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Multilayered social media self-presentation practices: How German adolescents present themselves on Instagram and Snapchat

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ABSTRACT

Self-presentation plays a significant role during adolescence and is often performed on image-based social media platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat. Our study examined common self-presentation practices and overarching forms of self-presentation among German adolescents as well as the influence of both individual (gender, social media use, perceived benefits) and structural influencing factors (audience size and anticipated feedback) on these forms of self-presentation. We conducted computer-assisted face-to-face surveys with 1,002 German Instagram and/or Snapchat users between 14 and 16 years of age. Our findings illustrate that adolescents present themselves through a variety of different practices on Instagram and Snapchat. We identified self-presentation practices that are common on both platforms, but we also found indications for platform-specific practices. Furthermore, principal component analysis identified three overarching forms of self-presentation: staged self-presentation, authentic self-presentation, and presentation of everyday life.

IMPACT SUMMARY

Prior State of Knowledge: Consolidating one's identity is a key developmental task in adolescence. To establish who they are, adolescents experiment with their identities and try out different roles through self-presentation. Social media platforms offer adolescents a wide range of opportunities for visual self-presentation.
Novel Contributions: This representative survey of German adolescents aged between 14 and 16 years examined common self-presentation practices on Instagram and Snapchat. We identified three overarching forms of self-presentation that coexisted on both platforms and examined their association with individual and structural influencing factors.
Practical Implications: Our results suggest that adolescents' self-presentation on Instagram and Snapchat is more diverse than

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previously assumed. Parents and educators can encourage adolescents to present themselves more authentically on social media. Additionally, platforms can integrate more opportunities for authentic self-presentation into their features.

Identity development is an ongoing process throughout a person's life; however, adolescence is a phase when beliefs about the self rigidify and a sense of identity evolves (Erikson, 1968; Havighurst, 1972). During this period, individuals become increasingly aware of their unique qualities and actively address questions regarding their values and ideals, ideas about their future, and sexual preferences. To perceive themselves as distinctive individuals and to obtain an integrated, coherent sense of their identity as something that persists over time, adolescents have to integrate various, sometimes conflicting, self-beliefs into a unified whole (Erikson, 1968; Havighurst, 1972). They resolve conflicting self-beliefs by experimenting with their identities and exploring different roles in various social contexts (Brinthaupt & Lipka, 2002), for example through self-presentation – a process that represents individuals' attempts to control the impressions others form of them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) and often includes evaluation of others' feedback and the desire for social approval (Goffman, 1959; Harter et al., 1996, 1997).

Social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat satisfy adolescents' need for self-presentation by extending previous modes of engaging in social interaction, obtaining information, sharing opinions, and expressing the self (Boyd, 2008). They enable adolescents to show who and how they are (or who and how they want to be seen) and to gain feedback from relevant others (McRoberts et al., 2017; Yau & Reich, 2019). Extensive research has demonstrated how social media users desire to convey a particular impression to gain social approval from their followers via likes, comments, and resharing activities. However, previous studies have often focused on rather specific practices of self-presentation, such as editing and posting selfies (Chae, 2017; S. Choi et al., 2020; Moon et al., 2016; Shin et al., 2017). These studies neglect the broad opportunities offered by social media platforms for self-presentation. Therefore, the present study argues for a more holistic understanding of self-presentation and considers the various technical features that Instagram and Snapchat provide for multilayered forms of self-presentation.

In addition, previous studies have investigated various individual and structural influencing factors, such as personality traits, motivation, and audience composition, that are related to how frequently and in what way users present themselves on social media (D. K. L. Lee & Borah, 2020; Moon et al., 2016; Tosun, 2012). Only a few studies (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016; Dumas et al., 2017) have considered the goal-directed dimension of self-presentation and examined the expectation of benefits as a relevant influencing factor for self-presentation. Our study extends this research by deriving common benefits of social media self-presentation and examining their association with various forms of self-presentation. While previous studies often focused on social media self-presentation by emerging adults (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016; Brailovskaia & Bierhoff, 2016; S. Choi et al., 2020; Huang & Vitak, 2022; Michikyan, 2020, 2022; Michikyan et al., 2014), our study considers middle adolescence between the ages of 14 and 16 years. Middle adolescence is characterized by an unstable self and is a critical time for identity exploration through

self-presentation (Harter, 2012). In addition, studies focusing on adolescents' social media self-presentation have often relied on rather small convenience samples (Fullwood et al., 2016; Metzler & Scheithauer, 2017) or have mainly adopted a qualitative approach (Gorea, 2021; Yau & Reich, 2019). Thus, the goal of the current study was to examine the variety of self-presentation practices adopted by adolescents on social media platforms and to identify overarching forms of self-presentation. A second goal was to analyze whether these forms of self-presentation can be explained by individual and structural influencing factors. Using a quota sample representative of 14- to 16-year-old Instagram and Snapchat users in Germany, we therefore investigated the influence of gender, social media use, perceived benefits of social media self-presentation, audience size, and anticipated feedback on three forms of self-presentation.

