

Students' impression management and self-presentation behaviours via online educational platforms: An archival review

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Abstract

Across global higher education contexts, students and staff are communicating online. Online communication is facilitated by the online disinhibition effect (reduction of nonverbal cues eases communication) and in turn this may make online self-presentation (behaviours used to present a desired version of the self) easier. Students may be utilising online self-presentation techniques to facilitate online communication with staff. We know that online self-presentation techniques can be advantageous, but where inappropriate they may be detrimental to the student-staff relationship. This study explores whether students are using self-presentation techniques when they communicate online with staff via an archival review of both private (e-mail messages) and public (Moodle forum posts) online educational environments. Through a deductive thematic analysis we identify that students are indeed using online self-presentation techniques but that these vary depending on whether the online educational environment is private or public. This is the first study to explore this topic via an archival review and we encourage future research to consider the role of online self-presentation techniques within student-staff communication.

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Introduction

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, online educational platforms (*e.g.*, Microsoft Teams, Outlook, Moodle and Blackboard) have become integral to the higher education (HE) teaching and learning experience. Even before the pandemic, online educational platforms were used to facilitate digital communication between students and staff. The transition to online learning, during the lockdowns, highlighted the usefulness of these platforms and so despite many U.K. universities returning to in-person learning, online educational platforms remain implemented within HE teaching and learning (U.K. Office for Students, 2022). We know that communicating online has its benefits; for example, the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) reduces the pressures of in-person communication by allowing more time and space to articulate the information that one discloses (self-disclosure; Kim and Dindia, 2011) and the image that one portrays (self-presentation; Michikyan, *et al.*, 2014). For students who are entering a new environment, this time and space may be useful for considering how to communicate effectively with HE staff (Bradford, *et al.*, 2007). We also know that communicating online has its drawbacks; for example, the online disinhibition effect removes important non-verbal cues (Suler, 2004) which may lead to misjudging the appropriateness of disclosing information (over-disclosure; Kim and Dindia, 2011) and behaviour used to present the self (Michikyan, *et al.*, 2014). With regards to students, communicating online may intensify the risk of offending

staff, particularly where the phrasing of a message is deemed inappropriate (Waycott, *et al.*, 2010). Research considering the self-disclosure and impression management behaviours of students is limited. It is important to explore how students disclose on online educational platforms and which impression management techniques (IMT) they use to understand how students are communicating with staff. With this aim, this study will qualitatively investigate U.K. HE students' online self-disclosure and IMT behaviours via an archival review of Moodle (an online educational platform) posts and Microsoft Outlook emails from one U.K. HE institution. Importantly, findings will shed light onto the effectiveness of these behaviours in relation to student-staff communication.

Online impression management theory and self-presentation techniques

According to impression management theory, social interactions are informed by how we wish others to perceive us (Schlenker, 1980). Impression motivation shapes our desired goals and impression construction conceptualises the tools used to hopefully achieve that goal (Schlenker, 1980). Goffman (1959) argued that impression construction is performative as we adapt our behaviour to act a certain way. The better a performance, the greater the likelihood of reaching a goal. The nature of this performance, however, is dependent upon the discrepancy between the desired self and the actual self (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980). If the discrepancy is particularly large the performance will require greater curation (Goffman, 1959).

To manage the impressions of others, we draw upon self-presentation techniques. Lee and colleagues (1999) categorised self-presentation techniques as assertive (actively trying to shape other's impressions) or defensive (protecting the impression already formed). Making excuses, for example, is a defensive technique as the individual is attempting to maintain an already existing impression of the self. Enhancement (supporting one's own behaviour) is an assertive technique as the individual is attempting to shape other's impressions to endorse their behaviour. The online space presents a unique environment for self-presentation techniques. Online disinhibition allows for more time, space and tools to be utilised when curating the performance of the self (Michikyan, *et al.*, 2015, 2014; Suler, 2004). For example, presenting the ideal self can be easily achieved by using filters to enhance attractiveness (Hong, *et al.*, 2020). Importantly, online self-presentation techniques allow for the discrepancy between the real and ideal selves to be minimised. For example, the false self to deceive comprises presenting an untrue self with the goal of deceiving others (Michikyan, *et al.*, 2015); offline, performing this self would be very challenging, but online this can be easily achieved by creating a false profile and posting images and text to trick someone. The discrepancy between the real self and this false self with the impression motivation of deception is minimised due to the utilisation of online self-presentation techniques. The online space therefore presents a unique environment for impression management as online self-presentation techniques are varied and accessible for curating an image.

