

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Self-presentation on social networking sites and college students' social adjustment: Basic psychological needs as mediators

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Abstract

Background: Social adjustment is critical for college students, and self-presentation on social networking sites influences adjustment outcomes. However, the effects and mechanisms of different self-presentation strategies remain unclear.

Objective: Based on self-determination theory, this study examined the effects of honest and positive self-presentation on social adjustment and tested the mediating roles of basic psychological need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, and relatedness).

Methods: This cross-sectional study included 721 college students (mean age = 18.97 ± 1.47 years; 52.43% male) from four Chinese universities. Participants completed measures of self-presentation, basic psychological need satisfaction, and social adjustment. Structural equation modeling tested the mediation model, with indirect effects estimated using bias-corrected bootstrapping (5,000 resamples).

Results: Honest self-presentation was positively associated with social adjustment ($\beta = 0.084, p < 0.05$), with partial mediation through autonomy ($\beta = 0.022$, 95% confidence interval [CI] [0.002, 0.047]), competence ($\beta = 0.047$, 95% CI [0.024, 0.077]), and relatedness ($\beta = 0.036$, 95% CI [0.016, 0.061]). Positive self-presentation was negatively associated with social adjustment ($\beta = -0.126, p < 0.01$). Relatedness showed a significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.021$, 95% CI [0.007, 0.043]), indicating suppression, whereas autonomy and competence effects were nonsignificant.

Conclusion: Honest self-presentation may promote social adjustment, whereas positive self-presentation may involve adaptive risks. Basic psychological need satisfaction is a key mechanism linking online self-expression to adjustment outcomes. These findings inform strategies for healthy social networking site use among college students.

Keywords: Social networking sites; Self-presentation; Social adjustment; Basic psychological needs; Satisfaction with basic psychological needs

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1. Introduction

With the rapid proliferation of mobile internet technologies, social networking sites (SNSs) have emerged as increasingly diverse rehearsal spaces for college students' social adjustment practices, constituting critical arenas for self-exploration, social interaction,

and relationship formation. Social adjustment denotes the ongoing process through which individuals, by actively regulating their mental and behavioral activities in social interactions, reach a condition of harmonious alignment with their surroundings.¹ As a central developmental task during the transition to adulthood, successful social adjustment fosters psychological well-being and facilitates career development among college students.^{2,3} Conversely, maladaptation has been associated with heightened depressive symptoms, elevated risks of persistent non-suicidal self-injury, and increased procrastination.^{4,5} Given the deepening integration of SNSs into the daily lives of college students, understanding how different self-presentation strategies shape social adjustment and the mechanisms underlying these effects has become an increasingly salient focus of empirical inquiry.

1.1. Self-presentation and social adjustment

Self-presentation on SNSs refers to the strategic behaviors through which individuals, by disclosing specific personal information on these platforms, consciously manage the impressions others form of them in order to construct a desired self-image.⁶ Given the nature of the content presented, extant research typically distinguishes between positive and honest self-presentation. The former emphasizes the selective display of one's positive attributes and strengths in accordance with an idealized self-image, whereas the latter entails presenting oneself in an objective and comprehensive manner, with an emphasis on the authenticity of the disclosed content. According to the ecological techno-subsystem theory, the Internet has become a significant environmental factor shaping individual development and adjustment.⁷ Relevant research has also indicated that SNS use can simultaneously sustain social connectedness and provide emotional support, while concurrently eliciting social comparison and the stigmatization of mental illness.⁸ Unlike general SNS use, which primarily reflects the frequency, intensity, or duration of platform engagement, self-presentation concerns the content individuals choose to disclose and the impressions they seek to create.⁹ Accordingly, as a prominent activity within individuals' online engagement, self-presentation on SNSs may exert multifaceted influences on college students' social adjustment. In prior research, social adjustment has generally been conceptualized as a multifaceted construct encompassing both positive and negative dimensions. On the one hand, favorable social adjustment is characterized by an individual's capacity to effectively meet environmental demands and derive positive subjective experiences from social life. Studies in this vein have frequently employed indicators such as life satisfaction¹⁰, positive affect¹¹, and social acceptance¹²

as markers of adaptive functioning. On the other hand, when individuals persistently experience need frustration or functional impairment within social contexts, maladaptive outcomes emerge. Common manifestations of social maladjustment include internalizing problems such as depressive and anxiety symptoms¹³, externalizing behavioral problems¹⁴, and negative affect¹¹, all of which are typically regarded as indicators of poor adaptation. From the perspective of self-consistency theory, individuals possess a strong intrinsic motivation to maintain coherence in their self-concept; when behavior aligns with their authentic self, they experience a sense of psychological harmony and comfort.¹⁵ Honest self-presentation on SNSs represents a concrete manifestation of this self-consistency motive within the online front-stage arena. Extant research has documented robust associations between honest self-presentation and social adjustment among college students, demonstrating positive correlations with indicators of adaptive functioning and negative correlations with markers of maladjustment. On the one hand, disclosing genuine personal circumstances on SNSs enhances subjective well-being.⁶ On the other hand, honest self-presentation can also elevate self-esteem among college students.¹⁶ Furthermore, honest self-presentation significantly enhances life satisfaction, with particularly pronounced compensatory effects observed among individuals with lower levels of self-esteem.¹⁷ Evidence from longitudinal studies further corroborates the directional nature of these relationships. Honest self-presentation prospectively predicts higher levels of self-concept clarity and lower levels of depressive symptomatology¹⁸, and over longer time frames, it positively predicts identity achievement and negatively predicts identity diffusion among college students.¹⁹ Additionally, honest self-presentation has been found to reduce fear of missing out.²⁰

