

***The Self on Instagram: A Study on How People with Different Hair Colors Use Instagram for Online Self-Presentation***

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**Abstract**

This study explores how women with different hair colors use Instagram for online self-presentation, considering how hair has been historically significant to identify a person's status. Goffman's framework of self-presentation was used in this study. Furthermore, he explains self-presentation through the concept of theater, in which a person performs different roles in front of an audience to influence their impressions. When Goffman conceptualized self-presentation, digital technology was unavailable. This study looks at how self-presentation is enabled by digital technology. In order to explore self-presentation in the context of digital technology, the researcher considered Instagram as the online self-presentation platform for this study. Made as a photo-sharing mobile application, the study looked at the top 10 most liked photos of the participants on their Instagram accounts. A mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods was used. The researcher used a quantitative method to know the themes visible on the participants' Instagram accounts; visual content analysis was used to examine and analyze the content of the participants' photos along with in-depth interviews to learn about their online self-presentation. The results showed that the participants perform offline and online strategies, curating one's self for their online self-presentation. Strategic online self-presentation paved the way for online self-branding where the participants get value from different companies and brands.

Keywords: online self-presentation, self on Instagram, hair color, Goffman, visual content analysis

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## Introduction

Each society has its own norms. These social norms are implemented inside different companies and institutions. Based on what their objectives are, these institutions disseminate the norms for their people to observe and follow. One of the social norms that caught the attention of the researcher is the dress code policy, specifically the policy on hair colors. This study emerged from the experience of the researcher where she was called out and questioned by different institutions and companies because of her unusual hair color. Thinking about how some institutions and companies watch and sanction people over their choice of hair color, the researcher thought of exploring the importance of hair styles, specifically hair colors, in today's society. Since hair is considered as a part of a person – not only through the concept of body but also in one's life – there are instances that people associate changes in their lives with changes in their hairstyles. When institutions and companies try to control or discipline people with their physical looks, there is an assumption that those people would try to resist.

## Social and Academic Significance

In ancient times, people used their hair as an indication of age, gender, and social status (Bartman, 2001, p. 1). Aside from being a signifier, hair is also considered as public, personal, and malleable as it is visible to everyone, linked to the body, and does not only suit personal preferences but also has cultural inclinations (Synott, 1987, p. 381). Since hair is personal, a person has a choice if he or she wants to style or change it. One of the properties of hair that could change is its color. However, even if a person has a choice on what hair color to wear, there are social norms that must be followed.

*Preview Magazine* explains that most people in the Philippines dye their hair black or brown to suit their skin tone. Two of the most famous hair dye companies in the world, *L'Oréal* and *Revlon*, sell their products at malls in the country. They offer different shades of black and brown hair dyes, from blackest black to blond/e, in order to suit the skin tone of Filipinos. When it comes to changing their hair colors, Filipinos could either do it by themselves inside their homes or ask for professional help at salons. They can have different motivations for choosing their hair colors. Since the researcher of this study is from the Philippines, she is only familiar with black and brown hair until she watched foreign films.

Let us look at how hair culture is presented in media. Most foreign films and television shows from other countries present celebrities that have light-colored hair; they're often blond/e. *Legally Blonde* (2001), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003), and *Mean Girls* (2004) are some of the films that the researcher saw which featured blonde or light-colored-hair women. According to Nuñez (2010), these films underestimate blondes at work and that the personalities of the characters in these films are dictated by their hair color (p. 27). Nuñez adds that these films associate blondes with being dumb and sexually active. Examples include the characters of Regina George and Karen Smith in *Mean Girls* (2004) who are both blondes and characterized as dumb but attractive based on interviews done among their schoolmates in the movie. These representations affect the life of people in real

life because some companies believe these representations pave the way in establishing dress and appearance guidelines (Karl, Hall & Peluchette, 2013, p. 443).

