Peer-Group Motives and Authenticity:

Associations with Self-Presentational Strategies on Social Media

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Independent Study Proposal

Abstract

Social media websites are becoming increasingly relevant in the lives of both adolescents and emerging adults. Research has shown that social networking platforms provide a space for identity development, specifically through engaging in different types of self-presentation. However, research on the relationship between social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Instagram and the identity development is limited and has not been tied directly to peer relationship mechanisms. In this study, I aim to integrate recent research on self-processes on social media and recent theoretical advances in the role of social media in peer relationships during emerging adulthood. Specifically, I will look at social motives including the need for popularity (NfP) and the need for belonging (NfB), presentation of the real, ideal, and false self, and authenticity. I expect that the need for popularity will be negatively associated with the presentation of the real self, and positively associated with presentation of the false self, and that the need for belongingess (NfB) will be positively related to presentation of the real self, and negatively associated with presentation of the false self. Finally, I predict that authenticity will be positively associated with presentation of the real self, and negatively associated with presentation of false self.

Introduction

Social media is becoming increasingly relevant for the identity development of adolescents and emerging adults. Social media websites such as Instagram and Facebook provide the platform which allows emerging adults to carefully craft an image that presents the best version of themselves for the world to see. By engaging in social networking sites (SNS) emerging adults are able to gain necessary feedback from peers that contribute to the development of their sense of self (Dungo, 2018). However, this research is only emerging, and has not been tied directly to peer relationship mechanisms. In this study, I aim to integrate recent research on self-processes on social media and recent theoretical advances in the role of social media in peer relationships during emerging adulthood.

Self-Presentation

According to Erickson (1968), identity formation becomes relevant in adolescence. However, research conducted by Kroger (2006) reveals it is not until young adulthood that individuals make "meaningful attempts to consolidate their sense of self" (Kroger, 2006). One of the ways that emerging adults make sense of who they are in a time of uncertainty is by engaging in self-presentation (Arnett, 2000). Self-presentation has been defined as "the process through which individuals communicate an image of themselves to others" (Yang & Brown, 2015), and in social psychological literature, this is reflected in behaviors aimed at "establishing, maintaining, or refining an image of the individual in the minds of others" (Goffman, 1959; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Schlenker, 1980).

Emerging adulthood is characterized by an important period of identity formation (Erikson, 1968) and due to shift in the nature of self-presentation from face-to-face communication to the digital sphere, social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram

afford new online contexts for self-exploration and self-presentational strategies (Yang & Brown, 2015). Past research has indicated that emerging adults seek out different SNSs to meet different needs. For example, for some, Facebook fulfills the need to belong by providing a platform for individuals to maintain relationships with others and engage in self presentation (Duango, 2018). In contrast, Instagram focuses on enhancing self- presentation and social validation through posting pictures and videos for peers to like and comment on (Duango, 2018).

Literature on self-presentation in emerging adulthood by Harter and colleagues (1997) reveals the construction of multiple self-presentations first emerges during adolescence, in which individuals may encounter different selves depending on certain contexts. For example, it is not out of the ordinary for many adolescents to present different aspects of themselves when among peers in contrast to when they are around their parents (Harter, Bresnick, Bouchey, & Whitesell, 1997; Harter & Monsour, 1992). This exploration of the self continues in emerging adulthood. According to Harter and colleagues (1997), the continuation of this exploration in emerging adulthood may reflect a normative part of identity development in which emerging adults make sense of these different facets of the self in order to form a cohesive identity (Harter, Bresnick, Bouchey, & Whitesell 1997).

Self-presentation, both online and in person, can entail depicting oneself in various ways that differ based on how they present themselves in real life. Some examples of some general self-presentational strategies employed in the online context may include; creating a profile, posting profile pictures, updating one's status, messaging with friends, and browsing other peers' profiles (Seidman, 2012). However, self-presentational strategies may differ in degree depending on the individual's social goals (Seidman, 2012). For example, if an individual's primary goal is to belong, they may post photos with peers or comment on friends' photos in order to feel closer

to their peers (Seidman, 2012). However, if their main goal is to gain popularity, they may engage in strategic self-presentation in which they post certain photos or updates in order to appear more favorable (Utz, Janis &Vermeulen, 2012). In this study, I seek to understand how emerging adults' need for belonging and popularity, as well as their authenticity applies to self-presentational strategies online.

