

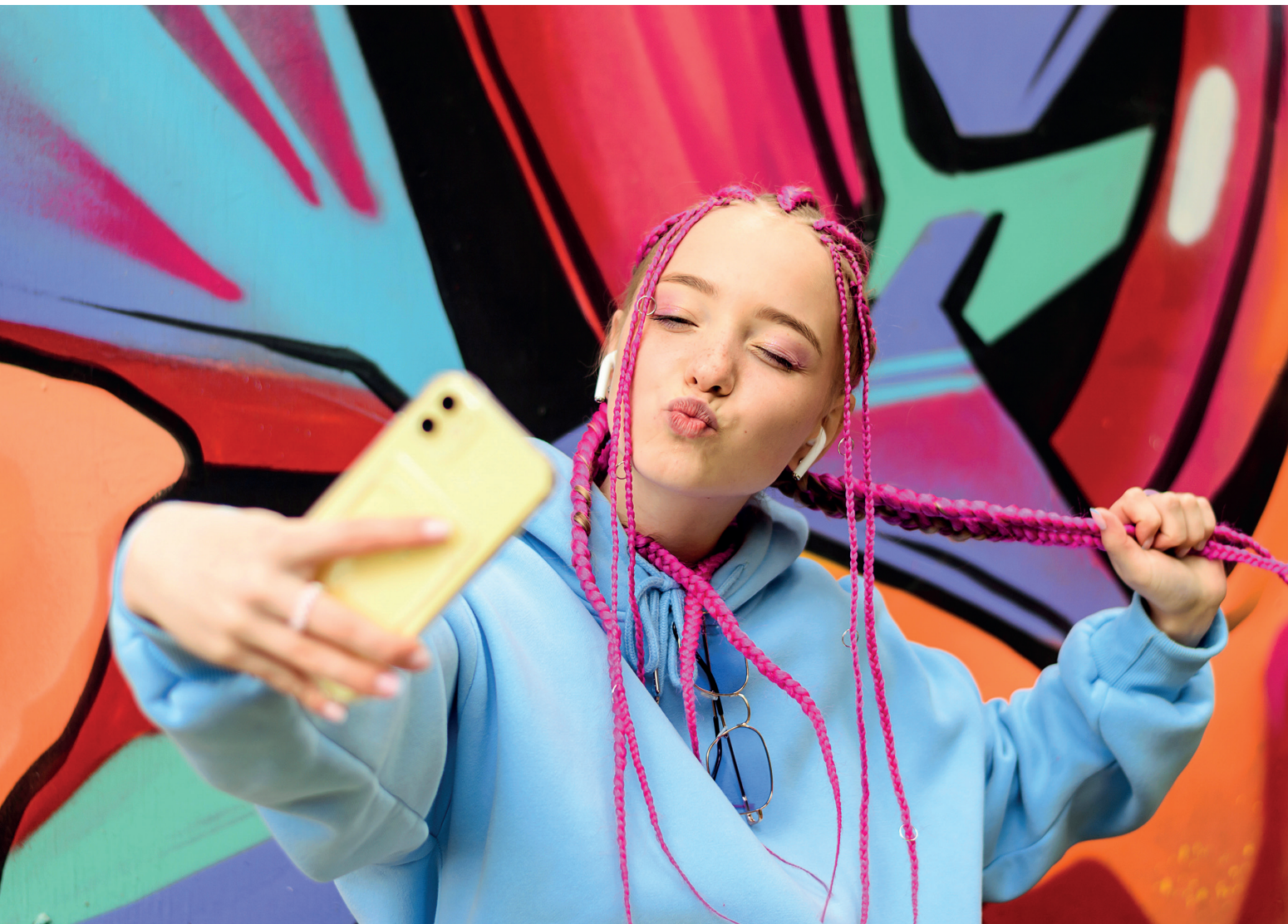
TO BE OR NOT TO BE (YOURSELF)

In our social-media era, the boundary between what we portray as true and what is false is growing increasingly thin. The decision of how we present ourselves on social media has a significant impact on our mental well-being.



