

ONLINE SELF-PRESENTATION IN SHAPING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION ANXIETY

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the contribution of online self-presentation in social media in shaping interpersonal communication anxiety. In the digital era, individuals often rigorously curate their identities to construct positive impressions, inadvertently creating psychological pressure. This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore the perspectives of participants regarding the online self-presentation that shape interpersonal communication anxiety. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, online observation, and documentation, and were analyzed using Miles and Huberman procedure. The results indicate that extreme impression management on the digital front stage creates a wide gap with the "back stage" or the informants' real-life reality. The increasingly blurred boundaries between these stages on social media trigger a constant mental burden that transforms into interpersonal communication anxiety during face-to-face interactions. Informants experienced a decline in communication self-efficacy due to a loss of control over their messages, leading to social withdrawal and interpersonal alienation. The study concludes that the less authentic an individual's online self-presentation, the more fragile their social competence and the higher the level of communication anxiety they face in everyday social reality.

Keywords: *Online Self-Presentation, Communication Anxiety, Interpersonal Communication, Dramaturgy.*

A. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social media has profoundly changed the human social interaction. Social media is no longer just a communication tool, but it has become a primary stage for people to develop and perform their identities (Luik, 2011). This phenomenon has resulted in a change of communication pattern, from direct and ordinary interaction to mediated and controllable communication. As mentioned by Aiyuda & Syakarofath (2019) that digital platforms provide people with full control over the information, images and impressions as they wish to present to the audience.

Individual using this media to post the best photographs, videos, status updates and narratives in order to show a good, ideal and seemingly perfect image (Irmando, 2021). This impression management is undertaken to gain social validation in the form of recognition, appreciation, or simply digital interactions such as likes and comments. However, the intense desire to continually show one's best side frequently traps individuals in self-imposed and unrealistic standards, under their own fake standards that they have created (Armani, 2023). The facility of modifying messages and content on social media has produced the phenomena known as online self-presentation.

The phenomenon of online self-presentation can be analyzed through dramaturgy theory, as proposed by Erving Goffman (2002). Based on the theory, social media functions as front stage, a space where individuals intentionally embody roles, employ idealized visual attributes, and polish their performances in order to captivate an online audience. In contrast, backstage, encompassing the real emotions, actual life, and personal faults, is purposefully

concealed. The online actor is required to maintain a high level of performance consistency due to the strict boundary between these two stages (Smith, 2016).

The psychological impact on users is substantial due to the dynamics of self-presentation on this virtual stage which necessitates perfection. A new mental burden arises when individuals devote an excessive amount of time to sustaining an ideal online image, such as anxiety regarding the judgment of others (Sari & Abidin, 2024). The persistent pressure to consistently show success, attractiveness, and happiness on social media platforms gradually diminishes an individual's confidence in communication. The digital space, which was initially intended to be a platform for unrestricted self-expression, has instead become a source of stress that induces emotional distortion (Setiawan, 2019).

The development of interpersonal communication apprehension is another consequence of failing to maintain this front stage performance. This anxiety is a result of the concern that one's ideal social media persona will crumble when faced with reality (Setyastuti, 2012). During in-person social interactions, individuals begin to feel anxious, tense, and insecure. They fear that cannot live up to the expectations or the ideal image they have cultivated on their digital media, as their front stage (Amaliah & Destiwati, 2022).

This is worsened by the gap between the edited cyber-self and the real self in everyday life. If the reality of the back stage is inconsistent with the front stage ideal, people acquire an obsessive dread of negative judgment by their social circle (Latifah, 2021). Individuals tend to avoid spontaneous and deep interpersonal engagement because they are afraid of social rejection. The fear of inauthenticity led them to hide behind their devices screens in order to maintain control over their online self-presentation (Nasution, 2012).

There are several studies on social media and communication anxiety, but the majority of the literature are discussing social comparison, fear of negative judgment, self-discrepancy, and self-esteem (Wright et al., 2018; Green, et al, 2016). Some of them also focus on the effect of social media intensity on the level of anxiety (Nan et al., 2024). There is only limited discussion on how online-self presentation has led to interpersonal communication anxiety using the dramaturgy lens.

Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by employing Dramaturgical Theory to explore the dynamics of online self-presentation that contribute the interpersonal communication anxiety. Using this lens, this research seeks to explain the psychological complexities of how digital impression management front stage extent and affect the face-to-face interpersonal communication. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the field of communication science, particularly by highlighting the importance of maintaining authenticity between one's online front stage and real life to minimize in-person communication anxiety.

B. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore the perspectives of participants regarding the online self-presentation that shape interpersonal communication anxiety. A qualitative descriptive approach is suited for studies aiming to provide description of the experiences of the participant in everyday language without relying on thick interpretive framework (Sandelowski, 2000). Primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with informants. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria targeting active social media users who exhibit symptoms of anxiety or a tendency toward high levels of content curation on their digital front stage. Online observation of the informants' social media activity and relevant document served as data triangulation techniques to ensure the credibility and validity of the findings.

All data derived from interview transcripts, observation notes, and supporting documents were analyzed using Miles and Huberman procedure. The analysis began with data

reduction, wherein the researcher sorted, focused, and simplified transcript content relevant to online-self presentation and interpersonal communication anxiety. The data were presented as a systematic descriptive narrative to map the gap between the informants' online performances and their interpersonal realities, leading to the formulation of a conclusion. To ensure data trustworthiness, the researcher verified credibility through source triangulation and member checking, reconfirming interpretations with the informants. These methodological stages were systematically designed to produce a rich, in-depth explanation of the case that objectively addresses the research gap.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Constructing the Digital Front Stage and the Reality Gap

This research reveals the dynamics of how individuals construct their digital identities through social media. Informants consistently demonstrated a strong tendency to engage in rigorous online-self presentation across all the digital platforms used. In these virtual spaces, informants acted like professional performers, meticulously designing their public personas to appear ideal, successful, aesthetically pleasing and perpetually happy. Digital activity is no longer merely casual interaction, but rather a carefully orchestrated performance designed to attract the attention of the online public (Schlosser, 2020).

Content curation has become the primary and most crucial tool for informants in constructing their self-image on the digital stage. This curation process involves a lengthy and deliberate series of actions, ranging from selecting photo angles and using visual editing apps to harmonizing the aesthetics of their feed and choosing specific words for captions. Informants deliberately spend a significant amount of time ensuring a single post looks perfect before releasing it into the public domain. A focus on visual aesthetics dominates the informants' mindset, transforming the act of posting content into a highly mechanized and artificial image-production process.

The driving force behind this front stage performance is an intense psychological need for social recognition and interpersonal validation (Duan, 2020). Informants link self-esteem and social existence to digital metrics such as the number of followers, likes, and positive comments. Every positive digital response received is viewed as a form of social acceptance that satisfies their ego. Conversely, a lack of interaction or the absence of a response from the online audience is seen as a failure to perform, triggering feelings of worthlessness within the digital ecosystem.

In addition to seeking validation, this construction of a front stage is also driven by defensive motives, particularly a strong desire to avoid negative judgement and stigma within the online environment (Angelini & Gini, 2024). Informants harbor deep-seated fears regarding aspects of their lives deemed ordinary, boring, or flawed that might be exposed to others. This leads to social media being viewed as a safe haven for filtering out the negative elements of real life. The information flowing into this virtual stage consists solely of narratives of success, glamorous urban lifestyles and manufactured moments of happiness, whilst failures and sadness are entirely excluded.

Findings suggest that this highly curated front stage performance ultimately creates a thick wall between itself and the informants' backstage reality. The backstage represents their real-life reality, full of natural human dynamics such as physical imperfections, financial difficulties, academic anxieties, and raw emotions unpublished by technology. This contrast creates a sharp identity dichotomy, in which individuals inhabit two starkly contrasting realities, between the perfect online persona and the real self-defined by limitations.

From the perspective of Dramaturgical Theory by Erving Goffman (2002), an actor's success and psychological comfort depend on their ability to maintain a safe distance between the front stage and the backstage. This is crucial to prevent the audience from perceiving

inconsistencies in the role or production flaws in the ongoing performance. If the audience catches a glimpse of the backstage area, the actor's credibility collapses, and the performance is deemed a failure. However, in the context of social media interactions in the modern era, the physical and spatial boundaries between these two stages have become extremely thin, transparent, and vulnerable to breach (Amelia & Amin, 2022).

The blurring of these boundaries creates constant and profound psychological pressure for the informants. They report living in a state of constant vigilance and anxiety, weighed down by the heavy responsibility of ensuring that the digital façade they have constructed does not crack in public. Every time they carry out an activity or post content, they are haunted by the daunting demand to maintain consistency in their front stage persona. This pressure intensifies as the number of followers grows and audience expectations rise regarding the idealized image successfully projected online.

