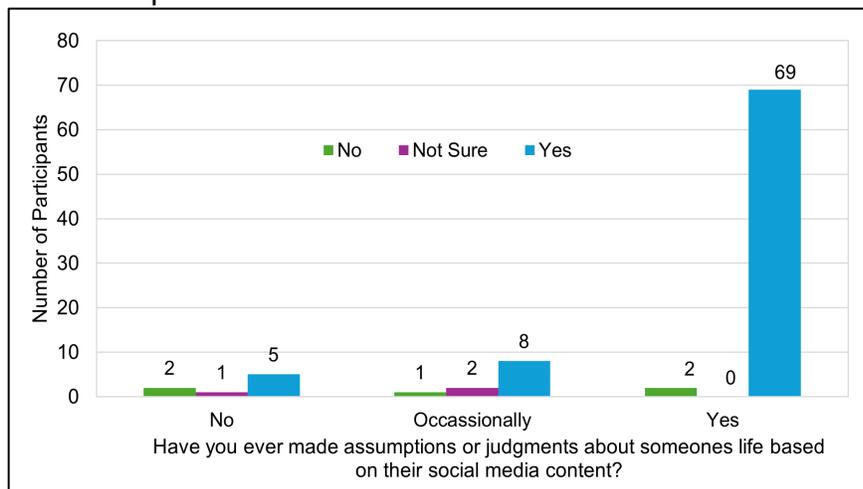
Table 11
Participants responses to unfollowing/blocking others on social media and the overall influence of social media on their lives

Have you ever unfollowed or blocked someone on social media due to their self-presentation or content?	How would you describe the overall influence of social media on your life?				Total
	A mix of positive and negative	Mostly negative	Mostly positive	No significant influence	
No	6 (6.7%)	0 (0%)	4 (4.4%)	6 (6.7%)	16 (17.8%)
Occasionally	3 (3.3%)	1 (1.1%)	0 (0%)	2 (2.2%)	6 (6.7%)
Yes	48 (53.3%)	2 (2.2%)	9 (10%)	9 (10%)	68 (75.6%)
Total	57 (63.3%)	3 (3.3%)	13 (14.4%)	17 (18.9%)	90 (100%)
All percentages shown are percent of total participants					

15 looks at the relationship between unfollowing and blocking someone on social media and feelings of pressure to project a certain image of relationships and personal life on social media, X^2 (4 [df]) = 11.1, *p* = .03. Participants who reported blocking and unfollowing of others on social media due to their self-presentation indicated feeling both

Figure 15
Relationship between unfollowing and blocking someone on social media and feelings of pressure to project a certain image of relationships and personal life on social media
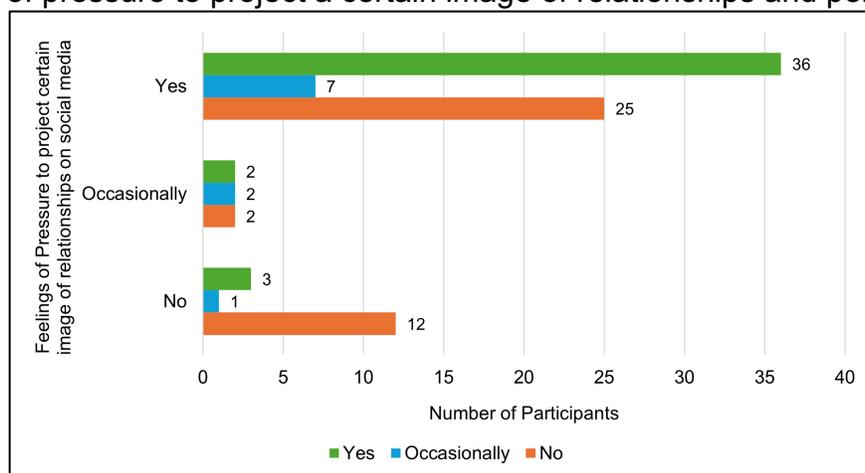
no pressure to project a particular image of their relationship online (*n* = 25) and feelings of pressure to no pressure to project a particular image of their relationship online (*n* = 36).

Qualitative Results

Qualitative data was gathered through four open-ended questions in the survey. This section will cover common themes found within responses to each question.

