

# The Self in the Digital Space: Exploring the Implications for Young Adults in Defining their Self on Social Media

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## **Abstract**

Young adults are immersed in a digital world, captivated in a social media space in which they have acquired the power to design interactions based on desired gratifications, ultimately, presenting an ideal version of the digital self. According to the Self-Concept theory and the Presentation of the Self theory, individuals can present many versions of the self that may not align to the real self, which can have further implications on the individual's development of identity. This begs the question of what benefits and challenges young adults may face in defining their concept of self when presented on social media. As such, this paper aims to address these benefits and challenges from an exploratory and constructivist approach to understand these implications of defining the concept of self on social media. A systematic review of the literature revealed that young adults present ideal versions of the self on their social media profiles by tailoring their posts to show higher social status, idealised images and biographies, and ultimately present their desired version of self. Whilst this may create a higher digital self-esteem, it also results in incongruent notions of self, negatively impacting self-esteem and creating a lack of self-concept clarity outside the digital space. Lacking in the literature is a focus on how the digital self is curated and how the challenges faced in this endeavour can be approached. Therefore, we recommend that further research focus on these areas and to provide solutions to the challenges faced.

**Keywords:** identity, self-concept, self-esteem, social media, young adults.

## **1. Introduction**

Within the twenty-first century, the world has become captivated with the digital space, immersed in various media and online platforms that offer many tools for entertainment, education and social purposes (Hilty et al., 2023). Focusing on social media (SM), it is often used as an umbrella term to describe a plethora of online media

platforms such as blogs, networks, forums, and digital platforms that allow for content sharing, wide-spread communication, and different types of social connectedness. Its uses are dynamic and everchanging as the SM space grows with technological advancements (Aichner et al., 2021). According to Statistica (2024), as of July 2024, 5.45 billion people globally were recorded as internet users, with 5.17 billion being SM users, most of which were young adults. According to Skogen et al. (2020), young adults deem SM desirable due to the immediacy it offers for social interactions, allowing them the power to obtain instant social gratification, feedback, and the opportunity to learn what is socially acceptable. Fullwood et al. (2020) further explain that young adults use SM to experiment with different self-presentation styles for identity development purposes as it provides a wide range of tools to design their own interactions and presentation according to desired gratifications. This further allows them to present idealised versions of their self that may or may not be congruent with their real self (Meeus et al., 2022). It is for these reasons that young adults have become captivated by the SM space.

Whilst this may have positive implications for well-being and self-esteem, it can also have negative implications on self-concept clarity and identity formation. According to Roger's (1959) Self-Concept theory and Goffman's (1956) Presentation of the Self theory, when incongruence between the ideal and real self occurs, self-esteem can be negatively impacted, which can further impact the individual's development of self, identity and self-actualisation. This uncertainty of the implications of young adult SM use begs the question of what the benefits and challenges are that young adults may face in defining their concept of self when interacting on SM. As such, this study investigates this question by dividing it into three sub-questions:

- (1.1) In what ways do young adults present their self on SM?
- (1.2) What congruence is present between the self that young adults present online and their real self?
- (1.3) What are the implications of these curated digital selves for young adults?

## **2. Methodology**

As the study aims to investigate the benefits and challenges faced by young adults in defining their concept of self on SM, a qualitative design was used. This design followed the interpretivist paradigm using its epistemological, ontological and axiological values and assertions to view the current topic. This was done from an exploratory and constructivist approach. The study's key research question and sub-questions are exploratory in nature. Furthermore, the proposed research questions were explored from a philosophical perspective which further required a constructivist approach that accounts for prior experiences and social interactions to inform current behaviour on self-presentations. Following these approaches and designs, the current study employed a systematic literature review to collect secondary data to describe the way in which young adults present their self on SM and to explore the implications of this self-presentation. The papers sourced for this review were first selected in two stages: collection of initial seed papers and the sourcing of further similar studies based on those seed papers. Seed papers are deemed influential publications which have high citation count as well as topic

centrality (links with other publications and authors) within a field of study. In the first stage, research databases were explored using search phrases based on the study's research sub-questions and key words. The first 10 most applicable and relevant papers were selected as seed papers. In the second stage, the selected 10 seed papers were used to source further applicable and relevant papers using key themes, theoretical approaches, and key words. A total of 22 papers were sourced as secondary data for the systematic literature review.