Self-presentation practices on social media

When social media users create their profiles, when they take, edit, and post photos or videos, or when they manage the feedback received from others, they selectively present certain aspects of themselves while downplaying others (Goffman, 1959). Following Leary and Kowalski (1990, p. 39), self-presentation includes "all behavioral attempts to create impressions in others' minds." Individuals want others to see them as they see themselves or to ensure, at least, that others see them accurately (Schlenker, 2012). Hence, they select the information that is most likely approved by others and omit information that does not fit their preferences or the preferences of their audience (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Self-presentation therefore includes both behaviors that actively foster a particular impression and protective behaviors that serve to avert a deterioration of one's image (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The present study is based on this holistic understanding of self-presentation as a goal-directed behavior aimed at controlling the impressions of others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 2012).

Image-based platforms like Instagram and Snapchat offer a particularly wide range of possibilities for self-presentation (Dumas et al., 2017; Jackson & Luchner, 2018; E. Lee et al., 2015). Previous studies have provided first insights into how users present themselves on social media (Chae, 2017; S. Choi et al., 2020; D. K. L. Lee & Borah, 2020; Moon et al., 2016; Seidman, 2013; Shin et al., 2017; Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016). However, most of these studies operationalized social media self-presentation either rather global as sharing information about oneself or giving an impression of oneself (D. K. L. Lee & Borah, 2020; Seidman, 2013; Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016), or they focused on single forms of self-presentation, such as sharing selfies (Chae, 2017; S. Choi et al., 2020; Moon et al., 2016; Shin et al., 2017). Only a few studies have addressed the many ways in which adolescents can present and explore different facets of their identity on social media. For example, through in-depth interviews with female adolescents from Singapore, Chua and Chang (2016) demonstrated that participants planned their photo-taking intensively and applied various editing techniques, including blurring facial imperfections or enhancing colors and effects, before uploading a selfie on Instagram. Additionally, a survey of emerging adults by Dumas et al. (2017) revealed that participants also engaged in activities that provided deceptive information about the context of their content, such as deleting a photo and putting it back up later. Similarly, Rui and Stefanone (2013) examined the management of content posted by others among U.S. college students and found that

most participants regularly engaged in protective self-presentation, such as asking friends to remove a photo or untagging oneself in a photo. Our study acknowledges the variety of self-presentation possibilities that social media platforms provide and the sophisticated manner in which adolescents may use these possibilities to give impressions of themselves. We ask the following research question:

RQ1: What are common self-presentation practices of adolescent Instagram and Snapchat users?

Besides studying the various self-presentation practices of social media users, previous studies have identified overarching goals of social media self-presentation. Classic theories describe self-presentation as a goal-directed behavior that attempts to control the impressions of oneself formed by others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 2012). This often includes emphasizing positive aspects of the self and making a desirable impression (Goffman, 1959). Findings from studies examining self-presentation norms among adolescents demonstrate the importance of presenting oneself in a positive or ideal way on social media platforms. For example, focus group discussions with U.S. adolescents by Yau and Reich (2019) revealed that adolescents perceived a need to appear interesting, likeable, and attractive on Instagram and Facebook. Similarly, a survey among Dutch adolescents and emerging adults by Waterloo et al. (2018) showed a higher acceptance of positive emotion expressions (e.g., pride and joy) than negative emotion expressions (e.g., sadness, anger, disappointment, and worry) on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, with highest effects on Instagram. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews with German Instagram users identified four types of adolescent self-presentation on Instagram (authentic, self-confident, self-staged, and audience-oriented self-presentation), depending on the underlying norms (Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021). That study highlighted the importance of conveying a particular impression by regular account updating and selective presentation of edited photos or videos on Instagram. However, some Instagram users valued an authentic or self-confident self-presentation and showed more natural and spontaneous versions of themselves.

