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## Personality and impression management: Mapping the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire onto 12 self-presentation tactics

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the relations between Tellegen's three-factor personality model, using the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ), and 12 self-presentation tactics operationalized in the self-presentation tactics scale (SPT). Differential correlations of the MPQ higher-order domains and primary scales were predicted based on a review of the literature pertaining to each self-presentation tactic and the dimensional classifications of tactics. Joint exploratory factor analysis was used to determine structural relationship among the higher-order MPQ traits and SPT indicators. Results suggest an important role for basic emotional and interpersonal personality traits in the frequency and nature of impression management behaviors, overwhelmingly in the domain of Negative Emotionality. Evidence of construct validity for the SPT and further evidence of the discriminant validity of the MPQ higher-order dimensions and primary scales is also presented.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. General introduction

An inescapable fact of everyday life is the need to “present well,” or to make a good impression on others, referred to as self-presentation or impression management (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 2005). Self-presentation behaviors have often been explained by underlying needs and motives. The need to be liked, for example, manifests in ingratiating behavior, whereas the need to be seen as blameless prompts excuses. Lee, Quigley, Nesler, Corbett, and Tedeschi (1999) recently categorized 12 of the most studied self-presentation tactics as defensive or assertive based on previous work by Tedeschi and colleagues (Tedeschi, 1981; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). Assertive tactics are behaviors used proactively to establish or develop an actor's identity, whereas defensive tactics are behavioral efforts to repair or restore an identity after it has been “spoiled” (Lee et al., 1999).

Defensive self-presentation has been associated with several indicators of negative affect or emotion. “Social anxiety arises in real or imagined social situations when people are motivated to make a particular impression on others but doubt that they will be able to do so, because they have expectations of unsatisfactory

impression-relevant reactions from others” (Schlenker & Leary, 1982, p. 645). Socially anxious or shy individuals tend to employ defensive tactics such as verbal disclaimers and self-handicapping (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Lee et al. (1999) found that defensive tactics, but not assertive tactics, were positively correlated with social anxiety and external locus of control. Other researchers have stressed the connections between self-presentation tactics generally and problematic personality features such as self-consciousness (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975), chronic insecurity and need for approval (Buss, 1980; Crowne & Marlowe, 1964; Watson & Friend, 1969), fear of negative evaluation, anxiety, low self-esteem, and fear of failure (Doherty & Schlenker, 1991; Leary & Kowalski, 1995; Schlenker & Pontari, 2000).

There is less evidence linking self-presentation to Positive Emotionality. However, high self-monitors, as measured by the Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder, 1974), are skilled at regulating expressions; they adopt more active, directive roles in social situations, and engage in strategic impression management more than low self-monitors. High self-monitoring individuals have been characterized as using *assimilative* (Wolfe, Lennox, & Cutler, 1986) and *acquisitive* (Arkin, 1981) forms of impression management that are conceptually similar to proactive assertive self-presentation tactics. High self-monitors express positive affect more often than negative affect (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000) and tend to score higher than low self-monitors on measures of Extraversion and Social Potency (John, Cheek, & Klohnen, 1996).

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Males and females tend to report using impression management tactics that are consistent with traditional masculine and feminine gender roles as would be expected on the basis of social role theory (Eagly, 1987) and socialization to stereotypes (Deaux, 1985). Females tend to use defensive tactics such as *apologies* and *supplication*, while males tend to use assertive tactics such as *blasting* and *intimidation* (Forsyth, Schlenker, Leary, & McCown, 1985; see Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007 for a review). Lee et al. (1999) found that men reported more frequent use of assertive tactics than women, but found no sex difference in the self-report of defensive tactics.

The present study is the first to examine associations between multiple self-presentation tactics and categories of tactics and personality broadly defined. Our specific aims were to: (a) predict the shared variance of higher-order personality domains and total, defensive, and assertive categories of self-presentation tactics, (b) predict relations between selected specific self-presentation tactics and primary personality traits both within and across higher-order personality domains, (c) investigate sex differences in self-presentation tactics, and (d) explore the joint factor structure of self-presentation tactics and higher-order personality factors.