### 3. Theoretical Approach

For this study two theories, Rogers' (1959) Self-Concept and Goffman's (1956) Presentation of the Self, were utilised to cement the conceptualisation of the self-concept and how the self is defined and presented in a digital space. Individuals have different versions of the self, of importance to this study is the real and ideal self and that the presentation of the ideal self in social interactions may not align to the real self, which can have further implications on the individual's development of identity and self-actualisation. Rogers (2010) aptly provides a robust theoretical understanding of self-concept, the development of self, self-structure, self-actualisation and ultimately the congruences or incongruences of self. He is deemed one of the founding members of humanistic psychology in which he had subsequently pioneered the person-centred approach to psychotherapy (Murphy & Joseph, 2018). It is within this approach where one finds the foundation of Self-Concept theory.

Self-concept refers to the organised, consistent conceptual *gestalt* composed of perceptions held of characteristics of I (or me), the relationships of the I (or me) to others, the various aspects of life and the values attached to these perceptions (Rogers, 1959). Gestalt signifies an intrinsic understanding and knowing that the concept of self is an organised whole that is perceived as more than the sum of its parts. Self-concept includes a person's view of self-structure. Self-structure includes the perceptions held of ones' developed self, socialised self and ideal self. The ideal self, of specific importance here, includes the self-concept of which the individual would most like to possess, and upon which one places the highest value for self and self-actualisation. Self-actualisation is the inherent tendency of an individual to develop and nurture all aspects and capabilities in ways which will serve to maintain and enhance the self.

Following the development of the self-structure, the individual's tendency towards actualisation further actualises the experience of the individual which is symbolised as the self. Therefore, if the self and experiences of the self are congruent in awareness, then the actualisation tendency is deemed unified resulting in unconditional self-regard, optimal psychological adjustment and maturity, and unique and creative adaption allowing for the continual process of further self-actualisation. However, if self and experience of self are incongruent in awareness, the individual is not able to move towards a tendency to actualise the self resulting in vulnerability, threat, defensiveness, denial, anxiety and psychological maladjustment. Thus, self-concept is holistically defined as a gestalt which is available to awareness in the pursuit of self-actualisation.

The above theory has provided the foundation for understanding self-concept, it is now important to understand how the self is presented. Goffman (1956) provides a dramaturgical analysis of human social interaction and social life. He is considered one of the most influential sociologist and social psychologist of the twentieth century (Stewart & Zaaiman, 2018). His conceptualisation has paved the understanding of how one presents the self within social interactions based on the situation, context and people around them.

When an individual interacts with others there is a common need on both ends to acquire information to draw generalisable conclusions about the individual and the interaction itself (Goffman, 1956). Information about the socio-economic status, competency, race, gender, character, and conception of self of the individual is important. Information about the individual helps others define the situation as well as what can be expected from that interaction. At times an individual will present a version of self in a way that aligns with larger socio-economic roles and expectations of that given time, place and society. Furthermore, this information allows the individual and others to 'act' accordingly.

Ultimately, when an individual performs in front of others – a socialised self is presented. The individual's performance is, thus, socialised; clearly annotating the larger values and expectations of society. Goffman (1956) refers to this as 'idealisation'. If an individual is to present an ideal expression of a socialised self, acceptable to others – at times the individual will need to conceal certain information or actions which are inconsistent with those held. This results in a socialised self that is not aligned to what Rogers (1959) deems the real self as the individual is expected to keep up the performance set out by society. Thus, 'misrepresentation' of the self is required, a somewhat 'false front' is developed to maintain the impression of the front which the individual is expected to perform – a state of 'mystification', whereby the performance of an individual accentuates certain matters and conceals others to maintain the definition of the interaction.

When viewing both theories through the lens of this study one can assume that an individual will present a particular version of the self in any social interaction. The version that is presented may be either the real or ideal self. Whatever self is being presented will be based on the interactional role the individual is expected to perform – based on the situation, social context and people found within the interaction. Applying this to a digital interaction if an individual presents a version online that is congruent with the ideal self a state of continual self-actualisation is possible for the digital self (also referred to as the digital persona). However, if the self presented does not align to the ideal self, the individual's self-concept is incongruent, creating a digital self unable to self-actualise.

