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Investigating Online Self-Presentation and Social Connectedness Among Filipino College Students

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Abstract

In an era where digital platforms are central to young people's social lives, understanding how online self-presentation shapes feelings of connectedness is crucial. This study investigates the relationship between online self-presentation and social connectedness among Filipino college students, addressing a gap in the literature that often overlooks the real-world relational implications of virtual self-construction. Drawing on responses from 290 students across Philippine higher education institutions, the research reveals a weak but significant negative correlation: students who engage more in curated online self-presentation, particularly through portraying multiple selves or showing a preference for online interaction, tend to report lower levels of social connectedness. These findings challenge the prevailing notion that digital self-presentation enhances social ties, suggesting instead that certain online behaviors may undermine authentic interpersonal connections. The study underscores the need for digital literacy initiatives that encourage critical reflection on social media use, particularly in higher education contexts where identity exploration and belonging are paramount.

Keywords: college students, online self-presentation, social connectedness, social media.

Introduction

Social connectedness fosters a sense of belonging, support, and understanding—qualities essential to well-being and development (Theisen, 2021). As digital platforms increasingly mediate our social lives, the question arises: does being connected online truly equate to being socially connected in a meaningful way? While the digital realm offers unprecedented avenues for interaction, it may also give rise to an "illusion of connection," a phenomenon Harvard psychiatrist Edward Hallowell describes as lacking the depth of a true "human moment" (Schlosser, 2020). One can accumulate thousands of online connections without experiencing the richness of face-to-face interactions that foster genuine emotional resonance (Turizo, 2018; Comidoy et al., 2018).

With the ubiquity of platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and TikTok, the act of curating one's identity online—self-presentation—has become integral to digital life (O'Donnell et al., 2021). Yet, while self-presentation is central to human interaction, its digital execution raises critical questions about authenticity, identity, and social bonds. The strategic presentation of an ideal self for likes and validation (Siibak, 2009), or the navigation of [1]multiple selves across platforms (Fullwood et al., 2016), complicates our understanding of how individuals form and sustain relationships online. The need to belong, as emphasized by Baumeister and Leary (1995), persists—but how it is fulfilled in the digital sphere remains complex and underexplored.

In the Philippine context, where collectivist values influence social behavior (Hofstede, 2001), digital self-presentation may be shaped by different cultural imperatives compared to Western individualist norms. Moreover, while studies have examined online self-presentation in various populations and contexts (Stehlik, 2015; Yang & Brown, 2016; Davidson & Joinson, 2021), Filipino college students remain largely underrepresented in global psychological and digital communication literature. Given that Filipino youth rank among the most active social media users worldwide, with 90.8 million active social media user identities, equivalent to 78.0% of the total population (DataReportal, 2025), their patterns of digital self-presentation carry important implications for how social connections are experienced and maintained.

This study addresses three critical research gaps: First, it focuses on Filipino college students, a group that is seldom centered in global scholarship on digital identity and connection. Second, it utilizes the Presentation of Online Self Scale (POSS) and correlates it with the Social Connectedness Scale (SCS), two constructs often examined in isolation but rarely studied together in a local empirical context. Finally, the study offers a nuanced exploration of how digital self-presentation practices—sometimes idealized or fragmented—interact with perceptions of belonging and intimacy in a collectivist society. These contributions aim to deepen our understanding of the potentially contradictory effects of digital expression on young people's sense of connection in a socially and culturally distinct setting.

Hypothesis

The hypotheses of the study were tested at a significant level of 0.05. Moreover, this study aimed to find indications to support or reject the following hypotheses.

Ho: There is no association between online self-presentation and social connections among college students.

H1: There is no domain in online self-presentation that predicts social connection among college students.

[1] Portraying multiple selves involves showcasing different versions of oneself on various online platforms or during distinct digital interactions. This practice illustrates the fluidity and adaptability of identity in online spaces, where individuals may curate distinct personas tailored to their audience, context, or platform (Fullwood et al., 2016).

