

Mitigating Social Desirability Bias in Self-Reported Data of Social Science Research: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Social Desirability Bias (SDB) raises a persistent threat to the validity of social science research, mainly in studies relying on self-reported data. This systematic literature review synthesizes evidence on how social desirability bias is conceptualized, manifested, detected, and mitigated across social science disciplines, with a specific focus on management and organizational research in the era of social media. Guided by the PRISMA-2020 framework, 28 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2000 and 2024 were systematically identified and analyzed using thematic synthesis. The findings reveal that social desirability bias is increasingly identified as a context-dependent and socially embedded phenomenon shaped by impression management motives, social norms, evaluation apprehension, and digitally mediated audiences. While a wide range of mitigation strategies has been proposed including indirect questioning, procedural safeguards, triangulation, and analytical controls, the review demonstrates that single method is not adequate. Instead, design-integrated and multi-strategy approaches are most effective. The review contributes theoretically by reframing social desirability bias as a substantive social mechanism than a peripheral methodological issue, and methodologically by offering evidence-based guidance for quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research. Implications for management research and digitally mediated studies are discussed, alongside directions for future investigations.

Keywords: *Research validity, Self-reported data, Social desirability bias, Social norms, Social Science*

Introduction

Social Desirability Bias (SDB) represents one of the most persistent threats to the validity of social science research. It refers to the systematic tendency of individuals to present themselves in a favorable manner by overstating socially approved attitudes and behaviors while underreporting socially disapproved and stigmatized ones (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; Grimm, 2010). This bias is mainly pronounced in self-reported data, which remain foundational across disciplines like psychology, sociology, education, public administration, and management research. When left unaddressed, social desirability bias distorts empirical findings, weakens construct validity, and compromises the theoretical and practical implications drawn from research evidence (Stocké, 2007; Grimm, 2010).

The prevalence of SDB is also problematic in management and organizational research, where key constructs including ethical behavior, leadership effectiveness, organizational citizenship behavior, counterproductive work behavior, job satisfaction, and employee engagement are frequently assessed through self-administered questionnaires and interviews. Because many of these constructs are normatively charged, respondents may consciously or unconsciously tailor their responses to align with perceived organizational expectations and professional norms (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). As a result, observed relationships may reflect impression management rather than substantive organizational phenomena, leading to inflated effect sizes and misleading conclusions & implications.

Although social desirability bias has traditionally been associated with quantitative survey research, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that qualitative methods are similarly vulnerable (Grimm, 2010). In interviews, focus group discussions, and ethnographic studies, participants may selectively disclose information, rationalize questionable practices, and construct socially acceptable narratives in response to interviewer presence, power asymmetries, and group dynamics (Bergen & Labonté, 2020; Bispo Júnior & Leite, 2022). These dynamics are mainly salient in organizational contexts where reputational concerns, hierarchical relationships, and job security considerations may inhibit honest disclosure. Consequently, qualitative findings may inadvertently reproduce idealized accounts of organizational life while obscuring deviant, unethical, and politically sensitive practices (Stocké, 2007; Bispo Júnior & Leite, 2022).

The contemporary social media environment further complicates the problem of social desirability bias. Social media platforms encourage continuous self-presentation, impression management, and norm conformity through mechanisms like public visibility, algorithmic feedback, and social comparison (Vogel et al., 2014; Zhao et al., 2023). These dynamics may heighten respondents' sensitivity to social evaluation, even when participating in anonymous research. Studies increasingly rely on online surveys, digital recruitment, and social-media-based samples, yet the implications of platform-mediated self-

presentation for research validity remain insufficiently theorized and empirically examined. In this sense, the social media era may not merely increase traditional forms of social desirability bias but also generate new manifestations that challenge conventional mitigation strategies (Zhao et al., 2023).

A wide range of methodological approaches has been proposed to detect and reduce social desirability bias. These include the use of validated social desirability scales such as Marlowe–Crowne measures, indirect questioning techniques including randomized response and list experiments, assurances of anonymity, careful item wording, and statistical controls during data analysis (Fisher, 1993; van de Mortel, 2008; Krumpal, 2013). More recent studies have incorporated implicit measures, behavioral indicators, digital trace data, and latent variable modeling techniques. In qualitative research, scholars recommend procedural safeguards such as rapport building, neutral probing, projective techniques, and data triangulation (Xiao & Watson, 2019; Bergen & Labonté, 2020). Despite these developments, empirical evidence regarding the comparative effectiveness of these strategies mainly across research designs and data collection modes remains fragmented and uneven.

However, existing reviews of social desirability bias tend to be discipline-specific, method-specific, and outdated, offering limited guidance for contemporary social science researchers operating in digitally mediated environments. There is a notable absence of integrative, systematic literature reviews that synthesize evidence across quantitative and qualitative paradigms, with explicit attention to social science and management research and the social media context. Moreover, many empirical studies continue to acknowledge social desirability bias only as a limitation than proactively embedding mitigation strategies into research design and analysis (Grimm, 2010; Krumpal, 2013; Zhao et al., 2023; Xiao & Watson, 2019).