#### **4. Literature Review**

Young adults find themselves immersed and captivated SM platforms that allow for multiple avenues of self-presentation, experimentation and identity formation – whether it be the development of the real self or an idealised self. However, many

scholars have produced research and findings that debate the value of the SM space for the development of self, how individuals choose to self-present on SM, the authenticity of the curated digital self, and the implications of this self-presentation and curation of the digital self for the individual. As such, this review discussed multiple papers and studies that provide varying findings on these debates from various contexts and locations to allow for a theoretical answer on what the benefits and challenges are for young adults in defining their concept of self when self-presenting on SM. In doing so, this systematic review aimed to understand three main components: (1) how young adults self-present in the SM space; (2) what congruency exists between the self they present on SM and their real self; and (3) what implications – positive and negative – can be expected in their curation of the digital self. These three components will be discussed in four main themes that discuss the relationship between the self and SM, what the curated digital self is and why it is significant, how the self is presented on SM, and the implications of this self-presentation and curated digital self on SM for the individual.

### **Social Media and the Self**

Since the inception of SM in the mid-1990s and its increasing uptake of users worldwide, scholars have investigated the links between SM and how SM is used. However, as SM use increased, more studies began to reveal findings that suggested links between SM and the self, particularly in self-presentation, identity formation, and how individuals gravitate towards SM platforms for its functions in these areas. To understand how young adults use SM for self-presentation and to curate their digital self (real or ideal), it is imperative to first cement contextual understanding of what the relationship between SM and the self is, and how it relates to the context of self-presentation, self-concept clarity and identity formation.

SM users engage on SM platforms for social interaction, self-presentation and experimentation, and self-concept and identity formation (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Goffman's Presentation of Self explains how the self is presented in social environments in the offline world but can also explain them in the digital space. Individuals perform their self according to the social environment in which they find themselves, projecting an image of their self they believe would be socially accepted. When this is done in the digital space, it creates a blended identity, suggesting that the online self re-informs the offline self by allocating power or dominance of self rather to one than the other (Baker, 2009). Linking this to self-concept, Stanculescu (2011) explains that there is a core self-concept that is stable and that acknowledges what components establish the self, and a working self-concept that is dynamic and flexible in nature, allowing for change and experimentation in what one knows to be the self. Within the digital space, this working self-concept is continuously built upon, allowing for the working self-concept to flourish as dominant, and sending the stable self-concept backstage in these social interactions and performances of self. This provides the theoretical understanding of the links between the SM space and the self, however, it further posits the question of why this digital space is so desired by young adults for these purposes.

According to Skogen et al. (2020), individuals view SM as desirable due to the immediacy of social interaction and feedback it provides – especially younger age groups who are still forming their sense of self and identity. SM allows for individuals to find characteristics, norms and patterns of what is currently deemed socially acceptable, providing them the tools to then shape and align their self-presentation, self-concept and identity to an idealised version that they think would be perceived as accepted. Fullwood et al. (2020) suggests that the most desirable characteristic of SM is that it provides the opportunity for individuals to present different versions of their self for identity development purposes and to manage how others perceive them, creating a safe space for self-experimentation. Meeus et al. (2023) corroborate this, adding that younger age groups use SM platforms as they provide identity management and performance tools that increase the possibility of selective self-presentation, allowing for the curation of content that conforms to idealised standards and that compliments ideal self-presentation. It can clearly be seen that self-presentation in the digital space is a significant part of online social interaction, mirroring its significance in the offline world as Goffman (1956) explains it. However, its significance in the digital space continuously influences the individual, social and cultural contexts and identities of individuals, adding an even more dynamic nature to self-presentation, self-concept and identity formation to navigate (Yang & Ying, 2021).

