

6-2023

## Identity Management in Permanent Digital Spaces

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University of Southern Maine  
Portland, Maine

**Identity Management in Permanent Digital Spaces**

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Honors Program Requirements

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June 2023

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Major                      Psychology

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Received by the University Honors Program on \_\_\_\_\_

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**Abstract**

Social media platforms have captured and transformed the social experience. Though media content is unique for each platform, all social media sites share some level of anonymity, asynchronous communication, and absence of non-verbal social cues. This environment provides a landscape where users can not only exercise a more conscious management and presentation of self, but are also able to explore creative identity formation processes. This study investigates the ways that users engage with social media platforms and the impact such engagement has on personal identity management. Methods consisted of distributing a personality inventory based on the widely accepted NEO-P-IR. Participants were also asked to self-report their current social media habits including which platform they use most frequently, and an approximation of the cumulative time they spend using all social media sites. A subset of those respondents participated in interviews that explored their responses deeper. Data suggests that social media users will maintain accounts on both an identifiable and more anonymous platform, using each site for different identity performances. Qualitative analyses have yielded usage themes such as: ease of relationship maintenance, political signaling, and information seeking. Because social media is used by a large percentage of the global population, it is crucial that the growing field of cyberpsychology continues research into the motivations of social media users to engage in content creation.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to acknowledge and give my warmest thanks to my Principal Advisor, R. Bruce Thompson, Ph.D. Without his guidance, patience, and expertise this work would not have been possible. I would also like to thank Rebecca Nisetich, Ph.D. for her continuous faith and excitement in this project. I owe my growth as a scholar and my eagerness for learning to you both.

I also extend my gratitude to the University of Southern Maine Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program and the participants of my study. This experience gave me a tremendous amount of confidence in my work. And to the staff of the Glickman Family Library for their assistance in framing my research.

Finally, I cannot thank my husband and two beautiful daughters enough for allowing me the opportunity to undertake this challenge.

## Literature Review

### *Historical Context*

To fully appreciate the current social culture created on social media, it is important to understand the social context and technological advances present during early development of these platforms. Some of the first social media platforms were developed for 15-20-year-olds in the late 1990s. At this time, there were too few households with internet access, so these early sites were unable to engage a reliable mainstream audience. However, the framework of attracting teens to a site with a promise of making new connections would be relied upon in the next decade's social networking boom. 2003 brought the launch of MySpace and LinkedIn, with Facebook allowing public access by 2006.

MySpace offered users customizable profile pages where they could manipulate the appearance of their page on the site, add music that would play instantly for other users that viewed their profile, and a public display of their friend group. Users of this site became increasingly creative. MySpace is considered a birthplace for lay people taking on web development. In just three years, MySpace became the most popular social media platform worldwide. After being sold to Murdoch Family's News Corporation, advertisers flocked to the platform eager to place their products in front of the multinational user base. This would ultimately lead to the downfall of MySpace as its competitor, Facebook, offered users an ad-free experience alongside expanded picture storage capabilities—a popular feature at the time.

Facebook quickly grew to dominate social media traffic. Owner, Mark Zuckerberg, bought out many start-ups that enabled Facebook with features such as mobile use and one-on-one messaging. Following a record-breaking IPO (valuation of \$104 billion) in 2012, Facebook acquired Instagram, a photo-based social media platform that had been quickly gaining

popularity. Having bought out nearly 100 startups and offering identity confirmation services across the internet, Facebook now plays a heavy role in the lives of average internet users making it almost impossible to engage on any website without interacting with Facebook in some way. Data collected in 2015 showed that an average teenager will spend at least 1 hour engaged with social media every day (Rideout, 2015). Further, 24 percent of teenagers in the US reported they were engaged with their social media accounts almost constantly (Lenhart, 2015). Considering the many roles Facebook has taken on, the corporation recently rebranded its image. Now called Meta, the company hopes to focus on the variety of software, new technology (such as artificial reality), and user experiences they have introduced to the world as the Facebook platform is no longer their largest source of revenue.

When these sites began to launch in the early 2000s, the user base was heavily weighted toward people under 30. By the end of 2010, 55 percent of 30–49-year-olds had at least one active social media account. Now, over 80 percent of people between 18 and 49 have at least one account (Pew Research Center, 2022). Our social structures have been completely altered by the presence of these platforms. During the early age of social media, teens would visit the sites to express themselves and connect with friends they knew in the offline environment. Now, businesses have taken part in social media to engage with their consumers and push advertisements into the feed. 2021 saw over 91 percent of businesses (with 100+ employees) use social media for marketing (Statista Research Department, 2023).

