

## “I DON’T WANT TO BE A BITCH”: THE STRUCTURE OF IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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### **ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION**

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Different individuals from different groups come into contact with college students on a daily basis. These individuals, such as friends, family, and strangers interact with the college student in unique ways each time. The uniqueness of each interaction may be impacted by the strength of ties, or a sense of closeness between the college student and another. This specific interaction, an inquiry for research, examines the difference between how college students act with different individuals. Thus, it can be asked, would every person want to be their true self in these different interactions?

Erving Goffman provided society dramaturgical analysis, the theatrical analogy explaining how people live their lives. Goffman compares people to actors on stage who choose how to present themselves in everyday life (Goffman 1959). With his theory, Goffman answered the question posed and applied the concepts of *front stage*, *back stage*, *setting* and impression management (Goffman 1959). The interactions that one has with another person can be examined in this lens, where one is the actor and the other is the audience. The actor can impression manage the audience either intentionally or unintentionally in a way that will give them some sort of result. For example, a person could make a specific impression by simply altering their outfit. A choice in clothing could relate to norms or to give off a deliberate message. Thus, people can form different perceptions, for the same outfit, impacting one’s behavior (Gurung et. al. 2019).

In this research project, dramaturgical theory was utilized as grounds to examine how college students gain social power through impression management. How people gain social power through impression management has not been investigated much. Through interviewing about people’s most micro-interactions among their friends or strangers, we can learn how one could potentially influence another person to do something that fits their agenda. This one interaction could cause one to change a system that can create a large impact or cause a minor social change that affects one’s life. This research project consisted of four semi-structured interviews of individuals purposively selected by me. The findings support that people do often gain social power through impression management of different means.

### **LITERATURE**

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Existing literature exhibits a wide array of social factors affecting how close individuals are to others in their social networks. Existing research finds that taboo conversations affect one’s impression formation of an individual. Taboo norms impact an individual’s interaction with their friendships and workplace relationships, thus requiring the need of socially correct norms (Lee et. al. 2020). This literature provides the foundation for conceptualizing norms that are socially correct in a friend group or workplace relationship. Norms are often tools of social conformity and influence impacting one’s choices in personal connections. Mark Granovetter argues that people’s personal connections in their networks vary based on the strength of their ties, creating the spread of influence (1973). He provides that people’s social networks include weak ties which are the most powerful connections when structure is involved (Granovetter, 1973). Thus, the strength of one’s ties in their social networks may impact how one presents themselves. So, those who are friends could receive different impressions than strangers. Established findings suggest that individuals partake in “levels of self-presentation” in conjunction with the ties and trust an individual has in a relationship with another person (Øverup & Clayton Neighbors 2016). When

it is understood that a person may use impression management differently with different people the next step includes understanding how they employ impression management.

Research finds that generally, people use a limited amount of “self-presentational personas” which represent expectations of normalcy when casting an image of oneself that is adapted for their targeted individual (Leary, Mark, & Allen 2011). These personas are found to relate to an individual’s personality by use of interpersonal styles, self-evaluations, and examinations of others’ critiques (Leary, Mark, & Allen 2011). Since the self-presentational personas represent expectations of normalcy, which impacts how an individual may intend to impression manage. The individual may intend to alter their image to present a specific image. They present an image of themselves intentionally by choosing an outfit to wear. Research exemplifies that people can form different impressions and perceptions based upon the clothing a person may wear, impacting one’s behavioral intentions (Gurung et. al. 2019). An intentional clothing choice can foster a beneficial perception for the individual participating in impression management.

Oftentimes values may impact how one chooses to partake in impression management. Scholars argue that impression management tends to align more with values that shine the light on social harmony, compared to those based on self-focus (Danioni, Francesca, and Barni 2021). This research provides the basis that one’s values consistent with reflecting harmony and agreement will prove impression management to be the most effective. Values relating to credibility become prominent. Presenting a credible image to influence others is an effective way to impression manage. In the workplace, for example, researchers found that employees persuade their coworkers to see things as they do. This persuasion technique influences and those who employ the technique are impression managing thus gaining increased involvement in the workplace, gained popularity in the workplace, and increased influence among their peers as a socially dominant being (De Clercq et. al. 2021). Thus, even though values claim social harmony, there are grounds for individual benefits or gain to impression management.