To address these gaps, the present study conducts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of social desirability bias in social science research, with a particular focus on management and organizational studies. Guided by PRISMA 2020 standards (Page et al., 2021), this review synthesizes conceptual definitions, measurement approaches, and mitigation strategies across research designs and data collection contexts, including online and social-media-enabled research. By integrating insights from diverse methodological traditions, the study aims to develop a comprehensive, evidence-based framework for minimizing social desirability bias and enhancing the validity of social science research in the current digital age.

Objectives of the Study

Below-mentioned four research objectives are established to be achieved in the current systematic literature review.

- i. Map and classify how social desirability bias has been defined, operationalized, and measured in social-science research.

- ii. Assess the relative effectiveness of mitigation strategies across data collection methods use in social science research.
- iii. Synthesize methodological trade-offs for integrating SDB mitigation into mixed-methods research.
- iv. Identify empirical gaps and produce an agenda for future research with specific reference to social science research studies.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: In the next section, the adopted methodology of the current study is outlined, and the results are presented. Next, the results are discussed, emphasizing their theoretical, methodological and practical implications along with the future research agendas. The final section comprises of the concluding remarks, limitations of the current study, and the directions for similar studies in the future.

Methodology

Review Design and Reporting Framework

This study employs Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to synthesize existing empirical and methodological evidence on social desirability bias in social science research, with particular attention to management and organizational studies. A systematic review approach was selected due to its suitability for consolidating fragmented methodological knowledge, identifying research gaps, and producing evidence-based methodological guidance (Tranfield et al., 2003; Snyder, 2019; Xiao & Watson, 2019). The review process strictly adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines, ensuring transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor in all stages of the review (Fisher, 1993; Xiao & Watson, 2019; Page et al., 2021).

Information Sources and Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was implemented to find relevant literature across multiple social science disciplines. Six electronic databases were systematically searched: Web of Science (Core Collection), Scopus, PsycINFO, PubMed, Business Source Complete (EBSCO), and ScienceDirect. These databases were selected for their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed research in management, psychology, sociology, public health, and related social sciences (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between January 2000 and December 2024. This timeframe was chosen to find both methodological contributions, and recent advances related to online data collection & social-media-mediated research contexts (Krumpal, 2013; Zhao et al., 2023). The search was conducted during November 01, 2025 - November 20, 2025 using a legitimate corporate subscription, and a user login authorized by a State University in Sri Lanka.

Search Strings

To ensure transparency and replicability, all search strings used in this systematic literature review are reported explicitly. The primary search string was constructed to capture literature addressing social desirability bias and closely related constructs within social science research contexts.

- Search String 1 (Core construct):
“social desirability bias” OR “social desirability response bias” OR “social desirability effect”
- Search String 2 (Related constructs):
“impression management” OR “self-presentation bias” OR “response bias” OR “response distortion”
- Search String 3 (Methodological context):
“survey” OR “self-reported-data*” OR “questionnaire*” OR “interview*” OR “qualitative” OR “mixed methods” OR “research method*”*
- Search String 4 (Disciplinary scope):
“management” OR “organization” OR “workplace” OR “organizational behavior” OR “social science*” OR “behavioral research”*
- Search String 5 (Digital and social media context):
“online survey” OR “web-based research” OR “digital data” OR “social media” OR “platform-based research”*

These strings were combined using Boolean operators to form the final search syntax applied across databases. The core combination used was: (Search String 1 OR Search String 2) AND (Search String 3 AND Search String 4), with (Search String 5) added iteratively to capture literature addressing online and social-media-enabled research contexts. Truncation (*) and phrase searching were applied where supported by database-specific syntax. As recommended by Krumpal (2013) and Xiao & Watson (2019), search strings were adapted to the indexing and search functionalities of each database while maintaining conceptual equivalence.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established prior to screening. Studies were eligible for inclusion if they explicitly addressed social desirability bias or closely related constructs as a methodological issue affecting the validity of research in social sciences. Eligible studies included quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, methodological, and conceptual papers within social science disciplines.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Topical focus	Studies that explicitly examine social desirability bias or closely related constructs as a methodological issue in research	Studies focusing on social desirability solely as a personality trait without methodological implications
Disciplinary scope	Research studies within social science disciplines	Studies limited to clinical or diagnostic contexts without relevance to social science research design
Research design	Quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, and methodological or conceptual studies	Studies lacking a clear research design or methodological discussion
Data collection context	Studies involving self-reported data, interviews, surveys, online data collection, or social-media-enabled research	Studies not involving human participants in either primary or secondary data collection
Methodological contribution	Studies addressing measurement, detection, mitigation, or implications of social desirability bias	Studies that merely mention social desirability bias as a limitation of the that study, without analysis or methodological insight
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Non-peer-reviewed sources
Language	Articles published in English	Articles published in languages other than English
Time frame	Studies published between January 2000 and December 2024	Studies published outside the specified time period
Availability	Full-text articles available	Full-text articles not available

Source: Authors, 2026

Studies were excluded if they examined social desirability solely as a personality trait without linking it to methodological bias, focused exclusively on clinical diagnostic tools without broader methodological relevance, or were non-peer-reviewed sources. Articles not available in full text or not written in English were also excluded. These criteria align with the best practices of systematic literature reviews in social sciences (Tranfield et al., 2003; Snyder, 2019). Table 01 depicts the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the current review.

