

A Qualitative Study Analysis of How and Why People Use Instagram for Online Impression Management

Analyzing the tools, techniques and motivations of Instagram users while engaging in online impression management via Instagram

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Abstract

Impression management is a sum of conscious and subconscious activities which is aimed at creating a certain impression on the viewers.(Goffman, 1959) When an individual engages in impression management in real life, the audience has an opportunity to assess whether or not the person's performance matches with their 'perceived reality'. However in the case of virtual online networks the audience do not necessarily have the opportunity to personally verify the 'authenticity' of the content that someone publishes on Social Networking Sites (SNS') such as Instagram. Thus, 'the publishers of content' on SNS' such as Instagram have a great deal of 'creative control' over how they portray themselves' on and through these platforms. (Manago, et. al, 2005) , (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016) This study tries to analyse how Instagram users use the platform for impression management and what are the various motives for choosing Instagram in particular for impression management

Keywords- Instagram, Impression Management, Online Impression Management

Introduction

Impression management refers to the collective of conscious and subconscious efforts taken by individuals in order to create a 'desirable impression' on the audience that they are interacting with (Goffman, 1959). Erving Goffman in his work 'The Presentation of self in everyday life' provided a comprehensive analysis of impression management processes undertaken by people in their daily lives and during their interactions with other individuals or groups of individuals. According to Goffman, impression management includes both conscious and subconscious steps taken by individuals to create a 'desired impression' on the particular audience that he or she is interacting with at that particular moment

In this study we will use the observations made by Goffman and Bandura on impression management and social interaction to explain why people engage in impression management over Social Networking Sites such as Instagram, how impression management occurs on Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Instagram and why people use Instagram in particular for impression management.

Literature Review

Instagram and Self Presentation - Innovations in technology bring changes to the society which consumes them. The launch of the Instagram app in the early 2010s coincided with the spread of fast internet services, and availability of cheaper smartphones. This is an important factor to consider because, unlike Facebook or Twitter, Instagram was launched solely as a mobile application, targeting the mobile phone using - demographic (initially the app was launched in Apple's iOS and later in the android OS). Thus, availability of cheap smartphones and faster internet services were key factors which contributed to the rise in popularity of Instagram. Rui and Stefanone (2013), argue that the spread of faster internet service and the popularity of smartphones

has made Social media sites such as Instagram as “novel venues for self-disclosure, self-presentation, and impression management.” Wagner (2015), has noted that Instagram has had a remarkable rise in popularity since its launch and currently is the fourth most popular social media platform only behind Whatsapp, YouTube and Facebook. The fact that hundreds of millions have opted to sign up for a particular social media platform strongly suggests that the platform has provided them with certain enticing features.’ This study aims to find how and why people opt to use Instagram for online self - presentation and what are the tools/options provided by the platform that appeals the most to them in this regard.