The dynamic nature of self-presentation, self-concept and identity formation in the digital space has also been noted as an influential factor for incongruence between the real and ideal self. Bailey et al. (2020) asserts that SM users engage in self-expression, and in doing so, face tension between self-presenting their real self or an idealised version of self. This incongruent self-presentation can be presented online in a variety of ways. SM platforms such as Facebook are commonly used as they allow users to post content, exchange comments and messages, and share personal stories to stay updated and connected with others – widening the social audience they are performing to (Jang et al., 2018; Schyff et al., 2022). This further allows for a perceived safer space for self-presentation and self and identity role play (Twomey & O'Reilly, 2017). This then further aligns to Roger (1959) and Goffman (1956) as SM allows for users to self-present in ways that can make them feel included and accepted, but also unique and distinctive compared to others (Brewer, 1991). Stanculescu (2011) argues that it is also this characteristic of SM and this allowance for self-experimentation that drives online self-presentation amongst younger age groups. This is also similar to identity management as it allows for users to be selective in performances to present according to multiple social roles and for multiple different audiences based on what they learned from their own content consumption (Pedroni et al., 2014).

Building on Stanculescu's (2011) work, Jin et al. (2021) argues that individuals use SM to explore new stages for new roles they wish to play, creating a space to perform certain roles they believe may help them achieve further self-satisfaction and that may improve the evaluation of their self-presentation from others. This can be further dissected in two categories of SM platforms according to Skogen et al. (2020); namely self-oriented and other-oriented SM. Self-oriented SM include platforms that revolve

around presenting content focused on the self, whereas other-oriented SM include platforms that focus on what others upload and interactions with other-user content. According to Steinsbekk et al. (2021) the way individuals interact with SM for self-presentation purposes differs based on these two SM platform categories.

Ultimately, SM has a significant link to self-presentation, concept of self, and identity formation in many different facets. Within this relationship, SM brings many benefits and challenges, especially due to its allowances for self-editing and idealised self-presentation, in which users can easily blur the links between real self-presentation, persona adoption, and uncertainty of identity and self-concept clarity (Jin et al., 2021). This could also assist individuals in promoting and improving their real self-presentation, concept of self, and stimulate a sense of belonging in a social capacity. As such, it is important to understand the digital self that is curated in this space.

### **The Curated Digital Self**

When presenting a certain self or a variety of selves on SM, a digital self is curated. Self-presentations, self-descriptions and social connections made and performed on SM are components that build this curated digital self (Stanculescu, 2011). According to Yang and Ying (2021), if the digital self is presented in a certain way, autonomy can be achieved without negative implications experienced in the real world, however, this requires self-presentation online that is congruent to the real self offline. Chan (2022) argues that different elements of the self are influenced and shaped by the digital world. Within the digital age, different domains of the self are influenced and mediated by the digital space and these influences manifest in both online and offline spaces. The changes that individuals may experience in their identity as a result of this may be that congruence between the real self and the digital self is achieved, or that incongruence occurs. Should misalignment occur, this can have negative implications for identity formation and clarity of self-concept – which is especially true if this incongruence occurs in other-oriented SM platforms (Steinsbekk et al., 2021).

Adding to Stanculescu (2011), Steinsbekk et al. (2021) and Chan's (2022) assertions above, Meeus et al. (2023) explain that if one's presented self on SM is met with positive conformity feedback, the presenter is more likely to internalise that self into their identity – regardless of whether it aligns to their real self. They also explain that idealised self-presentation on SM is not always cause for concern as it could be for self- or identity experimentation purposes – especially during formative and adolescent years – to promote self-discovery and to develop a validated core self-concept. Similarly, Bullingham and Vasconcelos' (2012) research concluded that the online self is anchored to the offline self, and when minimal disparities between the two are present, positive implications occur. As such, the way in which one self-presents on SM dictates what digital self is curated and may dictate the implications of that self-presentation for the individual. This further aligns to Roger's (1959) assertions of self-concept and how clarity of self can be achieved. However, to understand the implications of this self-presentation and the anchoring between the digital self and the real self offline, the way young adults self-present on SM must be cemented.

### **Self-Presentation on Social Media Platforms**

How individuals self-present on SM is dynamic as new platforms, new functions, and new types of media are released. Stanculescu (2011) points out that research from as early as 1999 has investigated the way in which people self-present on SM, and that findings from that time period already indicate that SM users have the tendency to present themselves in a positive light to garner social approval. For instance, individuals use SM to present themselves as more physically appealing, more competent, and more socially connected and of a higher social status to gain social approval. Within this, there is interplay between self-description and self-monitoring in the digital and offline space to manage impressions of the self to others. On SM, individuals will present certain traits of their personal self, social self, and their core and working self, specifically selecting what traits to depict and to manage how others view them. This links back to Goffman's (1956) assertion that people perform versions of their selves, almost as if wearing a mask for the performance, based on the audience (Jin et al., 2021).