Study Selection Process

From all the records retrieved from database searches, duplicate records were identified and removed manually. The study selection process proceeded in three sequential stages: title screening, abstract screening, and full-text eligibility assessment. During title screening, clearly irrelevant studies were excluded. Abstracts of the remaining records were then evaluated against the predefined inclusion criteria. Finally, full texts of potentially eligible articles were reviewed to confirm relevance, methodological focus, and disciplinary fit.

Throughout the screening process, decisions were guided by standardized protocols of PRISMA-2020 to reduce subjectivity. As recommended by Page et al. (2021), the ambiguities encountered during abstract and full-text screening were resolved through a sound review against the eligibility criteria in line with PRISMA-2020 guidelines.

PRISMA Flow Diagram and Description

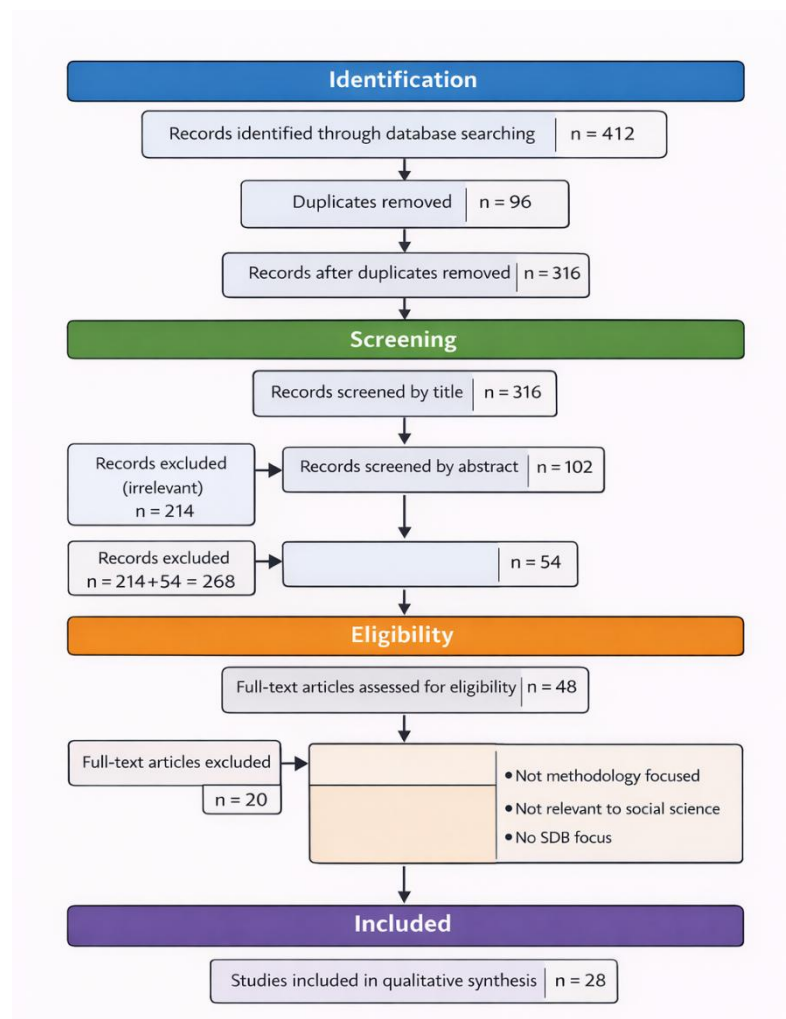


Figure 1: PRISMA-flow Diagram

Source: Authors, 2026

The initial database search yielded 412 records. After the removal of 96 duplicate records, 316 articles remained for title screening. Title screening resulted in the exclusion of 214 records due to irrelevance to social desirability bias and research methodology. The abstracts of the remaining 102 articles were screened, leading to the exclusion of 54 articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria. Full-text assessment was conducted on 48 articles, of which 20 were excluded due to lack of methodological focus, insufficient relevance to social science research, or failure to address social desirability bias explicitly. The final sample comprised 28 peer-reviewed articles, which were included in the qualitative synthesis. This selection process is depicted in figure 01; PRISMA-flow diagram.

