

The Relationship Between Presentation of Online Self and Conscientiousness in Emerging Adults in India

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Abstract

With the rise of social media use, understanding how individuals curate their online presence and experiment with different aspects of their digital identity is crucial in determining whether their online self is an extension of their offline identity or a distinct construct. This necessitates an examination of personality traits, particularly conscientiousness, to explore its role in online self-expression. Existing research suggests that individuals with high conscientiousness tend to maintain consistency between their online and offline identities (Authentic Self), are less likely to engage in varying self-presentations online (Adaptable Self), and experience greater restraint in expressing themselves freely in digital spaces (Freedom of Self Online). The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between conscientiousness and the three factors of online self-presentation—Authentic Self, Adaptable Self, and Freedom of Self Online—among emerging adults in India. The study administered the Presentation of Online Self Scale for Adults (POSSA; 2021) and the Concise Conscientiousness Measure-S (CCM-S; 28 items; 2021) to assess these variables among individuals aged 18–25 years ($n = 116$). The results indicated a significant positive correlation between conscientiousness and Authentic Self ($r = 0.294$, $p < .01$); and a significant negative correlation between conscientiousness and Freedom of Self Online ($r = -0.225$, $p < .05$). Moreover, a negative correlation was found between conscientiousness and Adaptable Self, however, it was not significant. Thus, it is likely that a relationship between conscientiousness and online self-presentation exists, wherein individuals might consider their online identities as an extension of their offline self but might feel restricted in their online interactions.

Keywords: Presentation of online self, conscientiousness, correlation, emerging adults

INTRODUCTION

Self-presentation is a fundamental aspect of social interaction, shaping how individuals convey their identity and manage impressions in various contexts. In today's interconnected world, the way individuals present themselves has evolved, especially with the rise of digital platforms that allow for curated self-presentation. Self-presentation refers to selective self-impression formation, wherein individuals try to manage the information about themselves, choosing the self-image that they want to show to others, including control over their character and appearance. Thus, the phenomenon of self-presentation encompasses various strategies that an individual may employ to mould the impression

that they want to present to other people, often presenting themselves in a particular light. An integral component of social behaviour, self-presentation is observed in a variety of contexts, including both offline, real world interactions as well as online interactions.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The world is now all connected through our fingertips and keyboards. The very nature of social relationships and interactions have changed tremendously with the rapid proliferation of social

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media platforms. This also means a shift in the way individuals behave and present themselves to others. Individuals now have a remarkable degree of flexibility to curate and shape their online personas, with unique and expansive elements and features for self-presentation management in digital spaces. The degree of control, deliberation and strategy over information presented is far greater online; the profiles can be fully curated, with boundless options as to what is to be shared, edited or deleted.

Online self-presentation includes two opposing aspects; positive self-presentation which calls to attention the positive characteristics of the individual to create a good impression, and honest self-presentation which brings to the fore the true, genuine characteristics of self. The self-discrepancy theory postulates that individuals tend to compare their actual self with the ideal self; negative psychological outcomes are a result of major inconsistencies between these two selves. As per the findings of a study which investigated the relationship between different online self-presentations and life satisfaction of 460 Chinese college students, positive online feedback was found to be a mediator, while self-esteem was a moderator. Moreover, truthful online self-presentation was found to be conducive to the life satisfaction of college students, especially those low on self-esteem. However, the self-presented online and the personality in the offline world may or may not be congruent; it is not unusual for individuals to try to present a different self-online.

An intriguing finding is how social networking sites can intensify lying self-presentation owing to the level of control users have over how they present themselves in such spaces; factors like ease of use, anonymity, difficulty in recognising non-verbal cues associated with lying in online contexts facilitate such lying behaviours. Furthermore, features of social media apps like editing and choosing which images to present aids individuals in creating deceitful self-images online [8]; in fact a considerable number of Facebook users held the belief that their Facebook self was different from their real self, since they accentuated their positive characteristics and minimised the negatives. In general, social media allows individuals to cover up or hide away undesirable qualities while emphasizing desirable qualities by putting them under the spotlight with ease. This results in an abundance of idealistic and unrealistic presentations of self-online. However, for those who feel that certain aspects of their self are undesirable in offline social contexts, online spaces can be supportive, and this allows them to present a more authentic self-online. Self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism played a role in online presentation of idealised self and multiple selves. They also found an association between an individual's self-presentation and the probability of them being a perpetrator of cyberbullying. Additionally, it was observed that rumination and idealised self-presentation were negatively correlated.

While various studies report consistency between the online and offline personality of individuals (Marriott and Buchanan, 2014, as cited in Stöven et al., 2024) [14], many other researchers have reported inconsistencies (Casale and Fioravanti, 2018; Michikyan et al., 2014; Twomey and O'Reilly, 2017, as cited in Stöven et al., 2024).