Media is an important source of information as shown by the number of people who have access and can watch different films, anime, and television shows. While people rely on it to be updated with the latest trends, it can also help a person to internalize the message being sent and put into action (Turtle, 1997, p. 270). Our self is associated with how we dress and how others look at us (Kostanski, n.d., p. 260). Media paved way to some creative activities like cosplay in Japan where people dress-up and reenact media figures that are found in animations and comics (Kafai, Peppler, Lemke & Warschauer, 2011, p. 106). Media paved way to some creative activities like cosplay in Japan where people dress-up and reenact media figures that are found in animations and comics (Kafai et al., 2011, p. 106). With the emergence of hair color culture in media, the researcher saw a gap where television shows and movies, mostly American, represented blonde, brunette, and black hair people but almost none for other hair colors like pink, blue, green, and purple.

By looking at the case above, social significance exists in the context of how society react to these kinds of hair colors. The policing of hair colors, acceptance and resistance to the policy, and self-presentation in social media are the researcher's motivation for doing this study.

This study allows people to rethink how hair colors affect not only the self but the society and the emergence of technology and social media as well. The researcher builds Goffman's self-presentation in light of the curation of self both offline and online.

### **Research Questions:**

- 1) How do people with different hair colors use Instagram for online self-presentation to achieve their online ideal self?
- 2) How do technology and social media affect self-presentation of people with different hair colors?

### **Hair Culture**

Before looking at the existing situation of hair culture, let us take a look at how it started and the differences among cultures. According to Bartman (2001), female hairstyles during ancient times were important signifiers of age, social status, and role that could express an identity (p. 1).

During the first century, men's sculptures have short hair while women's sculptures have long hair. According to Bartman (2001), these sculptures represent what men and women wore during that time. Based on Roman rules, men should have shorter hair than women because longer hair would require attention and would appear unmanly (p. 3-4). Aside from associating gender with hair, the cutting, grooming, and braiding of hair during the Roman period signifies the participation of a person to society (p. 5). Women are likely to be associated with head hair compared to men because of the cultural definition that having long hair symbolizes femininity (Synott, 1987, p. 383). According to Bartman (2001), there are certain hairstyles that express

Roman culture such as old women having their long hair tied while adolescent girls wearing their hair loosely. Hair is notably considered to determine physical attractiveness (p. 5). The hairstyles of Roman women were inspired from Venus, who symbolizes beauty, and is usually associated with physical attractiveness (p. 22).

Hair meanings are dependent to the culture. Two cultures might have the same hair practice but can have different ideologies assigned to them (Bartlett, 1994, p. 60). Pergament (1999) claims that aside from hair representing a culture, it could also show how a culture can change over time through the acceptance of different hairstyles (p. 44). For example, shaving the hair of a Jewish bride means having an active sexual life while a hermit's shaved head symbolizes abstinence from sexual life (Bromberger, 2007, p. 380). With the study on African sculptures, Sieber and Herreman (2000) stated that hairstyles are always changing from generation to generation and what might be an accepted hairstyle today might not be accepted in the future, just like how hood hairstyle became popular for only a year (p. 57). Another example would be how people used to look up to blond/e Hollywood stars who eventually are perceived as a laughingstock today (Bromberger, 2007, p. 396).

According to Lawson (1971), hair color can give meaning to one's personality (p. 322). De Bortoli and Maroto (n.d.) add that colors are important as they could be a part of communication because of the various meanings given to them (p. 4). A color's role in marketing could create, increase, and modify a brand's personality (Labrecque & Milne, 2011, p. 711). This could be one of the bases that hair color affects one's identity. Despite the expenditures, time, and health risks involved, Guenard (2015) finds one thing that is certain as to why people still dye their hair: there is an emotional connection between them and their hair (para. 43). Considering how the importance and meaning of hair varies from one society to another, it serves as a subtle element that should not be ignored.

### **Self-Presentation**

As discussed earlier, this study revolves around Goffman's self-presentation. He describes self-presentation using an analogy of a person's performance in a theater with an audience (p. 10). He posits that self-presentation is a sociological perspective in society. In order for a person to express one's self, he or she must "perform" in front of an audience and gain an impression from them (Goffman, p. 3). Performance, as defined by Goffman, is an important concept in the paradigm of self-presentation; it is an act that influences other people. He assumes that once a person appears in front of an audience and performs, that person is trying to manipulate their impressions (p. 8). In this study, the researcher looks and analyzes how participants "perform" their self-presentation with their hair color.