According to self-enhancement theory, individuals possess a fundamental motivation to maintain and augment the positivity of their self-concept.²¹ Positive self-presentation on SNSs constitutes an overt behavioral strategy serving this motivational impetus. By selectively presenting a more idealized self-image, individuals actively construct and consolidate positive self-perceptions, thereby fulfilling the core function of self-enhancement and, in turn, promoting psychological well-being. Within undergraduate cohorts, prior literature has robustly established that positive self-presentation is significantly associated with broader indicators of effective psychological and social functioning. Specifically, this behavior has been found to directly enhance subjective well-being⁶ and bolster self-esteem.¹⁶ However, the strength of this positive relationship appears contingent upon individual differences; for instance, a significant

positive covariation between positive self-presentation and self-identity was found exclusively among college students with comparatively high mindfulness quotients.²² Moreover, longitudinal evidence further reveals that positive self-presentation prospectively predicts identity achievement status among college students.¹⁹ Systematic reviews provide converging support for these findings: positive self-presentation on SNSs is positively correlated with higher self-esteem and greater perceived social support and has been shown to improve body image and overall well-being.^{23,24}

Taken together, evidence suggests that both honest and positive self-presentation are associated with better social adjustment among college students. Grounded in self-consistency and self-enhancement theories^{15,21}, honest self-presentation may contribute to psychological adjustment by preserving congruence between individuals' online and offline selves, whereas positive self-presentation may facilitate adjustment by reinforcing favorable self-perceptions and enhancing self-worth. Consistent with these theoretical assumptions, prior research has shown that honest self-presentation is associated with greater self-concept clarity, while positive self-presentation is linked to higher self-esteem.^{16,18} Therefore, both forms of self-presentation may facilitate college students' adaptation to their social environment. However, relatively few studies have directly examined the relationship between SNS self-presentation and social adjustment. Instead, prior research has primarily focused on positive and negative psychological outcomes, such as well-being, life satisfaction, and loneliness.^{6,17,18} Although these variables reflect individuals' psychological functioning and may indirectly indicate their level of adjustment, they are more appropriately conceptualized as outcomes associated with social adjustment rather than social adjustment itself.²⁵ Unlike indicators that primarily emphasize subjective experiences or mental health status, social adjustment denotes the degree of interpersonal consonance and situational fit between individuals and their social environment. It encompasses not only individuals' evaluations of their life circumstances but also their functioning in interpersonal relationships, social role performance, and broader social functioning, representing a comprehensive state achieved through psychological and behavioral adaptation to environmental demands.²⁶ Hence, focusing on social adjustment may illuminate the developmental role of SNS self-presentation in college samples and concurrently close a relevant research gap. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were proposed:

- H1: Honest self-presentation is positively associated with college students' social adjustment.

- H2: Positive self-presentation is positively associated with college students' social adjustment.

1.2. The mediating role of basic psychological needs satisfaction

Satisfaction of basic psychological needs may serve as a central explanatory pathway linking SNS self-presentation to social adjustment among college students. According to self-determination theory, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are innate universal needs that serve as basic motivational drivers for psychological flourishing and social adaptation.²⁷ Specifically, autonomy entails volitional self-endorsement across one's actions and thoughts; competence involves perceived mastery and effectiveness in environmental interactions, and relatedness reflects felt closeness and inclusion in one's relational world. When these three needs are consistently satisfied, individuals are more likely to activate intrinsic motivation, foster self-integration, and exhibit enhanced environmental adaptability and social functioning in daily life.²⁸ Conversely, chronic thwarting of these needs may precipitate aggressive behavior or psychological distress.²⁸ Furthermore, the fulfillment of basic psychological needs exhibits a robust positive association with a broad spectrum of mental health indicators among university students²⁹, and longitudinal research has shown that it significantly and positively predicts their college adjustment.³⁰

According to the integrative model of self-determination theory, external environmental factors do not directly produce adaptive outcomes; rather, they exert their influence by facilitating or forestalling the satisfaction of basic psychological needs.²⁷ Uses and gratifications theory provides a complementary behavioral explanation: Individuals are not passive recipients of information but active users driven by distinct psychological needs, who deliberately select and utilize specific media to fulfill those needs.^{31,32} In this light, self-presentation on SNSs can be viewed as a key behavior through which college students actively seek basic psychological need satisfaction within the online environment. Empirical evidence suggests that positive self-presentation on SNSs, by selectively showcasing an idealized self-image to elicit favorable feedback from others, serves to satisfy the need for competence³³ and, through the social support thereby garnered, reinforces the need for relatedness.³⁴ Additionally, honest self-presentation builds deep interpersonal connections through candid self-expression, directly satisfying the need for relatedness, while the very ability to articulate one's inner thoughts and feelings clearly also fulfills the need for competence.³⁵ Moreover, the act of self-presentation itself entails exercising control over one's personal information, which can inherently satisfy college