Real, Ideal, and False Selves

According to Erickson (1968) of the ways that individuals engage in identity formation is by exploring various aspects of themselves and then integrating these various aspects into a cohesive identity. According to self-concept literature, in adolescence, due to the changing social environment, individuals may be pressured to "develop different selves in different social contexts". The self that one presents to the world may change depending on social contexts. For example, the self we present to our friends may differ from the self we are with our parents. Research has differentiated between the real, ideal, and false selves that emerge in adolescence (Harter et al., 1996; Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Selman, 1980). The real self is defined as an individual's authentic and true feelings about who they are (Harter et al., 1996). The ideal self can be thought of in terms of an individual's ideal attributes and who they would like to be (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Finally, the false self includes feelings and behaviors that are not true to the real self (Harter et al., 1996). According to (Harter et al., 1997), presenting multiple aspects of the self is a normative process emerging adult engage in when developing their self-concept (Harter et al., 1997). In addition to the real, ideal and false selves, according to Dr. Seidman, the internet offers a venue for individuals to present "hidden aspects" of the self (Seidman, 2012).

Authenticity and Self-Presentation

Authenticity is important to understanding motives behind different kinds of self-presentation strategies on SNS. Barret-Lennard (1998) defined authenticity by using a "person-centered approach". According to Barret-Lennard, authenticity as a construct is measured by the consistency between "a person's primary experience, their symbolized awareness, and their outward behavior and communication" (Barret-Lennard, 1998). According to this framework, there are three aspects of authenticity. First, authenticity involves measuring or identifying any mismatches between a person's conscious awareness and their actual experiences (Barret-Lennard, 1998). Second, authenticity also measures a person's congruence between their actual experiences and their reactions or behaviors. The last aspect measures to the extent that a person accepts the influence of others in the social sphere (Barret-Lennard, 1998).

Authenticity as a construct is important for understanding self-presentational strategies and behaviors because it is a reliable indicator of a person's psychological well-being. For example, it is clear that having a healthy self-esteem is important to psychological functioning (Kernis, 2005). In addition, recent literature has suggested authenticity is an important factor in developing a healthy self-esteem (Goldman, 2006; Kernis, 2003). Further, researchers have discussed the role of authenticity and psychological needs, including feelings of self-worth (Heppner, Kernis, Nezlek, Foster, Lakey, & Goldman, 2008).

An important finding of this study included the notion that self-esteem is derived from both external and internal influences (Heppner, Kernis, Nezlek, Foster, Lakey, & Goldman, 2008). For example, the self-determination theory emphasizes internal influences, stating that the need for autonomy (or high authenticity) is central to a healthy self-esteem (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1995; Moller, Friedman, & Deci, 2006). In turn the sociometer theory emphasizes external

influences, stating that when people feel socially connected (or feel like they belong), they tend to exhibit higher levels of self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). In line with the sociometer theory, researchers found that "the extent to which participants felt intimate and connected with other people predicted self-esteem" (Heppner, Kernis, Nezlek, Foster, Lakey, & Goldman, 2008). In addition, in line with the self-determination theory, they found both autonomy and felt authenticity were related to daily self-esteem (Heppner, Kernis, Nezlek, Foster, Lakey, & Goldman, 2008).

These findings are important as they suggest that authenticity not only encourages healthy psychological processes such as self-esteem and feelings of belonginess but may even serve to clarify or strengthen one's identity, a normative process that occurs during emerging adulthood.

However, studies have also shown individuals low in authenticity present their false self-more often on SNS (Gil-Or, Levi-Belz & Turel, 2015). For example, in a study about self-presentation on Facebook (Gil-Or et al., 2015), researchers explored how authenticity shapes the development of the "Facebook Self". The Facebook Self is defined as "a more socially acceptable and popular version of self" (Gil-Or et al., 2015). Interestingly, they found that certain individuals may be more vulnerable to engaging in false self-presentation than others (Gil-Or et al., 2015). Specifically, researchers pinpointed personality characteristics that contribute the presentation of the false self. The findings of this study indicated that having low self-esteem and an "unawareness of the true self" (or a lack of self-concept clarity) contributed to the presentation of the false self. In terms of attachment, self-esteem and general authenticity tended to be lower in those who had either avoidant or anxious attachment styles (Gil-Or et al., 2015).