Can you describe situations in which social media has played a positive role in shaping your self-perceptions? Conversely, can you share examples of negative influence?

This question had a response rate of 78%. The themes that were identified were sub-grouped into positive influences and negative influences. Overall, participant responses show that while social media offers various benefits such as connection, creativity, and support, it also presents challenges like comparison, cyberbullying, and unrealistic expectations, which can impact self-perception both positively and negatively.

Positive Influences

Theme	Summary	Participant Responses
Allows for self expression	Participants indicated that social media can be a tool for self-expression, creativity, and connecting with others. It provides opportunities for personal growth, learning, and building a supportive network.	"The way social media has played a positive role is through online communities that align with my interests and experiences and provide me with a safe space that has allowed me to express myself and provide support when needed." "Social media has connected me with supportive transgender communities, providing validation and understanding."
Affirmations and encouragement	Participants indicated that social media platforms have been instrumental in promoting body positivity, providing resources for self-improvement, and facilitating connections with others who share similar experiences and interests. Some users also find affirmation and encouragement through social media, receiving positive feedback and support from friends and followers.	"Providing peer support that I didn't think I had, or others I didn't think would reach out." "Being part of supportive artistic communities allows individuals to receive positive feedback, encouragement, and recognition for their creative endeavours, boosting their confidence and self-perception."
Confidence and self-love	Responses from participants indicated that social media has	"Social media has allowed me to feel 'normal' and to practice self

	allowed individuals to feel "normal" and practice self-love. It boosts confidence when posts receive positive feedback, and it helps individuals feel less isolated by finding relatable content and supportive communities online.	love and has made me feel confident when I post something and lots of people appear to like it…" "I mean I get a lot of positive comments and feel like I am perceived very well from a mass audience so it's given me a ton of confidence."
Learning	Participants responses showed social media can also serve as a platform for learning and self-improvement. Social media provides access to diverse perspectives and communities.	"…providing a platform for positive affirmations, connecting with supportive communities, and sharing achievements, fostering a sense of accomplishment and self-worth." "there's a lot of diverse influencers who share positivity about minority groups (one to which i belong) and their cultures, makes me happy and proud to be one of those people."

Negative Influences

Theme	Summary	Participant Responses
Unrealistic expectations	Participant responses showed social media can contribute to unrealistic beauty standards, cyberbullying, and feelings of inadequacy through comparison with curated content. These sites can perpetuate toxic diet culture, misogyny, and unrealistic expectations, leading to negative self-perception and harmful behaviors.	"People fronting their perfect lives, setting unrealistic standards. Can mess with your head, making you feel inadequate or like you're missing out." "setting negative and unrealistic expectations that drive unhealthy mindsets and behaviors"
Distressing content	Social media can lead to exposure to distressing content like war scenes can lead to feelings of sadness and overwhelm.	"… also made me feel very sad with so much terrible footage of war scenes and bombings which can be overwhelming"
Insecurity, inadequacy, and anxiety	Participants indicated social media can also foster feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, and anxiety, especially when individuals compare themselves	"social media can make you feel insecure in various ways such as what you wear, how you look, where you go, who you go with, almost everything could become an insecurity due to the pressure

	to others or face cyberbullying and harassment online.	of social media to be a certain way" "Instagram's emphasis on perfection and comparison has sometimes left me feeling inadequate. Seeing influencers with seemingly flawless lives can trigger feelings of jealousy or self-doubt. At times, I've found myself obsessing over my appearance or comparing my achievements to others, which has taken a toll on my self-esteem." "looking at other people doing well in their careers, even with their carefully curated social media presence, demotivates me and induces anxiety about my own future, negatively impacting my self perception."
Jealousy	Responses identified that social media can lead to feelings of jealousy, self-doubt, and pressure to conform to unrealistic standards. The emphasis on perfection and comparison can erode self-esteem and contribute to mental health issues.	"the pressure to maintain a curated image and the comparison trap can lead to insecurity and self-doubt."

How do you believe social media impacts how we perceive beauty, or relationships? Can you provide examples from your own experiences or observations?

This question had a response rate of 78%. Five main themes were identified from this response set, showing the complex and multifaceted nature of social media's influence on perceptions of beauty and relationships, encompassing both positive and negative aspects.