students' need for autonomy.³⁶ Therefore, college students' self-presentation on SNSs, whether honest or positive in content, represents an important avenue for proactively satisfying their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Furthermore, self-determination theory posits that basic psychological need satisfaction provides an essential foundation for fostering individuals' positive development and social adjustment.³⁷ Related research has also shown that maintaining high levels of basic psychological need satisfaction over time predicts better social adjustment.³⁸ Thus, self-presentation on SNSs may enhance college students' social adjustment by facilitating the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs. Although existing research has well established the significant associations among the three constructs, systematic elucidation of the underlying mechanisms remains relatively scarce. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory, the satisfaction of basic psychological needs constitutes a core mediating pathway linking environmental support to individual adaptive functioning, with satisfaction levels robustly predicting individual differences in psychological growth and well-being.³⁹ Therefore, incorporating need satisfaction into the context of SNS use may facilitate a deeper understanding of the internal processes and mechanisms underlying college students' psychological development in the digital age. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were proposed:

- H3: Basic psychological needs satisfaction mediates the association between honest self-presentation and social adjustment.
- H4: Basic psychological needs satisfaction mediates the association between positive self-presentation and social adjustment.

1.3. The present study

Prior research reveals key gaps that the present study aims to address. First, prior research has predominantly focused on the associations between SNS self-presentation and specific indicators of social adjustment among college students, such as life satisfaction or depressive symptoms^{17,18}, with comparatively little empirical attention devoted to examining overall social adjustment. Second, the majority of studies have centered on the relationship between general SNS-use behaviors and social adjustment, whereas the specific impact of SNS self-presentation as a distinct online behavior has rarely been investigated in isolation.⁴⁰ Third, the mediating role of basic psychological needs satisfaction in the relationship between SNS self-presentation and social adjustment remains yet to be subjected to direct empirical scrutiny.

In addition, college students find themselves in

the developmental period of emerging adulthood, characterized by frequent shifts and contradictions in self-understanding, which necessitate the construction of a stable self-identity and value system.^{41,42} Moreover, as heavy users of SNSs, college students are likely to be profoundly influenced by these platforms, warranting sustained scholarly consideration.⁴³ Accordingly, examining the relationship between SNS self-presentation and social adjustment within this population not only carries considerable practical significance but also helps illuminate the distinctive mechanisms underlying youth socialization in the digital era.

To remedy the noted gaps, this study examines the link between SNS self-presentation and social adjustment among college students, with needs satisfaction serving as multiple mediators. It further assesses how honest versus positive self-presentation affects social adjustment directly and indirectly through needs satisfaction. The conceptual model is shown in [Figure 1](#).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and design

Using cluster sampling, 786 college students from four universities in China were recruited to complete the questionnaire survey in November 2025. After excluding invalid questionnaires and those with patterned responding, 721 valid responses were retained, yielding a valid response rate of 91.73%. Among the participants, 378 were male (52.43%), and 343 were female (47.57%), with 487 first-year students (67.55%). The mean age of the participants was 18.97 years (standard deviation = 1.47).

A priori sample size determination was performed via G*Power (3.1, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, Germany) under the assumptions of $f^2 = 0.10$ (small to medium), $\alpha = 0.05$, statistical power = 0.95, and five independent variables. The required n was calculated at 204; the obtained sample ($n = 721$) exceeded this criterion by a wide margin, confirming sufficient statistical power.

All procedures involving human participants were approved by the Educational and Psychological Research Ethics Committee of China Three Gorges University (protocol code: H23001) on September 6, 2023, with ethical approval valid from 2023 to 2026. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained verbally from all participants at the beginning of the questionnaire, after they had been fully informed of the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any time. All responses were collected anonymously, and confidentiality was strictly maintained.

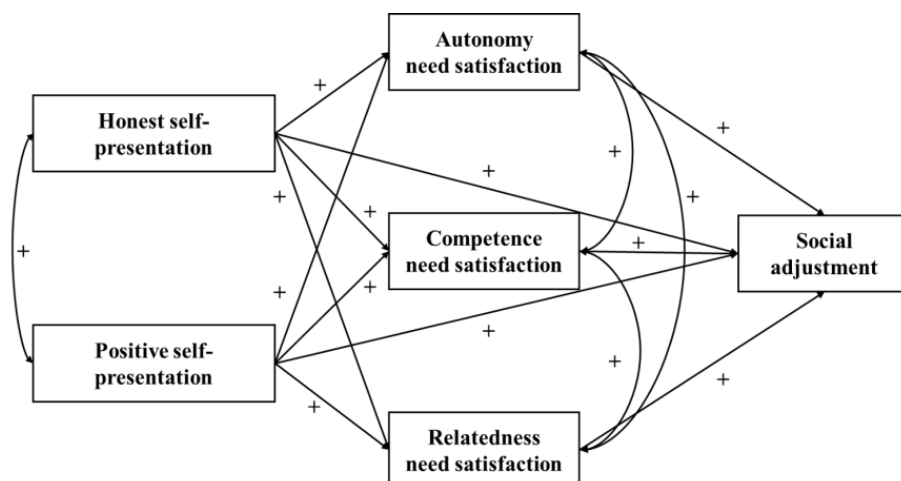


Figure 1. Conceptual model diagram

Note: "+" indicates a hypothesized positive relationship.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Honest and positive self-presentation scale

