PERFORMING THE SELF IN DIGITAL INDIA: NEGOTIATING IDENTITY, AUDIENCE, AND IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

The intensification of integration between social media and people's lives results in profound changes in identity performance and impression management within the contemporary society. While there is some scientific literature dedicated to exploring digital identity and online communications, comparatively little attention has been paid to these phenomena from the viewpoint of classical sociological theories. Therefore, in the present paper, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach will be applied to identify the patterns of impression management and identity performance by Indian social media users. To achieve the research objectives, a qualitative secondary-data analysis method will be used relying on the content analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, sociological theory, and digital-media reports. Data will be taken from DataReportal's Digital 2024: India, which estimates that, in 2024, there are approximately 462 million social media users and 362.9 million Instagram users in India. The study also draws information from scholarly publications discussing identity construction, digital self-presentation, online audience management, and impression management. Applying Goffman's terms of front stage, back stage, audience segregation, and impression management, this research examines the strategies adopted by social media users to perform desired online identities. The fact that family, peer, and professional audiences overlap on social media leads to a blurring of lines between public and private identities and creates novel conditions for social interaction and identity performance. With the help of dramaturgical theory adapted to the Indian digital reality, this article demonstrates that classical sociological theories can be still relevant in interpreting contemporary online behaviours' and phenomena.

Keywords: dramaturgical theory, social media, digital identity, impression management, India.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of modern digital communication technologies has led to significant transformations in the ways social interaction occurs nowadays. Contemporary social platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, X (formerly known as Twitter), and LinkedIn have become an integral part of everyday life of millions of people. Unlike conventional means of communication, social media give an opportunity for people to produce continuous representations of themselves and display them to various audiences. Therefore, social networks become not just channels for communication but complex social environments where identity is negotiated and performed.

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The importance of social media for India cannot be underestimated. In the past decades, India experienced a fast digitalization process, Internet became widely available, and smartphones started being used regularly. Today in India there are approximately 462 million social media users and 751.5 million internet users[319]. Particularly Instagram attracted approximately 362.9 million users, demonstrating its popularity in this country.

The growing prominence of social media in everyday life and communication generates many questions concerning the processes of constructing online identities. On social media people may express themselves freely, but at the same time, they have the ability to present only the most favorable representation of themselves[320]. The users can choose the photos they want to post, edit the personal information they disclose to the audience, regulate what kind of information they are looking for, etc. Thus, these actions make people wonder whether such a level of control makes the digital identity authentic or not.

Among numerous approaches to identity construction and performance, the dramaturgical model by Erving Goffman should be singled out. Goffman's work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) explains why he perceives social interaction as the performance of actors who try to create the desired impressions among their audiences[321]. Using such concepts as front stage, back stage, audience segregation, and impression management, Goffman demonstrates how people represent themselves and interact in different settings. Despite the fact that dramaturgical theory has been developed for analyzing face-to-face interactions, it is very relevant when studying people's activities in digital spaces.

First, dramaturgical perspective can be easily extended to social networks due to their similarity to theatres. User profiles, photographs, videos, stories, posts, comments, and conversations represent symbolic artifacts through which people create impressions in virtual environments. Secondly, the conditions of performance have changed dramatically due to the persistency, accessibility, and visibility of the content created on digital platforms. People can watch the performances recorded long ago as well as constantly observe the changes in profiles' content.

There are many scholarly publications that focus on self-presentation and interaction on social networks. Some researchers discuss the strategies of creating and sustaining digital identity, others pay attention to the issue of audience management, while some authors highlight influencers' culture, online reputation formation, or any

[319] Simon Kemp, "Digital 2024: India", in *Data Reportal*, February 21, 2024, Available at: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-india, Accessed on September 10, 2026.

[320] See:

1. Danah Boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014;

2. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, New York, Basic Books, 2011.

[321] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959.

other aspect of digital interaction. The problem is that these studies mostly rely on the data collected in Western countries. Meanwhile, the process of social interaction in the digital space is unique even if the principles behind it are the same for every person. Therefore, there is a lack of literature on how dramaturgy operates in the Indian context.

Considering the fact that social media is becoming increasingly important in India, it is relevant to explore how people use it and how their performances take place. The social context in India is quite specific since people perform before the audience formed by their family members, friends, teachers, bosses, peers, and others. In this way, social media becomes an environment for negotiating various identities. Besides, the blurring of the boundaries between front and back stages can be another interesting topic to discuss within the scope of this research.

