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# The Ideal Self Online: Identity and Self-Presentation in the Digital Age

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## Keywords

Ideal self; Digital age; Digital identity; Social media; Psychological wellbeing

### 1. Definition

The ideal self online refers to the curation and portrayal of an ideal version of the self that aligns with personal aspirations and socially desirable traits. It is often shaped by audience expectations, audience feedback and platform features.

### 2. Introduction

In the digital age, the way individuals manage their identity is considerably different from the offline context. A central part of this identity construction is the emergence of the *ideal self* online. The *ideal self* refers to a version of oneself that reflects personal achievements and socially desirable traits. Unlike offline contexts, where the presentation of the self is limited by physical appearance and social immediacy, digital environments allow users to carefully curate and manage how others perceive them. This has resulted in the widespread adoption of idealised personas across social media, dating applications, professional networks and virtual communities.

In cyberpsychology, it serves as a key construct for understanding how individuals navigate digital identity, self-perception and social validation. This chapter provides an overview of the online ideal self. It will explore the theoretical underpinnings of the ideal self and its manifestation in an online context. This chapter will also address the psychological outcomes of engaging with ideal self-presentation strategies online as well as broader implications for identity development in a digital age.

### 3. Theoretical Foundations

Understanding the 'ideal self' online draws upon several psychological and sociological theories that explain how individuals conceive of and present their identities. The self-discrepancy theory (SDT; Higgins, 1987) explains how discrepancies between different aspects of the self can lead to emotional vulnerabilities. SDT proposes that individuals maintain multiple domains of the self: the *actual* self (whom you believe you actually are), the *ideal* self (whom you wish you were - a person's hopes, dreams, and aspirations), and the *ought* self (whom you think you should be - an individual's sense of duty, obligations or responsibilities). Each of these self-presentations can be viewed from two perspectives: (1) how you view yourself and (2) how you believe others view you. Discrepancies between the actual and ideal self can lead to negative emotions such as disappointment and dissatisfaction. These experiences are likely intensified in online environments where presentation of the ideal self is common and constantly reinforced through social feedback. For example, social media often becomes a space where the ideal self dominates with the ability to amplify and mitigate discrepancies. Findings from a review of the literature highlight how specific design features impact self-discrepancy by allowing individuals to present idealised versions of themselves while also shaping their personal standards through exposure to online content and social norms (Hu et al., 2022).

Carl Rogers' humanistic theory explains how the ideal self is formed. Rogers (1959) argued that psychological wellbeing is dependent on congruence between the actual and ideal self. However, online contexts often disrupt this congruence because of the drive for validation and social comparison, which leads users to construct ideal selves that are vastly different from their actual selves. Nor et al. (2025) found that false self-presentation and social comparison on social media heighten users' fear of negative evaluation, especially as individuals strive to maintain their idealised online personas that differ from their actual selves. This research supports the idea that digital platforms disrupt self-congruence through validation-seeking and the construction of curated identities.

Goffman's dramaturgical theory (1959) and Baumeister's self-presentation theory (SPT; 1982) are two additional theoretical frameworks that are important for understanding the online ideal self. Goffman (1959) poses that social interaction is a performance where individuals manage impressions by presenting curated personas on a 'front stage' (public) and concealing less aspirational aspects to a 'backstage' (private). This metaphor is particularly relevant in understanding how individuals on social media perform an ideal self while simultaneously concealing aspects that may undermine it. Baumeister (1982) adds that these performances are motivated by a desire for approval or to maintain self-esteem rather than authentic self-expression. Together, these theories emphasise that identity around the ideal self is shaped by social context and audience. Online platforms act as digital 'stages' where people carefully curate content to align with their ideal selves and present versions of themselves that help them gain approval from others in order to boost their self-esteem (Meeus et al., 2019).

#### *4. The Online Environment*

Online platforms offer distinct opportunities for presenting an idealised version of oneself. Anonymisation, asynchronicity, content permanence and platform publicness are all common platform design features that influence how individuals portray the ideal self online. Digital platforms allow users to choose carefully curated images and avoid content that portrays an undesirable version of themselves. LinkedIn is a platform designed for professional interaction where users can showcase their skills and highlight career-related achievements. Although there is a need for users to present a version of themselves that is close to the actual self, they are still able to curate an ideal version by presenting a polished, aspirational version of themselves that aligns with their career goals.

Alternatively, social media platforms like Instagram encourage users to curate idealised versions of themselves through carefully selected images, filters and captions. Instagram is designed as a platform for visual storytelling in the form of pictures and videos, and public metrics like likes and comments are central in encouraging users to present the best version of themselves. Chua and Chang (2016) explored how adolescent girls use Instagram to construct and display an idealised version of themselves through carefully curated selfies. It revealed that Instagram fosters a cycle of self-presentation where the ideal self is validated through likes and comments.

Dating platforms enable users to curate idealised versions of themselves through selective photos, bios and prompts. In particular, platform design features such as swiping mechanisms and limited profile space encourage quick judgements prompting users to present their ideal selves in order to maximise matches. However, these same design features impact users' authenticity as they may

prioritise certain features (e.g. attractiveness) over an honest representation of themselves. A study by Zhang et al. (2025) found that young adults on dating platforms selected photos and crafted narratives that emphasised desirable personality traits and often traits they aspired to but did not possess. There is a need for users to find a balance between appearing desirable to potential partners while maintaining a level of reality to prepare for possible in-person meetings.