Literature Review

Self-Presentation in the online world

Undoubtedly, social media provides individuals with a platform to establish their online identity within various online communities. However, this virtual identity can differ from one's real-world identity due to the selective characteristics presented online. Studies, including those by Amaral (2018), Vyshemirskaya and Na (2021), and Davidson and Joinson (2021), have shown that people often tailor their self-presentation across different websites and platforms, leading to a fragmented online persona.

The internet serves diverse purposes, making maintaining and relating a cohesive online identity to one's offline self-challenging. Recent design decisions, such as Twitter's introduction of Fleets in 2020 to mimic Facebook and Instagram stories, exemplify how platforms expand beyond their original social purposes (Davidson & Joinson, 2021), contributing to the complexity of online identities.

This complexity is evident in contexts like online dating. Solis (2022) found that individuals strategically adapt their self-presentation on platforms like Grindr, Twitter, and Facebook. Gay men and transgender individuals tailor their usage for different purposes, such as hookups, serious interactions, or group engagements. Self-branding on dating apps becomes essential for successful online dating, with some individuals avoiding these platforms due to concerns about discrimination and image perception.

Moreover, Fullwood et al. (2016) identified distinct ways people experiment with self-presentation online. These include portraying an idealized self (Ideal Self), presenting varied selves across online contexts (Multiple Selves), and aligning online and offline self-presentation (Consistent Self). Fullwood's scale also introduces the concept of an individual's Online Presentation Preference, which measures the extent to which they choose to present themselves online.

The Social Self and Social Connectedness

Social connections, an essential aspect of human life, encompass the sense of belonging within social networks (Lee & Robbins, 1995). As highlighted by Donne, human interdependence is integral for thriving, underscoring the fundamental nature of social interactions. This need for connection is reflected in the widespread use of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Skype, reshaping how we communicate and share knowledge (Kaushal, 2021).

Shifts in social networks are inherent as life paths change, influencing relationships (Décieux & Mörchen, 2021). Notably, studies emphasize the impact of social connections on well-being. Clark et al. (2018) emphasize the role of social network sites in fostering meaningful connections, while Baumeister and Leary (1995) highlight the universal need to belong and its influence on emotions and cognition.

Recent research examines the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on social networks. O'Donnell (2021) finds that online social connections mitigate the negative impact of health anxiety or depression, particularly in situations of social isolation. Jo et al. (2021) use network data to reveal how individuals adapt their social ties to cope with pandemic-induced uncertainty, observing a decline in the maintenance of advice ties and an influence of emotional exhaustion on relationship preservation.

Methodology

To achieve the study's objective, the research employed a quantitative survey design that focused on correlations between variables.

Sampling Technique

The sampling technique used in the study is purposive quota sampling. 290 respondents were subjected to answer the questionnaires. The sampling size was identified through the Rule of 10, also known as 10:1 (sample-item ratio), wherein there should be at least 10 cases for each item of the research instrument used (Nunnally,1978). There were 29 articles on research instruments in this study: 21 items for the Presentation of Online Self Scale (POSS) and eight (8) items for the Social Connectedness Scale (SCS).

Moreover, Guillford (1954) stated that an absolute minimum of 200 samples are required for Pearson Correlation, while for regression, Hair et al. (2018) stated that at least 50 samples and generally 100 for most research situations. This means that a total of 290 students as the sample is enough.

Research Instrument

The researcher employed a self-administered survey-adopted questionnaire, the POSS developed by Fullwood et al. (2016), and the SCS developed by Lee and Robbins (1995).

Moreover, POSS comprises 21 items and has an internal consistency of 86% (Cronbach's α=0.86). The questions were on a 5-point Likert Scale: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither agree nor disagree; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree.). Initially, POSS was the 24-item scale, and when it was time to determine the final factor structure through exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation, only factor loadings of 0.4 or greater were deemed statistically significant, so only 21 items were kept. Using the scale for this study, the researcher no longer needs to ask for permission because it is openly available for non-commercial and research purposes.