This mental burden is exacerbated by a sense of alienation resulting from the loss of authenticity in communication. Anxiety escalates rapidly when the demands of maintaining an idealized virtual persona become exhausting, whilst the reality of life behind the scenes fails to live up to those expectations (Wright et al., 2018). Informants feel trapped in a never-ending cycle, driven to constantly create visual illusions in order to feed the online public perception they themselves cultivated from the outset.

The discrepancy between their online self-presentation and their true selves gradually erodes their emotional stability in everyday life. Influenced by the high standards set for their virtual personas, the informants begin to view the reality behind the scenes with a critical and dissatisfied eye. Ordinary real-life experiences are often seen as embarrassing shortcomings that must be carefully concealed from the outside world. Such distorted thinking transforms face-to-face social interactions in their private lives from enjoyable experiences into exhausting psychological battlegrounds.

This phenomenon also illustrates how communication technology has transformed the function of social media from a tool for interpersonal connection into a space for the commodification of the self (Schlosser, 2020). The informants sacrifice honest self-expression to build an artificial yet socially marketable personal brand in the online world. The emotional exchanges that take place on this digital stage are superficial. Audiences love and validate the informants as fictional characters deliberately created to attract attention, rather than their true selves. The awareness of this artificial validation is causing them to stumble, as stated by Wright et al. (2018) that false self-presentation in social media is linked to mental health outcomes, such as anxiety.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that excessive self-presentation on the virtual front stage trigger's social identity disintegration. The informants experienced a sense of disorientation regarding their true selves, as the constraints of their roles as digital actors often obscured their personal self-awareness in the real world. Informants felt alienated from their true selves or back stages, as much of their psychological energy had been drained by bringing to life and maintaining the idealized character displayed on the front stage.

Heavy reliance on message control on social media also made the informants highly vulnerable to uncertainty. On the cyber stage, they have full power to shape reality and conceal personal shortcomings, a privilege entirely unavailable to them behind the scenes of real life. The fear of losing control over this image lies at the root of the anxiety experienced. Informants realize that in the real world, there is no delete or edit button to save them if they make a mistake. In short, this inauthentic digital persona presented to the public has created a burden and caused anxiety for the informants. As the strain of upholding this constructed identity intensifies, the accumulated worry and mental strain are poised to overflow from the virtual sphere, jeopardizing their capacity to establish genuine connections in reality.

2. The Dynamics of Interpersonal Communication Anxiety in Real-World Interactions

The psychological burden that accumulates due to the intense need to curate one's persona on the digital platform extends beyond the online realm. This tension translates into reality, presenting itself as nervousness in social interactions. The online realm, initially a platform for self-expression, has transformed into a psychological confinement that suppresses individuals' bravery to partake in authentic human communication (Fullwood et al., 2020). The research results indicate that this fear becomes evident when participants engage in in-person interactions that necessitate spontaneity.

Findings confirm that informants experience acute fear and intense physical tension when initiating or accepting invitations to direct conversations in the real world. Clinical and psychological symptoms, such as a racing heart, cold sweats and sudden physical stiffness, frequently arise when they are in a physical social setting. This tension peaks particularly when participants have to meet in person with individuals who were previously their social media followers. The main trigger for this surge in communication anxiety is an obsessive fear that differences in identity will be revealed to others.

Informants are haunted by the thought that a real-life audience will soon realize the stark contrast between their perfect online persona and their true self. The fear that their stage mask might be forcibly removed in public creates mental pressure that paralyses their natural ability to communicate. In particular, the informants feel deeply anxious about the possibility that their back stage aspects might be judged negatively by those around them. These aspects include unattractive physical appearance (without camera filters), speech patterns that may be halting or unclear, and a real socio-economic status that is far away from their glamorous digital image. The informants feel that the loss of the visual aesthetic elements they usually control on social media will immediately diminish their self-esteem and appeal in the eyes of others.

This psychological state aligns with the concept of social evaluative anxiety, whereby individuals project high standards from their front-stage persona onto others, assuming that a real-world audience will demand the same level of perfection (Pratiwi et al., 2023). Informants perceive themselves as perpetually scrutinized and evaluated by the public's gaze, as though each action they undertake is under assessment. The perceived obligation to excel in reality converts even basic kinds of communication into a formidable and high-pressure examination.

Furthermore, this dynamic leads to a significant decline in the informants' self-efficacy regarding communication. The reason is that social media offers the privilege of absolute control over messages through features such as editing, deletion, and the ability to delay responses (Walther, 2011). When this control is lost in face-to-face interactions, which take place linearly and in real time, informants suddenly feel powerless and experience a loss of communicative competence.

