

A Vanity Affair- Principles of Self-Presentation in the Digital Age with Evidence from Neuroscience- A Synthesis of Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Humans have always been a social species. We have been communicating, coordinating, cooperating, with one another since time immemorial. Our communication today differs starkly from what it was before. Thanking this expansive-multifaceted machinery which spans globally- conducts a flow of information, opinions, and behaviours that are meant to inform, persuade, entertain and (perhaps) manipulate us, also causes a certain sense of disruption. With the advent of media, our lifestyles have become ever more transient and reliant on digital tools, and our sense of self is under acute threat. This review is used to direct observation to investigate the relationship between social media, presentation of oneself, conformity within (unwritten) rules, norms and regulations- and how it pervades not only our interactions in the online world but also makes itself apparent, offline. The existing relevant literature was retrieved via a literature search. Published articles were classified according to their overall themes and then modestly summarized. The results convincingly showed that there is a significant difference that lies in the way individuals present themselves online, as opposed to their true self offline, which causes a severe dissonance. This study also highlights ideas from neuroscientific research to provide evidentiary support for the topics covered. However, the subsequent literature may be vulnerable to class differences and confirmation bias. Thus, it is well-advised for a larger, in-depth study to be undertaken in the future to overcome these deficiencies.

Keywords: *Impression Management, Conformity, Social Media, Dissonance, Selfie*

Humans attribute themselves as a social animal that tends to be open for social interaction. They manoeuvre through life individually, or in groups perennially searching to create friendships and intimate bonds throughout life. Due to an inherent need for social interaction and thus often being in the presence of others, they often project a certain image of themselves consciously or unconsciously, to create a "reputation" which can be called a social identity. They further manipulate certain aspects of their demeanour, appearance, settings, to if not maintain, but to perpetuate that created 'identity'.

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Impression management involves the behaviours people exhibit to create and maintain these desired impressions (Schlenker, 1980).

Stemming from the larger social-psychological tradition of symbolic interactionism, Erving Goffman used theatre as a metaphor to elucidate the ways that people utilize and make identity claims, prepare for, and perform roles in their daily social interaction (Goffman, 1959). Due to the constant exposure of a certain kind of behaviour, the accumulated knowledge from that behaviour then acts as a reservoir aiding in predicting the forthcoming actions. The purpose of such identity work is not only to present and maintain favourable impressions but also, to *maintain* an illusion of authenticity. Those created favourable impressions are undertaken to be viewed as likeable, individualistic and competent. The most prominent means of managing impressions is through self-presentation, which Schneider defined as "the manipulation of information about the self by the actor" (Schneider, 1981).

Individuals now not only seek to manage their offline impressions but also in computer-mediated environments (Zhao et al., 2008). The pressure to conform arises from unwritten social norms, which reflect the values or desired circumstances of a wider, prevailing dominant group (Smith & Claypool, 2014). The Internet is the most widespread and rapidly adopted technology in the history of humanity. As opposed to earlier when the public self was limited to the real world, the advent and the rise of the Internet has not only perpetuated but also given these acts of impression management a global visibility (Nicolescu, 2016b). Facebook surpassed 2.50 billion monthly active users (Facebook, 2019), while Twitter stood at 330 million users monthly (Twitter, 2018).

These social media platforms, alongside Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube, act as mediums, which guides people to reinterpret their self-images, create and interact within new social circles, and orchestrate their reputation (Choi et. al, 2014). This presents seemingly unlimited methods for individuals to manipulate their acts, while also enabling the circulation of social norms which would not be as accessible, influential or possible in an otherwise offline world (Joinson & Greitemeyer, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