Goffman's analysis of self-presentation is the relationship between performance and life. He argues that a person plays different roles in front of other people and that a person does not have an actual true self.

## Technology, Social Media, And Online Self-Presentation

A significant amount of time has passed since Goffman's initial discussion on self-presentation. Presently, people have learned new ways to incorporate new technology into their lives and identities. In a study conducted by Muzellec and O'Raghallaigh (2017), they find smartphones as a piece of technology that have intensified human consciousness (p. 13). It is not just a device that lets people store data and information; it's a device that can extend the self.

Nicolle Ellison (n.d.) writes that social media is used as a platform to create an identity and to control how others view them. Ellison notes that self-presentation is selective since people have more control over what they show to others. *Selective self-presentation* can happen if a person with multiple identities, chooses among them and presents it online (p. 2). Having multiple identities is characterized as identities online evolving over time (p. 5). It also means creating a different identity for different social media platforms (p. 10). Turkle (1997), as discussed earlier, articulates that early forms of social media let people to create multiple identities; social media platforms give people a chance to express who they are, who they want to be, and discover more about themselves. However, social media platforms today avoid these kinds of scenarios. On Facebook, people are encouraged to create a profile or an account that is parallel to who they are offline (Ellison, n.d., p. 10).

Online self-presentation requires time and effort (Frunzaru & Garbasevski, 2016, p. 4). The eagerness to present one's self leads to the curation that requires time and effort in choosing what to show the audience. Online self-presentation in social media is getting complicated because of different features. An example is how a person can communicate publicly, share information with other people, and/or post a photo that they would want others to see. In addition to these features, friends of friends or those within one's network can share a post or tag photos that do not align with one's online ideal self (Rui and Stefanone, 2013, p. 2). A 2009 study by Ramirez and Walther note that this type of additional information challenges the image portrayed by a person (as cited in Rui & Stefanone, 2013, p. 2). Goffman's self-presentation is similar to online self-presentation since both concepts need an audience.

According to Schroeder (2018), visual self-presentation is an effective way to use in the different social media platforms (p. 92). According to Miller et al. (2016), one of the reasons why visual self-presentation is widely used is that it makes it easier for people to communicate to others even with few words (as cited in Schroeder, 2018, p. 292). Ibrahim (2015) adds that posting photos on Instagram could be associated as an objectification of the self. This could invite the public gaze and the preservation of identity through posting of photos online (p. 51). All things considered, Rettberg (2016) posits that a feed could express a narrative about the user (p. 35).

All things considered, it must be noted that people can present themselves differently to different online communities depending on their motivations (Rettberg, 2016, p. 42).

## Online Influencer Culture and Online Curation

In the context of self-presentation and social media, influencers do things, or rather curate their selves, to successfully achieve their role. On Instagram, online curation is considered as choosing what information and photos to share. In order to fully understand how online curation happens, Abidin (2017) explains that it is a “learned process” that has to look natural. Online curation varies from one influencer to another. According to Abidin (2013), one of the examples is how a person documents his or her “daily life” (p. 7). Details of one’s daily life or routine are shared online to the audience. For example, the outfit before and after leaving the house, food shots before and after consumption, and lastly, the infamous self-portrait “selfie”, are shared online.

The processes and the preparations on how the contents are done serve as the curation of the self. Similar with Goffman’s self-presentation, curation of the self requires strategic acts that can result to the ideal self. Curation can happen either offline or online, depending on one’s strategies. According to Abidin (2013), these influencers undergo “trial” and error”, in order to develop strategies that would expand their specialty on the virtual world (p. 9).

In the digital world, the narratives about one’s self, serve as a confirmation of one’s identity to the audience (Eakin, 2015, p. 20). In order to create a narrative on the online self, people must consider their experiences offline and share it online (Eakin, 2015, p. 26). Taking into consideration what self-presentation means, we can say that online curation is the careful selection of the information associated to one online.

The illustration below shows how an online self is made based on Goffman’s self-presentation, technology, and social media.

