Social Media Is an Illusion: Faking Tendencies on Social Media – A Systematic Review

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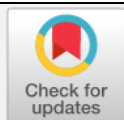[1] Airlangga University, Surabaya, East Java Province, 60132, Indonesia
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ABSTRACT

The expansion of social media platforms has made it easier for people to present themselves online. However, this self-presentation is often carried out by displaying only the most favorable aspects of oneself, with little consideration for authenticity. Such behavior becomes a form of faking tendency aimed at gaining advantage through curated self-presentation. This tendency may alter and influence an individual's self-concept as they attempt to stay aligned and consistent with the image they present on social media. Yet these alterations cannot change the fact that their online persona may remain far removed from their actual identity. A total of 10 articles were included in this review. The methodology began with a selection of studies based on their basic characteristics and relevance to the topic. Second, all selected articles were summarized and reviewed. Third, the information gathered from the review was synthesized, including the effects of self-presentation on self-concept, the processes of self-concept alteration, and the faking tendencies that may emerge during these processes. Overall, this article outlines several potential directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Social media is becoming increasingly common as technology advances rapidly. Social media has become an ideal platform for presenting oneself (You & Liu, 2022). Previous research has examined the relationship and influence between self-concept and self-presentation, as well as the reverse, on social media platforms (Choi et al., 2020; Nash, 2023). These studies have also identified various dimensions of both self-concept and self-presentation within social media contexts. Some investigations have focused on the connection between self-presentation and social media addiction (You & Liu, 2022; Zhu & Xiong, 2022), self-presentation as a behavioral strategy to satisfy psychological needs such as the need for relatedness (Yang & Ying, 2021), and several studies have explored self-presentation on social media as a means for personal image construction and brand management (Baldwin, 2020; Khamis et al., 2017; Ning et al., 2024).

Most of these studies have focused on how self-presentation on social media is influenced by various behavioral phenomena and how it, in turn, contributes to the fulfillment of new psychological needs specific to social media environments. Additionally, self-presentation on these platforms impacts users' self-concept. The more social media is used strategically for self-presentation, image crafting, and brand management, the more it alters users' self-concepts, often diverging from their authentic identities (Schlosser, 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). Consequently, there remains a need for a literature review exploring the connection between self-presentation and self-concept on social media, particularly the tendency to fabricate a more favorable image that deviates from one's true self.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining relevant literature and answering the following research questions: (1) What is the relationship between self-presentation, self-concept, and the tendency to fake on social media? (2) How does self-presentation express itself through various online behaviors?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Self-Concept in Self-Presentation

In today's digital age, social media serves as a platform offering various forms of entertainment and engagement (Nash, 2023). Its growing influence is gradually reshaping how people interact and behave. Extended use of social media can lead to changes in multiple areas of life, including mental health, relationships, emotional well-being, academic achievements, and work performance, along with other negative consequences linked to excessive use (Zhu & Xiong, 2022).

When communicating and engaging on social media, individuals often aim to showcase their most favorable qualities (Zheng et al., 2020). This environment can create pressure from public expectations, which may lead to significant changes in a person's self-concept as they strive to improve their online social interactions (Choi et al., 2020). Overall, it appears that people tend to modify their self-perception after presenting themselves on social media, internalizing the values and behaviors they display in an effort to maintain consistency (Tice, 1992).

Irving Goffman's self-presentation theory hypothesizes that people often pretend to exhibit certain behaviors when interacting with others in real life. As this interaction goes by, there is an internal drive to do self-promotion in an urge to match the presentation (Goffman, 1959). This theory was further developed through the work on impression management, which posits that individuals employ strategic behaviors to regulate how they are perceived by others (Jones &

Nisbett, 1971). This line of thought later evolved into what is now commonly referred to as self-presentation.

The change in self-concept may manifest in an illusion to mask the true self, or as in need to interact and be seen by others (Choi et al., 2020). This concept relates to the public commitment someone faces when they interact with the public, whether in real life or in social media. This change may be so different from the true self, a side unknown to others but actually exists and is important, yet not expressed freely because of the self-presentation someone did in the first place. There is a thin line between the actual self and the true self. The actual self refers to the self-concept that may appear or be shared during an interaction; on the other hand, the true self is the hidden, private self-concept that is not expressed or shown to others (Schlosser, 2020). The gap between the actual self, the online identity, or everything people share on social media, and the true self may stem from the self-presentation they present.

