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Original Paper

Student Impression Management in the Classroom

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Abstract

With the growing shift from lecture-style teaching methods to interactive and experiential group exercises, instructors need to know more about their students, such as their desired impressions, to adequately engage and support students' social interactions. This study addresses this need by providing an overall understanding of the types of images that are important for students to project when interacting with others in a classroom. After a concise review of impression management literature and grounding our reasoning in cybernetic theory (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997) this study offers an insight of the positive impressions students desire to project in front of their peers and professors and the negative impressions students aim to avoid. With a two-part survey based on 269 responses, we measured students' ranking of specific images and the effort level they exerted towards achieving or avoiding them. We offer suggestions of how these findings can be integrated into teaching for improved student learning and experiences.

Keywords

impression management, management education, impression motivation

1. Introduction

Impression management, which was anchored in self-presentation by Goffman (1973), involves a process of creating, maintaining or avoiding a desired image (Rosenfeld et al., 1995; Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997). The trend for impression management studies, continues to be heavily tied into the interview process (for example, Adkins, Russell, & Werbel, 1994; Wilhelmy, Kleinmann, König, Melchers, & Truxillo, 2016; Roulin, Bangerter, & Levashina, 2014) and more recently into online interactions (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). Searches in pedagogical publications provided a scant number of studies that examined students' impression management in the classroom (e.g., Becker-Lindenthal, 2015; Rui & Stefanone, 2013) most of which predominantly focused on online education.

With a growing shift in teaching methods from lecture-style to interactive and experiential group

exercises instructors incorporate case analysis, group projects, interactive in-class exercises, advanced technology, and flipped classroom methods in college education (Farashahi & Tajeddin, 2018; Mazur, 1993; Strayer, 2012). To adequately engage and support students in classroom interactions instructors should seek to develop a deeper understanding of students' preferences and characteristics as a way of relating to student (Chory & Offstein, 2016).

Arguably, colleges provide professors with limited information about students' individual differences such as personality, attitudes, experiences, strengths, values, expectations, learning styles, and goals. Having this information might enable professors to structure more individualized and optimized teaching methods to enhance students' learning. Today, not only do most instructors build their course outline ahead of students' registration, they primarily rely on their intuition and selective prior experience to craft courses with little regard for the characteristics and individual differences of their particular students. While some instructors seek input from students about their individual expectations in the course (Spiegel, 2012) or use learning styles to customize content (Boyatzis & Kolb, 1997; Kolb, A. & Kolb, D., 2017), it is rare for faculty to explicitly inquire about personal self-images that students strive to make in class.

Questions about the role of students' self-images in a classroom are largely unanswered in the current literature of impression management (Bolino, Long, & Turnley, 2016). With the goal to identify ways of leveraging impression management in teaching for improved student learning experience. This paper aims to explore the role of students' self-presentation motives in learning and the potential effects of impression management effort in face-to-face class interactions.

The following research questions were formulated to guide the development of the study:

1) What do we know about self- impressions that students strive to attain in class?

2) How do students want to be perceived by their peers and, their professors?

2. Purpose and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Study Purpose

Although it may not yet be feasible to gather and provide faculty with all the particular information about enrolled students, this study provides insight into impressions and self-presentations (Goffman, 1973) that are important to students when interacting in a classroom. Following a review of impression management literature and grounding the conceptual process in a theory, this study offers an insight of the positive impressions students' desire to project in front of their peers and professors and the negative impressions students aim to avoid. Specifically, we measured students' ranking of specific images and the effort level they exerted in making these impressions in front of peers and professors.

2.2 Cybernetic Theory of Impression Management

The theoretical reasoning for applying impression management into a classroom based on cybernetic theory (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997). Impression management had its dramaturgical onset, initially set by Goffman (1973), who compared the process of making impressions in human interactions by comparing

it to actors and targets—the audience. Cybernetic systems have three primary parts: a reference standard or a desired image goal that an actor strives to achieve (e.g., a person wants to be seen as friendly); feedback from the target whether the actor is perceived in light of the desired image (e.g., the target does not perceive the actor as friendly); and a comparator, which is the process by which a comparison is made between the feedback and the reference standard (e.g., actor evaluates target's response and cues about being perceived as friendly).

