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Self-Esteem and Breadcrumbing Perpetration: The Mediating Role of Inauthentic Online Self-Presentation and Differences by Previous Breadcrumbing Experience

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Abstract
The present study aimed to examine the relationship between self-esteem and breadcrumbing perpetration and to explore the mediating role of inauthentic online self-presentation. It also examined differences in the study variables based on previous breadcrumbing experience. A quantitative approach and cross-sectional research design was used, and data were collected from 346 young adults aged 18 to 25 years through purposive sampling. Three scales were used to collect the data. Self esteem scale by Fleming and Courtney (1984). Inauthentic online self-presentation was measured using a 6 subscale of the Presentation of Online Self Scale by Strimbu et al. (2021). BREAD-ASR Questionnaire by Rodríguez-García et al. (2020). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and mediation analysis through PROCESS. Independent-samples t-tests were also used to examine differences between participants based on their previous breadcrumbing experience. The results supported all the proposed hypotheses. Overall, the study helps explain how self-esteem and inauthentic online self-presentation may be related to breadcrumbing perpetration among young adults. These findings may contribute to a better understanding of the psychological factors involved in online and romantic interactions and provide a foundation for future research on digital interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Self-Esteem, Breadcrumbing Perpetration, Inauthentic Online Self-Presentation

Introduction

People often deliberately craft and control the ways by which they present themselves to others (Strimbu et al., 2021). In the contemporary digital landscapes, identity is not restricted to the physical presence. It rather extends into online spaces and heavily influences individuals' interactions and relationships. For young adults, navigating this digital transition presents distinct psychological challenges as they frequently manage idealized online self-presentations to protect and validate their internal self-esteem (Meeus et al., 2019; Yang & Brown, 2016). Social media and online dating platforms grant users strategic control over information disclosure, enabling individuals to selectively edit and modify their personas prior to observation (Strimbu & O'Connell, 2019). Consequently, digital spaces function either as canvases for authentic identity expression or as curated tools for impression management (Ellison et al., 2006; Toh & Lee, 2022).

This capacity for strategic impression management is deeply tied to self-esteem that is the evaluative core of individual self-worth (Pounders et al., 2016). Self-esteem is positively associated with self-concept (Campbell, 1990) and studies indicate that young adults with lower self-concept frequently experience a gap between their offline and online selves, utilizing idealized digital personas as psychological buffers against social rejection (Solnik, 2024;Strimbu& O'Connell, 2019). When self-esteem is compromised, individuals are more inclined to rely on inauthentic self-presentations to secure external validation. Crucially, this strategic manipulation of one's digital persona is significantly associated with maladaptive interpersonal actions online (Willis et al., 2023).

Self-esteem may be relevant to breadcrumbing perpetration because it is related to how individuals evaluate themselves and seek social approval. In romantic relationships, some individuals may seek attention and reassurance without being ready to establish a committed relationship. Breadcrumbing allows a person to maintain another individual's interest through occasional communication without making a clear commitment. Research on breadcrumbing has discussed the possible role of self-esteem concerns and the desire for attention in this behavior (Rodríguez-García et al., 2020). However, the direct relationship between self-esteem and breadcrumbing perpetration requires further investigation. Examining these variables together may help clarify whether self-esteem is associated with individuals' involvement in breadcrumbing behavior

Modern digital communication platforms increasingly facilitate various forms of technology-mediated social neglect and distracted interactions that undermine the quality of human relationships across diverse adult contexts (Zahra et al., 2024). Among these emerging dysfunctional behaviors is breadcrumbing, which is alternatively referred to in psychological literature as 'Hansel and Gretelling' (Rodríguez-García et al., 2020). Operationalized as the practice of transmitting sporadic, low-effort signals of romantic interest to maintain another person's engagement without intent to commit, breadcrumbing relies heavily on superficial digital interaction (Daraj et al., 2023; Navarro et al., 2020b). Research investigating breadcrumbing initiators indicates that active engagement correlates with specific digital dating patterns, including online surveillance, preferences for short-term relationships (Rodríguez-García et al., 2020), higher Dark Triad traits (particularly vulnerable narcissism) and inauthentic online self-presentation (Willis et al., 2023). Since individuals with fragile self-esteem often struggle with direct relational vulnerability, online self-presentation may serve as a critical mechanism connecting self-esteem deficits to active breadcrumbing perpetration.