2.2. Self-Presentation on Social Media

The development of social media platforms has enabled individuals to engage in self-presentation, which often serves as a means of constructing their personal image or brand. The identity they project online may differ significantly from their actual selves. However, this process of self-presentation can have complex effects on the individual. Social media use can encourage the rise of false self-presentation (Wright et al., 2018), which may negatively impact a person's well-being and contribute to psychological issues. False self-presentation is typically aimed at enhancing one's self-concept and impressing others, whereas presenting one's authentic self is aimed at seeking validation and confirming one's identity (Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Swann, 1983). These differing outcomes arise because many people choose to engage in false self-presentation to boost their self-image rather than presenting their true selves for self-verification.

Online self-presentation is often achieved through the creation of an idealized online identity that may not accurately reflect one's true self-identity (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). In several studies on self-presentation in social media (specifically Facebook), people often engage in self-enhancement by creating an inaccurate, ideal persona to make an impression, but they rarely disclose their true emotional state online (Back et al., 2010). These findings already show that people often fake themselves on social media, hiding their true selves and altering their self-concept. The self-presentation people did to fit the audiences they had and meet the expectations of these audiences, or even their own expectations (Khamis et al., 2017). Thus, they modified their self-concept to fulfill these presentation needs. This study aims to explore how self-presentation influences self-concept and to examine the tendency to engage in faking behaviours that lie between these two constructs, based on a literature review.

3. Research Methodology
3.1. Search Strategy

Several research databases were used in this study, including Scopus, ScienceDirect, Wiley Online Library, Taylor & Francis, Sage Journals, Frontiers in Psychology, and the National Library of Medicine. These databases provide a broad spectrum of relevant literature related to self-presentation, self-concept, and faking tendencies examined in this study. The search keywords covered several terms associated with the study's focus, including self-presentation (e.g., "self-presentation," "online identity," "branding," and "ideal self"), self-concept (e.g., "self-concept" and "true self"), and faking tendencies (e.g., "faking behavior," "online behavior," "fake identity," and "false self-presentation"). Full-text articles were reviewed where available, with no restrictions on publication date.

3.2. Selection Process

The article selection process involved several inclusion criteria, including: (a) addressing the relationship between self-presentation and self-concept in both online and offline interactions; (b) describing the effects of self-presentation on self-concept; (c) detailing online behaviors, such as tendencies toward faking or showcasing; (d) being indexed in Scopus; and (e) being published in English. Exclusion criteria were used to ensure that the findings were not limited to proceedings, reports, or book reviews. Studies that examine self-presentation, self-concept, and faking tendencies, using either quantitative or qualitative methods, have been included in this review. During the search, we simultaneously eliminate articles that are not relevant to our studies by reviewing the full text, resulting in 10 articles comprehended in this review.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Impact of Self-Presentation on Social Media

The growth of social media platforms has enabled individuals to express themselves and foster interactions and relationships with others. This phenomenon has encouraged people to create alternative identities to satisfy these social needs, increase their engagement, and offer more appealing portrayals for others to observe (Nash, 2023). Such self-presentation can modify the original self-concept that individuals hold. To showcase these idealized versions, people might exaggerate or fabricate aspects of themselves to meet expectations or impress their intended audience. The development of this new online persona can lead to specific online behaviours in which individuals construct a façade to conceal their authentic selves (Wright et al., 2018). Over time, frequent engagement in this kind of false self-presentation may not only alter one's self-concept and self-perception but also significantly influence their behavior and mental health. Presenting a false self can negatively impact psychological well-being, particularly for those with limited social skills (Verduyn et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2018; Ziv & Kiasi, 2016). Additionally, research indicates that false self-presentation is associated with increased stress levels (Grieve & Watkinson, 2016).

4.2. The Expression of Self-Concept

Essentially, self-concept is an intricate, structured, and ever-evolving construct that results from beliefs, attitudes, and opinions that guide one's existence (Purkey, 1988). When expressing this self-concept, especially on social media, people may present an idealized image of themselves. The ideal self-representation could stand out from their real self-concept. This ideal representation proclaims an alternate, better version of someone, alongside likable behavior and visions, usually shaped by environmental influences (Nash, 2023). Thus, people usually build another identity on social media to facilitate their needs for self-presentation. The sole reason why these new identities are built is that there is an eagerness lying underneath to augment self-sense, enhance their efficacy by growing more physical and social resources, perspectives, and character in achieving one's personal goal (Aron et al., 2001). They will gradually internalize these online identities into their self-concept, so in that way, their self-concept could change.

