

# Embarrassment and Self-Presentational Efficacy: Effects of an Audience and Type of Presented Self

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## EMBARRASSMENT AND SELF-PRESENTATIONAL EFFICACY: EFFECTS OF AN AUDIENCE AND TYPES OF PRESENTED SELF

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This study examined the effects of anticipation of an audience and the conveyed impression on embarrassment and self-presentational efficacy. Forty Japanese students presented themselves self-depreciatingly or self-enhancingly toward an interviewer and were videotaped simultaneously. Then, they watched the VTR with an audience. Consistent with the hypothesis the participants who had anticipated the audience were significantly more embarrassed, and had a lower estimated self-presentational efficacy than those who had not anticipated the audience. However, contrary to the hypothesis, the Japanese participants who presented themselves self-depreciatingly were significantly more embarrassed than those who presented themselves self-enhancingly. The implications were discussed.

**Key words:** self-presentation, embarrassment, audience, cultural self.

### INTRODUCTION

Self-presentation is the process by which individuals attempt to control their impressions on others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) or the activity of regulating identity primarily for real or imagined others (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). Researchers have found that people who believe to have given desirable impressions to others increase their self-esteem (Jones, Rhodewalt, Berglas, & Skelton, 1981; Rhodewalt & Agustsdottir, 1986), establish their identities (McKillop, Berzonsky, & Schlenker, 1992; Schlenker & Trudeau, 1990), and strengthen their social power (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Tedeschi & Norman, 1985).

On the other hand, what happens to people who fail to make desirable impressions on others? First, those who fail in self-presentation may be embarrassed. Miller (1996) defined embarrassment as "the acute state of flustered, awkward, abashed chagrin that follows events that increase the threat of unwanted evaluations from real or imagined audiences (p.129)." So, failure in self-presentation is a typical event which increases such a threat.

Second, those who fail in self-presentation may lose self-confidence in their ability to modify impressions, that is, they cannot retain their self-presentational efficacy, a subjective probability of conveying desired impressions to others (Leary & Atherton, 1986; Leary & Kowalski, 1995, pp.67-69). Just as a performance failure reduces self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, p.195), a self-presentation failure may reduce self-presentational efficacy. From these

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perspectives, the present study attempted to examine the effects of self-presentation on embarrassment and self-presentational efficacy.

#### UNEXPECTED AUDIENCE

The type of desired impression one wants to convey varies depending on the audience (Fukushima, 1996; Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995), suggesting that self-presentation is strategically planned and controlled toward audiences. People may use information about the audience for planning and controlling their impressions. Thus, when they know the existence of another audience only *after* they presented themselves, they may feel that they have failed in self-presentation because they did not have the information about the audience. For example, a father who wants to show his dignity in front of his children may feel that he failed in his self-presentation when he finds out that his children saw their father being obsequious to his boss. On the other hand, when people know in advance the existence of another audience *before* they present themselves, they may not feel that they fail in self-presentation, because they have the information about the audience to use for planning and controlling their impressions.

On the basis of this reasoning, it was predicted that participants who do not anticipate an audience will be more embarrassed and will rate their ability to make impressions lower after self-presentation than those who anticipate the audience (Hypothesis 1).

#### TYPES OF PRESENTED SELF

People become embarrassed and rate their self-presentational ability as low when they learn that they gave socially undesirable impressions on others. However, desirability of social self seems different between cultures. Markus and Kitayama (1991) argued that Westerners who have an independent construal of self tend to enhance the self, while Easterners who have an interdependent construal of self tend to depreciate it. For example, in social comparison, Japanese university students accepted their failures more readily than their successes (Takata, 1987), and Japanese school children presented themselves self-depreciatingly toward their classmates (Yoshida, Kojo, & Kaku, 1982). These findings suggest that self-depreciation is regarded among Japanese as socially or culturally desirable self-presentation more than self-enhancing. The latter is often regarded as a failure in self-presentation. According to these theoretical considerations, it was predicted that Japanese participants who present themselves self-enhancingly will be more embarrassed and will rate their ability to modify impressions lower than those who present themselves self-depreciatingly (Hypothesis 2).

#### METHOD

*Participants:* Participants were 40 university students (24 males and 16 females), who participated in the experiment in order to receive a course credit.

*Procedures:* When the participants arrived at the experimental room, the experimenter

asked them to participate in "the self-evaluational interview" and explained how the interview would be conducted: an interviewer would ask each participant to rate himself or herself on nine 10-point personality trait scales and to illustrate their ratings by giving examples from his or her everyday behaviors. The experimenter showed a video camera to the participants and explained that it would be used to record the interviews, and they would watch the VTR afterwards.