Self-presentation on SNSs was operationalized using a 10-item inventory, derived from the Positive and Honest Self-Presentation Scale originally developed by Niu *et al.*¹⁶ The measure was bifurcated into two subscales, namely the positive dimension of SNS self-presentation (six items, e.g., "Irrespective of my actual emotional state, I only share posts that portray me as being exceptionally happy") and the honest dimension (four items, e.g., "I am capable of openly expressing my unpleasant emotions"). Responses to all items were collected on a 7-point scale, with endpoints labeled 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree); higher averaged scores on the two subscales indicated greater levels of positive and honest self-presentation, respectively. In the present study, the Cronbach's α was 0.79 for positive self-presentation and 0.70 for honest self-presentation.

2.2.2. Basic psychological needs satisfaction scale

Basic psychological need satisfaction was gauged with the Chinese version of the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction Scale⁴⁴, a translation and revision of the 9-item measure originally proposed by Sheldon and Niemiec.⁴⁵ Three subdimensions were incorporated into the scale: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, each operationalized with three items (e.g., "In my life, I am free to do things my own way" for autonomy; "In my life, I have taken on and mastered difficult challenges" for competence; "In my life, I feel a close and connected bond with people who are important to me" for relatedness). A 7-point response format, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7

(strongly agree), was employed for all items. The score for each dimension was calculated as the mean of the three corresponding items. In the present study, the Cronbach's α was 0.81 for autonomy need, 0.86 for competence need, 0.85 for relatedness need, and 0.90 for the total scale.

2.2.3. Social Adjustment Diagnostic Scale

Social adjustment was measured using the Social Adjustment Diagnostic Scale developed by Zheng.⁴⁶ The scale comprises 20 items (e.g., "No matter how much my living conditions change, I can quickly adapt"). The scale was rated on a three-point Likert scale (1 = "Yes", 2 = "Uncertain", 3 = "No"), with reverse scoring applied to even-numbered items. This three-point response format has also been commonly adopted in prior applications of the scale. Higher total scores indicate better social adjustment.^{47,48} In the present study, the Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.78.

2.3. Statistical analysis

Data processing was conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 27.0, IBM, United States) and Mplus (8.3, Muthén & Muthén, USA). Specifically, descriptive statistics and correlational analyses were conducted in SPSS, and a subsequent structural equation modeling procedure was implemented in Mplus to examine mediating effects. The model's goodness-of-fit was evaluated using standard criteria, including the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR). Conventionally, CFI and TLI above 0.95, in combination with RMSEA and SRMR under 0.05, are considered to reflect satisfactory model fit.

3. Results

3.1. Common method bias control

An examination of common method bias was conducted via Harman's single-factor test, given that all variables were based on self-reports. Following the established procedure, an unrotated factor analysis was run on the full set of scale items, and the variance explained by the first unrotated factor was extracted.⁴⁹ The result of 17.38% fell well below the 40% criterion, suggesting that common method variance posed no serious concern for the present dataset.

3.2. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

Table 1 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients for all study variables. Honest self-presentation was significantly and positively correlated with autonomy need satisfaction ($r = 0.245, p < 0.001$), competence need satisfaction ($r = 0.234, p < 0.001$), relatedness need satisfaction ($r = 0.233, p < 0.001$), and social adjustment ($r = 0.178, p < 0.001$). However, the correlation between honest self-presentation and positive self-presentation was not significant ($r = 0.059, p = 0.111$). Positive self-presentation was significantly and positively correlated with relatedness need satisfaction ($r = 0.149, p < 0.001$), autonomy need satisfaction ($r = 0.073, p = 0.049$), and competence need satisfaction ($r = 0.083, p = 0.025$), but was significantly and negatively correlated with social adjustment ($r = -0.077, p = 0.040$). In addition, the three basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) showed strong positive intercorrelations ($r_s = 0.569$ – $0.643, p_s < 0.001$). Social adjustment was also significantly and positively correlated with all three basic psychological needs satisfactions ($r_s = 0.327$ – $0.373, p_s < 0.001$). These significant correlations among the study variables provided the necessary foundation for subsequent mediation analyses.

3.3. Mediation model testing

To assess the indirect role of basic psychological needs satisfaction, a structural equation model was run in Mplus with SNS self-presentation predicting social adjustment. Controlling for the covariates of gender and age, the model demonstrated good fit to the data: $\chi^2 = 8.137, df = 4, CFI = 0.996, TLI = 0.978, RMSEA = 0.038, SRMR = 0.019$. Mediation significance was assessed via bias-corrected bootstrapping (5,000 resamples). The corresponding estimates are summarized in Figure 2 and Table 2. Because the sampling distribution of indirect effects often deviates from normality, the significance of mediation effects was assessed primarily using bootstrap 95% confidence intervals (CIs). Following established conventions, a mediating effect was considered statistically significant if the 95% CI did not include zero.^{50,51}