Theme	Summary	Participant Responses
Self-Esteem and Mental Health	Participants indicated Concerns about the impact of social media on self-esteem and mental health are evident, with many expressing worries about the effects of constant comparison and exposure to idealized images.	"Personally, I've observed friends feeling pressure to conform to these standards, leading to self-esteem issues and even harmful behaviors like extreme dieting or cosmetic procedures."

Influence of Beauty Standards	Responses showed social media platforms contribute to the perpetuation of beauty standards by promoting edited and filtered images that set unrealistic ideals. Users reported feeling pressured to conform to these standards, leading to issues with self-esteem and body image.	"I think it sets an unreasonable standard for beauty for everyone. This isn't all bad though. Of course, it can raise insecurities within people and cause their self esteem to be lower. It can also encourage people to change their appearance in an attempt to conform to what they see all over the internet. However, it can also encourage you to try and be the best version of yourself if you're seeing what looks like people reaching their full potential on the internet everyday"
Glorification vs. Authenticity	Social media was indicated to often portray beauty and relationships in an idealized manner, showcasing only the positive aspects while masking the challenges and imperfections. This disparity between reality and portrayal can create unrealistic expectations. Some individuals express concern about the lack of authenticity on social media platforms and its potential impact on vulnerable audiences.	"Most people present their ideal self on social media. Which means that it is unrealistic. I think it's harmful not being able to see people be a least slightly authentic. Especially for young children who are very impressionable and vulnerable to these sorts of ideas."
Influence on Relationships	Participants indicated social media can influence perceptions of relationships by showcasing only the positive aspects, leading to unrealistic expectations. Comparison with idealized relationships portrayed online may impact individuals' satisfaction with their own relationships.	"The relationships I have with people online feel like they are based in the ideas we have of each other. I feel as though people don't get a sense of the real me in real-time because I can take hours to formulate I perfect response that I think they will respond well to, as opposed to my natural reactions to things. I can get along really well with people online and then not enjoy their company in person, because they aren't who I thought they would be or vice versa."

| Consumerism and Capitalism | As indicated by participants the beauty industry's presence on social media contributes to the promotion of consumerist ideals, as trends and standards constantly evolve, encouraging individuals to purchase products or undergo procedures to meet societal expectations. | "New trends and aesthetics have been creating these unrealistic standards and further promoting consumerism in so many ways that are altering and affecting the way we view ourselves and others. We are constantly trying to fit in or label ourselves into a category that makes it so difficult to view ourselves positively. Something I've noticed is how quick people are to hate on something that isn't in trend, if someone expresses any likeness towards out-of-trend things, they get hated on or questioned for their taste."
"OH MY GOD. Our culture is SO obsessed with beauty!! What the heck are we even talking about?? There's a new trend every week I feel. I feel like women especially are told that their value is held in their beauty, which is NOT true. Everyone is so obsessed with beauty and you know what the root issue is?? THAT'S RIGHT. CAPITALISM. THEY ARE PROFITING OFF OF INSECURITIES AND WHENEVER THERE IS A NEW TREND, THEY MAKE MONEY. Also, there's an obsession with "glowing up" and I mean it can be good in some aspects, but there's a LOT of toxic stuff online... Like the comeback of the "heroin chic" trend?? do people even hear themselves???? what are we doing??" |

Can you describe how you decide what to post on social media to present yourself to others? What factors influence your decision?

Five main themes were identified from this response set, and this question had a response rate of 78%. These themes highlight the complex interplay of personal, social,

and psychological factors influencing individuals' decisions about what to post on social media.