Authentic self-presentation on social media can be understood as a "construction of an image that fosters reliability, and 'realness' with the audience" (Gorea, 2021, p. 3). Social media users are authentic when they are not trying too hard to convey a particular impression (Hollenbaugh, 2021). Authenticity on social media is expressed, among other things, by spontaneously and informally sharing daily activities, thoughts, and emotions (Kreling et al., 2022). This can also include content with a negative valence (Huang & Vitak, 2022). Presenting oneself more freely on social media can also benefit a user if it both matches the user's self-view and what other users know about the person (Hollenbaugh, 2021). Hence, social media platforms can serve different goals of self-presentation that relate to different overarching forms of social media self-presentation. Therefore, we ask:

RQ2: Which overarching forms of social media self-presentation can be identified among adolescents?

Benefits of social media self-presentation

Considering self-presentation as goal-directed behavior implies that it benefits the individuals presenting themselves (Schlenker, 2012). Self-presentation has an explicit social goal, "in that people attempt to exert interpersonal influence by convincing audiences of their qualities" (Toma, 2016, p. 170). Previous literature has linked achieving this goal to feelings like social belonging, social approval, and social support (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 2012), which can be described as *social benefits*. Furthermore, self-enhancement theory (Leary, 2007) illustrates that making a positive impression increases positivity and decreases negativity in one's self-view, providing *benefits for the self*. In the present study, we consider social benefits and benefits for the self as individual influencing factors for adolescents' self-presentation on social media. For example, Pang (2020) showed that honest self-presentation on the Chinese social media platform WeChat significantly predicted social support and sense of social belonging. Similarly, Proudfoor et al. (2018) demonstrated that users who perceived higher impression management capabilities on Facebook were likelier to perceive social benefits, such as feeling socially connected and included. Yang and Bradford Brown (2016), who examined self-presentation of college freshman on Facebook, showed that four forms of self-presentation were associated with perceived social supportive feedback, which was related to higher self-esteem. Their longitudinal data also revealed that users who presented themselves intentionally (e.g., were thinking about consequences when posting on Facebook) later reported higher self-esteem mediated through self-reflection. Thus, intentional self-presentation seems to have long-term benefits for the self. Against this background, our study examines both social benefits and benefits for the self as relevant influencing factors. Therefore, we ask:

> **RQ3:** How are perceived benefits associated with overarching forms of social media self-presentation among adolescents?

The success of one's self-presentation also depends on the composition of the audience and their feedback (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). On social media, the perceived audience and their anticipated feedback (e.g., in forms of likes and views) is closely linked to the technical infrastructure of the respective platform. Therefore, we regard audience size and anticipated feedback as structural factors that can influence how adolescents present themselves. Several studies have examined the link between social media self-presentation and such structural factors (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016; Hollenbaugh, 2021; Moon et al., 2016; Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Stsiampkouskaya et al., 2021). For example, Moon et al. (2016) indicated that a larger audience size is generally associated with a higher frequency of self-presentation through selfie posting and profile picture updates. Rui and Stefanone (2013) found a positive association between a larger audience size and engagement in protective self-presentation, such as untagging one's connection with a photo. Bareket-Bojmel et al. (2016) examined the relationship between social feedback (number of likes and number of comments) and different forms of self-presentation, namely self-presentation striving for self-enhancement (showing positive and desirable aspects of oneself) and self-presentation striving for self-derogation (showing less positive and less desirable aspects of oneself). They reported that, compared to neutral self-

presentation, self-presentation aimed at self-enhancement, as well as a derogative self-presentation, was linked to an increase in social feedback in the form of likes and comments. Because audience response might alter future self-presentation, we ask:

RQ4:   How do audience size and anticipated feedback influence different forms of social media self-presentation among adolescents?

Method

Sample and procedure

In summer 2022, we conducted computer-assisted face-to-face surveys with 1,035 Instagram and/or Snapchat users aged between 14 and 16 years. The study was approved by the institutional review board of the authors' university. The surveys took place in the adolescents' homes and were carried out by iconkids & youth, a German market research institute. Each adolescent and one parent gave their written consent before the surveys started. Half of the participants were surveyed about Instagram, and the other half were surveyed about Snapchat. The questionnaire, data, and analysis scripts can be accessed via https://osf.io/6rdfe/.

A quota sample representative in terms of age, gender, migration background, school form, state, and community size was drawn from 14- to 16-year-old Instagram and Snapchat users in Germany. All participants were active users of Instagram, Snapchat, or both, who had used one of the two platforms several times a week for at least one year and published content there several times a month. Before the analysis, 33 participants who answered less than 75% of the items measuring self-presentation practices ($n = 17$) or who were outliers regarding their overall platform use ($n = 16$) were excluded. The final sample consisted of 1,002 participants ($n_{Instagram} = 496$; $n_{Snapchat} = 506$); 49.2% were female. The participants had an average age of 15.02 years ($SD = 0.82$) and 87.4% held German citizenship.