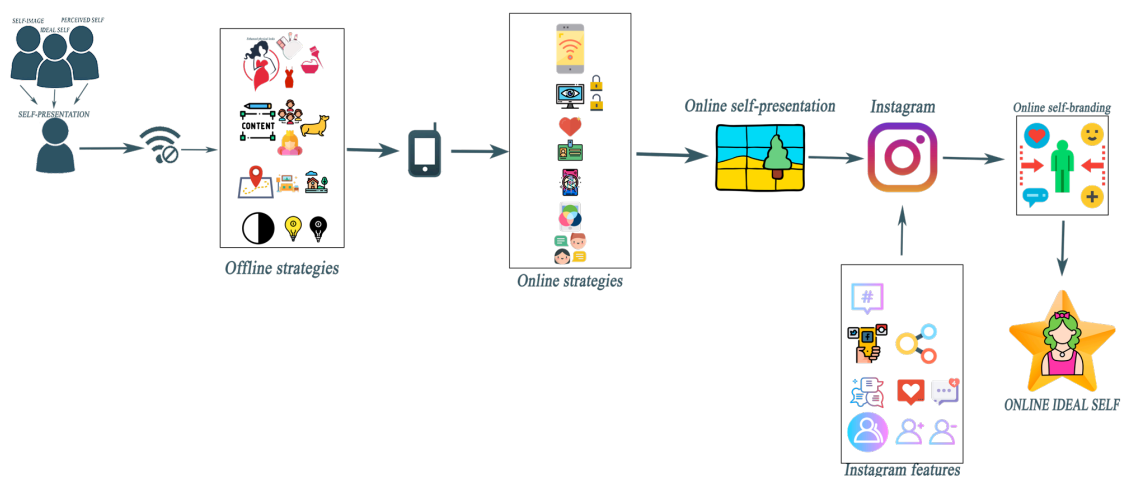


Figure 1. The process of online self-presentation that resulted to self-branding.

## **Research Question 1: How do people with different hair colors use Instagram for their online self-presentation**

Goffman's self-presentation concept can be applied on the self-branding of the participants. According to Evans (2017), self-branding shows how a person wants to be seen by other people, especially those who want to achieve success (p. 271). In this study, strategic means being able to utilize technology and social media features, together with the ability to curate the photos and apply their knowledge on the current trends. Participants have similarities when it comes to their strategies for online self-presentation. Since all of them want to be seen as cool and artistic, they used their colored hair to help them achieve that goal. However, they did not only use hair colors. There are other strategies, both offline and online, that helped them establishing their ideal selves.

According to a study made by Schroeder (2018), online self-presentation requires more effort than self-presentation through face-to-face interaction (p. 84). This is proven because based on the in-depth interviews, the participants exerted time preparing for their photos, thinking about what to wear, how and where to pose, what angle, and what to post, which are all parts of their strategies to present themselves. According to Giddens (2009), self-presentation is explained by Goffman through the metaphor of theater, which is all about the performers being well-prepared before their on-stage performance, and how it's one of the many perspectives in looking at self-presentation (p. 291). In everyday real life, people do not exactly rehearse or prepare themselves with settings, scripts, props, costumes, and make-up, the same as with theater. As discussed by Pinch (2010), new media technologies are linked with Goffman's self-presentation as it already became a part of everyday life (p. 411). Instagram serves as the theater stage for the participants, where they are able to prepare and rehearse to achieve their ideal selves and their online self-presentation.

According to Crossan, individuals create their reality (as cited in Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018, p. 5). In this study, the participants created their online identities with different strategies that are popular and commonly used in their circle. The use of photo-editing applications and filters were common strategies used by the participants. With different offline strategies, online strategies, and Instagram features, the participants strategically perform self-presentation and make sure that they achieve their ideal selves. Khamis et al. (2016) add that self-branding is when a person changes his or her personal image to have more chances of gaining commercial or cultural investment (p. 191). Both self-presentation and self-branding enhance the self through different strategies.

Self-presentation is different from self-branding. In self-presentation, one can achieve the ideal selves without acquiring value from others but acquiring impressions. Self-branding, on the other hand, is about enhancing the self to gain value, whether social value or commercial value (Gehl, 2011, p. 5). However, in this study, the participants were not aware that their self-presentation would lead to gaining value and being able to profit from it. They did not know that it could result to self-branding. With their hair color, online strategies, technology, and social media, self-presentation shows a strong correlation between self-branding, where people try to show their idealized selves, and unknowingly getting a value from others. The participants first wanted to show their idealized selves on Instagram and with that, they were able to capture the

attention of people and companies that gave them commercial and social value through features and sponsorships.

