The Role of Social Media in Social Identity Construction and Self-Image

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine how social media can be used to construct social identity and influence ideas of self-image, using Communication Privacy Management (CPM) as the primary theoretical framework. Social media hosts millions of users around the world, creating significant gray area in how large-scale digital communication can influence individuals long-term. To address and reduce this gray area, a 14-question semi-structured interview guide was developed to examine how users may decide to withhold or disclose information, represent themselves online, and how engagement metrics may influence self-confidence. The interview guide also explores how users interpret perceived audience expectations and how these perceptions may lead to long-term online habits. After qualitative analysis of the data, themes emerged of online persona curation, managed self-disclosure and surveillance, and social validation through social media engagement. These findings confirm the principles of CPM, as well as reveal social media as a tool for persona management and social evaluation.

Introduction

Social media has become an increasingly relevant term, referring to digital platforms that attract vast numbers of users worldwide. As noted by Kim and other contributors, “There are 4.66 billion social media users around the world in 2021, accounting for almost 60% of the global population” (2023, pg. 654). Given its enormous audience, it is unsurprising that social media has become an element of daily life, shaping how people communicate, access current news, and express themselves creatively. Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok are examples of popular platforms for younger users, making them extremely influential. According to Snyder and Peebles, an audience of 18- to 19-year-olds are 78% on Instagram, 67% on Facebook, and 62% on TikTok (2025, pg. 194). While these platforms offer a way to stay connected to others in distance, they also leave room for negative public opinion and comparison to others. With no foolproof age restriction, individuals are often exposed to these negative elements of social media at a young age. This can play a crucial role for impressionable young children trying to understand who they are and who they want to be. However, with such a large user base, identity construction on social media does not begin and end with children. As stated by Tereszkiewicz, all identities presented online are essentially a socially negotiated concept, being actively molded by its audience (2024, pg. 187). Still, it remains important to explore how individuals intentionally manage their own self-image in digital spaces. Therefore, this research study aims to discover how social media can be used to construct social identity in a more favorable light, as well as how it is used to influence sense of self.

As discussed previously, online social identity is co-constructed by its audience. Therefore, social identity often reflects the community that one associates or wants to associate with. Notably, in the COVID-19 era, this constructed identity became the only accessible version

of oneself that was accessible to others. That is why the choices that people choose to make online are crucial to how someone is socially viewed and who they are related to. Face-to-face communication allows individuals to understand another person through personal experience and interaction. However, without personal interaction, users can choose to curate aspects of identity through a simple post or profile update. As outlined by King and Fretwell, online platforms serve as an opportunity for diverse identities to redefine their preconceived notions (2025). Understanding how social media users create and mold themselves into a favorable identity is important to understand these platforms as a tool of expression rather than an honest representation of real-life traits. This can help dissolve psychological tension and unrealistic standards.

Additionally, self-image is often curated through the viewpoints of the individuals who surround us. Willoughby and Couto address social comparison on social media and how it can curate a negative idea of self. They said, “women may evaluate their appearance by comparing to the thin ideals and beauty standards media present, thereby feeling inadequate” (Willoughby & Couto, 2025, pg. 2759). They also discuss how body-image can be positively impacted by social media features beyond viewing (Willoughby & Couto, 2025). Features, including likes, comments, and shares, offer social validation quicker and easier than face-to-face interaction. The mental image of oneself that is depicted by this positive feedback can make people feel strengthened and secure. However, it adds a level of pressure to consistently live up to the image that others may view us as. For example, if we get extremely positive feedback from a certain Instagram post, individuals will feel as though they must deliver the same results every time they post. This can be motivating, as well as mentally draining for social media users. Realizing significance of the correlation between social media and self-image can help individuals

understand power that comparison, online interaction, and feedback has on confidence in oneself and mental well-being.

The primary theoretical framework that is used to guide this research is Communication Privacy Management. This theory explains how individuals can make decisions to reveal or conceal private information (Herrman and Tenzek, 2017, pg. 55). These decisions made by social media users shape the way the public perceives an individual's identity, and gives feedback based on information that is given. This theory will be used to examine the role that social media plays in social identity construction online, as well as the effects it has on self-image.