Theme	Summary	Participant Responses
Aesthetic considerations	Participants indicated the aesthetics of a post, including how they look and the overall visual appeal, play a significant role in deciding what to share on social media.	"…if it is my main account, it would be more sophisticated, and aesthetic." "I consider the overall aesthetic and tone of my feed, ensuring consistency while allowing room for creativity and spontaneity." "Fun activities or a night out - which include good aesthetic pictures. How I look in them. How my friends look. Make sure to present the best angles and side."
Spontaneity vs. Planning	From participant responses, There's a spectrum between spontaneous posting and strategic planning. Some individuals post impulsively, while others carefully curate their content to maintain consistency and engage their audience effectively.	"I just throw stuff up there, I don't really care what people think. Sometimes it's a random selfie, sometimes it's food, or just a dumb joke. Zero planning, just whatever's on my mind. Maybe if I'm doing something cool or want to share a laugh. But it's all spur-of-the-moment. I ain't trying to impress anyone. Social media's just a place to kill time, not a stage for some grand performance."
Privacy and safety	Responses showed participants have concerns about privacy and safety, and potential negative repercussions influence decisions about what to post. Some individuals are cautious about sharing sensitive information or content that could lead to judgment or backlash.	"I'm mindful of privacy concerns and potential repercussions of sharing sensitive information." "I'm cautious about privacy and potential backlash, prioritizing self-care and positive representation." "I consider authenticity, safety, and advocacy. I share experiences that validate my identity, promote transgender visibility, and connect with supportive communities."
Social comparison and peer influence	Participants show a desire to present a lifestyle that others may envy or find impressive, which is evident in some responses, indicating social	"What influences my decision is if other people will think about me when I post it and if their opinion on me will change in a negative way."

	comparison and peer influence are factors in decision-making.	"I realize that I have some anxiety around posting anything, because I fear that I may post the wrong thing from my camera roll or that I will be perceived poorly by social media audiences." "Use it as a memorial of the memories I've made or things I don't want to forget. Peer influence isn't a major concern."
Personal enjoyment and meaning	Some participants primarily post content that brings them joy or serves as a digital scrapbook of meaningful experiences rather than focusing on others' reactions. Emotional factors, such as feeling confident in a post or worrying about judgment from others, also impact decision-making regarding social media content.	"I will post myself enjoying things and life and pictures where I think I look good but not overly fake" "I just post things that I personally enjoy or had a good time doing"

How do you decide what aspects of your life to share on social media, and what do you choose to keep private? Can you explain your thought process?

This question had a response rate of 68.89, where five main themes were identified from participant responses. These themes demonstrate individuals' complex thought processes when deciding what to share on social media and what to keep private. Ultimately, the decision is influenced by privacy concerns, safety considerations, personal values, and past experiences.

Theme	Summary	Participant Responses
Preference for positive experiences	Some participants choose to share positive experiences on social media, such as holidays or special occasions while keeping negative experiences private. As well, some indicate often sharing only what they feel comfortable with or what they believe would be acceptable to their audience. They may share achievements and happy moments but keep certain aspects of their lives private, such as relationships and hardships.	"I prefer to share positive experiences because if I experience something negative I rely on my actual friends for support rather than my followers." "I show positive aspects of my life, such as; pictures with friends, family, and my partner. If I like a picture I just post it"

Boundary setting	Participants establish boundaries for what they share online, often based on their comfort level and the nature of their relationships with their followers. They may share certain aspects of their lives with close friends but keep other details private.	"I also recognize the importance of boundaries and choose to keep certain aspects of my life private, such as personal struggles, intimate relationships, and sensitive information. This decision stems from a desire to maintain a sense of autonomy, protect my privacy, and respect the privacy of others." "I keep private matters such as family, relationships, and sensitive issues off-limits to safeguard personal boundaries and respect privacy"
Content selection	Participants indicated choosing to share content based on aesthetics or what makes them look good. They may post pictures that are aesthetically pleasing or reflect positively on them.	"My decisions prioritize engaging content that adds value to my platform while balancing transparency with maintaining a level of discretion for personal well-being"
Alignment with personal values	Responses show participants may choose to share content that aligns with their values, interests, and the image they wish to convey. They prioritize authenticity while respecting their privacy and the privacy of others.	"I prioritize sharing moments that align with my values, interests, and the image I wish to convey. These often include achievements, experiences, and insights that will resonate positively with my followers, fostering connection and authenticity."
Safety considerations	Participants showed that concerns about safety influence what they share on social media. They may avoid sharing personal information, such as their location or family details, to protect themselves from potential harm.	"things i wouldn't be comfortable with strangers knowing, things that could implicate my safety, mostly positive or fun content" "I share aspects of my life that validate my identity and contribute to transgender visibility while prioritizing safety and mental health. I keep private details that could compromise my well-being or invite discrimination, striving for authenticity while protecting myself from harm."

Discussion

Social media has impacted how individuals present themselves online, as these online platforms have become spaces where we can curate an idealized version of ourselves. This digital realm creates various opportunities for personal branding and self-expression, allowing individuals to create an image that will fit societal standards. Through a dramaturgical framework, our study explored how individuals use social media as a stage for self-presentation and expression.