Survey instrument and measures

The survey consisted of three parts. The participants provided sociodemographic information in part one. In the second part, they answered questions about their social media use, including frequencies of using different social media platforms, posting a photo or video, and posting a photo or video of themselves (7-point scale with 1 = *less than once a month* and 7 = *several times a day*); time spent on each social media platform (6-point scale with 1 = *less than one hour* and 6 = *more than 5 hours*); number of followers (Instagram) or friends (Snapchat); average number of likes (Instagram) or views (Snapchat), and whether their accounts were private or public. The third part of the survey included the following measures:

Self-Presentation Practices were measured with 16 items for Instagram and 15 items for Snapchat. Following our holistic understanding of self-presentation, we developed a pool of standardized items that include a variety of active and protective self-presentation behaviors possible on the platforms. The items were based on reviews of previous quantitative (T. R. Choi & Sung, 2018; Dumas et al., 2017; Rui & Stefanone, 2013) and qualitative studies (Chua & Chang, 2016; Gorea,

2021; Yau & Reich, 2019) that integrated self-presentation practices besides posting photos or videos. All items were modified and adapted for Instagram and Snapchat. Most items considered identical activities for both platforms. However, platform-specific activities only possible on one of the two platforms due to their technical structure were also integrated. Participants used a 5-point scale with 1 = *never* and 5 = *always* to report how often they had done the various activities on Instagram or Snapchat in the past four weeks.

Perceived Benefits were included in the survey to assess relevant influencing factors of self-presentation. Following Rimal and Real (2005) four items measured benefits for the self ("Posting/Sharing photos or videos an Instagram/Snapchat (a) makes me feel confident, (b) allows me to show who I am, (c) feels good to me, (d) shows me that I belong.") and another four items measured expected benefits for one's anticipated socialization ("Posting/Sharing photos or videos an Instagram/Snapchat (e) do all young people these days, (f) expect my friends from me, (g) is important for my future life, (h) allows me to find friends.") based on a 5-point scale (ranging from 1 = *do not agree at all* to 5 = *completely agree*). Responses to each subdimension were used as mean indices, after removing one item ("Posting/Sharing photos or videos on Instagram/Snapchat do all young people these days.") due to insufficient reliability: (a) perceived social benefits (three items, $M = 3.6$, $SD = 0.87$, $\omega = .73$) and (b) perceived benefits for the self (four items, $M = 4.0$, $SD = 0.71$, $\omega = .77$)

Audience size was operationalized as the number of Followers/number of Friends the participants had on Instagram/Snapchat. Participants could either report the numbers if they knew them or after looking them up on their account.

Anticipated Feedback was operationalized as the average number of likes/views the participants reported having received on their photos or videos on Instagram/Snapchat. The participants could again check their numbers on Instagram and Snapchat on their smartphones.

Data analysis

To answer RQ1, we analyzed the prevalence of the surveyed self-presentation practices, defining a practice as common when at least 50% of the participants reported performing that practice *often* or *always* when they had used Instagram or Snapchat during the last four weeks. To examine RQ2 and to identify overarching forms of self-presentation, we conducted a principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test = .80, $df = 55$, $p < .001$) on 13 items that measured self-presentation practices and were consistently measured for both Instagram and Snapchat. The PCA was applied in both subsamples (Instagram and Snapchat) and in the total sample to ensure consistency of the underlying factors. We conducted correlation analysis to answer RQ3 and RQ4 regarding the association between different forms of self-presentation and the influencing factors perceived benefits, perceived audience size, and anticipated feedback. The data were not normally distributed; therefore, we used the nonparametric Spearman's rank correlation (see supplemental online material Tables A1 – A5).

Results

The results of our study reconfirmed Instagram and Snapchat as integral parts of adolescents' lives (see also Mittmann et al., 2022). Overall, 88.5% of the surveyed Instagram users and 80.5% of the surveyed Snapchat users reported daily use of the platform, while 31.2% of the Instagram users and 30.4% of the Snapchat users used the respective platform two hours or longer on a weekday. In total, 33.3% of Instagram users and 47.9% of Snapchat users reported posting a photo or video at least once a day. In general, 92.1% of the Instagram users and 95.3% of the Snapchat users had only one account on their respective platform. Most Snapchat users reported having a public main account (79.2% public; 20.8% private), whereas public and private accounts were balanced among the Instagram users (51.3% public; 48.7% private).

