

Exploring university students' online self-presentation techniques and self-disclosure behaviors as predictors of staff response

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ABSTRACT

Online educational platforms (e.g., Microsoft Outlook and Moodle) are integrated within higher education communication. Predominantly aged 18-24 years, university students have only ever known a digitally connected world and communicating online is a core component of their reality. Higher education students and staff are thus regularly communicating online. Online self-presentation techniques and online self-disclosure behaviors are required to communicate online. The online disinhibition effect elevates the risk of over-disclosure. Students may be drawing upon online self-presentation techniques and self-disclosure behaviors to communicate with staff via online educational platforms; this may be useful and result in informative responses from staff, or this could be unsuccessful (particularly if students over-disclose) and result in less informative responses from staff. To explore this, a mixed methods approach has been adopted within this study drawing upon 100 Moodle forum posts and 100 emails between students and staff at one U.K. higher education institution. A deductive thematic analysis identifies occurrences of students online self-presentation techniques and self-disclosure behaviors, and staff's content disclosure (informativeness of responses). A path analysis then explores the predictive relationship between these components. Findings are the first to highlight that students are indeed utilizing online self-presentation techniques and self-disclosure behaviors via online educational platforms, and that these do predict the informativeness of staff response. Importantly, these findings should be used to support students in how to effectively communicate with staff via online educational platforms, and to educate staff in considerations of how they respond.

Keywords: communication, education, online, self-disclosure, self-presentation

INTRODUCTION

Particularly since the COVID-19 lockdowns, universities have identified the usefulness of the online environment within higher education; this has resulted in online communication becoming an integrated component of university life (Office for Students, 2022). Many educational platforms exist providing opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous communication both publicly (e.g., forum posts on Moodle) and privately (e.g., emails via Microsoft Outlook). Online self-disclosure, revealing information about the self via online platforms (Kim & Dindia, 2011), is required to communicate online. University students are typically motivated by help-seeking when they communicate with staff online (Fan & Lin, 2023) and so online self-disclosure is required in order to outline the help needed. Online self-disclosure via educational platforms has many benefits such as increased speed and ease of accessing information (Nikolopoulou, 2022; Paechter & Maier, 2010), but there are also risks, particularly over-disclosure (revealing

inappropriate/too much information to a misjudged audience; Kim & Dindia, 2011). Online over-disclosure is facilitated by the online disinhibition effect, the reduction of non-verbal cues (e.g., vocal tone, eye contact) easing online communication (Suler, 2004). Students' online self-disclosure may be facilitated by the online disinhibition effect, and this could result in over-disclosing to university staff. The use of self-presentation techniques (Lee et al., 1999) to manage impression management online may be associated with online self-disclosure. For example, we know that ingratiation (e.g., flattery; Lee et al., 1999) is associated with positive responses from others (Gordon, 1996). For students, utilizing online self-presentation techniques to facilitate impression management (Michikyan et al., 2014) may be useful for eliciting positive responses from staff. However, students are at risk of over-disclosing using self-presentation techniques; for example, excuses (minimizing responsibility associated with negative events; Lee et al., 1999) are often associated with negative responses (Tsai et al., 2010). Ultimately, over-disclosing via educational platforms can result in offending staff (Waycott et al., 2010) and this may shape how staff respond.

Importantly, research considering students' online self-disclosure and self-presentation techniques is limited. Understanding these behaviors may help university staff to support students in communicating effectively online. The potential repercussions of this may benefit students in both their academic experiences and future careers. With this aim, this study aims to explore the following research question: do students' online self-disclosure behaviors and self-presentation techniques predict staff response? A mixed methods approach will be adopted within this study drawing upon a deductive thematic analysis (qualitative) and path analysis (quantitative). Findings will identify whether students' online self-disclosure behaviors and self-presentation techniques inform staff response.

Self-Disclosure via Online Educational Platforms

Online self-disclosure is required in order to communicate online (Kim & Dindia, 2011). The facilitation of online self-disclosure due to non-verbal cues is defined as the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004); for example, communicating with someone face-to-face involves interpreting eye contact, vocal tone and body language as well as the content but online the lack of these cues removes the need for interpretation placing the focus solely on the content, this may ease the process of communicating. Nguyen et al. (2012) argue that self-disclosure forms the basis of information exchange and that due to the online disinhibition effect removing extra cues even more information is required in order to communicate online. The majority of university students globally are aged 18-24 years (HESA, 2023); this age group is defined as the developmental stage of 'emerging adulthood' (Sawyer et al., 2018). Emerging adults have only ever known a digitally connected reality (Stockdale & Coyne, 2020) and we know that using the internet is integrated into their daily lives (Horgan & Sweeney, 2012). Students are therefore regularly communicating in an environment that both facilitates and requires online self-disclosure. Further, it is evidenced that online help-seeking behaviors increase during emerging adulthood (Horgan & Sweeney, 2012; Stockdale & Coyne, 2020) and even more so amongst students specifically (Fan & Lin, 2023; Lattie et al., 2019). When we consider that students have only ever known a digital world, where online self-disclosure both is facilitated and required, and that they typically present more help-seeking behaviors, it is possible that students are at a greater risk of over-disclosing online.

The majority of university staff are generationally different to students particularly in terms of digital exposure. Unlike students, staff have known a time without the integration of digital technology in everyday life. As a result, it is evidenced that students and staff's perceptions of online communication differ. Through focus groups, Waycott et al. (2010) found that students' perceptions of appropriate online contact via educational platforms differed from staff. Similar findings are highlighted elsewhere (Lohnes & Kinzer, 2007; Park, 2010). The disparity between students' and staff's perceptions of online communication emphasizes the risk of student over-disclosure; this risk is heightened by students' online help-seeking behaviors.