A comparator process is used to detect discrepancies between the reference standard and the target's feedback to inform the actor of actions to take. There are three potential outcomes to this process: zero discrepancies, in which the individual does not have to perform corrective measures (e.g., target perceives the actor as friendly). Negative discrepancies, where the individual is not reaching their reference standard (e.g., the actor is seen as not friendly enough) and corrective measures are needed in order to minimize these discrepancies (e.g., the actor may engage in more friendly behavior), or the reference standard must be changed to reflect the feedback (e.g., the actor may agree to hold an image of being less friendly). Positive discrepancies, where the individual is exceeding the reference standard (e.g., the actor is perceived as too friendly), the discrepancies might be corrected, tolerated, or incorporated into the reference standard depending on the situation (e.g., the actor may decide to be less friendly or may accept the image of being overly friendly).

Motivation for managing impressions can be understood as a function of perceived discrepancies between feedback received from the target and the reference goal (Argyle, 1988; Green & Welsh, 1988). If individuals perceive that their image, is being properly conveyed to those around them, then there is no need for them to take any corrective actions. When their image is being improperly conveyed, they will make corrective adjustments through the use of impression management tactics in order to alleviate the discrepancies. For example, when students sense that they are not being viewed as competent by other students, they may start an in-class discussion on a topic with which they are familiar with the intent of displaying their competence. To them, selecting a familiar topic is preferable to starting a discussion that they are unfamiliar with, even though they could have benefited more by learning about a new topic. Another way, they may decide to overly criticize a disliked topic. Such action is considered *hypercriticism*, a type of verbal behavior, used in impression management (Gibson & Oberlander, 2008). Depending on the context, individuals may select different targets and reference standards. In a classroom, desired impressions of students are typically influenced by peers and professors (Edwards, 1992). A different impression maybe sought and emphasized towards students than professors. Impression management is a prevalent and vital component of every day social life including the classroom (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Students may actively pursue their desired images when driven by the perceived discrepancy in the eyes of peers and professors (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1996; Edwards, 1992). Understanding students' motivation to attain desired identities in a class should be an advantage for instructors looking to provide a more effective learning experience. Next, we describe the research methodology and data analysis.

3. Methodology

The study was designed to include two cross-sectional self-report surveys. The first survey was conducted as a test pilot followed by a final survey, which details are described below.

3.1 Test Pilot Design

To identify what impressions are important for students, we first used an open-ended questionnaire pilot administered to 30 undergraduate sophomore students in the Northeast of the United States (U.S.) for extra credit (see Table 1). In an open ended questionnaire, they were asked to list the top five positive impressions they wanted for their peers and professors to have of them. We also inquired about the negative impressions they wanted to avoid projecting to their peers and professors. Together, responses from the four types of questions were grouped on the basis of synonyms provided by the Oxford dictionary shown in Table 2. Words that appeared most were used to anchor its category. Two coders were involved in identifying the five initial categories. The top five categories for each question were selected for inquiry in the final survey.

Table 1. Test Pilot Survey Questions

Please answer the following questions for a pilot research survey on impression management in the classroom.
1. Please list and rank the top 5 attributes that best reflect how important it is that your peers see you as.
2. Please list and rank the top 5 attributes that best reflect how important it is that your professors see you as.
3. Please list and rank the top 5 attributes that you are afraid of being perceived as by your peers.
4. Please list and rank the top 5 attributes that you are afraid of being perceived as by your professors.