The next section of this study will review past research on the topic of social media and its effects on personal and social identity elements, as well as target comparison. Following this discussion, concepts of social media, identity construction, self-image, and key elements within Communication Privacy Management will be examined thoroughly. Discussion of methodology of the research, as well as findings will be presented, following the literature review.

Literature Review

Past Research:

A study conducted by Gürkan et al. (2024) explores how constructed online identities and gender identities communicate self and social perception. The researchers examine the conceptual definitions and relationships between authenticity and anonymity. Within this research, authenticity refers to the true reflection of yourself that is portrayed on social media. Meanwhile, anonymity is defined as the masking of oneself and reflecting ingenuine qualities on social media. While the concepts of anonymity and privacy are similar and connected, privacy

relies on control of certain information and anonymity relies on the camouflage of authentic traits (Gürkan et al., 2024). Additionally, the concept of identity is defined within this study, as well as its relationship with gender. Identity refers to characteristics of oneself hat evolve overtime. Gender and gender identity often reflects in online behavior and self-perception (Gürkan et al., 2024).

The purpose of this study is to determine how individuals construct and present their self-identity and gender identity on social media compared to the real world. To conduct this research, Gürkan et al., (2024) used convenience sampling for in-depth interviews with four females and four males, aged 19-23 years old, and studying at a university. Additionally, they were active users of social media platforms. Gürkan et al. (2024) asked open-ended questions related to anonymity, authenticity, and the relationships between gender and online identity in an online context. This interpretive study utilized qualitative textual analysis, creating categories of themes and sub-themes which summarizes the data. The results of this study found that individuals can utilize social media to construct or mask themselves as they see fit based off outside opinion. It was also found that individuals often experience fear and anxiety when sharing on social media from fear of societal punishment.

An additional study conducted by McComb et al. (2023) examined how social media can promotes upward target comparison, affecting self-evaluation and emotion. Using the social comparison theory, the researchers examined the concept of upward comparison, which refers to the comparison of oneself to another individual deemed to a higher value or rank in some aspect. According to McComb et al. (2023), individuals often use upward comparison as a form of personal advancement. However, this behavior often results in “feelings of envy, anxiety, frustration, and depression” (McComb et al., 2023, pg. 613). On the other hand, downward

comparison refers to the comparison of oneself to another individual deemed inferior to personal value or rank. Downward comparison often serves as a confidence, mood, and self-image boost (McComb et al., 2023). The researchers of this study discuss reactions of assimilation and contrast during self-evaluation. Assimilation is defined in this context as internalizing traits or behaviors of your target of comparison, while contrast disaffiliates from the traits or behaviors of the target. According to the study, assimilation can inspire positive emotion, while contrast leads to negativity regarding emotion and self-image (McComb et al., 2023).

The purpose of this study is to determine the strength of the relationship between social media usage and target comparison, as well as its effect on self-evaluation and emotion. McComb et al. (2023) conducted this research by a systematic search, selecting articles relevant to research concepts and topics. After selection, 48 studies were deemed appropriate to be included in this multilevel meta-analysis, using data from 7,679 participants. Additionally, 118 effect sizes were extracted from the data to be used (McComb et al., 2023). The results of this study found social media exposure of upward comparison targets leads to negative self-evaluation and emotion. Additionally, social media users tend to use a contrast response in comparison, which causes negative effects toward self-image and emotion.

Theories:

The primary theory of this study is Communication Privacy Management (CPM). Communication Privacy Management theory was developed by Sandra Petronio and examines the way in which individuals balance keeping information private or sharing information publicly. Within the context of social media, this theory suggests that individuals decide what information they should conceal (privacy) or reveal (self-disclosure) to be able to shape their online identity. Zhang and Fu discuss the privacy rules that individuals may develop to determine

“when, where, how, and with whom it is appropriate to share a piece of private information, typically based on criteria such as gender, culture, context, motivation, and risk-benefit ratio” (2020). These factors largely come into play when deciding what to share on social media, in relation to the identity you are trying to display.

