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Social Media and Reality: Are social media profiles a true representation of people's lives?

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Abstract

This study explores the authenticity of self-presentation on social media by analyzing users' perceptions of their Facebook and Instagram profiles. A structured questionnaire was administered to 200 social media users aged 18-35 in Kashmir (IAK & PAK). Descriptive analysis revealed most participants actively used both platforms daily. While 59.2% felt their profiles reflected absolute truths, sizeable minorities admitted embellishments, driven by peer acceptance motivations. Instagram personas were viewed as more authentic versus Facebook's increased selective portrayals. Dissonance between online facades and offline realities correlated with dissatisfaction. Participants acknowledged intentional persona cultivation, applying

beauty filters and deriving self-worth from peer validation indicators. However, some grappled with social media-induced anxieties and the impact of unrealistic social comparisons. Although profiles reflected some truth, considerable idealized portrayals were admitted, substantiating impressions management motivations. Notable platform variations also emerged. Mindful authenticity balancing can foster psychologically-healthy social media engagements amidst identity explorations in the digital age. This study provides meaningful insights into nuanced self-presentation techniques, motivations and authenticity discernments.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites (SNS), Facebook, Instagram, Social Media, Online Persona

Introduction

Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have proliferated over the past few decades and have become an essential part of modern society. By allowing users to create customized virtual profiles, these platforms enable the distribution of carefully curated snapshots of users' lives through a wide range of textual and visual content, as well as interactive engagements (Ellison & Boyd, 2013) ^[5]. However, there has been a lot of scholarly discussion over whether or not these digitally mediated personas are accurate depictions of users' true identities and experiences (Marwick, 2013; Yang & Brown, 2015) ^[12, 18]. This prevalent concern drives the current research project's primary goal.

The current study is specifically designed to examine a variety of challenging questions, as listed below:

1. How much do people's online profiles match who they really are and what they do in real life?
2. Do people purposely show a different, better version of themselves on social media? Why do they do this?
3. Are profiles on Facebook different from profiles on Instagram when it comes to being real or not?

The theoretical framework supporting this investigation is based on Goffman's ground-breaking self-presentation theory (1959), which holds that identity is a staged performance infused with contextual factors. Within this context, the study aims to understand how users perceive the legitimacy of their social media presence. The research aims to draw conclusions relevant to the complex web of identity formation in the digital era by probing the innermost motives and platform-specific methods used by individuals in shaping their digital identities.

Despite social media's explosive growth as a phenomena in society, empirical research particularly defining the relationship between these digital personas and the substance of users' true selves is strikingly lacking. The selective sharing of aspects of one's identity inside online contexts has been established by prior study (Vogel *et al.*, 2014) ^[15], as well as people's predisposition to curate an exaggerated version of their personas (Yang & Brown, 2015) ^[18]. An improved understanding of the complex interaction between the unique technological affordances of each platform and true self-presentation stands to be gained by contrasting insights gained from Facebook and Instagram (Dhir *et al.*, 2018) ^[4]. The current study aims to fill these

gaps by using survey data collected from users of both platforms who are located within Indian Administrated Kashmir (IAK) and Pakistani Administrated Kashmir (PAK).

Beyond its theoretical contributions about online identity enactment and the systematic drawing of lines separating one's public and private selves, this research's implications are also of practical significance. These revelations may help to shed light on educational activities designed to encourage a more genuine and subtle use of social media platforms. The research uses a targeted online survey approach that is directed at Facebook and Instagram users in the Indian IAK & PAK and concludes with quantitative analysis, so enhancing the subsequent dialogue. The next parts will follow the contours of a thorough literature study, outline the methodology, present the key findings, and ignite a conversation about the implications of those findings.

Literature Review

The literature on the phenomenon of social media participation demonstrates a complex interplay between user activity and the representation of personal identities. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have ushered in a new era of communication and self-expression, but questions about the consistency between online personas and real-world personalities still exist. The key question of this inquiry is how closely individuals' online and digital personas correspond.

According to research by Vogel *et al.* (2014) [15], people have a propensity to strategically disclose certain aspects of their identity on social media. Notably, this selective revelation includes qualities as well as emotions, viewpoints, and personality traits in addition to plain traits. Additionally, reading other people's updates causes accidental, spontaneous social comparisons (D. T. Gilbert *et al.*, 1995) [7]. The indicators of online interaction that are easily accessible, such as follower counts, likes, comments, and retweets, are what feed these comparisons. The impact of social comparison dynamics is amplified by these indicators' visibility (Appel *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, the very design of social media platforms makes it easier to maintain current offline relationships while cultivating new ones online, which amplifies the impact of social comparison (Gross & Acquisti, 2005) [11].

Goffman's (1959) [10] seminal self-presentation theory, which sheds light on the idea of identity as a contextual performance, has relevance in this area of study. The study under consideration builds on Goffman's theoretical framework by examining users' perceptions of their own authenticity in their online personas. This provides insight into the reasons and techniques used to create online personas. The congruence between online identity projection and offline self-identification, however, continues to be an area that has received little attention in the research.

According to previously published research, social comparison can contribute to social anxiety (Festinger, 1954) [6]. According to P. Gilbert (2000) [8], social comparisons that are both upward (comparing oneself to those viewed as superior) and downward (comparing oneself to those judged inferior) may cause social anxiety to increase. The relevance of this construct in the digital environment is supported by research showing that people may alter their behavior to conform to accepted standards or norms, regardless of the direction of comparison (P. Gilbert,

2001) [9]. A perceived lack of social skills and increased social anxiety may result from this increased self-consciousness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) [1]. Even though social media is widely used, there haven't been many comprehensive studies of how online personas and real self-align. Sylvia *et al.*'s (2013) [13] observation that despite social media's widespread use, there are few studies explaining users' perceptions of social media traits and benefits across various platforms captures this lack of research. These different impressions, which are frequently influenced by usage patterns, gender, and age, continue to be a vastly unexplored territory.

Similar studies carried out in Singapore highlight the interaction between Instagram use, social comparison, and self-esteem, with the latter two mediating the link between Instagram use and social anxiety (Delonia *et al.*, 2019) [3]. Direct research into how offline and online identities coincide, nevertheless, is still largely unexplored. A growing corpus of research has also recognized the impact of platform-specific affordances on self-presentation techniques (Dhir *et al.*, 2018; Waterloo *et al.*, 2018) [4, 16]. Instagram promotes the curation of aspirational photos due to its focus on visual content, in contrast to Facebook's more wide range of identity expressions.