Thus, the present paper examines how users perform on Indian social media with the help of dramaturgical theory and data provided by peer-reviewed literature and statistical reports. Applying classical sociological ideas to the process of digital communication and identity construction, the author tries to demonstrate the applicability of classical sociological theories in explaining contemporary digital phenomena.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Social media and social interaction

The development of social networks has had a significant impact on social interaction since they are not only communication mediums but also unique social spaces. Social media allows people to consume and produce content actively. Furthermore, social networks are considered powerful environments for social relations construction[322].

One of the most popular topics related to social media is self-presentation. People use online platforms as means of constructing their identities. Social networks give users a great deal of freedom for expressing themselves, communicating with peers, sharing photos and videos, discussing interesting topics, and creating impressions[323]. It can be stated that social media is a place where people can show only the best sides of themselves.

Besides, online communication is viewed as one of the main causes of people's tendency towards impression management. In the modern digitalized society,

[322] See:
1. Danah Boyd, *op. cit.*;
2. José Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

[323] Nicole B. Ellison, Rebecca Heino and Jennifer Gibbs, "Managing Impressions Online: Self-Presentation Processes in the Online Dating Environment", in *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2), 2006, pp. 415–441.

individuals believe that others lead a better life judging from their online content, so they start presenting themselves in the desired way[324]. Social media can be viewed as spaces where people can develop and nurture various identities.

2.2. Self-presentation on social networks

Self-presentation is one of the central concepts used in sociological research to understand how online interaction occurs. This term refers to all the efforts made by people to influence other people's impressions about them positively. On social networks, users can employ special techniques to achieve this aim.

For instance, some scholars believe that the possibilities that people have to create and nurture their identities are much greater on social networks due to the specific character of such interactions[325]. Manago *et al*. found that the development of social networking sites allows people to explore their identities and present different selves on the Internet[326]. This process is facilitated by the availability of editing features on social media.

Additionally, the visual orientation of many social networks expands people's opportunities for constructing their identities[327]. The presence of photo editing features helps people create the best representations of themselves. High-quality photographs, videos, profile pictures, and captions become tools of performing certain social roles and constructing different social identities.

As the literature proves, online identities are constructed and maintained with regard to audience expectations[328]. In the process of interaction on social networks, people get continuous feedback in the form of likes, comments, shares, views, and followers. Based on their reactions, people can adapt their future behavior to the audience needs and requirements.

2.3. Impression management on social media

Impression management is a common topic discussed by scholars interested in online communication. It refers to the process during which a person attempts to create the impression he/she wants to be conveyed to the audience.

[324] Hui-Tzu Grace Chou and Nicholas Edge, "'They Are Happier and Having Better Lives than I Am': The Impact of Using Facebook on Perceptions of Others' Lives", in *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15(2), 2012, pp. 117–121.

[325] Shanyang Zhao, Sherri Grasmuck and Jason Martin, "Identity Construction on Facebook: Digital Empowerment in Anchored Relationships", in *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(5), 2008, pp. 1816–1836.

[326] Adriana M. Manago et al., "Self-Presentation and Gender on MySpace", in *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 29(6), 2008, pp. 446–458.

[327] *Ibidem*.

[328] *Ibidem*.

Researchers suggest that there are some distinctive features of impression management on social media. They include selective posting of content, photo editing, restriction or expansion of the audience, deleting of posts, etc.[329]. All these strategies aim at presenting an individual as socially desirable, attractive, intelligent, competent, etc.[330].

Unlike face-to-face interaction, social-media communication provides more opportunities for impression management since the content created on social networks can be permanently available[331]. In this way, a person always has the ability to look at his/her posts and think about the way in which he/she presented him/herself. This circumstance makes people pay more attention to the image they are building.

The process of impression management is no longer limited to social interactions since it occurs both personally and professionally[332]. There are special websites that allow professionals to maintain a positive online presence and build career-enhancing reputations. In this way, it becomes clear that impression management includes various elements from different spheres of life.

2.4. Audience segregation on social networks

Another important topic discussed by scholars studying online social interaction is audience segregation. From the dramaturgical viewpoint, individuals can maintain different social roles for different audiences. During face-to-face interaction, people can behave in one way for their parents and grandparents, in another way for their friends and neighbors, and in yet another way for their coworkers and superiors.

