

## Students' Impression Management in MOOCs: An Opportunity for Existential Learning?

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### Abstract

The article considers students' impression management on discussion boards of massive open online courses (MOOCs) by applying the conceptual framework provided by Simmel and Goffman. Students exhibit different motives and functions of impression management, ranging from the need to "fit in" over self-experimentation to Machiavellian interests. This holds for education in conventional classrooms as much as for online courses, and indulging in impression management strategies and receiving (indirect) feedback for it can be considered part of existential learning. However, the article argues that in the lean medium of a MOOC, it is more difficult for a teacher to interpret students' impression management and to react accordingly. This constitutes a challenge for the humanities, which conventionally aim at a holistic education including students' personal development.

**Keywords:** massive open online course, self-presentation, humanities, holistic education, teaching philosophy, existentialism, Georg Simmel, Erving Goffman

### Introduction

Steadily, web-based learning has risen to a new level: *Massive Open Online Courses* (MOOCs) caused a "media hype" (Kennedy, 2014) by promising access to education without spatial or temporal boundaries at low marginal costs. All over the world, participants can enroll in online courses, even without being formally enlisted at a university. Students can study what they want, when they want and where they want. Beside the idealistic appeal of bringing "education to the world," MOOCs create economic opportunities: commercial enterprises like *Coursera*, *edX*, or *Udacity* offer the services and technology needed for online teaching and cooperate with hundreds of academic institutions that usually provide the course content.

MOOCs are *massive*, as they do not restrict the number of course participants. By aggregating the demand globally and by not requiring physical presence of the students, online courses attract student numbers that even the largest universities cannot serve in traditional settings. Both mainstream courses and niche-topics can draw large student crowds online. For instance, Prof. Jon Stewart's course "Søren Kierkegaard – Subjectivity and the Crisis of Modernity" (Copenhagen University/Coursera) attracted 26,178 international students. From October until December 2013, it facilitated a discussion of Kierkegaard's philosophy, existentialism, and irony. In addition, the course also addressed questions about individual self-realization, community, and society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Being a member of the teaching staff that moderated the conversation on this MOOC's discussion board, I was provoked to reassess my teaching practices and my role as a teacher of the humanities in general. In particular, dealing exclusively with online identities, and being unable to tell how truly they represented the person behind the profile picture and comments, spurred me to reflect on students' online impression management in relation to what philosophy teachers usually do in a classroom. Provided that a philosophy course should not only transfer knowledge, but also initiate the students' self-reflection and encourage personality development, the teacher *per definitionem* is engaged with the learners' selves. Thus, students' online self-

presentation is an important factor in this pedagogical process. Yet it has been neglected by the research.

The following paragraphs provide explorative thoughts on impression management and the role of the teacher with particular regard to MOOCs. The article first addresses the concept of holistic education in the context of online teaching (1.). It then explains the notion of impression management as it has been developed by sociology and interaction theory, and applies it to *online* self-presentation (2.). Third, it discusses the effect that the feature of a MOOC has on students' impression management (3.). Subsequently, it analyzes the *motives* and *functions* of these impression management strategies, and it reflects on possible pedagogical interventions (4.). Finally, the article summarizes the many-sided implications impression management in MOOCs has for holistic education, and it formulates questions for future research. The article concludes with a suggestion to incorporate a critical reflection on impression management in the course work itself to turn it into a pedagogical benefit (5.).

### 1. Teaching the Humanities Online

In the academic literature, MOOCs usually are juxtaposed with the holistic concept of education pursued in a Liberal Arts College's traditional classroom (Scholz, 2013). Traditionally, the humanities aim at knowledge transfer as well as personal development. In neo-humanistic education theories, "the role of the intellect, and the need for much acquisition of objective knowledge is not denied" (Thatcher, 1980, p. 126), but this knowledge acquisition is thought to transform the learner. It should challenge the student to question her habits of mind, her worldviews and beliefs (Uhl, 2011). When developing an emphatic interaction with others and a responsible relation with society, "gaining insight into oneself" is considered a necessary step (Nordenbo, 2002, p. 348). Correspondingly, the teacher is not only a knowledge expert, but also a facilitator of existential learning. He or she provides a challenging, yet supportive environment – a "safe space" for students' self-expression and interaction with each other (Bain, 2004). Ideally, the teacher even acts as a "midwife," guiding students toward an authentic relationship with themselves and others (Uhl, 2011, p. 109).