This article is a narrative review of the existing literature on techniques of self-presentation with the context of the principles of social media. A search of electronic database like Google Scholar, Medline, PubMed, Research Gate, JSTOR was undertaken using the search terms "impression management", "conformity", "social media", "mental health", "selfie" in various permutations and combinations. There were over a handful of citations that were found, thus the relevant ones were distilled and included in the review. Peer-reviewed publications, case reports in peer-reviewed journals and published working papers have been selected to conduct the study. Duplicate articles were removed and the titles and/or abstracts of the articles were evaluated for relevance to the objective of the present study. A diligent and orderly review of the selected articles lead to the findings of this study.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

To fulfil the social norms of any group, individuals conform either by compliance or internalization. Compliance occurs when an individual conforms to a majority despite no internal change in belief, i.e., the change is temporary and exists for the benefit of the social group (Hogg & Vaughan, 2014). However, internalization occurs when individuals conform

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to a social norm, and *additionally* experience an internal change in their attitudes and actions, i.e., desired behaviour subsists regardless of the presence of a majority (Hogg & Vaughan, 2014).

While conformity traditionally arose from the influence of offline interactions with family members, classmates or colleagues, in the online world conformity can present itself through beauty standards, opinions on political movements, academic and/or social accomplishments and affluence. Posts related to these subjects circulate on a larger scale, arguably increasing the commonality of conformity.

Even Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg has recognized the strategic communication taking place on the social networking site and has subsequently launched the introduction of a new profile format. The new profile format is geared to aid individuals in creating profiles that align with how they want their friends to see them; the page layout was reorganized, enabling users to create more desirable pages for themselves and emphasize similarities and shared interests among users (Fager, 2010). As changes are being made to Facebook that is structured around the persuasive nature of impression management, one can only imagine various other covert techniques utilized.

Social media is universally accepted as a place where people perform a self that is continuously monitored, controlled and judged. In other words, this is a place under surveillance, whether self or public. Individuals differ in the extent to which they monitor (regulate, control, and observe) the selves they display in interpersonal relationships and social situations (Turnley & Bolino, 2001). Therefore, the behaviour is categorically altered concerning public or private spaces. It helps create alternative layers of personal presentation – between the constrained public domain and the personal, intimate one. It is through this incessant process of scaling, that social relationships are constructed (Nicolescu, 2016a).

Strategic control of desired impressions is also reflected in their social media profiles. What one likes: the kinds of bands, foods, fashion, restaurants, films, television series, and so on that one prefers is termed as a "taste performance" (Liu, 2007). This process of self-monitoring is repeatedly applied to social media. People who rank high in self-monitoring, are skilled at controlling images of themselves and adapting to social situations and their social media profiles are a reflection of their virtual performance (Daly, 2002). These self-descriptive and factual declarations are thought to be considered as asserting their individuality against the dominant established society, but the outsider only sees them as conforming to the aesthetics of their chosen subculture (Haynes et al., 2016).

Social media allows individuals to display multiple versions of individualism, but only when these are within an expression of social conformity. It is a ubiquitous occurrence for men and women to display, through their uploaded and filtered pictures- their style, emphasis on aesthetics, moods, and their daily pursuits. They aim to portray themselves as perennially happy. It also lets individuals make their public selves *consistent* with their private selves. People engage in impression management so as to decrease the incongruence between their private self (identity) and public self (image) (Tata & Prasad, 2015.)

The most apparent feature may be the importance people give to their profile pictures. When people join online dating services, they often alter their profile pictures to appear more

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attractive (Hancock & Toma, 2009). It can be considered as the "first impression" on social media. After curating the image which is chosen as "profile picture", these often portray young men dressed in earnest, elegant or professional clothes even when they do not normally adopt this dress code in their daily lives. This emphasis on future career achievements and economic stability means there is a sharp discrepancy between the self as portrayed online and how it is displayed in the offline world. The tendency of the individual to present itself, irrespective of their gender, in a socially desirable manner only accelerates conformity (Mc Donnell & King, 2013). Selfie-takers also leverage the affordances presented by social media platforms to further enhance their self-presentation. Given that what we share online provides information about our identity (Pempek et al., 2009), we argue that desirable images are selected for sharing and individuals strategically select media platforms depending on audience norms and expectations related to each platform. Platforms like Facebook and Snapchat allow users to communicate by sharing content that reflects their interests and thoughts (Bayer et al., 2015). The affordances associated with each platform also influences self-presentation decisions. Many more selfies are uploaded on Snapchat than on Facebook or Instagram, given the 24-hour visibility window which it offers.