The findings from our study indicated that 71.1% of the participants engaged in impression management to curate a certain image on social media, varying in frequency. This aligns with Goffman's concept of the front stage, as individuals uphold a specific image in the public eye (Goffman, 1959). Most often, individuals will attempt to conform to the norms and expectations of their desired audience through selective sharing, filtering, and false presentation. By doing so, they will gain validation and acceptance through the number of followers, likes and shares. In addition, 61.1% of the participants feel pressured to maintain a particular image on social media, stemming from societal expectations and peer influence. At the same time, nearly 50% felt pressure to project a particular image of their relationships and personal lives. This pressure resonates with Goffman's idea of the theatrical stage and script, as the actor must adhere to a particular script when performing in front of an audience (Goffman, 1959). To maintain their ideal image, they strategically utilize various props to enhance their performance (Goffman, 1959). This process involves curated posts and interactions that align with their audience's perception, through which they seek validation and reassurance. The constant stream of false realities creates an unrealistic standard among social media users, further creating feelings of insecurity. By applying Goffman's dramaturgical lens, we gained deeper insight into how individuals interact on social media, highlighting how societal expectations and peer influence play a crucial role in their performance.

Our results also substantiated that participants showed cognitive dissonance when using social media. 34.3 percent of participants stated that social media negatively affects their self-esteem, yet ninety percent said they still use it multiple times a day. Social media breeds comparison, as we saw an association between participants' frequency of social media use and how often they compare their relationships and life experiences to what they see on social media. Our analysis also discovered that individuals who used social media more frequently made more assumptions or judgments about other people's lives based on their social media. Based on these correlations, we can conclude that social media use negatively affects participants, including increased comparison and judgement. Although participants reported being aware of social media's negative impact on their judgements of others and their self-esteem, they continue to use it, which causes a sense of dissonance.

Festinger (1957) suggested that individuals cope with this dissonance by "discrepancy reduction," which can be reflected in our results. For example, 81% of female and 59.1% of male participants reported unfollowing or blocking someone on social media due to the other accounts' self-presentation or content. Following these people may have conflicted with participants' beliefs or their content, giving them a sense of discomfort. Therefore, unfollowing them may have reduced participants' sense of dissonance by using a discrepancy reduction strategy (Festinger, 1957).

Brewer's (2007) optimal distinctiveness theory provides a framework to understand participants' online behaviours regarding self-presentation and identity formation on

social media. The theory states that individuals seek social identities to satisfy two needs: desire for group affiliation and personal distinctiveness (Brewer, 2007). Qualitative participant responses to our survey exemplify this, as they engage in self-presentation strategies that reflect their desire for group affiliation and personal distinctiveness. For example, participants stated the importance of receiving compliments and finding relatable content online, which enhances their sense of belonging. Simultaneously, they grapple with a decrease in positive self-perception when encountering others online who seemingly possess more desirable attributes. Additionally, participants demonstrate a strategic approach to identity and content curation online by aligning their online profiles with their desired image and keeping personal boundaries by keeping some aspects that do not align private. This relates to optimal distinctiveness theory's emphasis on balancing social inclusion with maintaining personal uniqueness. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate their online identities to fulfil their social and psychological needs within the framework of optimal distinctiveness theory.

Considering Swann's (2007) self-verification theory, our research findings showcase the dynamic interplay between individuals' self-perceptions and the pressures put on them by social media. Swann's theory states that individuals strive for consistency between their self-concept and the impressions they wish to convey to others (Swann, 2007). Our results reveal that most participants (61.1%) reported feeling pressured to uphold a particular image on social media platforms, driven by societal and peer influences. This aligns with self-verification theory, as individuals may feel compelled to maintain a consistent online persona that aligns with their desired self-image, even if it deviates from their authentic selves. Additionally, most participants (91.1%) reported that social media has influenced their perceptions of other people's lives and relationships. This suggests that individuals may engage in self-verification processes not only in shaping their own online identities but also in interpreting and comparing themselves to others' curated identities on social media. Thus, our findings align with Swann's self-verification theory in the context of social media, highlighting the influence on individuals' self-concept maintenance and interpersonal perceptions.

