

People are willing to pay to curate their online social image

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Social media provides a new environment that makes it possible to carefully edit the image you want to project of yourself. A study from Lund University in Sweden suggests that many people are prepared to pay to "filter out" unfavorable information.

Economists Håkan Holm and Margaret Samahita have investigated how we curate our social image on the web using [game theory](#).

Previous studies have been conducted on, for example, how anonymity affects our willingness to act pro-socially, and thus our concern for social image. However, the internet and [social media](#) now make it possible to edit the image we want to project of ourselves retroactively. One can therefore expect other, - less impulsive, mechanisms to control this behavior. The purpose of the study was therefore to better understand online behavior.

Each subject participated in a cooperative situation with an anonymous person, and the participants earned real money during the experiment. They could be "good" and cooperate a lot, which is costly, or be less cooperative, which costs less. They then found out that [information](#) about how much they actually cooperated could be published online along with their name, but that they could avoid this publication if they paid to censor the information. It turned out that those who cooperated less, valued the censorship highest which meant that information about this group's actions tended to be filtered out.

"That the image people share of themselves is 'softened' on the internet is perhaps not that surprising. What is new is that this is shown under experimental control and that the will to 'filter out' is so strong that one is prepared to pay for it", explains Håkan Holm.

Before the cooperative situation was presented, a group of subjects had to take a "[selfie](#)" while other subjects did not. One question was the effect of a selfie on the willingness to share sensitive information.

"The selfie can be said to increase visibility, and by combining this with the information about subjects' cooperation, we found that it increased their valuation of censorship. This was especially true for those who cooperated little", says Holm.

Another effect that surprised the researchers was that the likelihood to cooperate, for subjects who reported that they often took selfies, was greatly influenced by the selfie-taking. For the frequent selfie-takers who took a selfie before the cooperative situation, cooperation was significantly lower than those who did not take a selfie.

"One interpretation is that among some groups, a selfie can initiate a temporary selfish mindset that crowds out other motives such as the willingness to cooperate with others. However, we would like to see more studies about this effect before it can be considered scientifically established", Håkan Holm concludes.

More information: Hakan J. Holm et al. Curating social image: Experimental evidence on the value of actions and selfies, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jebo.2018.02.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2018.02.008)

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