Online educational platforms such as Moodle, MS Teams and Blackboard are used by students as a tool for sourcing

information (Er et al., 2015); to achieve this, help-seeking behaviors are used (Aleven et al., 2003; Fan & Lin, 2013). Rooted in self-regulated learning strategy (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012), students help-seeking behaviors are used to independently source information that meets their academic goals (Aleven et al., 2003). Online educational platforms are an effective tool for help-seeking behaviors as they offer more time to curate a question or request (Cheng et al., 2013) as and when the student seeks the information (Koc & Liu, 2016) often receiving a response in a timely manner (Broadbent & Lodge, 2021). We know that students with better self-regulation skills are more successful in sourcing information through help-seeking behaviors (Dunn et al., 2014). We also know that when online help-seeking behaviors receive positive responses from staff students report greater satisfaction.

In order to ask for help, one must disclose relevant information (Vogel & Wester, 2003) but this can make an individual feel vulnerable and thus be off-putting (Adams et al., 2022). In fact, university students report worrying about asking for help for fear of being viewed as incompetent (Martin-Arbo et al., 2021) Facilitated by the online disinhibition effect and generational differences in online communication, emerging adults are more likely to seek help online than offline (Pretorius et al., 2019). However, compounded by generational differences in perceptions of appropriate online communication, students may be at risk of over-disclosing (revealing inappropriate information to a misjudged audience; Kim & Dindia, 2011) whilst help-seeking. Subsequently, staff may respond negatively and in turn this may dissatisfy students and impact their academic experience.

Impression Management Theory & Online Self-Presentation Techniques

Impression management theory conceptualizes social interactions as a method of how we wish others to perceive us (Schlenker, 1980). Our desired goals inform our impression motivation and the tools we use to hopefully achieve that goal inform our impression construction (Schlenker, 1980). According to Goffman (1959), we adapt our behavior through impression construction, and it is therefore performative: the better the performance, the more likely we are at achieving our impression motivation. How we shape this performance, however, is based upon the discrepancy between the real and ideal selves (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980). If there is a large discrepancy between the real and ideal selves, our performance (impression construction) will require greater curation in order to reach our desired goal (impression motivation).

Self-presentation techniques are a common tool within impression construction. Self-presentation techniques fall into two categories: assertive (actively trying to construct other's impressions) and defensive (defending an impression already constructed; see **Table 1** for full list of Lee et al.'s, 1999 self-presentation techniques). The online disinhibition effect (facilitation of online self-disclosure due to non-verbal cues; Suler, 2004) facilitates the use of self-presentation techniques for impression construction within an online environment (Michikyan et al., 2014, 2015). Online, an individual can draw upon a wider range of tools to construct an impression. For

Table 1. Self-presentation techniques & definitions categorized as assertive or defensive as per Lee et al. (1999)

Assertive self-presentation techniques	Defensive self-presentation techniques
-Ingratiation (presenting self positively to gain an advantage)	-Excuse (minimizing responsibility associated with negative events)
-Intimidation (presenting self as powerful & dangerous to gain an advantage)	-Justification (accepting responsibility for a negative event, but overexplaining reasons to condone it)
-Supplication (presenting 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 (positively endorsing own behavior)	-Apology (accepting responsibility for a negative event & expressing remorse)
-Blasting (labelling another individual or group as negative)	
-Exemplification (endorsing own behavior with a specific focus on integrity & worth)	

example, one can use filters or editing software to present an ideal self (Hong et al., 2020; Michikyan et al., 2014). Importantly, the discrepancy between the real and ideal selves is easier to manage online due to the wider range of available tools. For example, trying to present the false self is very challenging in-person (e.g., wearing a disguise), whereas online it is easy to create a fake profile or avatar and subsequently present a false self (Michikyan et al., 2015). The performative element of impression construction is therefore much easier via online self-presentation techniques and can make managing impression motivations more successful.

Assertive and defensive self-presentation techniques can reap different responses online. For example, assertive self-presentation techniques are typically associated with aggression (Abell & Brewer, 2014; Reed & Saunders, 2020). Further, Hart et al. (2019b) found that all assertive self-presentation techniques (except for supplication) were closely linked with dark triad traits (particularly narcissism). Detection of assertive self-presentation techniques can thus receive a negative response (Burusic & Ribar, 2014; Highhouse et al., 2016). Ingratiation, supplication and enhancement, however, tend to be viewed more positively than other assertive self-presentation techniques (Ahmed, 2014; Wong, 2012). Cheng et al. (2019) identified ingratiation as a self-presentation technique typically used by emerging adults who rated high in autonomy. They also identified ingratiation, exemplification and supplication as self-presentation techniques typically used by emerging adults who rated highly on motivation and self-determination. Autonomy, motivation and self-determination are linked to increased help-seeking behaviors (Karabenick & Puustinen, 2013; Newman, 2008). Students may therefore draw upon the assertive self-presentation techniques of ingratiation, exemplification and supplication when communicating via online educational platforms, but staff may only respond positively to ingratiation, supplication and enhancement. If true, this means that students who use the assertive self-presentation techniques of intimidation, entitlement, exemplification and blasting may be more likely to receive negative or less informative responses from staff.

Defensive self-presentation techniques may be viewed more positively than assertive self-presentation techniques (Gillespie, 2020). Defensive self-presentation techniques are typically viewed as more socially acceptable than assertive self-presentation techniques, both by the individual using the technique and the audience (Øverup & Neighbors, 2016). Defensive self-presentation techniques are also often more subtle than assertive self-presentation techniques (Cohen, 2001; Schmid & Betsch, 2019). However, defensive self-

presentation techniques (particularly excuse and justification) can be associated with irresponsibility and dishonesty (Hart et al., 2019a, 2019b; Schlenker, 1980) resulting in negative feedback from the audience (Sadler et al., 2010). Students may use defensive self-presentation techniques due to feelings of imposter syndrome (Shahani-Yeilaghi et al., 2007) or shame of potential academic failure (Ferrari & Dúaz-Morales, 2007). If viewed as indicators of irresponsibility or dishonesty, staff may respond negatively.