Conceptual Definitions:

Social media is a complex string of platforms in which individuals can showcase themselves physically and emotionally. Each platform, such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, X, etc., has its own posting capabilities in which users can create, share, engage with their audience/followers. Social media has a multitude of definitions, but Carr and Hayes within their article formally define it as an “Internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of masspersonal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content” (2015, pg. 49). Additionally, social media can be described as an important aspect of daily life, providing information of interest and connecting similar groups of people (Duong, 2020). While there is no absolute definition, society often defines social media as a major role in today’s world.

This study aims to dive into the elements of social media platforms and how they can shape our identity. Identity is everything that makes an individual who they are. It is shaped by oneself, other people, or defining moments in our lives. How individuals construct their identity is how others can view them. Grigoraş defines identity construction as “an individual and relational process, for oneself and in relation to others, which aims not only at the present and the past of the individual, but also at his projection into the future” (2020, pg. 230). It is an on-going mold of ourselves that is constantly being reshaped by our actions and our experiences.

A related concept is the idea of self-image, which can be influenced by the way we construct our identity. In another sense, your self-image can also shape the way you choose to form your identity. It is the perception or evaluation of ourselves that we hold. Cathcart and Gumpert (1986) discuss self-image as being based off our daily and physical social activities. They examined self-image as an element which takes form through communication and shapes itself through symbolic and experimental processes (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1986). Like identity construction, it is an on-going process in which individuals develop over time.

This research study uses the Communication Privacy Management theory, which discusses concepts of privacy, control, and self-disclosure. Privacy refers to the decision to keep certain information personal or to a group of trusted individuals. Through privacy, individuals can keep certain ideas from infiltrating the public's perception. Trepte refers to privacy as "the selective control of information sharing, where control is key" (2021, pg. 549). He also discusses definitions from other authors, who describe privacy to be "the claim of individuals, groups, or institutions to determine for themselves when, how, and to what extent information about them is communicated to others" (Trepte, 2021, pg. 550). Control plays a large role in how privacy is kept. Without control, information can be leaked to the public, shaping image and identity. Trepte (2021) determines control as a prerequisite of privacy and the behavior in privacy regulation in which people can allow or deny information access. Self-disclosure is the opposite of privacy. It involves honesty and trust with information communicated to the public. Ashuri and Halperin (2025) discuss self-disclosure as being the behavior in which individuals reveal personal information about themselves. Social media influencers are a modern-day example of people who often take part in mass self-disclosure.

Research Questions:

This research study investigates how social media may express and create online identities, as well as defines how these online platforms may shape self-perception. My research questions are as follows:

RQ 1: How do social media users construct and negotiate their online identities to align with or differ from their offline selves?

RQ 2: What factors determine how social media users choose to disclose or withhold information?

RQ 3: In what ways does social media profile engagement affect user self-confidence?14

This study uses these three research questions, tied in with Communication Privacy Management, to evaluate the relationship between social media, identity construction and self-image.

Methods

Research Instrument

The research instrument in this study is a 14-question semi-structured interview, including participant demographics. As outlined by Croucher and Cronn-Mills, “The purpose of interviewing is to ask questions and get answers from the participants involved in your study in order to discover knowledge” (2019, pg. 103). Further, semi-structured interviews offer a flexible interview script with a main set of questions, a mix of closed and open-ended questions, and a

mix of response options (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2019, pg. 104). In using a semi-structured interview format, participants can feel comfortable in communicating a variety of personal opinions and experiences. Interview questions were developed to gauge how social media users use their platforms to display specific identity traits, decide what personal information to share, and evaluate levels of self-worth. The instrument breaks down the research questions through discussion of social media activity, self-disclosure, privacy, engagement, and online versus offline persona. The effects of these social media elements are gathered through interpersonal communication and participant responses.

Interview questions vary from introductory, direct, in-direct, interpretive, and probing to get an in-depth understanding of participant's social media experience. Many questions are probed deeper through the request of examples and further explanation to get a larger grasp of participant feelings and personal opinions. Four examples of questions asked of participants are as follows:

Q 1: Can you describe your typical social media activity? What platforms do you use the most and how often are you using them?

