



A Study Of User Presence Cues And Impression Management In Ephemeral Media

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how individuals construct and project their identities through the transient features of Instagram and Snapchat Stories. Stories, which disappear after 24 hours, foster immediacy and spontaneity in content sharing by encouraging users to post outside of their carefully curated permanent feeds. The ephemeral nature of Stories not only facilitates authentic self-expression but also serves as a tool for impression management, enabling users to signal presence and relatability through candid images, behind-the-scenes glimpses, and real-life moments. Drawing on a comprehensive review of relevant literature and qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, this research examines the motivations behind user engagement with Stories and how these platforms function as key arenas for identity performance. Furthermore, it investigates the impact of ephemeral content on self-esteem, self-concept, and interpersonal relationships, shedding light on the complex dynamics between identity construction and impression management in the digital age.

Keywords: Ephemeral Medium, Social Media, Impression Management, Instagram Stories

1. Introduction

The emergence of the digital age has brought about a significant transformation in how people interact and present themselves on the internet. In July 2023, for example, the astounding figures show that 5.19 billion people, or 64.6% of the world's population, have made the internet their home. Of them, an even more startling 4.88 billion people, or 59.9%, have made social media platforms their virtual home (Source: Statista). Because of this unprecedented connectivity, the idea of a digital persona where individuals carefully create and manage their virtual identities was born. Social media platforms have been instrumental in changing the face of communication and self-expression in this rapidly changing digital environment. renowned websites such as Facebook and social media platforms such as X (Twitter), Instagram, and Snapchat have transformed into digital venues where individuals carefully create stories about their emotions and objectives. These platforms provide a unique platform for self-presentation, helping users to create their digital identities with care by sharing material that matches their values, interests, and goals. Social media platforms have effectively encouraged users to share what they do every day and the range of dynamic emotions they feel through the "Stories" feature.

The primary purpose of this research was to study people's behavior and methods on different social media platforms when using ephemeral features. The objective of this research was to get an in-depth understanding of what was under study by closely investigating the self-presentation tactics and actions of a carefully selected sample of fifteen users. To do this, the researcher asked the chosen users insightful questions and held in-depth interviews with them. Following the collection of qualitative data from these interviews, a thorough and precise analysis of the data was conducted. This in-depth investigation examined several important factors related to social media use, such as impression management, relatability, authenticity, self-esteem, self-context, and self-identity.

1.1 Objective of the study:

1. To analyze the impact of impression management on Online identities, Relatability and Authenticity.

2. To find out the motivations behind these ephemeral platforms' impression management practices.

1.2 The hypothesis of the study:

The basic assumption of the study is that users could use unique impression management strategies on ephemeral platforms. This assumption arises from the concept that people's management and presentation of their online identities may be influenced by particular features of these platforms, such as their focus on real-time updates and ephemeral content.

H1: Users present various impression management behaviors on ephemeral mediums.

H2: Ephemeral Content positively affects the user's self-esteem, self-concept and self-identity

1.3 Research Question

1. How are users gratified by their desire to convey authenticity, relatability and online identity?
2. How does ephemeral content positively affect the user's self-esteem, self-concept, and self-identity?
3. How do users exhibit distinct impression management behaviors on ephemeral mediums?

2 Review of Literature:

2.1 Social Networking Site:

With the advent of Web 2.0, the internet evolved into interactive platforms, often called "Web 2.0 applications" (O'Reilly, 2005). This shift transformed traditional media consumers into active content producers on their personal pages (Dominick, 1999). Social networking sites (SNS), commonly known as social media, have since revolutionized how people connect, communicate, and share information. These platforms allow users to create digital profiles, build connections, and exchange ideas within online communities (William, 2011). While "social networking sites" and "social network sites" are often used interchangeably, the emphasis on "networking" highlights their core function of fostering new social connections (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

A large portion of SNS users are "Digital Natives" (Prensky, 2010)—individuals who grew up immersed in technology and are fluent in its use. For them, SNSs serve as essential tools for social interaction, information exchange, and self-expression.