The motivations of the participants are personally driven. When the participants first used Instagram, their motivation was to satisfy their self-expression. In this study, the researcher found out that elements of Goffman's self-presentation are also applicable on the Internet and social media platforms. People use photo composition, photo content, and Instagram features to help them in performing self-presentation. In Goffman's terms, these are props, locations, appearance, clothes, and attitudes. They are similar in such a way that the elements help people establish themselves. On the other hand, they are different because the ease of curating makes it difficult to determine what is fake. Through their performance or online posting and curating of photos, they use strategies to gain what they want from their audience and at the same time, unintentionally get social values and brand values. Through their persistent online self-branding, they are already getting sponsorship from brands which is at first, was not part of their motivations.

Previous studies show that hair in general is a signifier of status. Gehl (2011) points out that this type of branding is often called "personal branding", where a person chooses to curate his or her own image as part of controlling one's social status (p. 2). The difference between Gehl's (2011) study and this one is that the main motivation in the former is to gain sponsorships, while in this study, the participants' first motivation is to express their identity (p. 2). The participants curate themselves by choosing photos that they think would fit their ideal selves. The visibility of their colored hair along with their recurrence in posting are parts of their strategy for self-presentation.

In order to achieve their ideal selves, the participants used their hair color as part of their strategies. People recognize and remember them because of their hair which made them decide to maintain it and associate it with their identity, by always dyeing it and making sure that it is visible in the photos.

The participants use hair as part of their branding so people can easily recognize and remember them. Just like a brand, they maintain their hair color because this is what people would remember them for. It becomes a part of their identity and self-expression, which Synott (1987) and Lawson (1971) also confirmed during in their previous studies. The colored hair of the participants helps them achieve their idealized self because hair colors, as part of branding, according to Labrecque and Milne (2011), can either create or modify personality.

As discussed earlier, the participants have different motivations for different social media platforms. Based on the study conducted by Jones (as cited in Ting, 2014), there are multiple motivations when it comes to using social media as a platform for self-presentation. Results showed that the participants started using Instagram because they want to be seen the way they wanted to be. They wanted to influence other people through their photos. By analyzing the responses of the participants, the researcher was able to know even without directly admitting it, that the participants want social rewards. These social rewards, according to Jones, were given to people who were seen positively. One of the features of Instagram is the capability of the audience to like posts, which could mean an affirmation. Liking a post means giving



positive feedback, which according to the results, made the participants feel that they achieved their ideal selves. The participants are aware that a large following elevates them to influencer status, giving them the capability to select, enhance, or edit (at any time) what they want people to see as their online self.