Online self-presentation may help explain the relationship between self-esteem and breadcrumbing perpetration. Individuals can select and modify the information they share online to create a desired impression. Previous research has linked self-esteem and other psychological characteristics with the ways individuals present themselves on social networking sites (Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Ibrahim et al., 2024). In online dating, inauthentic self-presentation has also been associated with breadcrumbing behavior (Willis et al., 2023). These findings suggest that online self-presentation may be relevant to understanding breadcrumbing perpetration. However, existing evidence does not establish that online self-presentation mediates the relationship between self-esteem and breadcrumbing perpetration. The present study therefore examines this proposed mediating role.

While existing literature has predominantly focused on victim experiences or examined how either personality or attachment insecurity connect to breadcrumbing individually (Khattar et al., 2023; Willis et al., 2023), limited research addresses individuals who occupy both recipient and perpetrator roles. Earlier research in this area has primarily investigated previous experiences of being breadcrumbed as a potential contributor to subsequent breadcrumbing perpetration (Navarro et al., 2020a). However, it remains unclear whether experiencing breadcrumbing necessarily translates into subsequent perpetration, or whether the relationship between experience and perpetration may be more complex and potentially reciprocal.

Previous experiences of breadcrumbing may be relevant to understanding individuals' later

relationship behavior. However, experiencing breadcrumbing does not necessarily mean that a person will engage in the same behavior toward someone else. Individuals may differ in their responses to previous romantic experiences and in their own patterns of online interaction. Comparing individuals who have previously experienced breadcrumbing with those who have not may help determine whether the two groups differ in breadcrumbing perpetration. Although previous research has examined breadcrumbing as a form of online dating behavior, further investigation is needed to understand how previous experience relates to individuals' own perpetration of this behavior (Rodríguez-García et al., 2020; Willis et al., 2023). The present study addresses these gaps by investigating whether individuals who report experience of breadcrumbing differ significantly in their levels of active perpetration compared to those who do not report such experience. It provides empirical insight into how digital manipulation patterns are sustained across modern dating environments.

To theoretically ground the underlying mechanisms connecting self-esteem vulnerabilities, digital impression management, and breadcrumbing engagement, this study integrates Sociometer Theory proposed by Leary et al. in 1995 (Leary, 2012) and the Hyperpersonal Model of Computer-Mediated Communication by Walther (1996). Sociometer Theory posits that self-esteem functions as a psychological gauge tracking social acceptance and relational value. Individuals with compromised self-esteem often experience heightened sensitivity to rejection. This sensitivity may prompt them to adopt protective interpersonal strategies. Within digital environments, the Hyperpersonal Model explains how asynchronous computer-mediated communication enables users to selectively construct and edit their online self-presentation. Consequently, young adults with deflated self-esteem may leverage selective online self-presentation as a compensatory buffer, maintaining control over how they are perceived while mitigating vulnerability. In turn, this reliance on curated, low-vulnerability digital interactions, facilitates maladaptive relational patterns (such as breadcrumbing) where individuals maintain intermittent romantic interest from others without risking genuine relational commitment.

Objectives

- To explore the relationship between self-esteem, inauthentic online self-presentation and breadcrumbing perpetration among young adults
- To examine the mediating role of inauthentic online self-presentation in the relationship between self-esteem and breadcrumbing perpetration among young adults

Hypotheses

H1: There will be a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and breadcrumbing perpetration among young adults

H2: There will be a significant negative relationship between self esteem and inauthentic online self presentation among young adults.

H3: There will be a significant positive relationship between inauthentic online self presentation and breadcrumbing perpetration among young adults

H4: Inauthentic online self presentation will mediate the relationship between self esteem and breadcrumbing perpetration among young adults.

H5: There will be a significant difference in self-esteem, inauthentic online self presentation and breadcrumbing perpetration between individuals with and without previous breadcrumbing experience among young adults.

Conceptual Framework

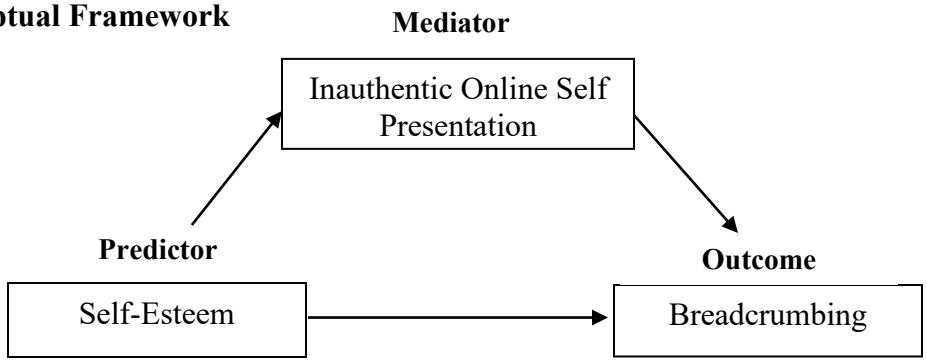


Figure 1: Modular summary for mediation of inauthentic online self presentation between self esteem and breadcrumbing among young adults.