Research Focus

Online educational platforms present a unique and greatly nuanced environment for students and staff to communicate. The online disinhibition effect (facilitation of online self-disclosure due to non-verbal cues; Suler, 2004) facilitates online self-disclosure (revealing information about the self; Kim & Dindia, 2011) and self-disclosure is required in order to connect with others. The online environment provides limited external information (e.g., nonverbal cues) and so more self-disclosure is required in order to communicate (Nguyen et al., 2012). Online self-presentation techniques are a tool for managing impressions of others within an online space (Lee et al., 1999; Michikyan, 2014; Michikyan et al., 2015). The online disinhibition effect provides greater opportunity for the curation of the online self via online self-presentation techniques (Michikyan, 2014; Michikyan et al., 2015). On the one hand, self-disclosure and self-presentation are linked: we may use self-presentation techniques as a way of disclosing about the self (Chen & Marcus, 2012; Rui & Stefanone, 2013a, 2013b). On the other hand, it is widely argued that self-disclosure and self-presentation present different constructs due to the variance in motivation and behaviors (Schlosser, 2020).

Drawing upon literature within an educational context, we know that students self-disclose online and that they utilize online self-presentation techniques (Binali et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2014; Horgan & Sweeney, 2012). We also know that students are increasingly using online educational platforms at university (Office for Students, 2022). Yet, an understanding of how students may self-disclose and utilise self-presentation techniques via online educational platforms specifically is lacking from the literature. If successful, online educational platforms can be an effective tool for student help-seeking, whereby staff respond efficiently with informative responses. If unsuccessful, students may over-disclose and receive negative or uninformative responses from staff; this may be detrimental to their educational experience.

To explore this, a mixed methods approach will be adopted within this study. A deductive thematic analysis (Braun &

Clarke, 2014, 2019; McKibben et al., 2020) will be used to identify instances of students' online self-disclosure and online self-presentation techniques as well as staff's online content disclosure (the informativeness of their response) from 100 Moodle posts (public online educational platform) and 100 Microsoft Outlook emails (private online educational platform). Following this, a path analysis will be conducted to explore the predictive relationship between students' online self-disclosure and online self-presentation techniques upon staff's online content disclosure. Although this study is novel and thus exploratory in nature, based upon previous research it is predicted that:

1. Greater instances of online self-disclosure (indicating over-disclosure) will be associated with lower staff content disclosure (less informative responses).
2. Greater instances of assertive self-presentation techniques: ingratiation, supplication and enhancement will be associated with higher staff content disclosure (more informative responses); the other assertive self-presentation techniques will be associated with lower staff content disclosure (less informative responses).
3. Greater instances of defensive self-presentation techniques will be associated with higher staff content disclosure (more informative responses), except for excuse and justification, which will be associated with lower staff content disclosure (less informative responses).
4. Online self-presentation techniques will mediate the relationship between student self-disclosure and staff content disclosure.

Exploring how students may self-disclose and use self-presentation techniques via online educational platforms and to what extent this may inform staff responses is important in understanding the relationship between students and staff's online communication. Importantly, findings will inform university policymakers and both students and staff how to communicate effectively via online educational platforms.

METHODS

Data

A-priori power analysis was calculated with an anticipated correlation coefficient of 0.10 and desired power of 80%, resulting in a proposed sample size of 126 (Cohen, 1988). Data were collected using a qualitative archival review of 100 Moodle forum posts and 100 emails from one U.K. higher education institution (HEI). Moodle was selected as it is a public online educational platform, where students communicate with staff via forums available to all students enrolled on that course/module. Emails were selected as they comprise communication within a private and more personal environment. We know that online self-disclosure behaviors are shaped by perception of the audience size (Clark-Gordon et al., 2019) and so it was important to capture data from both public and private online educational platforms so that our data represented the breadth of student-staff online communication.

All data were anonymized prior to analysis for ethical purposes and so we cannot determine specific demographic information. We do however know that from the psychology undergraduate students at the selected U.K. HEI, 57% are aged 18-23 years, 86% are from the U.K., and 88% identify as female.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, this study received ethical approval from a U.K. HEI and was also conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society ethical guidelines. As the data was collected using qualitative methods, the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research guidelines were followed throughout (Tong et al., 2007) to ensure a robust and reliable methodology. The author is a member of teaching staff at HEI and the research assistant on this project was an undergraduate student also at HEI and this was considered carefully throughout the data collection phase in terms of potential biases. Moodle forum posts were randomly selected from undergraduate modules from the academic year 2021-22 by a technical member of staff who was unrelated to this project; all potentially identifiable data were anonymized by the research assistant. Emails were collated from four teaching staff who were opportunistically sampled by the author; of these staff two were male (identified as White, aged 28 and 30 years) and two were female (one identified as White, one identified as British Asian, aged 26 and 33 years). Teaching staff were asked to anonymize all potentially identifiable data before sending emails across to the research assistant on this project. The text from the posts and emails were copied and pasted into Microsoft Word documents by the research assistant. Following this, these files were loaded into NVivo software (released in March 2020) for analysis by the author. Subsequent data was imported into R Studio (RStudio Team, 2020) for quantitative analysis, also by the author.

Data Analysis

A mixed methods analysis was drawn upon following data collection comprising a deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2014, 2019; McKibben et al., 2020), to identify theoretically driven themes of self-disclosure, content disclosure and impression management tactics, and a path analysis (Lleras, 2005) to explore any predictive pathways between these themes.

