

THE EFFECT OF SELF-PRESENTATION STRATEGIES IN INSTAGRAM ON GENERATION Z'S INDIVIDUAL DESIRED IMPRESSIONS

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Abstract: *Instagram has helped its users to create their own personality be it according to their own style, interest, and passion, or it could be according to the audience's preferences. According to Erin E. (2021), in social media, it is important to carefully select a friends' list that able to accept the user's self-presentation content and posts as the feedback given would bring effectiveness to the user's self-presentation for future references. Hence, this study explores the effects of self-presentation strategies on Generation Z's desired impressions through Instagram usage. Based on Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory, it examines five strategies: ingratiation, self-promotion, exemplification, intimidation, and supplication. Using a purposive sampling method used in quantitative research where a method of sampling is mainly focuses based specific group and criterion which Instagram users among Generation Z in Klang Valley. Findings indicate that self-promotion and exemplification significantly influence desired impressions, emphasizing Generation Z's tendency to showcase competence and moral integrity online. In contrast, ingratiation, intimidation, and supplication have a minimal impact, suggesting a shift away from passive or manipulative strategies. The study highlights the need for greater awareness of online identity construction among Generation Z. Future research should explore self-presentation across diverse platforms and cultural contexts to deepen understanding of social media's evolving role in identity formation*

Keywords: *Instagram, Self-Presentation Theory, Desired Impressions, Generation Z, Social Media*

Introduction

With over half of the global population now actively engaging with social media, the digital environment has experienced an unprecedented expansion in user participation—evidenced by the addition of 316 million new users within a single year (Datareportal, 2021; Hernández-Serrano et al., 2022). According to the Global Digital Report, Instagram ranks as the second most favored platform globally among individuals aged 16 to 64, following WhatsApp, with users spending an average of 11.2 hours per month on the platform. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok have fundamentally transformed communicative practices and significantly influenced the behavioral patterns of younger demographics, particularly with regard to content creation, interaction, and consumption (Hernández-Serrano et al., 2022).

Within this digital milieu, Generation Z—commonly defined as those born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s—has demonstrated a distinct preference for Instagram over older platforms such as Facebook (Salomon, 2013; Md. Salah Uddin & Saodah Wok, 2020). Despite the proliferation of various platforms, including Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, and WeChat, Instagram remains one of the most utilized among this cohort, largely due to its intuitive interface and highly engaging features. Kullolli and Trebicka (2023) emphasize Generation Z's proclivity for visually oriented platforms like Instagram, signaling a broader shift from text-based communication to image- and video-rich content.

Instagram's affordances—such as likes, comments, and reposts—offer users dynamic mechanisms through which identity is both performed and negotiated. These interactive features not only facilitate self-expression but also enable users to obtain social feedback and validation from their digital communities (Chen, 2023). Such interactions serve as vital instruments in the processes of identity formation, fostering a sense of social belonging and recognition within online spaces (Walther, 2022; Yenilmez Kacar, 2023; Ballara, 2023).

Accordingly, this study seeks to investigate the self-presentation strategies employed by members of Generation Z on Instagram and to analyze the extent to which these strategies contribute to the construction of their preferred self-image. More specifically, it aims to explore the interplay between digital self-presentation and individual identity formation within this generational cohort.

Literature Review

Creating Desired Impression in Real Life

In everyday social interactions, one of the central objectives is to ensure consistency in the personal information individuals present about themselves over time, thereby maintaining a coherent and credible self-image (Guo, 2020). Within both digital and face-to-face contexts, the concept of self-presentational, also known as impression management, plays a pivotal role in navigating social expectations and relational dynamics (Goffman, 1959; Kuzenkoff, 2013; Al Rousan & Darwish, 2023). Impression management encompasses the strategic and often selective disclosure of personal information to construct an idealized version of the self, tailored to fit the social context and audience (Hogan, 2010; Nazmine et al., 2021). Jones and Pittman (1982), as cited in Kumar and Ram Tripathi (2022), conceptualize impression management as a set of behaviors motivated by the desire to influence how others perceive one's attributes or

characteristics. These behaviors are often employed with the goal of acquiring or maintaining social power or relational advantage. Regardless of how the behavior may be interpreted by others, individuals engage in impression management to project specific facets of themselves that align with their intended social image (Kumar & Ram Tripathi, 2022). This strategic presentation underscores the performative nature of identity, highlighting how personal agency, social perception, and relational positioning are intricately intertwined in both offline and online self-expression.