Methodology

The present study was based on cross-sectional survey research design. Sample of the study was consisted of young adults (N = 346) after excluding incomplete and inconsistent entries from the obtained dataset. Data was collected from different universities in Sargodha division. Purposive sampling technique was used for data collection. Informed consent was obtained from the participants before administering the questionnaires

Inclusion Criteria

Participants were eligible for inclusion if they were aged 19 to 25 years, owned a smartphone or laptop with internet access, actively used at least one social media platform, and provided informed consent to participate.

Exclusion Criteria

Those individuals who were having any serious mental or physical illness were excluded from the study.

Data Collection Tools

For self-esteem, the 36-item Self-Rating Scale constructed by Fleming and Courtney (1984) was used. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert type scale and response pattern ranging from never = 0 to always= 6 Individual can minimum obtain scores 36 whereas maximum scores cannot exceed than 216. Obtained scores on this scale were interpreted in terms of low and high scores rather than cut off scores. The overall internal consistency of the scale was reported as .92

For measuring inauthentic online self-presentation, the 6 item subscale of the presentation of online-self scale (POSS) adapted by Strimbu et al. (2021) was used. It is a 5-point Likert scale and response pattern ranging from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree= 5 Individual can minimum obtain scores 6 whereas maximum scores cannot exceed than 30. Obtained scores on this scale were interpreted in terms of low and high scores rather than cut off scores It's a reliable scale with Cronbach's alpha of .87.

For breadcrumbing, the 16-item BREAD-ASR Questionnaire established by Rodríguez-García et al. (2020) was used. This is a 5-point Likert scale and response pattern ranging from never = 1 to always= 5. Individual can minimum obtain scores 16 whereas maximum scores cannot exceed than 80. Obtained scores on this scale were interpreted in terms of low and high scores rather than cut off scores. None of the items in this scale are reverse scored. The reported internal consistency reliability for this scale is .83.

Previous Breadcrumbing Experience

Have you ever experienced Breadcrumbing, where someone from the opposite gender showed

intermittent interest to keep you engaged virtually but did not pursue a serious relationship?
☐ YES ☐ NO

Procedure

After getting permission from authors of the scales used in the study, the participants were approached to collect data online. To ensure participants met the inclusion criteria, an initial dichotomous (Yes/No) screening item was included in the survey to verify active engagement with social media platforms. All the 377young adults were active social media users. However, inconsistent responses were excluded and a total of 346 valid responses were retained for analysis. The study was conducted in strict accordance with ethical standards.

Ethical Considerations

The current study was conducted with stringent adherence to ethical standards. Permission was obtained from the authors of scales used in the study. Voluntary informed consent was secured from all attendees before their participation in the study. They were informed that their data would be kept confidential. They could leave the study whenever they wish without needing to notify the researchers. In accordance with ethical guidelines regarding participant autonomy, response fields were non-compulsory, granting individuals the freedom to refrain from answering any specific item. Submissions with missing data were subsequently removed during the dataset screening process to ensure data integrity. No deception was used in the study. Additionally, participants were advised that if the study triggered any negative emotions, the researchers would provide support to address these concerns. All participants received a debriefing statement and were thanked for their participation.

Results

Table 1

Pearson Correlation among study variables

Variables	M	SD	*A*	1	2	3
Self esteem	150.48	17.71	.84	---	-.34***	-.28***
Inauthentic self presentation	19.44	3.64	.76		---	.41***
Breadcrumbing	45.76	7.61	.79			---

Note: $N = 346$, ***$p < .001$,

Table shows Pearson correlation among study variables. The findings indicate that self esteem is significant negative correlation with inauthentic online self presentation (r = -.34, p<. 001) and breadcrumbing (r = -.28, p<. 001). The inauthentic online self presentation and breadcrumbing have significant positive correlation. (r = .41, p = .001).

