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# The brighter side of materialism: Managing impressions on social media for higher social capital

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## ABSTRACT

Individuals adjust their behavior on social media to varying extent, and commonly in their idealized way. Most studies have focused on the problems associated with materialism and social media use, yet their potential positive contributions remain less clear. In fact, impression management holds potential for both negative and positive: it has been linked with materialistic attitudes, but also increased amounts of self-reported social capital. This study examines how young people's materialistic values connect with status-seeking impression management on social media, and subsequently to social capital, within the same model. Eight hundred Finnish participants aged 15–19 participated in our structured phone survey. We applied structural equation modeling to examine the connections between materialism, impression management, and online social capital. Our findings show that materialism is positively related to impression management, while impression management is positively associated with online social capital. Additionally, we found positive indirect effects between materialism and both bridging and bonding social capital through impression management. In sum, more materialistic young people who engaged in higher impression management had higher amounts of social capital.

## 1. Introduction

Young people are heavy users of social media (e.g., [Pew Research Center, 2021](#)) and social media has become an inseparable part of their lives. As young people have unlimited access to social media, they are constantly exposed to various content and topics, including commercial content. At the same time with the emergence of commercial social media, materialism has increased among youth in the past decades ([Twenge & Kasser, 2013](#)). According to [Richins and Dawson \(1992\)](#) materialism refers to consumers' values, and their widely-used scale constitutes of three factors: the pivotal role of acquisitions in one's life, pursuing happiness by means of acquisitions, and the determination of one's success through possessions. There is already empirical research indicating that social media usage has a positive impact on materialism (e.g., [Kamal, Chu & Pedram, 2013](#); [Thoumrungroje, 2018](#)).

Social media has also provided a new arena for people to manage their impressions in their desired way ([Baumeister & Bushman, 2015, p. 102](#)). Impression management refers to people's tendency to try to control and influence how others perceive them ([Cole & Chandler, 2019](#); [Leary, 2001](#)). Theoretically, impression management derives from [Goffman's \(1959\)](#) work, which suggested that

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when individuals are in front of others, they adjust their behavior so that it conveys their preferred impression to the audience (p. 4). Studies have suggested that impression management is easier to control online than in face-to-face situations (Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006; Fullwood, 2019; Ward, 2017), and not least because people have far more time to consider their next steps online. Thus, a lot of studies on impression management have focused on the social media context (Ellison, Hancock & Toma, 2011; Gadgil, Prybutok, Peak & Prybutok, 2021; Michikyan, Subrahmanyam & Dennis, 2014; Sun & Wu, 2012). For example, Chen (2016) found that some people tend to upload carefully considered content on YouTube which reflects their idealized selves.

Along with the rise of social media, researchers have shown increasing interest in the online version of social capital (Abbas & Mesch, 2018), as people can attain social capital in both online and offline environments. While offline social capital refers to the individuals' social networks labeled by the call of reciprocity and trust (Putnam, 2000, p. 16), online social capital, in turn, refers to the resources and connections on the internet and social media (Abbas & Mesch, 2018). While studies have found that social media usage is positively connected to social capital (Utz & Muscanell, 2015), focus has been on specific issues, such as how to measure online social capital (e.g., Williams, 2006).

In this study we examine associations between status-seeking impression management, materialism, and online social capital among young people. Researchers have typically associated materialism with negative connotations (Balikcioglu & Arslan, 2020; Dittmar, Bond, Hurst & Kasser, 2014; Lipovčan, Prizmić-Larsen & Brkljačić, 2015). More importantly, materialism correlated with self-monitoring, as they were both linked to the external rather than inner cognitive orientation (Chatterjee & Hunt, 1996). Self-monitoring is related to impression management to some extent, as high self-monitors used impression management tactics more effectively than low monitors (Bolino & Turnley, 1999). This suggests a connection between materialism and impression management. Actors always take the audience into consideration when performing a certain act. Although this study builds on Goffman's impression management framework, our operationalization of impression management refers to its applied version with an emphasis on status-seeking perspective and online context. Status-seeking impression management on social media can be, for example, exaggerating wealth or overemphasizing luxury experiences to indicate higher social status.

Some researchers have proposed that online impression management contributes to developing social capital (Abro & Zhenfang, 2013). Social capital is highly valuable as it provides access to otherwise unattainable resources (Huysman & Wulf, 2004), and it can be a channel to significant assets, such as emotional and financial support (Liu, Ainsworth & Baumeister, 2016), and higher well-being (Bae, 2019). In this study, social capital refers to the forms it appears online (Abbas & Mesch, 2018; Williams, 2006). As online impression management frequently leads to the desired outcomes, people might perceive social capital as a valuable by-product of status-seeking impression management.

Although many previous studies have focused on the negative implications of materialism, it is not always a negatively valued concept. For example, Wang, Gu, Jiang and Sun (2019) published an article titled "*the not-so-dark side of materialism*" in which they showed how people with greater materialistic values behaved more eco-friendly in public situations (in contrast to private situations) due to their impression management motives.

While some studies have examined the relationship between materialism and impression management (Christopher & Schlenker, 2004; Christopher, Morgan, Marek, Keller & Drummond, 2005; Wang et al., 2019), and between impression management and social capital (Abro & Zhenfang, 2013; Krämer & Winter, 2008), there is very little scientific understanding of how materialism, status-seeking impression management, and social capital work together within the same model. To address this gap, we explore whether materialistic attitudes along with status-seeking impression management have a positive link to higher social capital, which researchers typically perceive as a beneficial asset. Thus, building on the idea of the brighter side of materialism (e.g., Wang et al., 2019) our perspective further enhances our understanding of materialism as not necessarily negatively deemed concept, when accompanied by impression management. We use structural equation modeling (SEM) which allows us to examine relationships between those theoretically derived concepts (materialism, impression management, and social capital). Such a model not only provides generalizable but also valuable information without measurement error.