The Use of Instagram in Creating Desired Impression Among Gen Z

Instagram, originally designed as a platform for visual content sharing, has evolved into a dynamic socio-cultural space, enriched with global narratives of inspiration, opinion, and lived experience (Staniewski & Awruk, 2022). Beyond its functional role in digital communication, it increasingly serves as a medium through which younger generations engage in processes of identity construction and performance. As Hernández-Serrano et al. (2022) observe, individuals often utilize Instagram not merely to socialize but to craft and express versions of the self that may diverge from their authentic emotional states or reflect aspirational self-concepts. According to Aulia and Putri (2024), Instagram can be a tool for people to know their identity better as it will help them to know their self-motivation, interests, and hobbies that will end the users to have the same interest they show through digital and real life. Content creation on the platform is thus inherently purposive, driven by individual motivations and personal aesthetic or social objectives (Chen, 2023). In this context, users are routinely confronted with curated portrayals of success and achievement, which can evoke feelings of inadequacy, envy, and a heightened desire for social validation (Koyuturk et al., 2023; Panova & Carbonell, 2022; Ballara, 2023). Such exposure fosters a culture of comparison, wherein individuals internalize dominant social norms and aesthetic ideals, often mediated through mechanisms of peer feedback such as comments and likes (Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021; Chen, 2023). This dynamic plays a significant role in shaping not only online self-presentation but also offline identity management, as users navigate the tension between digital performance and lived authenticity. Moreover, contemporary digital natives increasingly perceive social approval as a central tenet of online self-representation, with significant implications for identity development and commitment to certain social roles or values (Boyd, 2007; Davis, 2014; Hernández-Serrano et al., 2022). This orientation toward social validation informs their decisions regarding content curation—distinguishing what is deemed appropriate or desirable for public consumption. Ultimately, the interplay between online and offline selves becomes reciprocal, as digital performances feed back into real-world behaviors and self-conceptions, thereby blurring the boundary between virtual and embodied identity.

Self-Presentation Theory

Self-presentation theory, introduced by Erving Goffman, refers to individuals' efforts to control or influence how they are perceived by others—a process also known as impression management (Goffman, 1959; Dayakisni & Hudaniah, 2009; Yorisa et al., 2021). According to this theory, individuals often curate and display carefully selected aspects of themselves in public, while reserving their true or unfiltered selves for private, "backstage" settings. This distinction helps explain how people selectively present themselves based on the social context and intended audience. For instance, individuals may highlight different facets of their identity depending on whom they are interacting with (Goffman, 1959; Erin E., 2021).

Rooted in the symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1986), self-presentation theory is underpinned by six key principles, as outlined by Goffman (1959) and further elaborated by Shulman (2016). First, individuals are viewed as performers who project specific identities to gain social acceptance. Second, they strive to present themselves as credible and authentic, often by demonstrating competence or expertise. Third, individuals attempt to remain "in character" to maintain consistency with expected social roles. Fourth, when their performance is disrupted or questioned, they engage in corrective behaviors to restore their desired image. Fifth, these performances typically occur in structured social settings—such as workplaces, public events, and digital platforms like social media—that function as stages for identity expression. Lastly, individuals may participate in team performances, where multiple actors collaborate to manage collective impressions and achieve shared objectives (Bahar, 2024). A self-presentation strategy, therefore, involves the conscious or unconscious regulation of behaviors, appearances, and disclosures to influence how one is perceived, often in pursuit of personal or social goals (Widya & Ingarianti, 2013; Yorisa et al., 2021).

Methodology

The research was conducted by the form of a survey method, using the Internet survey technique, supported by a questionnaire in an electronic version prepared in Microsoft Forms. As previously mentioned, the survey was conducted with a questionnaire, distributed online via social media. This was a purposive selection focusing on studying Gen Z of age 18 until 27 in Klang Valley who are active Instagram users. 204 questionnaires were collected. However, due to not meeting the criteria or errors, 8 questionnaires were rejected, because there were missing data in the answers. A total of 196 questionnaires qualified for further analysis.

Sample Size

The G*Power calculator, designed as a stand-alone power analysis program that is used to determine the sample size of a study that is commonly used in social and behavioral research. The current study of The Effect of Self-Presentation Strategies in Instagram On Generation Z's Individual Desired Impressions is using the G*Power analysis calculator to calculate its number of sample size respondents that need to be collected. Based on the five predictors, a statistical power of 0.95, an alpha error probability of 0.05, and a predicted effect size of 0.15 were all utilized in the current computation. Therefore, it is stated that the sample size of respondent that needs to be collected is to be at least 138 respondents for Generation Z in Klang Valley for the study.

Research Measurement

The questionnaire used for data collection in the study was divided into four sections (A, B, C, D). All items for all sections were developed from other scholars and researchers relating to Self-Presentation theory usage, and the development of the items was carefully administered by a professional evaluator. The items were developed based on the independent and dependent variables of the study. Section A was on the demographic of the respondents containing six questions. Sections B, C, and D consist of opinions or thoughts about the statements asked based on the Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat agree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree) presented. Each variable consists of three to five items. Section B consists of 21 items. Section C consists of four items. Section D consists of six items.