Selective self-presentation & impression management - Erving Goffman in his 1959 work, ‘The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life’ talks about how individuals engage in ‘selective self-presentation’ during social interaction in order to create a socially acceptable, and ‘desirable’ ‘fronts’ which the individual ‘presents’ in front of others in order to conform to the social norms. This effort to influence how one is perceived by others is called by Goffman as ‘impression management’ - which refers to any conscious or subconscious effort by an individual to influence how the audience will view her/him. In other words, one’s self-presentation is a continuous ‘performance’/process which may contain a multitude of presentation strategies (which are in accordance with the audiences, goals, context etc), through which the individual ‘intends’ to influence the audience.(Goffman, E. (1959)A ‘performance’ according to Goffman are ‘controlled actions that an individual does to persuade others perceptions of him or herself’ (Goffman, 1959). Goffman also talks about the concepts of ‘sincere’ and ‘contrived acting’ while behaving in a social setting. Sincere acting occurs in the belief of the role that one plays, or one believes that their performance is a true extent of their personality, while contrived acting is knowing well that they are presenting themselves to meet the needs of the situation or to in order to gain a means to reach an end. He also introduces the concepts of ‘performance’, ‘impression management’, ‘out of character communication’, etc. According to Goffman, people prefer ‘conformity’. Conforming to social norms are seen as ‘routes for social acceptance’. The ‘fronts’ as per Goffman are ‘masks’ that the individuals did so as to gain the acceptance of the peers. The elements constituting ‘fronts’ include:-‘Setting’: refers to the location of the performance. For example, the frame of a photograph. And ‘Personal Front’ which refers to the stimuli provided by the appearance and manner of the performer. For example, the body language shown by the subject of a photograph. In his work, Goffman demonstrates how we use different ‘narratological’ and ‘symbolic mechanisms’ to shape the manner in which we are perceived and perceive others - which we will look into detail later while discussing ‘performativity’ in online spaces. Goffman’s and much of the related literature were developed during the pre-internet age, therefore we would also need literature which describes self-presentation through online media.According to Lauren Reichart Smith & Jimmy Sanderson, self-presentation through online platforms gives the audience almost absolute control over how they present themselves to the audience. While interacting solely via social media, there is a distinct possibility that the audience doesn’t get the chance to personally or physically verify whether or not what they see online are in fact a hundred percent really what they are shown to be. Thus, people have more control over how they want to present themselves and this opens up avenues of ‘virtual impression management’. (Lauren Reichart Smith & Jimmy Sanderson (2015)As stated earlier, the online platforms give the users much more control over how he/she can present themselves to the others. This focus on self-presentation could be in search of gratification and vicarious pleasures which are received through validation. This sense of validation could be attributed to selective retention of ideas, selective perception regarding the existing status quos, and confirmation bias which influences selective perception, and retention. This also helps to boost one’s sense of narcissism, by engaging in online self-indulgence. This is achieved by creating a hyper-real persona/profile. (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016)

Selective- self presentation on/via SNS’ - In their 2008 study titled “Self-Presentation and Gender on Myspace”, Adriana M.Manago,MichaelB.Graham, Patricia M.Greenfield and Goldie Salimkhan

explains this kind of selective self-presentation, and what could be the reason for undertaking such care in curating one's image. (Manago, A. M., Graham, M. B., Greenfield, P. M., & Salimkhan, G. (2008).

The Instagram user spends considerable time and effort choosing the correct picture, set the correct filter to achieve desired lighting, shade, choosing the correct caption, etc. This could be attributed to the need for social acceptance, and validation. (Lauren Reichart Smith & Jimmy Sanderson (2015) Since the majority of Instagram users belong to the tech-savvy, on the move, millennial, and generation z (or post millennial) aged <35, this tendency could be attributed to peer pressure from fellow social media users. Thus the need for validation could be a key influencer in creating perfect portrayals of one's self. (Wagner 2015) One could observe that Instagram, as an image-centric platform, gives more control on self-presentation than ever before. This aspect of Instagram has also brought much criticism about the "authenticity" of the images which are seen in the platform. The knowledge that the images that we see could very well be manipulated, or in the least slightly altered could make one wonder if anything that is seen online is believable. (Lauren Reichart Smith & Jimmy Sanderson (2015)

Uses and Gratification theory

According to: Sheldon and Bryant, who analysed the Uses and Gratifications theory to explain why individuals want to use social media sites such as Instagram which could include diversion (escape from problems; emotional release), personal-relationship (social utility of information in conversation; substitute of the media for companionship), personal identity (value-reinforcement; self-understanding) &, surveillance

Appearance-schema

Hazel R Markus, in her 1977 work 'Self-Schemata and processing information about the self' talks about the concept of 'appearance schema' which defines to be "...the cognitive generalizations about the self, derived from past experience, that organize and guide the processing of self-related information contained in an individual's social experience". (Markus, 1977) Individuals who are concerned about their appearance and consider it to be an important aspect about their life are considered as schematic, whereas those who do not consider appearance that important are considered as a-schematic for body image. (Markus et al., 1987) According to Cash and Labarge (1996) the appearance of schematic individuals would be much more invested in curating their looks to be constantly updated with the new standards of times. This is essential for them as it influences their sense of self-worth and perception about themselves. "... (Appearance-schematic people) would encode, process, and react to appearance-relevant stimuli" (Cash & Labarge, 1996)." The 'appearance relevant stimuli' could include the images, visuals or any sort of cues received through social interaction such as films, advertisements, social-media generated content etc.

