



Behind the Screen: A Qualitative Study of Digital Masking, Screen Time, and Self-Esteem among College Students

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored how college students experience and manage a curated, or “masked,” online identity, and how this practice, together with daily screen time, relates to self-esteem. Using a phenomenological design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 undergraduate students (ages 18–23) enrolled at a four-year university. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Four themes emerged: (a) the curated self as a form of digital masking, (b) upward social comparison and its emotional toll, (c) screen time as both escape and entrapment, and (d) growing awareness and selective resistance to performative online behaviour. Participants described a persistent gap between their online self-presentation and their private sense of self, a gap that many linked to fluctuating self-esteem, particularly during high-use periods. Findings suggest that interventions aimed at improving college students’ well-being should address not only the quantity of screen time but also the psychological labour involved in maintaining an idealised online persona. Implications for campus mental health programming and directions for future research are discussed.

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Introduction

College students today navigate their social, academic, and personal lives through screens. Smartphones and social media platforms have become primary spaces for self-expression, connection, and comparison (Twenge et al., 2018). Alongside this shift, researchers have documented a phenomenon in which individuals present a polished, idealised, or “masked” version of themselves online, a curated identity that may differ substantially from their private, offline self (Goffman, 1959; Hogan, 2010). For college students, who are simultaneously navigating identity development and increased independence, the pressure to maintain this digital mask may carry significant psychological weight.

Self-esteem, broadly defined as an individual’s overall evaluation of their own worth (Rosenberg, 1965), has long been recognised as sensitive to social feedback and comparison. Social media intensifies these processes by making comparison constant, quantifiable (through likes, comments, and followers), and visually curated (Fardouly et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2014). At the same time, rising screen time has been linked to declines in psychological well-being among young people (Twenge et al., 2018). What remains less understood, particularly from a qualitative standpoint, is how college students themselves describe the lived experience of maintaining an online mask, and how they connect this practice to their own self-esteem and screen use.

This study addresses that gap by asking college students directly about their experiences. Rather than measuring self-esteem and screen time as separate variables, this research treats masking, screen time, and self-esteem as intertwined and asks participants to make sense of the connections in their own words.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how college students experience digital self-presentation (“masking”) and screen time, and how these experiences relate to their self-esteem. The study was guided by three research questions.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do college students describe the process of curating or “masking” their identity online?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do college students describe the relationship between their screen time and their sense of self-worth?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What strategies, if any, do college students use to manage or resist pressure to maintain an online mask?

Significance of the Study

Understanding these dynamics in students' own words can inform campus counseling services, digital wellness programming, and peer-support initiatives. While quantitative research has established correlations between screen time, social media use, and self-esteem, qualitative inquiry can surface the meaning-making processes underneath those numbers why students engage in masking, what it costs them emotionally, and how they attempt to cope.

Literature Review

Screen Time and Psychological Well-Being

A growing body of research links heavier screen and social media use to lower psychological well-being among adolescents and young adults. Twenge et al. (2018) found that increases in screen time after 2012 corresponded with declines in life satisfaction, self-esteem, and happiness among U.S. adolescents, with effects most pronounced for social media and gaming. However, other scholars caution that the relationship is not uniformly negative and may depend heavily on how technology is used passively scrolling and comparing versus actively connecting with others (Vogel et al., 2014).

Self-Presentation and the Curated Self

Goffman's (1959) foundational work on self-presentation described social life as a kind of performance in which individuals manage impressions through a "front stage" self, reserving a more authentic self for "backstage" moments. Hogan (2010) extended this framework to social media, arguing that platforms function less like live performances and more like curated exhibitions, where users selectively display only their most favorable moments. This curation referred to in the present study as digital masking — allows users to control how they are perceived, but may also create a persistent gap between one's online image and private self-concept.

Social Comparison and Self-Esteem

Social comparison theory suggests that individuals evaluate their own worth relative to others, and that upward comparisons (comparing oneself to those perceived as better off) can diminish self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014). Chou and Edge (2012) found that heavier Facebook users were more likely to believe that others were happier and had better lives, a bias attributed to the fact that users primarily see curated highlights rather than the full range of others' experiences. Fardouly et al. (2015) similarly found that exposure to appearance-focused content on social media increased body image concerns among young

women. Together, these studies suggest that the curated content students consume and produce may erode self-esteem through repeated comparison.

Gaps in the Literature

Much of the existing research relies on quantitative, survey-based methods that establish correlations between screen time, social media use, and self-esteem but say little about how students themselves interpret and experience these dynamics. Few studies explicitly examine “masking” as a named, lived practice from the perspective of college students, or explore the coping strategies students develop in response. This study addresses that gap using a qualitative, phenomenological approach.

Method

Research Design

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of college students regarding digital masking, screen time, and self-esteem. Phenomenology is well suited to research questions that ask what an experience is like and how individuals make meaning of it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than testing hypotheses, this design prioritised rich, first-person descriptions of participants’ experiences with online self-presentation.

Participants

Twelve undergraduate students (8 women, 3 men, 1 nonbinary participant), ages 18 to 23 ($M = 20.1$), were recruited from a four-year university using purposive and snowball sampling. Eligibility criteria included current full-time enrollment and self-reported daily social media use of at least one hour. Participants represented a range of academic majors and class standings (freshman through senior). Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to protect participant confidentiality.

Data Collection

Data were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews lasting 30 to 50 minutes, conducted in person and via video call according to participant preference. An interview guide included open-ended questions such as “Can you describe a time you felt pressure to present yourself a certain way online?” and “How does your screen time affect how you feel about yourself?” Follow-up probes allowed participants to elaborate on personally significant experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: (a) familiarisation with the data, (b) generation of initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the final report. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge directly from participant narratives rather than being imposed from existing theory.