This expanding field of inquiry emphasizes the need for careful investigation. It would be interesting to look into how users' perspectives, motivations, and self-presentation techniques intersect with their social media profiles. In order to shed light on the complex interactions between self-presentation, social comparison, and digital authenticity, the current study conducts a systematic analysis of user perceptions regarding the veracity of their online identities in the contexts of both Facebook and Instagram.

Methodology

This study used a survey-based methodology to collect data, concentrating on Facebook and Instagram, two well-known social networking sites. A Purposive Sampling technique was used to choose the participants, with the goal of gathering responses from a total sample size of 200 people, with 100 participants from each platform. The participants for data collection were chosen with the use of a straightforward random sampling approach. The survey method, which uses a structured questionnaire, was selected to support a quantitative approach because it entails gathering standardized data from a predetermined group of participants. This strategy is best suited for a respondent population with a high level of literacy.

The distribution of the online questionnaire was conducted via direct messaging, targeting 100 Facebook users and 100 Instagram users. The survey instrument comprised closed-ended questions, which were designed to align with the educational and literacy levels of the respondents. Various statistical techniques and formulas were applied to analyze the gathered data and derive meaningful results.

Population: 200 social media users

Methodology: Online Survey

Tool: Questionnaire

Sampling method: Purposive sampling

This study adopts a quantitative survey approach with the primary objective of exploring users' perceptions concerning the authenticity of profiles on Facebook and Instagram. The

research is guided by the following key objectives:

- Assess the accuracy of Facebook and Instagram profiles in reflecting users' real lives.
- Investigate users' intentions in presenting an idealized or altered self on social media.
- Examine variations in authenticity perceptions between profiles on Facebook and Instagram.

To address these objectives, a structured online questionnaire consisting of 30 multiple-choice questions was developed. The questionnaire covers aspects such as the frequency and purpose of social media use, the accuracy of self-presentation, motivations for portraying oneself online and demographic details.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to gather responses from a diverse group of 200 social media users aged 18 to 35, with equal representation from both Facebook and Instagram. The participant pool was drawn from the regions of Pakistan Administered Kashmir and Indian Administered Kashmir. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents' identities remained anonymous.

Descriptive statistical analysis was performed to present frequencies and percentages for each survey item. Additionally, a comparative analysis was conducted to identify differences in authenticity perceptions and self-presentation motivations between the two platforms. Graphical representations were utilized to enhance the visualization of key findings. This quantitative approach facilitated a systematic examination of perceptual trends within the collected data.

However, it's important to acknowledge certain limitations associated with the quantitative methodology. The closed-ended nature of the survey questions may have constrained participants' ability to provide detailed explanations. Moreover, the sample's geographical restriction may impact the generalizability of the findings. Future qualitative research endeavours could provide deeper insights into the rationale behind participants' authenticity evaluations.

Participant’s information

This study includes (43%) male and (57%) females. The ages of the respondents ranged between 18 and 35 years. 77% of respondents were between the ages of 20 and 30; 8% were between the ages of 18 and 20; 8% were between the ages of 30-35; and 7% were aged 35 and over.

According to data collected, 48% of respondents hold a Postgraduate degree, 24.5% hold a Graduate degree, 20.5%

hold an Undergraduate degree, and 7% hold a Doctorate degree, indicating that respondents were highly educated.

Table 1: Participants Background

<i>Frequency=N()</i>			
		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	86	43%
	Female	114	57%
Age	18 - 10	16	8%
	20- 25	74	37%
	25- 30	81	40.5%
	30-35	16	8%
	35 and above	13	6.5%
Level of education	Undergraduate	41	20.5%
	Graduate	49	24.5%
	Postgraduate	96	48%
	Doctorate	14	7%

Analysis of the data

Detailed analysis of the proposed questions:

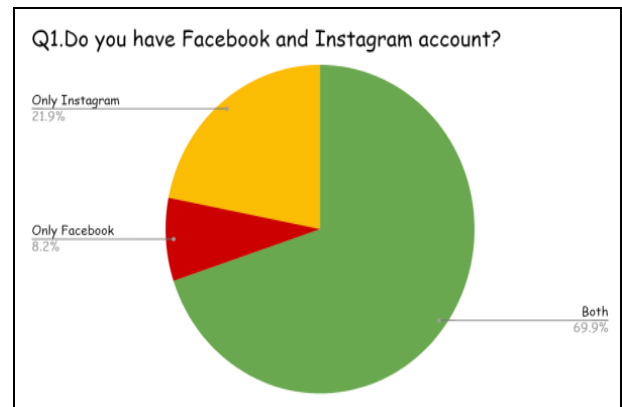


Fig 1

While responding to the question about Facebook and Instagram accounts, 69.9% of respondents have both accounts, 21.9% have only an Instagram account, and 8.2% have only a Facebook account, indicating that the majority of the respondents used both social media platforms as shown in Fig 1.

According to data 74% of the audience spends 1-4 hours per day on social media, 15.8% spend 4-6 hours per day, and 6% spend 6-8 hours per day on social media, indicating that the majority of the respondents are active social media users.

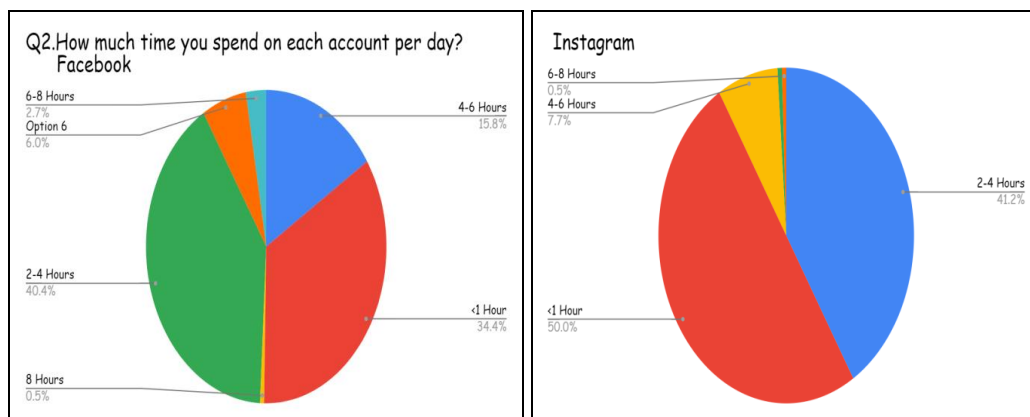


Fig 2

This Fig (2) shows, 50% of Instagram users log in everyday for one hour, 41.2% for two to four hours, 7.7% for four to six hours, and 2% for more than six hours. 74% of the population uses Facebook every day for 1-4 hours, 15.8%

use it for 4-6 hours, and 10% use it for more than 6 hours, indicating that the respondent's uses social media accounts frequently.