### 1.2. The present study

Personality traits are substantially heritable and stable dispositions (Bouchard, Lykken, McGue, Segal, & Tellegen, 1990; Pedersen, Plomin, McLearn, & Friberg, 1988; Tellegen et al., 1988), rooted in biological mechanisms (e.g., Clark, Watson, & Mineka, 1994). Importantly, traits are distinct from the features of behavior that result from interactions between the influences of traits and the social environment (McCrae, Löckenhoff, & Costa, 2005; Tellegen & Waller, 2008). These behavioral features or “characteristic adaptations include habits, attitudes, skills, roles, and relationships...intended to help the individual adapt to the requirements and opportunities of the social environment” (McCrae et al., 2005, p. 272). Self-presentation behaviors may be viewed within this framework as behavioral adaptations developed through early experience in and evoked by social situations. Banerjee and Watling (2010) recently showed that self-presentational concerns and tactics are evident in middle childhood and are associated with social anxiety.

Tellegen and Waller's (2008) Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) operationalizes Tellegen's (1985) three-factor model of personality. Positive Emotionality (PEM) and Negative Emotionality (NEM) are broad affect dimensions reflecting variation in susceptibility to positive and negative emotional states. PEM and NEM subsume social, interpersonal and pure emotional constructs. Two primary traits, Wellbeing and Stress Reaction, represent the core emotional dispositions of PEM and NEM, respectively. The interpersonal aspects of PEM are measured at the facet level by Achievement and Social Potency (agency) and Social Closeness (communion), and in NEM by Aggression (confrontation) and Alienation (estrangement). The higher-order Constraint (CON) factor subsumes Control (impulsivity reversed), Harm Avoidance (avoidance of physical danger), and Traditionalism (conventionalism). A separate trait of Absorption reflects the proclivity for imaginative, aesthetic and self-absorbing experiences. Unlikely Virtues is a stand-alone measure reflecting endorsement of highly improbable virtues and denial of common failings (Tellegen, 1982).

High PEM scores reflect self-efficacy and active involvement in social relationships and work. The PEM dimension has been associated with positive adjustment and adaptive behavior (Leon, Kanfer, Hoffman, & Dupre, 1991), general level of social activity and leadership (Kamp, 1986) and prosocial behavior (Krueger, Hicks, & McGue, 2001). Wellbeing, variously operationalized, has been strongly related to health, positive adjustment (Diener, 2000),

and a range of positive life outcomes (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

NEM is correlated with anxiety and depression (Clark & Watson, 1991; Tellegen, 1985). Stress Reaction has been found associated with a “neurotic” cluster of biographical items, such as missing school due to emotional problems and frequent headaches (Kamp, 1986). NEM is clearly the MPQ marker of maladaptive emotional reactivity.

Our predictions were based on conceptual links between the defensive and assertive self-presentation factors, specific self-presentation tactics, and higher-order and primary MPQ personality traits. Because PEM and NEM have been shown to tap relatively independent dimensions of affect (Tellegen, 1985; Tellegen, Watson, & Clark, 1999; Watson & Tellegen, 1985), we expected to find a clear divergence of correlates for these temperament domains. Based on the extensive literature associating self-presentation with anxiety-related characteristics, we predicted that greater overall use of self-presentation tactics and greater use of defensive tactics would be associated with NEM and its emotional marker Stress Reaction but not with PEM. We expected greater shared variance overall between self-presentation tactics and NEM.

With respect to specific defensive tactics, we expected *disclaimer* and *self-handicapping* to be more strongly associated with NEM than with PEM. We predicted that the assertive tactic of *intimidation* would show a pattern of correlates across the NEM and PEM domains, including Social Potency and Aggression. Considering Social Potency and Positive Emotionality as markers of high self-monitoring, we predicted that Social Potency would show multiple correlates with assertive tactics. We predicted that the assertive tactic of *exemplification* (conveying impressions of moral worthiness) would show associations across the PEM and CON domains, including Wellbeing, Control and Traditionalism. Within CON we predicted that Harmavoidance would not be significantly related to self-presentation as Harmavoidance reflects fear and avoidance of physically dangerous situations rather than socially threatening situations.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Two hundred and thirty undergraduate students enrolled in general psychology courses at a Midwestern college completed two self-report measures in a single session (60% female,  $M = 18.9$  years,  $SD = 0.9$ ). Participants received credit toward a course research participation requirement.