4.3. The Difference Between the Self-Concept Altered by Self-Presentation on Social Media and Real Identity

The self is a multifaceted concept (Hu et al., 2019). People may avoid expressing themselves to avoid judgment from others, especially when their true selves do not align with prevailing social norms (Hu et al., 2019). Social media also allows people to express characteristics that might

not be accepted in real-life interactions (Hjetland et al., 2022). Thus, they might build an alternate identity to hide these authentic characteristics in real life and express them freely on social media. This online identity refers to one's self-concept, how they view themselves, their beliefs about themselves, and their interactions with information technology (Nash, 2023). Changes in one's concept and point of view are an act of internalization, alongside the addition of recent behaviour and attitude (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959).

Two behavioural characteristics can determine what people internalize. Behavior can be divided into two forms: public and private. Public behavior refers to actions that are observable and acknowledged by others and that are clearly associated with an individual's identity or distinctive characteristics. In contrast, private behavior involves actions that are not publicly recognized or that diverge from behaviors typically associated with an individual, such as actions performed anonymously or in concealed contexts (Tice, 1992).

Internalization is less likely when individuals rely solely on private behavior, as it generally requires public enactment and social feedback. However, private behavior may still be internalized into one's self-concept if it is enacted, even anonymously, in contexts that involve public evaluation, impression monitoring, or concerns about being noticed and remembered by others (Tice, 1992).

In addition, the things that differ alter self-concept and true identity; the altered self-concept is shaped to develop a new, distinctive characteristic that is more in line with the 'ideal-typical' type, rather than the 'description of reality' type (Baldwin, 2020). These types of characteristics not only seem 180 degrees different from how an individual actually is, but also set a routine, structured behaviour to capture this characteristic during usual self-presentation on social media. Hence, one's self-concept changes throughout the self-presentation process, especially when the presentation involves faking or falsifying. A shift in one's self-concept means a shift in how they see themselves and behave, so it an affect how self-presentation changes self-concept and makes it distinctly different from who they actually are (Tice, 1992). Lying, faking, and falsifying self-presentation surely take a lot of time and effort, especially when done daily, but the asynchronicity of social media once again facilitates these tendencies (Schlosser, 2020). Asynchronous interaction grants more control over expressing what people want than synchronous interaction, where everything happens spontaneously and is less controllable.

4.4. The Online Behavior That Manifests a Faking Tendency

This article reviews several articles that explain the manifestation of faking tendencies in particular online behaviours. The findings were explained further in the list below:

1) The building of alternative, online identities. By altering their self-concept to fit more with their online identities and take advantage of these identities, such as expectations and relationship management, they open more social situations and ensure that they are in full control of their self-concept (Nash, 2023). This result aligns with previous findings indicating that it has become increasingly common for individuals to create separate or secondary social media accounts to selectively present carefully curated content to specific target audiences (Zheng et al., 2020). This is linked to the varied audiences one's on social media can have. The rise of building alternative identities is inseparable from anonymity (Schlosser, 2020). The ability to stay anonymous on social media allows people to express the contentious aspect of their own true identity freely.

2) Post or display of idealized and impractical presentations of an individual, even if it is inauthentic and far from who they actually are (Hjetland et al., 2022). Online self-presentation is different from online self-disclosure (Schlosser, 2020). In contrast to online self-disclosure,

which tends to reveal factual aspects of an individual, online self-presentation presents an enticing aspect of oneself, whether or not it is true, contingent on whether the truth would convey a pertinent public image. They only show what is desired, whether it is appearance or expression (Tice, 1992). Some may even do more with their promotional appearance post, such as enhancing their photos using photo enhancement software (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). These behaviours could act as a counter to the individual who did, in light of the inability to stay consistent and congruent with their true identity in real life and their presented self on social media (Zheng et al., 2020).

3) Managing impressions. People who lie in their self-presentations usually manage their impressions to continue receiving approval and to gain other forms of social support (Hancock, 2007; Mun & Kim, 2021). Impression management theory (IMT) has been closely associated with tendencies toward faking, particularly in online self-presentation contexts. Empirical findings suggest that faking behaviours are influenced by individuals' perceptions of their social environment, including perceived pressures to engage in faking, perceived behavioural control, and prevailing subjective norms, as well as by personality traits such as conscientiousness and emotional stability (Hanson et al., 2006). However, these findings also indicate that faking tendencies used as impression-management strategies do not necessarily involve deliberate attempts to violate one's true identity. Instead, within IMT, faking tendencies may manifest under different conditions and through alternative mechanisms that are not always intended to misrepresent the self (Hanson et al., 2006).

4) Deletion tendencies. During false self-expression in online social interactions, deletion tendencies are higher when these fake identities affect the psychological well-being of the individuals engaged in these interactions, due to changes in self-perception (Mun & Kim, 2021). These findings were based on the Korean population. Once this fake identity starts affecting how people perceive themselves and others, they might start erasing all of these identities from a social media platform.