**Magdalena Iwanowska,
MSc**

is doing doctoral-thesis research on the impact of social media on the values and goals of Polish teenagers. She collaborates with institutions that consider comprehensive and outside-the-box media education important.
magdalena.iwanowska
@ug.edu.pl



TATIANA BUZMAKOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Magdalena Iwanowska

Department of Economic and Organizational
Psychology University of Gdansk

Right after waking up, Sophie heads to the bathroom to put on her makeup, then gets back in bed to snap a selfie. She posts it on Instagram, suggesting in the caption that the photo shows her natural look (#iwokeuplikethis). James, out a morning walk, buys himself a green smoothie, which he promptly throws away after merely tasting it. But before doing so, he shares a photo of it on his profile, with an appropriate hashtag (#healthybreakfast). These are scenes from a popular YouTube video entitled “Are you living an Insta lie?”, but it is safe to say they are a good reflection of common behav-

One of the most important reasons why young people turn to Facebook or Instagram is the opportunity for extensive, virtually limitless self-presentation.

iors among young people today. The film has sparked a lively discussion about authenticity in the modern world. Are we truly living an “Insta lie”? And if so, what does it give us, and what does it take away?

Psychologists consider *authenticity*, or being one-self, to be one of the fundamental preconditions for the process of self-development and attaining satisfaction in life. According to Carl Rogers, one of the founders of person-centered psychology, an authentic person is one who neither pretends nor hides their true personality. They express their needs, feelings, and beliefs in a sincere manner. This is a beautiful, profound vision of a person who understands and accepts themselves – their psychological and physical characteristics – and who is engaged in a constant process of self-discovery.

The self

Rogers believed that our “self” combines two dimensions. The “ideal self” is the person you want to become, while the “real self” is who you actually are. To achieve a sense of fulfillment, we need to bring

these two selves closer together – to make them more *congruent*. This is no easy task, as our “self” is shaped by many factors: by our personal experiences, especially those from childhood and adolescence, as well as by the values and expectations of the culture to which we belong. Therefore, we live in a constant discord between who we really are and who we would like to be – including in the context of social expectations.

Nowadays – something Rogers probably did not foresee – social media play a significant role in shaping the “self,” especially among young people, and in setting the standards and norms of the given culture. The video mentioned above provides us with several clues about the contemporary notion of the “ideal self.” It implies that we should present ourselves as physically attractive, dress fashionably, visit posh restaurants, buy only healthy food, actively engage in sports (setting new records), enjoy a vibrant social life, and have successful relationships. As my research shows, it is also thought to be very important to boast about this “ideal self” to others.

For teenagers, for whom peer acceptance is an important element of their identity, it is especially difficult to resist the temptation of presenting their everyday life in an idealized way. Each time young people go onto Instagram or TikTok, they make a decision (more consciously or less so) about whether to present their real “self” or succumb to the pressure to project an ideal reality using filters and retouching. However, the choices they make entail specific consequences.

Idealization

Projecting an ideal reality certainly has some plus sides. Self-idealization can help us recognize the disconnect between our “real self” and “ideal self.” The desire to reduce this gap can, in turn, contribute to self-improvement. For instance, James, the character from the video, might continue buying different healthy dishes until he eventually finds ones he likes, and so ultimately decide to adopt a healthy lifestyle. He would then be presenting a more accurate image of himself on Instagram. However, such outcomes are rare.

The problem, it seems, is that Instagram was not really designed for showing one’s “real self.” At its core lies promoting materialistic desires, which are characteristic of the dominant consumer culture in Western countries. More and more people are nowadays believing that the key to happiness is achieving financial success, prestige, and an attractive outward image. However, research clearly shows that such an attitude towards life is – paradoxically – associated with lower life satisfaction and a lower sense of fulfillment. This is the case for at least two reasons. First, when we focus on materialistic goals, we pay less attention to what truly brings happiness, such as

self-development or building deep, meaningful relationships with others. Second, achieving materialistic desires is actually impossible in a fundamental way – there will always be people richer or more attractive than us. Especially in the world of social media, which is essentially the primary source of social standards for young people today.