Table 2. Test Pilot: Categorized Impression Attributes by Word Count, N=30

Positive Peer Impressions (sought)	Positive Professor Impressions (sought)	Negative Peer Impressions (avoided)	Negative Professor Impression (avoided)
INTELLIGENT: Intelligent (7), Smart (5), Wise	INTELLIGENT: Intelligent (8), Smart (5), Analytical, Knowledgeable, Logical, Wise	DUMB: Dumb (12)	DUMB: Dumb (8), Careless (4), Ignorant (2), Illogical (2), Unprofessional (2), Foolish
HARD-WORKING: Hard-Working (2), Ambitious, Conscientious, Diligent, Engaged,	HARD-WORKING: Hard-Working (10), Diligent (4), Attentive (3), Conscientious (3),	LAZY: Lazy (10)	LAZY: Lazy (13), Tardy (2), Slacker, Not-Working-Hard

Focused, Motivated	Dedicated (2), Eager-to-Learn (2), Focused (2)		
FRIENDLY: Friendly (7), Agreeable (3), Outgoing (3), Helpful (2), Kind (2), Approachable, Caring, Empathetic, Easy-going, Good-Friend, Nice, Understanding	FRIENDLY: Friendly (3), Kind (3), Agreeable (2), Communicative (2), Nice (2), Open (2), Outgoing (2), Caring, Compassionate, Extroverted, Personable	MEAN: Mean (6), Rude (5), Aggressive (2), Angry (2), Abrasive, Conceited, Intimidating, Nasty, Unfriendly	DISRESPECTFUL: Disrespectful (4), Rude (3), Mean (3), Selfish (2), Aggressive (2), Disruptive (2), Grumpy, Moody, Angry, Abrasive, Disagreeable, Jaded
RELIABLE: Reliable (8), Loyal (5), Responsible (1), Trustworthy	ENGAGED: Engaged (2), Aware, Contributor, Interested, Involved	UNRELIABLE: Unreliable (5), Dishonest (4), Disloyal (2), Irresponsible (2), Careless, Flaky, Irrational, Liar, Secretive, Untrustworthy	UNRELIABLE: Unreliable (4), Dishonest, Disloyal, Liar, Unhelpful
FUNNY: Funny (10)	ORGANIZED: Organized (6)	ANNONYING: Annoying (2), Unprofessional (2), Silly (2), Lackadaisical, Nuisance, Weird	UNMOTIVATED: Unmotivated (4), Uninterested (4), Unengaged (3), Bored (2), Irresponsible (2), Aloof, Disorganized, Unorganized, Tired
OTHER	OTHER	OTHER	OTHER

3.2 Final Survey Design

Based on the pilot, the final survey first listed the five top impressions and asked participants to rank the impressions in the order of importance, that is, how important it is that their peers or professors view them as the listed item. This process was repeated for the impressions that students most wanted to avoid. The second section of the survey asked participants to indicate how much energy and effort they were willing to exert in order to be perceived by peers and professors, as each of the listed items. Again, we asked about impressions that participants desired to avoid. The level of effort exerted to attain or avoid these images was measured on a five point Likert scale, with one being the least amount of effort and energy, and five being the most.

3.3 Population

For the final survey, we asked 239 students enrolled in marketing courses and participating in the Marketing lab for extra credit. The racial background of respondents included 68% White, 14% Asian, 12% Hispanic and 6% other. 63% of the prospective participants were women. The average grade point average (GPA) was 3.42 out of 4.0 with standard deviation of 0.32. The following GPA distribution contained 13% students with less than 3.0; 19% between 3.1 and 3.3; 27% between 3.4 and 3.5; 29% between 3.6 and 3.7; and 12% above 3.8.

4. Data Analysis

We first calculated the average rankings for all impressions displayed in Table 3. We focused on analyzing the top two images per target group. For peers, students showed that they want to be perceived as reliable with an average rank of 2.53 and friendly with 2.68. For professors, students most valued being seen as hard-working which had an average rank of 1.93 and intelligent with a rank of 2.60. On the other hand, while they wanted to avoid being seen by peers as annoying with an average rank 2.35 and unreliable with 2.86, students revealed that they most wanted to avoid being perceived by professors as disrespectful with 2.13 and unmotivated with 2.86.

We also used ANOVA in SPSS to examine the association of GPA and gender with effort levels. Specifically, 15 out of 20 items (five categories x four scenarios) measuring effort levels turned out to be statistically different ($p<.10$) among students GPA groups. In addition,14 out of 20 effort level response items were statistically different ($p<.05$) between men and women.