Where obvious advertising was the beginning of MySpace's downfall, the more subtle advertising of today's networks has become appealing. Internet influencers are typically present on most social media sites; and their profiles usually bear a token such as a blue checkmark to denote their status on the site. Influencers can come from celebrities famous for their talents on



traditional media forms or micro-celebrities that use their social media platform to grow and maintain a large fan base (Marwick, Boyd, 2011). Maintaining a fanbase as a micro-celebrity requires a steady stream of new, yet familiar, content. The influencer, themselves, becomes a consumable good. They act not only as conduits of traffic for a platform but also, through paid partnerships with businesses, they can place directed ads in front of an engaged audience.

It may seem that micro-celebrities rose from mimicking the more traditional celebrity, allowing more access to a persona that would otherwise not engage with the viewer. The opposite is true. Early “influencing” found its start in so called “mommy blogs” that were popular in the early 2000s. Those early, amateur sites would focus on telling what felt like raw and authentic stories of their motherhood directly to an audience of mothers. During this time, Mormon women were particularly active in mommy blogs spaces. Mormons hold a tradition of keeping the lives of their children well documented. The only real difference between a non-denominational mommy blog and a Mormon blog is that Mormon mothers would have more restraint when it came to showing their family as anything less than perfect.

When Instagram started gaining popularity, the new visual medium element allowed these bloggers to place images of products alongside the stories from their lives. The monetization of storytelling was aided in part by the launch of Instagram’s paid partnership feature, which created an ease of access for brands to collaborate with media personae. Naturally, the change from hobby level blogging to significant income source meant that posts had to be made more thoughtfully. Mormon blog sites, with their clean and constantly positive content, became a standard for aspiring content creators. Where a fan might have read a humorous motherhood horror story, they now found a polished glimpse of pseudo-reality.

The traditional celebrity, who brings their own endorsements and partnerships, would find this a welcome space for controlling their image in the 2000s. In the 1990s, technological developments in photo and video recording allowed paparazzi to gain access to the lives of celebrities in an unprecedented way. Some of the most infamous moments came from two notorious high-speed chases. On June 17, 1994, the Los Angeles police department learned that O.J. Simpson, who they were seeking on charges of first-degree murder, had fled his LA home in a white Ford Bronco. LAPD pursued Simpson for two hours as he traveled from Orange County to Brentwood. This chase was broadcast over multiple news networks, with viewers enthralled across the nation. Three years later, on August 31, 1997, Diana, Princess of Wales, was followed by over 30 paparazzi hoping to capture a photo of her alongside her boyfriend “Dodi” Fayed. Attempting to evade the photographers, the driver of the car turned into Alma Tunnel and lost control of the vehicle. Ultimately, this crash was fatal for all the occupants of the vehicle except Fayed’s bodyguard. The paparazzi who were chasing the car took chilling photos of the wreckage moments after the crash. These incidents gained a large amount of viewership from the public and became a new norm for celebrity gossip. Both incidents would go on to be dramatized in film and television.

Entering the 2000s digital boom, celebrity blog sites, like the controversial Perez Hilton blog, started booming in popularity. Along with them, the growing demand for more intrusive information about top celebs. Britney Spears would be the next victim of a brutal attack on image and reputation. Spears was undergoing a difficult divorce from her husband of two years, Kevin Federline. The divorce was made more challenging because of the amount of public interest Spears’ life had garnered. In 2007, Britney Spears suffered as was photographed shaving her head and assaulting paparazzi. This was followed by a hospital stay during which she

underwent a psychiatric assessment and was put under a thirteen-year conservatorship controlled by her estranged father. Britney Spears was pushed to these extremes by intense public interest and scrutiny which she had no control over.

On social media, mommy bloggers had created a template for image control where the perception of being authentic became currency. They had actively contributed to the rising popularity of social media, so the next influx of usership came from celebrities. On social media, celebs found a place where they could allow access to the private moments of their lives, this time on their terms.

### ***Platforms and algorithms***

In her book *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle identifies three “wishes” that can be granted by mobile devices: That a person will always feel heard; they can control where they place their attention; and that they never have to be alone (Terkle, 2017). This idea may make it seem as if the user is in control of the content they are presented. This may have been the case during the early years after launch, but today’s social media platforms have artfully hidden how little control users have over their personal feed.