Performativity in online spaces

As stated earlier, social media spaces are interactive environments in which people connect with other people. These spaces are also highly selective in what they show the users.

This is achieved by search algorithms created on the basis of factors 'likes' and 'search-history' of the individual users. This creates a subjective experience to the user where they are actually witnessing what they want to see, and could remain insular towards other perspectives. Thus boosting one's existing selective perception regarding existing status quos, values, as well as beauty standards. While using the social media spaces the users also get exposed to pictures which are posted by the people they 'follow' on Instagram, and the nature of these images could play a key role in shaping an individual's own opinion regarding posting what kind of an image, in what sort of a manner could gain them more 'likes', or 'comments', or appreciation from the peers. Thus these online spaces are also sites for 'performativity'. According to J.L. Austin, performativity refers to the

performance of a narrative. The narrative here being the idyllic depictions of lives of various individuals.

Ute Berns, in her work 'The Living Handbook of Narratology' cites – "performativity refers to the imitation or illusion of a performance." According to her, performativity refers to a fully embodied, live enactment in front of a real-world, context, or stage. The audience, co-present with the presenters or actors can experience this performance visually and acoustically (as in most theatrical, musical, and real-world performances). Even though Berns's study deals primarily with drama, theatre, literature, and live performances, we could still use here inferences to grasp an understanding about performativity in online spaces. According to Berns, the impact that the performance could have on the audience is influenced by the medium that is used. Thus audio-visual cues could have much more of an impact on the audience than purely verbal cues. The tendency of the peers to post idyllic-images about aspects of their life could have an influence on the users wanting to project the best versions regarding their life online as well. It might be this fear of not wanting to look less interesting, or not just to conform to the standards of the time that triggers this kind of behavior.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study aimed at identifying the common themes when it comes to people's Instagram usage. The method adopted for data collection is the telephonic interviews. A questionnaire on how and why the Instagram users use the platform was used to gain insight on how people use the app and why they use the app. The sample size for the particular study was 20. All the respondents of the study have been using the app for at least 3-4 years old and were chosen using purposive sampling. The purposive sampling method was used to identify and choose respondents who have been using Instagram for a while, and thus been able to witness the evolution of the app and its feature. Since the respondents have been using the app over a period of time, their experience and usage of the app must have also evolved along with the evolution of the app. The evolution of the app and its usage would provide us insights which would be helpful for this study.

Research question

1. How the respondents use feature of Instagram for impression management?
2. Why respondents used Instagram for expression management

Objectives of the study

1. Find out the reasons why people use Instagram.
2. Find out how they use the feature of the application

These two main objectives would shed light on -details about the social experience on the app and the motives for choosing to use the app for impression management

Theoretical framework

This study uses Erving Goffman's Theory of Impression Management at its core. Impression management is a sum of conscious and subconscious activities which is aimed at creating a certain impression on the viewers. When an individual engages in impression management in real life, the audience has an opportunity to assess whether or not the person's performance matches with their 'perceived reality'. However in the case of virtual online networks the audience do not necessarily have the opportunity to personally verify the 'authenticity' of the content that someone publishes on Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Instagram. Thus, 'the publishers of content' on SNS such

as Instagram have a great deal of 'creative control' over how they portray themselves' on and through these platforms. This study tries to analyse how Instagram users use the platform for impression management and what are the various motives for choosing Instagram in particular for impression management. (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016) This is combined with literature on appearance schema, performativity in online spaces, social learning theory, uses and gratification theory, self esteem, and hyper reality were also used to understand people's choice to use the app, use of its features and experience while using the app. The respondents study consists of 10 male and 10 female respondents who have been using the app at least for one year. This was purposely done so as to gain a sampling population who have witnessed the evolution of the app and whose interaction with the app has evolved with it. The respondents were contacted via telephone interviews because of the current pandemic situation and were asked open ended question about why they were using Instagram, their experiences of the app, how they use the app, their observation changes in the features of Instagram and their personal use of the app. Their responses were recorded and a concise report of their responses was prepared. This along with their background information they wanted to disclose, were combined to build a profile report of that respondent. This profile was used to search for any repeating patterns in the usage of the features of app for impression management and motivations behind the use of app for impression management. These inputs were analyzed using the literature which analyzed the mentioned ahead and we try to find the most visible patterns in terms of individual usage, social experience, and motivation for using the app for impression management.