Data Extraction and Coding

A structured data extraction protocol was developed in the current study to ensure consistency and analytical rigor. For each included article, data were extracted on publication details, disciplinary context, research design, data collection methods, conceptualization of social desirability bias, measurement or detection approaches, mitigation strategies employed, and key methodological findings. Contextual factors including online data collection or social media involvement were also recorded. This structured approach facilitated cross-study comparison and thematic synthesis (Xiao & Watson, 2019). *Table 02 summarizes the key data extraction categories used in the current review.*

Table 2: Data Extraction Framework

Category	Description
Bibliographic information	Author/s, year of publication, journal name
Discipline / Subject	Management, psychology, sociology...
Research design	Quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods
Data collection method(s)	Face-to-face, online, social media-based
Conceptualization of SDB	Definition, and theoretical framing
Detection method(s)	Scales, indirect questioning, indicators
Mitigation strategies	Design-based, procedural, statistical
Key findings	Methodological implications
Limitations	Bias-related limitations reported

Source: Authors, 2026

Design-specific Quality Appraisal Tools

To evaluate the methodological quality of included studies, design-specific quality appraisal tools were applied. Quantitative studies were assessed using criteria adapted from the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklists, focusing on sampling adequacy, measurement validity, and bias control. Qualitative studies were appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) qualitative

checklist, emphasizing credibility, reflexivity, and transparency in data collection and analysis. Mixed-methods studies were evaluated using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) recommended by Hong et al. (2018).

Rather than excluding studies based solely on quality scores, appraisal results were used to contextualize findings during synthesis, and to weight the strength of evidence, in line with contemporary systematic review guidance (Snyder, 2019). This approach allowed for inclusive but critical synthesis across diverse methodologies in social sciences (Hong et al., 2018).

Data Synthesis Strategy

Given the heterogeneity of study designs, disciplinary contexts, and outcome measures, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted. Studies were grouped thematically according to: (i) sources and mechanisms of social desirability bias, (ii) detection and measurement approaches, (iii) mitigation strategies, and (iv) contextual influence, including online & social media environments. Patterns of convergence and divergence across studies were identified and interpreted in light of methodological quality and context. This synthesis strategy aligns with established guidance for systematic reviews incorporating mixed evidence bases (Popay et al., 2006).

Results

The selected articles bridged multiple social science disciplines, including management and organizational studies, psychology, sociology, public health, and interdisciplinary behavioral research. Methodologically, the sample included quantitative studies ($n = 14$), qualitative studies ($n = 7$), and mixed-methods or methodological studies ($n = 7$). Data collection modes varied, with a noticeable shift from face-to-face surveys & interviews to online surveys and digitally mediated research, including social-media-recruited samples in more recent studies. Across the corpus, social desirability bias was examined either as a central methodological problem or as a critical validity threat affecting substantive findings. Thematic synthesis revealed four overarching themes, each encompassing multiple subthemes that cut across research designs and disciplinary boundaries.

Theme 1: Conceptualizations and Sources of Social Desirability Bias

The first dominant theme concerned how social desirability bias is conceptualized and theorized. Earlier studies primarily framed social desirability bias as an individual-level response tendency, rooted in stable personality traits or moral self-regulation, often measured using standardized scales. However, more recent studies emphasized a contextual and interactional perspective, arguing that social desirability bias emerges from situational cues, power relations, and perceived evaluative contexts than from individual disposition alone (Krumpal, 2013; Bergen & Labonté, 2020).

Across both quantitative and qualitative studies, three primary sources of social desirability bias were consistently identified: (i) norm salience; (ii) evaluation apprehension; (iii) impression management motives. Norm salience was mostly pronounced in studies involving ethical behavior, compliance, health behaviors, and organizational deviance, where respondents were acutely aware of socially sanctioned responses. Evaluation apprehension was amplified in hierarchical organizational contexts, especially when data were collected internally or when participants feared traceability. Impression management motives were found to operate both consciously and unconsciously, shaping not only response content but narrative structure in qualitative interviews as well (Gnambs & Kaspar, 2015).

Notably, several studies highlighted that social desirability bias is not static but fluctuates depending on title sensitivity, data collection method, and perceived audience, challenging the adequacy of one-size-fits-all measurement scales & approaches.

Theme 2: Manifestations of Social Desirability Bias Across Research Designs

The second theme concerned how social desirability bias manifests across quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research designs. In quantitative survey research, social desirability bias was most frequently observed as systematic under-reporting of socially undesirable behaviors, and over-reporting of socially valued traits & behaviors. Several studies demonstrated that failure to account for this bias led to inflated correlations and misleading regression, mainly in cross-sectional designs, and self-reported data (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

In qualitative research, social desirability bias manifested more frequently. Rather than outright falsification, participants often engaged in selective disclosure, rationalization, or moral framing of their actions. Focus group discussions were found to be more vulnerable, as group dynamics & peer presence encouraged conformity, and discouraged dissenting or stigmatized actions. Interview-based studies noted that interviewer attributes shaped participant narratives, reinforcing socially acceptable responses (Dalton & Ortegren, 2011; Bispo Júnior & Leite, 2022).