Table 3. Students' Desired Positive and Negative Impressions (By Peers and Professors, N=237)

Rank Average (Std. Dev) 1 (lowest)-5 (highest)	Effort Average (Std. Dev) 1 (lowest)-5 (highest)
Positive Peer Impressions	
Reliable: 2.53 (1.30)	Reliable: 4.05 (1.12)
Friendly: 2.68 (1.41)	Friendly: 3.81 (1.18)
Intelligent: 3.06 (1.35)	Intelligent: 3.65 (1.13)
Hard-working: 3.22 (1.42)	Hard-working: 3.61 (1.23)
Funny: 3.51 (1.37)	Funny: 3.39 (1.27)
Positive Professor Impressions	
Hard-working: 1.93 (1.15)	Hard-working: 4.26 (1.00)
Intelligent: 2.60 (1.27)	Intelligent: 4.10 (1.08)
Engaged: 2.79 (1.20)	Engaged: 3.97 (1.14)
Organized: 3.74 (1.15)	Organized: 3.56 (1.24)
Friendly: 3.94 (1.26)	Friendly: 3.40 (1.20)

Negative Peer Impressions	
Annoying: 2.35 (1.34)	Unreliable: 3.97 (1.14)
Unreliable: 2.86 (1.22)	Annoying: 3.88 (1.23)
Dumb: 2.97 (1.39)	Dumb: 3.69 (1.23)
Mean: 3.03 (1.49)	Mean: 3.68 (1.31)
Lazy: 3.79 (1.23)	Lazy: 3.24 (1.32)
Negative Professor Impressions	
Disrespectful: 2.13 (1.35)	Disrespectful: 4.35 (1.04)
Unmotivated: 2.86 (1.33)	Unmotivated: 4.11 (1.10)
Dumb: 3.07 (1.48)	Dumb: 4.01 (1.10)
Lazy: 3.28 (1.27)	Unreliable: 3.99 (1.06)
Unreliable: 3.66 (1.16)	Lazy: 3.86 (1.12)

5. Findings

A number of interesting findings can be drawn. Intelligence or avoiding being seen as *dumb* not the top image that students are concerned with in the academic environment. Hardworking turned out to be the top positive image for professors and reliability for peers. While the perception of being unreliable serves as the second most avoided negative image by average rank for peer targets, it is the least avoided negative image when targeting professors. Avoiding being seen as unreliable by other peer students was more important than by professors.

Our instrument allowed us to examine the relationship between desired images and effort. We compared average ranking and effort level for the five impressions in each section shown in Table 3. The results revealed on overall congruence in the average effort levels given to positive impressions and their average rank of desirability. Both positive peer and professor impressions aligned: the impression with the highest rank was also given the highest average effort level. With the lowest average rank of 1.99 the hard-working image was also top ranked of all positive impressions toward professors and was given most effort with the average of 4.26.

A slight misalignment occurred for negative impressions with the *unreliable* image targeting both peers and professors alike. With an average rank of 2.86, unreliability was the second most avoided image in the eyes of peers and jumped to number one as the top average effort of 3.98. Interestingly, students showed top preference for not being seen as annoying according to the rank average but yet admitted to exerting most effort towards not being seen as unreliable. Unreliability also moved up to the fourth spot over *lazy* in the top negative images projected towards professors with an average effort level of 3.99. The findings indicate that avoiding this particular image takes relatively more energy than other negative impressions. The overall trend toward an alignment between image desirability and effort suggests the more individuals want to attain an image the harder they will try to get it.

On average students were willing to expend a greater amount of effort on managing the positive impressions presented to their professors than their peers based on an overall average effort of 3.70 toward peers and 3.86 toward professors. The same holds for managing negative impressions with 3.69 toward peers and 4.07 toward professors. In summary, students claimed to spend more energy on managing self-impressions when targeting professors than peers and exerted even more effort on avoiding making negative impressions in front of professors.

Lastly, GPA was positively related to the effort levels students devoted towards impression management suggesting that students with a higher GPA use more impression management than students with a lower GPA. Gender was associated with effort such that women indicated a higher willingness to manage desired impressions in the school environment.