Self-presentation practices on Instagram and Snapchat

RQ1 asked about common self-presentation practices of adolescent Instagram and Snapchat users. We identified nine common self-presentation practices on Instagram and ten on Snapchat (Table A1). Presenting oneself through posting or sharing certain content (see also Metzler & Scheithauer, 2017; Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2012) were common across both platforms, and the technical features such as adding stickers, tagging, or following were often used for adolescents' self-presentation, as two-thirds or more reported to use them often or always. However, self-representation practices also differed significantly depending on the platform. The tendency to "post/share photos or videos spontaneously, without thinking much about it" was greater among Snapchat users than Instagram users, $t(999) = -4.73$, $p < .001$, $d = .19$, 95% CI [−0.42, −0.18]. In general, 52.2% of the Snapchat users stated doing so *often* or *always* when sharing photos or videos; therefore, we can assume that this is a common self-presentation practice on Snapchat but not on Instagram.

Our data also clarified that platform-specific activities are part of the established repertoire of self-presentation on Instagram and Snapchat. Although Instagram has adopted ephemerality by introducing Instagram Stories, content and feedback are considered to be more permanent on Instagram than on Snapchat (T. R. Choi & Sung, 2018). Hence, a common self-presentation practice on Instagram is curating content. In addition to editing photos, this also includes removing photos or videos from profiles that users no longer like or for which the users received too little positive feedback and asking friends to like their photos or videos. On Snapchat, where users' profiles usually contain less information, adolescents nevertheless use the specific possibilities of the platform to present themselves by changing their Bitmoji appearance when they no longer like it and by sending roundsnaps to increase their snapscores.

Overarching forms of social media self-presentation and their relationship with individual and structural influencing factors

RQ2 examined the overarching forms of self-presentation among adolescents. The PCA, following removal of two items due to an insufficient or inconsistent factor loading, identified three factors accounting for 54.72% of the variance (Table A2). The PCA of

the Instagram and Snapchat user subsamples indicated the same three factors as for the overall sample. Items with a factor loading of ≥ .50 were combined to form three mean indices: (a) staged self-presentation (six items, $M = 3.2$, $SD = 0.76$, $\omega = .77$), (b) authentic self-presentation (three items, $M = 3.0$, $SD = 0.81$, $\omega = .64$), and (c) presentation of everyday life (two items, $M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.66$, $r_s = .35$). Although the index "authentic self-presentation" obtained a lower McDonald's Omega, we included it in the data analysis because it relates to a freer self-presentation (including posting emotional and sponta-neous content), as recently discussed in the literature (Gorea, 2021; Huang & Vitak, 2022; Kreling et al., 2022). The three items of the index "authentic self-presentation" also showed satisfactory discriminatory power, and the index has good homogeneity. Aiming at a deeper depiction of the identified forms of self-presentation, we examined their relationship with gender, used platform, and general social media use. To answer RQ3 and RQ4, we examined the influence of perceived benefits, audience size, and anticipated feedback on the identified forms of self-presentation. We report the results addressing RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 conjointly for each of the three identified self-presentation forms.

Staged self-presentation

Adolescents who present themselves in a staged manner carefully plan their appearance in their photos or videos by posing and showing a lot of skin. They also enhance their looks by editing their photos or videos with filters. These results are in line with findings from other studies that have shown that adolescents' self-presentation on social media shows their most favorable aspects (Chae, 2017; Chua & Chang, 2016; Metzler & Scheithauer, 2017). The factor "staged self-presentation" also contains the practices of adding stickers to be on trend, and unfollowing/unfriending other accounts to show one's dislike. Hence, our results illustrate that staged self-presentation on social media plat-forms includes both active selection and editing of content and active deselection of content – a practice that has seldom been addressed in previous studies on social media self-presentation. It illustrates that self-presentation is a dynamic and recursive process (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) in which individuals evaluate the effectiveness of their behavior in achieving their goals. When an account no longer matches users' interests or beliefs, they unfollow it to suppress information that does not fit their desired impression.

The participants who identified themselves as female presented themselves in a staged manner significantly more often than participants who identified themselves as male, $t(988,653) = -6.45$, $p < .001$, $d = .41$, 95% CI [−0.40, −0.21]. We found no significant differ-ence between Instagram and Snapchat users, $t(1000) = 0.47$, $p = .640$, $d = .03$, 95% CI [−0.07, 0.12]. Thus, both platforms were used equally for staged self-presentation.