Q 2: How do you decide what aspects of yourself that you should post online or keep private? Can you give an example of when you had to make this decision?

Q 3: How do you feel when your posts do not receive the amount of engagement that you expected? Have you ever considered deleting or editing these posts?

Q 4: Have you ever felt inspired or discouraged when looking at other people's social media profiles? Would you say that these feelings influenced your posting habits moving forward?

These questions tie back to the primary theoretical framework, Communication Privacy Management Theory, in several aspects. Questions, such as Q1, address social media activity. This offers insight into participants habits of self-disclosure and privacy, two key concepts of CPM. Further questions, such as Q2, directly probe how participants create rules to manage privacy or disclose personal information, which is the baseline of this theory. Privacy turbulence, a term within CPM, discusses re-evaluation of privacy rules when rules are broken down (Zhang & Fu, 2020). Low engagement on a post of self-disclosure could cause feelings of re-evaluation, which correlates to the topics of Q3. Additionally, questions, such as Q4, offer insight on emotional comparison and how that may affect self-disclosure in the future.

Demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, and education level) are also included within this research instrument. These questions play an important role in analyzing the relationship of social media within online identity construction and self-image. Demographic questions asked at the end of a research instrument help clearly define a participant and allow for an accurate interpretation of the data (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2019, pg. 248-249). A demographic element, such as age, influences social experience within social media platforms. For example, older users have more experience on social media platforms and encounter more mature content compared to younger users. Furthermore, educational level may affect digital literacy and the ability to navigate platform concepts. Social media algorithms often cater to demographics, such as ethnicity, to influence similar social media behavior and habits within specific groups. Recognizing how certain demographics may influence specific responses allows for reliable data assessment and findings.

Sampling:

According to Croucher and Cronn-Mills, convenience sampling uses cohorts of individuals easily assessable, which is the simplest and most in-expensive way to collect data for research (2019, pg. 56). However, data results are relatively non-generalizable and have a limited scope to whom they may apply to (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2019, pg. 54). In contrast, snowball sampling can allow for easier inclusion of individuals from groups that would be difficult to reach using participant referrals (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2019, pg. 56). While this approach can help expand the sample to harder-to-reach populations, it is hard to say whether it accurately represents the population. (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2019, pg. 56).

For my data sampling, I will be using convenience and snowball sampling. In doing so, I can ensure efficiency and low-cost, as well as relevance to the needs of my research. I will start by collecting participants that are readily available. All initial participants will meet the criterion of utilizing or posting on social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, etc.) multiple times a week. From these volunteers, I will ask for participant referrals within their network for sample expansion.

Procedure:

Interviews will be conducted through a mutually agreed, in-person location or through Zoom, based on the preference of the participant. Interviewing participants in their "natural habitats" will help them feel more comfortable, as they are in their own space (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2019, pg. 57). To fully explore the topics regarding social media, social identity construction, and self-image, each interview will last between 30 to 45 minutes. Before each interview is conducted, participants will be emailed a consent form, which explores all aspects of purpose, methods, benefits, and confidentiality. In terms of confidentiality, all participants will remain anonymous.

After data collection, interview recordings will be transcribed and analyzed to conduct a grounded theory analysis. Grounded theory is defined as “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2019, pg. 108). Through this analysis process, transcribed recordings of each interview will be coded to highlight central ideas or purpose and compared to find similarities between transcriptions. This allows central themes and categories to emerge between the collection of texts. Interview transcriptions will be further analyzed through examining demographic elements of age, gender, ethnicity, and education level. This analysis will help identify meaningful differences between participants, rather than collectively being defined as identical beings.

Findings

After semi-structured interviews were completed, numerous codes were assigned to organize data patterns and label important ideas related to identity navigation on social media. These codes were based on concepts of identity construction, information disclosure, engagement metrics, and motivations on social media. Data was furthered coded according to responses reflecting emotional and phycological impact. In the qualitative data analysis, codes were grouped together to create broad themes that support the three primary research questions. While demographic parity was not reached within this research sample, participants offer unique perspectives of the research questions that allow for nuanced interpretation of the topic.