Social media, however, complicates the situation since individuals can be in touch with various audiences at the same time. Marwick and Boyd introduce the term 'context collapse,' implying that people use social networks to contact various audiences that were kept separated offline[333]. On social networks, individuals interact with their parents, peers, teachers, employers, and others. Such a situation forces users to adopt certain strategies to cope with overlapping audiences.

According to the literature, audience segregation is now regarded as an important element of social interaction. Since individuals tend to have multiple social roles, there is a need to maintain different audiences and perform differently in each case. This practice creates quite complicated social environments since users should keep all the audience separate.

[329] Alice E. Marwick and Danah Boyd, "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience", in *New Media & Society*, 13(1), 2011, pp. 114–133.

[330] Bernie Hogan, "The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online", in *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30(6), 2010, pp. 377–386.

[331] *Ibidem*.

[332] *Ibidem*.

[333] Alice E. Marwick and Danah Boyd, *op. cit.*

2.5. Dramaturgical theory in digital age

Dramaturgical theory by Erving Goffman remains topical to date. In his seminal book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman introduces a metaphor comparing social interaction with theatre where performers represent themselves and interact with their audiences trying to leave favorable impressions[334]. Later, some researchers tried to apply this theoretical perspective to social media interactions[335].

It is possible to say that, in many cases, dramatic performance and online identity are similar. Social-media profiles are exhibitions where performers present persistent artifact' to their online audiences[336]. However, the basic concepts of Goffman's theory can be employed when analyzing online interaction as well.

Front stage and back stage are the two most important aspects of Goffman's dramaturgical approach. Social-media profiles, posts, and videos belong to front stage where individuals perform their identities to the public audience, while back stage may include, for example, private messages, conversations in restricted groups, or anonymous accounts.

Digital environments require reconsidering the distinction between front and back stages since there is no guarantee that any piece of information will stay private[337]. The persistence, availability, and accessibility of information create conditions for blurring the line between private and public social performances.

2.6. Social media in India

India can be called one of the largest and fastest-developing digital societies. There is no doubt that in India there is the fast development of social media since today in India there are approximately 462 million social media users and 751.5 million internet users[338]. Particularly Instagram attracts approximately 362.9 million users.

There are plenty of studies related to online self-presentation, social networks, digital identity, etc., yet it seems that not enough attention is paid to these phenomena from the Indian sociological perspective. The majority of papers discussing social networks are dedicated to technology adoption, digital marketing, and political communication, yet little attention is devoted to studying social media users and the specifics of social media performance in India.

In fact, social media performance in India has several distinctive features since people in India live in specific social environments. For example, they maintain close

[334] Erving Goffman, *op. cit.*
[335] Bernie Hogan, *op. cit.*
[336] *Ibidem.*
[337] *Ibidem.*
[338] Simon Kemp, *op. cit.*

connections with their relatives, they have many expectations from their peers, teachers, employers, colleagues, and other social actors that surround them. In this way, their interaction and identity performances on social media become quite complicated.

3. RESEARCH GAP

Based on the review of literature, three gaps can be mentioned. Firstly, the majority of studies focus on the Western context, thus neglecting the issue of social media use in India, identity performance, and impression management in this particular country. Secondly, it seems that sociologists rarely refer to classical sociological theories when studying digital identity, impression management, and other aspects related to social media. Lastly, there is little empirical literature considering the recent statistical data about India's social media use.

Taking into account the outlined gaps, the present paper tries to bridge them by introducing classical sociological theory to Indian social media users. The paper examines how Indian people perform their identities, manage impressions, negotiate the audiences and cope with new challenges of digital age.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of the study is to explore the processes of identity construction and impression management among Indian social media users through the prism of dramaturgical theory developed by Erving Goffman. In the age of increased digital connectivity and widespread use of social networks, individuals continuously perform their selves to their online audiences. Therefore, there is a need for understanding how social interaction takes place in digitally mediated environments.

The research objectives are to:

1. Investigate the ways Indian social media users construct and present their digital identity on social-networking platforms.
2. Analyze the strategies employed by Indians to manage impressions on social networks.
3. Examine the applicability of Goffman's concepts of front stage and back stage in the contemporary digital context.
4. Explore how social media performance is affected by the process of audience segregation and context collapse.
5. Find out how Indian social and cultural context affects social media use and impression management strategies.
6. Discuss the applicability of the classical approach to impression management and online identity construction.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1. Research design

Since it is necessary to interpret the processes of identity construction and management on social media, secondary data analysis should be chosen as the methodology for conducting this research. It implies that the researcher will not collect primary data themselves.