Due to statistically relevant differences in adolescents' use regarding frequency of posting, $t(999) = -5.80$, $p < .001$, $d = .37$, 95%-CI [−0.57, −0.28] and frequency of posting a photo or video on which they are shown, $t(986,284) = -5.01$, $p < .001$, $d = .32$, 95%-CI [−0.60, −0.26], we conducted the Spearman's rank correlation analysis separately for each subsample (Table A3 and Table A4). The Instagram subsample showed small to moderate positive associations between the frequency of adolescents presenting themselves in a staged manner and the frequency of posting a photo or video ($r_s = .26$, $p < .001$) as well as the frequency of posting a photo or video on which they are shown ($r_s = .29$, $p < .001$). Snapchat users showed a small positive correlation between staged self-presentation and

frequency of users posting a photo or video on which they are shown ($r_s = .26$, $p < .001$). A statistically significant association was also evident between staged self-presentation and the general frequency of posting a photo or video on Snapchat ($r_s = .11$, $p = .02$); however, this effect was rather marginal, indicating that Snapchat users put extra effort into strategically crafting photos or videos that could be seen and evaluated by other users.

The Spearman's rank correlation analysis also showed significant positive associations between staged self-presentation and perceived benefits for one's anticipated socialization and oneself (Table A5). Adolescents who perceived posting photos or videos on Instagram/Snapchat as beneficial for their future socialization ($r_s = .45$, $p < .001$) and for themselves ($r_s = .34$, $p < .001$) reported presenting themselves in a staged manner more frequently.

We also examined whether staged self-presentation is associated with the perceived audience size and with anticipated feedback. The number of Instagram followers or Snapchat friends, $t(745,082) = 6.16$, $p < .001$, $d = .39$, 95% CI [53.56, 103.66], and the account settings (i.e., private to public account), $t(990,432) = -2.46$, $p = .01$, $d = .16$, 95% CI [−0.13, −0.01], differed significantly between the subsamples; therefore, we again conducted separate analyses for Instagram and Snapchat. Instagram users reported having more followers and more often having a public account. Our analysis revealed positive correlations between staged self-presentation and both variables, with stronger effects in the Instagram subsample. We found moderate positive associations between staged self-presentation and audience size ($r_s = .39$, $p < .001$) and anticipated feedback (r_s = .33, $p < .001$), indicating that the audience size as well as anticipated feedback influences the way adolescents present themselves. This results in a more controlled and strategic self-presentation when they perceive their audience to be larger due to a higher number of followers and when they expect to gain more feedback via likes. We found similar results on Snapchat, where staged self-presentation also correlated moderately positively with the perceived audience size ($r_s = .33$, $p < .001$). The smaller effect sizes (compared to the correlation between staged self-presentation and perceived audience size) could reflect the fact that Snapchat users reported having significantly fewer Snapchat friends than Instagram users reported having followers, $t(745,082) = 6.16$, $p < .001$, $d = .39$, 95%-CI [53.56, 103.66]. We also found significant correlations between anticipated feedback and staged self-presentation on Snapchat ($r_s = .29$, $p < .001$). Based on the effect size, the possible influence of feedback anticipation on the staged self-presentation can be expected to be weaker on Snapchat than on Instagram. Whereas receiving likes on Instagram is inherently connected to positive feedback, received views on Snapchat may not necessarily be interpreted in the same way by users.

Authentic self-presentation

Authentic self-presentation is characterized by spontaneous posting of photos or videos. This can also include showing negative emotions or embarrassing situations in one's content. Our results showed that participants present themselves as equally authentic whether they identified as female or male. We found that authentic self-presentation was significantly more often reported on Snapchat than on Instagram, $t(999,485) = -4.15$, $p < .001$, $d = .26$., 95%-CI [−0.31, −0.11], although the effect size suggested a rather marginal practical impact. Nevertheless, our results are in line with prior research reporting that

Snapchat, due to its ephemerality, is used especially for spontaneous and less favorable self-presentation (T. R. Choi & Sung, 2018; S. Choi et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2016). Spearman's rank correlation analysis again revealed that authentic self-presentation is positively associated with the frequency of posting a photo or video ($r_s = .24$, $p < .001$), and posting a photo or video showing oneself on Instagram ($r_s = .25$, $p < .001$). On Snapchat, we found statistically significant but marginal correlations between authentic self-presentation and the frequency of posting a photo or video ($r_s = .11$, $p = .01$) or posting a photo or video of oneself ($r_s = .16$, $p < .001$).

We examined the influencing factor perceived benefits as a relevant driver of self-presentation and found a significant but marginal positive correlation between authentic self-presentation and perceived benefits for one's anticipated socialization ($r_s = .18$, $p < .001$) but no significant correlation with benefits for themselves ($r_s = .06$, $p = .059$).