## 2. Impression management and social media

Impression management stems from Erving Goffman's theory on human behavior "*dramaturgy*", according to which individuals are like actors whose everyday actions take place on the stage (Goffman, 1959). Leary and Kowalski (1990, p. 34) defined Impression management as '*individuals' attempt to control the impressions others form of them*'. Many scholars have used impression management interchangeably with self-presentation, although the latter is rather a part of impression management (Owens, 2006, p. 211).

Researchers have shown growing interest in applying the concept of impression management to social media platforms such as YouTube (Chen, 2016), Facebook (Sun & Wu, 2012), blogging (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005), and online dating (Ellison et al., 2011). People can manage their impressions more strategically online than in face-to-face situations (Ellison et al., 2006; Papacharissi, 2002), for example, by exaggerating their sense of humor and wisdom, and using self-promotional tactics (e.g., declaring their positive accomplishments on social media) (Huang, 2014). That is, the risk of getting caught is significantly smaller online than in face-to-face situations.

Scholars have noticed impression management tactics such as ingratiation, self-enhancement, self-promotion, apologizing, and excuses (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Lee, Quigley, Nesler, Corbett & Tedeschi, 1999). These tactics are also present online. Bloggers used ingratiation by being kind to their audience rather than critical or vicious (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Likewise, Taiwanese social media users uploaded idealized content on YouTube (Chen, 2016). Similarly, Holmberg, Berg, Hillman, Lissner and Chaplin (2018) found that overweight individuals used impression management tactics by not uploading content related to their bodies or weight on social media.

Studies have focused on the motives (Baumeister, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990), goals (Rosenbaum, Johnson, Stepman & Nuijten, 2009), and outcomes of impression management (Gioaba & Krings, 2017; Wayne & Kacmar, 1991). Leary and Kowalski (1990) suggested that the value of the desired goal and the goal-relevance of impression are the main motives behind impression management. Our understanding of impression management emphasizes young people's desire to attain higher social status through impression management actions, and thus we define it as status-seeking impression management. Status-seeking refers to multiple actions aiming to enhance one's social value within their social circles (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007).

These motives and goals appear to be reasonable as intentionally managed impressions are somewhat profitable. When older job applicants engaged in impression management tactics, they received more favourable assessments in terms of the hiring process than those who did not (Gioaba & Krings, 2017). Also, supervisors rated those subordinates' performance higher who participated in impression management (Wayne & Kacmar, 1991). However, actors are not always aware of the outcomes of their impression management. For example, one can try to impress their followers on Instagram with stylish impression management, which simultaneously engenders commercial partnership proposals.

Impression management can be deceptive, relatively sincere, or something in between. For example, Goffman (1959, p. 62) stated that people can give a false impression without telling serious lies. Deceptive impression management can be a little lie (Toma & Hancock, 2010), or a discrepancy between the real and ideal (Ellison et al., 2011). In contrast, some authors have underlined the individuals' motivation to be authentic in their impression management (Rosenbaum et al., 2009, p. 21). Hence, our operationalization of impression management includes clearly deceptive and more sincere statements. Deceptive impression management can be especially relevant to young people, who might boost their lower self-esteem (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling & Potter, 2002), and certainty in self (Hogg & Grant, 2012) with deceptive status-related pictures. These pictures, in turn, might generate likes from their friends which positively predict their self-esteem (Marengo, Montag, Sindermann, Elhai & Settanni, 2021).

While almost everyone occasionally manages their impressions, especially online, the degree to which people engage in impression management online varies. Researchers have associated impression management with negative traits such as neuroticism (Michikyan et al., 2014) and narcissism (Hart, Adams, Burton & Tortoriello, 2017), as well as more neutral traits such as extraversion (Krämer & Winter, 2008). Interestingly, Wang et al. (2019) suggested that materialistic people value more social status, impression management motives, and are more sensitive to others' opinions compared to their nonmaterialistic counterparts. However, scholars have paid far too little attention to examining connections between impression management and materialism.

### 3. Materialism as an antecedent of status-seeking impression management

As mentioned above, materialism refers to the mindset that emphasizes the role of acquisitions and possessions in one's life, their role as instruments for achieving happiness, and their role as indicators of success (Richins & Dawson, 1992, pp. 304-307). In line with Richins and Dawson (1992), we perceive materialism as reflecting consumers' values and attitudes rather than personality traits in this study. Researchers have typically associated materialism with negative things, such as lower well-being (Dittmar et al., 2014), lower life-satisfaction (Lipovčan et al., 2015), as well as depression and anxiety (Kasser & Ryan, 1993). Materialism is typically high among young people as it reaches its highest peak during the adolescence and young adulthood (Jaspers & Pieters, 2016). Young people are building their identities and therefore they are especially susceptible to peers' opinions. This may increase their materialistic attitudes (Roberts, Manolis and (Jeff) Tanner, 2008), and risky behavior (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005).

Materialism appears to be positively related to status-seeking activities. Fournier and Richins (1991) found that materialistic people are motivated to acquire goods to display their social status. Status-seeking, in turn, refers to a common motivation to achieve respect and appreciation from others (Goldsmith, Reinecke Flynn & Clark, 2014), while people can achieve status through multiple ways. Therefore, we expect that more materialistic people are also more interested in activities related to status-seeking impression management on social media.

Researchers have suggested that status consumption (consumption that aims for attaining social status) (Heaney, Goldsmith & Jusoh, 2005), is an outcome of materialism (Goldsmith & Clark, 2012). Also, Heaney et al. (2005) found a positive relationship between status consumption and materialism. On social media, people are seeking status through impression management; not necessarily by buying products per se, but also by presenting status symbols such as luxury goods and experiences.