With the existing research in context, there is a foundation of how impression management exists in the social world. The first step includes analyzing what prompts impression management. I argue that social ties prompt impression management. When examining social ties allows insight to the degree one may utilize impression management rises to the surface. Thus, paving way for the second step, comprehending one’s intentionality of impression management. The comprehension of one’s intentionality explains one’s reasons for the participation in impression management. One’s reason(s) for impression managing are important, but comes after the third reason, which examines how one chooses to carry out impression management must be looked at first. If college students are going to participate in impression management, then, “how are they doing it?” Finally, the “why,” a result of impression management that explains what college students gain from participating in impression management. Ultimately, the literature foregrounds inquiry into how college students use impression management for their gain.

## **METHODS**

I conducted a qualitative interview study that consisted of four semi-structured interviews. Across all the interviews, each lasted for about an average of 19 minutes. The interviews were conducted using Zoom software where they were recorded for transcription. The participants were asked general information about their friends and friend group dynamics, as well as how they may be influencing those friends and others. They were also asked about how they may manage their image around others. A sample question included: “What kinds of information do you not want to present to others? Why?”

Participants were drawn from a population of college students, particularly from TCNJ. The sample is restrictive to college students that are a part of a formal (organizational group) or an informal group (friend group). Purposive sampling was employed, as I chose each participant based on their ties to established friend groups or organizations on TCNJ’s campus. Three of the four participants were linked to sororities and were members of a large friend group where there is expected to be impression management occurring. The other participant was chosen due to their smaller friend group and experience in knowingly managing their image often.

After all interviews were conducted and transcribed; transcriptions were then imported into the qualitative coding software Atlas.Ti. The coding procedure consisted of grouping quotes from the participants into codes related to themes. Codes used included *strength of ties influential*, *altering image (mask)*, and *gain*. The *influential* code examined how the participant believed they were influential through examples of either intentional or unintentional influential acts. The *altering image (mask)* code consisted of analyzing examples where the participant would alter their image, put on a mask, for their intent. The *strength of ties* code explored how the participants' closeness to others affected their likelihood to impression manage around others. Finally, the *gain* code examined the benefits one received as a result of engaging in impression management.

## RESULTS

### *Strength of One's Ties*

The closeness in a relationship between one individual and another person may vary. The strength of the closeness an individual has with another person can be termed as the *strength of ties* (Granovetter 1973). When examining impression management, the element of social distance or closeness that an individual has with another, must be considered. Variation in the strength of closeness an individual has with another person is explained as weak ties, strong ties, or no ties; where the weakest ties would include a person that an individual knows little and the strongest being the closest two individuals can be (Granovetter 1973). Across all four interviews, the respondents tended to exemplify that their closer ties would often cultivate comfort and willingness to be more honest. Participant three specifically demonstrates the strength of ties:

"Like with my best friend. Me and her are definitely. Like we have...I don't know how to word it. So, we are very close. We act like sisters, like we've known each other for a long name. We literally tell each other everything in every little detail, but like with other people that say it's someone I'm not as close with I won't share as much information I'll try, I try to keep that to myself, because I don't know how a person acts, but I know how my best friend is."

The amount of comfortability and trust affect a participant's closeness with another. Therefore, if an individual has more comfort and trust with another person, that individual will impression manage less often. This would be true in vice versa as well. Participant two has explained the converse:

"With my roommate, if she asked me 'Does this sweater make me look fat?', I'd be like 'yeah you look a little "tinty"' like I would say something like that. But if I had my cousin walk up to me, being like: 'How does this sweater make me look?', I'd be like: 'It looks good but maybe in a different size', like I would try to be a little bit fluffier I guess around the edges, but the people closest to me I'm not as fluffy."

The participant expressed that a lesser relationship they have, with their cousin, results in a "fluffier" message or tone. This expression indicates impression management that is employed by the participant. In the context of strength, the weaker the tie one has means that an individual will participate in impression management more often. The participant expressed prior that they were very close to their roommate. So, under that condition, the participant willingly gives off impressions closer to their core identity with those who they have stronger ties with, like their roommate. In the case of no ties, the use of impression management is the strongest. Participant two provides:

"Like if I was trying to like sell something and trying to get someone to like... trying to persuade someone to buy something I would probably want to connect with them on a personal level, rather than being like buy this car because it's blue like you would want some relation to it on like a personal level, not just be like 'Look how pretty.'"