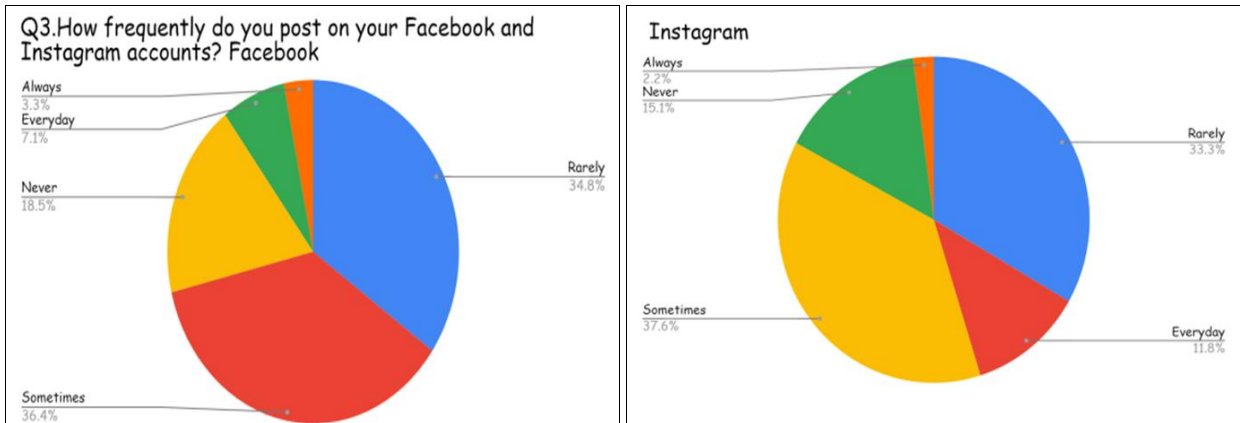


Fig 3

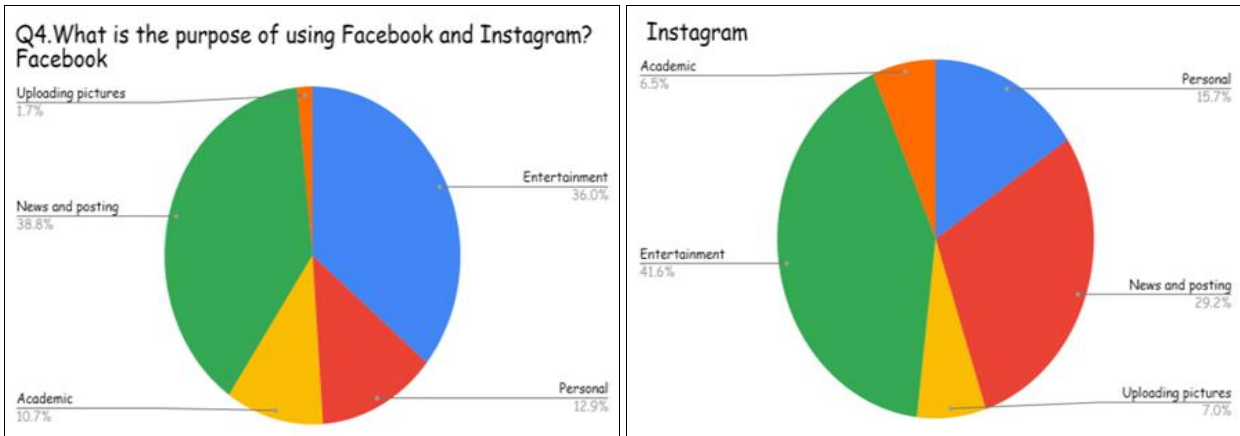


Fig 4

It was pointed out from the above Fig (3) that, 36.4% of respondents post sometimes on Facebook, 34.8% post rarely on, 18.5% never post on Facebook, 37.1% post every day on Facebook, and 3.3% always post on Facebook. While the responses of Instagram users indicate that 11.8% post every day, 33.3% post rarely, 15.1% never, 37.6% sometimes, and 2.2% always post on Instagram.

account Fig (4) shows, 12.9% of respondents use it for personal use, 36% use it for entertainment, 10.7% use it for academic purposes, 38.8% use it news and posting, and 1.7% use it for uploading picture. However 15.7% of Instagram users utilize the platform for personal posts, 41.6% for entertainment posts, 6.5% for academic, 7% for image uploads, and 29.2% for news and posting.

While answering about the purpose of using a Facebook

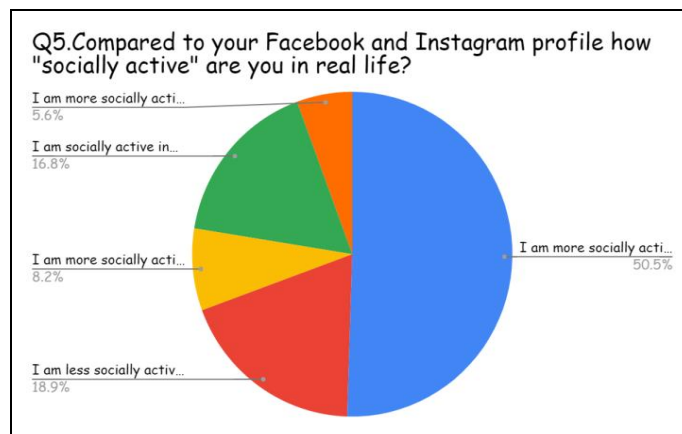


Fig 5

According to Fig 5 responses, 50.5% of respondents are more socially active in person than on Facebook and Instagram, 18.9% are less socially active in person than on social media, 5.6% are more socially active on Facebook than Instagram, 8.2% are more socially active on Instagram than Facebook, and 16.8% claim to be socially active both offline and online.