The direct effect of honest self-presentation on social adjustment was significant ($\beta = 0.084, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.014, 0.153]$). Mediation analyses revealed that honest self-presentation exerted indirect effects on social adjustment through three distinct pathways: first, via autonomy need satisfaction ($\beta = 0.022, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.002, 0.047]$); second, via competence need satisfaction ($\beta = 0.047, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.024, 0.077]$); and third, via relatedness need satisfaction ($\beta = 0.036, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.016, 0.061]$). None of the 95% bootstrap CIs for these three pathways contained zero, indicating that all three indirect effects were statistically significant. The total effect of honest self-presentation on social adjustment was also significant ($\beta = 0.189, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.109, 0.265]$), with the three dimensions of basic psychological needs satisfaction partially mediating this relationship. Pairwise comparisons of the indirect effects were further conducted. The results indicated that the difference between the indirect effects via autonomy need satisfaction

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Honest self-presentation	4.282	1.049	1	–	–	–	–	–
2. Positive self-presentation	4.140	1.025	0.059	1	–	–	–	–
3. Autonomy need satisfaction	5.163	0.932	0.245***	0.073*	1	–	–	–
4. Competence need satisfaction	5.096	0.958	0.234***	0.083*	0.643***	1	–	–
5. Relatedness need satisfaction	5.106	1.015	0.233***	0.149***	0.569***	0.619***	1	–
6. Social adjustment	2.044	0.327	0.178***	–0.077*	0.327***	0.373***	0.334***	1

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Abbreviation: SD: Standard deviation.

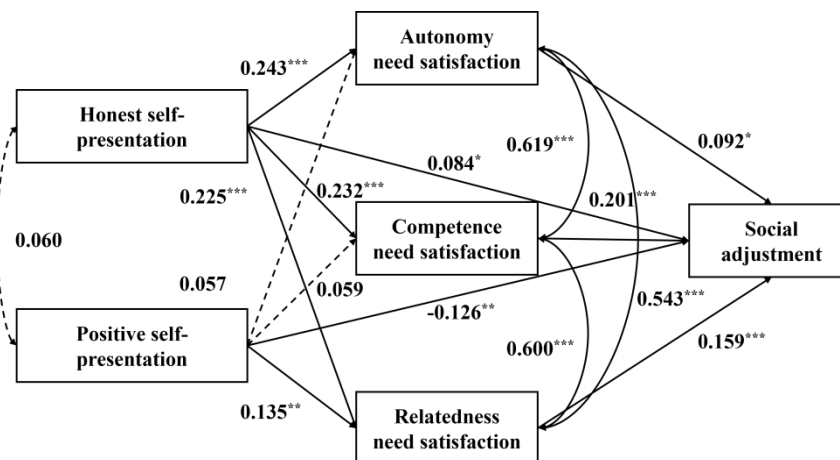


Figure 2. Standardized regression coefficients from the mediation model of the association between self-presentation on SNSs and social adjustment through basic psychological needs satisfaction

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Standardized indirect and total effects of self-presentation on social adjustment through autonomy, competence, and relatedness need satisfaction

Mediation path	β	p	95% CI	
Honest self-presentation→ Autonomy need satisfaction→ Social adjustment	0.022	0.047	0.002	0.047
Honest self-presentation→ Competence need satisfaction→ Social adjustment	0.047	<0.001	0.024	0.077
Honest self-presentation→ Relatedness need satisfaction→ Social adjustment	0.036	0.002	0.016	0.061
Direct effect	0.084	0.020	0.014	0.153
Total effect	0.189	<0.001	0.109	0.265
Positive self-presentation→ Autonomy need satisfaction→ Social adjustment	0.005	0.296	-0.001	0.019
Positive self-presentation→ Competence need satisfaction→ Social adjustment	0.012	0.180	-0.003	0.032
Positive self-presentation→ Relatedness need satisfaction→ Social adjustment	0.021	0.018	0.007	0.043
Direct effect	-0.126	0.001	-0.196	-0.054
Total effect	-0.088	0.033	-0.168	-0.007

Abbreviation: CI: Confidence interval.

and relatedness need satisfaction was not significant ($\beta = -0.004$, 95% CI $[-0.015, 0.006]$, $p = 0.419$). The difference between the indirect effects via autonomy need satisfaction and competence need satisfaction was also not significant ($\beta = -0.008$, 95% CI $[-0.020, 0.003]$, $p = 0.198$). Similarly, the difference between the indirect effects via competence need satisfaction and relatedness need satisfaction was not significant ($\beta = 0.003$, 95% CI $[-0.007, 0.016]$, $p = 0.558$).

For positive self-presentation, the direct effect on social

adjustment was significant and negative ($\beta = -0.126$, 95% CI $[-0.196, -0.054]$). Regarding the indirect pathways, only the mediating effect of relatedness need satisfaction was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.021$, 95% CI $[0.007, 0.043]$), exerting a suppressor effect. In contrast, the 95% CIs for the indirect effects via autonomy need satisfaction (95% CI $[-0.001, 0.019]$) and competence need satisfaction (95% CI $[-0.003, 0.032]$) both included zero, suggesting that these two mediating pathways were not significant.