### *5. Psychological and Social Motivations*

Self-enhancement, a psychological motivation, refers to an individual's desire to present themselves in a desirable light (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). Online environments enable users to present themselves in a way that showcases the positive and ideal aspects of their life, appearance or achievements. Another psychological motivator relating to the ideal self is social validation. Online features, such as likes, comments, and followers, serve as immediate feedback loops that reinforce users' presentation of the ideal self. A study by Stsiampkouskaya et al. (2021) demonstrated that social media feedback reinforced the ideal self by encouraging users to post content they believed would emotionally engage their audience and receive validation. These digital affirmations offer a sense of belonging and approval, which in turn reinforces this presentation of the ideal self.

Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) offers additional insight into helping understand motivations to present an ideal version of the self in an online context. This theory poses that individuals present themselves online in a way that aligns with specific in-groups or aspirational communities. Through online means, users can present themselves in a way that adopts the norms of these groups which in turn strengthens their association with these groups and fosters a stronger sense of identity. Research by Bates et al. (2020) demonstrates how LGBTQ+ adolescents utilise social media to connect with affirming communities and selectively present ideal aspects of themselves. The presentation of the ideal self in an online context enables users to experiment with their identity more freely than they can in an offline context.

### *6. Impact of the Ideal Self Online*

The construction of the ideal self on digital platforms has both positive and negative outcomes. Positive outcomes associated with presenting an idealised version of the self online include increased confidence and support identity exploration. This is particularly true for adolescents and members of marginalised groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community, who may use digital spaces to affirm identity in ways that feel safer, acceptable and accessible than offline environments. Research by Noon et al. (2024) revealed that presenting an ideal version of the self online, when positive and authentic, can enhance self-acceptance and support sexual identity development among sexual minority youth.

However, there are significant adverse outcomes associated with maintaining an idealised persona online. Presenting an idealised version of oneself online can lead to persistent self-discrepancy – the gap between the actual self and the online ideal – which is associated with psychological distress, including anxiety and low self-esteem (Schlechter et al., 2022). Maintaining this idealised persona is associated with inauthenticity fatigue and performance pressure as the sustained effort to appear 'ideal' becomes mentally and emotionally exhausting. Research suggests that engagement in idealised self-presentations on Instagram through photo manipulation may contribute to feelings of inauthenticity and depressive symptoms (Lamp et al., 2019). Therefore, the ideal self online may impact on well-being especially when striving to meet an ideal version of the self that is significantly different from the actual self.

## *7. Cultural and Developmental Contexts for the Ideal Self*

Cultural and developmental contexts influence how individuals present themselves online. Technology provides constant opportunities for self-curation, making cultural norms more visible and influential. Cultural and group norms heavily influence what is considered 'ideal' – whether that is beauty, success, or social connectedness – and these ideals are often reinforced through algorithmic trends and global visibility. Western, individualistic cultures may encourage self-promotion and personal achievement, whereas collectivist cultures may promote self-presentations that align with social harmony or familial pride.

Developmentally, adolescents are particularly susceptible to curating their ideal selves online. Adolescents, as they form and experiment with their identity, are more likely to curate aspirational versions of themselves, which are often influenced by peer approval and social media trends (Yau & Reich, 2019). Research by Bell (2019) showed that adolescents engage with image sharing on social media to explore and present socially and physically attractive versions of themselves, aligning with their evolving sense of identity and ideal self. Visible feedback and peer approval played an important role in reinforcing the presentation of the ideal self.

Gender dynamics online also play an important role in ideal self curation. Women often face pressures to conform to beauty standards and emotional expressiveness, while men may present themselves as successful or humorous (Paddock & Bell, 2024). For gender-diverse individuals, the digital space can be both liberating and challenging. There may be pressure to conform to dominant aesthetic trends, lack of platform inclusivity and threat of online harassment. However, many find empowerment in online communities that often affirm diverse gender identities (Austin et al., 2020). Ultimately, the digital landscape both constrains and empowers, sharing how individuals across cultures, ages and gender identities negotiate and perform their ideal selves.

## *8. Considerations for Future Research*

As digital technologies continue to evolve, new questions emerge around the construction and presentation of the ideal self in an online context. Developments such as virtual influencers (i.e. computer-generated characters designed to mimic real-life social media influencers), AI-generated avatars and customisable digital personas blur the lines between authentic and artificial self-presentation. This raises questions about identity development and exploration, as well as the potential psychological impact.

Constant technological advancements require further investigation into how users navigate these quickly evolving digital environments, particularly in the context of the ideal self, identity and self-presentation. Current psychological research often lags behind leaving significant gaps in our understanding of the role of different types of technology in identity exploration and formation, including the ideal self. Future studies must address not only individual behaviour in relation to these technologies but also platform design and digital literacy. Research needs to evolve and adapt to explore how these constantly changing technologies can support, rather than harm, identity development in the digital age.

## *9. Conclusion*

Digital platforms are deeply embedded in everyday life, and so the construction of the ideal self in these contexts is an important concept for understanding identity development and psychological

wellbeing. Differing from offline contexts, online environments offer unique opportunities for users to present a version of themselves that shapes how one is seen by others. The ideal self online operates as a psychological construct and a performative behaviour. Drawing on key theoretical frameworks, this chapter demonstrates how the ideal self operates in a digital age influenced by platform-specific design features and how psychological and social motivations influence the process of presenting an ideal self in these contexts. While curating an ideal self online can foster exploration and confidence, particularly for marginalised groups, it also creates challenges such as self-discrepancy, performance fatigue and social comparison. Furthermore, as technology develops, the boundaries between authenticity and aspiration may become increasingly complex, and so understanding these dynamics is important for promoting safe digital environments and positive identity development. The ideal self online is not just a reflection of who individuals want to be; it is both a performance and a product of the digital systems and cultures that shape who they think they should be.

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