Deductive content analysis

Data were numerically coded to create variables of student self-disclosure, staff content disclosure and each self-presentation technique per Lee et al.'s (1999) categories: ingratiation, intimidation, supplication, entitlement, enhancement, blasting, exemplification, excuse, justification, disclaimer, self-handicapping, apology. Each of Lee et al.'s (1999) self-presentation techniques were included in order to measure the breadth of both assertive and defensive self-presentation techniques (see **Table 1** for definitions for each technique). Student self-disclosure comprised the extent to which students revealed information about the self. Staff content disclosure comprised how much information the staff member disclosed. For student self-disclosure and staff content disclosure variables, data were coded as either zero (no occurrence of self-disclosure/content disclosure), one (one

Table 2. Predictor & outcome summary (mean [M] & standard deviations [SDs]) table with bivariate correlation coefficients of all predictors: Student self-disclosure, ingratiation, intimidation, supplication, entitlement, enhancement, blasting, exemplification, excuse, justification, disclaimer, self-handicapping & apology, & outcome variable: Staff content disclosure

	M (SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.
1. Student online self-disclosure	0.61 (0.74)		.26	.10	.12	.31	.14	.09	<.01	.05	.38	.22	.42	.37	.40
2. Staff content disclosure	1.12 (0.73)	.26		.19	-.07	.20	<.01	-.13	-.14	-.03	-.06	.02	.07	.27	-.03
3. Ingratiation	0.31 (0.46)	.10	.19		-.02	-.04	-.07	<.01	-.14	-.12	-.21	-.02	-.12	<.01	-.16
4. Intimidation	0.02 (0.14)	-.07	.12	-.02		-.08	.36	-.03	.15	-.03	.17	.16	.08	-.06	.07
5. Supplication	0.22 (0.42)	.31	.20	-.04	-.08		-.10	-.01	-.11	.05	-.01	.02	.16	.23	.13
6. Entitlement	0.04 (0.19)	.14	<.01	-.07	.36	-.10		.08	.38	.13	.01	.01	.08	-.07	.02
7. Enhancement	0.05 (0.22)	.09	-.13	<.01	-.03	-.01	.08		-.05	-.04	.06	-.02	-.08	-.09	<.01
8. Blasting	0.04 (0.20)	<.01	-.14	-.14	.15	-.11	.38	-.05		-.04	<.01	<.01	.06	-.08	.01
9. Exemplification	0.03 (0.17)	.05	-.03	-.12	-.03	.05	.13	-.04	-.04		-.07	-.07	-.04	.11	.13
10. Excuse	0.12 (0.33)	.38	-.06	-.21	.17	-.01	.01	.06	<.01	-.07		.19	.24	.09	.28
11. Justification	0.13 (0.33)	.22	.02	-.02	.16	.02	.01	-.02	<.01	-.07	.19		.09	-.01	.12
12. Disclaimer	0.26 (0.44)	.42	.07	-.12	.08	.16	.08	-.08	.06	-.04	.24	.09		.22	.02
13. Self-handicapping	0.13 (0.34)	.37	.27	<.01	-.06	.23	-.07	-.09	-.08	.11	.09	-.01	.22		.16
14. Apology	0.11 (0.31)	.40	-.03	-.16	.07	.13	.02	<.01	.01	.13	.28	.12	.02	.16	

occurrence of self-disclosure/content disclosure), or two (more than one occurrence of self-disclosure/content disclosure). See **Appendix A** for examples of data coded as student self-disclosure and staff content disclosure. For each self-presentation technique, data were coded as zero (no evidence of this technique used) or one (evidence of this technique used).

Path analysis

To explore whether student self-presentation techniques and self-disclosure behaviors predict staff content disclosure, a path analysis was conducted. A path analysis was selected to explore the strength of both direct and indirect relationships between observed variables (Grapentine, 2000). Following the deductive content analysis, numerical data was imported into R studio (RStudio Team, 2020) for quantitative analysis in R using path analysis via the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012). Mean scores were calculated for each variable. For student self-disclosure, continuous mean scores ranged from zero (no self-disclosure) to two (high self-disclosure). For staff content disclosure, continuous mean scores also ranged from zero (no content disclosure) to two (high content disclosure). Each self-presentation technique (ingratiation, intimidation, supplication, entitlement, enhancement, blasting, exemplification, excuse, justification, disclaimer, self-handicapping, apology) was entered as individual variables; these were coded as continuous variables with mean scores ranging from zero (no evidence of this technique) to one (evidence of this technique).

Preliminary analyses were conducted to explore descriptive information including assumptions. Following this, the path analysis was conducted with student self-disclosure, ingratiation, intimidation, supplication, entitlement, enhancement, blasting, exemplification, excuse, justification, disclaimer, self-handicapping and apology as predictors, and staff content disclosure as the outcome. Maximum likelihood was included as the estimator. The fit indices of the path analysis were checked against recommendations of good fit indices including comparative fit index (CFI) of >0.85 (Carlbak & Wong, 2018); Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) of >0.90 ; root mean square error of approximation

(RMSEA) of <0.05 ; standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) of <0.05 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

RESULTS

Following confirmation that assumptions were met, descriptive information was explored. See **Table 2** for correlation coefficients between all variables. On average, students disclosed some but not too great a deal of information when communicating via online educational platforms (mean $[M]=0.60$, standard deviation $[SD]=0.74$) and utilized an average of one to two self-presentation techniques ($M=1.57$, $SD=1.23$). Of these self-presentation techniques, ingratiation ($n=61$), disclaimers ($n=51$) and supplication ($n=44$) were the most frequently used. On average, staff responded to students with some information via online educational platforms ($M=1.12$, $SD=0.73$); typically not a great deal of information but also not too limited. Overall, both students ($M=1.00$, $SD=0.78$) and staff ($M=1.23$, $SD=0.73$) self-disclosed more via private online educational platforms (emails).