4. Discussion

The results indicate that honest self-presentation positively predicted social adjustment, with the three needs satisfaction partially mediating this relationship. Positive self-presentation, in contrast, exhibited a negative direct effect but a positive indirect effect via relatedness satisfaction, while the remaining indirect effects were non-significant, partially supporting the hypotheses.

4.1. The relationship between self-presentation and social adjustment

The present study showed that honest self-presentation and positive self-presentation exerted markedly divergent effects on college students' social adjustment. Specifically, honest self-presentation was significantly and positively associated with social adjustment; that is, the stronger the tendency to present one's honest self on SNSs, the higher the level of social adjustment. This finding supported Hypothesis 1. Prior research has provided indirect corroboration for this relationship from various angles: honest self-presentation is not only positively correlated with positive indicators of social adjustment, such as subjective well-being and life satisfaction^{6,17}, but also negatively correlated with negative indicators, such as depression and fear of missing out^{18,20}, suggesting that honest self-presentation on SNSs may serve as a protective factor for social adjustment. According to the self-consistency theory, this congruence between one's inner and outer self helps reduce cognitive dissonance and psychological conflict¹⁵, thereby promoting psychological and physical well-being, which in turn generalizes to broader social adaptation contexts. Compared to previous studies that predominantly used specific indicators as proxies for overall adjustment, the current study directly focused on the comprehensive construct of social adjustment, thereby providing a clearer, more holistic understanding of the positive implications of honest self-presentation on SNSs.

In contrast, positive self-presentation on SNSs exhibited a negative predictive effect on social adjustment; that is, undergraduates with a stronger inclination toward positive self-presentation reported poorer social adjustment. This result contradicts the proposed Hypothesis 2 and may be explained by two possible pathways. First, drawing on self-discrepancy theory, the self-enhancement effects of positive self-presentation on SNSs may be merely transient and superficial, failing to bridge the gap between the actual and ideal selves.⁵² The more effortfully college students present a positive facade on social platforms, the more likely they are to worry that their real-life selves fall short of the

idealized image constructed online. This stark contrast may readily engender self-dissatisfaction and negative affect⁹, thereby diminishing their social adjustment. Second, from the perspective of the impostor phenomenon, individuals who habitually engage in positive self-presentation on SNSs often harbor impostor feelings: a persistent sense that they are "not good enough" or not as competent as their online persona suggests.⁵³ Such feelings are similarly detrimental to psychological and physical well-being: to sustain a carefully curated positive persona, individuals must continually engage in self-regulatory efforts while simultaneously suppressing their authentic feelings.⁵⁴ Over time, this chronic suppression and neglect of one's genuine self creates inner imbalance, which, in turn, further erodes social adjustment. In addition, extant research has demonstrated that positive self-presentation on SNSs undermines college students' life satisfaction¹⁷ and, from a longitudinal perspective, predicts the emergence of identity foreclosure status.¹⁹

Furthermore, existing research has not reached a consistent conclusion regarding the effects of positive self-presentation on SNSs. Extensive research links positive self-presentation to greater social support, self-esteem, and subjective well-being.^{6,16,23} Taken together, these findings indicate that positive self-presentation is neither inherently beneficial nor detrimental; rather, its consequences may depend on a range of contextual and individual factors. One important factor is users' underlying motivations. When positive self-presentation is primarily used to establish and maintain social relationships, it is more likely to facilitate positive psychosocial outcomes.⁵⁵ At the same time, individual characteristics may shape how people experience and interpret positive self-presentation. Individuals with low self-esteem, high neuroticism, or low mindfulness are more likely to experience self-discrepancy, engage in social comparison, and develop fear of missing out during the positive self-presentation process, thereby attenuating its potential benefits.^{17,20,22} In contrast, individuals with greater psychological resources may be better able to interpret positive self-presentation as a common form of online self-expression and, consequently, derive more positive experiences from it. Accordingly, the negative effect observed in the present study should not be interpreted as evidence that positive self-presentation is inherently maladaptive. Rather, it suggests that its influence on social adjustment is highly contingent upon both situational and individual factors. However, this study did not address these possible moderators. Future investigations might incorporate usage motives, dispositional factors, and psychosocial assets to

yield a more refined account of the conditions under which positive self-presentation facilitates or undermines social adjustment.

4.2. The mediating role of basic psychological needs satisfaction in the relationship between honest self-presentation on social networking sites and social adjustment

The findings reveal that honest self-presentation on SNSs enhanced college students' social adjustment by satisfying all three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thus supporting Hypothesis 3.

First, honest self-presentation on SNSs significantly enhanced college students' social adjustment by satisfying the relatedness need. According to social penetration theory, the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships constitute a gradual, reciprocal process of self-disclosure, wherein the breadth and depth of disclosure directly shape the intimacy of the relationship.⁵⁶ Honest self-presentation on SNSs, by sharing unfiltered personal information and genuine emotional experiences, substantially increases the depth of self-expression, accelerates social penetration, facilitates the development of social relationships, and thereby satisfies individuals' relatedness needs.⁵⁷ The satisfaction of relatedness needs, in turn, provides individuals with stable emotional bonds and social support networks, which constitute core psychological resources for coping with stress and maintaining mental health.²⁷ When students enjoy high-quality friendships and robust social support, they experience lower levels of loneliness and social anxiety and are more willing to actively engage in social interactions, thus demonstrating higher levels of social adjustment. Extant research has also confirmed that honest self-presentation is significantly and positively correlated with perceived friendship quality and social support⁵⁸, both of which are well-established predictors of social adjustment.