Online educational platforms

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, HE institutions were forced to move teaching online (U.K. Office for Students, 2022). Since the easing of the lockdowns, most HE institutions have adopted a hybrid approach where elements of both in-person and online teaching are integrated into the teaching infrastructure (Linder, 2017; Weissmann, *et al.*, 2021). Students are therefore familiar with communicating with HE staff online. In fact, students are experiencing more varied forms of communication with HE staff compared to students pre-COVID (Bashir, *et al.*, 2021; Guppy, *et al.*, 2022). Compared to just using e-mail messages or forum posts, students are now accessing instant messaging (Sobaih, *et al.*, 2021), video calls (Katz and Kedem-Yemini, 2021) and even texting services (Al-Jarf, 2021; Le, 2022) to communicate with staff.

Communicating with staff online is perceived by students as quicker and easier than communicating offline (Nikolopoulou, 2022; Paechter and Maier, 2010). We know that speed of staff response influences student satisfaction (Dawson, *et al.*, 2019; Goodyear, *et al.*, 2001) and so students may be motivated to communicate with staff online. Where effective, students may receive information from staff (Broadbent and Lodge, 2021; Waycott, *et al.*, 2010), feel satisfied, and subsequently benefit the student-staff relationship (McCarthy, 2017). It is reported, however, that students and staff have different perceptions of the role of online communication (Richardson and Radloff, 2014; Waycott, *et al.*, 2010). Students expect staff to communicate online more regularly than staff may be willing or able to (Craig, *et al.*, 2008; Waycott, *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, as a digitally connected generation, most students are likely used to the informal nature of online communication (Beins, 2016; Lai and Hong, 2015). If we combine student expectations with online disinhibition, it is possible that students may contact staff more regularly (Cicha, *et al.*, 2021; Nordmann, *et al.*, 2020) and informally (Whittle, *et al.*, 2020) than staff deem appropriate. In which case, the student-staff relationship may be negatively affected.

Students' online impression management via online educational platforms

We know that students use self-presentation techniques to manage impressions elsewhere online (Hall, *et al.*, 2014; Michikyan, *et al.*, 2015, 2014; Roulin and Levashina, 2016) but we know less about this behaviour via online educational platforms. Considering the importance of the student-staff relationship upon student satisfaction (Dawson, *et al.*, 2019; Goodyear, *et al.*, 2001) it may be in students' interest to present the self positively online to benefit this relationship (Houtman, *et al.*, 2014; Paechter, *et al.*, 2010). For example, presenting the real self and using ingratiation (aim to be viewed as likeable in order to gain something, Jones and Pittman, 1982) may result in a positive response from the staff member

(e.g., a quick response). After all, ingratiation has been linked with positive staff response offline (Khizar, *et al.*, 2021). Alternative self-presentation techniques, such as blasting (aim to negatively communicate about or evaluate a person or group, Cialdini and Richardson, 1980), may elicit negative responses from staff members (e.g., no response). Our understanding of how students may be utilising online self-presentation techniques to manage impressions is limited; because of this, we cannot be sure how to support students' online communication with staff.

Research focus

Student-staff online communication is now commonplace across U.K. HE institutions (U.K. Office for Students, 2022). As digitally immersed emerging adults, students (aged 18–24 years) may not only be used to communicating online (Beins, 2016; Lai and Hong, 2015) but may also use online communication differently to adults (Cicha, *et al.*, 2021; Normdann, *et al.*, 2020; Whittle, *et al.*, 2020). Students may self-disclose and use self-presentation techniques to achieve impression management goals when communicating with staff online, but we cannot be sure what these techniques are or how effective they are within an HE context. Importantly, research considering how students communicate with staff online is limited, especially via online educational platforms. This study aims to explore the self-presentation techniques of U.K. HE students (aged 18–24 years) via online educational platforms. An archival review of student-staff Moodle posts (public) and e-mail messages (private) across an undergraduate Psychology cohort (Years One to Three) from one U.K. HE institution will be conducted. Following this, a deductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) will determine the self-presentation techniques students use to manage impressions when communicating with staff online. Findings will develop a preliminary understanding of students' online communication behaviours with HE staff, which in turn will inform HE staff and policy-makers in supporting students' appropriate and effective communicative strategies.

