



Emerging adults' social media self-presentation and identity development at college transition: Mindfulness as a moderator



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ABSTRACT

Scholars have described how youth perform online self-presentation and its implications for identity formation. However, only a few studies have statistically examined the associations between self-presentation on social media and identity development at major developmental transitions. Also, although mindfulness is found to moderate the relationship between social media use and psychological outcomes, its moderating role has not been investigated in self-presentation/identity research. Drawing on a multi-faceted model of online self-presentation and identity theories, we explored how four dimensions of social media self-presentation related to college freshmen's self-esteem and identity clarity. Survey data from 219 college freshmen between the ages of 18 and 23 ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.29$, $S.D. = 0.75$; 74% female; 41% White, 38% Black) showed that positive online self-presentation was related to higher self-esteem. It was also related to higher identity clarity but only among mindful freshmen. Authentic online self-presentation was related to higher self-esteem, also for mindful freshmen only. Presenting personal/intimate information was associated with lower identity clarity. The negative relationships between such self-presentation and the two identity outcomes were stronger among less mindful freshmen. Findings revealed the diverse associations between online self-presentation and identity development at the college transition.

1. Emerging adults' social media self-presentation and identity development at college transition: mindfulness as a moderator

Self-presentation refers to the process of communicating one's own image to others (Baumeister, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990), and it plays a crucial role in identity development (Baumeister & Tice, 1986; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The practice should be particularly important at emerging adults' transition to college, when many are in the status of identity moratorium (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010), eagerly exploring and defining themselves in the new environment.

For youth today, social media (e.g., Facebook and Instagram) provide a convenient and powerful venue for self-presentation. Scholars have described how young people craft their images on these platforms (e.g., Chua & Chang, 2016; Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Michikyan, Subrahmanyam, & Dennis, 2015; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), but only a few have statistically examined whether and how online self-presentation is associated with youth's identity development (e.g., Michikyan, Dennis, & Subrahmanyam, 2015; Yang & Brown, 2016). In addition, little is known about how mindfulness, a personal characteristic that enhances positive effects of

social media use and mitigates negative ones (Charoensukmongkol, 2016), may moderate the implications of online self-presentation.

Using a multi-faceted model of online self-presentation (Yang & Brown, 2016) and drawing on theories of identity development, we collected survey data from first-year college students and explored how four different dimensions of social media self-presentation were associated with students' self-esteem and identity clarity, with the level of mindfulness being a potential moderator. We conceptualized college freshmen as emerging adults rather than adolescents (Arnett, 2014), but given identity development is a continuous process and is crucial for both groups (Arnett, 2014; Erikson, 1968), we included literature involving either or both samples. We expected this study to contribute to existing literature by (1) statistically examining the diverse associations between online self-presentation and identity development among young emerging adults experiencing the college transition, and (2) investigating the moderating role of mindfulness.

1.1. Self-esteem and identity clarity at the college transition

Two important aspects of identity development are self-esteem and

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identity clarity (Campbell et al., 1996; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Self-esteem reflects a person's overall evaluation of her/his self-worth (Campbell et al., 1996; Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach, 1989). Identity clarity denotes the degree to which a person integrates the different selves he/she has experimented with, makes sense of self-related values and goals, and gains a clear and coherent sense of who he/she is (Campbell et al., 1996; Erikson, 1968; Harter, 2012).

Self-esteem and identity clarity typically increase from adolescence to emerging adulthood (Erol & Orth, 2011; Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006; Kroger et al., 2010; Orth, Maes, & Schmitt, 2015), but the transition into college seems to be an exception interrupting this pattern. For instance, Chung et al. (2014) found that college freshmen experienced a noticeable drop in self-esteem during their first semester, although their self-esteem bounced back by the end of the first year and then increased for the remaining college career. One meta-analysis also showed that at the age of 18 there was a substantial drop in the proportion of emerging adults being in the status of identity achievement; in contrast, a large proportion were in the status of moratorium, and this proportion peaked at the age of 19 (Kroger et al., 2010). Given that 18 and 19 are the typical ages of college freshmen, the results may reflect the challenges and opportunities presented by the transition to college.

Because individuals are particularly motivated to manage their image when they have the need to maintain self-esteem and construct an identity (Baumeister, 1982; Baumeister & Tice, 1986; Leary & Kowalski, 1990), the above-mentioned identity fluctuations should propel college freshmen to engage in self-presentation. Below, we reviewed how youth present themselves on social media and how such online practices may contribute to their self-esteem and identity clarity.