### 2.2. Measures

*Personality.* Participants completed the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) described in detail by Tellegen and Waller (2008). The instrument is an omnibus inventory of normal personality composed of 276 dichotomous mostly True–False items, developed through a series of exploratory factor analyses. The MPQ measures 11 primary factors at the first-order level, 10 of which load on 3 higher-order dimensions, Positive Emotionality (PEM), Negative Emotionality (NEM), and Constraint (CON). The MPQ higher-order dimensions and primary traits were described earlier. Two validity scales are incorporated in the MPQ to detect inconsistent responding: the Variable Response Inconsistency and True Response Inconsistency scales (as described by Patrick, Curtin, & Tellegen, 2002). The MPQ is widely used in personality research and has demonstrated excellent psychometric properties. The primary scales are relatively independent ( $r = .00-.48$ ,  $M = .16$ ) (Tellegen & Waller, 2008). The median alpha coefficient

was reported as .85 and one-month test–retest correlation as .89. Tellegen's three-factor structure of personality has been repeatedly supported by joint factor analysis of the MPQ and other established personality inventories (Ben-Porath, Almagor, Hoffman-Chemi, & Tellegen, 1995; Church & Burke, 1994; Patrick et al., 2002; Tellegen & Waller, 2008).

**Self-presentation.** Participants completed Lee et al.'s (1999) self-presentation tactics scale, a 63-item self-report inventory that measures the frequency with which individuals use 12 self-presentation behaviors. Responses are made on a nine-point scale, from "Very Infrequently" to Very Frequently" (see Table 1 for scales, alphas and sample items). The SPT yields scores on defensive and assertive self-presentation dimensions which sum for an index of total self-presentation. The SPT was reported to be internally consistent across the entire inventory (alpha of 0.94), however, the authors also reported a two-factor structure consistent with the assertive and defensive categories.

### 2.3. Statistical analysis

Zero-order correlations and joint exploratory factor analysis were used to explore relationships among all MPQ traits and SPT indicators. Our medium-sized sample did not permit factor analysis of all MPQ and SPT scales, however, we were able to examine the broad MPQ emotional temperament domains (NEM and PEM) with all SPT indicators.

The number of components for extraction from the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was determined using the minimum average partial correlation method developed by Velicer (1976). This procedure calculates the average of the squared partial correlations as each additional component is partialled out of the correlation matrix, and extracts the number of factors that minimizes the average squared partial correlation. This method has been shown to yield fewer, more meaningful factors than Bartlett's test or the eigenvalue less than 1.0 rule (Zwick & Velicer, 1982). EFA models were fit using maximum likelihood estimation. All analyses were

**Table 1**  
Reliability estimates and sample items for self-presentation tactic scales.

SPT scale	$\alpha$	Sample item
Total SPT	.90	
Defensive tactics	.86	
Excuse	.81	"When things go wrong, I explain why I am not responsible"
Justification	.82	"I justify my behavior to reduce negative reactions from others"
Disclaimer	.69	"When I believe I will not perform well, I offer excuses beforehand"
Self-handicapping	.53	"I put obstacles in the way of my own success"
Apology	.73	"I express remorse and guilt when I do something wrong"
Assertive tactics	.85	
Ingratiation	.76	"I express the same attitudes as others so they will accept me"
Intimidation	.78	"I behave in ways that make other people afraid of me"
Supplication	.42	"I use my weaknesses to get sympathy from others"
Entitlement	.72	"I point out the positive things I do which other people fail to notice"
Enhancement	.72	"I tell people when I do well at tasks others find difficult"
Blasting	.70	"I exaggerate the negative qualities of people who compete with me"
Exemplification	.85	"I try to get others to act in the same positive way I do"

conducted using Stata, version 10.1 (StataCorp, College Station, TX).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Internal consistency

All MPQ protocols met validity criteria on the Variable Response Inconsistency and True Response Inconsistency scales. All scores on the Unlikely Virtues scale were within normal limits thus providing a check on social desirability bias. In the present sample the MPQ subscales yielded Cronbach's alphas from .81 to .91 with the exception of Harmavoidance (.59). However, alphas in the MPQ test construction research were all within .76–.89 (Tellegen & Waller, 2008). Alphas for the SPT scales ranged from .42 to .85. Alphas for the total self-presentation scale and defensive and assertive dimensions were .90, .86, and .85, respectively (see Table 1). The supplication scale with an alpha of .42 did not seem applicable to our sample and was dropped from further analysis.

### 3.2. Correlational relationships between the MPQ and the SPT

Correlations for the MPQ primary and higher-order dimensions and SPT scales are shown in Table 2. An absolute value of  $r = .20$  is significant at an adjusted  $\alpha$  of .003. As expected, there was a clear divergence between the MPQ higher-order emotionality domains and overall use of self-presentation tactics. NEM was positively correlated with the total SPT ( $r = .44$ ) while PEM was unrelated to total SPT ( $r = .13$ ). NEM was moderately and positively correlated with both defensive ( $r = .34$ ) and assertive ( $r = .41$ ) self-presentation. Stress Reaction was moderately correlated with defensive tactics generally ( $r = .42$ ) but uncorrelated with assertive tactics ( $r = .14$ ). Stress Reaction was moderately correlated with the defensive tactics of *disclaimer* ( $r = .35$ ) and *self-handicapping* ( $r = .58$ ). Aggression was strongly associated with the assertive tactics of *intimidation* ( $r = .61$ ) and *blasting* ( $r = .52$ ), and was negatively associated with *apology* ( $r = -.45$ ).