Research design

The primary data is to be collected from the input received from the respondents about their use of the feature of Instagram. The social experience of the respondents while on the app will also be analyzed for understanding the motivation for using this application. The secondary data available for this study include the existing literature covering topics on Instagram for impression management. Uses and gratification theory, appearance schema and the observation on narcissism, and self esteem also will be included for analyzing the study.

- **Variables** - Any research would involve independent and dependent variables. Independent variables are the people's desire for impression management. The dependent variables are the individual's use of social experience on Instagram. Impression management for dramatic realization of one's ideal self (Goffman, 1959) is a central theme of Erving Goffman's impression management theory. In other words, impression management is a tool by which people satisfy their desire to project themselves in an idealized manner. Thus the respondent's desire for impression management is chosen to be the independent variable whose variations influence the individual's use of features of the app, the individual's social experiences on the app and their motivation for using the app. The respondent's usage of Instagram is shaped by their desire for impression management. Thus we have identified it to be the dependent variable of the study (Papacharissi et al, 2011)

- **Problem statement**

This study aims to analyze how Instagram users use the app for impression management and why they use the app for impression management by using, in depth interviews with Instagram users who have been using the app over a period of time so as to gain inputs from them regarding the evolution of the app, the evolution of their activity on the app, and the evolution of their motivations behind using the app.

- **Context of the study**

This study took place between October 2020 and April 2021. This study occurred in the backdrop of the covid 19 pandemic. This has influenced the methodology adopted for data collection. The precise issue, which we would be focusing on would be why people use Instagram for impression management and the motivations for choosing Instagram for impression management.

- **Scope or relevance of the study**

According to Hootsuite.com stats of 2021, Instagram is the fourth most used mobile application, behind Whatsapp, YouTube, and Facebook. This app has also seen a 20 percentage rise in users in India in the year 2020 (according to Hootsuite (2021)). Thus we could observe that Instagram is a highly popular social network service, especially among the <35 demographic, which mainly consists of millennial and post millennial (hootsuite ,2021) (Duggan et.al, 2015) . This study tries to analyze how and why people use Instagram for impression management. So we could use their insights for analyzing the app's popularity in the future studies.

Objectives of the study -Find out the reasons why people use Instagram.and find out how they use the features of the application This would shed light on - details about the social experience on the app and the motives for choosing to use the app for impression management.

Sample Selection - A sample audience size of 20, consisting of 10 male and 10 female respondents from Kerala were chosen for this study. The respondents were purposively chosen to be individuals who have been using the app for at least 3 years. This was done so as to gain insights from an audience who have been using Instagram over a period of time. Since they have been using the platform for a while, these respondents would have noticed the evolution of the features of Instagram, and could also give us an insight into their interaction with the platform

- **Data Collection Method**

- The method for data collection adopted by this study would be in depth interviews carried out with the 20 respondents. Due to the constraints placed by the Covid 19 pandemic, the data collection was done via telephone calls. The respondents were asked open ended questions regarding their Instagram use. Instagram usage is a personal process (influenced by external factors). The purpose of Instagram usage, and intensity/duration of engagement in Instagram activity could vary from person to person. This study uses a qualitative approach to analyse the topic of discussion which is – “how and why people use their Instagram feed and stories for Impression management amongst their peers?”The qualitative approach would help us to analyse the underlying themes, trends, related to the topic and also reveal the behaviour and perception of the target audience with reference to a particular topic. Since the data collected through qualitative methodology is non numeric, it allows us to explore how the research sample population members made certain decisions and help explore the context in which these decisions were made. Qualitative research helps to break down complex issues to simpler inferences which could be easily understood by all. Qualitative methods are used to answer questions about the experience, meaning and perspective most often from the standpoint of the participant. In depth interviews could help to understand how each individual who participates in the study uses the platform, and thus help gather different perceptions/viewpoints. Having a diverse crowd in terms of Instagram usage would also prove helpful to create an accurate account of how Instagram uses influences, various sections of our society and also to what extent this influence would be.The participants first take part in an in-depth personal interview in which they describe in detail the tools, techniques and motivations involved in the process of Instagram usage.