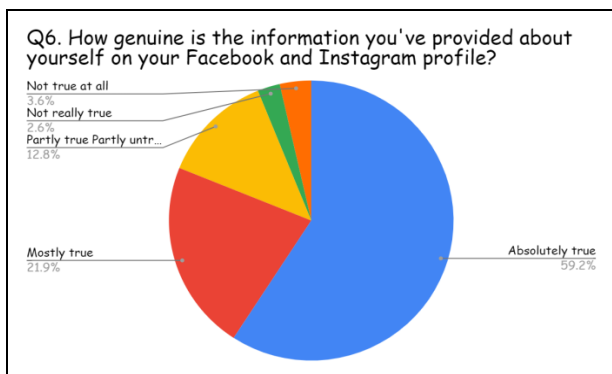


Fig 6

Answering the above-cited question from Fig (6), 59.2% of respondents have answered that they share absolutely true information about themselves on their Facebook and Instagram profiles, 21.9% have answered as mostly true, 12.8% say partly true and party untrue, while 3.6% answered not true at all, and 2.6% say not really true.

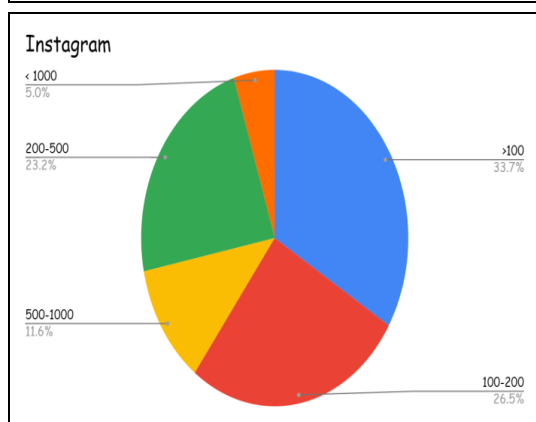
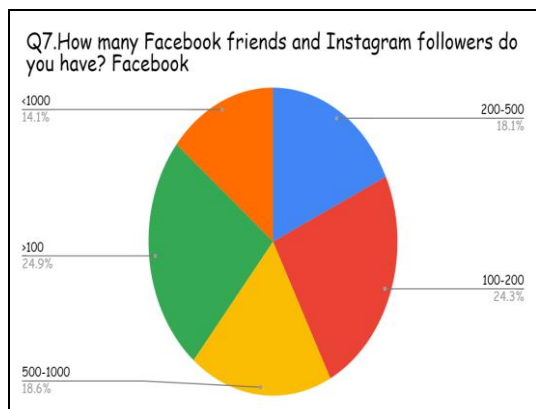


Fig 7

24.9% of respondents from the above Chart (7) have less than 100 Facebook friends, followed by 24.3% with between 100 and 200, 18.1% with between 200 and 500, 18.6% with between 500 and 1000, and 14.1% with more than 1000.

While 33.7% of Instagram users have fewer than 100 followers, 26.5% have between 100 and 200, 23.2% have between 200 and 500, 11.6% have between 500 and 1000, and 5% have more than 1000.

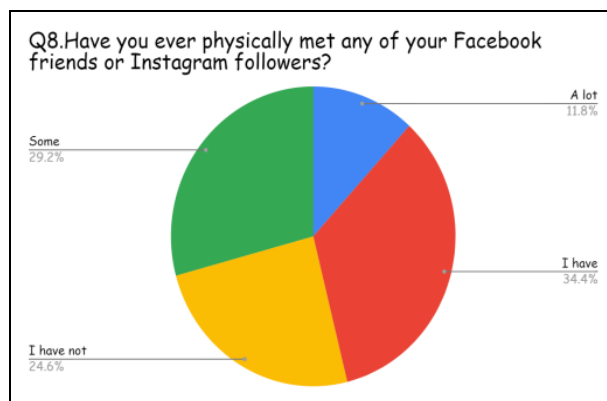


Fig 8

From the Fig (8), a total of 34.4% of respondents have actually met their social media pals in person, followed by 29.2% who have met some, 11.8% who have met a lot, and 24.6% have not met any of their online acquaintances.

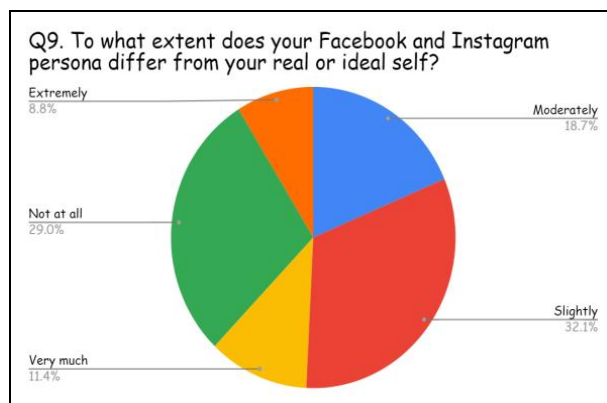


Fig 9

The majority of respondents (29%) indicated that they are not different from their social media persona in real life, followed by 32.1% who are only slightly different, 18.7% who are moderately different, 11.4% who are significantly different, and 8.8% who are extremely different.

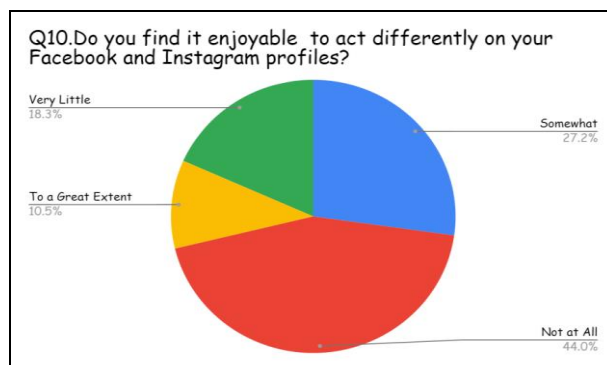


Fig 10

Answering to the question mentioned in Fig (10), 10.5% of respondents said they appreciate acting differently on social

media to a great extent, 27.2% said they like it somewhat, 18.3% said they like it very little, and 44% said not at all.

6.6% believe they can communicate with people on social media with whom they cannot interact in real life, 31.3% believe they are authentic on social media, 8.8% believe they gain acceptance on social media by acting differently, and 44.5% believe they overcome their real-life anxieties.