Images are powerful. They have the ability to move us in ways that words prove to be inadequate. The potency stems from their perceived realness and also arises from their emotional force, thus leaving a lasting impact (Denny & Harms, 2010). Despite the traditional emphasis on words, there has been an acknowledgement of the picture superiority effect for images. Pictures, irrespective of their context, are more easily recognized and recalled than words. This can be understood for the effort usually applied to curate one's profile picture (Hockley, 2008; Sternberg, 2006). Consequently, women do not leave their homes before spending a considerable period adorning themselves, applying makeup and dressing appropriately.

Dressing is the easiest and the most apparent tool of presentation which is an extension of ones social and economic status they believe they possess which social media needs to reflect. Images uploaded by women often contribute to the ideal beauty standards, also because they are aware that their public presentations of the self are likely to be highly discussed and have the potential to launch a whispering campaign among their peers (Costa, 2016). The democratization of luxury also allows teenagers to use luxury goods as a means of social distinction (Gil, Good, & Johnson, 2012).

Individuals choose products congruent with the social image of certain aspirational groups. The symbolic meaning of products used by significant others helps individuals to construct, maintain, and express the desired identity. Nowadays, celebrities, movie and music stars have become cultural icons. They serve as visible signs of affluence and fame – the hedonistic values admired by most individuals. The attempt to resemble the aspirational reference group underlies the bandwagon effect in conspicuous luxury consumption. Bandwagon consumption occurs when consumers buy certain categories of luxuries due to their popularity, especially among famous personalities (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012). The purpose of the study mentioned below was to analyze bandwagon consumption through an experimental approach.

An experiment undertaken by Niesiołędzka M. (2018), explains how teenagers to keep up with normative values can easily be influenced. In the experiment, participants were told the

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study was intended to examine consumers' evaluation of an advertisement. Participants received an advertisement for an iPhone. In the experimental condition, participants saw a picture of the iPhone and read the slogan "All your favourite stars already have it, and you?" while those in the control condition only saw the picture of the iPhone (visible, publicly consumed brand of product indicated as a luxury in pre-test studies conducted in the comparative group). After watching the advertisement, participants were asked to complete a missing letter in a word. Two words were presented; each word could be completed differently, with one option referring to the world of famous people and the other option referring to a more neutral reference – without any association with famous people. Then the participants reported the maximum amount of money they would spend to acquire the iPhone. Participants in the experimental condition more often created words referring to the world of famous people i.e. 'fashion' and 'fame' than participants in the control condition.

The experiment revealed a significant effect for the advertisement with the slogan referring to their favourite stars. As predicted, participants watching the iPhone advertisement with the slogan were willing to pay significantly more than participants watching the advertisement only with the picture of the iPhone. Consistent with the hypothesis, when the advertisement included references to the aspirational group, participants were willing to pay more for the luxury product than participants who watched the advertisement without explicit cues to significant others. Conformity is visible, only corroborated by the significance of the slogan in the experiment. Buying these products guarantee social approval because they signify success, fame, and membership within the relevant status groups.

As explained in the experiment, the utilitarian purpose that an iPhone serves, is similar to most other phones available. However, the *prestige* associated with it, which is validated through acceptance in higher status groups, has made Apple's revenues rise to US \$260.174 billion (Apple Inc., 2019). However, that gratification to the aspirational group in order to portray ones self is instantly diminished once the individual is aware of the deplorable conditions of the Apple workers in China. This is when the Cognitive Dissonance Theory is applied. The dissonance can arise when ones self-image is inconsistent with ones belief, attitudes or behaviours (Kitayama et al., 2004). Performing an untrue self can lead to a certain level of dissonance and emotional exhaustion (Pugh et al., 2011).