Operationalization of Variables

The survey was divided into four sections: A, B, C and D. Firstly, section A addressed the demographic information of the respondents. Next, section B focused on the independent variables, Five Self-Presentation Strategies (Ingratiation; Ing, Self-promotion; Sp, Exemplary; Exe, Intimidation; Inti, and Supplication; Supp). Section C examined the Instagram Usage (IU). While section D identified on the dependent variable which is the Individual Desired Impressions (IDI).

Data Analysis Method

In the process of analysing the data collected through Google Forms, this research has employed using statistical tools such as SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). This involves calculating measures of central tendency such as the mean, median, and mode, providing insights into the typical or central values of variables, which are known to be descriptive analysis. An appropriate statistical test was done based on the type of data and research questions.

Findings and Discussion

This section will explain on the demographics of the respondents collected and the interpretation of data collected that has been run using SPSS tools. This section will also interpret whether the data was normally distributed or not-normally distributed, to see if the hypothesis between independent variables; self-presentation strategies (ingratiation, self-promotion, exemplification, intimidation and supplication) has significant relationships or not with dependent variable; individual desired impressions through correlations analysis and multiple regression.

Demographic Characteristics of The Respondents

A total of 204 respondents participated in the study. Table 2 presents the findings on the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The table shows that more than three-quarters of respondents (62.7%) were female, and the rest were male (37.3%). As for gender, 10.3% of the respondents fell under the age of 18 – 20 years old, 26.0% were 21 – 23 years old, 24 – 26 held highest percentage with 47.5%, whereas 16.2% were those age 27 and above. As for the races' category, 34.3% were Malay, which held the majority respondents, 25.5% were Chinese, 28.9% were Indian, while Others held a percentage of 11.3%. Furthermore, as for educational level, a pre-university held a 14.7%, Diploma or Advanced Diploma held 30.4%, which is the second highest respondents held, led by Bachelor's Degree (45.6%), and Postgraduate's Degree held the lowest number of respondents (9.3%). Next, a question was asked which is "Do you use Instagram?" as to determine whether the respondents use Instagram or not with a choice of Yes (96.1%) and No (3.9%). The question followed by what the respondents usually post on Instagram which is daily life (27.0%), interest (15.2%), current issue (14.2%), study (9.8), work (13.7), sports (6.9%), and others (2.5%).

Table 2 Demographic profile of respondents (n = 204)

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	76	37.3
	Female	128	62.7
	Total	204	100
Age	18 – 20	21	10.3
	21 – 23	53	26.0
	24 – 26	97	47.5
	27 and above	33	16.2
	Total	204	100
Race	Malay	70	34.3
	Chinese	52	25.5
	Indian	59	28.9
	Others	23	11.3
	Total	204	100
Education	Pre-University	30	14.7
	Diploma or Advanced Diploma	62	30.4
	Bachelor's Degree	93	45.6
	Postgraduate's Degree	19	9.3
	Total	204	100
Do you use Instagram?	Yes	196	96.1
	No	8	3.9
	Total	204	100
If yes, what would you usually post on Instagram?	Entertainment	22	10.8
	Daily life	55	27.0
	Interest	31	15.2
	Current issue	29	14.2
	Study	20	9.8
	Work	28	13.7
	Sports	14	6.9
	Others	5	2.5
	Total	204	100

Descriptive Analysis

A statistical term known as standard deviation measures how different or dispersed a group of values are. This fundamental metric shows how dispersed a data set's numbers are. A small standard deviation indicates that the data points tend to be nearer the mean. A high standard deviation, on the other hand, suggests that the values are dispersed over a larger range (Stanford Deviation Calculator, 2023).

Table 5 Descriptive analysis on variables

Variable (s)	Std. Deviation
Ingratiation	0.684
Self-Promotion	0.673
Exemplification	0.809
Intimidation	0.882
Supplication	0.742
Individual Desired Impressions	0.567

In this study, the descriptive analysis presented in Table 5 provides insights into the use of five self-presentation strategies: Ingratiation, Self-Promotion, Exemplification, Intimidation, and Supplication. Among these strategies, Ingratiation (SD = 0.684) has the highest mean score suggesting that participants are more inclined to engage in behaviors aimed at gaining approval and building rapport with others. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating the widespread use of ingratiation in Instagram usage to be perceived as friendly and nice by people around them, be it online, or in real life.

Self-Promotion (SD = 0.673) and Exemplification (SD = 0.809) followed closely, indicating moderate levels of usage. However, the higher standard deviation for Exemplification reflects greater variability in participants' responses, suggesting that this strategy is utilized differently across individuals.

Conversely, Intimidation had the lowest mean score (SD = 0.882), indicating that it is the least employed strategy among participants. Additionally, the high standard deviation for intimidation suggests significant differences in how participants perceive or engage in intimidating behaviors. Supplication (SD = 0.742) ranked slightly above Intimidation, with moderate variability in responses.

