

Making a Positive Impression About the Mission of an Urban, Catholic University: Gender, First-generation College, and Religious Preference Comparisons

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Abstract

This study investigates how research participants' desire to make a positive social impression may affect their responses to survey questions. Specifically, participants may react in socially appropriate ways to create a positive social impression for those persons reviewing their responses. This concept is termed "impression management," or more commonly, "social desirability."¹ At an urban Catholic university, students (1,070 women, 616 men: M age = 21.61, SD = 5.49) completed measures of impression management and perceptions of the school's mission identity and mission-related activities. Impression management scores were found to be significantly related to survey responses, and were then entered as a covariate in subsequent analyses of gender, first generation college student status, and religious preference. Controlling for impression management tendencies, student responses on mission identity and mission-related perceptions showed significant differences related to gender, first-generation status, and religious preference. For administrators at Catholic universities interested in students' perceptions of their institutions' mission and values, the present study suggests the utility in examining social desirability influences among different groups of students.

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¹ Delroy L. Paulhus, "Two-Component Models of Socially Desirable Responding," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 46 (1984): 598-609; Delroy L. Paulhus, "Individual Differences, Self-Presentation, and Cognitive Dissonance: Their Concurrent Operation in Forced Compliance," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 43 (1982): 838-852.

Social and behavioral scientists who use survey methodology to conduct self-report research have long noticed that respondents, consciously or not, have a tendency to make biased choices when reporting on their beliefs, opinions, and lifestyle choices.² One example of self-reported biased response is labeled *social desirability*, the tendency to incorrectly report one's feelings, beliefs, or opinions in a manner that would receive more positive social approval.³ One common form of social desirability tendencies is labeled *impression management*, the conscious and deliberate misrepresentation to others of one's thoughts, beliefs, and opinions.⁴ Impression management involves strategically applying socially desirable survey responses to present a positive image to others.⁵ Controlling for socially desirable response bias (e.g., impression management), therefore, seems an important step to ascertain more accurate survey research results. If certain groups of students are providing socially appropriate answers to impress others on school-related survey topics, such as their perception of the school's mission, then it is important that researchers account for impression management in their analyses. The present study focuses on whether impression management tendencies affected students' responses regarding their Catholic university's mission identity and mission-driven activities. More specifically, we explored impression management tendencies self-reported by college students who differ across variables such as gender, first-generation college status, and religious preference. We chose these general demographic aspects simply to ascertain whether social desirability tendencies by students may be found in campus-wide surveys.

² Douglas P. Crowne and Douglas Marlowe, "A New Scale of Social Desirability Independent of Psychopathology," *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 24 (1960): 349-354; Deniz S. Ones and Chockalingam Viswesvaran, "The Effects of Social Desirability and Faking on Personality and Integrity Assessment for Personnel Selection," *Human Performance* 11 (1998): 245-269; Celine Darnon, et al., "Achievement Goal Promotion at University: Social Desirability and Social Utility of Mastery and Performance Goals," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96 (2009): 119-134.

³ Crowne, "A New Scale of Social Desirability," 349-354; Paulhus, "Two-Component Models," 598-609; Joseph R. Ferrari and Shaun E. Cowman, "Toward a Reliable And Valid Measure of Institutional Mission and Values Perception: 'The DePaul Values' Inventory," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 25 (2004): 43-54.

⁴ Paulhus, "Two-Component Models," 598-609; Paulhus, "Individual Differences, Self-Presentation, and Cognitive Dissonance," 838-852.

⁵ Paulhus, "Two-Component Models," 598-609; Delroy L. Paulhus and Douglas B. Reid, "Enhancement and Denial in Socially Desirable Responding," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 60 (1991): 307-317.

Previous research found that survey responses may be influenced by non-test relevance indicators prompted by impression management.⁶ For instance, a number of studies found significant gender differences in the tendency to use socially desirable responses. In a meta-analysis of 66 studies, Ones and Visweswaran⁷ reported that males show stronger self-reported socially desirable responses than females. Consequently, controlling for males' impression management response bias is essential as these individuals may not provide true, accurate opinions and attitudes on survey-based research.⁸ Our study also examined whether men and women responded differently to perceptions of their Catholic school's mission, controlling for impression management tendencies.