Every time a person “likes” a post or shares content made by another they are giving consumer data to a sophisticated algorithm (Dijck, 2013). The act of liking, commenting, or sharing others’ original content to a follower base is called “user engagement.” User engagement is closely monitored by every platform as it directly affects the purchase of ad space on that platform; the main way social media makes a profit. In an attempt to curb declining engagement, Facebook overhauled their algorithm in 2018. Internal files leaked from Meta showed that users were not logging in less frequently, rather when they did visit the site, they would stay active for shorter periods and comment/like/share less than they had earlier in the 2010s (Hagey, Horowitz,

2021). In a video announcing the changes to their system, Facebook claimed the new algorithm would enhance the connections made on the platform and aid in user well-being. Their goal would be prioritizing “posts that spark conversations and meaningful interactions between people” (Mosseri, 2019). To achieve this goal, Facebook began assigning a point value to the types of engagement users would have with a post. Simply liking the post would be the lowest value, with long comments or selecting the “enraged emoji” option being the highest value interaction. This kind of scoring system goes unnoticed by the average user, but the likelihood of a post being seen by wide audiences is completely reliant on its initial popularity score. The algorithm assigns popular posts with high priority status and displays them in the News Feed of that user’s friends.<sup>8</sup> Meaning, that if a person you are connected with on Facebook selects an “enraged emoji,” you are more likely to see that post in your own News Feed regardless of whether you are interested in the content or not. This can leave users with unrealistic ideas about the ethics and morality of people they follow, and it amplifies the perception of certain topics being serious social issues.

### *Sharing yourself*

There is a problem when we consider the effect influencers have played on our own content creation. Not only is user activity a commodity sold to third parties for shockingly targeted ads, users feel they can and should do more to make their digital life more marketable. This started with moving from the blogosphere to a monetized Instagram account which brought along with it a change in how influential users were presenting their lives online. Celebrities started flooding social media. This gave them a number of benefits. By opening their private lives to the public, celebrities were able to control their narrative and gain privacy from invasive paparazzis. They could also, instantly, monetize their content through brand endorsements.

Finally, these intimate views of their life allowed for the public to cultivate parasocial relationships with their favorite media persona, resulting in a wider fan base who felt they had an emotional stake in keeping their idol relevant. At the same time, Mormon mommy bloggers became more concerned with how marketable their children and families appeared. Managing their social media presence became a primary source of income for an elite few who were able to curate their presence perfectly. Meaning the average user, who may have joined social media from peer influence or to keep in contact with their social network, would now be inundated with visual representation from photos and videos of popular creators and metrics (likes, comments, etc.) for what would make them more popular online.

Social cognitive theory describes this phenomenon as a process in which a person will change their thoughts or behaviors to match a modeled persona (Bandura, 2001). Further research has shown that emotionally engaging with social media persona through parasocial relationships will also yield this “wishful identification” (Lim, Choe, Zhang, & Noh, G.-Y, 2020). This means that as a person spends more time cultivating parasocial relationships, they will also adapt their own original context to mimic what they see from influencers.

Recent studies have shown that online popularity can build more bonding social capital for active Instagram users. This kind of social capital plays a mediating role in the relationship between frequent Instagram usage and life satisfaction (Reimann, Ozimek, Rohmann, & Bierhoff, 2021). Users who find positive connections with others online seem to feel happier about their lives, a motivation to continue using the site. Further, obtaining more and more “likes” on Facebook has been linked to increasing gray matter in the nucleus accumbens. Because gray matter tissue is dense with neuronal bodies, more gray matter leads to more function in that part of the brain. The nucleus accumbens is the center of the brain associated

with motivation and reward, arguably the reason why contemporary internet usage can become addicting (Montag, et. al., 2017). Users who regularly receive likes are stimulating the nucleus accumbens and having a physical response similar to substance abuse. These findings give a glimpse to how users can fall into a pattern of posting that earns them the highest psychological reward. Users that do cater toward “likes” are given immediate feedback by two methods. First, their post will populate with popularity metrics in real time. Users will be shown their follower engagement, such as likes and comments, as their follower base begins interacting with the post. On some platforms, the creator also receives information on how many people, and who, viewed the content. None of these metrics are difficult to find, most platforms have them listed just below the created content. Second, notifications are sent to the user’s mobile device.