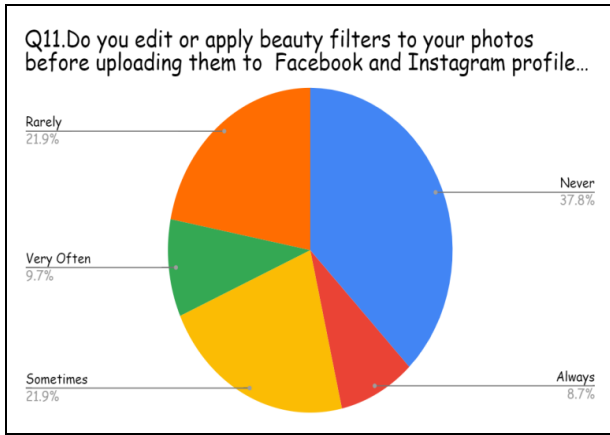


Fig 11

Results from Fig (11), show that 37.8% of people never use beauty filters, 21.9% use them sometimes, 21.9% rarely use them, 9.7% use them very often, and 8.7% always use.

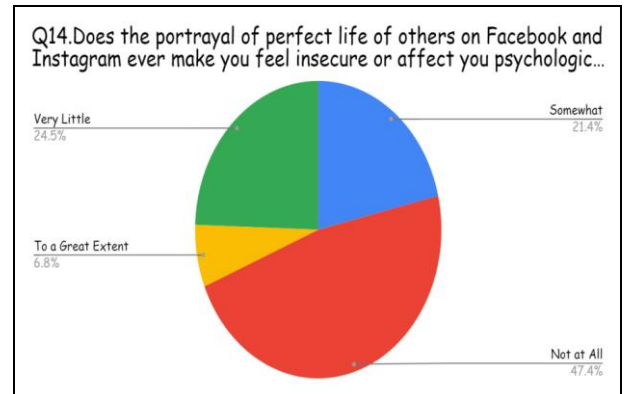


Fig 14

Fig (14), indicates that 6.8% of respondents feel insecure and mentally affected by the ideal lives of others on Facebook and Instagram to a great extent, 21.4% feel somewhat, 24.5% feel it very little, and 47.4% do not feel it at all.

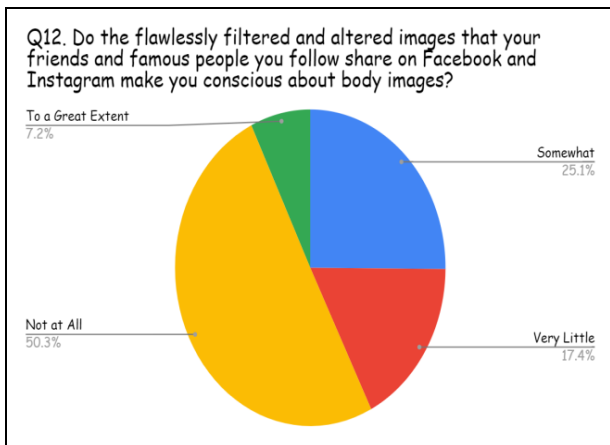


Fig 12

50.3% of persons surveyed claimed they weren't self-conscious when viewing filtered photographs of their friends and celebrities, while 25.1% percent indicated they were somewhat, 17.4% were only slightly self-conscious, and 7.2% were extremely self-conscious.

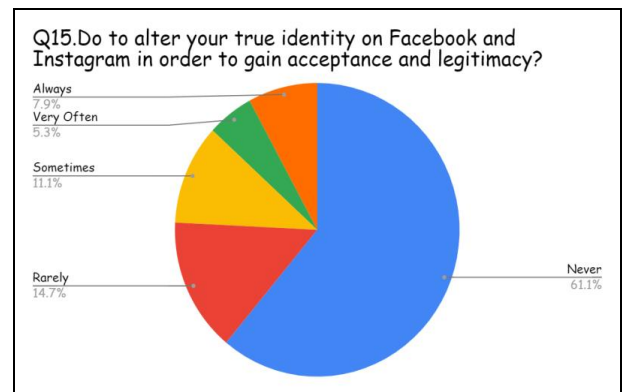


Fig 15

61.1% of respondents believe the never alter their genuine identity on social media to obtain acceptance, 5.3% feel it very often, 11.1% sometimes, 14.7% rarely, and 7.9% always.

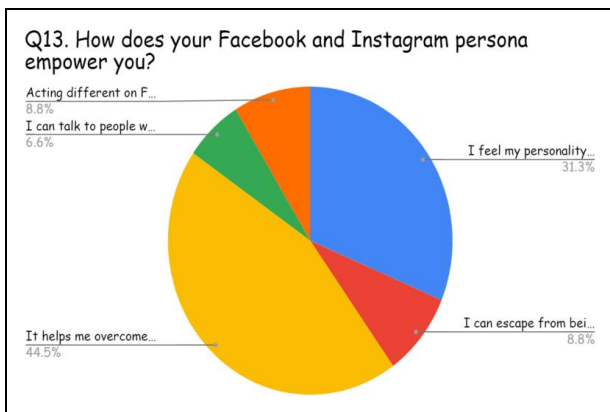


Fig 13

8.8% of respondents believe Facebook and Instagram empowers them by allowing them to avoid being judged,

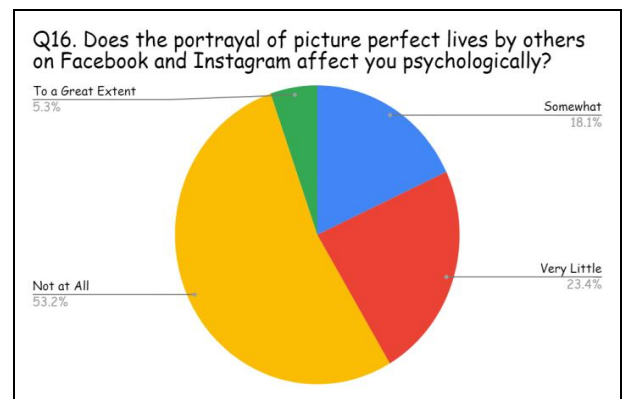


Fig 16

As per the data, 53.2% of respondents believe that the depiction of others' picture-perfect lives on social media has no psychological impact on them, while 23.4% believe it has a very little impact, 18.1% believe it has a moderate impact, and 5.3% believe it has a significant impact.