Mixed-methods studies provided particularly strong evidence of social desirability bias by revealing discrepancies between self-reported data and behavioral or documentary evidence. These differences highlighted the value of data triangulation for detecting hidden or normalized forms of SDB that might remain invisible in mono-method designs (King & Bruner, 2000; Bispo Júnior & Leite, 2022; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Theme 3: Detection and Measurement Strategies

The third theme synthesized on how social desirability bias is detected and assessed. Traditional self-reported social desirability scales remained the most commonly used tools, mostly in quantitative studies. However, several articles questioned their sufficiency, noting that such scales often capture general impression management tendencies than item- or context-specific bias.

Indirect questioning techniques like randomized response techniques and list experiments were shown to yield higher prevalence estimates of sensitive behaviors compared to direct questioning, suggesting substantial underreporting in conventional surveys. However, these techniques were underutilized in social science research (Krumpal, 2013; Bergen & Labonté, 2020). Qualitative studies relied less on formal measurement and more on procedural detection strategies, such as probing inconsistencies, triangulating accounts, and reflexive analysis of interview dynamics (Chung & Monroe, 2003). A recurring finding across the literature was that explicit reflection on social desirability bias was rarely documented, even researchers acknowledged its presence. Accordingly, the results indicate a mismatch between the recognized pervasiveness of social desirability bias and the limited range of detection tools routinely applied, particularly in social science research.

Theme 4: Mitigation Strategies and Effectiveness

The final and most integrative theme concerned strategies for mitigating social desirability bias and their effectiveness across research contexts. Design-based strategies like assurances of anonymity, neutral item wording, and self-administered surveys were widely recommended and moderately effective, mostly for reducing evaluation apprehension. However, evidence suggested that these strategies alone were insufficient for highly sensitive topics.

Advanced methodological approaches, including behavioral measures, digital trace data, and implicit indicators, were identified as promising alternatives to sole reliance on self-reports (Bispo Júnior & Leite, 2022). Several recent studies highlighted how social-media-derived data can both exacerbate and alleviate social desirability bias: while platform norms intensify self-presentation pressures, unobtrusive digital traces may offer less reactive indicators of behavior when used ethically and analytically. In qualitative research, mitigation strategies emphasizing rapport building, interviewer neutrality, prolonged engagement, and triangulation were consistently associated with richer and less sanitized data. However, only a few number of studies reported these strategies systematically, indicating a gap between methodological recommendations and actual research practices (Holtgraves, 2004; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Across all designs, the synthesis revealed a clear trend: multi-strategy approaches combining procedural, design-based, and analytical techniques were more effective than mono-method solutions. Yet, such integrative approaches remain the exception than the norm.

Table 03 summarizes the four themes and their key methodological implications.

Table 3: Summary of Thematic Synthesis

Theme	Core Insight	Methodological Implication
Conceptualization	SDB is contextual and dynamic	Treat SDB as a situational design issue

Manifestation	Bias varies by method and context	Avoid sole reliance on self-reports
Detection	Tools are fragmented and underused	Combine direct and indirect measures
Mitigation	Multi-strategy approaches work best	Integrate design, procedural, and analytical safeguards

Source: Authors, 2026

Taken together, the results demonstrate that social desirability bias remains a systematic and under-addressed threat to validity in social science research. Though awareness of the bias is widespread, proactive and integrative mitigation remains limited, mainly in digitally mediated research environments. The findings emphasize the need for a methodologically pluralistic framework that embeds SDB considerations across the entire research process; from design to data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Discussion

Integrative Interpretation of Findings

This systematic literature review was carried out to synthesize how Social Desirability Bias (SDB) is conceptualized, manifested, detected, and mitigated across social science research, with particular emphasis on social media era. The findings demonstrate that, despite decades of methodological awareness, SDB remains a systematic and inadequately addressed threat to research validity, especially in studies relying on self-reported data. The thematic synthesis reveals a clear shift in the literature from viewing SDB merely as a stable individual trait toward understanding it as a contextually embedded, socially constructed response phenomenon (Tourangeau et al., 2000). This shift has important theoretical and methodological implications.

Across the reviewed studies, SDB was shown to be dynamic, situational, and sensitive to perceived norms, power relations, and audience effects. This aligns with contemporary critiques of trait-based measurement approaches and supports the need for embedding bias mitigation strategies into research design than treating SDB solely as a statistical issue in analysis (Tourangeau et al., 2000; Krumpal, 2013; Bergen & Labonté, 2020).