Notifications will give them the same data acquired when looking at the post, but adds a level of urgency to review the data as they are physically alerted to incoming information. Additionally, due to a previously learned association between the ringtone of their mobile device and social interaction (a phone call or text message), the user is priming their neural pathways associated with prosocial rewards.

The immediacy and urgency of social media interactions are two of many aspects of digital communication that contribute to the substantial change in the way we interact with each other. Nesi, Choukas-Bradley, and Prinstein (2018) have created a theoretical framework for further research in social media interaction with a focus on youth social development. They argue that social interaction is transformed online due to factors like the absence of non-verbal cues, publicness, perceived anonymity, and permanence (Nesi, Choukas-Bradley, & Prinstein, 2018). Meaning that youth, who are especially sensitive to peer-feedback, are learning to function with novel social demands. This may lead to performative status seeking behaviors

such as a public display of conflict, which increases a person's visibility and participatory audience (Marwick, & Boyd, 2011).

Additionally, these interactions are taking place in an asynchronous environment that allows for careful crafting, editing, and removal of content or comments (Nesi, Choukas-Bradley, & Prinstein, 2018). While a person is able to engage in identity performances offline, the digital environment offers a space for users to bring more mindful intention to those performances; and for some this feels like a demand.

## **Present Study**

The aim of this study is to investigate the correlations among personality traits, social media habits and self-reported values associated with digital presentation. This included an examination of how individuals define "personal authenticity," what internal and external influences shape content creation, and how these factors play into usage habits.

### ***Methodology***

#### *Hypothesis and research questions*

The first hypothesis predicted that those who view their authentic self as a summation of both good and bad qualities will spend more time on social media platforms that allow for disinhibition. Conversely, those that feel their ideal self reflects who they are will spend more time on websites that allow users to curate their identity to the public. Online disinhibition refers to the phenomenon where people engage in behaviors online that they do not feel comfortable engaging in offline. Online disinhibition is due to a variety of factors that are unique to the digital space. A few examples are: the perceived level of anonymity afforded by digital

communication, removal of non-verbal social cues, and the ability to communicate with others asynchronously (Suler, 2004).

The second hypothesis is there will be any gender differences or cohort effects (e.g., differences across generations) in the way individuals interact with online persona. Third, the amount of time a user spends online will have a positive correlation to the degree to which they are concerned with their digital presentation. The final hypothesis is that individuals who lack a strong social network that allows them to freely express themselves offline will spend more time on social media sites compared to individuals who do find acceptance offline.

A main research question investigates which personality traits, or combination of traits, may be associated with user values and habits that would be indicators of how they view “authenticity”.

#### *Sample and Measures*

Students at the University of Southern Maine were invited to participate in an abbreviated personality inventory adapted from the NEO-PI-R inventory, which measures personality traits using the widely accepted five-factor model. Questions were asked using five-point Likert scale responses. Respondents were also asked to identify which social media platform they were most active on, the number of followers they have and how many they follow, and a series of questions related to digital authenticity (Table 1).

Respondents were primarily 18–24-year-olds, with three aged 25-34. Most participants were women (60%); men and transgender folks made up 26.6% and about 13.3% respectively. Of the 18 responses, three were eliminated due to failure to respond to all survey questions.

A group of six respondents participated in an in-depth interview following their submissions to the survey. Four participants were aged 28-24 and two were 25-36. Four of the



participants identify as female, with one person identifying as male and one identifying as transgender.

Q14 Please use the scale to indicate how well the following statements apply to you.

	Not well at all (1)	Slightly well (2)	Moderately well (3)	Very well (4)	Extremely well (5)
My social media accounts accurately portray my life. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
First impressions matter. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If I make a mistake I forgive myself easily. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I post things online that I'm not comfortable telling people in person. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I lose respect for others if they behave poorly once. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I keep my online activity separate from my offline life. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I like to stay anonymous online. (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Table 1: Digital Authenticity values.

## Results

### Initial analyses

Two variables from the survey had near identical answers from all participants. The first was reporting the age at which the person made their first social media account. All responses were at age 13, with one person estimating between 12 and 13. When asked what platform they use the most, 12 participants reported using a highly visual, easily identifiable platform (e.g., Instagram, Facebook). One participant reported Reddit, a text-based platform with pseudonyms for usernames, as their primary identity. Additionally, all six interviewees reported about equal use of one or more high visual platforms along with Reddit.