Table 02

Direct and Indirect Effect of Self Esteem on Breadcrumbing through Cognitive Vulnerability

		Direct Effect			Indirect Effect		
			95% CI			95% CI	
Outcomes	Predictors	*B*	*LL*	*UL*	*B*	*LL*	*UL*
IOSP	Self esteem	-.37***	-.49	-.25			
Breadcrumbing	IOSP	.33***	.24	.42	.12[a]	-.18	-.07
	Self esteem	-.15**	-.25	-.05			

Note.[a]Sobel's Z = 4.50; ***$p < .001$, IOSP = Inauthentic online self presentation

Table shows direct and indirect effect of self esteem on breadcrumbing. The R^2 value of .113 indicates that self concealment explained 11.3% variance in inauthentic online self presentation with F (1, 344) = 44.96, p < .001. The R^2 value of .196 indicates that inauthentic online self presentation and self esteem explained 19.6% variance in breadcrumbing with F (2, 344) = 40.36, p < .001. The Sobel's Z value of 4.50, p < .001 confirmed the mediating effect of inauthentic online self presentation between self esteem and breadcrumbing.

Table 03

Mean, Standard Deviation and t –values of with and without Previous Breadcrumbing Experience Self-Esteem, Inauthentic Online Self Presentation and Breadcrumbing

	With previous breadcrumbing experience (n = 140)		Without previous breadcrumbing experience (n = 206)			95% CI		
Variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t(78)*	*LL*	*UL*	*Cohen's d*
Self esteem	146.50	18.61	153.21	17.10	-3.46***	-10.53	-2.89	.38
IOSP	20.38	3.79	18.80	3.51	3.97***	.80	2.36	.44
Breadcrumbing	49.50	8.21	43.19	7.19	7.54***	4.67	7.95	.83

Note: N = 346, ***p < .001, IOSP = Inauthentic online self presentation

Table shows mean, standard deviation and *t*-values for with previous breadcrumbing experience and without previous breadcrumbing experience participants on self-esteem, inauthentic online self presentation and breadcrumbing. Results indicate significant mean differences on all study variables.

Discussion

Online platforms have become an integral part of how individuals initiate, develop, and maintain interpersonal and romantic relationships. Social media, dating applications, and messaging platforms allow individuals to connect with both known and previously unfamiliar people, initiate conversations, develop emotional or romantic interest, and maintain intimacy across geographical boundaries (Gioia & Boursier, 2022). Although these digital environments have expanded opportunities for forming and sustaining romantic connections, they have also created challenges in interpersonal communication, including deception, ambiguity, and inconsistent patterns of relational engagement. Such behaviors are particularly relevant in online romantic interactions, where communication can be initiated, maintained, reduced, or withdrawn without the level of direct interpersonal accountability typically present in face-to-face relationships (Whitty & Joinson, 2008). One such relational behavior is breadcrumbing (Helin & Woods, 2023). The present study examined the relationships among self-esteem, online self-presentation, and breadcrumbing perpetration, as well as differences in breadcrumbing perpetration between individuals who had previously experienced breadcrumbing and those who had not.

The findings of the first hypothesis indicated a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and breadcrumbing perpetration, suggesting that higher self-esteem was associated with lower breadcrumbing perpetration. This finding is consistent with previous literature suggesting that self-esteem has significant negative relation with breadcrumbing behavior. Graff (2023), in exploring the reasons underlying breadcrumbing, reported that participants perceived individuals who engaged in breadcrumbing as sometimes having low self-esteem and seeking emotional support, affection, attention, or a sense of power over their partners. The findings further indicated that some individuals may engage in breadcrumbing to obtain attention from their partners or enhance their social image. Similarly, Khattar et al.

(2023) found that insecure attachment, including anxious and avoidant attachment, was significantly associated with breadcrumbing engagement among young adults in India and Spain. Although their study did not directly examine self-esteem, the findings suggest that individual psychological and relational vulnerabilities may be associated with breadcrumbing behavior. The stronger association differed across countries, with anxious attachment more strongly related to breadcrumbing in India, whereas avoidant attachment showed a stronger association in Spain. These findings provide broader support for the present results by highlighting the possible relevance of personal and relational vulnerabilities to breadcrumbing perpetration, although the specific relationship between self-esteem and breadcrumbing requires further investigation..