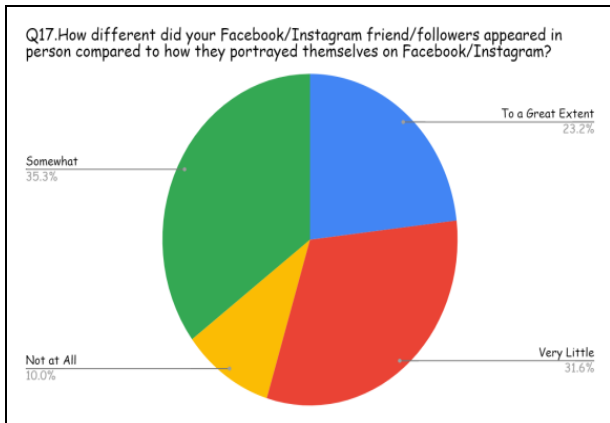


Fig 17

While answering about the question mentioned in Fig (17), 10.0% of respondents believe their Facebook friends and Instagram followers they met in person are the same in real life as they portray on their profiles, while 31.6% believe they are very little different, 35.3% believe they are somewhat different, and 23.2% believe they are different to a great extent.

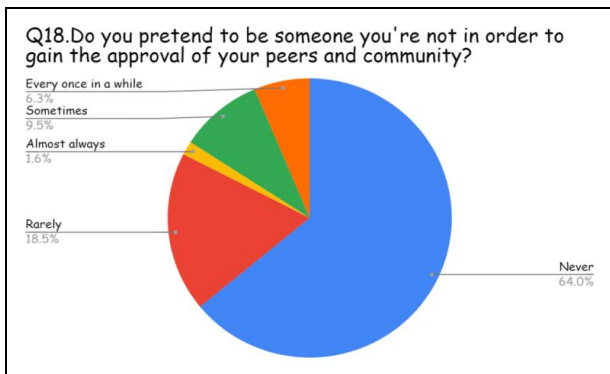


Fig 18

Pie Chart (Fig 18), shows that 64.0% respondents never pretend to be someone that they are not to gain approval of their peers and community, 18.5% pretend it rarely, 9.5% pretend it sometimes, 6.3% pretend every once in a while and 1.6% pretend it almost always.

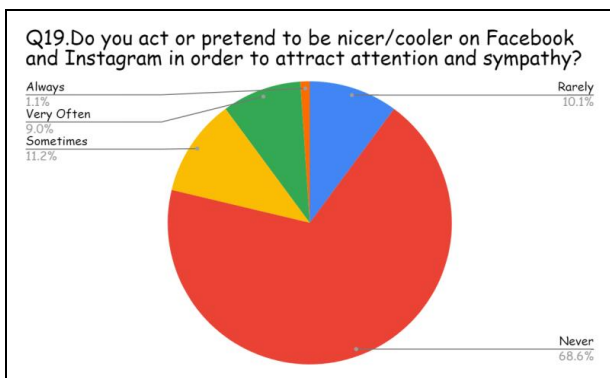


Fig 19

From the gives data in Fig (19), it is clear that 68.6% of respondents believe they never act or pretend to be kinder on Facebook and Instagram to garner attention and compassion, 10.1% rarely do so, 11.2% sometimes do so, 9% does it very often, and 1.1% always do so.

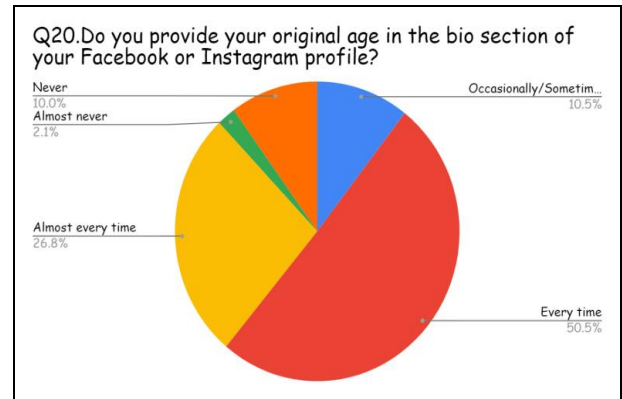


Fig 20

Another piece of information that is often required at signup for Facebook and Instagram is a birth date. 50.5% people share their original age in the bio section of their accounts, 26.8% share it almost every time, 10.5% share occasionally/sometimes, 10% never share their original age while 2.1% share almost never.

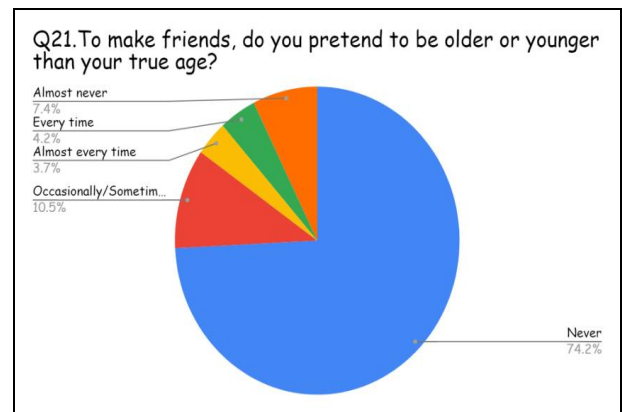


Fig 21

In response to the question 21, Fig (21) shows, 74.2% of respondents claimed they never lie about their age to make friends on social media, 7.4% almost never, 10.5% occasionally, 4.2% every time 3.7, and 3% almost every time.

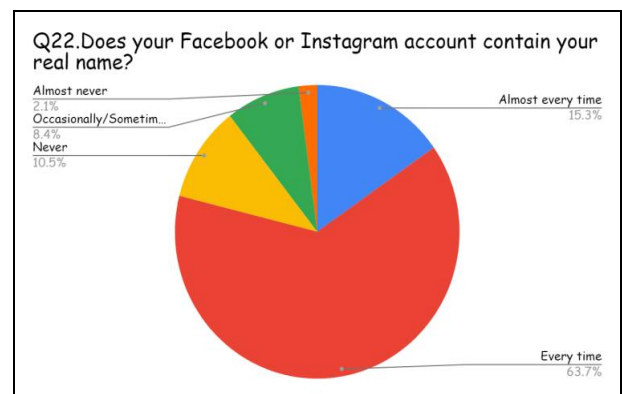


Fig 22

Given that Facebook and Instagram requires a first and last name when creating an account, 63.7% have their real name on Facebook and Instagram account, 15.3% have almost every time, 8.4% have occasionally/sometimes, 2.1% said almost never and 10.5% never mention their original name.