Bullingham and Vasconcelos's (2012) findings, contradict this, indicating that individuals re-create their offline real self on SM, allowing for their real self to completely inform the digital self. Their study showed that participants would rather create their digital self which mirrored their real self than engage in ideal self-presentation. However, participants would engage in minor self-editing in creating this digital self, and this embellishment of self can still be viewed as subtle forms of idealised self-presentation. Azar et al. (2014) found similar results, stating that the selves individuals present on Facebook are usually real but separated into different aspects of self by posting content and media in different album categories on that profile. In this way, they can construct and manage their profile and interactions by separating their personality into certain aspects to gratify certain psychological needs. Potentially, this could also be a strategy that allows for individuals to separate the aspects that make up their real self for further development and self-concept clarity.

Pedroni et al. (2014) found results that corroborate Stanculescu's (2011) findings. Their study explained that people manage their image on SM by dealing only with content that they perceive to be more socially acceptable. They assert that individuals will consume the content posted by their friends on SM and use this to identify patterns in what is socially accepted, using those patterns to manage their own self-presentations to feel more connected. Adding to this, Twomey and O'Reilly (2017) found that Facebook users in particular use their profiles to present a self that is an enhanced version of their real self. However, their data indicated that whilst enhancements were present, the presented digital self remained a highly accurate presentation of their real offline self, demonstrating congruence between their digital and real self.

Wright et al. (2017) further found that idealised self-presentation was highly demonstrated on SM and that it was usually done through lying and liking behaviours - lying behaviours include posting falsified or fictional information or creating fake profiles, and liking behaviours include dishonest liking of posts and content. Their results showed that moral norms such as age, self-esteem, group norms, and social

norms were major predictors in these behaviours – specifically lying behaviours – and contributed to the idealised self-presentation found. Jing's et al. (2018) study sheds light on this, explaining that when using SM for social connectedness and interaction, individuals will use these predictors to manage their relationships with others by managing their self-presentations. They argue that this is done in real self-presentation strategies or idealised self-presentation strategies.

Building on the abovementioned findings, Harris and Bardey (2019) found that Instagram users consistently present idealised versions of self, indicating the presence of the halo effect as integral in the process of self-presentation on SM. They too found that users present what they believe to be their positive personality traits to garner social acceptance. Interestingly, Brewer (1991) provides context for these findings, explaining that individuals will perform and present a self that will meet, adhere to, or supersede societal norms to ensure positive uniqueness and social acceptance – regardless of whether it reflects the real or idealised self. Bailey et al. (2020) estimated the degree of self-idealisation versus real self-expression as the proximity between user's self-reported real self and personality traits and what they perceive to be positive personality judgements based on likes. This means that individuals' tendency to self-present idealised versions of self could depend on the degree to which they meet positive personality judgements from others.

Focusing on this self-presentation tendency, Skogen's et al (2020) study notes that self-presentation practices include sharing of self-created content, posting of opinions and personal material, and sharing and promoting of other-user content. It is the individual performer who chooses how to consume and present these materials. Their findings also indicated a higher focus on self-presentation practices in younger SM users, specifically adolescents. Similarly, Jin et al. (2021) found that SM users control and manage how they self-present more on platforms where their identity is known than on anonymous platforms. This is because platforms that are not anonymous call for users to be cautious in how they choose to self-present, specifically in what they post about, the words they use in their posts, and the content they share. In contrast, they suggest that participants were more likely to present a real self on anonymous platforms as they did not need to be as cautious. Overall, their study concluded that in both anonymous platforms and those platforms where identity is known, users present a self with a level of masking – as per Goffman's (1956) theory, with certain masks being deeper or more edited than others based on the audience and anonymity of the performer.

This is also similar to Steinsbekk's et al. (2021) findings that the way in which individuals self-present differs based on the focus of the platform and who the audience of that performance is. This is also corroborated in Yang and Ying's (2021) study, indicating that self-presentation online includes self-enhancement when the audience is perceived by the presenter as needing to socially accept the performer. Schyff's et al. (2022) study on phubbing – the use of one's mobile device to the point of disregarding company and social interaction in the physical world – may also play

a role in self-presentation. Their findings indicated that excessive Instagram use and phubbing influences the likelihood of idealised self-presentation on SM.