The participant here describes a situation where they have no ties to an individual and are simply "trying to sell them a car." In this situation, there is deliberate intention to partake in impression management. However, the strength of ties that the individuals have is none. Due to the lack of ties, the most potent utilization of impression management occurs. The lack of ties is not an exception to the analysis; rather, it creates the environment for an individual to use the most amount of impression management. Although more examination is required in other types of situations where ties are devoid to another individual as the "car salesman job" may lack inclusivity to represent all situations.

### *Intentionality of Impression Management*

Impression management can be executed intentionally or unintentionally as Goffman explains (1959). To understand intent, knowledge that impression management is occurring is required. The intentionality of impression management explores how a participant partakes in impression management because intent is situational. The variation of intent occurs in situations depending on whether one alters their image intentionally or unintentionally. Each participant intentionally altered their image, however, there were instances where participants did not intentionally attempt to alter their image. Participant one says:

“I'd be more like crafty with what I'm saying in the sense that I don't want to appear too like dumb or like too silly.”

In this instance, the participant is explaining their recognition of intentionally altering their image. In this case, the specific selection “to be crafty” emphasizes the intentionality of the participant. The participant may not understand that they are employing impression management, but still explain how they are altering their image. Participant two also shows intentionality:

“Like right now, I'm literally sitting in sweatpants and this shirt. I wouldn't wear this if I was going to meet someone for the first time, like, for instance, this past week I just met 40 people in my sorority. I put on leggings and a sweater. I didn't walk up to them like in this overly baggy shirt. Because this is like what I look like when I'm sitting in my room and the only person that is going to see me is my roommate. So, when I met my sorority I tried to look a little bit more lively like, last night, I just got my little in my sorority, so I put on makeup. I also had to curl my hair and just tried to look a little bit more awake and alive than just rolling up a mess.”

This participant is choosing to adapt their clothing choices intentionally to give off a specific impression. This finding shows that not only behavior is used to partake in impression management, but the alteration of clothing too. This example represents the participant's adherence to images they aimed to present. The participant explicitly recognizes that they dress differently around others to present a specific image. Contrastingly, Participant four has unintentionally participated in impression management:

“I would not say that putting on a mask is the correct terminology to achieve my influence, I think that I am an agreeable person and charismatic person. Those soft skills come with people liking you, as in liking me, and so, I do not need to pretend or fake or put on a mask to hide my personality, when I need to make an influence.”

The participant, when asked about what kind of mask they may put on, responded that they refrain from altering their image rather, rely on their intrinsic values for influence. However, the act of explaining themselves, in itself, is impression management. The inability to recognize in this specific response how one may present themselves to others or alter their image is unintentional. This respondent described in a later quote that they have partaken in impression management knowingly, thus contradicting this statement. As a result, even when individuals may not believe they are partaking in impression management, the reality is the opposite.

### *Social Power*

The ability to influence others is the concept of social power. Social power is analyzed by examining how participants utilize their agency to influence others' actions in ways that potentially benefit the influencer. Variation may include the aspect that social power, like impression management, can be intentional or unintentional. Furthermore, there are many variations for how social power is carried out. One of the most common ways social power plays out is through utilizing credibility. Participant one seemed to have the least intentional control over their ability to influence others:

“Everybody was deciding on going on the earlier time, but I was the one that was saying to do a later one because I knew that nobody was going to be running on time, so I took initiative and I was the one that was saying we're going to do the one at 10 instead of the one at 9:30.”

The participant here made an executive decision based on what they thought was most beneficial to the group. This was deemed to be influential, but minimally, as the actions were more declarative than

influential. The recognition of influence here is important because of the use of a credible approach which exemplified enough influence to anchor the declarative statement into reality.). However, the participant had agency to employ a direct, honest, and assertive approach to sway the group to a specific time. Thus, an assertive approach creates the mirage of a credible interaction that can allow others to be influenced by impression management. Participant four contrasted by utilizing an appealing approach to present credibility:

“So, if the likes-dislikes commonalities with someone is let's say...movies, I don't really like movies, I mean I'm not going to be a movie hater but I don't necessarily enjoy talking about movies. However, I will in that conversation spend more time talking about movies, than I may have otherwise, because that is what the partner is asking for me in the conversation”

This participant is appealing to the person swaying their judgment. This appeal is done through impression management as a means of influence. Giving off an impression that includes tailoring one's image to the other person's interests is a way to influence another person. In this case, the participant acts as if they were credible in the movie sphere of knowledge. This idea of credibility has shown up once again. Participant three also shows this concept in a unique way:

“I know with my major being a nursing major; people just tend to trust that profession a little bit more like I mean I'm not a nurse right now. But you know I'm going through classes to talk to people and keep that confidentiality like we had a whole lesson on being non-judgmental and I've been practicing that even before I started nursing. I've never been a really judgmental person.”