Another construct of importance to the study of self-presentational strategies includes self-concept clarity. Similarly, to authenticity, self-concept clarity is measured by incongruencies between different versions of the self and is defined as "the extent to which self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable" (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavallee & Lehman, 1996). Several studies have been done assessing how an individual's level of self-concept clarity plays a role in how they present themselves online. For example, research by Michikyan, Dennis, & Subrahmanyam (2014) examined associations between self-presentation and identity development in college freshman (Michikyan et al., 2014). One of the aims of the study included examining the extent to which emerging adults presented multiple facets of the self—including the real self, ideal self, and the false self on Facebook (Michikyan et al., 2014). The findings of this study indicated that emerging adults who had a clear sense of their self-concept (high self-concept clarity) presented their real selves on social media, where emerging adults who did not have a clear sense of self presented their false self to a greater extent (Michikyan et al., 2014). These researchers measured self-presentation strategies by labeling various dimensions of social media self-presentation including, breadth, depth, positivity, and authenticity (Michikyan et al., 2014). These strategies are relevant to the types of posts that individuals make and underlie social motivations. For example, breadth refers to the amount of information about the self that is revealed in a certain post. Depth was defined as the amount of intimacy presented in a post including information such as personal thoughts, emotions, or weaknesses. Positivity was determined by reflecting on how positive or negative the presented image appeared to be. Finally, authenticity measured how genuine or accurate representation of the self was (Michikyan et al., 2014).

In addition to these findings, Yang and Brown (2015) studied changes in emerging adults' self-presentation online during the transition to college (Yang & Brown, 2015). They employed the same dimensions of self-presentation as were used in the Michikyan et al. (2014) study. The findings of the study indicated that self-reflection and audience feedback played a critical role in the dimension of self-presentation that was observed. For example, engaging in broad, deep, positive, and authentic self-presentation as positively associated with perceived support from the audience (Yang & Brown, 2015). In addition, intentional self-presentation was associated with a higher level of self-reflection (Yang et al., 2015).

Peer Group Motives and Self-Presentation

Social media is by its nature a social tool. Research suggests that social media may play a major role in determining emerging adults' peer status via engaging in self-presentation online. Often, self-presentation on social media sites are reinforced by peer's approval or rejection (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Peers may influence self-presentation in two ways (Yang et al., 2015). First, building from self-presentational theories and symbolic interactionism, peers' feedback may boost or diminish an individual's self-esteem (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) and in turn shape their self-concept positively or negatively (Mead, 1934). Secondly, individuals reflect on their self-presentation and how this may influence how their peers think of them (Cooley, 1902; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The present study will examine how need for popularity and belonging among peers are related to self-presentation strategies.

In addition, within groups of people, individuals will vary in their status and level of inclusion within the peer group (Cillessen & Lansu, 2012). According to researchers, "popularity" as a construct can be defined as the rank ordering of an individual in their peer group according to the amount of power or prestige they possess (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004;

LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998; Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004).

Parkhurst & Hopmeyer (1998) elaborated on peer status by emphasizing new terms to

differentiate two "types" of popularity: sociometric popularity and perceived popularity.

Sociometric refers to being well liked and accepted within a group where perceived popularity

refers to being of high status and prestige among peers (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998). Apart

from actual experienced peer group status, what individuals *strive for* among peers differs

between individuals. Research on adolescent social goals has found that behaviors differ

depending on the peer-group motive underlying them. However, most of the research on social

goals among peers has been primarily conducted in adolescents and not within the context of

social media.

Recent literature has revealed that striving for popularity may serve as a primary

motivator for using social networking sites (SNS). Recently, a new term has emerged within self-

presentational literature known as "the need for popularity" (NfP) (Utz, Janis &Vermeulen,

2012). NfP is an interesting construct as it refers to individuals who strive for acceptance by a

large peer group. Nfp individuals differ from narcissistic individuals in the way that narcissists

may believe in their own superiority, but do not strive to leave a favorable impression among

peers (Utz et al., 2012). In a study, researchers consistently found that high NfP individuals both

engaged in selective presentation (e.g. editing profile pictures), as well as "social grooming"

behaviors (e.g messaging friends, browsing around other profiles). In both studies conducted, it

was found that NfP predicted selective self-presentation online (Utz et al., 2012). These findings

are important because they imply a number of things about these high-status striving individuals.