Trustworthiness

Consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research, several strategies were used to strengthen the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings. These included member checking (sharing preliminary themes with participants for feedback), peer debriefing, an audit trail documenting analytic decisions, and reflexive journaling to help the researcher remain aware of personal assumptions about social media use throughout data collection and analysis.

Findings

Four major themes emerged from the analysis: (a) the curated self as a form of digital masking, (b) upward comparison and its emotional toll, (c) screen time as escape and entrapment, and (d) awareness and selective resistance.

Theme 1. Presenting an Ideal Self on Social Media

Most participants reported carefully selecting photographs and posts to present a more confident, successful, and attractive image of themselves. They explained that they invested considerable effort in managing how others perceived them online. This finding supports the concept of self-presentation proposed by Erving Goffman (1959), who suggested that individuals consciously manage the impressions they create for others. It is also consistent with the work of Sherry Turkle (2011), who argued that digital environments encourage the construction of idealised online identities.

"I'll take like thirty pictures just to post one. It's not even that I look that different in them; it's more like... I'm choosing the version of me that looks like I have it together." (*Maria, Sophomore*)

Several participants also described a gap between their online identity and their real-life experiences, suggesting that social media often functions as a space for presenting an ideal rather than an authentic self.

“Online I’m funny and chill and doing great. In real life I’m stressed and kind of a mess most of the time. It’s like two different people, and only one of them is real.” (*Jordan, Senior*)

Theme 2. Comparing Themselves with Others

Participants frequently reported comparing themselves with the carefully curated posts of others on social media. Although they recognised that most users share only positive aspects of their lives, these comparisons still negatively affected their self-esteem. This finding is consistent with Leon Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, which explains that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing themselves with others.

“I know logically that everyone is posting their highlight reel. But at 1 a.m. scrolling through it, logic kind of goes out the window and I just feel like I’m behind everyone else.” (*Priya, Junior*)

Participants reported that such comparisons often reduced their confidence regarding their appearance, academic performance, and social life.

Theme 3. Social Media as Both Comfort and Stress

Participants described social media as a temporary escape from stress and negative emotions. However, many acknowledged that prolonged use often left them feeling more distressed, creating a cycle of dependence. This finding is consistent with the compensatory internet use perspective proposed by Giuseppe Riva and colleagues (2016), which suggests that individuals may use online platforms to cope with negative emotions, even though excessive use can worsen psychological well-being.

“When I’m stressed, I open the app without even thinking about it. It feels like relief for like five minutes, and then I look up and an hour is gone, and I feel worse than when I started.” (*Devon, Freshman*)

Several participants explained that social media became both a coping strategy and a source of increased stress and low self-esteem.

Theme 4. Developing Healthier Social Media Habits

Most participants demonstrated awareness of the negative effects of excessive social media use and described adopting healthier habits, such as limiting screen time, unfollowing accounts that promoted unhealthy comparisons, and posting more authentic content. These findings are consistent with research by Larry D. Rosen (2017), which emphasises the importance of mindful technology use and self-regulation in promoting digital well-being.

“I started posting stuff that isn’t perfect on purpose messy room, no makeup, whatever. It felt scary at first, but it also felt like I was taking the mask off a little.” (*Sam, Junior*)

Although participants acknowledged occasionally returning to previous habits during stressful academic periods, their experiences reflected an active effort to develop a healthier and more balanced relationship with social media.

Discussion

This study explored how college students experience digital masking, screen time, and self-esteem in their own words. Findings suggest that masking is experienced not as an occasional performance but as an ongoing, effortful practice with real emotional costs — consistent with Goffman’s (1959) and Hogan’s (2010) theorising about curated self-presentation. Participants’ descriptions of upward comparison and its toll on self-esteem align closely with prior quantitative findings (Chou & Edge, 2012; Fardouly et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2014), while adding texture to how that comparison actually feels and unfolds in daily life.

The theme of screen time as both escape and entrapment extends existing well-being research (Twenge et al., 2018) by highlighting a self-reinforcing cycle: low self-esteem prompts screen use for comfort, but that same use often deepens the very comparison and inadequacy that lowered self-esteem in the first place. This cyclical pattern may help explain why simple recommendations to “reduce screen time” are often difficult for students to sustain the behavior is emotionally functional even when it is self-defeating.

Importantly, participants were not uniformly passive. The theme of awareness and selective resistance suggests that many students have already developed informal strategies curated unfollowing, intentional unfiltered posting, temporary breaks that could be formalized and supported through campus programming, such as digital wellness workshops or peer-led social media literacy initiatives.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The sample was drawn from a single university and was relatively small ($N = 12$), limiting transferability to other populations or institutional contexts. Self-report interview data are subject to social desirability bias, particularly given the sensitive nature of discussing self-esteem. Finally, the cross-sectional design captured a single point in time and cannot speak to how these experiences may change across a student’s college career.

Future Research

Future studies could employ longitudinal qualitative designs to track how masking practices and self-esteem shift over the course of a college career, or combine interviews with experience-sampling methods to capture in-the-moment emotional responses to screen use. Comparative studies across institution types, or between platforms with different affordances (e.g., ephemeral content versus permanent posts), may also clarify which specific features of digital environments most strongly influence masking behaviour and self-esteem.

Conclusion

College students in this study described digital masking as an effortful, emotionally costly practice closely intertwined with their screen time and self-esteem. While participants recognised the artificiality of curated content, this awareness did not fully protect them from its effects, and screen time often functioned as both a refuge from and a contributor to feelings of inadequacy. At the same time, participants' strategies of awareness and resistance point toward realistic, student-generated starting points for intervention. Supporting students in narrowing the gap between their online and offline selves may be a more productive target for campus mental health efforts than screen time reduction alone.

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