In contrast to the more recent studies that indicate the growth of idealised self-presentations on SM, Kreling et al. (2022) found that SM users engage more in real self-presentation. Specifically, their results indicated that Instagram users today engage in slightly more real self-presentations through their story updates rather than their posts. They explain that this is because Instagram story updates have different expectations and cognitions than Instagram posts, resulting in different self-presentation strategies used by the users.

Meeus et al. (2023) focuses on whether the self-presentation is real or idealised, finding that during all self-presentations on SM, social feedback was of significant importance. They explained that feedback such as online popularity, likes, comments, and tags by other users allowed users to not only evaluate others' self-presentations, but also their own for learning and development. When presenting the self on SM, individuals adapt to the features they are given by posting certain self-descriptions, such as specific photos of themselves to selectively disclose information to the audience to collect social feedback and approval. Based on this, they concluded that all self-presentation on SM can be deemed selective as users will present their self based on such information. Users may present a self that is congruent to their real self, but these too are intentional performances and are selected knowingly.

As can be seen, the study of self-presentation on SM has provided mixed results on whether SM users present a real self or an idealised self in the digital space. This may be since self-presentation runs on societal norms and trends, or it may be since not all influential factors have been considered – such as whether the presenter is an active or passive user and creator on SM platforms (Ruan et al., 2020). Moreover, these contradictory results beg the question of what the implications could be considering that there is evidence of real and idealised self-presentation on SM platforms.

### **Implications of Digital Self-Presentation**

Whether one's self-presentation is reflective of their real or ideal self, implications of self-presentation are usually present. Previous research indicates the presence and experience of both positive and negative implications as a result of self-presentations (real or ideal), which has sparked the debate of the value of self-presenting on SM. Focusing first on the positive implications, Stanculescu's (2011) results indicated that self-presentations influence the way one curates their digital self and how they view their self-concept. Furthermore, for individuals with high levels of shyness or anxiety, the use of self-presentation can be beneficial as it allows them to manage how they self-present to gain social acceptance, providing an avenue to lessen social embarrassment and uncertainty, and increase their sense of security, self-confidence, and overall subjective well-being. Furthermore, selective self-presentation can help individuals find their personal and social identity.

Adding to this, Reinecke and Trepte (2014) found that online authenticity on SM can have a positive long-term effect on subjective well-being for users who have low levels of well-being. Building on this, Jang et al. (2018) found that high self-esteem users showed greater degree of self-reported happiness after posting on Facebook, regardless of the nature of their self-presentation. Similarly, Bailey et al. (2020) found that individuals who present their real self report greater life satisfaction and well-being. Yang and Ying (2021) suggest that these benefits can be explained by the need for intimacy, asserting that active self-presentation on SM is done to reduce feelings of loneliness as the primary image-based content of SM platforms provides enhanced intimacy. They also suggest that these self-presentation strategies are positively linked to overall psychological well-being. However, Meeus et al. (2023) maintain that these positive implications of self-presentation on SM only coincide with more truthful and real self-presentations.

Twomey and O'Reilly (2017) debate the opposite, stating that idealised self-presentation on Facebook is associated with lower self-esteem, higher social anxiety, neuroticism and narcissism. Skogen et al. (2020) similarly found that a high focus on self-presentation is associated with more mental health problems and risks and overall reduced quality of life. Wright et al. (2017) explains that these types of self-presentations are also usually associated with depression and stress, presenting further negative implications of idealised self-presentation on SM. Jin et al. (2021) also acknowledged that this could lead young adults to experience role confusion in the physical world if the roles they perform on SM do not align to those they undertake in face-to-face interactions. Schyff et al. (2022) adds that excessive use of enhanced self-presentation could be related to the problematic use of social networking sites as it allows for higher levels of social comparison. Hjetland et al. (2022) suggests that this social comparison, as well as feedback-seeking and strategic self-representation may represent risk factors for negative mental health implications.