Understanding Adolescence and Social Media

Adolescence is a crucial and vulnerable stage in development, which is defined as the transition period between childhood and adulthood (approximately ages 10–22 years). This is the time where teenagers begin to form their own identity, a strong sense of self and create meaningful relationships (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). A period characterized by experimentation with novel but risky behaviors such as use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs (Duckworth et al., 2010). In particular, increased dopamine release to subcortical reward centers during adolescence encourages attraction to novel and immediately exciting experiences (Chambers et al., 2003). Indeed, the dopamine system, which is eminently sensitive to detecting novel rewards (Schultz, 2002), motivates search for such experiences (Panksepp, 1998).

It is a developmental stage in which parental influence decreases and peers become more important (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Being accepted or rejected by peers is highly salient in adolescence, along with a strong need to fit into the peer group.

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In today's cultural and technological climate, everyone uses some sort of social media. An important question regarding adolescent risk taking is whether adolescents have the capability to control such drives. One hypothesis based on developmental neuroscience is that brain maturation of the frontal cortex is not complete until the third decade of life (Casey et al., 2008; Steinberg, 2008). As a result, adolescents do not have sufficient frontal control to inhibit impulsive drives such as sensation seeking. This hypothesis has the strong implication that for youth with high levels of impulsivity, such as sensation seeking, there is little one can do to prevent the rise in adolescent risk taking other than to enforce abstinence from such behaviors until the brain has achieved sufficient maturation to enable control over the behaviors (Steinberg, 2008).

The issue that can occur with the use of social media is that children can possibly start an account earlier than what the social networking site requires by just changing their birthday. Garber (2014), states that most social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat require that the users are 13 years old or older. The problem here is that there is a growing number of children signing up for social media at a younger age than what the sites require, with or without their parents knowing (Garber, 2014).

Neuroscientific Evidence

From a neurological viewpoint, presentation of self on social media affects different brain functions in unique ways. It contains many combinations of stimuli that can trigger different reactions, and because of this, social media's effects on the brain appear in a variety of ways.

Given that brain regions involved in many social aspects of life are undergoing such extensive changes during adolescence, it is likely that social influences—which also occur through the use of social media as the internet connects adolescents to many people at once—are particularly potent at this age in coalescence with their media use. Also, the subcortical brain regions undergo pronounced changes during adolescence (Goddings, 2014). There is evidence that the density of grey matter volume in the amygdala, a structure associated with emotional processing, is related to larger offline social networks (Bickart et al., 2012) as well as larger online social networks (Von der Heide et al., 2014; Kanai et al., 2012).

Positive attention on social media, for example, affects multiple parts of the brain. Accruing likes on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram causes activation in brain circuitry implicated in reward including the striatum and ventral tegmental area. The ventral tegmental area (VTA) is one of the primary parts responsible for determining the rewards system in people's bodies. When social media users receive positive feedback (likes), their brains fire off dopamine receptors, which is facilitated in part by the VTA.

Another study that employed the use of MRI technology to monitor brain activity found similar results. Neuroscientists at UCLA wanted to focus their study to understand adolescents using fMRI machines and recorded which regions of their brain lit up as they used the researcher's version of Instagram. They experimentally manipulated the number of likes, whether they saw their own photos or others, the kind of photos they saw, whether they depicted risky or neutral behaviours. The results revealed that seeing photographs with more likes was associated with more activity in brain regions responsible for social cognition rewards (dopamine system) and attention (visual cortex). When the participants

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saw photos with more likes they experienced a greater overall brain activity and their visual cortex lit up. They found that viewing photos with many (compared with few) likes was associated with greater activity in neural regions implicated in reward processing, social cognition, imitation, and attention (Sherman, 2016). These results held true whether they were looking at their pictures or that of others