6. Discussion & Implication for Practice

The above findings leave us with a number of important implications for teaching and pedagogical research. Evidence found in the alignment between average ranking of most items and effort (see Table 3) suggests all selected images are actionable and embrace some form of effort. We compared values to students' desired impressions by integrating value research (Rokeach, 1968; Braithwaite & Law, 1985) which determined two types of values that people hold: instrumental (actively pursued) versus terminal values (static end-state). Images that students yearn to project are primarily instrumental in nature. With the exception of intelligence, where one can argue that it carries a certain static or terminal quality, all other attributes are considered instrumental and imply an ongoing activity and effort as part of the image formation. Finding for mostly instrumental value-type images among students enriches the motives aspects in the impression management research model (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) in the context of education. It also offers a practical application for management professors who can inquire about students' instrumental values, which in turn can shed light into students' self-presentation motives in class.

6.1 Implications for Practice

Overall, we entice faculty to consider impression management motives, goals, and effort levels in observing and supporting students' interactions in a classroom. Suggestions include creating a suitable environment for students to easily attain their desired image goals in order to lessen reliance on impression management tactics and thus enhance their overall experience in class. Professors should design class activities that emphasize reliability among students especially in the first part of the semester when first impressions are formed. Introductory group projects with small and easy interdependent activities that require students to be dependent on each other could foster a sense of mutual reliability.

With regard to the peer impression of being friendly, team activities provide ample opportunities for students to display friendliness. However, caution should be exercised here. Working on being seen as friendly may result in students exhibiting excessive agreeableness which has been positively associated with ingratiation tactics (Bourdage, Wiltshire, & Lee, 2015). Being too agreeable may hinder teammates

from discussing important controversial task-related issues and undermine ultimate group decisions. Professors should design and grade group activities that allow students to display friendliness without jeopardizing group outcomes. On the other hand, professors should also teach students how to portray friendliness while being assertive in contributing on debatable issues. For example, negotiation exercises could be graded on both the end result and attained perception of friendliness.

A study of supervisors and subordinates found that witnessing ingratiation can increase one's positive perception of people involved (Foulk & Long, 2016; Wayne, Kacmar, & Ferris, 1995). As such, faculty should be aware not to fall prey to this bias when observing students interacting with each other in class. We found that students mostly want to be perceived as hard-working by professors, even more so than as intelligent. Therefore, in order to increase student experience and satisfaction, they should be given opportunities to demonstrate working ethics to professors. We suggest assigning relatively small and easy tasks in a way that faculty can notice and evaluate students not only on knowledge or correctness but also on their effort.

In addition, one of the reasons students participate in extra credit assignments is to be recognized for their effort by professors (Pynes, 2014). We recommend that extra credit participation should be studied as a viable impression management tactic aimed at cultivating students' hard working image in the eyes of their professors. Chiaburu, Stoverink, Li, and Zhang (2013) found that extraverts engage more in citizenship behaviors when motived by impression management. Students also may participate more in extra credit assignments when motivated to appear as hard-working.

Surprisingly, being *annoying* was the most rated attribute that students avoid in their interactions with peers. In other words, being sensitive to others and following acceptable social norms prevents one from being seen as annoying. In team projects, it is important to establish early on social norms of communication, goals, and expectations. Team charters can be used to explicitly outline norm expectations for teammate interactions. Professors should also emphasize cultural differences among students that can affect social norms, behaviors, and the perceptions of being annoying.

Lastly, the most avoided negative impression involves the lack of respect toward professors. Students may not express their opinions or contradict professors when fearing to be regarded as disrespectful. For students who avoid disrespect above all other impressions, is imperative to explicitly encourage challenging knowledge-based arguments for the sake of learning. It is also important to have discussions in class about disrespect towards each other and how both groups attribute respect.

7. Conclusion

This study was designed with the intent of learning about impressions that are most valued by students, and the perceptions about themselves they fear most. We hope that the study would lead to a more effective teaching styles that align educational goals and criteria with desired student impressions. Although the study has a number of limitations (i.e., self-reported data) it embarks on a new path of leveraging impression management for enhanced student social interactions and learning.

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