2.2 Ephemeral Medium:

The term *ephemeral*, derived from the Greek word *efimeros*, means "short-lived" or "lasting only one day" (Henry George Liddell & Robert Scott). While ephemerality has long existed in natural phenomena, food, travel, and oral communication, it has now become central to digital media. A major milestone in this shift was Snapchat's introduction of the *Stories* feature in 2013, allowing posts to disappear after 24 hours and encouraging more spontaneous content (O'Connell, 2020). Following Snapchat's success, Twitter launched *Moments* in 2015, and Instagram introduced *Stories* in 2017. Facebook and WhatsApp later adopted similar features under the name *Status* (Olson, 2017).

Users turn to these ephemeral platforms to communicate emotions and activities with their social networks, reinforcing their sense of presence (Choi & Toma, 2014). Defined by their temporary nature, ephemeral platforms such as WhatsApp Status, Facebook Status, Snapchat, and Instagram Stories have rapidly become integral to contemporary social interaction (Bayer et al., 2016).

2.3 Impression Management:

Impression management refers to the conscious and subconscious behaviors individuals use to create a desirable impression on others (Goffman, 1959). It is a central aspect of social interaction, influencing personal relationships, professional endeavors, and everyday encounters. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) analyzed how people perform roles in social contexts, using "fronts" or "masks" to gain acceptance from peers. These fronts consist of elements such as *setting*, which defines the context of a performance (Harisankar & Dinesh Babu, 2021).

On social media, where physical verification is absent, users engage in "virtual impression management" (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Here, self-presentation becomes a performance shaped by selective disclosure, allowing individuals to emphasize certain traits while withholding others (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). However, the merging of public and private spaces online complicates audience awareness, making it difficult for users to identify who their performance targets (Boyd, 2010). Ultimately, impression management in digital spaces reflects both deliberate strategies and subtle behaviors aimed at maintaining favorable perceptions (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

3. Methodology

Based on the statement provided, the study involved the selection of 15 stakeholders for in-depth interviews. The sample composition was carefully structured to capture a diverse range of experiences.

3.1 Sample Design

Purposive sampling, a non-random selection method, has been selected for this study. It helps the researcher to pick participants who have the expertise and ability required to tackle the study objective. The primary methods of collecting data for this study are in-depth interviews and observations, which allow the researcher to have a full understanding of those involved with impression management on different platforms. The researcher conducted phone call interviews with some participants working in different metro cities. Open-ended questions and probes are essential instruments for enabling the collection of rich, qualitative data because the researcher encourages participants to be honest about their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Using this approach, the researcher gains an in-depth understanding of how users maintain their online personas in the context of ephemeral social media.

3.2 Data Collection:

In this study, the researcher observed some individuals before selecting the participants by following up on their social media platforms and ephemeral usage. The researcher selected 23 participants initially to collect data and some of the participants were not available and not willing to the interviews. So the sample size is limited to 15. The selected participants are not influencers they using these platforms to create and consume content actively. 9 male and 6 female participants were separated by the age group of 17-20, 21-24 and 25-35. Because most Instagram users are tech-savvy, millennials or post-millennials are under 35, peer pressure from other social media users may be the reason for this increase in usage (Lauren Reichart Smith & Jimmy Sanderson (2015)).

| Age | 17-20 | 21-24 | 25-35 |
|----------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| No. of Participants, | 5 | 6 | 4 |

3.4 Data Variables

This study used six key variables to collect data from participants: online identity, authenticity, relatability, self-esteem, self-concept, and self-identity.

3.4.1 Online Identity

Online identity refers to an individual's or organization's digital persona, including personal details, characteristics, interactions, and online behaviors. It encompasses private information, online footprints, and community participation, forming a dynamic representation that evolves over time. Online identity influences how people communicate, engage, and present themselves in digital spaces.

3.4.2 Authenticity

Authenticity in impression management measures how accurately an individual's online presentation reflects their true self, beliefs, and personality. Authentic self-presentation involves honesty and consistency, while deceptive management intentionally misrepresents one's identity. Maintaining authenticity online is challenging, as users often feel pressure to present an idealized version of themselves, balancing self-verification with adaptation to social or professional contexts.