Chatterjee and Hunt (1996) found that materialistic people and high self-monitors shared a similar cognitive orientation as they both underline the external factors as a reference point. They noted that the importance of legitimate possession for materialists and socially acceptable behavior for high self-monitors reflects the salience of their external orientation. By self-monitoring, we refer to the definition by Gangestad and Snyder (2000) according to which people differ in how much they are concerned about whether their self-presentation is socially appropriate, and thus, monitor their self-presentation so that it conveys a socially desirable image. Consequently, high self-monitors are more inclined to regulate their behavior according to the social and situational factors. In contrast, low self-monitors' behavior conforms to their inner attitudes and emotions (p. 530). Although impression management and self-monitoring are two discrete phenomena, high self-monitors use impression management tactics more effectively than low monitors (Turnley & Bolino, 2001). Also, Xie, Huang, Wang and Shen (2019) found that self-monitoring is positively related to impression management tactics. Lastly, Gangestad and Snyder (2000) noted that the self-monitoring scale is closely related to "status-oriented impression management motives" (p. 547), and thus suggests a potential link between materialism and impression management.

Furthermore, Christopher and Schlenker (2004) stated that materialism correlated with the concerns of impression management (e.g., fear of negative evaluation). Subsequently, Christopher et al. (2005) found that materialistic respondents avoided impression management tactics such as ingratiation to avoid showing weakness but surprisingly did not use self-promotion either. They suggested that materialistic people doubt their capability to impress others through direct behavior, and thus they are prone to use indirect

conventions through symbolic possessions as a safer way. Status-seeking impression management might also be what [Christopher et al. \(2005\)](#) referred to as symbolic possessions that materialistic people might prefer when they need to make an impression indirectly on social media. Based on the above arguments, we assume that materialism is positively related to online status-seeking impression management among young people.

#### 4. Social capital as an outcome of impression management

Putnam distinguished two different forms of social capital based on the type of networks and connections: bonding and bridging ([Putnam, 2000, p. 20](#)). Bonding refers to group inertia, ‘strong ties’, emotionally close relationships, such as family and close friends, and bridging to links beyond the group or ‘weak ties’, loose connections with people who can offer new resources and information. Both ties have value depending on the needs of the network, but access to novel resources usually results from bridging social capital ([Luoma-aho, 2016](#)). It is valuable as social capital created in one context is usable in other contexts ([Coleman, 1988](#)). [Abro and Zhenfang \(2013\)](#) found that impression management on social networking sites (SNS) assisted social media users to create bridging social capital. In parallel, [Liu et al. \(2016\)](#) found that online self-disclosure, which relates to self-presentation, was positively associated with both social capital forms, albeit mainly by strengthening already existing social ties. Nevertheless, this suggests a connection between impression management and social capital.

Researchers have distinguished offline social capital from online social capital. [Abbas and Mesch \(2018\)](#) noted that online social capital refers to online social resources, while in the case of offline social capital these resources are mainly face-to-face connections. Researchers have described social capital as an outcome rather than a network itself ([Williams, 2006](#)). In this study, we perceive social capital as an online version of social capital and as an outcome or by-product of status-seeking impression management.

Many studies have focused on the motives ([Baumeister, 1982](#); [Leary & Kowalski, 1990](#)), goals ([Rosenbaum et al., 2009](#)), tactics ([Jones & Pittman, 1982](#); [Lee et al., 1999](#)), and outcomes of impression management ([Gioaba & Krings, 2017](#); [Wayne & Kacmar, 1991](#)). Even though some researchers have examined the connection between impression management and social capital ([Abro & Zhenfang, 2013](#); [Krämer & Winter, 2008](#)), much uncertainty still exists about that relationship.

Social capital has commonly been associated with positive concepts such as health and well-being ([Helliwell & Putnam, 2004](#); [Oksanen, Kouvonen, Vahtera, Virtanen & Kivimäki, 2010](#)) and subjective happiness ([Han, Kim, Lee & Lee, 2013](#)). More importantly, social capital seems to be especially important for young people, who are building their identities and social networks and identifying with their reference groups ([Holland, Reynolds & Weller, 2007](#)). Also, studies have associated both family social capital and community social capital (e.g., peer support) with better mental health among teenagers ([McPherson et al., 2014](#)). Thus, social capital is not only a valuable outcome of impression management but also a goal worth pursuing behind impression management. However, the question as to whether social capital is an outcome or a goal, depends on how conscious individuals are about their goals. Hence, social capital can be an intentional goal, an unintended outcome, or both. In this study, we perceive social capital as an unintended by-product of impression management since we operationalized social capital accordingly.

In general, a systematic literature review has shown that people can use SNS for enhancing and nurturing social capital ([Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007](#); [Williams, 2006](#)). That is, while an intensive Facebook usage was related to higher bridging social capital ([Ellison et al., 2007](#)), a meta-analysis including 50 studies showed that SNS usage correlated with both bridging and bonding social capital ([Liu et al., 2016](#)).

Existing literature suggests a link between online social capital and status-seeking impression management. For example, positive online self-presentation was related to positive feedback from a Facebook community ([Metzler & Scheithauer, 2017](#)). People can get positive feedback from their friends, but also from strangers, which may assist in building up social capital, or strengthening weak ties ([Liu et al., 2016](#)). [Krämer and Winter \(2008\)](#) found that those with higher self-efficacy in terms of impression management had more virtual friends. In parallel, [Abro and Zhenfang \(2013\)](#) stated that impression management strengthened the connection between social media use and social capital, underlining the importance of impression management in creating social capital. Also, [Liu et al. \(2016\)](#) found that online self-disclosure was positively related to both social capital forms by strengthening already existing social ties. Thus, we assume a positive link between both sides of social capital and impression management.

#### 5. Research questions

As described above, previous studies have suggested the connections between materialism, self-monitoring ([Chatterjee & Hunt, 1996](#)), and impression management ([Christopher & Schlenker, 2004](#)), and also between impression management and social capital ([Liu et al., 2016](#)). How these components work together remains unclear. In this article we tackle this research gap by analyzing materialism, status-seeking impression management, and online social capital in the same model.

The main objective of our study is to examine the interconnections between materialism, status-seeking impression management, and bridging and bonding online social capital. The specific research questions are:

RQ 1: What is the connection between materialism and status-seeking impression management on social media?

RQ 2: What is the connection between status-seeking impression management and online social capital (both bridging and bonding)?