5.2. Sources of data

All the information used in the analysis will come from secondary sources including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, sociological theory, research reports, and digital-media researches. Statistical data about social media and Internet use in India will be taken from recently issued digital reports (particularly, Digital 2024: India published by DataReportal[339]).

5.3. Method of data collection

For identifying the literature on the issues of interest, the databases Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate, Sage Journals, etc will be searched. The search criteria will include the following keywords: “social media”, “social network”, “digital identity”, “impression management”, “audience segregation”, “online self-presentation”, etc. Peer-reviewed papers focusing on the issues of interest will be chosen for further analysis.

5.4. Method of analysis

Content analysis will be the key method for collecting and organizing the findings. Thematic analysis of the literature will be conducted based on the concepts proposed by Goffman in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

5.5. Theoretical framework

The theoretical perspective chosen to conduct the study is dramaturgical theory proposed by Goffman[340]. This theory will provide the theoretical framework for analyzing the process of identity construction and performance on social media as well as the processes of managing impressions online.

[339] *Ibidem.*
[340] Erving Goffman, *op. cit.*

5.6. Scope and limitations

The focus of the research is on Indian social media users. Since secondary data will be used as the source of information, this paper will be based on the literature and statistical information about social media in India. Primary data collection will not be performed in the course of this research.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1. Social media as a digital front stage

According to the findings, social media serves as a stage in modern times where people act in order to establish their identities in front of different audiences. As suggested by Goffman's dramaturgy model, social media users make deliberate efforts of presenting themselves in ways that create good impressions among other users. This is achieved via social media applications such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and X (formerly known as Twitter). In its turn, the current research paper seeks to examine technological environments where ongoing performance of the self is facilitated through pictures, videos, status updates, stories, commentaries, and social interactions.

In conventional social environments, social performances happen in limited social contexts and are often limited in terms of time and location. In digital platforms, however, social performances tend to transcend direct contacts, and user-generated content can be reviewed for a long period of time. As a result, social performances in digital environments tend to gain in importance as people tend to revisit, assess, and interpret their performances throughout a long period. Therefore, the notion of impression management gains special importance as people's digital performance constitutes their identity in digital spaces.

As shown above, social media users rarely provide complete pictures of themselves. Social media users share photographs and other types of content that help them to create positive social images, such as pictures showing achievements, vacations, academic success, professional successes, fitness activities, and social life. On the contrary, personal losses, mistakes, problems, failures, or negative emotions do not usually appear in online pictures. In this regard, social performances on digital media reflect the postulate by Goffman who states that performers intentionally control the amount of information to be provided.

Moreover, today's digital social media platforms are visualized. Various options, such as photo editing, stories highlighting, and profile customization, are among the means that allow users to create specific digital images, which are carefully crafted. In other words, social media performances tend to be highly controlled as users present carefully prepared images of certain lifestyles and social identities rather than natural manifestations of their social selves.

In the Indian context, front-stage performances are expected by multiple audiences simultaneously. Namely, people have to meet expectations associated with families, peer groups, educational organizations, work places, and other social groups at once. Thus, their social performances in digital environments involve the attempt to strike a balance between personal representation and social norms.

Therefore, the hypothesis stating that digital environments increased the scope of social performances was confirmed by this research.

The paper argues that social media functions as the modern performative platform wherein identity construction emerges as the regular part of daily interactions through diverse audiences mediated via various processes.

6.2. Impression management and curated identity

One of the key conclusions made during the analysis is that social media users are actively involved in impression management practices through the curation of their digital identities. Based on the work of Goffman, people attempt to impact the formation of others' impressions by controlling information within social interactions[341]. The evolution of such process became more complex owing to the possibilities created by social media sites.

In fact, it has been revealed that people hardly share any piece of information accidentally. On the contrary, users tend to select the content they decide to distribute, edit, and organize in a particular way to communicate their desirable qualities. Photographs, captions, stories, and personal profile description are all carefully crafted in order to represent identity based on such categories as beauty, success, intellectuality, professionalism, creativity, or sociability.

Selective self-disclosure represents one of the most important elements of impression management. People choose which pieces of information to disclose about themselves and which ones to withhold from their online audience. Positive events –graduation, promotions at work, parties, holidays, or successful attempts at something – are often shared in their social media accounts. Negative experiences like failures, conflicts, disappointments, and other similar occurrences are left out of people's virtual life. This creates the idealized self-presentation that may differ greatly from real-life experience.