We also examined the associations between authentic self-presentation and the perceived audience size as well as anticipated feedback. For Instagram authentic self-presentation was associated only to a small extent with the perceived size of the audience ($r_s = .23$, $p < .001$) and marginally associated with anticipated feedback ($r_s = .19$, $p < .001$). The latter result implies that Instagram users who present themselves as authentic do so regardless of their anticipation of positive feedback. Likewise, authentic self-presentation seems to gain less positive feedback in terms of likes on Instagram than is gained with staged self-presentation. For Snapchat, the audience size ($r_s = .30$, $p < .001$), as well as anticipated feedback ($r_s = .31$, $p < .001$), is moderately positive correlated to an authentic self-presentation.

Presentation of everyday life

The third factor is presenting one's hobbies or interests and showing special events in one's photos and videos. Presentation of everyday life is a widespread form of self-presentation ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.66$) and equally common on both platforms, $t(1000) = -2.62$, $p = .005$, $d = .17$., 95%-CI [−0.19, −.03], regardless of whether participants identified as female or male, $t(1000) = -2.26$, $p = .012$, $d = .14$., 95%-CI [−0.18, −0.01]. We found significant correlations between the presentation of everyday life and (a) users frequency of posting a photo or video, (b) users frequency of posting a photo or video on which they are shown, (c) audience size, and (d) anticipated feedback; however, none of the correlations implied relevant practical impact due to their marginal effect sizes. These results further strengthen the assumption that the presentation of everyday life can be seen as a rather global and independent form of presenting oneself on social media. Nevertheless, presentation of their everyday lives is not only very prevalent among adolescents, but their perception of benefiting from presenting their everyday lives seems to be a relevant influencing factor: We found a small correlation with perceived benefits for one's anticipated socialization ($r_s = .18$, $p < .001$) and moderate correlation with perceived benefits for oneself ($r_s = .28$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

This study explored how adolescents present themselves on Instagram and Snapchat by utilizing a variety of different options that the platforms offer and examined the relationship between overarching forms of self-presentation and relevant influencing

factors. Our findings illustrate that adolescents present themselves through a variety of different practices on Instagram and Snapchat – both practices that actively promote a particular impression and practices that aim to protect users from a deterioration of their image (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Adolescents not only select, edit, and post content on social media platforms, but also change or delete it to convey a particular impression of themselves. Thus, the results of our study demonstrate the benefit of adopting a more holistic view of self-presentation on social media and understanding self-presentation as a dynamic and recursive process (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). In this process, individuals evaluate whether they have achieved their desired impression, possibly changing their self-presentation behavior, and adapting existing impressions of themselves. Future quantitative studies may benefit from integrating these diverse self-presentation practices into their analyses to approach as closely as possible the everyday practices of adolescents and appreciate their creativity when presenting themselves on social media.

We identified three overarching forms of self-presentation on Instagram and Snapchat: staged self-presentation, authentic self-presentation, and presentation of everyday life. All three forms are evident on both studied platforms. This is especially noteworthy for Instagram, since self-presentation on Instagram has often been reduced to conveying positive or ideal impressions (Chua & Chang, 2016; Hollenbaugh, 2021; Stsiampkouskaya et al., 2021). As our results show, Instagram is also used for a more authentic and spontaneous self-presentation (see also Hernández-Serrano et al., 2022; Kreling et al., 2022). Snapchat is often described as a platform on which users can express themselves more freely by spontaneously and informally sharing activities, thoughts, and emotions, as well as sharing creative and funny content (Kreling et al., 2022; Piwek & Joinson, 2016; Xu et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the results of our study show that adolescents also present themselves on Snapchat in a staged manner, as the prevalence of staged self-presentation and authentic self-presentation did not differ significantly between Instagram and Snapchat. Regarding the overlap of staged and authentic self-presentation, future research should explore adolescents' self-presentation on different features within one platform in greater depth (e.g., Posts, Stories, Reels/Spotlights).

We also found relevant differences between Instagram and Snapchat, suggesting that some practices are more common on one platform than on the other. For instance, spontaneously posting content is considered more common on Snapchat than on Instagram. These differences also demonstrate that the specific features of each platform are part of the platforms' appeal (such as changing the appearance of one's Bitmoji on Snapchat) and adolescents' self-presentation on these platforms. Hence, our results highlight the importance of assessing both similar as well as unique self-presentation possibilities when studying different social media platforms.