Therefore, it is evident how identity curation and experimentation is an integral part of online self-presentation. Emerging adulthood (18-25 years) is an age group characterized by identity exploration (Arnett, 2000) [2], hence necessitating an investigation of their online self-presentation behaviours.

The Presentation of Online Self Scale for Adults provides 3 factors of online self-presentation. The first factor, Adaptable Self, refers to the multiple personas that an individual can try and act out online; they can adapt to a more desirable identity and escape from their own self. The second factor, Authentic Self, is concerned with the genuineness or authenticity expressed by the individual in the online world as compared to their offline identity. The third factor is Freedom of Self Online, which alludes to an individual's beliefs about how freely they can express themselves online. Hence, the present research study examines these 3 factors of online self-presentation.

Conscientiousness and Online Self Presentation

Many studies explore personality traits in conjunction with self-presentation in various social contexts (Chen & Marcus, 2012 [3], Fullwood et al., 2020 [5], Lee et al., 2014 [7] Murphy, 2024[10], Seidman, 2013 [13], Tong et al., 2019) [18]. The personality trait of conscientiousness is particularly of interest considering its multifaceted structure. MacCann et al. (2009) [8] elaborate on the major facets of conscientiousness, which are - Industriousness, Perfectionism, Tidiness, Procrastination Refrainment, Control, Cautiousness, Task Planning, and Perseverance. These are the facets (except Perseverance) that the present study will investigate, using the Concise Conscientiousness Measure - Short form (CCM - S). Industriousness refers to the inclination of individuals for hard, efficient work, striving for excellence and exceeding expectations. Perfectionism is the strive to be perfect and surpass others. Tidiness refers to propensity towards cleanliness and neatness. Procrastination Refrainment refers to the tendency to start tasks immediately, with no time wasted. Control refers to the propensity for impulse control. Caution has to do with the tendency for reflection before taking actions. Task Planning refers to organizing time and making plans (MacCann et al., 2009) [8].

The study by Hjetland et al. (2022) [6] in 2023 senior high school students in Norway recorded that individuals with high scores on agreeableness and conscientiousness were less likely to focus on their self-presentation, which included feedback-seeking, strategic self-presentation, and social comparison.

In the study by Putri et al. (2024) [11], which had a sample of 209 participants between the ages of 17-43 years, it was found that those individuals with high conscientiousness and openness to experience are likely to present their authentic selves online.

Results of the study as cited in Strimbu et al., 2021) [15] indicate that online self-presentation is more closely associated with preference of personality expression compared to the individual's actual personality. Even those with low scores on conscientiousness were found to prefer to express their true selves online, demonstrating an inconsistency in their presentation of true self online and offline; however when analysed in conjunction with the ratings of their friends, it was found that ratings given by offline friends were significantly closer to those of the participant as compared to ratings given by online friends. This means that on the whole, the participants did not present themselves more authentically online in comparison to offline presentations.

Strimbu et al. (2021) [15] noted from their study on 531 individuals aged 18-25 years that more conscientious individuals show fewer inconsistencies between online and offline presentation of their selves; and that individuals high on conscientiousness demonstrated more consistency between online and offline self-presentation.

Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky (2010) [1] through their study with a sample of 237 Israeli university students also found that those individuals scoring high on conscientiousness had greater number of friends on Facebook and used the picture upload feature to a lesser extent.

Thus, it is apparent how conscientiousness and online self-presentation are associated in various ways. Hence, the objective of our study was to understand the relationship between conscientiousness and the factors of online self-presentation, which are based on the Presentation of Online Self Scale for Adults.

METHOD

Objective

To understand the relationship between Conscientiousness and different factors of Online Self Presentation among emerging adults in India.

Hypotheses

1. There will be a positive relationship between Conscientiousness and the Authentic Self factor in the Presentation of an Online Self Scale for Adults.

2. There will be a negative relationship between Conscientiousness and the Adaptable Self factor in the Presentation of Online Self Scale for Adults.
3. There will be a negative relationship between Conscientiousness and the Freedom of Online Self factor in the Presentation of Online Self Scale for Adults.

Design

This research employed a correlational research design to explore the relationship between conscientiousness and the three factors of online self-presentation- Authentic Self, Adaptable Self, and Freedom of Self Online, among emerging adults in India.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used in this study. The research included a sample of 116 emerging adults between the ages of 18 to 25 years. The inclusion criteria stipulated that participants must be within the given age range and actively use any of these social media platforms - Whatsapp, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat.

Measures

Presentation of online self-scale for adults (POSSA)

The Presentation of Online Self Scale for Adults (POSSA; 2021) was employed to measure how people portray themselves in online spaces. The original scale, POSS, was designed for use with adolescents. It was adapted by Strimbu et al. (2021) [15] for use with adults. This 17-item measure includes three factors: Authentic Self, Adaptable Self, and Freedom of Self Online. Responses are measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Reliability analysis indicated high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for the Adaptable Self factor ($\alpha = .87$), moderate reliability for the Authentic Self factor ($\alpha = .72$), and acceptable reliability for the Freedom of Self Online factor ($\alpha = .77$).