Participant Demographics:

A total of 13 individuals participated in this study, ranging in age from 18 to 24 years old. There were 7 females, with 6 identifying as White and 1 identifying as Italian and Lebanese. There were 6 males, with 4 identifying as White, 1 identifying as mixed, and 1 identifying as

Hispanic. 9 participants reported their highest level of education to be some college, 3 had earned their bachelor's degree and 1 earned a high school diploma.

Curated Online Personas

A major theme that emerged from the data was curated online personas, which refers to the deliberate presentation of an idealized version of oneself on social media. This selective presentation often differs from one's offline identity. Many participants felt they were only sharing themselves in an idealized light, rather than their true identities. When asked the question, "Would you consider your presence on social media as an accurate reflection of your offline persona?", one female participant remarked that social media is presented as a "highlight reel" that represents when an individual is the "best version" of themselves. One male participant responded, "No…I only post, like, the fun stuff I do, and I don't show myself being in my room 24/7, studying all the time." Another male participant stated that he tries to be authentic on social media, but he does have "performative moments." When a female participant was asked "Do you think people who only know you from online platforms would perceive you in a different way?", she stated that she would most likely be perceived as "more exciting" than she actual is, when that is only a small window into reality.

Additionally, participants often adjusted their self-presentation based on the social media platform. One female participant stated she felt pressure on Instagram to present herself in a certain way because "you post when you look the nicest" on that platform. One male participant stated, "Snapchat, for example, [is] like more humor…I like to be myself mainly on that…for Instagram, especially I like to cater myself to perfection…" These findings suggest that participants will often recognize their performative habits on social media, and negotiate their image based on the type of platform they are using.

Managed Self-Disclosure and Surveillance

A second theme that emerged from the data was managed self-disclosure and surveillance, which alludes to the way individuals will actively consider perceived audiences, such as employers, organizations, or family members, when deciding what to post online. Many participants, both male and female, have voiced future or current employment as the strongest factor in withholding information on social media. Regarding a potential social media post, one female participant stated, “I can't post on social media because I worry about like…future jobs and I don't want a bad image.” Similarly, one male participant discussed his increasing privacy on social media as he has aged. He said, “Growing up, I didn't really have, like, anything to hold me back from posting whatever I wanted, but now I kind of gotta watch what I post, 'cause it can be seen by…my professors, future bosses… and people that supervise me.”

Additionally, participants involved in college organizations and programs have expressed purposely managing their social media profiles to abide by given rules. A female participant in a Greek organization stated, “All the time with our sorority. Um, if I am like going to post a picture, I always think to myself like, okay, is this a good reflection…not only on my chapter but also like on me in general.” A male participant in an athletic training program in college responded, “I'm kind of cautious with what I…tie my account to” based on the athletes and peers that may see his profile on social media.

Familial surveillance of social media profiles also plays a role in information disclosure and privacy. When discussing their social media presence, one female participant stated, “I try to keep it very much like me, but nothing that's like me drinking or doing something that like I wouldn't want my grandma to see.” One male participant responded, “I just don't post things like that [I] wouldn't want my mom seeing or something, 'cause if I wouldn't want my mom to see it,

why would anyone else want to see it?" This data demonstrates the deliberate management of one's online presence by the audience they perceive to be watching, such as future employers, organization leaders, or family members.

Furthermore, this theme directly influences the construction of curated online personas. The awareness of being observed leads individuals to intentionally withhold certain aspects of their offline identities, which contributes to the creation of a more controlled and idealized online identity.