Theoretical Implications

The findings strongly resonate with Impression Management Theory and Self-Presentation Theory, which posit that individuals actively regulate their behavior and self-disclosures to influence how they are perceived by others (Goffman, 1959; Nederhof, 1985; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Many of the reviewed studies, mainly those in organizational contexts demonstrate that respondents frame their

answers to align with professional, moral, and organizational expectations, even in truly anonymous research settings. This suggests that research participation itself constitutes a social performance, reinforcing the need to conceptualize surveys and interviews as social interactions, not neutral measurement tools.

The review extends self-presentation theory by highlighting how digital contexts and social media norms intensify impression management motives. Online identities, algorithmic visibility, and persistent audience awareness appear to heighten respondent sensitivity to social evaluation, thereby amplifying social desirability pressures in web-based and platform-recruited studies (Paulhus, 1991; Zhao et al., 2023). This suggests that traditional self-presentation models require updating to consider for platform-mediated audiences. The synthesis also reinforces Social Norm Theory, which emphasizes that behavior and self-reports are shaped by perceived descriptive and injunctive norms (Cialdini et al., 1991). Across the reviewed literature, norm salience consistently emerged as a core driver of SDB, mainly in social research on ethics, compliance, and deviant workplace behaviors. Respondents were more likely to distort responses when norms were clear, morally charged, and socially enforced.

Closely related is evaluation apprehension theory, which explains how fear of judgment affects behavior and disclosure (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). The findings suggest that evaluation apprehension persists even under conditions of anonymity, especially in organizational research where respondents may fear indirect identification and reputational consequences. This challenges the assumption that anonymity alone is adequate to eliminate socially desirable responding and emphasizes the importance of perceived confidentiality.

From a methodological theory perspective, the results extend work on Common Method Variance (CMV), and method effects (Podsakoff et al., 2003). While CMV has traditionally been treated as a statistical artifact, the present synthesis shows that social desirability bias represents a substantive psychological and social mechanism underlying method effects. In this sense, SDB is not merely a nuisance variable but a theoretically meaningful process that shapes how respondents engage with research instruments. The review further suggests that treating SDB purely through post-hoc statistical controls risks obscuring its theoretical roots. Instead, SDB should be theorized as an interaction between respondent motivations, research context, and measurement design.

Methodological Implications

The findings have significant implications for research design across quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods. First, the synthesis highlights the limitations of relying exclusively on self-reported instruments, mainly for normatively charged constructs common in social research. Second, while traditional social desirability scales remain useful, they are insufficient on their own, as they often fail to capture context-specific bias.

The review provides strong support for methodological multiplicity. Studies that combined self-reports with indirect questioning, behavioral indicators, and qualitative triangulation were more effective in detecting and mitigating SDB. In qualitative research, procedural rigor; including reflexivity, rapport building, and triangulation have emerged as a critical but underreported safeguard against socially desirable narratives (Bispo Júnior & Leite, 2022). Moreover, the findings suggest that bias mitigation must be proactive, embedded throughout the research process rather than addressed retrospectively. This calls for a shift from reactive bias correction to bias-aware research design.

Implications for Management Research

For management scholars, the implications are particularly salient. Many central constructs in organizational research like ethical leadership, integrity, commitment, engagement, and organizational citizenship are inherently value-laden and thus highly susceptible to social desirability bias. The review indicates that failure to address SDB may partially explain inconsistent findings and inflated effect sizes in these domains. Moreover, as organizational research increasingly adopts online surveys and social-media-based recruitment, the risk of unexamined social desirability bias is likely to grow. Management researchers must therefore reconsider prevailing assumptions about data neutrality in digital contexts and incorporate design features that explicitly address online self-presentation and impression management dynamics.

Future Research Agenda

The findings of this systematic literature review emphasize the need for a more sophisticated and context-sensitive research agenda on SDB, mainly within social science research conducted in digitally mediated environments. While prior studies have established the existence and consequences of SDB, future research must move beyond descriptive acknowledgment toward theory-driven, design-integrated, and context-aware investigations. This section outlines priority directions for future research, with particular emphasis on web & social-media-based methodologies.

Advancing Theory: Contextual and Multilevel Models of Social Desirability Bias

Future research should re-conceptualize SDB as a multilevel phenomenon, rather than an individual-level response tendency. Existing work has largely emphasized dispositional explanations (e.g., impression management traits), yet the present review demonstrates that SDB is shaped by organizational norms, power relations, and digital audiences. Integrating impression management theory (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), and social norm theory (Cialdini et al., 1991), and could help explain how organizational climates and professional logics systematically influence self-report distortion in social science research.

Moreover, scholars should develop dynamic models of SDB that account for situational variability across time, platforms, and audiences. For example, the same employee may exhibit different levels of socially desirable responding depending on whether data are collected via internal organizational surveys, anonymous external platforms, or social-media-linked recruitment channels. Longitudinal and experience-sampling designs offer promising avenues for examining how social desirability pressures fluctuate across contexts and over time (Krumpal, 2013).