In addition, we assessed students based on their self-reported status as *first-generation* college students. First-generation students are characterized as individuals who are the first in their family to attend higher education institutions.⁹ Previous research¹⁰ showed that, on average, first-generation college students had lower SAT scores and grade point averages, and often worked at a job more hours per week than non first-generation college students. These findings suggest that first-generation college students may not be as socially integrated in their university's community and may not fully understand or engage in their university's mission and values when compared to non first-generation college students. In turn, first-generation students might provide socially desirable responses on survey measures about their school in order to impress others. No published study examined whether these individuals would provide more socially desirable responses on mission-related surveys compared to non first-generation students. In the present study, we examined this possibility and controlled for impression management tendencies in comparing first- and non first-generation student responses.

⁶ Crowne, "A New Scale of Social Desirability," 349-354.

⁷ Ones, "The Effects of Social Desirability," 245-269.

⁸ Rosanna E. Guadagno and Robert B. Cialdini, "Gender Differences in Impression Management in Organizations: A Qualitative Review," *Sex Roles* 56 (2007): 483-494; Jochen Musch, et al., "Ein Inventar zur Erfassung von Zwei Faktoren Sozialer Erwünschtheit," *Diagnostica* 48 (2002): 121-129.

⁹ Ernest T. Pascarella, et al., "Experiences and Outcomes of First-Generation Students in Community Colleges," *Journal of College Student Development* 44 (2003): 420-429.

¹⁰ Brian L. Drozd, "Comparisons of First-Generation and non First-Generation College Students on Academic and Psychosocial Measures," *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering*, 69 (7-B) (2009): 4416.

We also explored the role of students' religious affiliations when responding to mission related statements at an urban, faith-based institution. According to Woodrow,¹¹ mission statements are designed to reach into an individual's heart and soul, motivating the person to collaborate with others toward a cause that provides an opportunity to make a difference in the world. Recently, Ferrari and Janulis¹² reported that, when compared to non-Catholic faculty and staff, Catholic faculty and staff demonstrated different perceptions and a different embracing of the institutional mission, vision, and values. Roman Catholic employees claimed the institution's mission-driven activities reflected the patron saint of the university and believed faith-formation opportunities were more important programs and initiatives than did employees who were either non-Catholic Christians or of no religious preference. As far as we know, no previous published study focused on student participants and their religious preference when examining perceptions of the Catholic school's mission. In the present study, we hypothesized that Catholic students (like Catholic faculty and staff)¹³ would report stronger perceptions of their Catholic school's mission-related activities than non-Catholic student groups. However, Roman Catholic students attending a Catholic college or university may respond in socially appropriate tendencies on surveys because they believe their Catholic religion should influence their responses and choices on such mission measures. Therefore, the study controlled for impression management tendencies by religious preference in our survey of the Catholic school's mission and mission-related activities.

In summary, this study examines socially desirable survey responding, emphasizing impression management tendencies. We expected impression management responding to be evident in questions about the university's mission identity and activities. More specifically, we expected to find three distinct demographic characteristics to be associated with students' tendency for impression management. First, consistent with previous studies, we expected to find males actively engaging in more socially desirable responding than females.¹⁴ Second, we expected first-generation students to express stronger impression management

¹¹ James Woodrow, "Institutional Mission: The Soul of Christian Higher Education," *Christian Higher Education* 5 (2006): 313-327.

¹² Joseph R. Ferrari and Patrick Janulis, "Embracing the Mission: Catholic and non-Catholic Faculty and Staff Perceptions of Institutional Mission and School Sense of Community," *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* 28.2 (2009).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Musch, "Ein Inventar zur Erfassung," 121-129.

tendencies than non first-generation students in order to “fit in” to the school’s climate.¹⁵ Finally, we expected Catholic students to report stronger impression management styles than Christian and other-faith student groups. Controlling for impression management tendencies, we examined whether significant differences in reported perceptions of the Catholic school’s mission and mission-driven activities would still emerge based on gender, generational status, and religious preference.

Method

Participants

A total of 1706 students (1070 female, 616 male, M age= 21.61, SD = 5.49) enrolled in a Midwestern, urban, Catholic university participated in the present study. Participants were primarily Caucasian (62.8%) and most were upper-division Junior/Senior students (53.1%). For the present study, participants self-identified as a first-generation family member to attend a college or university (n =128) or a non first-generation (n = 942), and in terms of religious affiliation as Catholic (n = 640), Christian (n = 291) or non-Christian (n = 429).