The problem with Instagram is that the scale of self-idealization there is significantly greater than in real life. An entire industry has sprung up around people's desire to present an ideal version of themselves. A constant supply of new filters allows users to modify everything from their skin tone to the size of their eyes or face. On Instagram, people have become virtual curators of themselves, editing or staging content pertaining to their appearance, personality, or interests. Much like the renowned Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman described in his theory of social interaction, Instagram users put on virtual masks and become actors, wanting to present themselves in the very best light. At the same time, they are spectators, absorbing what others consider attractive and desirable.

Vicious cycle

In the long term, inauthenticity in social media can be psychologically costly. The negative effects of the “Insta lie” make themselves particularly evident in studies on self-esteem among young people. Research shows that greater use of social media is associated with lower self-esteem. On the one hand, this may suggest that platforms like Instagram tend to attract people with low self-esteem, or on the other hand, it may indicate that participating in the spectacle of extreme idealization on these apps can lead to a deterioration of one's self-worth. In other words, it is hard to pin down the direction of the relationship between self-esteem and self-idealization in social media. It most likely operates as a vicious cycle: the lower our self-esteem, the more inclined we are to present an idealized version of ourselves on social media to feel better for a moment, thanks to the likes and hearts we receive from other users. However, the more often we present an idealized version of ourselves online, the worse we feel about ourselves. Acting contrary to our “real self” leads to internal conflict, and a wide disconnect between our “real self” and “ideal self” leads to psychological discomfort. In the world of social media, this is primarily associated with a lack of acceptance for anything outside the norm, as well as the impossibility of actually achieving the ideal imposed by society. Moreover, self-idealization perpetuates the existing standards in social media, which affects other users. This contributes to a general decline in self-esteem and can lead to various mental health problems, such as depression or anxiety disorders.

Truth

Importantly, although expressing our “true self” in social media may put us at risk of criticism and rejection, in the long term, doing so allows us to build more lasting and genuine relationships with other users. A study conducted by the American psychologist Erica Bailey and her team in 2020 confirms that being authentic in social media – expressing oneself in accordance with one's own personality – is associated with greater life satisfaction.

As a society, we certainly have our work cut out for us in coping with the “Insta lie.” It would be good if the creators of social media themselves took more responsibility for the consequences of their actions. In 2021, journalists from the *Wall Street Journal* revealed secret data from Meta (the owner of Facebook and Instagram), showing that the creators of Instagram were well aware of the drastic consequences this app was having on teenagers' self-esteem. It is worth knowing

As parents, teachers, researchers, and activists, we all need to point out aware of how social media should be used to avoid the trap of the “ideal self.”

that the content shown by social media is not always consistent with what teenagers want to see (or should see). What appears in the newsfeeds of young people is largely decided by the algorithms of the tech giants – who design new services that promote materialism and unrealistic standards. It may perhaps be difficult to speak of any kind of “truth” in social media, as they are primarily profit-focused and serve the corporate goals of their owners.

However, companies like Meta are not the only ones responsible for the social changes in this area. As parents, teachers, researchers, and activists, we all need to be drawing attention to how social media should be properly used, to avoid falling into the trap of the “ideal self” imposed by pop culture. We need to talk about what values lead to a good life, and point out the consequences of living in a consumer culture. Young people need to be able to develop their “real self” as well as an “ideal self” based on their own needs and personal potential. Then perhaps they will create – or force corporations to create – media apps that, in opposition to the “Insta lie,” will enable the building of a “social media truth.” ■

Further reading:

Bailey E.R., Matz S.C., Youyou W., Iyengar S.S., Authentic self-expression on social media is associated with greater subjective well-being, *Nature Communications* 2020, doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-18539-w

Dittmar H., Bond R., Hurst M., Kasser T., The relationship between materialism and personal wellbeing: A meta-analysis, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 2014, doi.org/10.1037/a0037409

Valkenburg P.M., Social media use and well-being: What we know and what we need to know, *Current Opinion in Psychology* 2022, doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.12.006