The practice of engaging through the protective barrier of a device's screen progressively diminishes the informants' social adaptability. For example, their capacity to decipher non-verbal communication signals. In-person communication necessitates that individuals react instinctively to their interlocutor's visual cues, voice nuances, and physical gestures, without the advantage of extended contemplation. Due to their infrequent engagement with social awareness, being overly focused on content curation, informants exhibit discomfort and hesitation when deciphering real-time feedback from their social environment (Schradin, 2013).

As a consequence of this low self-efficacy, when faced with real-life interpersonal communication situations, informants tend to adopt defense mechanisms to withdraw socially. They consciously limit their participation in group discussions, remain passive, avoid eye contact with their conversation partners, and distance themselves from crowds whenever possible. This withdrawal is not driven by antisocial tendencies but serves as an escape strategy

to alleviate the anxiety they feel. In unavoidable face-to-face interactions, informants often use their devices as a makeshift social shield. When tension rises or a face-to-face conversation threatens their comfort, they pretend to be busy checking notifications or scrolling through their social media feeds. Shifting their attention to their mobile screens is a subconscious attempt to retreat to their digital front stage, a realm where they retain full control of the situation (Angelini, 2024).

The long-term impact of this withdrawal and reliance on social shields is a deepening sense of interpersonal alienation (Bamps et al., 2022). By consistently avoiding the depth of real-world interactions, the relationships the informants build in the physical world become superficial and transactional. They miss out on the opportunity to cultivate emotional intimacy, empathy and deep mutual trust, qualities that can only truly be attained through authentic and honest face-to-face communication (Teutsch, et al., 2018).

Social media as a platform that originally designed to expand networks and bring people closer together has instead become a thick wall that isolates users' inner selves. Although the informants may have thousands of followers and receive hundreds of likes on their virtual stage, they feel lonely and alienated behind the scenes of their real lives. They remain trapped in the delusion of digital popularity, which lacks a solid foundation in their everyday social reality. This phenomenon confirms that anxiety regarding interpersonal communication in the digital age is a by-product of a failed process of identity integration (Obrenovic et al., 2024). When individuals allow their cyber identities to dominate and define their self-worth, they inevitably view the real world as a threat poised to shatter that illusion of perfection. The more energy invested in constructing a social media façade, the greater the fear faced when that mask is challenged by physical reality.

This finding extends the relevance of Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory (2002) by demonstrating that, in the cyber age, the digital front stage carries the potential for far greater psychological damage than the traditional physical stage. Whilst an actor's performance on a traditional stage ends when the curtain falls, the social media performance continues unceasingly, twenty-four hours a day. It is this relentless demand for performance that drains the actor's emotional energy, leaving no room to be their authentic selves in the real world.

Furthermore, these findings offer a perspective for psychology communication regarding the importance of digital mental health literacy. The communication-related anxiety experienced by the informants is not merely a case of ordinary anxiety, but rather a new form of communication pathology arising from an acute dependence on validation via social media algorithms. Without the critical awareness to set boundaries and distinguish real self-worth from digital metrics, the social media users will remain trapped in prolonged interpersonal anxiety, which ultimately erodes the quality and sustainability of their interpersonal relationships in everyday life.

D. CONCLUSION

The management of inauthentic impressions on social media contributes significantly to the formation and exacerbation of anxiety in real-world interpersonal communication. Through the lens of Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, individuals consistently construct artificial digital front stages to seek social validation and avoid negative evaluation, which is manifested as digital metrics. This extreme curation of content creates an ever-widening gap between their digital persona and the backstage real life, which is full of human limitations. The increasingly blurred and transparent boundaries between these stages in the digital age impose a constant cognitive burden and psychological pressure on individuals to maintain the consistency of their ideal roles. Concerns regarding interpersonal communication become particularly acute when individuals face in-person interactions requiring spontaneous responses. The loss of absolute control over the messages they enjoy behind the screen of their

devices leads to a drastic decline in the effectiveness of their independent communication. Consequently, an obsessive fear arises that their physical social environment will detect the falseness of their cyber persona and lead to their social rejection. This phenomenon forces individuals to resort to destructive defense mechanisms, such as social withdrawal or using their devices as a social shield. This reality underscores that the more manipulative a person's online self-presentation is in the virtual realm, the more fragile their social competence becomes, and the higher the level of communication anxiety they experience in everyday interpersonal interactions.

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