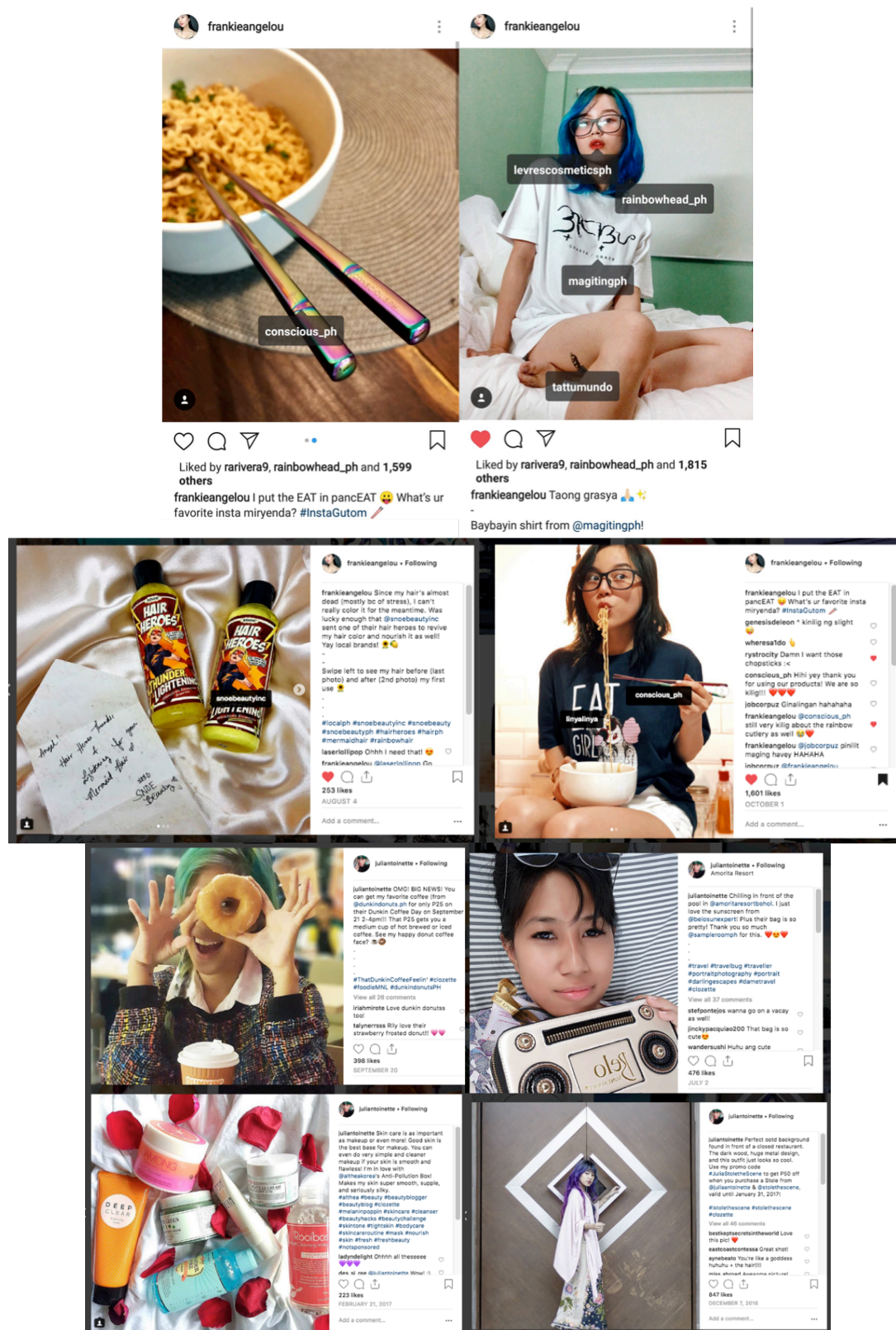


Figure 2. Screenshots of the participants' Instagram posts and comments.

The participants confirmed that their self-presentation paved the way for sponsorships, which motivated them to be more aware of their self-branding.

Online self-branding according to the participants involves processes that make themselves a brand of their own. According to Djafarova and Trofimenko (2018), positive images would gain positive feedback and impressions from the audience (p. 7). Since the participants already have an idea on their self-presentation strategies, they choose and post images that they think would gain attention from brands and companies, that would lead to their “influencer” title, with the application of their online ideal self.

### **Research Question 2: How do technology and social media enable online self-presentation?**

Selfies and self-portraits were the most common themes in the participants’ contents. The posting of these types of photos complements the participants’ strategy of having visibly colored hair since colored hair is easily seen in selfies and self-portraits. As part of self-presentation, Katz and Crocker (2016) add that by creating selfies, people are able to communicate themselves to others. These selfies are staged and performed to control the impressions of the audience (Katz & Crocker, 2016, p. 134).

The selfies and the portraits of the participants are strategically staged, as they carefully prepare every shot and choose only the best photos. Crafting the look means spending time to put on make-up, accessories, and choosing the best photo among all the photos taken (Miller et al., 2016, p. 83). Strategically staged means that the participants prepare themselves before taking and posting a photo. Almost all of the photos are selfies and portraits give a clear view of the participants’ hair color, make-up, clothes, and settings that add up to their online self-presentation. Based on the results, people mostly like photos where the face and the body are visible. Only two out of the forty photos contain other things. This means that people are more interested to see the physical appearance of the person compared to the things she does (Ramos-Serrano & Martinez-Garcia, 2016, p. 101).