As noted, PEM was not associated with the total use of self-presentation ( $r = .13$ ) and showed extremely weak associations across all SPT scales. Wellbeing was negatively correlated with the defensive tactic of *self-handicapping* ( $r = -.32$ ). Social Potency showed correlations with the assertive tactics of *intimidation* ( $r = .37$ ) and *blasting* ( $r = .33$ ), but none of the defensive tactics. CON was not associated with overall SPT ( $r = .06$ ) and also showed weak associations across SPT scales. As expected, Harmavoidance was negatively associated with *intimidation* ( $r = -.32$ ) and was not correlated with any other self-presentation scale.

Certain self-presentation scales showed joint associations across MPQ domains. The traits most strongly associated with the assertive tactics were NEM Aggression ( $r = .40$ ) and PEM Social Potency ( $r = .36$ ). Aggression strongly predicted the assertive tactics of *intimidation* ( $r = .61$ ) and *blasting* ( $r = .52$ ), and was negatively associated with *apology* ( $r = -.45$ ). The assertive tactic of *exemplification* was associated with higher-order dimensions of PEM ( $r = .40$ ) and Constraint (CON) ( $r = .33$ ) as well as the PEM scale of Wellbeing ( $r = .38$ ) and the CON scale of Traditionalism ( $r = .48$ ).

### 3.3. Sex differences

One-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) indicated a significant main effect of sex on the 12 self-presentation tactics scales,  $F(12,215) = 3.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .17$ . Univariate follow-up tests indicated that females were more likely than males to use defensive tactics overall,  $F(1,226) = 11.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .53$  but

**Table 2**  
Zero-order correlations between self-presentation tactics and MPQ higher-order dimensions and primary scales.

MPQ scale	Total SPT	Defensive SPT	Excuse	Justification	Disclaimer	Self-handicapping	Apology	Assertive SPT	Ingratiation	Intimidation	Supplication	Entitlement	Enhancement	Blasting	Exemplification	
Positive Emotionality																.40
Wellbeing						-.32										.38
Social Potency							.36		.37					.33		.30
Achievement																
Social Closeness																
Negative Emotionality	.44	.34		.31		.48		.41		.42				.40		
Stress Reaction	.30	.42			.35	.58					.30					
Alienation						.39										
Aggression	.31						-.45	.40		.61			.33	.52		
Control																
Constraint																.33
Harm																
Avoidance																
Traditionalism																
Absorption																.48

**Table 3**  
Exploratory factor analysis.

Scale	Factor loading	Uniqueness
MPQ PEM	.06	.996
MPQ NEM	.46	.79
Excuse	.71	.49
Justification	.58	.66
Disclaimer	.47	.78
Self-handicapping	.39	.85
Ingratiation	.75	.43
Intimidation	.41	.83
Supplication	.52	.73
Entitlement	.76	.43
Enhancement	.74	.45
Blasting	.64	.59

there was no significant sex difference in the use of assertive tactics,  $F(1,226) = 0.17$ ,  $p = .68$ ,  $d = .06$ . Females reported significantly higher use of the defensive tactics *disclaimer*,  $F(1,226) = 11.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .46$ , and *self-handicapping*,  $F(1,226) = 14.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .50$ , whereas males reported higher use of the assertive tactic *intimidation*,  $F(1,226) = 8.69$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $d = .34$ .

### 3.4. Exploratory joint factor analysis of the MPQ and SPT scales

In a joint factor analysis of the 11 self-presentation scales and two MPQ emotional temperament scales NEM and PEM, *apology* and *exemplification* loaded poorly on both one- and two-factor solutions and were therefore excluded. A second factor produced no factor loadings above an absolute value of 0.43 with the exception of *disclaimer*, 0.64. The minimum average partial correlation procedure suggested a one-factor solution with *apology* and *exemplification* excluded.

Factor loadings and item uniqueness are shown in Table 3. NEM loaded on the one-factor structure (0.45), while PEM did not (0.07). Post-hoc analysis using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy suggested that our sample size was satisfactory for EFA, 0.83.