Methods

Data

Data were sourced from two online educational platforms: Moodle and Microsoft Outlook based within the Department of Psychology at one U.K. HE institution. Moodle was selected as it is a public online platform where students post comments on forums directed at staff members. Microsoft Outlook was selected as it is a private platform where students directly contact staff members. We know that online self-disclosure and impression management behaviours can vary based on the perception of the audience size (Clark-Gordon, *et al.*, 2019). It was therefore important to review both a public and private educational platform to capture the breadth of students' online self-disclosure and impression management behaviours.

For ethical purposes, all data were anonymised prior to analysis, therefore specific demographic data of students was not identifiable. We do know that of psychology undergraduate students studying at this U.K. HE institution 57 percent are aged 18–23 years, 86 percent are from the U.K., and 88 percent identify as female.

Procedure

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the COREQ guidelines were followed throughout the procedure (Tong, *et al.*, 2007). This study received ethical approval from a U.K. HE institution and was conducted in compliance with British Psychological Society guidelines.

In total, 100 Moodle posts and 100 e-mail messages were selected for analysis. The Moodle posts were randomly selected from undergraduate psychology modules from the academic year 2021–22. The e-mail messages were randomly selected following opportunity sampling of undergraduate teaching staff. Staff members ($N=4$, 2 male, 2 female) sent a selection of e-mail messages received from students from the academic year 2021–22; of these, 100 e-mail messages were randomly selected.

Data analysis

Data were imported into NVivo 12 (released in March 2020) for analysis. Deductive thematic analysis was used, in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2022; Clarke, *et al.*, 2015) framework, to elicit manifest meaning from the data whilst maintaining a reflexive approach. Specific codes of self-presentation techniques (assertive and defensive; see [Table 1](#)) were deduced from the data as these represent the theory-driven components of students' online communication behaviours. Assertive self-presentation techniques comprise behaviours that aim to proactively shape a desired identity, whereas defensive self-presentation techniques comprise behaviours that aim to protect a threatened identity (Lee, *et al.*, 1999).

Table 1: Self-presentation techniques and definitions categorised as assertive or defensive as per Lee and colleagues' (1999); these were used to deductively code the data within this study.	
Assertive self-presentation techniques	Defensive self-presentation techniques
Ingratiation (presenting the self positively to gain an advantage)	Excuse (minimising responsibility associated with negative events)
Intimidation (presenting the self as powerful and dangerous to gain an advantage)	Justification (accepting responsibility for a negative event, but overexplaining reasons to condone it)
Supplication (presenting the self as weak to gain an advantage)	Disclaimer (providing an explanation before an event occurs to mitigate potential negative consequences)
Entitlement (claiming responsibility of positive events)	Self-handicapping (providing a barrier to success before an event occurs)
Enhancement (endorsing own behaviour)	Apology (accepting responsibility for a negative event and expressing remorse)
Blasting (labelling another individual or group as negative)	
Exemplification (endorsing own behaviour with a specific focus on integrity and worth)	

The second author completed the first round of deductive thematic analysis; following this, the first and third authors analysed and refined these codes, and the first author repeated the process in compliance with Braun and Clarke's (2015) guidance for a reflexive approach. Having analysed and refined these codes for the second time, the second author was invited to analyse and refine further to ensure no biases from the first or third author influenced the final codes. All authors then discussed and confirmed the final codes.

Results

Following deductive thematic analysis, it was identified that students use the self-presentation techniques of ingratiation, disclaimer, supplication and apology most prominently when communicating with staff via online educational platforms. When communicating on public online educational platforms (forum posts), students utilised disclaimers more so than other self-presentation techniques. When communicating on private online educational platforms (e-mail), students utilised ingratiation more so than other self-presentation techniques.

Self-presentation techniques were used less via public online educational platforms than private online educational platforms. When techniques were used, defensive self-presentation techniques (behaviours that protect a threatened identity) were the most prominent. Disclaimers (providing an explanation before an event occurs to mitigate potential negative consequences) were used in relation to help-seeking: *"I did do the prep for the seminar and I've checked all the resources, but I'm not really sure what to do now"*. By using the disclaimer that they have engaged with the course content, the student may wish to mitigate the possibility of being perceived as disengaged, particularly as they appear unsure of the staff member's

expectations (“*I’m not really sure what to do now*”). Where the perceived future event was more concrete (e.g., missing a deadline), the disclaimer would be coupled with an excuse (minimising responsibility associated with negative events): “*My supervisor has been away on leave so things have been a bit delayed, so I’m not confident I’ll have passable work by the deadlines*”, or an apology (accepting responsibility for a negative event and expressing remorse): “*sorry about this*”. As the negative consequence is more concrete, the threat to the student’s identity is elevated and so a wider range of defensive self-presentation techniques may be required to mitigate this threat.