In the anticipated audience condition, then, the experimenter introduced a male student (the confederate) to the participants and told them that he would watch the VTR of the interviews and would rate the personality impressions of each of the participants. In the non-anticipated audience condition, the same confederate person was introduced to the participants but his role was not explained until the interviews were finished. It was explained to the participants that they could reject participation in the experiment, but none of them did.

Before each interview, the experimenter asked participants to either enhance or depreciate themselves. In the self-enhancing condition, the participants were asked not to be modest and not to say negative things about themselves. In the self-depreciating condition, the participants were asked not to be boastful and not to say positive things about themselves. These instructions were also posted on a panel board in front of the participants during the interview.

In the interview, the participants were asked to orally rate themselves on nine 10-point personality trait scales. The ratings ranged from 1 (*not at all characteristic*) to 10 (*extremely characteristic*). The scales consisted of six positive traits: cheerful, intellectual, autonomous, tender, sincere, and being as a leader, and three negative scales: sly, timid, and lacking the will to do something. The order of rating was counterbalanced across each condition.

Two raters independently rated the behavior examples described by each participant on how it was self-depreciating or self-enhancing on a 5-point bipolar scale. The correlation coefficient between the two raters was high,  $r = .77$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $df = 38$ . The correlation coefficient between the mean ratings of behavior examples by the raters and the mean self-ratings by the participants themselves was moderately high,  $r = .55$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $df = 38$ . Both means were summed into the final score of each participant's self-presentation.

Immediately after the interview, the participants were asked to rate how much stress they felt and how well they performed during the interview on 15-point scale. The experimenter took the participants to the next room and introduced a male student (the confederate) to them. Then they took a seat in separate booths. The experimenter told the participants that the student would rate the participants' impressions after watching the VTR of the interview, and asked them to fill out a questionnaire, which would measure their embarrassment: "I worried that the student in the next booth will have a bad impression of me after watching the VTR"; "I don't care if the student in the next booth watches the VTR (this shows an opposite reaction)." There were items to measure a desire for watching the VTR: "I want to watch the VTR"; "I like to watch pictures of myself on the VTR." They rated these items on a 15-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 15 (*very much*). After watching the VTR, the participants were given an opportunity to express rejection of the VTR by rating the following

items on 15-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 15 (*very much*): "If possible, I want to correct my presentation on the VTR"; "The VTR has made false impressions of me to the student in the next booth"; "I don't want the student in the next booth to watch the VTR." They were also asked to respond to their ability to modify the self-presentation scale, which was a subscale of the revised self-monitoring scale (RSM; Lennox & Wolfe, 1984). Finally, every participant was debriefed, that is, it was explained to them that, in fact, the male student neither watched the VTR nor rated the participant's personality impressions.

## RESULTS

### *Manipulation Check*

The participants' self-presentation scores were transformed into standardized scores. A 2 (expected or unexpected audience)  $\times$  2 (enhanced or depreciated self-presentation) ANOVA<sup>2</sup> of the scores indicated that the participants in the enhanced condition were significantly more self-enhancing ( $M = .64$ ) than those in the depreciated condition ( $M = -.64$ ),  $F(1,36) = 5.74$ ,  $p < .05$ , suggesting that the participants presented themselves according to the experimenter's instructions regarding self-enhancing/self-depreciating. No other effects were significant<sup>3</sup>.

### *Embarrassment*

Table 1 shows the mean scores of participants' embarrassment after self-presentation. A 2  $\times$  2 ANOVA of those scores indicated that, consistent with the hypothesis, participants in the

Table 1. *Mean Embarrassment as a Function of Self-Presentation and Audience.*

Self-presentation	Audience	
	Anticipated	Non-anticipated
Depreciated	8.35	10.15
Enhanced	5.35	7.85

2. Though initial ANOVAs were conducted with the sex of the participant as a factor, any significant effects of the sex of the participant were not found.
3. It is possible that the anticipation of an audience would have an influence on the favorability of the participants' self-presentation, but the effect was not significant in the present study,  $F(1,36) = 1.16$ , *ns*. Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Stine (1985) also did not find a significant main effect in the anticipation of future interaction, on the participants' self-presentation. They did find that only low socially anxious participants who anticipated a future interaction, increased the favorability of their self-presentation.

non-anticipated audience condition felt significantly more embarrassed ( $M = 9.00$ ) than those in the anticipated condition ( $M = 6.85$ ),  $F(1,36) = 4.18$ ,  $p < .05$ , but that, contrary to the Hypothesis 2, Japanese participants who depreciated the self felt significantly more embarrassed ( $M = 9.25$ ) than those who enhanced themselves ( $M = 6.60$ ),  $F(1,36) = 6.34$ ,  $p < .05$ .