## 4. Discussion

The present study is the first to explore higher-order and primary personality traits as they relate to multiple self-presentation behaviors. As expected, results indicated that individuals with relatively higher levels of Negative Emotionality report using self-presentational tactics more often than those with lower NEM scores. Although Lee et al. (1999) reported stronger associations between social anxiety and defensive tactics, we found that both assertive and defensive tactics were endorsed more often by those individuals most vulnerable to anxiety and interpersonal difficulties. The present findings are consonant with self-presentational theories of social anxiety (Leary, 2001; Schlenker & Leary, 1982).

Several authors have shown that anxious, less socially-skilled individuals are self-consciously focused on impression management and vigilant to self-presentational failure, but are hampered by self-doubt and fall short of constructing a desired identity (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). Heightened self-presentational concerns likely foster the negative impressions and reactions from others that the actor fears, thereby perpetuating social anxiety (Heerey & Kring, 2007; Leary, Kowalski, & Campbell, 1988). For lower NEM individuals, self-presentational behaviors may be less of a concern, and operate with relatively less conscious effort and attention (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000).

Based on recent descriptions of high self-monitoring individuals, we predicted multiple correlates within the PEM domain, primarily between Social Potency and the assertive self-presentation tactics.

Social Potency was indeed positively correlated with assertive self-presentation generally, but not with defensive self-presentation. Social Potency was positively correlated with the assertive tactics of *intimidation* and *blasting* but with none of the defensive tactics. Aggression was positively correlated with total self-presentation, assertive tactics, and the specific assertive tactics of *intimidation*, *blasting*, and *enhancement*, and negatively correlated with *apology*. We also found that Aggression and Social Potency correlated jointly, suggesting that a cross-PEM and -NEM aggressive interpersonal style may play a role in particularly active and even confrontational impression management.

Individuals who endorsed frequent use of *self-handicapping* showed elevated scores on NEM, and the NEM subscales Stress Reaction and Alienation, as well as low scores on Wellbeing, the core emotional marker of PEM. This cross-NEM and -PEM pattern points to characteristics of frequent negative emotions, infrequent happiness, and feelings of victimization and betrayal in interpersonal relationships. The *disclaimer* construct bears some resemblance to verbal *self-handicapping*, and similarly was strongly associated with Stress Reaction but was not associated with PEM or any of its subscales.

We found a complex pattern of correlations for *exemplification* across the higher-order PEM and CON domains. *Exemplification* was associated with PEM, Wellbeing, Achievement, Control, and Traditionalism, but none of the NEM domain scales or NEM itself. These correlations seem to point to a cross-PEM and -CON theme of socialized virtuousness. *Exemplification* was not related to MPQ Unlikely Virtues. The *exemplification* items tap behaviors aimed at modeling and encouraging moral or “positive” behavior, whereas the Unlikely Virtues scale reflects claims of improbable virtues and denial of common shortcomings. These results provide evidence against social desirability bias and support the discriminant validity of the Unlikely Virtues scale. The divergent correlates found for Negative and Positive Emotionality complement previous evidence for a two-factor structure of affect (Tellegen, 1985; Tellegen, Watson, & Clark, 1999), provide additional evidence of discriminant validity for the PEM and NEM domain scales, and extend the network of external correlates for the MPQ.

Where sex differences in self-presentation behavior have been found, they have been in the direction of traditional sex roles, with females favoring the use of defensive tactics and males tending to use assertive tactics. Lee et al. (1999) found that males were more likely to use assertive tactics and we found that females were more likely to use defensive tactics, both consistent with previous research.

As our sample consisted predominantly of Caucasian undergraduate students, it is unclear whether these results would generalize to community samples or organizational settings. Our research relied on self-report and is subject to the potential biases inherent in such data; future research may employ observer ratings as convergent evidence of individual self-presentation tendencies, particularly for observable self-presentation behaviors. As noted, sex differences were found in the correlational analysis, however, we were not able to subdivide joint factor analyses by sex due to our modest sample size. Our cross-sectional design did not permit us to investigate the stability of individual self-presentation profiles. We suspect that individual patterns of self-presentation tactics are stable but may also be amenable to change with intervention.

It is clear that individual differences in personality traits and temperament may predispose styles of impression management and self-presentational behavior. The present study provides initial evidence of a strong role for negative emotional temperament in self-presentational behavior. Further study should further explore the role of social anxiety and other negative emotional dispositions in both proactive identity construction (assertive tactics) and reac-

tion to threatened identity (defensive tactics). In summary, the present study demonstrates that the joint study of personality trait measures and self-presentational behavior can enrich both domains of inquiry.

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