Students also utilised assertive self-presentation techniques via public online educational platforms, albeit less frequently than defensive self-presentation techniques. Ingratiation (presenting the self positively to gain an advantage) was typically used prior to asking a question regarding lecture content: “*Thank you for the lecture, please could you explain the process [...]?*” Ingratiation was evident through manners, particularly via thanks: “*Thank you for your time*”. By being polite, students may wish to appear likeable to the staff member and thus receive an answer to their question.

Students utilised assertive self-presentation techniques more frequently via private online educational platforms. Ingratiation was utilised by complimenting the staff member: “*I’d like to say that I really enjoyed last week’s lecture and am looking forward to our other lectures on this topic*”; this would often be followed by a question suggesting that the student sought more personal likeability for the advantage of receiving information: “*I thoroughly enjoyed the session on Thursday! I am just emailing with some questions regarding the coursework essay*”.

Supplication (presenting the self as weak to gain an advantage) was very present via private online educational platforms and was often coupled with disclaimers. Students would initiate with a disclaimer followed by supplication:

“I am experiencing some difficulty in regards to meeting the deadline for the draft. This is because I have been very ill for the past 2 weeks with a cold and fever which has significantly affected me to get my work done [...] I will also be attempting to book an appointment with my GP, as my symptoms are still present. I would like to politely ask if there could be any way for me to submit my draft at a later date”.

By presenting the self as weak prior to the event, students may seek the outcome that is more advantageous to them (e.g., a deadline extension). Via private online educational platforms, students were also more likely to go into detail with their disclaimers as well as be more explicit with their supplication:

“An incident occurred a few days ago, in which I am involved in. I have reported this issue to security in which was then told for me to report to police and there is an investigation taking place. Because of everything going on, I am in no state to take my exam Thursday and I do not want to stay here any longer on campus as feeling unsafe, so I am going home tomorrow evening. I understand I will have to apply for extenuating circumstances, but I’ve been told to talk to you”.

Collectively, these findings suggest that students do indeed utilise self-presentation techniques on online educational platforms, but in slightly different ways depending on whether the platform is public or private.

Discussion

Online educational platforms present a unique environment for managing the impressions of others. Using a deductive thematic analysis on 100 Moodle forum posts and 100 e-mail messages from one U.K. HE institution, we aimed to explore students’ self-presentation techniques via online educational platforms. Our findings highlight that students do indeed use self-presentation techniques when communicating via online educational platforms, and that these vary depending on the environment. When disclosing publicly (e.g., forum posts), students mainly use defensive self-presentation techniques, namely disclaimers. When disclosing privately (e.g., e-mail messages), students mainly use assertive self-presentation techniques, namely ingratiation. Our findings are an important step in understanding students’ motivations behind self-disclosure via online educational platforms and apply to student-facing staff and policy-makers across HE institutions.

Students used disclaimers via both public and private online educational platforms, but the way that they use them differs. Disclaimers are useful for providing situational context (Eakins and Eakins, 1978) in a way that softens the key message (Grob, *et al.*, 1997), and are typically evaluated positively (Lakoff, 1972; Shapiro and Bies, 1994). Within a public

environment, disclaimers are evidenced as effective in minimizing perceptions of incompetence (McLuhan, 2020). For students posting questions on a public forum, the risk of appearing incompetent is elevated as not only staff members but also peers can view their post. Utilising disclaimers may therefore be an effective strategy for asking questions whilst defending positive and competent impressions of the self. In fact, research by Wetherell and Potter (1988) supported this by suggesting that disclaimers were effective in justifying legitimacy. With regards to students, disclaimers may therefore be a useful tool for justifying the legitimacy of their question to further defend their competency.