1. When did you started using Instagram – (year)
2. What were the compelling reason/s for starting to use Instagram?
3. Is the user still using the same account that they first created on Instagram or have they deleted or started a new account?
4. What kind of account does the user have? (Public or Private?) ?
5. Did the user use (or still use) any other social media platform before using Instagram?
6. What is their Instagram user ID and reason for choosing it?
7. How do you describe your account? (A blog? A resume? An album? Etc.)
8. How much they use Instagram (average daily usage)
9. For what purposes do they use instagram/ Which Instagram activities appeal to them the most?
10. Is peer connectivity a crucial persuasive factor when choosing to use the platform?
11. Is online impression management among the audience/followers important for the user?
12. What would someone see in your account – describe the nature of contents in your account (What do you post & why?)
13. If you post images/videos etc. – what kind of device do you use to capture it?
14. Does the user's account reflect their taste or their aesthetics or does it help project/create the desired impression on the audience?
15. Which creative control option do they use the most? (Emojis, stories, filters, reels, reposts, geo tags, hash tags, mentions, IG TV, etc.)
16. Does these options/these tools which helps/facilitates in altering/filtering helps in creating idealised versions/depictions of themselves- online
17. Does the user alter/filter the content that they post online?
18. Are they aware of the possibility of altering/filtering/manipulation of the contents that they consume/witness/see in their Instagram Feed
19. Does consuming these idealised/filtered content affect the user? If so, does it happen in a positive or negative manner?
20. How has the user's Instagram activity evolved over time?

● Method for data Analysis

The respondents were contacted via phone calls and these calls were recorded with the permission of the respondents and were deciphered. The responses were then used to create a profile of the respondent which was used to analyse their responses using the literature which were mentioned before and we try to find the most visible patterns in terms of individual usage, social experience, and motivation for using the app for impression management.

Analysis

More number of Male respondents (70%) preferred having public accounts while more number of Female respondents (80%) preferred having private accounts. Male respondents with Public accounts cited that they wanted to create a certain impression on the general audience through what they post. A slightly higher % of respondents (55%) preferred having a private account than a public account (45%). Privacy, connectivity with an audience of your own choice were cited as the main reasons by the female respondents for preferring to use a Private account. Majority of both Male (70%) and Female respondents (80%) preferred to incorporate their name into their User ID. 16/20 respondents reported that introduction of 'free internet networks by JIO' – 'played a crucial role in starting the use of Instagram' - Internet & social media usage became a daily habit post introduction of the 'Jio network'. 18/20 respondents reported that their Facebook activity has reduced their Facebook activity (that the time they spend less time on the platform) - all female respondents included. All female respondents reported that - 'they felt more at ease/comfortable' using Instagram than Facebook because Instagram provided better 'privacy' than Facebook. All