Psychometric Scales

All participants completed the 20-item impression management subscale (α = 0.76) of Paulhus’ *Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR)*. Example items within the impression management subscale include, “I sometimes tell lies if I have to” and “I always obey laws even if I’m unlikely to get caught.” Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = not true to 7 = very true.

In addition, all participants completed the *DePaul Mission and Values (DMV)* scale.¹⁶ This measure consists of two components: mission identity and mission-driven activities. The mission identity component, which evaluated students’ perceptions of the institution’s mission identity and activities, was rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not true; 7 = very true). Mission identity consists of two subscales: innovative and

¹⁵ Drozd, “Comparisons of First-Generation,” 4416.

¹⁶ Joseph R. Ferrari and Jessica Velcoff, “Measuring Staff Perceptions of University Identity and Activities: The Mission and Values Inventory,” *Christian Higher Education* 5 (2006): 243-261.

inclusive, and Catholic pluralism. The 10-item innovative and inclusive subscale ($\alpha = 0.92$) explored the university's diverse stakeholders with varied viewpoints and investigated the university's innovation in its educational focus and its willingness to take risks and engage in change toward "cutting edge" higher education operations. Example statements include: "XXX University provides access for all to higher education regardless of class, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, or economic barriers. The XXX community is welcoming and draws great strength from its diversities." The 6-item Catholic pluralism subscale on mission identity ($\alpha = 0.85$) explored whether the university offered religious services, programs, and education for faiths other than Catholicism. A sample statement included, "I support XXX's current approach to expressing its Catholic identity."

The mission-driven activities component consisted of three subscales, each rated along a 4-point Likert scale (1 = not very important; 4 = very important). The 8-item urban / global engagement subscale ($\alpha = 0.83$) measured the university's commitment to the needs of its surrounding city and the world as a whole (e.g., "How important is community based service learning to you?") The 6-item university specific program subscale ($\alpha = 0.87$) assessed the importance of university specific programs based on the school's patron saint (e.g., "How important do you view student XXX heritage tours in Europe to be?") The final 9-item subscale, faith formation programs ($\alpha = 0.91$), surveyed the importance of faith-based programs and activities like campus ministry and religious education (e.g., "How important do you believe religious education and spirituality programs on campus to be?").

Procedure

All traditional-age college students at the university were administered an online survey that included the *DMV* scale on mission and values of the institution as well as the *BIDR* impression management subscale. Students were offered incentives to participate, such as a raffle ticket for a free four-hour credit waiver and gift certificates for purchases made through Amazon.com. Students completed surveys within forty minutes, and their responses were kept confidential. The online survey was posted on the web for approximately five weeks during the middle of the Fall term to facilitate student access, and students were sent one reminder about the survey 7-10 days before the website linked to the survey was closed.

Results

We undertook several preliminary analyses prior to mission and demographic analysis. First, we performed zero-order correlational analyses between *BIDR*-impression management scores and the mean subscale scores of the *DMV* in order to ascertain whether there were any significant relationships between social desirability and university mission perceptions. Results indicated that impression management scores were significantly related to all five *DMV* subscales, namely inclusiveness and innovation, $r (n = 1392) = 0.13, p < .001$; Catholic pluralism, $r (n = 1414) = 0.12, p < .001$; urban / global activities, $r (n = 1487) = 0.05, p < .05$; the school's unique patron saint program, $r (n = 1495) = 0.13, p < .001$; and Catholic and faith-formation programs, $r (n = 1593) = 0.11, p < .001$.¹⁷ These results suggest that, as reported in other studies,¹⁸ students provide socially appropriate responses on survey measures, even those that assess beliefs about their urban, Catholic, teaching university. Consequently, we reported a conservative approach to the primary analysis by entering impression management scores as covariates.