RQ 3: What kind of indirect connections exist between materialism and online social capital?

Thus, we assume that materialism will have a direct positive relationship to status-seeking impression management, and that impression management also has a positive and direct connection to both bridging and bonding social capital ([Fig. 1](#)). In addition, via impression management, we assume a positive indirect connection between materialism and both aspects of social capital.

## 6. Method

### 6.1. Participants

We collected the survey data in collaboration with a research company (IRO Research) during December 2019 and January 2020 among young people aged 15–19. Data sampling and data collection were the company's only responsibilities. The data were obtained through structured telephone interviews that took approximately 30 min. The data sample was randomly selected from the Finnish Population Register. The randomly selected sample size was 16 000. The final sample ( $n = 800$ ) was adjusted to be nationally representative by age (by one year), gender, and the area of residence. That is, data collection was discontinued since the desired sample size of a certain subpopulation (e.g., gender) was achieved. According to the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, young people at the age of 15 or older are allowed to participate in surveys without parental consent. The participants received a small reward from the research company for their participation. Questions did not involve any identifiable information, and thus do not raise any ethical issues. Also, very few missing values exist in our dataset. The final data contains 800 participants, aged 15–19 who live in Finland. The majority of participants are studying, and almost everyone reported using social media (Table 1). The survey was conducted in Finnish and then translated to English.

### 6.2. Measurements

All statements are shown in (Table 2 (see appendix) and Table 4).

#### 6.2.1. Materialism

We assessed the participants' materialistic values by using a shortened 6-item version adopted from Richins' scale of materialism (Richins, 2004), with the Likert scale (1–5) (1=totally disagree and 5=totally agree). The materialism scale focuses on three dimensions: the centrality of possessions in one's life, and the role of acquisitions in determining happiness and success. Six statements are shown in Table 2 (see appendix) and Table 4.

#### 6.2.2. Social capital

We used an online social capital measurement, adapted from Williams (2006) and Abbas and Mesch (2018), with the Likert scale (1–5) (1=totally disagree and 5=totally agree). Originally, these operationalizations stems from Putnam's (2000) framework of social capital and thus have two forms of social capital: bridging and bonding. Bridging items measure aspects such as one's feeling of belongingness to a larger community, or outward-looking (e.g., trying new things) while bonding items measure, for instance, emotional support (e.g., There is someone one can turn to when advice is needed) (Williams, 2006).

#### 6.2.3. Status-seeking impression management

As a complete measurement for status-seeking online impression management was missing, the authors decided to create a measurement based on the articles related to impression management and its derivatives such as deceptive self-enhancement (see items 7–11). All items of this scale reflect online impression management aiming to seek and present higher social status. We used the Likert scale (1–5) (1=totally disagree and 5=totally agree) and described a rationale for the items below.

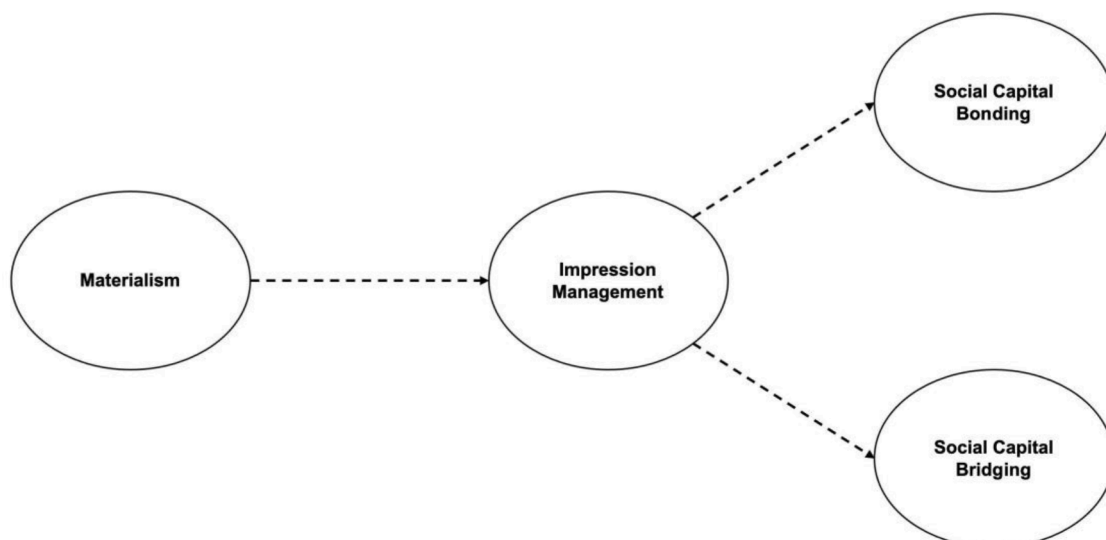


Fig. 1. Proposed Model.

**Table 1**  
Participants' Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	n <sup>b</sup>	% <sup>a</sup>
Gender		
Male	400	50
Female	400	50
Age		
15	152	19
16	168	21
17	160	20
18	160	20
19	160	20
What do you do for a living?		
Studying	699	87
Working	64	8
Military or civil service	14	2
Other	23	3
Do you use social media?		
Yes	784	98
No	16	2

<sup>a</sup> Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

<sup>b</sup> Maximum (n) full sample in data = 800.

**Table 3**  
Covariates for The Robust Model.

Variable	Mean <sup>a</sup>	Variance	Scale	Value	n <sup>b</sup>
Gender	0.5	0.25	0/1	Female/Male	800
Age (continuous)	17.0	1.99	15–19	Years	800
Personal financial situation <sup>c</sup>	0.67	0.22	0/1	Good	797
	0.26	0.19	0/1	Moderate	797
	0.07	0.07	reference	Poor	797

<sup>a</sup>with dichotomous variables, mean (=p) gives a proportion to what extent the value 1 has been answered. Proportion of zero answers can be calculated from Equation 1-p.

<sup>b</sup>Maximum (N) in data = 800.

<sup>c</sup>Variable included three classes which were dichotomized (dummy) for the analysis.