In addition, the Social Connectedness Scale comprises eight items. The measure was named the Social Connectedness Scale, while the item content reflects a moderate sense of social disconnectedness and detachment. It properly reflects the inverse relationship between the item content (i.e., in a negative direction) and the direction of the rating system (from 1 = agree to 6 = disagree). Thus, higher scores reflect a more reported sense of social connectedness and belongingness. It has a 91% (Cronbach's α=0.91) for the first calculation, while the test-retest correlation from a separate sample during the two-week interval was 96% (Cronbach's α=0.96). Using this scale for this study, the researchers asked permission from the author and abided by the terms.

Statistical Tool

The data analysis involved several statistical techniques to gain insights into the research questions. First, the mean was utilized to provide a comprehensive overview of the dataset's central tendency, summarizing its statistical characteristics (Sykes et al., 2016). Various scientific literature has proved its ability to succinctly represent data trends (Fan, 2010).

Moreover, to find the association between the independent variable (online self-presentation) and the dependent variable (social connections), the Pearson Correlation

was employed. This tool is known for quantifying the statistical relationship between two variables (Ary et al., 2010), thereby aiding in addressing the research objective.

Furthermore, linear regression was utilized after determining the correlations between the variables. This analytical approach assessed the predictive potential of specific variables or sets of variables on the dependent variable (social connections) (Kasmaoui, 2019). The study aimed to identify which facets of online self-presentation predominantly influenced social connections among college students.

Results and Discussion

Level of Presentation of Online Self

There are many ways for a person to explore their presentation of their online self, and each is met with different purposes (Fullwood et al., 2016).

Table 1
Level of the domains of Presentation of Online Self, n=290

Domains	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**	**Description**
Ideal Self	3.798	0.700	High
Multiple Selves	3.390	0.951	Moderate
Consistent Self	3.234	0.761	Moderate
Online Presentation Preference	3.099	0.750	Moderate

Presented in Table 1 are the results for the domains of online self-presentation, in which the ideal self has the highest mean of 3.798 (SD=0.700), which is identified as high. It means that the level of online self-presentation in terms of the ideal self is much observed. In other words, users engaged in an idealized online self-presentation (Harris & Bardey, 2019). The features offered by online communication and social networking sites and the availability of filtering reinforce ideal self-presentation wherein everyone can present their enhanced and idealized self (Feliho, 2019).

In addition, it was followed by multiple selves with a mean of 3.390 (SD=0951), which was identified as moderate. It means that the level of online self-presentation in terms of multiple selves is sometimes observed. It shows that they manage their online self-presentation by presenting various versions of themselves. A situation calls for it, and cases wherein presenting multiple selves is not intentional but instead triggered in different circumstances (Ribáry et al., 2017). These circumstances involve having a separation between authentic identity and fake identity. The users may present their public self or themselves that they could not publicise because it may be emotional or inappropriate (Huang & Vitak, 2022).

Next is the Consistent Self, with a mean of 3.234 (SD=0.761) identified as moderate, which means that the level of online self-presentation in terms of consistent self is sometimes observed. In other words, there are circumstances where it is possible to have an online self that is coherent with their offline self, as this individualized strategy can help build a good reputation and an effective way of showing competence (Negrut, 2021).

Lastly, Online Presentation Preference with a mean of 3.099 (SD=0.750) was identified as moderate, which means that the level of online self-presentation in terms

of online presentation preference is sometimes observed. In other words, online self-presentation is a way to facilitate interactions in the online environment to the same extent as facilitating interaction when not online, and often, this online and offline interaction allows reality checks with one another (Cocking & van den Hoven 2018).

Level of Social Connectedness

"Social connectedness" describes a person's subjective perception of being connected to the social world. It includes the feeling of belonging to a group or society.

Table 2
Level of Social Connectedness, n=290

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Description
Social Connectedness	3.703	1.368	Moderately High

Table 2 presents the findings related to the level of social connectedness among the participants, with a mean score of 3.703 and a standard deviation of 1.368. This indicates a moderately high level of social connectedness among 290 students. The notion of social connectedness aligns with the works of scholars who emphasize the significance of online interactions in fostering a sense of belonging and companionship. According to Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007), social networking sites offer a platform for individuals to maintain and strengthen relationships, which is reflected in the present study's mean score. Additionally, the concept of "weak ties" proposed by Granovetter (1973) suggests that even these moderately high levels of social connectedness can be influential, as they provide access to diverse sources of information and opportunities. Therefore, the observed level of social connectedness underscores the continued importance of digital platforms in facilitating meaningful interpersonal connections and aligns with the established literature on the subject.