We found no gender differences of practical significance for authentic self-presentation and presentation of everyday life; however, the frequency of staged self-presentation was more prevalent among adolescents who identified themselves as female. The reported relationship between gender and staged self-presentation is in line with previous research showing that women and girls perceive femininity as something that is defined by physical attractiveness (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015; Kapidzic & Herring, 2015; Manago et al., 2008; Yau & Reich, 2019). Hence, the results of our study confirm that gender roles play an important role in adolescents' social media self-

presentation and that traditional gender stereotypes may still be persistent (Butkowski et al., 2020; Van Oosten et al., 2017).

Our results indicate that the perceived audience size, as well as the anticipation of feedback, influence the way adolescents present themselves on Instagram, resulting in a more staged self-presentation. This agrees with Jackson and Luchner (2018), who indicated that receiving positive feedback, such as likes, can be suspected to evoke a more selective and favorable self-presentation. Because authentic self-presentation was only marginally associated with both factors, we assume that authentic self-presentation on Instagram is less driven by these factors. Likewise, authentic self-presentation seems to gain less positive feedback than staged self-presentation in terms of likes on Instagram. Using social media platforms such as Instagram is often characterized by context collapse, the flattening of multiple audiences into one unspecific group (Vitak, 2012). This may lead Instagram users to present themselves in a more controlled and strategic manner. On Snapchat, both staged and authentic self-presentation were positively associated with the number of Snapchat friends and the average number of views participants reported to receive for their photos or videos. While anticipated feedback is only related to staged self-presentation on Instagram, it is related to both staged and authentic self-presentation on Snapchat. Receiving likes on Instagram and receiving views on Snapchat may possibly have different values for the surveyed adolescents. Whereas likes on Instagram may express positivity and acceptance toward one's self-presentation, views on Snapchat may function as a more neutral feedback. While positive feedback can lead to a more selective and favorable self-presentation, neutral feedback can encourage adolescents to go beyond like-seeking and strive for both a staged and an authentic self-presentation.

Limitations and future research

This study has many strengths: It comprised a representative sample of 14- to 16-year-old adolescents from Germany and identified the multilayered self-presentation practices they apply on Instagram and Snapchat, as well as their association with both individual and structural influencing factors. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the use of self-reported measures required participants to reflect on their self-presentation on Instagram and Snapchat over the last four weeks. Most participants reported using several social media platforms, raising the possibility that their responses were not distinct. Second, our results are mostly based on correlation analyses; thus, they indicate an existing relationship between the different types of self-presentation and influencing factors, but do not allow us to assess causality. Future studies should investigate these relationships using experimental designs or longitudinal studies, which may also examine motivational factors for and consequences of different forms of self-presentation. Third, although we hope that our measure of self-presentation practices will inspire future quantitative studies of self-presentation on social media, we acknowledge that its validity has not yet been tested, for example, by examining its correlation with other scales. Moreover, the index "authentic self-presentation" obtained a lower McDonald's Omega and the index "presentation of everyday life" consisted of only two items. The development of reliable measures of social media self-presentation that examine different practices of self-presentation should be considered in future studies. Finally, the context of our

study is Germany and thus our results are specific to this country. Although the self-presentation practices of German adolescents may be similar to those of adolescents in other Western democracies, self-presentation depends on individuals' characteristics, the social context, and the availability of the social media platform in a country. Therefore, future studies should examine adolescents' self-presentation practices in cross-national studies.

Conclusion

Our study findings suggest that adolescents' self-presentation on Instagram and Snapchat is more diverse than previously assumed. Building on existing research, we identified common self-presentation practices and overarching forms of self-presentation among German adolescents and their association with individual (gender, social media use, perceived benefits) and structural (audience size and anticipated feedback) influencing factors. Our findings encourage future research to study social media self-presentation more holistically and consider the various technical features that Instagram and Snapchat provide for multilayered forms of self-presentation.

The results of our study can serve adolescents as a basis for reflecting their own self-presentation practices on social media by comparing their self-presentation with the common practices of their peers, and making a conscious, reflected decision for or against certain self-presentation practices. As the results show, staged self-presentation is particularly widespread among female adolescents. Hence, parents and educators can help encourage adolescents to present themselves more authentically on social media. Our study findings also suggest that adolescents value the opportunities offered by the platforms for a more authentic self-presentation. This could encourage social media platforms to integrate even more opportunities for authentic self-presentation into their features (such as Instagram's decision to introduce ephemerality in Stories or allow hiding of likes), giving adolescents greater control over their self-presentation on social media.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The data are available on https://osf.io/6rdfe/.

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