See **Table 3** and **Table 4** for a full breakdown of descriptive data including examples of each self-presentation technique.

Path Analysis

The overall model fit of the path analysis was excellent, $\chi^2(29)=1463.84$, $p<.001$; RMSEA=0; SRMR=0; CFI=1.00; TLI=1.00 and presented two pathways. Pathway one presented a positive relationship directly between self-handicapping ($\beta=0.40$, $SE=0.49$, $p<.001$) and staff content-disclosure, apology ($\beta=0.31$, $SE=0.46$, $p<.001$) and staff content-disclosure, ingratiation ($\beta=0.31$, $SE=0.23$, $p<.001$) and staff content-disclosure, blasting ($\beta=0.20$, $SE=0.82$, $p<.001$) and staff content-disclosure, exemplification ($\beta=0.13$, $SE=0.94$, $p<.001$) and staff content-disclosure, entitlement ($\beta=0.09$, $SE=1.04$, $p<.001$) and staff content-disclosure, and enhancement ($\beta=0.08$, $SE=1.04$, $p<.001$) and staff content-disclosure. These findings suggest that students who utilize the self-presentation techniques: self-handicapping, apology, ingratiation, blasting, exemplification, entitlement, and enhancement receive more information in the subsequent responses from staff members.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics highlighting occurrences of student self-disclosure & staff content disclosure at each scoring level (0: no occurrences; 1: one occurrence; 2: more than one occurrence) per online educational platform type (private–emails, public–forum posts), & overall mean (M) & standard deviation (SD) scores

		Occurrences at each scoring level			Mean	Standard deviation
		0	1	2		
Student self-disclosure	Private	30	39	29	1.00	0.78
	Public	75	20	3	0.26	0.51
	Total	105	59	32	0.60	0.74
Staff content disclosure	Private	18	48	34	1.23	0.73
	Public	23	47	28	1.05	0.72
	Total	41	95	62	1.12	0.73

Table 4. Descriptive statistics highlighting total occurrences of each impression management technique

	Self-presentation technique	Occurrences			Example
		Private	Public	Total	
Assertive	Ingratiation	44	17	61	<i>"I would like to say thank you for such a clear & well-designed & explained lecture"</i> (private).
	Supplication	33	11	44	<i>"I'm super confused on how it's supposed to be structured and was wondering if you were able to look at it and help?"</i> (private).
	Enhancement	6	4	10	<i>"I have not found any precise information about this, so I thought it would be a good idea to ask"</i> (public).
	Blasting	3	5	8	<i>"I do not want to stay here on campus any longer as I do not feel safe"</i> (private).
	Entitlement	3	3	6	<i>"I think we did a good job on the ethics"</i> (public).
	Exemplification	1	5	6	<i>"I handled the situation very well even though it was difficult"</i> (private).
	Intimidation	3	0	3	<i>"I will be contacting [name] as I am not happy with the outcome"</i> (private).
Defensive	Disclaimer	32	20	52	<i>"I am experiencing some difficulty in regards to meeting deadline [...] been very ill for past 2 weeks with a cold & fever, which has significantly affected me to get my work done"</i> (private).
	Apology	17	11	28	<i>"I am sorry for the questions, I had not realized that the forum was closed"</i> (public).
	Self-handicapping	15	12	27	<i>"Because of everything going on I'm in no state to sit my exam"</i> (private).
	Justification	18	8	26	<i>"I understand that I have not put-up explicit subheadings, so I have followed the template and I have answered every sub-heading asked for"</i> (public).
	Excuse	18	6	24	<i>"The marker said that the study I had proposed was not qualitative and that it was quantitative, but there are no scales to measure what I wanted to"</i> (private).

Pathway two presented student self-disclosure ($\beta=-0.81$, $SE=0.07$, $p<.001$) as a negative mediator between self-handicapping ($\beta=0.32$, $SE=0.47$, $p<.001$) and staff content-disclosure, blasting ($\beta=0.19$, $SE=0.77$, $p<.001$) and staff content-disclosure, exemplification ($\beta=0.16$, $SE=0.88$, $p<.001$) and staff content-disclosure, and justification ($\beta=0.13$, $SE=0.45$, $p<.001$) and staff content-disclosure. These findings suggest that students who utilize the self-presentation techniques: self-handicapping, blasting, exemplification, and justification also self-disclose more and receive less information in the subsequent responses from staff members (see **Figure 1**).

DISCUSSION

This study provides a unique exploration of students' online self-disclosure behaviors and self-presentation techniques via online educational platforms and to what extent they may predict staff response. These findings build upon limited literature of this nature within an educational context. Importantly, these findings highlight that certain self-presentation techniques may be facilitated via the online disinhibition effect resulting in over-disclosing via online educational platforms; in turn, this is associated with less informative responses from staff. University policymakers and student-facing staff should consider these findings when

supporting students in appropriate online communication with staff. Further, these findings should be used to help staff to recognize students' online behaviors and consider this when responding online.