Questions asked for the personality survey and values related to digital authenticity portions of the survey were arithmetically grouped to create the following variables: aggregated extraversion (AggEx), aggregated openness (AggOp), aggregated neuroticism (AggNe), aggregated conscientiousness (AggCo), aggregated agreeableness (AggAr), and aggregated digital authenticity values (AggDAV). The digital authenticity values factor represents the extent that a user will mimic their offline life in the digital space. Meaning that scoring low in this field indicates a larger divide between offline and online self, and a high score would mean there is little separation in what from the offline life is shared on social media. The data extracted from survey participants were analyzed using the statistical software SPSS.

Initial analysis showed a strong negative correlation between AggEx and AggDAV ( $r(13) = -.71, p = .006$ ), indicating that the social media presence of people who score high in extraversion will be less like their offline life compared to those that score low in extraversion. AggEx was also correlated with the amount of time a user spends editing before posting original content ( $r(13) = .74, p = .004$ ), meaning extraverts are more likely to engage in curating behaviors. AggDAV was negatively correlated with time spent editing before posting original content ( $r(13) = -.55, p = .047$ ), this means that the more identical the offline and online life are, the less time that user will spend editing their pictures, captions, videos, or comments before posting new content online.

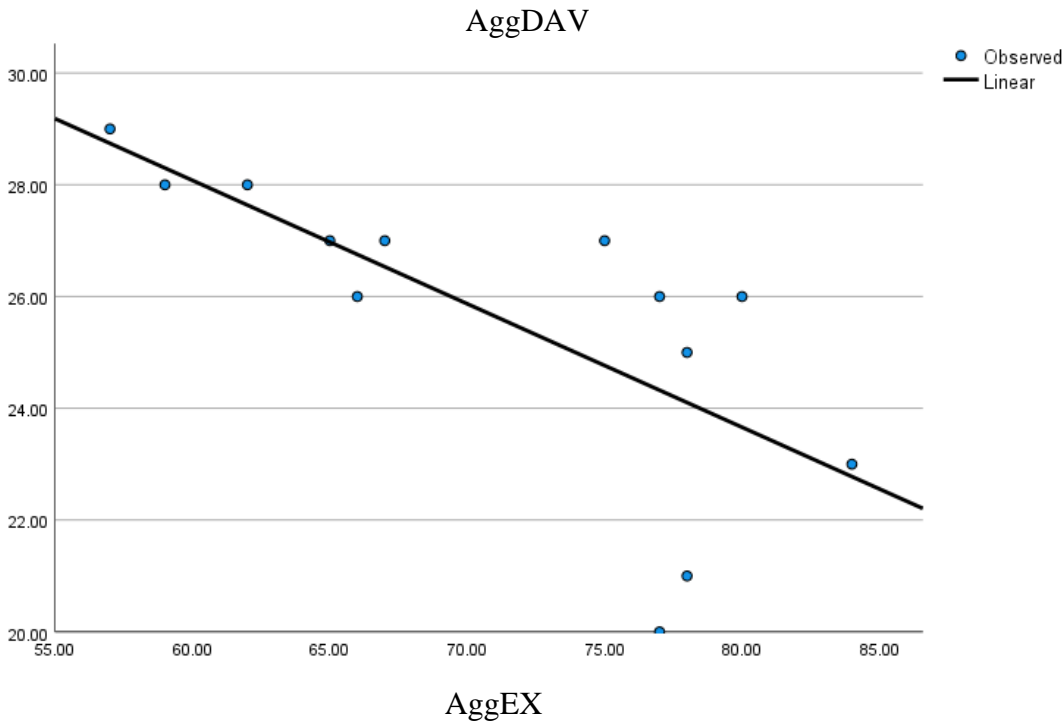


Figure1: Regression analysis determined that Extraversion negatively predicted digital authenticity values,  $R^2 = -.511$ ,  $F(1,11) = 11.512$ ,  $p = .006$ .