Item 7 measures one's attempt to affect how others perceive them through modifying their appearance with filters and is thus a fundamental part of impression management. Filters allow people to enhance their appearance on social media, and thus support their intended high social status impression. Therefore, we interpret this item as a part of the self-enhancement strategy (see e.g., [Toma & Hancock, 2010](#)).

Items 9 and 10 suggest a deceptive and exaggerated impression management behavior and intentions to look more prestigious and wealthier than in reality (higher social status), and thus are part of deceptive self-enhancement. For example, [Toma and Hancock \(2010\)](#) suggested that one can enhance their social status by lying about their income. Therefore, we adapted items 9 and 10 from the ideas of deceptive impression management (e.g., [Carlson, Carlson & Ferguson, 2011](#); [Toma & Hancock, 2010](#)), and from the impression management self-enhancement scale by [Lee et al. \(1999\)](#).

Items 8 and 11 measure impression management behavior and an intention that aims to let everyone know about their social relationships and luxury experiences (social status). We adapted these items from the impression management self-promotion scale by [Bolino and Turnley \(1999\)](#).

### 6.3. Data analysis

We used the covariance based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) as an analysis method in this study. SEM consists of the measurement model and the structural model (Fan et al., 2016). The first step in our analysis is to create and evaluate a measurement model that examines the connections between the latent factors and its indicator variables by using Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) ([Kline, 2011, p. 121](#)). The second step is to specify our model by using SEM to test the connections between the latent factors. We treated all indicator variables as categorical. Table 2 (see appendix) shows the frequencies and used scales. In addition, [Table 3](#) presents the details of gender, age, and personal financial situation that we treated as covariates and tested in the model. Since a commitment to impression management vary between genders ([Singh, Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2002](#)), and when materialism correlates with age ([Jaspers & Pieters, 2016](#)), gender ([Kaminen, 2005](#)), and financial situation ([Chaplin, Hill & John, 2014](#)), we incorporated these variables into our model. The third step is to test the robustness of our SEM model by adding these covariates into our model and examining how coefficients will behave ([Lu & White, 2014](#)).

We used Mplus 8.4 package as a statistical program in this study, and WLSMV as an estimator in this model due to the categorical

**Table 4**  
Results from a Measurement Model.

Items <sup>a</sup>	Factor loadings <sup>b</sup>	R-Square
Materialism		
1. I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes.	.74	.55
2. The things I own tell a lot about how well I'm doing in life.	.48	.23
3. Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.	.65	.42
4. I like luxury in my life.	.69	.48
5. I'd be happier if I owned nicer things.	.55	.30
6. I would be happier if I had much more money.	.37	.14
Impression management		
7. I have modified my appearance, (e.g., by using filters) on social media.	.46	.21
8. It is important for me to show on social media that I have friends (e.g., photos with friends).	.62	.38
9. I have intentionally uploaded content on social media that gives the impression that my life is more prestigious than in reality.	.73	.53
10. I intend to be seen wealthier than I actually am on social media.	.81	.65
11. I especially share pictures of my luxury experiences on social media (e.g., traveling).	.67	.44
Social capital (bonding)		
12. There are several people on social media I trust to help solve my problems.	.80	.65
13. There is someone on social media I can turn to for advice about making very important decisions.	.87	.75
14. There is no one on social media that I feel comfortable talking to about intimate things (reversed).	.68	.47
Social capital (bridging)		
15. Interacting with people on social media makes me feel like part of a larger community.	.62	.39
16. Interacting with people on social media makes me interested in what people different than me are thinking.	.58	.33
17. Interacting with people on social media makes me want to try new things.	.62	.39
18. Interacting with people on social media gives me new people to talk to.	.69	.48

Note. Estimator WLSMV.  $N = 800$ . All items are significant at  $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup> Items are numbered so that they can be identified in Fig. 2.

nature of our indicator variables. Also, we used standardized coefficients (STDYX) in our analysis. Moreover, we estimated our model fit in comparison to widely accepted cut-off criteria suggested by [Hu and Bentler \(1999\)](#): 0.95 for the TLI and CFI, 0.08 for SRMR, and 0.06 for RMSEA. These cut-off criteria are also suitable for categorical outcomes ([Yu & Muthén, 2002](#)). Furthermore, the SRMR fit index replaced the WRMR fit index for WLS estimators in Mplus 8.1 ([Asparouhov & Muthén, 2018](#)) and is thus used in this study.

## 7. Results

[Table 4](#) presents the results of the measurement model, p-values, factor-loadings, and communalities of these variables. Latent factors were materialism, impression management, and social capital, which included two sub-factors: bridging and bonding. [Table 5](#) shows correlations between latent factors. Modification indices showed that the model fit would improve if items' (5 and 6) as well as (16 and 17) residual covariances could be estimated freely. These items had similar statement structure in the questionnaire, which explains why residual covariance existed. Therefore, their residual covariances were freely estimated in the analysis.

Our measurement model ([Fig. 2](#)) showed a good fit: (*accepted cut-off criteria in parenthesis*) ([Hu & Bentler, 1999](#); [Yu & Muthén, 2002](#))  $\chi^2 = 405,423$   $df = 127$ ,  $p < .001 (>0.05)$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.052 (<0.06)$ ,  $CFI = 0.951 (>0.95)$ ,  $TLI = 0.941 (>0.95)$ ,  $SRMR = 0.047 (<0.08)$ . Therefore, we were able to execute a further analysis of the model (SEM).

Also, a test model (SEM) showed good model-fit: (*cut-off criteria in parenthesis*) ([Hu & Bentler, 1999](#); [Yu & Muthén, 2002](#))  $\chi^2 = 386,709$ ,  $df = 129$ ,  $p < .001 (>0.05)$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.050 (<0.06)$ ,  $CFI = 0.955 (>0.95)$ ,  $TLI = 0.946 (>0.95)$ ,  $SRMR = 0.048 (<0.08)$ , which suggests that the tested model is acceptable. Although the significance of our Chi-square remains significant, it is highly sensitive to the big sample size ([Kline, 2011, p. 201](#)) and cannot be used as the only indicator for making decisions about model fit ([Schermelleh-Engel, Moosbrugger & Müller, 2003](#)). Therefore, we considered other diagnostics (CFI and TLI, see above) to assess the model fit.