### *Estimated Self-Presentational Ability*

A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA of the participants' estimation of self-presentational ability indicated that, consistent with the Hypothesis 1, the participants in the non-anticipated audience condition rated their ability as marginally significantly lower ( $M = 25.15$ ) than those in the anticipated audience condition ( $M = 29.20$ ),  $F(1,36) = 3.36$ ,  $p = .075$ . The main effect of type of self-presentation was not significant,  $F(1,36) = 2.58$ ,  $p = .117$ . As shown in Table 2, the pattern of means was contrary to Hypothesis 2 and was the same as the pattern of means of embarrassment. The participants who depreciated themselves rated their self-presentational ability ( $M = 25.40$ ) lower than those who enhanced themselves ( $M = 28.95$ ).

Table 2. *Mean Estimated Self-Presentational Ability as a Function of Self-Presentation and Audience.*

Self-presentation	Audience	
	Anticipated	Non-anticipated
Depreciated	27.80	23.00
Enhanced	30.60	27.30

### *The Other Measures*

A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA of participants' desire for watching the VTR indicated that the participants who depreciated themselves wanted to watch the VTR significantly less ( $M = 5.95$ ) than those who enhanced themselves ( $M = 8.85$ ),  $F(1,36) = 5.17$ ,  $p < .05$ . This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction,  $F(1,36) = 5.17$ ,  $p < .05$ , which showed that the participants who depreciated themselves wanted it less than those who enhanced themselves only when they did not anticipate the audience (see Table 3). A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA of the participants' rejection of the VTR indicated that the participants who depreciated themselves were significantly more rejective of the VTR ( $M = 9.52$ ) than those who enhanced themselves ( $M = 6.54$ ),  $F(1,36) = 13.96$ ,  $p < .05$ . No other significant effect was found.

Table 3. *Mean Desire for Watching Self-Pictures as a Function of Self-Presentation and Audience.*

Self-presentation	Audience	
	Anticipated	Non-anticipated
Depreciated	8.05	3.85
Enhanced	8.05	9.65

## DISCUSSION

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the participants who did not anticipate the audience felt more embarrassment before watching self-pictures on the VTR and rated the self-presentational ability as lower after watching the VTR than those who anticipated the audience. The reason of the present results may be that the participants in the non-anticipated condition could not plan and control impressions of themselves toward the audience. It is important for every social actor to know what kind of audiences exist.

Contrary to Hypothesis 2, the participants who presented themselves depreciatingly were more embarrassed and rated their self-presentational ability as lower than those who presented themselves enhancingly. These results imply that self-depreciating was less desirable to the Japanese participants than self-enhancing. If the participants were Westerners, it would be easy to understand the results. However, in the case of Easterners who are assumed to tend towards depreciating themselves (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), these results need further consideration.

In order to understand these controversial results, we must attend to variables other than culture, which are assumed to affect the desirability of self-presentational style. Tice et al. (1995) found that an enhancing self-presentation was more frequently attempted towards strangers rather than friends. The subjects of Tice et al.'s experiment seem to have expected that their friends would have good impressions of them even when they modestly presented themselves, because their friends knew their other positive qualities or achievements, than just those that they explicitly presented. On the other hand, they may have been afraid that strangers would have good impressions of them only when they explicitly presented their positive aspects. This finding suggests that the desirability of self-presentation changes depending on the relationships or familiarity between actors and audiences. In the present experiment, the participants and the audience did not know each other, so the participants might have assumed that self-enhancing was more desirable than self-depreciating.

The analysis of the other measures supported this argument. The participants' motivation to watch the self-pictures and denial of those pictures were significantly lower in the depreciated condition than in the enhanced condition. This means that the participants did

not like to see those pictures when they were in the depreciated self-presentation than in the enhanced self-presentation. Additionally, the significant interaction effect on the motivation to watch the self-pictures showed that, among the depreciated participants, those who did not anticipate the audience were more reluctant to see themselves in the VTR than those who anticipated the audience. This suggests that the participants who were given an opportunity to make a self-presentational plan expected to see good self-pictures even though they depreciated themselves. However, after watching the VTR the depreciated participants did not accept the self-pictures.

From the above discussion, it is reasonable to say that the depreciated self-presentation was unfavorable to participants in the present experiment. Therefore, the depreciated participants were more embarrassed and estimated their self-presentational ability less than the enhanced participants.

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