

Is Your Digital Identity Stopping You From Self-Actualizing?

By **Tolu Aibana**

No one posts the shitty aspects of their life online.

You're probably aware that comparing yourself to pictures of photoshopped celebrities or models online can be terrible for your self-esteem. However, constantly creeping others profiles might not be the only thing making you feel bad on social media.

In fact, creeping yourself might be doing some damage too.

Many would like to think that the person they claim to be online is a close approximation of themselves. However, although you may not have a celebrity marketing team managing your social media account, your DIY profile may not be as authentic either.

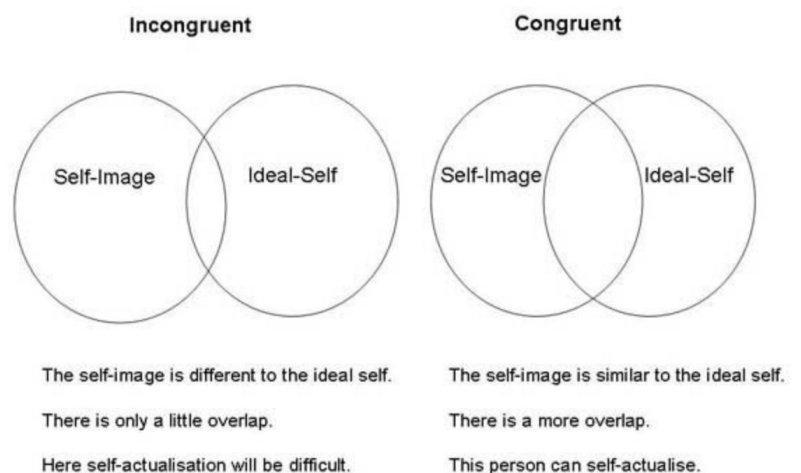
Your Actual v.s Your Ideal Self

People aim to self-actualize to improve their self-esteem and fulfill their potential. Psychologist Carl Rogers explained that people have an instinctive desire to achieve self-actualization by aligning their actual self and their ideal self. He says the actual self is the representation of the attributes that you believe you possess. Meanwhile, the ideal self is a representation of the attributes you'd ideally like to possess.

Essentially, the actual self is who you are intrinsically, while the ideal self is who you'd like to become.

When you're progressing toward your aspirations, you'll feel a greater sense that your actual self and ideal self are in alignment. Thus, when these self-representations are consistent, you'll be able to achieve a higher sense of self-worth.

There can be major consequences when these two selves aren't aligned. Psychologist Edward Higgins elaborates on the relationships between these self-representations with the Self-Discrepancy Theory. This theory says that when there's a significant gap between the actual self and the ideal self, you're likely to feel emotional distress. This reaction is because when you feel like who you are intrinsically could never amount to the person you wish you were you'll have a lower sense of self-esteem. The inability to become your ideal self leads to you feeling inept and worthless which stops you from attaining self-actualization.



Identity Performativity in the Digital Realm

Social media platforms have allowed people to share their identities for audiences ranging from the hundreds to millions of people. Judith Butler's ideas surrounding identity performativity can be used to understand how these platforms are allowing users to construct their digital identities.

Performativity is the idea that a person's identity is constructed through the habitual performance of gestures and behaviors. Meaning that your identity doesn't stem from anything essential within you but is a creation of speech acts and symbolic communication.

Identity performativity applies to the online world, in that social media platforms allow users to construct and reaffirm their identity. Thus, the act of choosing what pictures you upload, what information to share, etc. are behaviours you engage in to perform your identity online.

Most people choose to share the best aspects of themselves online, meaning that it's the ideal self-being represented. Daily use of social media not only allows people to externalize their ideal selves online, but it also causes them to repeatedly acknowledge the misalignment between their actual self and ideal self.

In fact, the magnitude of a user's audience can amplify the importance of their ideal self. This level of social pressure can lead people to construct an enhanced misrepresentation of who they wish they were. As a result, this greater widens the gap between the actual self and the ideal self.

Case Study

In 2015, The Guardian published an article discussing the pressure social media platforms place on the personal lives of young women. The publication interviewed several young women ranging from 18–24 on their feelings towards their online profiles.

One woman shared "there have been times where I have felt pressured to make a photo or memory of myself look a certain way because I'm presenting it on Instagram". Another woman claimed "sometimes when I post a photo of myself, I end up taking 20 different pictures and choosing the best one. It can get depressing at times".

These statements show the burden people will take to create an artificial idealized self for the public. The level of effort taken to construct these identities makes the women more aware of the gap between who they intrinsically are and who they aspire to be.

As the use of social media platforms increases, it's important for people to realize the limitations and artificiality of social media profiles. Acknowledging these shortcomings may help one feel more comfortable to represent themselves more authentically online.

Even if you don't want to stop pretending to be an overdramatized version of yourself online, at least recognizing this construction may stop taking yourself or your profile too seriously.