Our research yielded a key finding where gender did not appear to be a substantial factor in determining how often individuals curate their online image on social media. This trend remained consistent even when examining whether societal expectations pressured men and women to uphold a particular image of themselves. These findings are intriguing, considering previous literature that suggests a stronger emphasis on image curation among specific genders.

For instance, a study conducted by Dhir et al., (2016) delved into age and gender disparities in selfie-related behaviours and was conducted through an anonymous online survey with 3763 participants. The findings suggest that women are more prone than men to engage in self-presentation through selfies and curated content on social media platforms (Dhir et al., 2016). Moreover, it is revealed that females more actively take and post selfies, while also editing the photos using cropping and filters than their male counterparts (Dhir et al., 2016).

Previous research findings support these results and indicate that women often post selfies to manage the impression they create of themselves, helping to build their online identity, communicate with others, and grow their social network, all while seeking social approval (Manago et al., 2008). The selfies are also used to indicate that they belong to

a social group or circle. These results highlight the persistent trend among women to utilize social media platforms for various social and self-expression purposes. However, while men are also affected by social media, they are less likely to be influenced by it and tend to respond differently (Manago et al., 2008).

Furthermore, this research indicated that women exhibit a higher susceptibility to social media addiction than men, which adversely impacts self-esteem and body image (Dhir et al., 2016). A common theme in our research was heightened feelings of insecurity and inadequacy due to social media pressure. Several participants stated that the increased exposure to online perfection and idealism triggers feelings of jealousy and self-doubt, ultimately impacting their overall self-esteem. Continuous comparison with curated images, lifestyles, and standards can take an emotional toll on users as they scrutinize their realities for not measuring up.

Other literature is consistent with our findings, such as the research done by Colak et al., (2023), which investigated the relationship between social media addiction and self-esteem to understand its effects on adolescent body image. This study used scales and questionnaires to evaluate self-esteem, body image and social media dependency (Colak et al., 2023). They found a negative relationship between self-esteem and social media addiction, indicating that as an individual's social media addiction increases, their self-esteem decreases (Colak et al., 2023).

Consistent with these findings, previous literature suggests that the level of social media usage is a variable that can affect one's self-esteem. Takieddin et al., (2022) conducted a cross-sectional study of 373 medical students using an online questionnaire to explore the effects of social networking on academic performance and self-esteem. Their findings indicate that excessive social media usage is detrimental to students' mental health, suggesting a persistent correlation between social media use and self-esteem (Takieddin et al., 2022). These findings align with our research as it recognizes that excessive social media use can harm individuals' mental health and self-esteem.

Broader Significance

The rise of social media has fundamentally shaped how we present ourselves beyond the physical realm. The strain between self-expression and an idealized image is causing individuals to feel disconnected from their authentic identity and further contributing to feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, and social pressure. Our research delves into this dynamic, examining how social media usage impacts our self-presentations online and mental health. Further gaining broader insight into how social comparison can alter our self-perception and increasing the pressure to project idealized versions of ourselves. Ultimately, our work offers a strong foundation for navigating the online world and future research, uncovering the interplay between self-presentation, social media, and our well-being in this digital landscape.

Conclusion

The results of this study offer valuable insights into the intricate interplay between social media engagement and individuals' perceptions of self and behaviour. The findings revealed a prevalent pressure among participants to cultivate and sustain a specific online persona driven by societal expectations and peer influence. While a majority of respondents reported a neutral impact of social media on their self-esteem, a substantial

proportion acknowledged negative implications stemming from comparison, cyberbullying, and the perpetuation of unrealistic standards within digital spaces. Despite these challenges, a noteworthy subset of participants positively perceived social media's influence on their lives, indicating diverse experiences and perceptions. Furthermore, the observed prevalence of pressure to conform to curated representations of personal relationships highlights the importance of fostering digital literacy and promoting strategies for navigating social media that prioritize authenticity and well-being. Addressing these complexities will be integral to fostering healthier online environments conducive to genuine self-expression and positive social interactions.