[Fig. 3](#) illustrates the results of the SEM. The analysis revealed a positive and significant connection between materialism and impression management ( $\beta = 0.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Likewise, impression management was significantly and positively related to the social capital, while the effect of impression management on bridging was ( $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and on bonding ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p = .003$ ). In addition, we found a significant and positive connection between bridging and bonding social capital ( $\beta = 0.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Table 5**  
Correlation Matrix of Latent Factors.

Variable	<i>n</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Impression management	800	–			
2. Materialism	800	.57***	–		
3. Social capital (Bonding)	800	.12*	.11*	–	
4. Social capital (Bridging)	800	.40***	.24***	.53***	–

Note. Correlations are estimated with STDYX.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \* $p < .05$ .



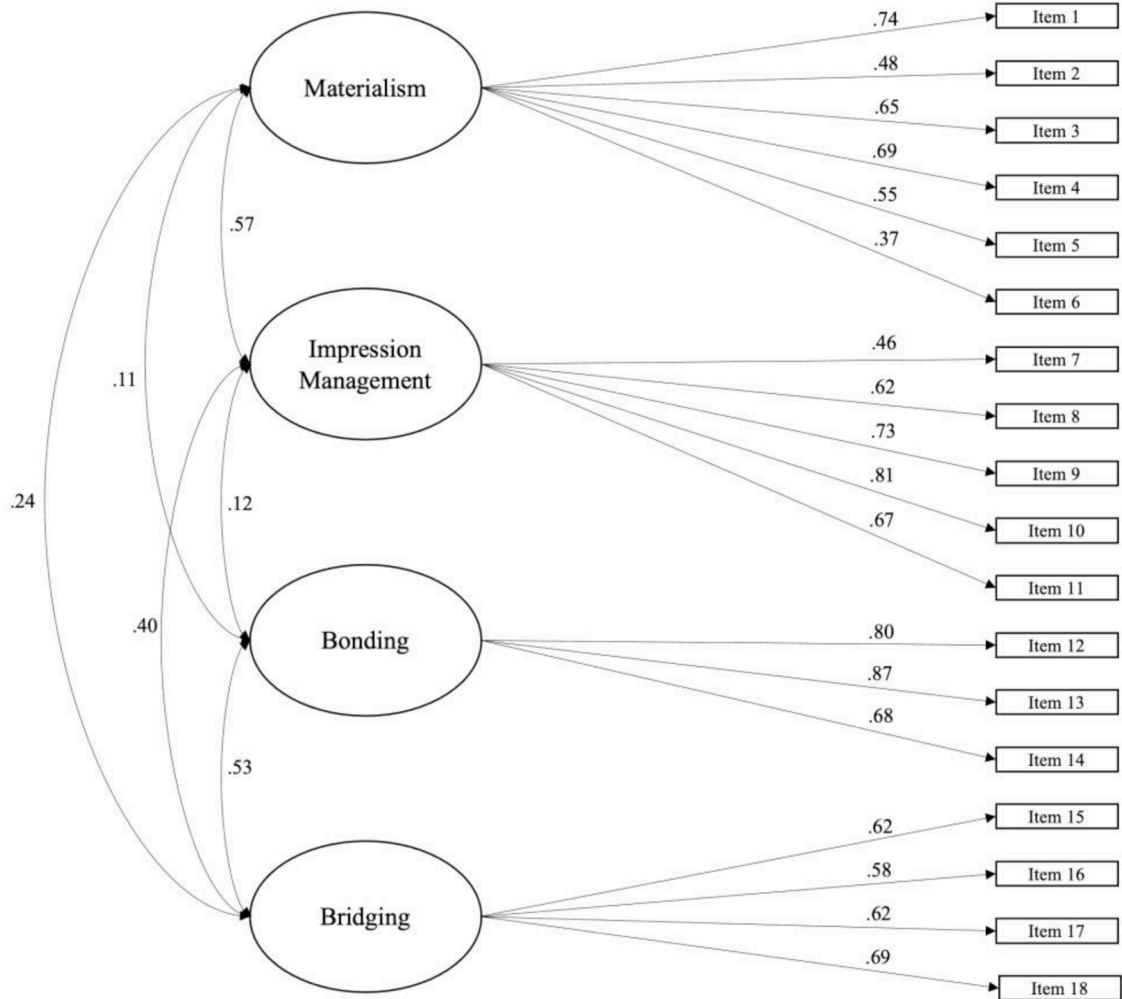


Fig. 2. Measurement Model

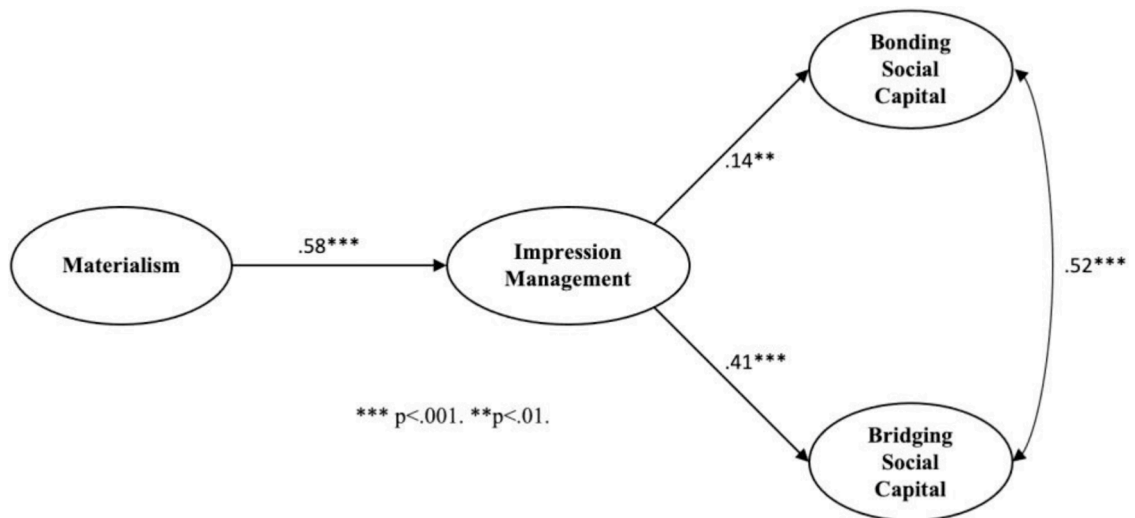


Fig. 3. Tested Model

In addition, the analysis showed an indirect and positive relationship between materialism and bonding social capital, mediated by impression management ( $\beta = 0.08, p = .003$ ). Also, we found an indirect relationship between materialism and bridging social capital, mediated by impression management ( $\beta = 0.24, p < .001$ ).

We executed an additional analysis to examine the effect of covariates (Table 3) on our tested model and whether the coefficients will alter. Covariates did not have a significant effect on the coefficients, which suggests our model is robust. The maximum difference between the robust model and the tested model was in the connection between impression management and materialism. The coefficient of this connection in the robust model was only 0.05 higher than in the tested model.

Also, the results of indirect connections between the tested model (Fig. 3) and robust model did not substantially differ. In the robust model, the indirect effect of materialism on bonding social capital was ( $\beta = 0.09, p = .003$ ) and on bridging ( $\beta = 0.25, p < .001$ ), with both mediated by impression management.

## 8. Discussion

Social media has contributed to the development of consumers' materialistic values and created a new arena for impression management and social capital. This study investigated the relationships between materialism, impression management, and online social capital among young people. We used SEM to analyze our survey data, composed of Finnish participants aged 15–19, and to show how materialism, impression management, and social capital are intertwined concepts. We perceived materialism (Richins & Dawson, 1992) as an antecedent for the actions of impression management on social media (Goffman, 1959), and online social capital (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Abbas & Mesch, 2018) as an unintended outcome of impression management.

The current study showed a positive association between materialism and impression management and bridging social capital. More surprisingly, we found a positive connection between materialism, impression management, and bonding social capital. Our results revealed an acceptable and complete structural model, including both direct and indirect connections between factors. That is, materialism was also indirectly and positively connected to social capital mediated by impression management. Furthermore, covariates did not have an influence on our model, which suggests the robustness of the model.

Although previous studies have suggested relationships between materialism and impression management (Christopher & Schlenker, 2004; Christopher et al., 2005), and between impression management and social capital (Abro & Zhenfang, 2013; Krämer & Winter, 2008), the evidence on this question was still scarce. Our findings add to our presumption that materialistic values can be positively related to higher impression management on social media and thereby result in higher online social capital.