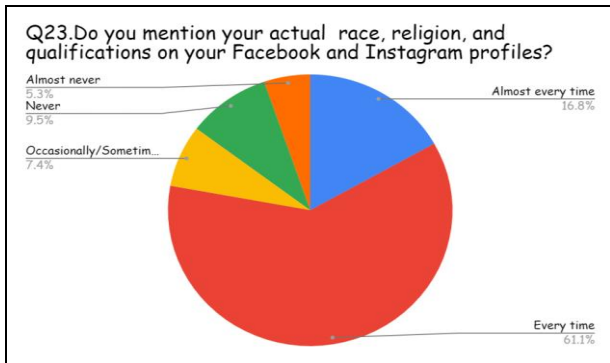


Fig 23

Similarly, 61.1% every time mention their actual race, religion and qualifications on Facebook and Instagram account, 16.8% share almost every time, 9.5% share it occasionally, 5.3% almost never share it and 9.5% never share it.

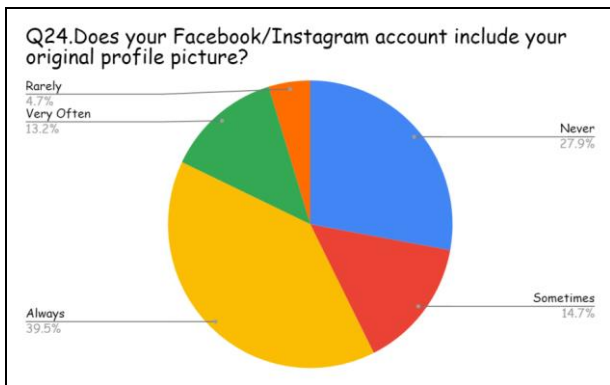


Fig 24

Furthermore Fig (24), shows majority of 39.5% respondents always share their original profile picture on their Facebook/Instagram profile, while 27% never share, 14.7% share sometimes, 13.2% share very often and 4.7% rarely.

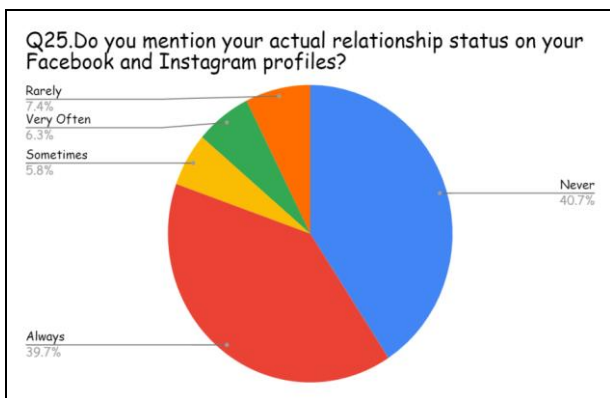


Fig 25

However, 40.7% respondents never mention their actual relationship status on Facebook/Instagram, while 39.7% always share, 5.8% mention it sometimes, 6.3% mention it

very often and 7.4% rarely mention their relationship status.

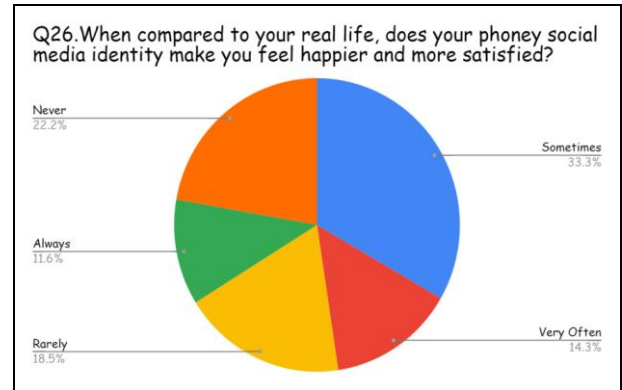


Fig 26

Out of 200 respondents, responding to question does your phoney social media identity make you feel happier and satisfied? 33.3% responded sometimes, 22.2% responded never, 18.55% rarely, 14.3% very often and 11.6% always.

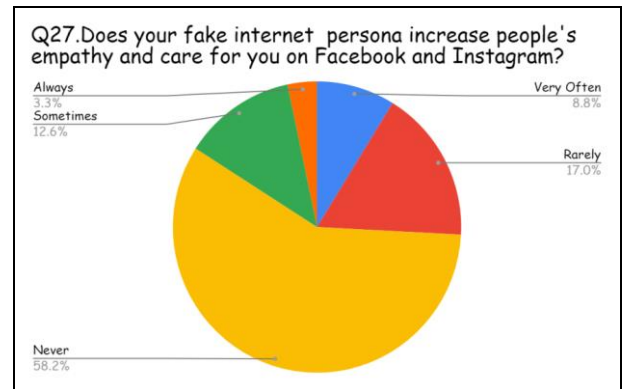


Fig 27

This chart makes it clear that majority 58.2% respondents said they never fake their internet persona, 17% said rarely, 12.6% respondents said sometimes, 8.8% said very often respondents agreed and 3.3% respondents said always.

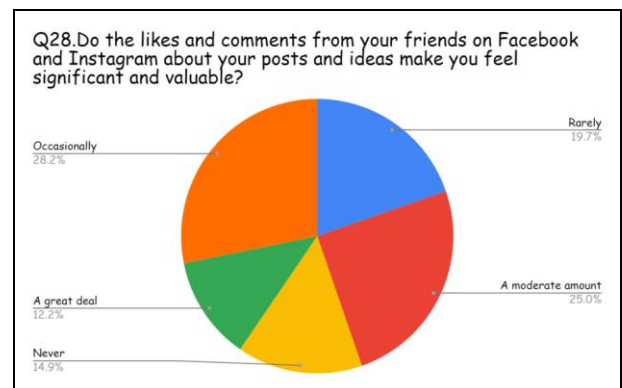


Fig 28

28.2% of respondents said they occasionally feel significant and valuable by the likes and comments from their Facebook friends and Instagram followers. Breaking the data down further, almost 25% of the respondents replied to a moderate amount, 19.7% replied rarely, 14.9% replied never and 12.2% said to a great deal.

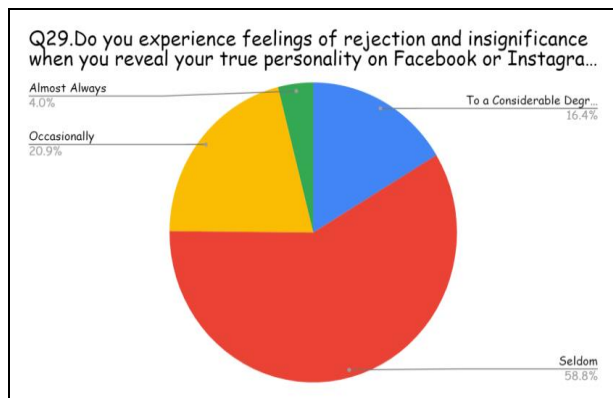


Fig 29

According to above Fig (29), 58% respondents replied seldom to the proposed question mentioned in Fig (29), 20.9% replied occasionally, 16.4% said to a considerable degree and 4% replied almost always.