We conducted a 2 (gender: male vs. female) by 2 (generational status: first vs. non first) by 3 (religious preference: Catholic vs. Christian vs. other faiths) *MANCOVA* analysis on *BIDR*-impression management scores. This preliminary analysis was conducted to determine if participants reflected impression management tendencies when compared on several demographic characteristics, namely gender, generation, and faith. Results indicated a significant main effect for gender, $\lambda = 0.95, F (1,267) = 2.21, p < .05$, such that a stronger tendency toward impression management was reported by women ($M = 6.06, SD = 4.15$) compared to men ($M = 5.21, SD = 4.11$). In addition, there was a significant main effect on expressing impression management tendencies based on religious preference, $\lambda = 0.93, F (1,267) = 1.90, p < .05$, with stronger social desirability experiences by persons of other faiths ($M = 5.91, SD = 4.17$) than Christian students ($M = 5.85, SD = 4.11$) or Catholic students ($M = 5.62, SD = 4.15$). However, there was no significant main effect on impression management tendencies between first-generation or non first-generation students, $p = .22$.

Having established that impression management tendencies (reflective of social desirability responding) were influencing student

¹⁷ p values less than .05 denote a meaningful relationship between impression management and subscales of *DMV*.

¹⁸ Paulhus, "Enhancement and Denial," 307-317.

responses on our survey instruments, we then conducted our primary analysis. That is, we assessed whether there were significant differences in students' perceptions of their Catholic university's mission identity and mission-related activities based on these students' gender, generational status, and religious preference, while also controlling for impression management tendencies.

We conducted a 2 (gender: male vs. female) by 2 (generational status: first vs. non first) by 3 (religious preference: Catholic vs. Christian vs. other faiths) *MANCOVA* on the five *DMV* subscale scores, controlling for impression management. Results indicated a significant three-way multivariate effect, $\lambda = 0.92$, $F(1, 283) = 2.19$, $p = .017$. Table 1 presents the mean score on each of the five *DMV* subscale scores for men and women who are first- or non first-generation students with a Catholic, Christian, or other religious faith preference.

Univariate analysis then showed significant three-way effect, $F(2, 284) = 3.80$, $p = .018$, on the importance for urban / global engagement activities, namely first-generation women with religious preferences other than Catholic or Christian reported the highest sense of urban / global engagement importance, while first-generation Catholic men reported the lowest sense of importance (Table 1). A significant two-way interaction between gender and religious preference also emerged with students' perceptions of the importance of urban / global activities to reflect the Catholic mission, $F(2, 284) = 4.89$, $p = .008$. *Post hoc* comparisons indicated that Catholic men reported significantly lower preference of urban / global engagement activities ($M = 27.79$, $SD = 5.03$) than other men (Christian, $M = 28.25$, $SD = 4.85$; other faiths, $M = 28.19$, $SD = 6.11$) or women of Catholic ($M = 29.17$, $SD = 4.27$), Christian ($M = 29.05$, $SD = 5.10$), or other faith preferences ($M = 29.18$, $SD = 4.58$).

There was a significant main effect, which might explain the obtained interaction effect. Controlling for impression management tendencies, women ($M = 29.23$, $SD = 4.54$) reported significantly stronger preference than men ($M = 28.03$, $SD = 5.44$) on the importance for urban and global mission-engagement activities, $F(1, 1493) = 18.68$, $p = .000$. There was no significant main effect for religious preference after controlling for impression management tendencies.

Discussion

Diverging from previous studies, we found that female participants responded in socially appropriate ways more often than male

Table 1

	Catholic		Christian		Other	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
DMV scale:	FG	NFG	FG	NFG	FG	NFG
Innovative and Inclusive	57.87 (3.64)	54.00 (8.52)	59.85 (9.64)	59.14 (6.71)	58.11 (5.57)	60.40 (6.29)
Catholic Pluralism	35.37 (2.19)	32.07 (5.43)	35.45 (5.90)	35.44 (4.36)	33.00 (6.41)	35.30 (4.11)
Urban / Global	23.37 (4.68)	27.89 (4.25)	29.91 (4.10)	29.56 (3.87)	29.38 (3.63)	28.80 (5.92)
Engagement Programs	19.87 (6.01)	20.93 (6.29)	22.94 (5.06)	22.64 (4.86)	22.77 (5.39)	21.60 (4.78)
University-specific	21.12 (6.35)	23.00 (8.73)	28.03 (7.49)	27.91 (6.71)	26.56 (7.81)	26.00 (7.94)
Faith-formation			19.33 (13.65)	19.33 (6.71)	26.56 (7.81)	26.00 (7.94)
Programs					22.29 (10.62)	22.29 (10.62)
					21.94 (8.17)	21.94 (8.17)
					20.75 (3.39)	20.75 (3.39)
					18.72 (4.03)	18.72 (4.03)
					28.44 (4.77)	28.44 (4.77)
					28.22 (4.39)	28.22 (4.39)
					56.44 (9.83)	56.44 (9.83)
					55.22 (9.63)	55.22 (9.63)
					59.06 (8.29)	59.06 (8.29)
					34.06 (6.56)	34.06 (6.56)
					32.33 (8.89)	32.33 (8.89)
					32.94 (4.72)	32.94 (4.72)
					31.06 (6.49)	31.06 (6.49)
					55.75 (7.84)	55.75 (7.84)
					55.22 (9.63)	55.22 (9.63)
					59.06 (8.29)	59.06 (8.29)