Our findings also highlight that students used apology and excuses to support a disclaimer, but only when disclosing about a potentially negative future event via a public online educational platform. Schlenker and Darby (1981) argued that apology is evaluated positively (especially within public environments) because it represents taking responsibility. We know that taking responsibility is viewed positively and minimises the risk of negative response from others (Kim, *et al.*, 2004) as it is associated with higher integrity (Zahari, *et al.*, 2022; Mason, 2001). Students may couple an apology with a disclaimer to manage impressions of both integrity and competency. Integrity may be important to manage in front of peers as integrity is a component of stronger peer relationships (Mayer, *et al.*, 1995; Miller and Schlenker, 2011; Firmansyah, *et al.*, 2019). Whilst competency may be important to manage in front of staff as an indicator of academic ability (Mah and Ifenthaler, 2017; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, *et al.*, 2019). Excuses, on the other hand, are evaluated less positively as they do not represent taking responsibility (Sheldon and Schachman, 2007) and invalidate a disclaimer (Higgins and Snyder, 1989). Students utilising excuses may therefore be at risk of being perceived negatively.

Students utilised ingratiation when communicating privately with staff. Help-seeking research highlights that ingratiation is effective in reaping positive feedback (Metzler and Scheithauer, 2018) especially when associated with being liked (Fitriastuti, *et al.*, 2021). When contacting staff privately, the nature of the communication is more personal and so the desire to be liked may be elevated. It is also strategic to be liked when communicating directly with staff. In fact, Asadullah and colleagues (2016) found that supervisors were more helpful when they liked the employee and ingratiation fostered this relationship. For the students within our sample, utilising ingratiation when contacting staff privately may therefore be strategic in reaping a helpful response. However, coupling ingratiation with a disclaimer (which many of our students did) may be unsuccessful. Disclaimers can be perceived negatively, especially where they are associated with negative traits such as laziness (Riard and Jory, 2011), arrogance (El-Alayli, *et al.*, 2008) and self-depreciation (Schlenker and Leary, 1982). When coupled with ingratiation, disclaimers can be viewed as inauthentic (Hart, *et al.*, 2019, 2017). For students, utilising disclaimer with ingratiation may therefore be unsuccessful as a staff member may view this negatively and thus provide less helpful responses.

Limitations and future research

Our findings highlight patterns in U.K. HE students' impression management behaviours via online educational platforms. Developing an understanding of the behaviours is important as we know that different tactics are associated with different responses, some of which may be advantageous to students, but some may be disadvantageous. Our study builds a foundation for future research which can further our understanding of the nuance of online student-staff communication, which is increasingly important in an ever hybrid education system. We recognise that our sample is limited to one U.K. HE institution, it would be useful to conduct an archival review using data from other institutions to evaluate whether behaviours differ. After all, we know that are institutional differences in similar topics such as social support (Tinajero, *et al.*, 2015) and Internet access (Mahmood, 2009; Martin, *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, although we drew upon COREQ guidelines (Tong, *et al.*, 2007) to ensure a robust qualitative approach, it would be interesting to explore this topic using quantitative methodologies. For example, investigating whether a predictive relationship exists between students' online behaviours and staff response.

Conclusions

This study is unique in the focus upon students' impression management and self-presentation behaviours via online educational platforms and highlights an important topic within an ever hybrid education system. Our findings demonstrate that students are utilising certain tactics within specific educational environments, which we know are associated with staff response. Importantly, students are still developing social skills and the nature of communication with HE staff differs from that of communicating with school teachers, friends and family, especially when communicating online. Developing our understanding of the nuances of student-staff online communication is important for both supporting students in successfully interacting with staff as well as supporting staff in successfully interacting with students. Our findings present an initial exploration into this topic and are useful for HE students, staff and policy-makers in understanding student-staff online communication. 

About the authors

Dr. Beatrice Hayes: My pedagogical research focuses on online communication between students and staff within a higher education setting. I am particularly interested in the link between students' online self-disclosure and their mental health and well-being. My pedagogic research also explores how staff communicate online with students and the impact this may have upon student engagement and learning. I am also interested in co-production within a research and applied context. Direct comments to: Beatrice [dot] hayes [at] rhul [dot] ac [dot] uk

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Prof. Dawn Watling: Much of my research explores children's and adolescents' social development with a focus on how they learn to navigate through our social world, and developing an understanding of what factors may influence behaviour. I am particularly interested in how children understand the complexities of impression management, both in face-to-face situations and online. Further, I am interested in how children recognise emotions. Within each, I explore how individual differences in personal factors (*e.g.*, social anxiety, depression, mood, etc.) may be associated (or impact) behaviour.

Availability of data and materials

The data analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to the qualitative and potentially identifiable nature but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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