Due to their interpretative openness and discursive features, subjects of the humanities are traditionally perceived to provide excellent opportunities for initiating students' self-realization. This particularly holds for a philosophy class. Here, a teacher does not just inform the student about the history of philosophy or aims solely at analytical and logical skills. At its best, a philosophy class fosters personal development among students. Existentialism especially can be taught "as an invitation to a personal adventure into the self" (Kelly, 2004, p. 194). It is a classic subject to "launch the student on his own journey, to goad him to his own action and his own choice, to confront him with possibilities" (Greene, 1974, p. 84).

However, this holistic approach mostly gets lost when it comes to online teaching. Online pedagogy concentrates on knowledge construction, and online courses are often designed "without paying any attention to the social (psychological) aspects of collaborating through CMC [computer-mediated communication]" (Kreijns et al., 2004, p. 156). Nevertheless, even in MOOCs, it is still considered an essential task of the teacher to create a "safe space" for all participants (Bali, 2014). In addition, the students' sense of "belonging" to the learning environment, their personal "growth" and "transformation" remain crucial in online courses as well (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Kalantzis & Cope, 2004). Replacing the face-to-face interaction with an exclusively computer-mediated communication does not necessarily consign online education to "second best" status (Blake, 2000, p. 184). It does, however, provide serious challenges for the teacher.

Especially the *presence of the teacher* is understood as crucial for engaging the online student, and an ample body of literature investigates how to establish and keep this presence. In order to demonstrate that the online instructor is "there" for the learners, she continuously and in a timely manner needs to fulfill a variety of roles like planner, role model, coach, facilitator and communicator (Heuer & King, 2004; Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006). It is further assumed that the teacher should encourage the *social presence of students* as well, because

sharing of personal characteristics allegedly leads to social connectedness which ultimately fosters cognitive presence and overall learning (Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2009).

Thus, the teacher is supposed to set a good example and share a personal introduction, “so students feel they too can describe themselves to their classmates” (Mandernach et al., 2006, p. 251). Moreover, the teacher should supply learners with frequent opportunities to observe individuating social information of all participants, for instance by including an “All-about-me”-category in the discussion threads (Savery, 2005; Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2009). Lehman and Conceição (2010) also recommend icebreaker techniques like “virtual license plates” or “vanity websites,” where participants can share pictures and personal information like hobbies, favorite travel destinations etc. Savery (2005) even advises to invite students to “share something about themselves that nobody knows about them” or to describe themselves in a text that contains two truths and one lie (and to ask other participants to guess the lie).

Thus, self-presentation is regarded as enhancing social presence and creating social connectedness, thereby fostering overall learning. Self-presentation, however, is not as straightforward as it might seem. Very often, impression management strategies are involved, and especially online, it is difficult to tell the authenticity of another person. This raises challenges for a teacher if he is to address the students as persons and encourage self-realization. I therefore argue that *if* we apply the standard of holistic education to an online learning environment, especially to an *exclusively online* course with *many* participants, students’ self-presentation demands consideration.

## 2. Online Self-Presentation and Impression Management

Impression management, defined as monitoring and influencing how others perceive us, has been the subject of interaction theories since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel, interaction partners *always* try to determine the impression they make (Simmel 1906). Erving Goffman uses the *theater* as a metaphor: everyone “presents” his- or herself on the “stage” of everyday life by disguising some and emphasizing other features of his or her personality (Goffman, 1973). Since people are “rarely, if ever, free of self-presentational concerns” (Leary, Allan, & Terry, 2011, p. 411), they continuously aim to influence how others perceive them. Impression management via self-presentation ranges from simply controlling one’s temper and keeping a smile despite anger to “stretching the truth” and even lying. It does not, however, necessarily imply consciousness and tactical planning. Quite to the contrary, impression management very often is “the product of highly overlearned habits or scripts” (Tetlock & Manstead, 1985, p. 62), and can be considered a habitual behavior (Leary et al., 2011).