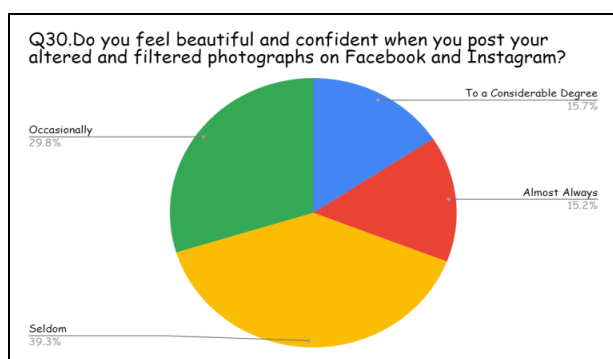


Fig 30

Most of the respondents (39.3%) from the above Fig (30) replied seldom to the above-cited question, 29.8% respondent said occasionally. While 15.7% respondents said to a considerable degree a considerably small amount of 15.2% said almost always.

Finding

The key findings that emerge from the survey data are as follows:

- A majority of participants (69.9%) reported having both Facebook and Instagram accounts, indicating widespread adoption of social media platforms.
- Most participants (74%) spent 1-4 hours daily on social media, evidencing extensive engagement with these platforms.
- While posting frequencies varied, sizeable portions posted content on both platforms daily or regularly. This highlight's active online identity construction.
- Entertainment and news/posting were the primary purposes of social media use, suggesting both leisure and utilitarian motivations.
- Participants perceived their Instagram personas as marginally more authentic than their Facebook profiles.
- Most respondents (59.2%) felt their profiles reflected absolute or near total truths about themselves. However, sizeable minorities admitted to partial or significant falsehoods.
- Peer acceptance and validation were frequently reported motivations for presenting an embellished persona online. Many derived self-worth from peer feedback.

- Dissonances between online facades and lived realities correlated with lower satisfaction levels, evidencing potential emotional costs of excessive impressions management online.
- Participants often acknowledged differences between their real and online personalities, though magnitudes varied. This indicates intentional cultivation of persona facets.
- Usage of beauty filters was polarized, with some regularly applying them for self-presentation, while others abstaining from them.
- Comparisons with others' profiles induced self-consciousness for some participants, highlighting potential social media-induced anxieties.

In summary, these findings reveal considerable intent and effort exercised by participants in crafting their social media personas, with underlying motivations of peer validation often overriding authenticity. Meanwhile, some grappled with the emotional toll of exaggerated online identities. Further research can enrich understanding of these complex dynamics of identity enactment on social media.

Discussion

This study aimed to evaluate the authenticity of self-presentation on social media by analyzing users' perceptions of their Facebook and Instagram profiles. The findings reveal intriguing insights into how individuals cultivate and portray an online persona, often divergent from their authentic self.

Overall, the results indicate a moderate tendency amongst participants to present an embellished or idealized version of themselves on social media. While a majority self-reported their profiles to be absolutely or mostly true, sizeable minorities admitted to partial or significant inaccuracies (RQ1). This aligns with existing research evidencing the curation of selective self-aspects online (Yang & Brown, 2015) [18].

Notably, participants reported greater authenticity in Instagram profiles compared to Facebook. The prevalence of visual content on Instagram may enable truer self-expressions, whereas Facebook's increased textual focus allows greater room for selective self-portrayal (RQ3).

A predominant motivation for this selective online self-portrayal appears to be peer acceptance, belonging, and validation (RQ2). Sizeable portions of participants acknowledged feeling empowered by social media through avoidance of judgment, interacting with new people, or overcoming social anxieties. Many reported deriving self-worth from peer validation metrics like comments and likes. However, these external motivations often engender internal dissonance between online facades and lived realities. Participants recognizing such disparities reported lower satisfaction levels. This substantiates impressions management theory, which posits emotional costs for considerable self-concept inconsistencies (Vogel *et al.*, 2014) [15].

Certain platform variations also emerged regarding motivations. Facebook was leveraged more for utilitarian needs like news and academic purposes, while Instagram served greater identity construction goals of sharing personal posts and pictures. This aligns with uses and gratifications theory, emphasizing purpose-driven media selections (Whiting & Williams, 2013) [17].

Limitations of this study include its reliance on self-reported data, which can involve inherent subjectivities and social desirability biases. The sample was also geographically restricted, constraining generalizability. Further research across diverse socio-cultural settings could illuminate cross-cultural nuances in online identity enactment.

Overall, these findings highlight the necessity for users to strike a balance between external acceptance motivations and internal authenticity values while navigating identity in the social media age. Media literacy efforts to this end may help engender more mindful and psychologically-healthy online engagements.

Conclusion

This study exploring the authenticity of social media profiles provides illuminating insights into how users portray themselves on Facebook and Instagram. The research indicates that while profiles often reflect some truth, a considerable proportion of users admit to portraying an embellished or idealized persona online. This selective self-presentation appears frequently driven by desires for peer acceptance and validation.

However, significant dissonances between online facades and offline realities can foster dissatisfaction. Hence, users must balance external motivations for social approval with internal values of authenticity for healthy identity enactment on social media.

Notable variations emerged in platform-specific presentations, with Instagram enabling more identity-based self-expressions, while Facebook allowed greater utilitarian uses. This substantiates the technology affordance perspective, emphasizing distinct user experiences based on a platform's technical architecture.

This study faced limitations regarding self-reported data and sample constraints. Further research among diverse cultural and demographic groups can enrich understanding of cross-cultural variations in online self-presentation motivations.

Nonetheless, these findings have meaningful practical implications. Educational initiatives promoting social media literacy should highlight mindful usage focused on authenticity over external validation. Additionally, incorporating reflective assessments of whether profiles truly mirror lived experiences could foster positive usage.

As social technologies continue proliferating amidst identity explorations in the digital age, users must remain cognizant of balancing genuine self-expressions with curated personas. Mindfully navigating this intersection between our virtual projections and lived realities will remain an enduring imperative in our technologically interwoven existence.

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