Expanding Methodological Innovations

A key implication of the review is that social science research remains overly reliant on single-source, self-reported data, despite repeated methodological warnings. Future research should prioritize methodological triangulation, integrating self-reports with behavioral indicators, archival records, peer evaluations, and digital trace data. Such approaches not only reduce reliance on socially desirable responding but also enable researchers to empirically examine discrepancies between reported and enacted behavior (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Additionally, future studies should systematically test the comparative effectiveness of bias mitigation strategies. For example, experimental designs could compare direct questioning, list experiments, and randomized response techniques within the same organizational sample to evaluate which methods most effectively reduce SDB for sensitive constructs. This line of inquiry remains underdeveloped in social science research but is essential for evidence-based methodological guidance (Krumpal, 2013).

Social Media as a Source and a Tool for Addressing SDB

The social media era introduces a paradoxical challenge for research on social desirability bias. On one hand, social media platforms intensify self-presentation, reputation management, and norm conformity, potentially amplifying SDB in surveys and interviews conducted online or through social platforms. On the other hand, these platforms generate unobtrusive behavioral data that might offer alternative, less reactive indicators of attitudes and behavior (Zhao et al., 2023). Thus, future research should therefore investigate when and how social media data mitigate versus magnify social desirability bias. Key questions include how platform affordances influence respondent honesty, and how ethical integration of digital trace data can complement traditional self-reports. Scholars must also critically examine new forms of bias introduced by algorithmic curation and selective self-disclosure, ensuring that methodological innovations do not merely replace one bias with another.

Strengthening Qualitative and Mixed-Methods Transparency

Qualitative social science research remains particularly vulnerable to under-examined social desirability bias, especially in studies of leadership, ethics, and organizational culture. Future qualitative studies should explicitly theorize SDB as part of the research process and report procedural strategies used to mitigate it (Bergen & Labonté, 2020; Zhao et al., 2023).

Mixed-methods designs represent a particularly promising direction, as they allow researchers to triangulate socially sensitive self-reports with qualitative narratives and behavioral data. Future work should focus on developing integrated mixed-methods frameworks that treat social desirability bias not merely as a threat but as a phenomenon that reveals how individuals navigate normative pressures within organizations and communities.

Priority Research Directions

Table 04 summarizes future research directions, theoretical foundations, and methodological implications for future research studies on SDB.

Table 4: Future Research Directions on SDB

Research Area	Key Research Questions	Theoretical Lens	Methodological Implications
Multilevel SDB	How do organizational norms shape SDB?	Institutional theory; social norms	Multilevel modeling
Dynamic SDB	How does SDB vary across contexts and time?	Impression management	Longitudinal designs
Method comparison	Which mitigation techniques work best?	Method effects theory	Experimental comparisons
Social media effects	How do platforms alter SDB mechanisms?	Digital self-presentation	Platform-aware designs
Qualitative transparency	How is SDB managed in fieldwork?	Reflexivity theory	Enhanced reporting; reflective analysis

Source: Authors, 2026

To further operationalize this future research agenda, table 05 outlines specific research opportunities at the intersection of social science research and social media.

Table 5: Future Research Agenda for Social-media-based Social Science Research

Focus Area	Research Opportunity	Suggested Methods
Online recruitment	Bias in platform-based samples	Mode comparison studies
Digital trace data	Validity vs. ethical concerns	Mixed-methods triangulation
Algorithmic visibility	Impact on self-presentation	Experimental platform studies
Professional identity	Online vs. offline self-report gaps	Longitudinal panel studies
Ethical reporting	Transparency in digital research	Methodological audits

Source: Authors, 2026

Accordingly, future research on SDB must adopt a theoretically integrated, methodologically pluralistic, and digitally informed approach in social science research. By treating social desirability bias as a substantive social phenomenon than a peripheral methodological inconvenience, scholars can generate more valid, credible, and contextually grounded knowledge. Addressing this challenge is especially critical as social science research increasingly unfolds within social-media-saturated contexts that reshape how individuals present themselves, interpret norms, and engage with research.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review advances understanding of Social Desirability Bias (SDB) as a theoretically meaningful and methodologically consequential phenomenon in social science and management research. Synthesizing evidence from 28 peer-reviewed studies, the review concludes that SDB cannot be recognized as a stable individual response tendency alone. Instead, SDB is best conceptualized as a contextually embedded social process shaped by impression management motives, social norms, evaluation anxieties, and increasingly, digitally mediated audiences. Drawing on Impression Management Theory (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), Social Norm Theory (Cialdini et al., 1991), and Method Effects Theory (Podsakoff et al., 2003), this review shows that socially desirable responding emerges from the interaction between respondents, research settings, and measurement designs than from respondents in isolation.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings extend existing models of self-presentation by emphasizing the role of organizational and platform-level contexts in shaping research responses. In management research, where constructs are often morally and professionally charged, SDB operates as a mechanism through which organizational norms & institutional pressures are reproduced in empirical data. The rise of social media further complicates this process by intensifying self-monitoring and audience awareness, thereby altering how individuals engage with research instruments even outside explicit organizational settings. By integrating insights across quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods traditions, this review highlights the need for a paradigmatic shift from treating SDB as a peripheral methodological nuisance to theorizing it as a core social mechanism influencing knowledge production.