Assertive Self-Presentation Techniques

Flattery is a form of ingratiation (presenting the self positively to gain an advantage, Lee et al. 1999), and this was prominent within this study's dataset (e.g., *"I'd like to say that I really enjoyed your lecture, and I am looking forward to our other lectures on this topic"*; email). Previous research suggests that receivers of flattery respond positively (Gordon, 1996); the findings of this study support this as staff did indeed respond more informatively when students used ingratiation self-presentation techniques. On the one hand, recipients of ingratiation (particularly flattery) align the positive comments with their own self-concept even if they suspect ulterior motives (Pandey, 2022; Vonk, 2002). On the other hand, it is evidenced that flattery can be detected as inauthentic resulting in a negative response (Cheng et al., 2023; Sanchez-Ruiz et al., 2023). Politeness is another form of ingratiation (Morand, 2000; Yagil, 2002) and this was also highly evident within this study's dataset (e.g., *"thank you for the informative lecture"*; forum post). Perhaps the combination of flattery and politeness mitigated the risk of inauthenticity. In fact, Jones et al. (1963) suggest that the combination of ingratiation (particularly flattery) and enhancement (positively endorsing

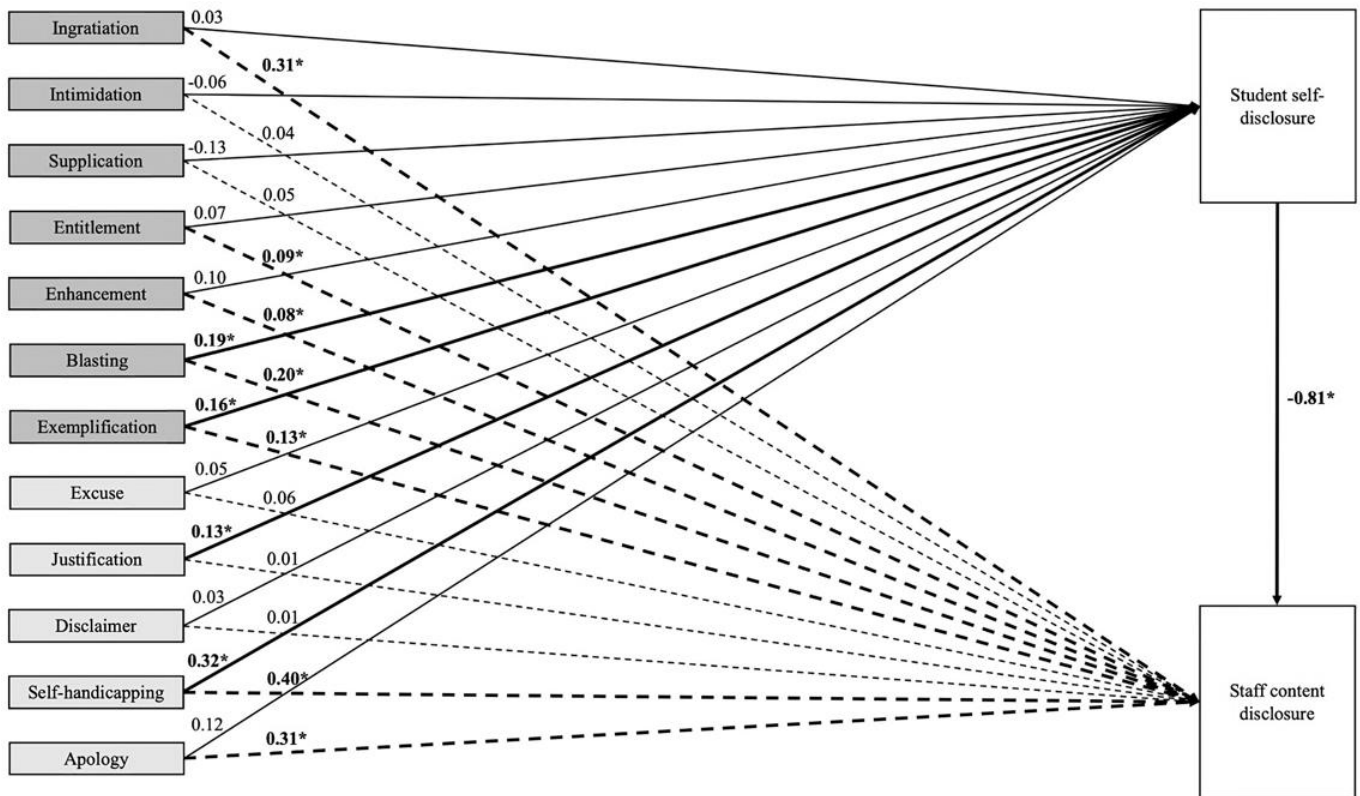


Figure 1. Path analysis diagram highlighting two pathways: Pathway one is indicated by dashed lines & pathway two is indicated by solid lines; significant relationships are identified in bold with an asterisk next to the estimates; assertive self-presentation techniques are shaded in dark grey, defensive self-presentation techniques are shaded in light grey (Source: Author's own elaboration)

own behavior, Lee et al., 1999) is particularly effective when used by lower status colleagues towards higher status colleagues as they foster perceptions of capability; these findings are further supported in more recent literature and also include politeness (Pandey, 2022; Yang et al., 2022). Thus, in relation to our findings, utilizing ingratiation (especially flattery and politeness) and enhancement may reap informative responses from staff due to positive perception, which align with staff self-concept as well as increased perceptions of student capability. Further, neither ingratiation nor enhancement were associated with over-disclosure, which suggests that utilizing these self-presentation techniques via online educational platforms is a positive and effective tool.

As well as ingratiation and enhancement, entitlement (claiming responsibility of positive events, Lee et al., 1999) was also associated with informative staff response and not associated with over-disclosure, but this came as a surprise. Previous research predominantly highlights entitlement as an aggressive self-presentation technique, which reaps negative responses (Abell & Brewer, 2014; Hart et al., 2019b; Reed & Saunders, 2020). Perhaps, it is the higher education context of this study that shapes the differing findings. If substantiated, entitlement can be viewed positively (O'Mara et al., 2018). Within the dataset of this study, students did often substantiate their entitlement with indicators of responsibility (e.g., "I have found a couple of papers myself on Google Scholar, which may work well", email), and we know that showing signs of responsibility and academic initiative are valued by higher education staff (Amro et al., 2013; Lea et al., 2003). As a result,

staff may be more likely to respond positively to students who utilize entitlement. Like ingratiation and enhancement, entitlement was not associated with over-disclosure and thus presents another positive and effective tool for communicating via online educational platforms.