The increasing role of images in communication via social media only strengthens impression management practices among users. They are provided with a large number of editing tools in order to make their photographs and videos look better before sharing them. Moreover, filters, various image enhancing applications, and different customizations are used in such process.

Audience feedback mechanisms contribute significantly to identity creation. For instance, likes, comments, sharing, views, and followers' numbers are some

[341] *Ibidem.*

metrics of social acceptance and visibility. The results suggest that social media users continuously track their audiences' responses and plan future posts based on the outcomes. Posts that attract more attention are likely to be replicated in the future, whereas those that do not get enough attention are likely to be deleted or edited. Hence, the process of identity performance becomes interactive since it involves the constant influence of interactions between performers and spectators.

In the Indian socio-cultural context, the concept of impression management involves meeting a number of conflicting social expectations. Young Indians are forced to meet social expectations both from their families, peers, teachers, colleagues, and employers. This is why an online identity usually includes a balance between modern life and culture. Indian users try to build a progressive and digitized identity without violating social norms and standards that govern Indian society.

It is important to note that impression management does not refer exclusively to interpersonal interactions since social media is also used for professional purposes. Platforms like LinkedIn require users to create an image that reflects their academic background, skills, successes, and career goals. In this way, digital identities become integral to employment and career development. Therefore, the use of social media is not merely social since users interact with potential employers and customers as well.

In summary, one can conclude that impression management continues to remain the key element of social media. Even though the technological environment creates new mechanisms for creating impressions, the social phenomena revealed by Goffman have not disappeared. Modern social media users build their identities, control the flow of information, and manage their audiences in accordance with Goffman's principles.

6.3. Audience segregation, context collapse, and identity negotiation

One of the most significant problems that users of social media encounter is managing several audiences in a virtual space. Goffman noted that people tend to perform in front of specific audiences, who are often kept isolated from each other[342].

An individual may adopt different versions of their self for various audiences, presenting themselves differently to the family, friends, or work colleagues. It is possible to refer to this as audience segregation because according to Goffman, it allows maintaining separate social identities in different contexts.

According to evidence collected through observations, the rise of social media has made the segregation more complicated. Unlike in offline contexts, where audience segregation is facilitated by physical and social boundaries, social media removes these barriers bringing together audiences that would remain separated otherwise, including families, friends, classmates, teachers, employers, colleagues,

[342] *Ibidem.*

and strangers. In other words, the use of social media leads to users being placed in communicative environments with mixed audiences at once.

From this perspective, context collapse can be considered the primary consequence of social media use. According to the theory by Marwick and Boyd, it occurs when individuals are unable to perform in front of different audiences because several social contexts are combined in a single online environment[343].

Consequently, users cannot tailor their content to specific audiences and are unsure how their content will be perceived by others because each audience has its standards and expectations. For example, something considered amusing and acceptable among friends might look improper in the eyes of family members or employers.

Analysis shows that Indians struggle with context collapse due to the interplay between traditional and contemporary social influences. Individuals remain under the influence of families; at the same time, schools and colleges, places of work, and peer networks play a significant role in shaping the individual identity. In other words, individuals communicate online with people whose standards are very different, forcing them to negotiate their identities constantly.

Individuals have developed many strategies to handle this issue. Most commonly, they make use of privacy settings allowing restricting the visibility of certain content. Sometimes, people choose to manage different audiences by creating multiple accounts. Finally, selective posting of content in private groups is often used to segregate audiences.

The findings also indicate that identity negotiation has become a continuous and reflexive process. People tend to consider how their posts will be perceived amongst different audiences before posting. Language, photographs, political opinions, cultural expressions, and personal disclosures are often chosen with an eye to the expected responses of audiences. Users often avoid discussing topics that could be controversial to avoid social conflict and to protect their reputation in multiple social networks.

Having a diverse audience also increases self-monitoring and social awareness. People learn not only how they want to present themselves, but also how their performances might be understood by various audiences. This awareness results in the creation of managed digital identities that try to meet multiple expectations at the same time.

In conclusion, the study shows that social media has become an important social institution in shaping the construction of identity, interpersonal relationships and visibility in public. The implications extend beyond academic discussions and feed into broader conversations about digital culture, social interaction and the changing nature of selfhood in contemporary society.

[343] Alice E. Marwick and Danah Boyd, *op. cit.*

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