Correlation between the domains of Online Self-Presentation and Social Connectedness

Pearson's R correlation was used to check whether there is a correlation between social connectedness and online self-presentation.

Presented in Table 3 is the correlation between Social Connectedness and the domains of Presentation of Online Self wherein all the domains of the online self-presentation showed low negative association except for consistent self, which results showed a negligible association.

In addition, the ideal self has an r-value of -0.144 and a p-value of $0.014<0.05$, which means that the ideal self is associated with social connectedness in a low negative relationship. Moreover, multiple selves with an r-value of -0.239 and a p-value of $3.813e\text{-}5<0.001$ mean that multiple selves are associated with social connectedness in a low negative relationship.

Similarly, online Presentation preference with an r-value of -0.193 and a p-value of $9.490e\text{-}4<0.001$ means that multiple selves are associated with social connectedness in a low negative relationship. Meanwhile, consistent self with an r-value of -0.016 and a p-value of $0.785>0.05$ means that it is not significant at 0.05 level and has a negligible association with social connectedness.

Table 3
Correlation between Social Connectedness and the Domains of Presentation of Online Self
* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

	Mean	**Std. Deviation**	**Pearson's r**	**p-value**
Social Connectedness	**3.703**	**1.368**		
Presentation of Online self	**3.380**	**0.491**	**-0.247 *****	**2.031e-5**
Ideal Self	3.798	0.700	-0.144*	0.014
Multiple Selves	3.990	0.951	-0.239***	3.813e-5
Consistent Self	3.234	0.761	-0.016	0.785
Online Presentation Preference	3.099	0.750	-0.193***	9.490e-4

However, the online self-presentation generally showed a low negative association with an r-value of -0.247 and a p-value of 2.031e-5<0.001, which is highly statistically significant at the .001 level. This means the variables have a weak negative correlation, and the null hypothesis is rejected.

Furthermore, it shows a negative relationship wherein when the level of one variable increases, the other variable's level decreases. These are somewhat at odds with prior research that used self-reported data, wherein presenting online self and active usage of social media has a positive relationship with social connection (Clark et al., 2018; O'Donnel, 2021). This self-reported data shows that when a student's level of online self-presentation increases, their level of social connectedness decreases, and when the level of online self-presentation decreases, their level of social connectedness increases. Hence, it is congruent with the theory of uses and gratifications (Katz et al., 1974), stating that they may gain gratifications or none in doing a specific action to respond to their need.

Generally, social media is defined as a tool for interaction and used as a venue for an attempt to make connections and for self-presentation (Lenhart, 2015) and so, with this, students believe that associating online self-presentation in seeking connections will fill the lack of support and social contact in the real world (Cauberghe et al.,2021).

However, this study revealed that online self-presentation is unnecessary for perceiving social connectedness. It should not be a measure of social connections, and social connectedness is not a measure of self-presence. It highlights that even when they are not connected online, one can still be socially connected. Recently, more young people have decided to minimize their social media presence, maximize their time offline, and claim to feel still socially connected (Matlin, 2017). Statistics showed that although ages 16-24 use social media to connect with people, entertainment has slowly become their first reason for use. This generation is found slowly disengaging themselves from the main aspects of social media, content with their real-life relationships (Negrut, 2019). This shows that one can still establish connections and nurture them.

To determine if there is a domain in online self-presentation that predicts social connection among college students, regression analysis was used to check which among the domains best predicts or influences social connections.