Since Goffman’s groundbreaking publications, impression management has been investigated thoroughly, mostly in the area of psychology and organizational studies (Schlenker, 1980). Also the phenomenon of self-presentation in online communities is well documented in the literature. Mostly, the research focuses on impression management on social networking sites (Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Stopfer, Egloff, Nestler, & Back, 2014). Particular attention has been paid to self-presentation in the online dating environment (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006) and on Facebook (FB): Rosenberg and Egbert (2011) for instance analyze the relation of personality traits to self-presentation tactics on FB, Bouvier (2012) distinguishes “identity categories” FB-users apply in order to create their online selves, and Ong et al. (in press) address adolescents’ self-presentation strategies on FB and narcissism.

Considerably less research has been conducted on online self-presentation with regard to learning. Toma (2013) suggests that FB-users’ selective self-presentation leads to self-affirmation and ultimately hampers performance in a subsequent cognitive task, because it decreases the motivation to perform well. Meskil & Sadykova (2007) investigate how graduate students of an online course present themselves narratively in order to be perceived as academically fit, and Samburskiy (2013) examines the impression management strategies of online teachers through introductory posts.

However, it has not yet been considered how the features of a MOOC affect students' self-presentation, and how the teacher is supposed to deal with it. MOOCs very often promote an alluringly simplified understanding of the teacher (the "celebrity professor," the "technical facilitator"). As a consequence, the "complexities of teaching" have mostly been ignored in the MOOC debates (Ross et al., 2014). Directly experiencing the *massiveness* of an MOOC as a teacher, its quantity of interactions and its opportunities for unrestricted self-presentation has directed my attention to this pedagogical issue. Since the literature on the nexus of online pedagogy and impression management is limited, the following paragraphs draw from the findings of psychology and sociology as well.

### 3. Students' Self-Presentation in a MOOC

"We don't have to stand before our fellow students, we are not sidetracked by looks, age, tone of voice and body language." This quote by one of my MOOC students suggests that MOOCs grant a more efficient environment to engage in learning than "real" classrooms do: students do not have to care about their own or a fellow student's appearance, thus, they concentrate on the course topic only, and participate in discussions on the forum purely for objective reasons.

Admittedly, in face-to-face-communications, more senses are involved, providing more channels for impression management. In online communities like MOOCs, participants mainly have to deal with written words. But the "lean medium" of computer-mediated communication is only at first glance a barrier to impression management. Paralinguistic clues like user name, writing style, quotes or emoticons transfer information, too (Becker & Stamp, 2005). The emphasis of writing in MOOCs can even be considered to lead to more cautiousness and strategic thinking in interaction, because a computer-mediated self-image is more permanent and difficult to correct (for instance, once comments are posted, only staff members can subsequently edit them). As Hythornthwaite and Bregman point out when investigating online education, "not only must thoughts and personae be constructed through text, but how you do that persists over time. Whatever you write now reveals your thoughts and personality for as long as the logs exist" (Hythornthwaite & Bregman, 2004, p. 130).

The written word also provides ample opportunities for *indirect* strategies of impression management. In most MOOCs, participants can start threads on the discussion board themselves. In addition to the teachers' questions and comments, the students' entries co-determine which aspects of the course should be deepened. However, the students' preferences are not always motivated by objective reasons. Changing the direction of the discourse is sometimes spurred by the desire to present oneself in a favorable way – students do not always initiate a discussion in order to understand something better, but also to display their knowledge and wit (Gibson & Oberlander, 2008). This can be helpful for fellow students, but it can also intimidate or annoy them. Furthermore, any strategy of "hypercriticism" hampers the learning process of the very student who wants to appear smart: he directs the conversation away from the topics that he has not fully comprehended.

Admittedly, this strategy can also be observed in the real classroom. However, in face-to-face interaction with a student group, it is easier for the teacher to interpret the situation. Discretely, she can intervene when indirect self-presentation diverts the attention away from the course goals, and redirect the discussion. Of course, MOOC instructors also make sure that the discussion stays focused on the course topic, but since it is not always a real time interaction (and discussants being distributed across different time zones), they sometimes are confronted with non-moderated discussions that evolved over night and which became an arena for competing self-promoters.

Moderating the conversation in a MOOC raises awareness for what teachers usually do during classroom discussions: as online teacher, one immediately misses the ability to read body language, facial expressions and tones of voice, and also to employ the same non-verbal language to enhance and steer the learning process. Not being able to follow the best practice rules as described by Bain – watching the students' reactions, reading their eyes and then adjusting the pedagogical tactic (Bain, 2004, p. 118) – leaves teachers with a narrow range of actions. Among others, it becomes harder to prevent impression management strategies

disturbing the learning process. The emphasis on written language might appeal to some students as more objective and efficient, but it certainly raises the bar for teachers.