Social Validation Through Engagement

The final theme that emerged from the final research question is social validation through engagement, which refers to how likes, comments, and shares can influence feelings of approval, self-worth, and acceptance. However, responses were often varied depending on demographic. For example, a female participant states that low engagement on posts would make her question if she were "ugly" or if people "hate" her. Additionally, when another female participant was asked how engagement metrics affect the way she views herself, she responded, "It does affect me because sometimes I'll post something and then I'm like, why did that not get as much attention as something else I posted?" In contrast, male participants more often reported having minimal concern regarding low engagement. One male participant said, "it doesn't affect me that much," while another stated, "I'm the type of person who never really cared about likes and things like that…"

Age also influenced sensitivity to engagement. Some participants reported becoming less interested in likes, comments, and shares as they have grown older and matured. For example, a female participant stated, "I used to care when I was younger about my likes." When a male

participant was asked about his feelings towards profile engagement, he responded, “maybe back when I was in high school, like, if somebody had more likes than me, I’d be like, ‘Ugh’. But anymore…I don't care.” These findings suggest that engagement metrics, such as likes, comments, and shares, can influence individuals differently, often depending on gender or age. Female participants were more likely to associate low engagement with decreased social validation, whereas males tend to be less affected. However, both males and females can become less interested as they get older.

Social validation is also influenced by curated online personas and managed self-disclosure. The more control an individual has over their self-presentation online, the more likely they are to attach meaning to low profile engagement. Additionally, pressures from surveillance can reduce consistent posting, leading to lessened opportunities for online validation.

Reliability

This study demonstrates reliability through the consistent use of qualitative, semi-structured interviews, which guaranteed that each participant was asked similar core and probing questions, allowing for substantive comparison across sample data. Additionally, the data analysis utilized a systematic coding process, starting with a wide range of preliminary codes based on central ideas of identity construction, information disclosure, engagement, metrics, and emotional impacts, which were then refined into broad themes associated with each research question. This structured approach allows for research findings to be consistent and repeatable, as similar patterns emerged across multiple participants. However, reliability is limited by the lack of intercoder reliability, with coding and interpretation being conducted by a single researcher and potentially introducing subjectivity.

Validity

This study demonstrates validity by accurately representing participant responses through direct quotes and in-depth descriptions that offer strong evidence for each theme identified. The findings closely adhere to the provided research questions, and the interpreted themes reflect meaningful patterns in how individuals construct their online identities, manage their image through self-disclosure, and respond to profile engagement metrics. The findings highlight multifaceted differences, discussing variation based on demographic factors, enhancing the credibility of the analysis. However, validity is limited by the small sample size and lack of demographic parity, as the viewpoints may not fully reflect the perspectives of a broader audience, affecting generalizability.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to determine how social media can be used to construct social identity and influence ideas of self-image. Overall, this work demonstrates that an individual's social media identity is often not a direct reflection of their reality, but a selective view into their lives shaped by audience, platform, and personal goals. This aligns with existing research, particularly by Gürkan et al. (2024). Gürkan et al. highlight the friction between authenticity and anonymity, supporting the idea that social media users often present idealized personas rather than authentic identities. This is also reflected in the principles of Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory, confirming that individuals create boundaries between their public and private information and actively decide what crosses that boundary on social media.

In this research, participants detailed decisions of what private information to share, how they manage those boundaries around that information, and how those boundaries shift depending on context and audience. These behaviors reflect CPM's concept of privacy, where individuals consistently access what they choose to disclose. Many participants clearly described filtering what they post and managing how they want to be perceived. However, participants were also aware they are presenting an idealized version of themself rather than showcasing their genuine identity. Similarly, Gürkan et al. (2024) found that fear of judgement and social consequences led social media users to manage their self-presentation online, which reinforces the relationship between surveillance and identity construction reported in this study. In addition, McComb et al. (2023), argue that social media creates upward comparison, which often leads to negative self-evaluation and emotional responses. This directly aligns with the social validation through engagement patterns that are observed in the present findings.

Limitations

There are limitations in this study to be noted. In this study, a sample of 13 participants were interviewed. This limits potential diversity among the responses that were given. By expanding the sample size, findings may alter due to increased variety in culture, age, and lived experience. Another limitation would be the narrow age range of 18 to 24 years old. This highlights constraints in lived experiences on social media platforms.

Further Research

This study opens further opportunities for future research. Future studies could offer a wide and more diverse sample group that could be acquired over time. This can present additional individuals that have had social media for many years to individuals with no

experience, offering diverse perspectives. Further opportunities would be to look at participants over an extended period, tracking participants as social media evolves with new platforms and AI. This could offer a deeper perspective into the topic as it continues to change. Lastly, a more platform specific study would prove to be beneficial. Tracking specific social media platforms may provide further data for how individuals may choose to manage their identity for certain audiences.