Receiving several likes under this kind of theme, based on the study made by Nicolescu (2016), serves as a validation of the participants’ appearance (p. 129). The likes and positive comments for the previous posts that focus on how good their physical appearances are make the participants knowledgeable on what kinds of posts the audience want or approve. Even if selfies and portraits are the most liked photos of the participants, they try to veer away from the audience’s concern on the normativity of liking only the physical appearance by posting other things such as their pets, food, hobbies, arts, and favorite places – which also tell something about them. They use social media to focus on themselves as a whole and not just on their physical appearances.

This study connects Goffman’s self-presentation with digital technology, the Internet, and social media. According to Chernev et al. (2011), advancements in technology helps self-presentation through the course of customizing media content anytime and anywhere (p. 66). The participants are able to choose photos that best suit their ideal selves whenever and wherever they are. By customizing the contents, the participants are actually “performing” how they wanted to be. Time and effort are given for the

strategies to be done. In order to create photos that suit the participants' personalities and ideal selves, they spend time and effort editing photos, looking for perfect locations, choosing which photos to post, acting out their personality, and lastly, bleaching and dyeing their hair. Bleaching and coloring the hair takes time, effort, and money.

When Goffman conceptualized self-presentation, this was at a time before the presence of the internet and social media. Therefore, applying the theory combined with the affordances of technology and social media today, the presentation of the self is different. This is how it is different. The online self, compared to the offline self, is not bound by space and time. An image or ultimately an identity persists despite not being physically present at a certain point in time. People can have a control on when they would post, and how they want to present themselves.

## **Conclusion**

The digital world allows its users to constantly look and re-invent themselves in their photos. The participants post things that are related to them to create and keep a memory of their idealized selves. Another point away from Goffman's self-presentation, is the use of people's faces through their selfies for their self-presentation, even without presenting their whole body. The act of framing online makes it possible for the people to focus on their selves. According to Wendt (2014), it is innate that people are captivated by themselves, which can explain selfies (p. 19). Most of the participants' posts contain selfies and self-portraits. This best describes McLuhan's explanation on how Narcissus did not fall in love with himself; he was just not able to recognize his own reflection (as cited in Wendt, 2014, p. 19). The participants confirmed that they only post photos where they think they are beautiful. As discussed earlier, the process of choosing what to post, especially photos that are considered as beautiful and accepted by society, is online curation. Self-curation happens because of the motivations of the participants to gain social rewards for their online self-presentation.

This research revolves around how self-presentation by Goffman can be applied with the emergence of technology and social media. With hair as an indicator of identity, this research focused on people with different hair colors that are unusual to the researcher's country. The researcher focused on these hair colors to contribute more information on the existing studies, which are mostly focused on the dominant hair colors like black, brown, and blonde.

The researcher found out that aside from using hair colors as a strategy for online self-presentation, the participants also edit their Instagram content through offline and online strategies to achieve their ideal selves. Editing their photos and choosing the photos to be posted are the most common strategies used by the participants. Knowing who they want to be, the participants had a clear view on their motivations and therefore adopted various strategies that helped or enhanced their online selves. The participants' hair colors became a part of their branding and trademark—which are also part of their identities. Aside from presenting their ideal selves online to give information to the audience on who they aspire to be, the participants use social media to influence other people because of its wide range and their number of followers. By posting of photos that include their hair colors, the participants try to show their

followers that having colored hair is not bad. The participants try to normalize other hair colors. Pink, blue, and purple hair do exist and should be acceptable.

In this study, self-branding emerged as a result of self-presentation. Instagram was first used as a social media platform for online self-presentation. However, with different strategies and through the emergence of technology, people were able to acquire value through self-branding. At first, Instagram for them was a place where they could express and show their idealized selves. Posting on Instagram is a way for them to promote themselves. As what Julia said, despite using Instagram for business, she is promoting and selling who she is so people actually “buy” herself.

The researcher found out that despite the participants saying that their online self is their actual or self-image, they still consider how others see them and what they desire to be. Based on the in-depth interviews, the participants show their online perceived and online ideal selves on Instagram.

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