respondents reported that they found Instagram to be a better platform for connecting with their peers than Facebook and that the layout/design & user interface of Instagram was better than that of Facebook. While the female respondents had unanimously reported that they preferred Instagram over other social media websites, about 80% of male respondents reported that they still used their accounts in other Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat etc. This inference is in line with the observation made by Kedzior, Douglas and Schroeder in their study, ^{The} selfie phenomenon – consumer identities in the social media marketplace., (2016) and by Amanda Lenhart who noted that individuals in the 18-35 demographic are more likely to use multiple social media platforms to satisfy their different needs. (Lenhart, 2015) Male respondents posted more full sized portraits, landscapes and traveling images. They reported that Instagram gave them an opportunity to ‘showcase’ their lifestyle, their tastes, their skills, creativity, their productions (arts, videos, etc), the things/objects they use (For eg, male respondents posted pictures of their motorcycles frequently), the environments in which they usually are in (For eg, travelling, or being in a fancy place etc). This allowed them to receive appraisal, and validation from their audience and this appraisal and validation were important to them. This was one of the major reasons Why use Instagram for impression management? Female respondents posted more selfies, group pictures, and social occasions than their male counterparts. The most common response from the female respondents regarding describing their account was that - ‘it was an album of their best moments shared with their closest social circle who also constitute their Instagram audience’. 80% of the female respondents used a private account and all the respondents unanimously reported that Instagram was their ‘go to choice app for socializing, peer connectivity, validation, and vicarious consumption of the explorer feed content.’ They found Instagram to be the perfect platform for ensuring privacy, finding similar minded people, and for self-expression while ensuring privacy .90% of both the male and female respondents reported that they felt that - ‘that Instagram was the best option for Impression management’. This inference is in line with the studies by Duggan et.al, 2015 who stated that the majority of the Instagram users belonged to the 18-29 demographic. Thus, Instagram provided a great opportunity for interaction with the peer group, gaining their attention, appraisal and validation. The respondents felt that Instagram provided them with the best possible platform for impression management because the app provided them with so many features to ensure control over how they wanted to project themselves, what they want to share with the audience, and whom they want to share it with. This along with validation and appraisal from their peers was the most attractive option for the respondents. Instagram users also have great control over ‘what kind of content they want to see or not’. The nature of content that the audience views on their individual ‘feeds’, depends entirely on their individual choices. The nature of content that the user is based on -he people whom they ‘follow’, the contents which they interact the most with (includes likes, or shares, or comments or even spending more screen time over that particular post rather than scrolling down from it). Sheldon, P., & Bryant, K. (2016). Last, but not the least - connectivity with peers is an important factor behind the users choosing to use Instagram. According to Hootsuite.com, as of October 2020, about 69.8% of Instagram users belonged to the <35 demographic. Another factor which makes Instagram more popular among Millennial and Gen Z as reported by the respondents of this study was the ‘aesthetically pleasing layout, and user friendly interface’ of the platform when compared to Facebook which the respondents reported to be ‘cluttered and the contents were not arranged in an aesthetically pleasing manner’ This information is consistent with the reports published by Pew Research Centre in 2019, and Business Insider in 2021 which reported that the millennial and post millennial, also known as Gen Z’s were the most likely to own a mobile phone, access internet via the mobile phone, and also exclusively access internet using their mobile phones. According to the Business Insider report of 2021, Instagram was the most frequently checked social media platform just ahead of YouTube. (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016) (Duggan M, 2015) (Kediri, Richard & Allen, Douglas & Schroeder, Jonathan. (2016). Thus, according to the respondents the most attractive features which motivated them for using it for Impression Management were that it-

- a) Has better aesthetical layout,
- b) Is seen to be more user friendly,
- c) Allows more peer interactions, validation and connectivity,
- d) Offers control over choosing who gets to see the contents that the user posts,
- e) Provides diverse options when it comes to the presentation of the content, and also
- f) Offers much more accurate suggestions (regarding the taste of the user - what they want to come across in their explorer page).
- g) Is more visual centric - and requires less effort to process or consume

Thus, to conclude, the popularity of Instagram could be mainly attributed to its offer to the users of significant 'control' over -

- a) Choosing the size of audience,
- b) Deciding what they want to share or not with their audience and,
- c) The nature of content that the user want to see in their 'explore' section
- d) The aesthetics of the content that they want to upload (for their audience to see)
- e) Ensuring peer interaction and validation

Research Limitations

Due to the constraints brought by the Covid 19 Pandemic, the research methodology had to be adjusted accordingly. Initially, the in depth interview sessions were planned to be conducted in a face to face manner but, due to the constraints brought by the pandemic, the method was changed to telephone interviews. This, also changed the approach to the studies, by adopting a combination of telephonic interviews and content analysis for analysing primary data (i.e, the inputs from the respondents, and analysing their individual Instagram accounts) and using the secondary data consisting of existing literature on impression management and related relevant topics which influenced it. The main limitation of this study is that this study would have been effective if the sample size and the time period for analysis of the phenomena being analysed was enlarged. A bigger sample size could have provided more insights about the research questions.

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