Findings support the active construction of curated online personas, presenting idealized versions of themselves that emphasize positive, socially desirable moments, while leaving out the less favorable aspects of their daily lives. Additionally, participants often described their profiles as “highlight reels,” showcasing the awareness of social identity construction and management on social media and aligning with the ideas presented in CPM. These responses reflect that social media use among young adults is a highly intentional and a selective process, rather than a reflection of one’s real-life identity and personality.

Further data reveals varied responses related to engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and views. This metric serves as a form of social validation, though diverse emotional reactions. Female participants were more likely to report decreased self-confidence in response to low engagement. While male participants generally expressed less concern. However, both groups indicated that the perceived importance of social media engagement tends to decrease with age. This could suggest a developmental shift toward reduced reliance on external validation as they age and gain life experience.

The findings of this research further demonstrate that decisions concerning what to share or withhold are strongly influenced by potential viewers and future consequences. Concerns related to professional image, such as a future employer, as well as concerns of organizational

affiliation, and family expectations play a central role in shaping what the participants may decide to post on their social media. This demonstrates participants actively managing their "digital footprint," the permanent trail left online that can be described as your digital reputation. The participants showcased the importance of demonstrating awareness of social media content, and the lasting implications beyond immediate social interactions.

Overall, these findings in this study suggest that social media platforms often serve as spaces of identity performance, evaluation, and control, where users carefully balance authenticity with how they wish to be perceived.

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Appendix

IRB Form:

https://falconbgsu-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/personal/cottere_bgsu_edu/_layouts/15/Doc.aspx?sourcedoc=%7BA1348390-67AC-42F9-89B8-20E970613DF3%7D&file=IRB%20Application%20-%20Emily%20Cotter.docx&action=default&mobileredirect=true&DefaultItemOpen=1

Research Instrument:

1. **Can you describe your typical social media activity?**
   - What platforms do you use the most and how often are you using them?
   - What usually motivates you to open a social media app?
   - Would you say you are more of an active poster or someone who mainly consumes what others share?

2. **Would you say that social media is important to your daily life and routine?**
   - If so, why?
   - Do you rely on social media for connection, information, entertainment, or something else?

3. **How do you decide what aspects of yourself that you should post online or keep private?**
   - Can you give an example of when you had to make this decision?

- Are any outside voices ever involved in this decision?
- Have your “rules” of privacy changed over time?

4. **Would you consider your presence on social media as an accurate reflection of your offline persona?**
   - Why or why not?
   - Do you think people who only know you from online platforms would perceive you in a different way?
5. **Do you feel pressure to present yourself in a specific manner online?**
   - If so, what kind of pressure and from whom?
   - Do you think social media encourages authenticity or performance? Why?
   - Are there norms or expectations on social media that influence your identity expression?

6. **How does profile engagement metrics, such as likes, comments, and shares, affect the way you view yourself?**
   - When consuming media, how do these metrics on other profiles effect the way you view them?
   - Do you associate engagement with popularity, success, or social approval?

7. **How do you feel when your posts do not receive the amount of engagement that you expected?**
    - Why do you think you feel this way?
    - Have you ever considered deleting or editing these posts?

8. **Have you ever felt inspired or discouraged when looking at other people's social media profiles?**
    - If so, could you please give an example?
    - Would you say that these feelings influenced your posting habits moving forward?

9. **In what ways do you consciously manage your social media profile to reflect who you are?**
    - Do you have specific "rules" regarding privacy in how you do so?
    - Do you feel more control over your identity online than offline? Why?

10. **How do you think other people's posts on social media affect the way you view yourself, your life, or your life goals?**
    - Is this a negative or positive effect?
    - Have other people's posts ever motivated you to make changes in your life?

Demographics:

11. **What is your age?**

12. What is your ethnicity?

13. What is your gender?

14. What is your highest level of education?