1.2. A multi-faceted model of online self-presentation

Youth's online self-presentation often reflects the prominent needs or norms of the given developmental stage. For instance, early adolescents, due to their particularly unstable sense of self, experiment with online self-presentation (i.e., pretending to be someone else) more frequently than older adolescents (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). At the transition to college, emerging adults carefully craft their online image in a way that allows them to both stay connected with family and friends from home and also make new connections on campus (Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012; Yang, 2016). Beyond the college transition, online self-presentation continues to be a common practice among emerging adults, who frequently display their individual and social identities on social media platforms (Michikyan, Subrahmanyam, et al., 2015). Many of such posts are positive and self-enhancing (Bareket-Bojmel, Moran, & Shahar, 2016), reflecting an idealized and/or socially desirable image (Manago et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2008).

Whereas many studies of online self-presentation attend to the construction of a positive self-image¹ (e.g., Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016; Manago et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2008), there are more dimensions involved in presenting oneself. Drawing on the literature of self-disclosure and self-presentation, Yang and Brown (2016) examined a multi-faceted model of online self-presentation. Specifically, the content of self-presentation varies on four dimensions. Breadth refers to the amount of self-information revealed; depth denotes the intimacy of the information presented (e.g., personal thoughts, emotions, weaknesses, etc.); positivity reflects how positive or negative the presented image is; authenticity indicates the level of genuine representation of the self.

¹ Positive self-presentation typically refers to presenting an idealized self-image (e.g., Manago et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2008) and/or presenting the self in a socially desirable manner (e.g., Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016; Chua & Chang, 2016). In social media research, positive self-presentation has been measured through both presenters' self-report (e.g., Yang & Brown, 2016) and an audience's evaluation (e.g., Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016).

This multi-faceted view allows scholars to obtain a more comprehensive picture of self-presentation, and thus was adopted as a framework of this study.

The relationship between online self-presentation and self-esteem is often analyzed based on Walther's (1996) hyperpersonal model, which focuses on selective (and thus presumably positive) self-presentation. Although the hyperpersonal model was originally developed to study computer-mediated communication, later scholars have expanded it to the research of self-esteem, arguing that selective (positive) self-presentation enhances one's positive self-view by bringing positive self-traits to the presenter's awareness (e.g., Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). However, in many of these experimental studies, selective self-presentation was operationalized as editing one's social media page; there was no information about whether the editing indeed highlighted the presenter's positive image (e.g., Gentile, Twenge, Freeman, & Campbell, 2012; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). Later on, Yang and Brown (2016) adopted the multi-faceted model and explicitly asked questions about positive self-presentation (along with the other facets), and found that all four dimensions introduced above were related to receiving more positive feedback from the audience, which in turn contributed to higher concurrent self-esteem.

It is curious, however, whether all four dimensions of self-presentation would still relate to higher self-esteem after the mediator (positive feedback from the audience) is removed, which Yang and Brown (2016) did not examine. If, as the expanded hyperpersonal model suggests, online self-presentation contributes to higher self-esteem mainly because it allows users to selectively present an optimized self-image and become aware of the characteristics they can be proud of (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011), then the dimension of positive self-presentation should indeed relate to higher self-esteem. However, the same association may not necessarily hold for other dimensions. For instance, the dimension of depth involves revealing one's weaknesses and information that could lead to negative judgments of the presenter (Yang & Brown, 2016). Such presentation may operate in the opposite direction from positive self-presentation and relate to lower self-esteem. The effects of broad and authentic self-presentations are less predictable under the hyperpersonal framework, although one would probably hypothesize authentic self-presentation to relate to higher self-esteem, considering the positive relationships between authenticity and perceived self-worth (Harter, 2012). Given that these dimensions may not relate to self-esteem uniformly, we proposed a research question to explore these different possibilities:

RQ1: How would different dimensions of social media self-presentation relate to self-esteem?

Regarding identity clarity in relation to Internet use, there are two competing hypotheses: the unity hypothesis and the fragmentation hypothesis (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Echoing Erikson's (1968) theory that exploration plays a central role in achieving a clear sense of self, the unity hypothesis argues that the Internet allows youth to clarify who they are by providing rich opportunities for exploration. In contrast, the fragmentation hypothesis, along the line of Gergen's (1991) theory that technologies lead to identity multiplicity, posits that the diverse personalities one can craft online make it more difficult to establish an integrated sense of self. Both hypotheses have received some support (e.g., Davis, 2013; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Yang & Brown, 2016), but none of these studies investigated the direct relationships between specific self-presentation dimensions and identity clarity.

According to the unity hypothesis, broad and deep self-presentations, which provide rich room for exploration, should facilitate identity clarity. Through such self-presentations, freshmen are likely to introduce a comprehensive version of the self to their new peers, which may accelerate their search for a niche in the new environment and thus regain a clear sense of self at the college transition (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2013). On the other hand, according to the fragmentation hypothesis, broad and deep self-presentations can cause identity multiplicity and thus hinder identity integration. Opposite

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