The findings of the second hypothesis demonstrated a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and inauthentic online self-presentation, suggesting that higher self-esteem was associated with lower inauthentic online self-presentation. Previous researches supported that and shown that self-esteem is associated with how individuals present themselves in online environments. Mehdizadeh (2010) found that individuals with lower self-esteem demonstrated greater Facebook activity and certain forms of self-promotional content, suggesting that self-esteem may be related to online self-presentation. Similarly, Yang and Brown (2016) found that different forms of Facebook self-presentation were associated with self-development and self-esteem. Their findings showed that broad, deep, positive, and authentic self-presentation was associated with perceived audience support, which was in turn related to higher contemporaneous self-esteem. They also found that intentional online self-presentation was associated with self-reflection and subsequent changes in self-esteem during the college transition. Together, these findings suggest that self-esteem and online self-presentation are interconnected, although the nature and direction of this relationship may vary according to the form of self-presentation and the online context.

The findings of the third hypothesis indicated a significant positive relationship between inauthentic online self-presentation and breadcrumbing perpetration, suggesting that higher inauthentic online self-presentation was associated with higher breadcrumbing perpetration. Previous research in online dating provides support for this association. Willis et al. (2023) found that vulnerable narcissism significantly predicted inauthentic self-presentation in online dating. Importantly, individuals who reported having breadcrumbed someone demonstrated significantly higher levels of inauthentic online self-presentation than those who had not engaged in breadcrumbing. The authors identified inauthentic self-presentation as a potentially relevant characteristic of individuals engaging in problematic online dating behaviors, including breadcrumbing. This finding is particularly relevant to the present study because it directly connects online self-presentation with breadcrumbing perpetration. However, the distinction between general online self-presentation and inauthentic self-presentation should be considered when interpreting these findings. Overall, the results suggest that the way individuals present themselves online may be relevant to understanding breadcrumbing behavior in romantic interactions.

The findings of the fourth hypothesis indicated that inauthentic online self-presentation partially mediated the negative relationship between self-esteem and breadcrumbing perpetration. The previous literature provides support for the relationships between the variables involved in this proposed pathway. According to Mehdizadeh (2010) and Yang and Brown (2016) demonstrated that self-esteem is associated with online self-presentation, while Willis et al. (2023) linked inauthentic online self-presentation with breadcrumbing perpetration. Taken together, these findings and the present results suggest that online self-presentation may help explain the association between self-esteem and breadcrumbing perpetration. The partial mediation further suggests that the relationship between self-esteem and breadcrumbing perpetration may involve online self-presentation as well as other factors not examined in the present study. However, given the cross-sectional nature of the study, the observed mediation should be interpreted as a statistical indirect association rather than evidence of a causal process.

Fifth hypothesis findings indicated that individuals who reported previously experiencing

breadcrumbing showed higher involvement in breadcrumbing perpetration than those who reported no previous experience. However, individuals without previous breadcrumbing experience also reported engaging in breadcrumbing behavior to some extent. Thus, breadcrumbing perpetration was not limited to individuals who had previously experienced the behavior themselves. This finding suggests that previous breadcrumbing experience may be associated with individuals' own involvement in breadcrumbing, but it does not establish that experiencing breadcrumbing causes subsequent perpetration. One possible interpretation is that individuals may occupy both the position of being breadcrumbed and, at another point, engaging in breadcrumbing themselves. Nevertheless, this interpretation should be treated cautiously because the Yes/No grouping did not establish the temporal order of these experiences. Although previous research has examined breadcrumbing as a form of online dating behavior, further investigation is needed to clarify how experiencing breadcrumbing relates to individuals' own perpetration of this behavior.

Limitations and Suggestion

The study was cross-sectional and relied on self-reported data, limiting causal interpretation and introducing possible recall and social-desirability biases. Moreover, the Yes/No grouping for previous breadcrumbing experience did not establish the temporal order of experiencing and perpetrating breadcrumbing. The findings may also have limited generalizability because of the sample characteristics and cultural context.

Future research could employ longitudinal, experimental, or cross-cultural designs with larger and more diverse samples to clarify the possible relationship between experiencing and perpetrating breadcrumbing. Given the association between online self-presentation and breadcrumbing, future studies could also examine whether some forms of breadcrumbing serve strategic or ulterior purposes, such as gathering personal information, assessing vulnerabilities, maintaining access to another person, or facilitating subsequent online exploitation.

Conclusion

Overall, the study found significant associations among self-esteem, online self-presentation, and breadcrumbing perpetration. Online self-presentation mediated the relationship between self-esteem and breadcrumbing perpetration, while individuals with previous breadcrumbing experience showed greater involvement in perpetration than those without such experience. However, breadcrumbing perpetration was also reported among individuals without previous experience. These findings highlight the potential relevance of self-esteem and online self-presentation to breadcrumbing behavior and indicate that the relationship between experiencing and perpetrating breadcrumbing requires further longitudinal investigation.

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