3.4.3 Relatability

Relatability is the ability to connect with an audience on a personal or emotional level. Users create relatable personas by sharing stories, experiences, emotions, and vulnerabilities that resonate with their audience. Consistency in tone, style, and messaging, along with open and transparent communication, builds trust and strengthens the perception of authenticity. Relatable content humanizes users and fosters meaningful online connections.

3.4.4 Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to an individual's sense of self-worth and confidence. High self-esteem supports authentic self-presentation, resilience to criticism, and meaningful social interactions, while low self-esteem often leads to social comparison and impression management aimed at compensating for perceived inadequacies. Individuals with strong self-esteem focus more on self-improvement and genuine engagement rather than manipulating perceptions.

3.4.5 Self-Concept

Self-concept encompasses the beliefs and perceptions individuals hold about their attributes, abilities, and values. It guides how people manage impressions and shape the image they present to others. Self-concept can be influenced by social comparison and affects strategies in self-presentation, reinforcing positive self-perceptions and aligning online behaviors with one's identity.

3.4.6 Self-Identity

Self-identity is the core aspect of a person's self-concept, consisting of beliefs, characteristics, and values that define who they are. It drives behaviors aligned with personal values and supports self-verification through consistent expression and interactions. Those with a secure self-identity prioritize authenticity, while individuals with lower self-esteem may engage in self-enhancement to protect or strengthen their perceived identity.

4. Data Interpretation

Users' gratification from ephemeral platforms varies by age and purpose, whether consuming or creating content. Among 17–20-year-old college students, engagement tends to focus on technical aspects of posts rather than authenticity. While they can distinguish real from computer-generated content, they rarely verify it and often share quickly. In contrast, working professionals and postgraduate students approach ephemeral media more cautiously, prioritizing content credibility and source intent. They consume more than they produce, targeting select contacts rather than broadcasting widely.

Relatability is central to user satisfaction, as content that mirrors their experiences and interests strengthens connections and perceptions of creators. For 21–24-year-olds, platforms like Stories are particularly popular for sharing moods, trends, and professional updates. Users trust content and creators whose online personas align with their own interests, and post-millennials often selectively consume content from close friends or family to ensure relevance and trust. Over time, the audience perceives individuals as embodying the qualities they post, enhancing authenticity and online reputation.

Ephemeral platforms are also used to shape online identity, particularly among post-millennials aged 25–35. This group communicates emotions, personal experiences, and professional ambitions through creative posts involving music, photos, travel, and memes. Content often reflects social or professional interests, such as promoting initiatives or community work. Self-esteem is closely tied to audience reactions, and users manage visibility carefully through features like “only share with” to control who sees specific posts.

Participants are conscious of their self-concept and online identity, carefully curating profile details such as job, school, location, and relationship status to assert individuality. Avatars and ephemeral content enhance self-expression and authenticity, allowing users to present a distinctive digital self. Many strive to balance their personal self-perception with social expectations, posting content aligned with beliefs while avoiding material that could harm their reputation. Gender differences emerge in engagement patterns, with females more likely to interact with content reflecting perceived social perspectives, while males engage less with content tied to self-concept. Decisions about where and what to post, such as Instagram versus WhatsApp, are influenced by concerns about credibility, relatability, and the impact on self-esteem and social connections.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the complex dynamics of user behavior and self-expression on ephemeral platforms, including authenticity, relatability, content credibility, online identity, self-esteem, and self-concept. Younger users (17–20) focus more on technical aspects than authenticity, while 21–24-year-olds are more discerning about the authenticity and credibility of content and creators. Post-millennials (25–35) use these platforms to express emotions and professional identity, leveraging avatars and verified profiles to enhance online self-presentation. Across age groups, online personas are closely tied to self-esteem and identity, shaped by audience responses and the perceived credibility of shared content. The study underscores that ephemeral platforms serve distinct purposes for different age groups, reflecting nuanced strategies for impression management, self-expression, and the cultivation of digital identities.

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