This participant recognizes their status as a nurse as grounds to be influential, a titular approach. They recognize that their experience leads them to believe that people think they are credible. This credibility is then used by the participant to influence their friend about their mental health decisions. All of the participants exemplify the variation of how to influence others but present an aspect of credibility that adds to impression management.

### *Benefits of Impression Management*

At the conclusion of impression management, there is a result. This result includes advantages that a person gains from the use of impression management. Ultimately, the process of impression management concludes in the achievement of some sort of benefit which can vary. Variations will be many as they are specific to the context of the situation. Participant three provides their gain as:

“Growing up, I always bottled my emotions and even with people I'm really comfortable with. Um, I don't like people seeing when I'm really upset or something bad is happening, even with my best friend like I don't tell my best friend stuff like that um. I guess it's just me being scared of being deplorable with people, but I am working on that.”

This quote shows that the participant does not want others to obtain a negative image of them being deplorable for their mental health and inability to express their emotions. The advantage of impression management in this situation is that the participant will gain the absence of fear that may make them uncomfortable. Participant four went as far as devising a plan to gain.

“Okay, sometimes I can be like a little manipulative to get my own gain and I think that that's what influences me. For example, I was looking for new people to live with next year, new housemates and I can sort of understand how people think about difficulties. Not difficulties in like emotionally difficult but questions, tasks, decisions, for example, who you're going to live with next year. And I knew that there was a group of people who were not necessarily looking for another housemate, but I could influence them to want to live with me. And so I hung out with them and learned their style of communication and it ended up being pretty crafty. They are the type of people who like to give homemade gifts, although gifts is a strong word, in order to show their affection and so as I started to hang out with them more realized that. Also like not just manipulatively, I wanted them. I also enjoy and like them. So, I can use their love language to influence them to like me more, and so, when I decided that I wanted to live with them, I also noticed that they had sort of decided they wanted to live with me. I made them gifts for a holiday that asked if they wanted to live with me and I think that that was more influential than me just

texting them and saying: "okay So are we living together?", because I was going along with their creativity, craftiness and style of communication."

The participant's plan was an elaborate full course of impression management. They were able to be crafty and influential under the guise of being considerate and friendly. The advantage of this method was the participant gained a place to live, especially with new friends that they ended up liking. Participant four was able to use their social power and ties to others to gain many benefits. Participant two has also gained a great deal similar to Participant three:

"So when I initially say these things you're not like wow Okay, she has no filter or like she's a bitch like I don't want I don't want people to perceive me as like self centered and blunt and just like whoa she just speaks her mind like whatever because that's not who I am. I do think of what I do. I do take into consideration what other people think of me, but I know people don't think of others. That's just how I'm wired like that's just what I do. So, I wouldn't want people thinking of me as like a self centered person just walking out into the world and speaking whatever thought bubble POPs into my head because that's not how I roll. So I feel like you need context and need to get to know me more before you can see 100% of me."

Participant two does not want to be seen as a bitch, self-centered, or blunt. They particularly are using their established mask of filtering themselves to ensure that that perception does not exist. This deliberate form of impression management leads to an extremely advantageous gain for the participant. They come across as a nice person and can influence others until they get to know them and be more like their core values. Considering all quotes, I find that college students will often participate in impression management, to gain some sort of benefit.

## **DISCUSSION**

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This article reflects my work in understanding the processes behind impression management among college students based on experiences, beliefs, and behaviors. Each of the four participants provided their stories that relate to Goffman's idea of impression management. Thus, the structure of impression management is as follows: the cause, the intent, the caring out, and the benefit. This form is underlying throughout the results section. Each participant exemplified active use of this road map while presenting multiple interesting experiences, beliefs, and behaviors.