Domains in Online Self-Presentation that Predicts Social Connectedness

Table 4
Final contributors on the Social Connectedness

Model	Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized	t	p
Intercept	5.500	0.387		14.204	4.828e-35
Multiple selves	-0.293	0.084	-0.204	-3.477	5.860e-4*
Online Presentation Preference	-0.259	0.107	-0.142	-2.423	0.016*
n=290		R^2_{adj}=0.070		F=11.836	

Table 4 shows the contributors to social connectedness, Multiple selves, and Online presentation preference, which is statistically significant at 0.5. This means that there is a domain in the presentation of the online self that influences social connectedness and that the null hypothesis is rejected. Thus, expressed in this final model shows an inverse or negative relationship between the variables.

Moreover, as multiple selves increase, social connectedness will decrease by .293, provided online presentation preference is constant. As online presentation preference increases, social connectedness will decrease by .259, provided the multiple selves are constant.

Furthermore, the F-ratio of 11.836 is the predictive capability of the regression model, and the r-squared of 0.080 reveals that 8% of the data fits the model and that 72% of the contributing factors to Social Connectedness are not accounted for.

Similarly, it concludes Steele and Brown's theory of the media practice model, stating that media is used unconsciously or purposefully to help make sense of life and that the usage involves identity work. The students use media, especially Facebook, to present their online selves, mainly their multiple selves and online presentation preferences.

Whether purposeful or not, engaging in these presentations is believed to be beneficial in attaining social needs and goals because it offers higher opportunities to reach distinct individuals who also offer a different sense of social fulfilment (Kang et al., 2015). However, this study's result does not reveal the opposite; instead, it introduces a different perspective on social media practice.

Additionally, the users hold the most basic notion of what social media promises its users: connection (Barlatier & Josserand, 2018). Unconsciously, at least in this study, it revealed that a connection is not promised when engaging in online and multiple self-presentation. Involving in the practice of online self-presentation does not guarantee perceived connectedness. It helped make sense that one's online activities do not dictate one's social connectedness in general. It is a reminder to assess offline relationships as much as the other because each supplements the other. In contrast, the absence of the other does not imply the complete absence of connectedness (Mesch, 2019).

Conclusion

This study critically examined how online self-presentation correlates with perceived social connectedness among Filipino college students. While digital spaces are often celebrated for enhancing interpersonal relationships, the findings reveal a more complex reality: students who engage more in curated and multifaceted self-presentation online, particularly through portraying multiple selves and expressing a preference for online interaction, tend to report lower levels of social connectedness. This inverse relationship challenges widely held assumptions that digital performance of the self equates to stronger social ties, calling into question the depth and authenticity of connections forged online.

Crucially, the study sheds light on the disconnect between digital presence and relational fulfillment. In a context where collectivist cultural values shape identity and belonging, the findings suggest that performative or fragmented digital selves may dilute, rather than deepen, one's experience of connection.

Instead of reinforcing a binary of online versus offline connection, this study advocates for a more critical engagement with digital practices among youth. Educators and policymakers must recognize that the dynamics of digital platforms can shape not just how identities are curated but also how social fulfillment is experienced or foreclosed.

Recommendation

In light of the findings, there is a pressing need for digital literacy programs that extend beyond technical proficiency to include reflective and critical engagement with digital identity practices. Specifically, interventions should focus on Critical Digital Identity Workshops, which encourage students to examine how social media platforms shape self-presentation and to reflect on the psychological and relational impacts of curating idealized or multiple selves online. Programs such as Digital Storytelling Labs could provide students with a space to craft narratives that integrate both their online and offline identities, promoting coherence and authenticity. Additionally, embedding Media Literacy and Emotional Intelligence modules into college orientation or general education curricula may help students recognize the emotional labor involved in self-branding and build resilience against the social comparison effects of social media. Peer-led initiatives like Offline Connection Circles can also be encouraged, inviting students to re-evaluate the role of face-to-face connection in their sense of belonging. Ultimately, these targeted interventions should cultivate not just skills for navigating the digital world but also a more critical awareness of how digital self-presentation intersects with social well-being and personal identity.

Meanwhile, future studies should explore longitudinal trajectories of digital self-presentation and connectedness, examine emotional labor in identity curation, and unpack how platform-specific cultures influence these dynamics. In doing so, scholars can better understand how the promises of connection in the digital age may, paradoxically, produce new forms of isolation.

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