4.5. Factors That May Have Contributed to Faking Tendencies: Creating a Contrast Between What Is Shown on Social Media and the True Self

Several factors that may contribute to the development of faking tendencies in self-presentation on social media have been examined. The existing research highlights the following key factors:

1) Privacy and safety reasons. During the creation of new online identities, an individual may uncover unexplored aspects of themselves, a side never publicly shown to others (Caspi & Gorsky, 2006). In this experiment with various parts of themselves, an individual may stumble upon some aspects that might be annoying to others, or even at odds with the prevailing norm (Turkle, 1995; Utz, 2005). Thus, an individual might mask these distinctive aspects of themselves by building a new identity online to present it safely. The smallest new identity-building could take the form in a pseudonym, identity play, and manipulation of social status (Caspi & Gorsky, 2006). These acts also serve as a selection of what an individual would share with others and what is not, including whether these things could meet their audience's expectations (Khamis et al., 2017). Another tactic used in relation to this is building a facade profile, which is alluring and acts as bait for the audience to see, and sharing minimal personal information that might debunk these identities.

2) Individual differences in personality traits help explain variations in online behavior, particularly in social media contexts (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). When self-presentation is oriented toward maximising visibility or attracting attention, it may reflect a greater influence

of extraversion than introversion. Levels of neuroticism also shape disclosure patterns, as individuals at both low and high ends of the neuroticism spectrum tend to share more basic personal information. In contrast, the disclosure of more private or intimate details is more strongly associated with higher levels of openness. Furthermore, individuals with elevated neuroticism are more susceptible to feelings of social rejection (Hjetland et al., 2022), a vulnerability that may manifest in attention-seeking behaviors on social media.

3) Furthermore, levels of narcissism and self-esteem also play a role in fostering these faking tendencies. Individuals exhibiting high narcissism combined with low self-esteem are more inclined to post content that is self-promotional or exaggerated on social media (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012).

4) The branding needs. To gain a commercial advantage through self-presentation on social media, people usually highlight aspects of themselves that are more enhanced, interesting, and worthwhile and downplay those that do not align with their branding goals (Khamis et al., 2017). The audience will see and judge the congruence between the brand represented through self-presentation and the self-concept (Zheng et al., 2020). The success of this branding depends on how people present themselves, as self-presentation serves as a mechanism to gain interaction, attention, and engagement (Ning et al., 2024).

5) Self-enhancement drive. This drive would incline people to present a more idealized self as a tactic to promote positive views of themselves among the audience (Zheng et al., 2020). When this idealized expression is presented publicly, people are more likely to receive feedback from the audience, which will complement one's self-sense, increasing their awareness of their own identity and their ideal, goal identity (Hu et al., 2019).

6) Public commitment. Having a permanent social media account serves as a stronger public commitment, leading to a greater self-concept shift (Choi et al., 2020). These changes occur dynamically as the need to appear consistent gradually increases, given the protracted accessibility of the information shared. Thus, people tend to evaluate and adjust their self-concept to better align with what they present on social media. In order to fulfil this public commitment, one needs a high level of mindfulness to withstand social media pressure and shape a better self–presentation (You & Liu, 2022).

7) Fulfillment of psychological needs. Self-presentation on social media has been shown to function as a means of fulfilling core psychological needs, particularly autonomy and belongingness. Evidence from studies of Chinese visitors in the United States indicates that self-presentation operates not only as a mode of self-expression but also as a reflective process in which individuals evaluate whether and how aspects of the self should be disclosed (Yang & Ying, 2021). Within this context, self-presentation among Chinese visitors tends to be more proactive and relational, reflecting a stronger orientation toward relatedness with others, whereas self-presentation among American users tends to in more defensive (Yang & Ying, 2021). These patterns are consistent with broader findings showing that socio-psychological needs, such as belongingness and relatedness, can be fulfilled through self-presentation practices on social media platforms (Zhu & Xiong, 2022).

5. Discussion

This article reviews multiple studies on self-presentation and its influence on altering an individual's self-concept, highlighting the reemergence of faking tendencies during this transformation. The findings indicate that self-presentation on social media can modify a person's self-concept, often diverging from their authentic self, as individuals tend to showcase only the favorable aspects of themselves, regardless of their accuracy. Most existing research has concentrated on self-presentation behaviors, typical online activities, and changes in self-concept.