Exemplification (endorsing own behavior with a specific focus on integrity and worth, Lee et al., 1999) also predicted the informativeness of staff response, but over-disclosure poses a risk for students utilizing this self-presentation technique. Within the dataset of this study, exemplification predominantly occurred via public online educational platforms. Utilizing exemplification within public spaces is risky. If viewed as strategically performative (i.e., 'showing off') or exaggerated, responses are likely to be negative (Gardner, 2003). The online space may amplify perceptions of exemplification being performative, particularly where the audience size is large (Ranzini & Hoek, 2017; Rim & Song, 2016; Oeldorf-Hirsch et al., 2017). Exemplification is often used for help-seeking (Cheng et al., 2019), and so an uninformative response may be especially detrimental to the student who is actively seeking information. The findings of this study do highlight that exemplification can be effective, but where over-disclosure occurs it has the opposite effect. Students utilizing exemplification when communicating with staff online, especially via public online educational platforms, should be cautious in how performative or exaggerated their post may seem. It would be interesting for future research to qualitatively explore students' online exemplification techniques and staff's perceptions of these to understand the

nuances around when they are perceived positively and when they are perceived as over-disclosure.

Unexpectedly, blasting (labelling another individual or group as negative, Lee et al., 1999) was associated with more informative responses from staff. The instances of blasting within this dataset were all associated with elevated help-seeking behaviors (e.g., *“the feedback from the module coordinator just was not helpful and I really could do with a meeting with you for some help”*, email) and we know from educational literature that elevated help-seeking is associated with poorer mental health (McAllister et al., 2014; Zochil & Thorsteinsson, 2018), namely anxiety (Goodwin et al., 2016). Staff may recognize blasting as a precursor of poor mental health and subsequently provide an informative response to support the student. Over-disclosure, however, presented a risk for students utilizing blasting. Blasting is widely recognized as an aggressive self-presentation technique and is associated with negative responses (Hart et al., 2019b; Ozkan et al., 2022; Reed & Saunders, 2020). The online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) may facilitate the nature of the blasting and result in over-disclosure. Feeling frustrated or panicked, students may construct an inappropriate message utilizing blasting, which staff may view as aggressive and subsequently respond less informatively. Staff may also view blasting as the student passing the blame rather than taking responsibility and we know from educational literature that this is viewed negatively (Hart et al., 2019a, 2019b). When we consider that students utilizing blasting may be responding to a severe situation, an uninformative response from a staff member is highly risky. These findings should be used to support students in understanding how to communicate appropriately with staff via online educational platforms. Further, these findings should also be used to educate staff about students' online blasting behaviors and how to respond appropriately but still informatively.

Defensive Self-Presentation Techniques

Only a select few defensive self-presentation techniques were associated with staff content disclosure. As expected, apology was associated with higher staff content disclosure. Apology (accepting responsibility for a negative event and expressing remorse, Lee et al., 1999) is widely evidenced as indicative of taking accountability for one's actions (Bolino et al., 2014, 2016; Meier, 1998; Schumann, 2018). In turn, this is often interpreted as a sign of respect (De Cremer & Schouten, 2008). Apology is often viewed as more sincere (Haugh & Chang, 2019) and therefore typically receives positive responses (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Basford et al., 2014). Considering the hierarchical difference between students and staff, it is possible that staff respond more positively to apology as they recognize it as a sign of respect. Staff may be more likely to respond informatively as an indicator of appreciation for the apology. Interestingly, over-disclosure did not pose as a risk for students utilizing apology as an online self-presentation technique. Thus, these findings highlight that apology may be a worthwhile online self-presentation technique for students.

Self-handicapping (providing a barrier to success before an event occurs, Lee et al., 1999) and justification (accepting responsibility for a negative event, but overexplaining reasons

to condone it, Lee et al., 1999) were both associated with more informative responses from staff members, but both were at risk of over-disclosure. Self-handicapping can be indicative of low self-esteem (Martin & Brawley, 2002). As educators, staff members are likely to recognize this association and subsequently respond with lots of information to support that student (Chen et al., 2018; Schwinger et al., 2014). Where students over-disclose, however, staff responses become less informative. Both self-handicapping and justification are associated with irresponsibility (Hart et al., 2019a, 2019b; Schlenker, 1980) such as procrastination (Barutçu Yıldırım & Demir, 2020; Strunk & Steele, 2011) and disengagement (Van der Velden, 2013). Academic staff perceive procrastination and disengagement very negatively (Kármén et al., 2015; Orpen, 1998) and may subsequently provide a less informative response. Responding less informatively may be detrimental to these students especially if they genuinely are lacking self-esteem. We know that perceptions of irresponsibility vary hugely (Chung et al., 2019; McCabe & O'Connor, 2014). With the addition of the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) potentially influencing the way in which a student constructs their message, there is the potential of misinterpretation. These findings should therefore be considered by staff when communicating online with students to avoid misrecognizing students' online self-handicapping and justification behaviors, and subsequently providing students with appropriate support.

Limitations & Future Directions

Despite the novel and applied importance of this study, limitations are evident and require consideration. All data were collected from one HEI based within the South of England due to practical restrictions. It would be useful to conduct a larger replication of this study drawing upon datasets from a wider range of institutions across U.K. to explore whether findings remain consistent or whether differences occur between institutions. This would also be effective in further diversifying the demographics of the student and staff data. We know that cultural differences exist in communicating online in general, let alone via online educational platforms (Liu et al., 2010; Ye, 2006). It would therefore be interesting to explore whether differences occur across a broader range of demographics from institutions more widely.