Our findings expand previous approaches that have connected both online and offline impression management with negative characteristics (Hart et al., 2017; Michikyan et al., 2014). These results also differ from the earlier studies which emphasized negative implications of materialism (Dittmar et al., 2014; Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Lipovčan et al., 2015). Our results, in turn, present the brighter side of materialism among young people by showing the indirect positive connection between materialism and bonding and bridging social capital via impression management on social media. That is, given the expected beneficial effects of social capital on individuals (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Holland et al., 2007; Oksanen et al., 2010), and since materialistic values were related to higher social capital through status-seeking impression management in this study, our findings indeed suggest the brighter side of materialism. The question remains whether social capital is always beneficial (see e.g., Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2017).

While impression management was positively related to materialism, it could be as Chatterjee and Hunt (1996) earlier suggested that people with higher materialistic values share the same externally focused cognitive orientation as do those with higher activity in impression management, or as in their case, self-monitoring. Although our measurement of status-seeking impression management is not about self-monitoring, it includes many features that are externally oriented such as editing one's appearance online, giving a more prestigious picture of one's life than in reality, and showing-off one's popularity and luxury experiences. These items, especially a deceptive one, reflect one's cognitive orientation and social concern of what other people might perceive as external indicators of high social status, and are thus externally oriented.

In parallel, researchers have suggested a link between status consumption and materialism (Goldsmith & Clark, 2012; Heaney et al., 2005). The goal behind status consumption has similarities with our measurement of status-seeking impression management as they both are status-seeking activities, and have a shared psychological mindset underlying their goals: to attain higher social status. This especially concerns young consumers who are probably not capable to attend status consumption themselves due to their financial dependency on their caregivers. Thus, their preferred alternative might be status-seeking impression management on social media that enables them to exaggerate and enhance those indicators signaling social status (e.g., wealth and luxury).

Alternatively, Christopher et al. (2005) suggested that materialistic people are prone to indirect impression management through their possessions. Likewise, impression management took place solely on social media in this study and therefore can be an indirect way of impression management. Moreover, our scale of impression management included many characteristics related to our participants' possessions such as showing luxury experiences and intention to appear wealthier than was the case in reality.

Our results are partially in line with Liu et al. (2016), who found that self-disclosure (part of self-presentation) was positively related to both bonding and bridging social capital. Liu et al. (2016) added that self-disclosure is not so much about creating totally new connections but rather about strengthening already formed relationships. In contrast, we found that status-seeking impression management was positively related to the bridging factor, whose one part suggested the arrival of new people they could talk to. Hence, we suggest that materialistic people are more inclined to online status-seeking impression management such as showing off their luxury experiences or wealth and thus they might attract other social media users' attention more than would be otherwise and bring new people into their lives.