Concise conscientiousness measure-S (CCM-S)

The Concise Conscientiousness Measure-Short (CCM-S; 2021) was employed to measure conscientiousness. It is a 28-item measure that assesses seven facets of Conscientiousness-Industriousness, Perfectionism, Procrastination Refrainment, Task Planning, Tidiness, Caution, and Control, on a four-item scale for each facet. The CCM-S exhibits good factorial validity, with satisfactory model fit indices (CFI = .93, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .05) and high correlations with the original CCM (MacCann et al., 2009), suggesting content validity. Reliability analyses indicated that all facets yielded reliable scores based on McDonald's ω and Cronbach's alpha, except for the Control facet, which needs further examination.

Procedure

Data was gathered online using a Google Form that included sections for both POSSA and CCM-S; this ensured accessibility and ease of participation. Following the submissions, the responses were scored and analyzed according to standardized procedures. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to, including informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality of responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

JASP (Version 0.19.3) was used to compute the results. Means, standard deviations, and correlations between Adaptable Self, Authentic Self, Freedom of Self Online, and Conscientiousness are presented in Table 1. The mean score for Adaptable Self is 14.90 (SD= 4.61), for Authentic Self is 14.68 (SD=2.74), for Freedom of Self Online is 18.79 (SD= 4.39), and for Conscientiousness is 95.98 (SD=14.82).

Correlations between Adaptable Self, Authentic Self, Freedom of Self Online, and Conscientiousness are presented in Table 2 and illustrated graphically in Figures 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3. The correlational analysis indicated a significant positive relationship between the variables of Conscientiousness and Authentic

Self ($r = 0.29$; $p < .01$), and a significant negative relationship between the variables of Conscientiousness and Freedom of Self Online ($r = -0.22$; $p < .05$). Additionally, a negative correlation was found between the variables of Conscientiousness and Adaptable Self ($r = -0.13$). (Figure 1)

Conscientiousness and Authentic Self

The results indicated a significant positive relationship between conscientiousness and Authentic Self. This aligns with previous research findings such as those of Strimbu et al. (2021) [15] and Putri et al. (2024), wherein it was found that individuals with high conscientiousness show a higher tendency to exhibit greater consistency between their offline and online selves. The trait of conscientiousness is characterized by discipline, organization, planning, and other such factors (John & Srivastava, 1999, as cited in Putri et al., 2024) [11]. Thus, individuals who exhibit high conscientiousness tend to structure their lives with a sense of order and consistency. (Figure 2-3) This tendency toward maintaining order may explain why individuals with high conscientiousness would be more likely to present their true/authentic selves on social media, ensuring coherence between their online and offline identities (Putri et al., 2024). Similarly, Seidman (2013) observed that conscientious individuals engage less in attention-seeking behaviors and are less likely to express hidden or idealized versions of themselves online. Hence, such individuals may be more likely to exhibit more authentic self-presentation online.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of the variables in the study.

Variables	n	M	SD
1. Adaptable Self	116	14.90	4.61
2. Authentic Self	116	14.68	2.74
3. Freedom of Self Online	116	18.79	4.39
4. Conscientiousness	116	95.98	14.82

Table 2. Correlations between each of the variables in the study.

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Adaptable Self	-	-	-	-
2. Authentic Self	-	-	-	-
3. Freedom of Self Online	-	-	-	-
4. Conscientiousness	-0.13	0.29**	-0.22*	-

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

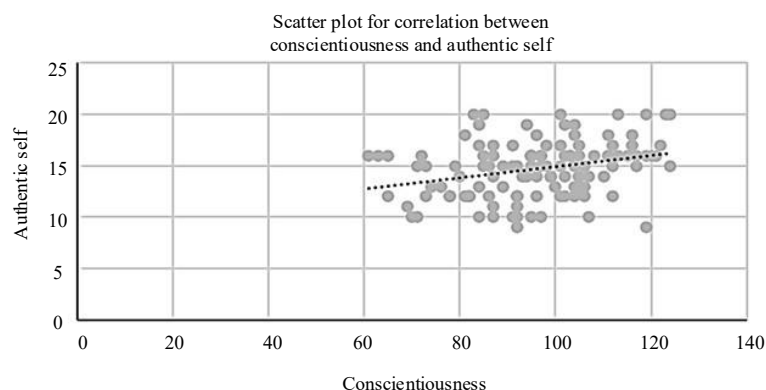


Figure 1. Scatter plot for correlation between conscientiousness and authentic self.