The staff data extracted for this study was from a younger demographic (aged 26-33 years; considered Millennials at the time of data collection, Dimock, 2019). Generational divides do still exist between this age group and that of the student demographic (aged predominantly 18-24 years; considered as Generation Z, Dimock, 2019). However, it is recognized that both of these generations are prolific users of the online space for communication (Ofcom, 2022) and therefore their perceptions of online communication may be more closely aligned than with older generations (e.g., Boomers; Jiang et al., 2016). It would be interesting to replicate this study with greater diversity in the age range of staff to explore whether the findings remain consistent or whether with older staff members we see differences in response to student online self-presentation techniques and self-disclosure behaviors.

It would be very interesting to explore the relationship between students online self-presentation techniques and

self-disclosure behaviors and staff's response over a period of time. Students go through intense social development at university and so their online behaviors may change over time (Anderson et al., 2017; Comegys et al., 2006; Walsh et al., 2013). Help-seeking behaviors may also vary depending on which academic year a student is in (Cheng et al., 2013; Goodwin et al., 2016; Martin-Arbo et al., 2021); for example, third-year students may seek more support as their assignments are more heavily weighted towards their overall classification. Exploring this relationship over time would be useful for understand whether any nuances in student-staff online communication exist across the course of a university degree.

It would also be useful to conduct a qualitative exploration of students' online self-presentation techniques and self-disclosure behaviors and how staff respond to these. From the data included within this study, it is identifiable how certain behaviors are associated, but a deeper understanding of why cannot be elicited. From qualitative data, a greater understanding can be fostered regarding the motivations and nuances surrounding students' online behaviors and why staff respond in a certain way.

CONCLUSIONS

This study is the first to explore the predictive relationship between students' online self-presentation techniques and self-disclosure behaviors, and staff content disclosure (informativeness of their response). Drawing upon a mixed methods approach, the findings highlight that there is indeed a predictive relationship between these components. Online self-disclosure behaviors mediate the relationship between self-presentation techniques and staff response, with assertive self-presentation techniques predicting staff response more so than defensive self-presentation techniques. Overall, ingratiation, entitlement, enhancement and apology presented as the only self-presentation techniques that were not associated with the risk of over-disclosure. Whilst blasting, exemplification, self-handicapping and justification were all associated with the risk of over-disclosure, which resulted in less informative responses from staff. Importantly, these findings highlight that students are utilizing online self-presentation techniques and self-disclosure behaviors when communicating with staff via online educational platforms, and that how they use these techniques and behaviors does inform how staff respond. Findings should be used to support students (e.g., providing guidance) around communicating more effectively via online educational platforms. Further, findings should be used to educate staff (e.g., training workshops) around recognizing students' online behaviors and ensuring that responses remain informative.

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APPENDIX A

Table A1. Examples of data coded as student self-disclosure & staff content disclosure

Code name	Code Example
Student self-disclosure	0 I wondered if it would be possible to have a copy of actual, raw PowerPoint (1 slide per page) without lines? I'm running into some difficulty with citations in the [name] assignment, as my essay will be heavily related to a piece of US legislature, and I have absolutely no idea how to cite this in APA. I've googled it but every website has a different method, and most of them end with 'use your judgement' which isn't that informative. Do you think it is necessary to cite this and if so, do you know how? I am not using any direct quotes. No worries if you are not allowed to answer!
	1 The last couple of months have been hard for me due to family circumstances. My grandpa had an accident in February and since then has been in and out of hospital. Especially the last few weeks his condition deteriorated more and more. Sadly, he passed away two days ago. The whole situation was really hard for me, especially since my family lives in [name]. With university obligations and due to other circumstances such as covid-cases in my family, I didn't have the chance to go home and see him before he passed. I did manage to complete all my exams and assignments (the last one with the deadline today), but I feel like the circumstances took a toll on my mental health and negatively affected the standard of my work
Staff content disclosure	0 Thank you for reminding me. They should be available now. Let me know if you run into any issues. If you wanted to draw upon some real-life examples/events that help bolster your argument, then it would be sufficient to provide a link to a news article, YouTube video, or even an image of a tweet or similar. For things like newspaper articles you can cite these in-text normally & add to your reference list. If you wanted to provide evidence that is more visual like a screenshot of a tweet, my suggestion would be to attach image in Appendix A. In text, you can refer reader to it like similar to a citation, e.g., see Appendix A & Figure 1).
	1 There is nothing wrong with picking a topic that has research on it, as long as you are not just going to repeat to me what one study or one paper did/found/said. So even if there is a paper (or a few papers) that examines TMT in relation to anorexia that is fine. You should, however, try to consider what it is that might distinguish your own ideas from theirs. After all, anorexia (and depression) are complex constructs that likely TMT relates to in many different ways, so you could distinguish your own answer from a specific paper by taking a slightly different focus. I'll give you an example of what I mean: In your other email, you mention that I have done some research on depression. That does not mean you cannot do depression, but you should think of something that isn't directly what [name] I cover in our paper – i.e., that is – if all you want to say is how death thoughts (as measured by DTA) may drive depression for those with low self-esteem, then you would just be repeating what we said. However, you could analyze something else about depression such as: 2 Why is perfectionism associated with depression? What would an existential analysis say about why CBT is effective, or the conditions of when it might be effective, in alleviating depression? How might religious beliefs relate to depression? You can of course cite [name] I's paper in your answer about the above if you feel it provides evidence for what you might want to say, but you would be analyzing something differently. So in relation to the two papers about anorexia–no you can analyze it–just come up with your own ideas or a slightly different perspective as to how TMT might apply. I hope this helps. Please do drop by my drop in sessions if I could assist further ☺.