Another study undertaken by Crone & Konijn (2018), reviewed cross-sectional functional neuroimaging studies. They discovered that increased rejection sensitivity to online social rejection is associated with greater activation in the subgenual anterior cingulate cortex and medial prefrontal cortex, when undergoing social exclusion in the lab, suggesting that adolescence is a stage marked by enhanced sensitivity to peer rejection. Socially accepted behaviours such as likes, encouraging comments and hashtags are described as socially rewarding experiences that trigger a subjective experience of pleasure and reward in adolescents. Crone & Konijn (2018), link these behavioural findings to the neuroimaging literature on reward processing in adolescence, which show ventral striatal activation in response to reward processing to peak during adolescence.

Peer influence on opinions has been studied in the laboratory in the form of behaviour change after seeing the opinion of others, either adults or adolescents. These studies show peer influence on behaviour to peak during early adolescence (Knoll, Magis-Weinberg, Speekenbrink, & Blakemore, 2015). At the neural level, the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and insula, regions that are also activated by both social rejection and acceptance, are involved in aligning ones behaviour with that of the group after receiving peer feedback (on issues ranging from personality to body image).

Recently, cognitive neuroscience studies have used structural and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to examine how the adolescent brain changes over the course of the adolescent years (Blakemore, 2014). The results of several studies demonstrate that cognitive and socio-affective development in adolescence is accompanied by extensive changes in the structure and function of the adolescent brain. Structurally, white matter connections increase, allowing for more successful communication between different areas of the brain (Achterberg et al., 2016). The maturation of these connections is related to behavioural control, for example, connections between the prefrontal cortex and the subcortical striatum mediate age-related improvements in the ability to wait for a reward (Achterberg et al., 2016). In addition to these changes in white matter connections, neurons in the brain grow in number between conception and childhood, with the greatest synaptic density in early childhood. This increase in synaptic density co-occurs with synaptic pruning, and pruning rates increase in adolescence, resulting in a decrease in synaptic density in late childhood and adolescence (Huttenlocher, 1990).

Implications

Despite these ever-growing concerns of performances in everyday life supported by neuroscientific evidence, there appears to be a gap in social psychology research, where social media's influence on conformity is yet under-researched (Kende et al., 2015).

Neuroscience research on social media is still in its infancy and there is a great potential to explore further. The number of people who engage in social media is enormous and continues to increase. People spend several hours on social media. Future studies could be targeted to understanding how this routine may affect us.

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This question is also relevant to adolescents who are the most frequent users, and may be particularly susceptible to environmental influences during their period of development. Does it correlate with altruism, for there can be a relation between a higher rate of social media usage (leading to narcissistic behaviour) and altruism? How does it contribute to academic performance, job loss, self-perception? Social media and privacy with ethical concerns should be touched upon, given the fact that the value of data surpassed the value of oil in the last year (Barrett-Maitland & Lynch, 2020).

Traditional theories of dissonance, conformity, and impression management shall be resurrected and applied to contemporary contexts. Although these studies provide insights into the occurrence and effects of ingratiation, the specific cause of verbal self-presentational behaviour individuals use to gain audience approval yet remain unexplored.

CONCLUSION

Eventually, we come around to what Goffman had initially proposed: interactions are performances. Performances occur almost in every sphere of life. The doctor wears a white coat, the magician waves a wand, a student acts to pay attention in class, the accomplished chef has a wide assortment of culinary utensils and a political candidate vouches for a better term. The increased maintenance of public value and normative ideal obliges people to sieve their pictures, identity, images and self. The fear of image misappropriation constitutes deep-rooted social anxiety. Despite the daily interactions undertaken being manipulated, controlled and organized- at times fail, and can be forgotten. However, with the digital footprint, pictures speak a thousand words and keep doing so, evermore.

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Conflict of Interest

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