Limitations

In the realm of academic research, it is integral to evaluate and acknowledge potential limitations present that may hinder the validity and integrity of the study. The first limitation presented itself as a conflict of interest. The student population was our peers, who come from the same population, which did influence participation, significantly impacting the integrity of decision-making during survey participation and leading to potentially biased answers. While this limitation introduces a form of self-reporting bias, it is crucial to recognize that it plays an integral role in preserving the privacy of undergraduate students at McMaster University. Due to our research focusing on the undergraduate population, we must aim to protect the confidentiality and integrity of our participants. Although self-disclosed information runs the risk of biases and discrepancies within answers, it was the best way to ensure that the integrity and privacy of this study were not lost or jeopardized.

Similarly, another limitation that impacted our study was sample bias. As the sample population for our study is undergraduate students, it became harder to generalize to the broader population. Our research primarily focused on younger undergraduate students due to its focus on social media, limiting the generalizability of our findings to the broader population, including older adults. As mentioned earlier, our research solely focuses on the undergraduate population; this is notably more convenient as it aligns with their academic environment. Involving older adults in specific social media studies is significantly more challenging due to their decreased likelihood of participation and less experience with social media. In several other studies, we identified similar limitations regarding the sample population; for example, Bracket-Bojmel et al., (2015) explored the relationship between the motives for self-presentation and likes and comments on Facebook. Their study sample included undergraduate students. As this study centres exclusively on social media, the sample population should be composed of active users of these platforms.

A significant limitation of this study was the self-reporting bias that may have been present, as our study used an anonymous online survey. Participants adhered to self-reporting their data, leaving room for inaccurate or incomplete information, potentially leading to biased answers (Dutot, 2020). While this approach allows participants to give a firsthand perspective of their lived experiences anonymously, we must acknowledge that we relied on the participants to accurately and comprehensively report their data.

Our study was also subject to social desirability, as respondents may have felt pressured to present themselves in a way they wanted to be perceived rather than discuss their authentic experiences and opinions. Furthermore, participants might have answered

in ways that aligned with social expectations and did not deviate from the norm, heavily hindering the accuracy of the data, as seen in Gil-Or et al., (2018).

Furthermore, a notable limitation of our research was its cross-sectional design. While this method enabled us to capture a snapshot of how social media influences self-presentation and perceptions of ourselves and others, it is limited to a single point in time. This prevented us from profoundly understanding how social media impacts behaviours over time. We could not determine if the increased social media usage led individuals to alter their self-perception or perception of others or vice versa. A longitudinal study would be more appropriate for this purpose, as it would allow the observation of participants' attitudes and behaviours over an extended period. This longitudinal approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of social media usage patterns, self-presentation styles, and perceptions of others as individuals continue to engage with these platforms. Moreover, it would facilitate the exploration of the complex interplay between social media and social behaviours while also allowing for identifying a cause-and-effect relationship between the factors.

Lastly, the ethical integrity and privacy of the participants might have been impacted if they, as participants, had replied to an email or interacted with a post related to the survey, giving up their identity. In conclusion, acknowledging and addressing these limitations, such as conflict of interest, sample bias, self-reporting bias, social desirability bias, the design of the study, and ethical concerns, is essential to maintain the credibility and transparency of the study and assist with the interpretation and significance of the findings.

Significant Insights

A key theme in our research was the stark contrast between the "curated self" individuals showcase online and their authentic selves. Social media platforms emphasizing aesthetics and curated narratives encourage users to prioritize projecting a specific image. Our findings showed that most undergraduate students felt pressured to maintain a curated version of themselves on social media to adhere to societal expectations.

Social media's influence extends beyond self-presentation. Our research investigated how social comparison, a natural human tendency, is amplified in online spaces. Users are constantly bombarded with carefully curated media of others' lives. Perceptions of others on social media can become skewed, leading to a warped sense of what constitutes a "normal" life or appearance.

Considering social media's comparative and observative nature, our findings contribute to societal understanding of how these platforms exacerbated social comparison among users, leading to increased feelings of inadequacy and distorted perceptions. In addition, our study expands on how communication and interactions within the digital realm shape self-expression and identity.

Future Research

Building upon our findings, future research can explore other factors and contexts that shape self-presentation and interaction dynamics in a digital space. By examining a diverse demographic, future researchers could enhance the generalizability of the study while also investigating the influence of additional factors on social media usage.

Additionally, future research could develop interventions or tools to foster authenticity and mindfulness on social media platforms, aiming to mitigate the negative impact on one's self-esteem and mental health.

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