### *Qualitative Thematic Analysis*

Out of the six interviews, four transcripts were made automatically by zoom software. One interview was recorded by hand; and significant quotes were captured in real time. The final interview was recorded and transcribed by hand. A total of 348 instances (verbal answers and non-verbal cues when available) were created and coded into 15 themes. These themes were: relationship maintenance (serious), relationship maintenance (casual), use of highly identifiable platforms (eg. Facebook, Instagram), use of anonymous platforms (eg. Reddit, 4Chan), information seeking, information sharing, sharing motivational posts created by others, creating new motivational posts, subtle political signaling, obvious political signaling, influencer

mimicking, peer-level mimicking, poor self-esteem, good or growing self-esteem, random or frivolous content creation, and curated content creation.

Anticipated themes were intentional content curation, peer-level content mimicking, influencer content mimicking, and content sharing. Content curation could be interpreted as the opposite of online disinhibition. It is the conscious effort put in to create a perfected presence online. This could include behaviors like taking an abundance of photos; prolonged editing of photos, videos, or captions; or posting highlights from the offline world that disregard negative moments

Intentional content curation was observed from all six interviewees an average of six times per interview. The participant with the most instances, A.B., also communicated the most about obvious political signaling (14 instances). She stated, “I usually put a lot of effort into my posts...I’ll edit the caption a couple times so everyone knows what I mean,” and “I would be [expletive] if somebody pretended to be me and posted on my account. I don’t care how well I know them.” The lowest scoring participants made two statements pertaining to intentional curation each, both when prompted for information about the theme. Both mentioned making a curated post to mark an occasion such as a birthday or holiday.

Influencer content mimicking was also found among all interviewees, averaging about four times per interview. Two participants reported mimicking their content with the purpose of winning a staged contest. Entry to these “lotteries” vary, but requirements involve at least creating a new post or comment and following the influencer account. One person, E.W., reported “[I will] tag a brand if I want them to see it and then, yeah, I would make a post that looks a lot like what they usually post.” When asked what her intention was behind that style of posting, she responded “...it would be cool if they saw it and posted it on their account.”

Another interviewee stated that she used to mimic posts of fitness influencers but has recently stopped. Peer-level content mimicking had about six references per interview. These participants would reference targeting certain individuals or groups of friends when creating original content. Tagging those individuals or groups was a common occurrence, but not a requirement for this behavior.

Content sharing refers to the ability to repost content created from another account so that one's followers can view the post as well. It was the most common behavior among five of the interviewees. This theme was further divided or absorbed into other variables as appropriate. However, sharing others' motivational content was the most common form of content sharing, and became its own theme. This was captured when asked questions about what they like to share from other accounts. Motivational content refers to a post that uses calming images or colors with feel-good quotes to leave the reader feeling empowered or uplifted. Participant E.W. exhibited some of the recent posts she had shared to her followers. One was a background of pink clouds with the words "I've learned that for good things to come your way, you must believe you deserve them." When asked why he chose to share motivational posts, N.A. stated, "they make me feel good."

Three additional themes were found: relationship maintenance, political signaling, and self-esteem. Each of these were separated into binaries. Relationship maintenance was one of the main reasons users reported wanting to keep their social media presence active online. This was categorized into serious or casual based on the importance a respondent felt about the relationships they have online. A serious relationship was a participant who uses Instagram to keep in touch with a sibling who lives internationally. Casual relationships were most reported by A.B. who used social media to keep in touch with like-minded, politically charged friends

whom she had never met in person. In addition to this, A.B. was also an outlier for creating obvious political signaling posts such as “tweeting” about electoral candidates and creating political “memes” for the subreddit “r/PoliticalHumor.” Most other participants had less than three instances of obvious or subtle political signaling. Two participants referenced trying to keep their social media politically neutral. No participants reported apathy toward political issues in general. Finally, self-esteem was divided into good or growing self-esteem and poor self-esteem. Three individuals reported actively reducing the amount of time they spend on Instagram because of their tendency to compare themselves to others. Previous research has found that engaging in upward body comparisons on social media has a negative effect on women’s body satisfaction, dieting and exercising behavior and mood (Fardouly, Pinkus, & Vartanian, 2017). Poor self-esteem was also captured from non-verbal signs such as avoiding eye contact or hesitantly responding when asked about social media history. All six interviewees reported feeling higher levels of self-esteem in the past year compared to previous years on social media.