However, as we mentioned earlier, it can also be that young people attend to status-seeking impression management in the hope of

receiving likes from their friends on social media to boost their self-esteem (Marengo et al., 2021; Robins et al., 2002). One could argue that pursuing likes on social media is conscious behavior, and therefore is inconsistent with our perception of social capital as an unintended by-product of impression management. First, although social media likes can be seen as an element of social capital to some extent, given its capabilities to connect people, we do not see likes on social media as equal to social capital. Even at their highest function, likes on social media are only one small part of social capital, and therefore the interpretation of conscious like accumulation and conscious social capital building as equal terms is not reasonable. Second, although we do not see the aforementioned concepts to be interchangeable, one could argue that their relationship depends on one's conscious goals behind the like accumulation: if someone consciously seeks likes in order to gain social capital, these two concepts seem to be interconnected, and thus they are conflicting with our perception. However, we suggest that most young people aim to get likes, which subsequently produces higher social capital, although unintentionally.

Surprisingly, we also found that impression management was positively associated with bonding, such as having someone to trust or turn to. The mechanism behind this connection might follow the same logic as Liu et al. (2016) suggested. People may have given polished impressions about themselves online, for example, by uploading photographs of their exotic travel experiences. This may have prompted their old connections, formed on- or offline to inquire more deeply about their trip and to ask what they are doing with their life nowadays. Consequently, their online discussions may be deepened and lead to higher trust among both sides. On the other hand, impression management can also lead to two strangers bonding as well. For example, one can upload a photograph about an exotic travel experience on Instagram, which in turn can encourage a total stranger, who shares the same interests, to have a discussion with the content uploader. As a result, these strangers might form a mutual feeling that they have someone whom they can trust or turn to.

Researchers have long been interested in the relationship between individuals' values and behavior, while it has been somewhat controversial how strong the relationship is (e.g., Lee et al., 2021). However, studies have suggested, for example, that materialism is negatively related to pro-environmental behavior (Hurst, Dittmar, Bond & Kasser, 2013), and that motivational type of values such as benevolence, in turn, predicts pro-environmental behavior. In the same manner, Homer and Kahle (1988) drew upon value-attitude-behavior model and showed how values influence behavior through attitudes. Since we consider materialism as a value-oriented mindset and impression management as, at least partly, a behavioral concept, our suggested model appears to have some parallels with these earlier mentioned value-behavior models. However, our model included an unintended outcome variable (social capital) which is rarely seen in the value-behavior model. Thus, our model, as it stands, and value-behavior models are not directly comparable.

With the statistical model (SEM) we were able to evaluate how well our theory derived model fits the data. Although we obtained valuable information about the relationships between materialism, impression management, and social capital, and even if the model serves as a basis for future research, our statistical model is not without limitations. First, even though statistical models aim to predict people's real-life behavior, they commonly are simplified approximations and predictions about real-life (e.g., Burnham & Anderson, 2002, p. 21). Relatedly, as in all surveys, respondents' feelings and emotions might affect their responses which pose epistemological and analytical challenges. That is, statements regarding materialistic values or impression management are, in general, value-laden by themselves. This could have resulted in socially desirable answers at least to some extent, if the respondents wanted to give less materialistic answers or played down their impression management tendencies, ironically, due to the impression management motives (see social-desirability bias).

### 8.1. Theoretical implications

Along with social capital and materialism, we adapted Goffman's (1959) theoretical framework of impression management for our research interests in social media and status-seeking impression management. This study adds to the knowledge of impression management, by analysing it in online environments. According to our results, online impression management actions took place on social media, which we consider as what Goffman referred to as the frontstage. On the other hand, it can be assumed that those actions that would have had any potential threat to the participants' desired impressions on the frontstage were hidden in the backstage. Our results suggest that Goffman's theory is applicable for studies on social media and, hence, these findings consider online impression management as a generator of higher social capital especially for young people. Interestingly, the increase in social capital happened even if the motives for impression management were unintended. This further deepens our understanding of the potential unintended and positive outcomes and/or by-products of impression management.

This study also adds to the theory of social capital and the long discussions of its contents. The antecedents and consequences of online social capital raise a question of the need for re-defining the concept of social capital in digitalised communities. As the core of the theory of social capital is mutual trust between individuals as well as between individuals and organisations (Luoma-aho, 2016; Putnam, 2000), online social capital primarily refers to a high number of connections in social media communities (Abbas & Mesch, 2018). In those communities, appearances and impressions increase the number of connections. Our results suggest that even false and deceptive impressions that are connected to materialistic values, may lead to higher social capital, perhaps in a similar way as swift or fast trust in online environments (Blomqvist & Cook, 2018). Further, our findings raise the question of whether social capital is merely beneficial, and what are its unintended trade-offs and consequences in the online environment.

Even if materialism and impression management among young people have been associated with negative characters, this study showed that these antecedents are not always fundamentally negative. Materialistic attitudes along with the online impression management together may help people not only to strengthen their existing relationships but also to find new friends and connections that might have a crucial positive effect on their life, career, and overall well-being. From that perspective, status-seeking impression

management appears to be a promising and poorly understood phenomenon. We should keep this aspect in mind when considering young people's idealized or misleading behavior on social media. That is what Cooley (1902, p. 320) suggested: 'If we never tried to seem a little bit better than we are, how could we improve or train ourselves from the outside inward'.

## 8.2. Limitations and future directions

We need to mention several limitations of this study. Due to the absence of valid statistical tests, our model was unable to explain the precise mechanisms of why materialism and impression management led to higher social capital. Thus, future studies could contribute to this gap by examining the potential mechanisms behind this connection. In addition, as we used a cross-sectional data, it was not possible to evaluate causality. Lastly, we could not test differences between genders because of the lack of metric invariance.

As the participants of this study were solely from Finland, our model could also be tested further in other cultural contexts. Also, future studies would benefit by taking new covariates into consideration within robust checking and they could specify and develop this model by examining new predictors. Overall, this study provides a comprehensive basis for further examination of these connections in other contexts, age groups, and datasets.

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## Data availability statement

The data used in this article is owned by the research project of #Agents - Young People's Agency in Social Media, and is available upon request.

## Author contribution statement

All authors have contributed this article and agreed to the submission.

## Submission declaration

This article is not currently being considered for publication by any other print or electronic journal.

## Declaration of Competing interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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## Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2022.101651](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2022.101651).

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