Focusing on both the positive and negative implications, Fullwood et al. (2020) found that individuals with higher self-concept clarity and self-monitoring were more likely to engage with real self-presentations on SM. In contrast, younger individuals and those with higher social anxiety and lower self-concept clarity were more likely to present idealised selves. Their results also indicate that more diverse self-presentations across multiple SM platforms is associated with lower self-concept clarity, lower self-esteem, and less self-monitoring, suggesting that adults with a less self-concept clarity may benefit from self-presentation experimentation like younger groups. Overall, the study concluded that individuals with a more stable sense of self present a self that is congruent with the real self and those with a less clear sense of self present an idealised version of self.

Steinsbekk et al. (2021) add that the nature of the impact of self-presentation could also depend on the type of SM platform being used, such as other-oriented or self-oriented platforms. Their findings suggest that there are negative impacts from other-oriented SM use on self-esteem that may be detrimental to other aspects of identity formation. They suggest that this is especially true for adolescents and young adults

who are still forming their identities. They also found that higher and more frequent use of other-oriented SM resulted in lower self-esteem during these formative development years as a result of over-stimulated social comparisons. Their study concluded that the distinction between self-oriented and other-oriented SM is important to consider when looking at implications of self-presentation as the nature of the implication and what it influences changes depending on the type of media used.

Furthering this perspective Kreling et al. (2022) demonstrate that when participants in their study's sample evaluated their self-presentations, they perceived themselves to be differently authentic based on their SM use. The impact of these self-presentations is most significant and pronounced for adolescents and emerging young adults who are still developing their real selves. Meeus et al. (2023) provided further perspective on this, explaining that more truthful online self-presentation practices were associated with more positive self-esteem towards one's physical appearance. In contrast to this, their study revealed that idealised self-presentations were associated with negative self-esteem and perceived attractiveness - especially for younger age groups. As such, they argue that SM can be used beneficially if the users focus on their own profiles in an authentic manner. If users perceive their self-presentations to be inaccurate and focus on idealised self-presentations across media platforms, their self-affirmation processes can be obstructed and challenges to their self-esteem and well-being may occur. Bij de Vaate et al. (2023) further note that the creation and consumption of authentic content can increase mental health and body satisfaction, and creating and consuming inauthentic content can reduce mental health and body satisfaction.

As such, some scholars believe that there are more challenges experienced as a result of self-presentation on SM, whilst others believe there are more benefits, or that there are a mix of implications depending on the type of media used and the nature of the self-presentation. However, what is clear is that there is a significant link in contemporary society between SM and the self, allowing for the curation of the digital self that can be presented using a variety of different self-presentation behaviours on SM. Additionally, it is clear that there are both positive and negative implications of this self-presentation on SM.

## **5. Discussion**

The current study investigated the benefits and challenges young adults face in defining their concept of self when presented on SM. In doing so, the study aimed to understand three main components: (1) the ways in which young adults present their self on SM; (2) whether there is congruence between the online presented self to the real self; and (3) what the implications are of these curated digital selves on self-concept, self-actualisation and identity. SM has become a pervasive part of contemporary social life for young adults, providing them a platform to define, express and present the self. Young adults have a plethora of ways to present the self to others and most commonly do so by presenting a self that will be deemed socially acceptable. Engaging on SM is used to identify which characteristics and norms are

preferred in social interactions by gauging how others present the self as well as through feedback from others. This further allows individuals to align their definitions of self, self-presentation and self-concept to what others deem acceptable (Jin et al., 2021; Skogen et al., 2020). Moreover, individuals engage on SM for self-expression and in doing so face tension between presenting a real or idealised self (Bailey et al., 2020) as individuals have contrasting needs of being included and to be distinctive to others (Stanculescu, 2011). Individuals, therefore, use SM to explore new roles that may help achieve further self-evaluation of their self-presentation (Jin et al., 2021). Thus, individuals perform multiple social roles for multiple audiences by creatively expressing content that is consistent with their self-presentation (Pedroni et al., 2014). How the self is presented online shapes an individual's self-concept.

Several studies show that individuals tend to present a self online that is appealing to others (physical attractiveness, attitude statements and social associations) and will adapt this construction of self-presentation by selecting the ideal traits to present (Harris & Bardey, 2019; Azar et al., 2014; Pedroni et al., 2014; Skogen et al., 2020; Stanculescu, 2011). This can be done through the tailoring of self-descriptions or biographies, the editing of posted images, and through lying and dishonest liking behaviours (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2012; Stanculescu, 2011; Skogen et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2017). Some scholars found that individuals tended to engage in real self-presentation that is congruent to their self (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2012). The above correlates with Goffman's theory that individuals adapt their presentation of self to ensure a socialised (ideal) self is presented in online social interactions to meet idealisation.