*p < .05 Values in parenthesis indicate standard deviations.

Note. DMV = DePaul Mission & Values scale; FG = First-generation students, NFG = Non first-generation students

participants. Also differing from previous studies,¹⁹ non first-generation students reported a stronger impression management tendency than first-generation students. Finally, the present study is the first to show non-Catholic Christian and other faith formations were more likely to respond in a socially desirable manner than Catholic participants.

Our results did not support the findings of previous studies; however, unlike previous studies, the present survey demonstrates that social desirability tendencies (specifically impression management strategies) operate within survey responding. In other words, it seems that many of the previous studies did not consider the role of social desirability with their student surveys. Although our results in terms of gender and generation are similar to other studies, once we controlled (statistically) respondents' tendencies to present a positive public impression, we found the results opposite to most other published studies. While we are not suggesting that social desirability responding occurs with *all* students in *all* surveys at *all* colleges and universities, we do recommend that school administrators and survey administrators (at least those who focus on Catholic mission assessment) include reliable and valid measures of impression management tendencies as a control variable when they conduct campus-wide surveys.

Implications for Catholic Mission Research

These results, taken together, suggest that, on Catholic mission surveys, certain groups of students provide socially appropriate answers to impress others. Researchers of institutional Catholic mission, vision, and value perceptions must consider the role of social desirability—specifically, impression management—when assessing their students' engagement and appreciation of the school's purpose. We think this variable is fundamental to understanding where students “come from” and where they “will go” as they develop in their higher education experiences. Of course, impression management by students or other educational groups is not necessarily negative. Such tendencies can be statistically controlled to yield useful and informative outcomes. Still, impression management tendencies must be considered in survey research.

¹⁹ Drozd, “Comparisons of First-Generation,” 4416.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There were several limitations to this study. The data analyzed all came from a single, large enrollment institution, located in an urban setting of the United States. While we suspect that the results would generalize to include small, rural Catholic institutions, we cannot be sure without further investigation. Therefore, we are currently engaged in similar research with small, rural, and suburban Catholic universities using the *DMV* to ascertain if we find the same results. Also, the present study used a single measure of impression management, suggesting that our results are limited to that measure. Because the *BIDR* is a widely-used measure in a variety of different academic settings, it is unlikely to be the case.²⁰ Still, future research needs to use different measures of social desirability in general, and impression management in particular, to determine if our results generalize across settings.

The purpose of this study was to explore impression management tendencies self-reported by college students who differ based on demographic variables and, more importantly, to investigate whether these tendencies impacted perceptions of their Catholic university's mission-related aspects. We found that students, when reporting perceptions of their Catholic institution's mission, frequently use impression management strategies, which is consistent with findings in other studies involving faculty and staff²¹ and even senior administrative officers.²² Impression management tendencies were most evident in results of female students, non first-generation attendees of college, and those who identify religions other than Christianity. Future researchers in this area may wish to include measures of social desirability in their survey administration, recognizing that human variables are common in responses. Impression management tendencies may be controlled by statistical methods, and as a result, studies may be more informative in terms of outcomes obtained.

²⁰ Andrew Li and Jessica Bagger, "The Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR): A Reliability Generalization Study," *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 67 (2007): 525-244.

²¹ Ferrari, "Embracing the Mission."

²² Jessica Velcoff and Joseph R. Ferrari, "Perceptions of University Mission Statement by Senior Administrators: Relating to Faculty Engagement." *Christian Higher Education* 5 (2006): 1-11.