Second, honest self-presentation on SNSs significantly enhanced college students' social adjustment by satisfying their competence needs. When individuals present an authentic self-image on SNSs, the positive feedback they receive is not contingent upon a deliberately curated idealized persona, but rather stems from others' affirmation of their genuine traits and abilities⁵⁹, thereby satisfying their competence needs. A study by Tian *et al.*⁶⁰ further confirmed that, compared to positive self-presentation, honest self-presentation elicits greater positive feedback. The satisfaction of competence needs, in turn, substantially enhances individuals' self-efficacy and self-confidence, enabling them to believe in their capacity to navigate diverse social challenges.²⁷ This self-verification

grounded in authentic competence constitutes a form of psychological capital that equips college students to tackle challenges in novel environments, ultimately manifesting as higher levels of social adjustment.

Finally, honest self-presentation on SNSs also enhanced college students' social adjustment by satisfying their autonomy needs. Honest self-presentation encompasses the candid sharing of negative emotions and experiences of frustration; this expressive behavior is rooted in a spontaneous willingness to reveal one's true self rather than in the extrinsic motivation to garner others' approval.^{6,61} Thus, irrespective of the specific content disclosed, the process of self-expression guided by one's own volition enables individuals to experience a profound sense of behavioral autonomy. As a core tenet of self-determination theory, the satisfaction of autonomy needs strengthens individuals' intrinsic motivation, rendering their behavior more congruent with their authentic preferences and values.²⁷ When individuals engage in autonomous self-expression and decision-making, they report greater well-being and fewer negative psychological outcomes⁶², which in turn correspond to higher levels of social adjustment.

It is noteworthy that, although the indirect effects through competence need satisfaction and relatedness need satisfaction were numerically larger than those through autonomy need satisfaction, pairwise comparisons revealed that these differences were not statistically significant. Accordingly, the present findings do not support differential mediation effects among the three basic psychological needs. Nevertheless, the observed pattern may offer some preliminary theoretical insights. On the one hand, relative to autonomy need satisfaction, honest self-presentation on SNSs may be more strongly associated with competence and relatedness need satisfaction. By revealing their authentic selves, individuals implicitly communicate trust and openness to others, which may increase opportunities for positive feedback and the formation of genuine and stable interpersonal relationships.^{17,60} Such experiences may be particularly relevant to the fulfillment of competence and relatedness needs. On the other hand, this pattern may be related to the nature of social adjustment. It involves not only individuals' effective coping with the environment but also positive interpersonal interaction and social integration.²⁶ Thus, competence need satisfaction and relatedness need satisfaction, which are closely tied to a sense of environmental mastery and interpersonal connectedness, may be more directly linked to social adjustment. In comparison, autonomy need satisfaction primarily reflects individuals' experience of self-determination and autonomous choice; although its facilitating effect is also

significant, it exhibited a relatively smaller effect size in the present study. Given that the aforementioned differences did not reach statistical significance, these interpretations await further verification in future research.

4.3. The mediating role of basic psychological needs satisfaction in the relationship between positive self-presentation on social networking sites and social adjustment

The findings revealed a suppressing effect of relatedness need satisfaction on the relationship between positive self-presentation on SNSs and college students' social adjustment. This finding partially supported Hypothesis 4. Specifically, positive self-presentation exerted an indirect positive effect on social adjustment solely through the mediating role of relatedness need satisfaction. However, its direct effect on social adjustment was significantly negative, and this negative effect was stronger than the positive indirect effect, thereby rendering the total effect negative.

According to the positive illusions theory, when individuals evaluate themselves slightly more favorably than warranted by objective reality, such positive cognitive biases can serve to maintain everyday psychological well-being.⁶³ Positive self-presentation on SNSs may function as a form of positive illusion, in which individuals construct an idealized self-image in others' eyes by showcasing their strengths and accomplishments. This process can substantially enhance an individual's social attractiveness, making it easier to garner attention and "likes" from others.⁶⁴ Furthermore, in accordance with social penetration theory, even such selectively filtered self-disclosure can expand the breadth of self-disclosure, providing conversational material and emotional resonance that sustain ongoing interactions.^{56,65} Accordingly, the idealized information conveyed through positive self-presentation has been shown to positively predict higher levels of friendship quality⁵⁸, thereby satisfying individuals' relatedness needs to some extent. In turn, the satisfaction of relatedness needs enables individuals to experience a sense of belonging, which can exert a compensatory effect on their social adjustment.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, positive self-presentation ultimately functions as an illusion. To maintain an unrealistically positive self-image, individuals must continuously engage in impression management, perpetually monitoring whether their words and actions align with social expectations. This high-intensity self-monitoring consumes substantial cognitive resources and psychological energy, eventually leading to emotional exhaustion and burnout⁶⁷, which in turn diminishes their social adjustment. Thus, even though positive self-presentation on SNSs can promote college students' social

adjustment by satisfying relatedness needs, this beneficial effect is minimal, and the detrimental consequences of the self-regulatory depletion inherent in positive self-presentation exert a stronger negative influence on social adjustment.