These studies generally agree that there is a link between alterations in self-concept and the self-presentation individuals engage in, as well as the online behaviours that reveal tendencies to fake during this process. However, despite these insights, several limitations remain in the current body of research.

First, there is insufficient investigation of the dynamic changes in self-concept resulting from self-presentation. Many prior studies have primarily focused on self-presentation and individual presentation behaviors (Hjetland et al., 2022; Schlosser, 2020; Yang & Ying, 2021; You & Liu, 2022; Zheng et al., 2020; Zhu & Xiong, 2022). Research specifically examining how self-presentation influences changes in self-concept is relatively scarce (Choi et al., 2020). This area warrants deeper exploration, particularly given the view that self-concept functions as a fundamental guide to an individual's existence (Purkey, 1988). Accordingly, future research should examine more closely how self-presentation contributes to changes in self-concept and how such changes may give rise to behavioral inconsistencies or forms of hypocrisy.

Second, the relationship between faking behaviors in online contexts and the formation of online identities requires further examination. The creation of an online identity does not necessarily indicate deceptive behaviour; while some individuals may construct a façade to conceal their true selves, such actions are often justified by concerns about privacy and safety (Caspi & Gorsky, 2006). This nuance suggests that more nuanced research is needed to understand better understand the complexities of online identity and its connection to faking behaviors.

Third, due to the lack of research on self-concept alteration, there is insufficient empirical evidence on how people actually perceive and notice changes in themselves. Studies on self-presentation have explained this by asking participants in surveys or questionnaires how they feel, whether they usually do or do not, and their perspective on their own presentation behaviour. This kind of explanation is needed in self-concept change studies to deepen individuals' understanding and perspective on how they experience self-concept change and whether they realize it as an impact of the self-presentation they engage in.

Fourth, these studies need to be conducted on more diverse populations and with broader demographic criteria. Most of the studies reviewed in this article were done on college students in the teenage to young adult age range. The wider age range should have been investigated as well. Alongside that, 20% of the studies compiled have been conducted on this concept in specific occupations, such as celebrities, athletes, and influencers, in addition to the majority population used in the rest of the studies, which was students. Variation in the subject's occupation is needed to better understand whether their occupation requires a high level of self-presentation urgency, which might lead to several faking tendencies.

6. Conclusion

This systematic review reveals that self-presentation on social media significantly influences users' self-concept, often resulting in a gap between their actual self and their true self. The studies examined show that individuals tend to highlight idealized qualities while downplaying less favorable traits during online interactions. Over time, this selective self-presentation contributes to changes in self-concept, which may lead to faking behaviors and the creation of alternative online identities.

Furthermore, the findings emphasise that false self-presentation is more than a superficial act; it affects psychological well-being, impression management, and social relationships. Key factors driving these behaviors include privacy concerns, personal branding, narcissism, and the desire for self-enhancement. Although self-presentation can satisfy psychological needs and aid

in identity construction, it also risks causing internal conflict and stress when the curated online persona diverges significantly from reality.

This review adds value by synthesising evidence on the relationships among self-presentation, alterations in self-concept, and faking tendencies, and by identifying important research gaps. Future studies should broaden their focus beyond student samples to include diverse demographic and occupational groups and explore more deeply the subjective experiences associated with changes in self-concept. Addressing these gaps will enhance our understanding of digital identity formation and its effects on mental health, authenticity, and social interaction.

Contributions and Limitations: Findings compiled in this review still have several limitations. This review analyses the topic solely based on English-language journal articles. For this reason, this study might not include other research conducted in other languages. A study written in another language may offer a broader perspective on the topic and may not be limited to a few populations. It is suggested that future researchers consider including studies written in foreign languages in their reviews.

Acknowledging the limitations of this study, it nonetheless makes valuable contributions to the research on self-presentation, self-concept, and faking tendencies. This review elucidates the relationship between self-presentation and alterations in self-concept by outlining the process of change and identifying online behaviours that reflect underlying tendencies toward faking. It highlights how presentation behaviors can lead individuals to display versions of themselves that diverge significantly from their true selves. The study concludes that people tend to showcase only desirable traits and aspects during self-presentation, particularly on social media platforms where factors such as asynchronicity and anonymity play a role. Over time, these idealized portrayals become internalized into their self-concept, even when they are not entirely authentic.

Additionally, this review compiles potential factors contributing to the emergence of these behaviors and the manifestation of faking tendencies. The findings provide a solid empirical foundation for understanding the effects of self-presentation on self-concept and the rise of deceptive behaviors. Furthermore, this study identifies several gaps in the existing literature and offers clear directions and recommendations for future research.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal affiliations that could have influenced the research or findings presented in this article.

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