#### *Quantitative Thematic Analysis*

Further analysis was run between themes from the interviews and between themes and survey variables. A strong correlation was found between motivational post sharing and information sharing ( $r(6) = .922, p = .009$ ). Motivational post sharing was also correlated with AggEx ( $r(6) = .87, p = .024$ ), and with intentional curating behavior ( $r(6) = .85, p = .032$ ). Intentional curating was also correlated with information sharing ( $r(6) = .933, p = .007$ ). There was a negative correlation between AggAr and peer-level mimicking ( $r(6) = -.842, p = .035$ ). Good or building self-esteem was correlated with creating motivational posts ( $r(6) = .91, p = .010$ ). Finally, information seeking behavior was negatively correlated with poor self-esteem ( $r(6) = -.81, p = .048$ ).

### ***Discussion***

This study explored the interplay between personality traits and the values that individuals bring to engaging with and creating content for various social media platforms. By offering participants the ability to define and self-report digital authenticity, comparisons were made to evaluate any potential correlations.

The first hypothesis, predicting digital authenticity values would be an indicator for platform preference, was not supported by the current data. Twelve of the survey respondents reported use of at least one highly visual platform and all six interviewees stated they have near equal usage on at least one highly visual and one anonymous platform. Further, those individuals reported using those different platforms for different identity performances.

The second hypothesis looked for differences due to gender or age. Limitations in the participant pool led to insufficient data to analyze these categories. According to prior literature focused on cyberbullying and self-esteem however, there is documented evidence of a gender gap in the way users engage online and the impact of that engagement on users' self-esteem and social development (Rousseau & Eggermont, 2018)(Nesi, J., Choukas-Bradley, S., & Prinstein, M. J., 2018). For example, when compared to adolescent boys, adolescent girls are more likely to use highly identifiable platforms such as Instagram. The link between Instagram usage and anxiety and depression is mediated by social comparison (Mackson, Brochu, Schneider, 2019). Highly visual platforms encourage social comparison, meaning the adolescent girls are statistically at a higher risk for negative mental health from social media usage. It is reasonable to assume that further investigation with a larger, representative participant pool could yield data supporting a gender divide in digital authenticity values and curating behavior.

A third hypothesis was that time spent online would be correlated with digital authenticity values. There was no strong indication found in the survey data to support this claim. However, when asked to verify their time spent on social media daily by checking the manufacturer installed monitoring software on their mobile device, five interviewees had reported incorrect data during the survey portion of this study. Two had over-estimated the amount of time they spent online, the other three under-estimated that time. The sixth interviewee had manually disabled that monitoring software.

The final hypothesis was that individuals who lack a strong social network that allows them to freely express themselves offline will spend more time on social media sites compared to individuals who do find acceptance offline. During the interview with A.B., she mentioned finding acceptance for her political ideas in a small online community. She also claimed that her continued presence online helps maintain those relationships. No other interview led to discussions that involved in-depth reflection of the online versus offline self. The other five interviewees did not report inclusion in intimate online communities. Further research is needed to verify this hypothesis.

The main research question asked which personality trait or combination of traits would be associated with user habits or values. The survey yielded data showing a strong, negative relationship between extraversion and digital authenticity values. Extraversion describes people who are social and talkative. The variables used to determine extraversion were friendliness, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity level, excitement seeking, and cheerfulness. The Likert scale created for digital authenticity had two variables, how much of the good and bad behaviors a person performs makes up their authentic self and the degree to which their digital identity reflects their offline life. High scores in AggDAV mean that a user is more likely to create a



digital presence that mirrors their offline self, portraying both good and bad parts of their life and personality. Low scores would indicate that a person feels that personal authenticity is more in line with the ideal self, and they would spend more time curating their digital identity. This strong negative relationship indicates that people who score high in extraversion are more likely to present idealized versions of themselves online. This could be a way for extraverts to maintain a neutral presence online, which would help them hold onto a wider follower base. Posting online and receiving comments and likes from those posts replaces face-to-face interactions. Meaning, a large digital following with high levels of engagement could satisfy an extravert's desire for social interaction. This theme should be explored further in a targeted study that follows up on the way extraverts engage online.