Furthermore, the present study found that the mediating effects of autonomy need satisfaction and competence need satisfaction were not supported. Self-determination theory holds that need satisfaction requires intrinsically motivated behavior and feedback grounded in authentic performance.²⁷ Positive self-presentation, in contrast, is extrinsically driven to sustain a positive self-illusion, garnering recognition of an idealized image rather than affirmation of true competence.⁶⁸ To maintain the illusion, behavior becomes subjugated to proving superiority rather than being guided by intrinsic volition, which obstructs autonomy; research confirms that such a presentation leads to identity foreclosure.²⁰ For competence, positive self-presentation fosters an illusion of competence and overestimation of abilities, and positive self-presentation more often elicits negative feedback⁶⁹, preventing individuals from deriving genuine growth and leaving competence needs unmet.

In summary, relatedness need satisfaction functioned as a suppressor in the association between positive self-presentation on SNSs and college students' social adjustment. This finding suggests that positive self-presentation may simultaneously involve both benefits and costs. On the one hand, presenting oneself in a favorable manner may help individuals obtain social approval and maintain interpersonal connections, thereby enhancing the need for relatedness satisfaction. On the other hand, the effort devoted to constructing and maintaining a desirable online image may consume psychological resources and create pressure to uphold it over time. Consequently, although positive self-presentation may foster a sense of connectedness, its overall contribution to social adjustment may be constrained by these potential psychological costs.

4.4. Practical implications

The present findings provide practical guidance for promoting college students' social adjustment through healthier SNS use. Rather than focusing only on the amount of SNS use, universities and practitioners should pay greater attention to how students present themselves online. Since honest self-presentation was positively associated with social adjustment through autonomy, competence, and relatedness need satisfaction, counseling services and psychoeducational programs should encourage students to engage in more authentic online expression. Such practices may help students experience greater self-determination, receive feedback based on their

genuine qualities, and develop more stable interpersonal connections. In addition, interventions should address the potential risks of excessive positive self-presentation. Although presenting an idealized image may temporarily enhance relatedness by attracting social attention, its overall association with social adjustment was negative. Therefore, educators and counselors should help students recognize the psychological costs of maintaining overly curated online images, reduce dependence on external validation, and develop more balanced patterns of SNS self-presentation. These findings are particularly relevant for first-year transition programs and campus mental health education, where students can be guided to use SNSs in ways that support authentic self-expression, meaningful relationships, and adaptive social integration.

4.5. Limitations and future directions

Given the cross-sectional design, this study does not permit causal interpretation of the SNS self-presentation–adjustment relationship or its mediation through need satisfaction; future longitudinal studies are thus necessary to establish temporal priority. Moreover, the observed detrimental effects of positive self-presentation may reflect unmeasured individual differences (mindfulness, neuroticism, self-esteem). As these were excluded from our model, subsequent research should include them to delineate the conditions under which such presentations are helpful or harmful to college students. Furthermore, given that our sample overrepresented first-year students undergoing the school-to-university transition, the findings may not extend to other academic stages. Broader sampling across all years would enhance our understanding of the SNS self-presentation–social adjustment nexus. In addition, because the sample was culturally homogeneous (Chinese undergraduates), the generalizability of these results to other cultural settings is unknown. Cross-cultural designs are needed to test whether cultural context moderates the relationship between SNS self-presentation and social adjustment. Finally, SNS self-presentation is only one element of social media use, and its effects may depend on use intensity, duration, platform type, feedback, and algorithms. Yet these were unmeasured, leaving their impact unknown. Subsequent studies should add these to better clarify the SNS self-presentation–social adjustment link and its mechanisms.

5. Conclusion

The present study yielded the following conclusions: (i) Honest self-presentation on SNSs positively predicted social adjustment among college students, whereas positive self-presentation on SNSs negatively predicted social adjustment; (ii) Basic psychological needs

satisfaction partially mediated the relationship between honest SNS self-presentation and social adjustment, with honest self-presentation promoting social adjustment through enhanced satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs; (iii) Relatedness need satisfaction served as a suppressing variable in the relationship between positive self-presentation on SNSs and social adjustment.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author contribution

Conceptualization: Guangcan Xiang

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Ethical approval and consent to participate

This study involving human participants was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Educational and Psychological Research Ethics Committee of China Three Gorges University (protocol code: H23001) on September 6, 2023, with ethical approval valid from 2023 to 2026. Informed consent to participate was obtained from all participants.

Consent for publication

Consent for publication was not applicable because this study does not include any identifiable human participant data, images, or personal information.

Availability of data

The data supporting this study's findings are not publicly accessible due to ethical restrictions. However, they may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request for academic use only.

Further disclosure

The authors used ChatGPT-4 and DeepSeek-V3 for language polishing to improve clarity and readability. The use of these tools was limited to grammar correction and

phrasing refinement under strict human supervision. The artificial intelligence (AI) tools were not involved in study design, data analysis, data interpretation, or conclusion drawing. All AI-assisted content was fully reviewed and verified by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the manuscript, and no AI tools are listed as authors.

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