Methodologically, the review highlights that no single strategy is sufficient to eliminate social desirability bias. Instead, design-integrated, multi-strategy approaches, combining procedural safeguards, indirect questioning, triangulation, and analytical modeling offer the most robust means of addressing SDB. Importantly, the findings emphasize that methodological rigor requires not only technical solutions but also reflexive engagement with how research practices themselves generate social pressures. In this sense, addressing SDB is both a methodological and an epistemological challenge, calling for greater transparency, pluralism, and theory-driven research design in social sciences.

Limitations

Despite the implications, this systematic literature review has four identified limitations. First, the review was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English, which may have excluded relevant studies published in languages other than English. Second, although the review adhered to PRISMA-2020 guidelines, the heterogeneity of study designs, disciplinary contexts, and outcome measures limited the feasibility of quantitative meta-analysis, necessitating reliance on narrative synthesis. Third, while the review explicitly addressed the social media era, empirical research in this area remains emergent, and conclusions regarding platform-mediated social desirability bias should be interpreted cautiously. Fourth, although rigorous quality appraisal tools were employed, assessments of methodological quality inevitably involved interpretive judgment, which might depict some degree of subjectivity.

Directions for Future Studies

Future research studies must advance theory-driven and context-sensitive models of social desirability bias, mainly within management & organizational research in social sciences. Scholars are encouraged to adopt multilevel and longitudinal designs that examine how SDB varies across organizational hierarchies, professional identities, and digital platforms. Greater methodological experimentation is needed to compare the effectiveness of different bias mitigation strategies across data collection methods, especially in online and social-media-based research. Additionally, future studies should explore ethical and analytical frameworks for integrating digital trace data with self-reports, while critically examining new biases introduced by algorithmic visibility and platform norms. Finally, qualitative and mixed-methods researchers should explicitly theorize and report how social desirability bias is managed throughout the research process, thereby contributing to greater transparency and cumulative methodological awareness.

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Annexure 01:

Table A01: PRISMA-2020 Checklist for the Systematic Literature Review

Section / Topic	Item No.	Checklist Item	Reported in Manuscript
Title	1	Identify the article as a systematic review.	Title
Abstract	2	Provide a structured summary including background, objectives, methods, results, and conclusions.	Abstract
Introduction	3	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of existing knowledge.	Introduction
	4	Provide an explicit statement of the objectives.	Objectives of the Study
Methods	5	Specify inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review.	Methodology (Table 01)

Section / Topic	Item No.	Checklist Item	Reported in Manuscript
	6	Specify all information sources (databases, registers, other sources), including dates searched.	Methodology
	7	Present the full search strategies for all databases, including filters and limits used.	Methodology (Search Strings)
	8	Describe the process for selecting studies (screening, eligibility).	Methodology
	9	Describe the data collection process and data items extracted.	Methodology (Data Extraction)
	10a	List and define all outcomes for which data were sought.	Methodology
	10b	Describe assumptions or simplifications made during data extraction.	Methodology
	11	Describe methods used to assess risk of bias or study quality.	Methodology (quality appraisal)
	12	Specify effect measures used (if applicable).	Not applicable (thematic synthesis)
	13a	Describe synthesis methods used to decide study eligibility for synthesis.	Methodology
	13b	Describe methods used to prepare data for synthesis.	Methodology
	13c	Describe methods used to synthesize results.	Methodology (narrative synthesis)
	13d	Describe methods used to explore heterogeneity.	Methodology
	13e	Describe sensitivity analyses conducted.	Methodology
Results	14	Describe results of the study selection process, including PRISMA flow diagram.	Methodology (PRISMA flow diagram)
	15	Describe characteristics of included studies.	Results
	16	Present risk of bias assessments for included studies.	Results
	17	Present results of individual studies.	Results
	18	Present results of syntheses.	Results
	19	Present results of additional analyses (if any).	Results

Section / Topic	Item No.	Checklist Item	Reported in Manuscript
Discussion	20a	Provide a general interpretation of results in the context of existing evidence.	Discussion
	20b	Discuss limitations of the evidence included in the review.	Discussion
	20c	Discuss limitations of the review process.	Limitations
	20d	Discuss implications for practice, policy, and future research.	Conclusions / Directions for Future Studies
Other Information	21	Provide registration information for the review (if applicable).	Not registered
	22	Describe sources of financial or non-financial support.	Funding statement
	23	Declare competing interests.	Conflict of interest statement
	24	Describe availability of data, code, and materials.	Data availability statement

Source: Authors, 2026