There was also a significant positive correlation between extraversion and sharing motivational posts. As stated above, motivational posts usually leave the reader feeling empowered or uplifted. N.A. stated that his reason for sharing these posts was that it made him "feel good" to read them. When sharing the posts, he accomplishes two goals: keeping that post in his personal archive thereby extending the amount of time he spends with the media, and providing an uplifting message for his follower base. Because of his own happiness from reading the message, N.A. could see this as a gift he is giving to his followers, that provides him with the psychological rewards of prosocial behaviors. Another potential motivator could come from maintaining a neutral presence. Because the post will be shown to their followers, extraverts may share others' feel-good messaging to maintain a presence with their digital social group in a low-risk way. Finally, the metrics for the original post are available to the extravert meaning they know the value of that piece of media. Metrics show a real-time, quantitative assessment of content through the amount of likes and comments it receives. Social media sites have recently

begun to allow the amount of times a post has been viewed to be available to the content creator as well. By sharing content that is already popular, the extravert has some guarantee that they will get follower engagement on the post.

*Limitations and suggestions for further research*

Despite the findings from this study, there are limitations that could use further attention. First, the sample was drawn from students matriculated at the University of Southern Maine. This led to a sample of predominantly 18-24-year-olds with similar socio-economic and education level backgrounds. A replication of this study, with representation from wider age groups could reveal cohort effects that have been missed. Additionally, qualitative data were gathered from a group of primarily women. Data may have been missed that might reveal gender differences in social media engagement. Furthermore, this study used an adapted version of the NEO-PI-R personality inventory. The long format, using 240 items, would yield a more reliable measure for participants by capturing more data for each personality factor.

Further work is needed to examine the relationship between extraversion, introversion, and digital authenticity. The current study revealed that this personality trait is linked to how comfortable a person feels about mirroring their offline life in their digital performance. Research that focusing on that link will be beneficial in understanding the motivations behind content creation. Also, this study found a change in behavior for three of the participants. A longitudinal study monitoring changes in social media engagement along with motivating factors (such as self-esteem or business marketing) would add to the body of knowledge surrounding maintenance of social media platforms.

Initial qualitative research has shown some valuable insights in the connection between the strength of digital vs. physical communities. The interviews conducted for this study did not

investigate this link except when the discussion was led to that information by a participant who found value in their digital community. New work should focus on membership in digital communities.

Finally, in 2020 a new social media app launched called BeReal. This platform gives users a random, two minute window to post an unfiltered photo. Using both the front camera and back camera on their mobile device, the user uploads booths a “selfie” and point-of-view snapshot of that moment in their day. While this app may only be a trend in current tech, its popularity calls into question what people desire from other social media users. Additional research should aim at uncovering users’ perceptions of the content others are posting, and to what degree they value raw honesty from others in the digital space.

## **Conclusion**

As illustrated by Nesi, Choukas-Bradley and Prinstein (2018), this study confirms that people who actively participate in digital culture do so by curating their identity performances.<sup>14</sup> This study has shown a correlation between the degree to which an individual intentionally curates their social media content and extraversion. Despite limitations, the data collected provide an insight into the complex dynamic of self-presentation and reputation preservation in the digital era. While the line separating digital and real world spaces becomes increasingly blurred, these findings may have implications on our understanding of performative identity sharing in the real world.

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in understanding social media platforms. Unfortunately, the very nature of the tech industry allows such rapid change in digital contexts that researchers and politicians will constantly be playing catch-up. For example, the

majority of work referenced in this study was published less than ten years ago. This means, the data collected to understand the social context of Instagram or Facebook is quickly becoming obsolete as the short-form video platform TikTok is now the most popular platform (197.8 million hours were spent watching videos on the site in 2020) (Stokel-Walker, 2023).

The implications for a lack of understanding are becoming more apparent as governments have begun regulating social media platforms. In 2020, France passed laws that allow adolescents more control over their digital presence. Minors in France will see their income as an influencer protected and have the ability to permanently remove videos and photos of themselves from social media platforms (Boring, 2020). The US currently has no protection for child influencers as they do not fall under laws that protect child actors such as the Coogan Law or traditional child labor laws. There are, however, an increasing number of restrictions and bans being created for specific platforms. Eleven countries have placed some kind of restriction on TikTok since 2020, with the state of Montana adopting its own total ban recently (Chan, 2023) (Maheshwari, 2023). The intention behind these actions have been cited as both censoring content for adolescents and protecting user privacy from China, a powerful geo-political rival. But, these blanket bans ignore or discredit the digital communities made online that bring real-world value to the mental well-being of users who form and maintain relationships online.

Continuously monitoring and studying digital social settings is a challenging task in a quickly evolving context. This study adds to a growing body of work that targets motivating factors for digital content creation. As governing bodies become more involved with digital regulations, it is imperative that this work continues.



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