First, these findings show how the need for being popular differs from narcissism, which is often

intertwined with self-presentation motives. The difference lies in where the motivation to self-

present comes from. For example, narcissists may post photos online to appear favorably, but do not strive to impress others the way that high NfP individuals do. In addition, the need for popularity differs greatly from the need to belong—which is another motive that is relevant to using SNS's. The need to belong refers to individuals who strive for meaningful connections and friendships within a peer group—not necessarily just acceptance. Individuals who have a need to belong differ from NfP individuals as they may not feel the need to present false versions of themselves to appear more popular within a peer group. NfP individuals are different in the way that they don't strive to form lasting relationships but engage in SNS simply to form as many connections online as possible in order to be perceived as more popular by a general peer group (Utz et al., 2012).

In another study, researchers examined a set of digital status seeking behaviors adolescents engage in and the implications of these behaviors in longitudinal health-risk behavior engagement (Nesi & Prinstein, 2018). The results of this study suggested that adolescents who engaged in greater digital status seeking behaviors reported not only more social media usage but also a desire for popularity (Nesi et al., 2018). Because digital status seekers place much greater value on peer perceptions of their social status than those who do not engage in these behaviors as frequently, these findings could indicate that digital status may have a tie to peer status (Nesi et al., 2018). Social networking sites such as Instagram and Facebook provide an ideal platform for high NfP individuals. Not only do SNS's allow NfP individuals to engage in strategic self-presentation, (e.g. selectively posting certain photos or crafting updates that make them appear to have a more popular image), but they also allow for NfP individual's to be noticed by a large audience—namely peers and strangers on these sites (Utz et al., 2012).

The Present Study

This study aims to extend research on self-presentation strategies on social media, authenticity, and peer relationships by examining associations among these constructs during emerging adulthood. Even with the development of autonomy and independence, the priority and impact of peer status remains of importance in peer groups of emerging adults (Cillessen & Lansu, 2012). However, this may pose a developmental challenge for this age group: the task of finding one's own identity, while maintaining ties to an established peer group (Cillessen et al., 2012). Further, given the increase in the normativity of social media, these processes are particularly important to understand in this context. Presently, we aim to examine popularity goals (NfP), belonginess goals (NfB), and authenticity as predictors of self-presentation of the real, ideal, and false selves. Our study hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1*:* I predict that the need for popularity (NfP) will be negatively associated with the presentation of the real self, and positively associated with presentation of the false self.

Hypothesis 2: I predict that the need for belonginess (NfB) will be positively related to presentation of the real self, and negatively associated with presentation of the false self.

Hypothesis 3: I predict that authenticity will be positively associated with presentation of the real self, and negatively associated with presentation of false self.
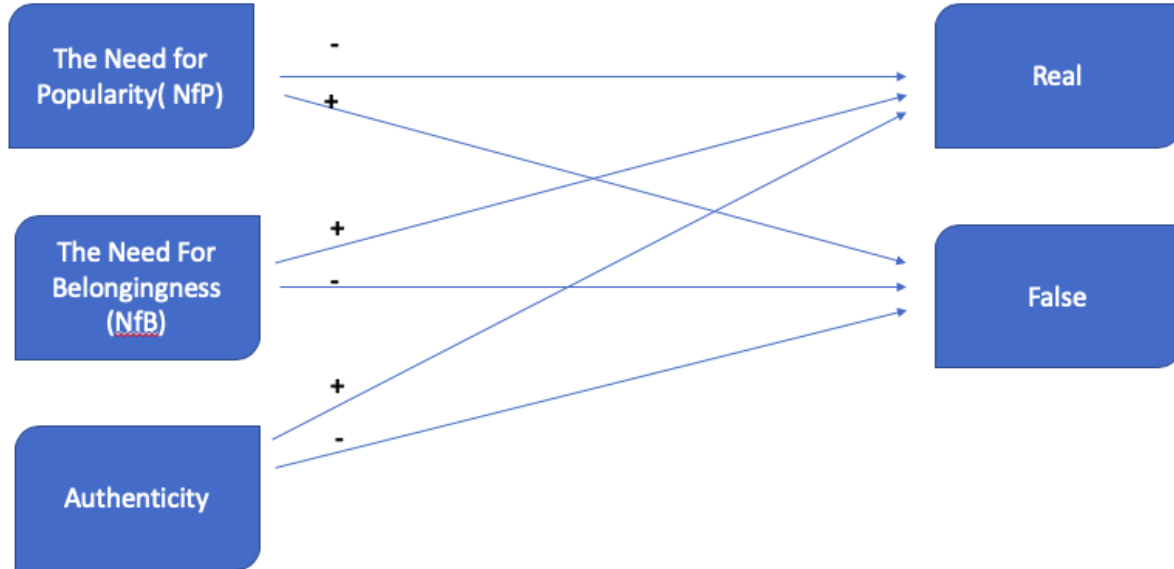
Exploratory Aims:

Aim 1:

My first exploratory aim would explore the associations between the predictor variables (need for belonging, need for popularity, and authenticity) and how these variables relate to presentation of the ideal self. The real and false selves are different in that the real self-compromises an individual's authentic attributes, where the false self-deviates greatly from one's real self. However, the ideal self can be seen as a halfway point between the real and false self. The ideal self can be defined in terms of an individual's ideal attributes and who they would like to be (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986). However, whether the "ideal" person they would like to be lies closer to one's real or false self is what remains unclear. This poses a question for which "self" individuals with a strong need for belonginess may present online. For example, an individual who strives to belong within a peer group may present themselves in ways that they feel would make them more likely to be accepted and may deviate a good bit from their real self.

Aim 2:

In addition, I would like to explore levels of authenticity as a possible moderator of the association between NfP, NfB, and presentation of the real and different aspects of the false self. In line with past research, on as spectrum from real to false self-presentation it is expected that those who are high in authenticity would score closer on the end of the real self. Thus, it is expected that those who are low in authenticity would score relatively closer to the false self. However, what I would like to explore is the relationship between those who score low in authenticity, their social needs (whether that is the NfP or the NfB) and how that reflects the form of false self-presentation they engage in. For example, individuals who are low in authenticity, but also have a strong need for popularity may engage in strategic false-self presentation. In this way, these individuals are striving to cultivate an image on SNS to present themselves in a way that will gain them more popularity and prestige among not only their friends but their peer group at large. On the other hand, those who are low in authenticity but have a strong desire to belong may also engage in false self-presentation to a degree but may display "hidden" aspects of the self-online that they are too shy or anxious to present in everyday life. This is especially prevalent in individuals who have social anxiety and may not feel comfortable being their real self in person and may compensate for this by presenting these hidden aspects of themselves online in order to feel a sense of belonging (Seidman, 2012).

Proposed Method

Participants

Emerging adults from Roanoke College will be recruited using an online survey platform. In addition, in order to recruit as widely as possible, some participants may be paid to participate through Prolific.

Measures

Self-presentation strategies: Participants' real, ideal, and false selves will be measured using the *Self-Presentation on Facebook Questionnaire* (SPFBQ) (Michikyan, Dennis and Subrahmanyam (2014). The scale consists of 17-items and all items will be scored on a 5-point Likert-style scale (1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Moderately disagree 3 = Neither agree nor disagree 4 = Moderately agree 5 = Strongly agree).

Need for belonging: Participants need for belonging will be measured using the *Need to Belong scale* (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2005). The scale consists of 10 items and will be measured using a 5-point likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Moderately disagree 3 = Neither agree nor disagree 4 = Moderately agree 5 = Strongly agree).

Need for popularity: Participants' need for popularity will be measured using the *Personality: Need for Popularit*y scale (Santor, Messervey, & kusumakar, 1989). The scale consists of 7 items measuring peer pressure, popularity, and conformity. All items will be scored on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = disagree strongly, 2 = disagree moderately, 3 = disagree a little, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = agree a little, 6 = agree moderately, 7 = agree strongly).

Authenticity: Participants' level of authenticity will be measured using the *Authenticity Scale* (Wood, Linley, Joseph, Malthy, & Baliousis, 2008). The scale consists of 12 items and are presented on a 1 (*does not describe me at all*) to 7 (*describes me very well*) scale. The items on the scale are broken down into different facets of authenticity including, Authentic Living,

Accepting External Influence, and Self-Alienation. Items 1, 8, 9, and 11 correspond to Authentic Living, Items 3, 4, 5, and 6 correspond to Accepting External Influence, and Items 2, 7, 10, and 12 correspond to Self-Alienation.

Peer-Experiences on Social Media: Participant's experiences with interacting with peers on social media will be measured suing the *Social Networking-Peer Experiences Questionnaire (SN-PEQ)*. The scale consists of 5 items measuring a variety of aversive peer experiences. Participants will rate the occurrence of each item on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 5 = a few times a week).

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