The variable representing individual desired impressions (SD = 0.567) has the highest mean score, suggesting that Generation Z users generally feel successful in achieving their desired self-presentation strategies on Instagram. The relatively low standard deviation indicates a consistent perception of success across respondents.

Overall, the findings suggest that ingratiation and self-promotion are the most commonly used strategies, while users feel moderately successful in crafting their desired impressions. Variability in the use of exemplification and intimidation indicates differing approaches to self-presentation among individuals. These results provide valuable insights into how Generation Z navigates self-presentation on Instagram to achieve their desired impressions.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 6 presents the results of a multiple regression analysis examining the relationship between Self-Presentation Strategies (independent variables) and Individual Desired Impression (dependent variable). Multiple regression helps determine how well a set of predictor variables can explain or predict a particular outcome, such as an important event or behavior. This outcome is often called the dependent variable, outcome variable, or criterion variable (Fein et al., 2022). Hence, this section of multiple regression analysis is done to examine the relationship

between Self-Presentation Strategies (independent variables) and Individual Desired Impression (dependent variable).

Table 6 Multiple regression analysis of self-presentation strategies with variables.

Variables	Unstandardized	Coefficients	Standardized	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	p
Self-Presentation Strategies				
(Constant)	2.265	0.252		<0.001
Ingratiation	0.081	0.060	0.098	0.174
Self-Promotion	0.177	0.064	0.210	0.007
Exemplification	0.113	0.053	0.161	0.034
Intimidation	-0.028	0.053	-0.043	0.602
Supplication	-0.067	0.062	-0.088	0.278

F = 4.677 df = 5 P = <0.001 R = 0.331 R² = 0.110 Adjust R² = 0.086

The multiple regression analysis examined the influence of self-presentation strategies on Generation Z's Individual Desired Impressions. The overall model was statistically significant (F = 4.677, p < 0.001), indicating that the self-presentation strategies collectively contribute to explaining variations in individual desired impressions. However, the model explained a modest portion of the variance, with an R² value of 0.110, suggesting that 11% of the variation in desired impressions is attributable to these strategies. Among the predictors, self-promotion emerged as the most influential variable (B = 0.177, Beta = 0.210, p = 0.007), demonstrating a significant positive relationship with individual desired impressions. This indicates that showcasing one's abilities and accomplishments significantly enhances the impressions Generation Z aims to apply on Instagram. Similarly, exemplification (B = 0.113, Beta = 0.161, p = 0.034) was found to have a significant positive effect, highlighting the importance of demonstrating integrity and moral worth in shaping individual desired impressions. Conversely, ingratiation (B = 0.081, Beta = 0.098, p = 0.174), intimidation (B = -0.028, Beta = -0.043, p = 0.602), and supplication (B = -0.067, Beta = -0.088, p = 0.278) were not statistically significant predictors, suggesting that these strategies have limited impact on creating individual desired impressions. These findings underscore the prominence of active and competence-based self-presentation strategies, such as self-promotion and exemplification, over submissive or manipulative approaches in influencing how Generation Z curates their desired impressions on Instagram.

Conclusion

This study provides meaningful insights into the influence of self-presentation strategies on the construction of desired impressions in real life through Instagram usage among Generation Z. The findings highlight how Generation Z actively employs self-presentation strategies, particularly competence-based tactics such as self-promotion and exemplification to shape favorable online identities. These approaches underscore a strong preference for showcasing personal achievements, capabilities, and moral integrity, aligning with Instagram's visually driven and success-oriented culture. Such strategies appear to resonate well with audiences on the platform, reinforcing the performative and curated nature of social media identity construction.

Conversely, passive or manipulative strategies such as ingratiation, intimidation, and supplication demonstrated limited or no significant impact on shaping desired impressions. This suggests that less assertive or coercive tactics may be ineffective or misaligned with the norms and expectations of Instagram users, particularly within the Gen Z demographic. These findings support existing theories emphasizing the importance of active self-presentation in digital impression management and contribute to a deeper understanding of how identity is strategically performed in online environments.

The researcher acknowledges several limitations of this study. Firstly, the scope of the study was restricted to self-presentation strategies on Instagram, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other social media platforms such as TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), or Facebook. Each platform differs in user demographics, content formats, and platform norms, all of which may influence how individuals construct and manage their self-presentation. Secondly, the study focused primarily on five self-presentation strategies, without considering other potentially influential factors such as personality traits, cultural norms, peer dynamics, or wider societal trends. These elements may significantly shape individuals' online behavior and impression management practices.

Recognizing these limitations provides a foundation for future research to build upon. Subsequent studies are encouraged to adopt more comprehensive approaches, incorporating a broader range of platforms and variables to deepen the understanding of self-presentation in diverse digital contexts.

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