Throughout this form, the first step included finding that individuals who have weaker ties are more likely to partake in impression management. However, this does not mean that stronger ties result in the lack of impression management. In fact, the opposite is true. Stronger ties mean that individuals are more closely connected to their core values around others, but impression management still occurs as participant three shows that even when they are with their best friend, they are giving off a joking image. An image that they don't typically present with everyone else. Individuals also have a sense of closeness with others that impacts how one is going to present oneself. Literature reinforces this idea of "levels of self-presentation." The level of self-presentation one uses depends on the ties that one has with another individual (Øverup & Clayton Neighbors 2016). The larger connection here relates to the concepts of how the relationship of the actor is with the audience. This relationship impacts how one decides to act based on who they are dealing with, resulting in a variety of different interactions. The closeness one is to another individual determines the level of taboo one is allowed to be. The aspect of being seen as taboo is impacted by impression management and should typically be socially correct (Lee et. al. 2020). Thus, reinforcing the use of impression management based on the strengths of one's ties.

In the second step, I analyzed the intentionality of the participants' impression management. I found that each participant was intentionally impression managing others. However, there were some instances where they were also unintentionally doing so, too. Both aspects result in the finding that college students are willingly going to alter their impressions daily. Participant one describes that they would rather not be perceived as "dumb or silly," so they are going to be crafty in what they say regarding themselves. These sayings connect to the existing research about "self-presentational personas" which represents what is supposed to be normal to cast an image of oneself that is adapted for their target audience (Leary, Mark, & Allen 2011). This research shows that the participant has a persona that they are intentionally using to not appear dumb or silly which is deemed by society as non-normal. Social norms

allow college students to influence others by presenting a persona rather than being an authentic version of themselves. Participant two also shows this through their intentional altering of their appearance. Goffman would call this a setting change in the performance (Goffman 1959). When going to a social event the participant stated that they would rather not go in “sweats and a shirt” because they wanted to be seen as livelier and more presentable. Existing research supports the participants actions as people can form different impressions and perceptions based upon the clothing a person may wear, thus impacting one's behavioral intentions (Gurung et. al. 2019). The altering of one's clothing choice is done intentionally by the participant and can apply to people daily. However, this does refer to the idea and role that social norms are at play. The criteria of a place or an event are going to influence the impression one is going to want to give off.

The third step consists of looking at how one does impression management. It was found that there are a variety of ways people choose to do impression management, however, what was consistent across all four participants was the manipulation of credibility in terms of influence. Participant three shows that they use their experiences of studying to become a nurse as a credible source. This image in conjunction with the broader social world tends to show that people could believe that certain professions are more credible than others leading people to be more susceptible to impression management. How one chooses to use their personality or title that shows personality based on social norms can impact how impression management is used. Social power is at play here utilizing credibility. Research shows that values like social harmony are often more aligned with impression management rather than those related to self-focus are more effective (Danioni, Francesca, and Barni 2021). Values relating to credibility can promote social harmony, thus credible approaches are likely to be influential.

The final step in the road map consists of the conclusion of impression management. It was found that impression management often benefits those who participate. In participant four's interview, they stated that they were looking for housing, so they crafted a plan that included altering their image to secure a place to live. Impression management can give minor or major benefits to those who partake. These benefits are even seen in the workplace. Existing research shows coworkers intentionally partake in impression management to achieve more influence or sustainability in the workplace (De Clercq et. al. 2021). The other three participants further exemplify that impression management gives them some sort of benefit, like not being seen a certain way or preventing a judgment from others. The benefit of understanding the gain in impression management helps the social world because the benefits could explain why people alter their image or behave a certain way in society.

College students actively engage in impression management. They tend to partake in impression management more with those who are not close to them, and they do it intentionally. Impression management among college students is carried out in a variety of ways, like changing appearance and having a credible persona. College students often receive benefits due to their participation in impression management. These findings answer the research question and allude to college students being prominent forces of social power in the world. College students can create and promote and create immense amounts of change in the social world.

### *Limitations*

Nevertheless, this research project has methodological limitations. The research process only included four participants, three of which were female and one male. Thus, the generalizability of the findings based on the sex or gender of an individual were limited. There are also grounds that this group is too small of a sample size to reflect most college students. The college campus's environment could also factor in limiting how effective the respondents demonstrated the concept of impression management. Beyond that, the culture of the campus could have impacted the need to participate in impression management among these participants. Improvements can be made to sample for certain social characteristics from a diverse set of colleges.

### *New Research Directions*

The research conducted studies the concept of impression management but does not analyze genuineness. This aspect could be important to understand the impact of the intentionality of impression

management. Other new questions that arose related to the risks that one takes when partaking in impression management, as well as, what would happen if impression management failed and lacked the desired results the individual wanted.

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