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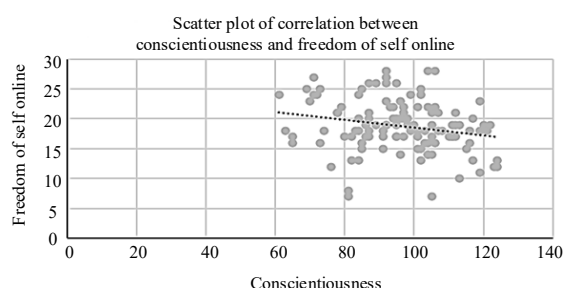


Figure 2. Scatter plot for correlation between conscientiousness and freedom of self-online.

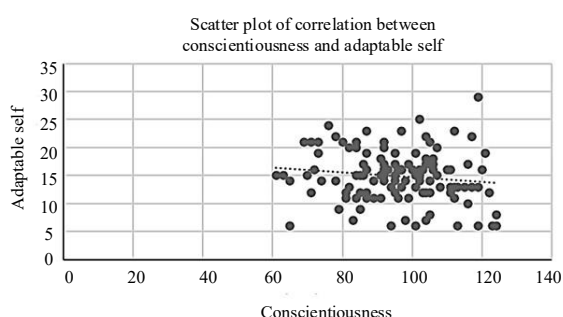


Figure 3. Scatter plot for correlation between conscientiousness and adaptable self.

Conscientiousness and Freedom of Self Online

The findings suggest a significant negative relationship between conscientiousness and Freedom of Self Online. This means that individuals with high conscientiousness are less likely to feel free to express themselves online. Prior research has found that individuals with high conscientiousness are more cautious in their online self-presentation (Seidman, 2013; Putri et al., 2024). Seidman (2013) [13] also noted that individuals with high conscientiousness tend to use social media less frequently and are less likely to engage in acceptance seeking behaviours and seek connections online (Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Wilson et al., 2010, as cited in Seidman, 2013). Instead, they may prefer to fulfill their social belonging needs through offline interactions (Seidman, 2013). This potentially makes them less likely to express themselves online.

Conscientiousness and Adaptable Self

The findings on conscientiousness and adaptable self suggest a negative relationship, though it is not significant. However, other studies have reported that individuals with high conscientiousness are less likely to explore and adapt different online identities (Seidman, 2013; Strimbu et al., 2021) [13-15].

Practical Implications

The findings of this study could have implications for well-being and life satisfaction of individuals trying to navigate their online identities. Existing research has suggested that authentic individuals tend to have higher self-esteem, psychological well-being and overall life satisfaction (Sutton, 2020; Davis et al., 2014; Rathi & Lee, 2021) [16][12]. Thus, it could be possible that individuals high on conscientiousness who are more authentic in their online self-presentations, might also have these improved psychological outcomes. On the other hand, individuals who do not present themselves authentically online may not experience these outcomes which might make them vulnerable to distress. These patterns could be useful in designing interventions that could focus on helping individuals develop a healthier and more authentic approach to online self-presentation.

Results have also suggested that individuals high on conscientiousness feel less free to express themselves online; this could potentially lead to feelings of social disconnection or emotional suppression over time. In this respect, interventions that encourage balanced digital engagement—such as structured self-expression exercises or guided online interactions—could help individuals feel more comfortable expressing themselves online without feeling overly restricted. These concerns can also be addressed in digital well-being programs or psychoeducation initiatives that could help individuals find a balance between maintaining authenticity and allowing themselves the freedom to engage meaningfully in online spaces.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the study highlights the relationship between conscientiousness and online self-presentation among emerging adults in India. The results suggest that individuals high in conscientiousness are more likely to maintain authenticity in their online identities while feeling less free to express themselves in digital spaces. These findings contribute to the growing understanding of how personality is related to online behavior and may have implications for digital well-being as well. Future research could further explore the contextual factors influencing online self-presentation as well as the influence of different social media platforms on these relationships. Understanding these nuances can promote healthier online interactions and help individuals have a more authentic and balanced digital presence.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

One potential limitation of this study is that it does not account for how individuals might present themselves differently across various social media platforms, depending on platform norms and audience expectations (e.g. posting differently for friends vs. employers). Thus, future research could explore how conscientiousness interacts with self-presentation on different platforms, considering variations in professional, social, and creative digital spaces. Moreover, relying solely on a self-report measure of online self-presentation might not accurately reflect the participants' real online self-presentations. Thus, behavioral data (e.g., content analysis of posts, interaction patterns) could also be used in conjunctions to gain a more objective and comprehensive assessment of online self-presentation. Further, various situational variables, life transitions, or perceived consequences of online expression (e.g., fear of judgment or digital footprint concerns) could moderate the observed relationship between Conscientiousness and Online Self-presentation but were not measured in this study. Thus, future research could account for these factors and provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between conscientiousness and online self-presentation in different digital contexts.

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