Concerning congruency of the online presented self to that of the real self, research shows that self-presentation is an important part of online social interaction allowing one to continuously build upon the real self-concept by allowing the ideal self-concept to flourish (Stanculescu, 2011). The self presented online is influenced by individual, social and cultural contexts – and since the inception of the digital age – the digital world (Chan, 2022) thus amplifying the nature of self-concept and identity formation (Yang & Ying, 2021). Thus, the self is influenced and mediated by the digital space which in turn manifests in physical and online interactions. It is further suggested that the changes an individual experience in their identity is resulting in newly formed selves – at times this newly formed self is incongruent with the perceived real self, as is the case with digital natives (Chan, 2022). Selective self-presentation was found to be often incongruent with the real self depending on how selective that self-presentation is (Meeus et al., 2022). Yet, other studies show that SM users engage in real self-presentation as individuals perceive their online self as having equal status with their real self and that it is simply performing a particular self in a different context (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2012; Kreling et al., 2022). Furthermore, some individuals prefer to recreate their real self on SM, clearly demonstrating a congruence between their online and real self (Twomey & O'Reilly, 2017). The above links with Rogers' theory, indicating that self-presentation that is not aligned to the real self creates an incongruency of selves and real self-presentation that aligns with the real self creates a congruency of self and self-concept.

When congruency or incongruency of selves occurs as a result of the curated digital self, it calls into question what the implications are. Research shows that SM provides beneficial opportunities for identity development as well as for individuals to experiment with different versions of the self (Chan, 2022; Fullwood et al., 2020; Meeus et al., 2023). Consequently, it increases the possibility for selective self-presentation using identity management tools due to the pressure to curate a self that conforms to idealised standards (Meeus et al., 2022). Furthermore, it allows for the development and actualisation of self-concept clarity by promoting and improving real self-presentation, however it could also inhibit the opposite should idealised self-presentation be perceived – ultimately, uncertainty of identity and self-concept (Jin et al., 2021). If individuals present a real online self in an authentic manner this allows for positive self-regard, as well as social desirability, approval and support – thus having a significantly positive impact on self-confidence, self-esteem, psychological well-being, self-reported happiness and life satisfaction (Bailey et al., 2020; Reinecke & Trepte, 2014; Stanculescu, 2011; Yang & Ying, 2012). However, studies show that idealised self-presentation online is associated with lower self-esteem, higher levels of social anxiety and depression, mental health problems and overall reduced quality of life (Kreling et al., 2022; Skogen et al., 2020; Twomey & O'Reilly, 2017). The above links with Rogers' and Goffman's theory, demonstrating that idealised self-presentation and the curation of a digital self that does not align to the real self creates incongruency, negatively impacting self-concept clarity, identity formation, leading to a digital self unable to self-actualise.

## **6. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Idealised self-presentation online is not necessarily a cause for concern as SM is deemed an experimental space to explore different versions of self in the quest to promote self-discovery and validate core self-concepts. Furthermore, should those audiences be experiencing pre-existing mental health issues such as social anxiety, low self-esteem and depression, experimentation with self-expression can be a valuable tool for self-discovery and self-concept clarity. Consequently, idealised self-presentation on SM can also lead to role, self-concept and identity confusion in these vulnerable age groups, worsening or creating psychological well-being, especially when the real self cannot actualise to become congruent with the curated digital self. Whilst there is research on the topic of young adults' self-presentation on SM and the implications of their curated digital self, there are still gaps present. It is clear from the previous research reviewed that the way in which young adults present the self on SM changes across time, geography and context – however, how this is actioned is not addressed. Thus, further research is required to understand how young adults in contemporary contexts present the self based on the above. Secondly, there is no current research from a South African context and little research from a mixed-method approach. As such, it is recommended that future research re-examine the provided research questions from this study using a mixed-method approach within the South African context, thus allowing the opportunity to provide recommended solutions for negative implications that may be experienced.

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