#### 4. Impression Management: Motives, Functions, and Pedagogical Intervention

There are many motives for engaging in impression management. They can be divided into motives that are *audience-oriented*, and motives that are related to *identity* and *self-construction*. *Audience-oriented* motives either consist of the need to be liked or to gain power. Thus, “pleasing the audience” can be a Machiavellian strategy to manipulate the interaction partners in order to reach personal goals, but also an attempt to “fit in” and seek affinity (Arkin & Shepperd, 1989; Baumeister, 1989). In learner communities, concerns about “getting along” sometimes hinder “getting ahead” (Arkin, 1981). Socially anxious students hold back in order not to risk a reputation of being the teacher’s pet. In the real classroom, the teacher is able to facilitate individual learning processes and at the same time consider group dynamics. In MOOCs, this is impossible: first, because the written interaction is more difficult to interpret, and second, because the sheer mass of participants prohibits getting to know the individual learners. But then, the large number of students might on the other hand lower the concern for “getting along” at all, decreasing the need for impression management, and thus helping students focus solely on their individual learning process.

Impression management also serves the purpose of *identity development* and *self-construction*. We have a desire to socially validate our identity, and one of our major tasks in life is “make one’s actual self correspond to as closely as possible with the ideal self” (Baumeister, 1989, p. 61). Through publicly committing oneself to an identity, that is, acting like the person we want to be in front of an “audience,” we finally become that person (Kelly & Rodriguez, 2006). According to Schlenker, “self-descriptions can become internalized to produce changes in the self-concept” (Schlenker, 1980, p. 195).

In addition, impression management makes *self-experimentation* possible. On the Internet and in its many online communities, there are no limits for trying out different personalities. Creating a user profile under a pseudonym allows for the design of an online identity that is not restricted by real life conditions and worries over being unmasked. Turkle therefore suggests considering the Internet as a “significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and restrictions of self that characterize postmodern life” (Turkle, 1995, p. 180). As recent studies show, members of online communities enjoy that “they can be who they want to be” in these communities, and they are fully aware of impression management as core to “trying out” new identities (Becker & Stamp, 2005, p. 248).

Thus, MOOCs seemingly provide optimal environments for existential learning and personal development: students play with different self-presentations and test their impact on how others react. Considering this is particularly important when teaching younger students who are still developing an understanding of their own identity. But it could also be argued that personal development is not as much fostered as it is in real classrooms; after all, the teacher is not able to provide guidance when it comes to tougher existential questions and psychological hardship.

Usually, “building rapport” with students is part of the best teachers’ formula for success. Concededly, “in the online world, it can be difficult to gather information from students” (Brinthaup, Fisher, Gardner, Raffo, & Woodard, 2001, p. 520). Possible solutions – students should introduce themselves through an office visit or phone call prior to enrolling in the online course – are not feasible for MOOCs with thousands of participants living all around the globe. In addition, only in the real classroom the teacher “is living a life right before the students’ eyes,” so he or she can serve as a role model while engaging students in reflections on existence (Kelly, 2004, p. 195).

In ideal face-to-face interactions, the philosophy teacher gives feedback to the students’ behavior (directly or indirectly). If impression management obstructs a student’s personal development, the teacher can subtly question it and make the student realize that some behaviors are habit-like responses that might not always be consistent with her actual self-concept. Meanwhile, impression management is a social competence, and sometimes it even needs to be trained in

order to develop interpersonal relations. Leary and Allen stress that people “who present essentially the same pattern of images to everyone with whom they interact may score points for consistency and authenticity, but maintaining the same image in all settings may lead others to view their behavior as normatively inappropriate” (Leary and Allen, 2011, p. 1034).

Ideally, the classroom is an environment where all students feel encouraged to ask questions and to express their thoughts. In real classrooms as much as in online learning communities, concerns about exposure are supposed to be lower when students know each other and their teacher well (Haythornthwaite & Bregman, 2004). Nevertheless, MOOCs also help the shy students out of the woods. The “benign disinhibition effect” of online interaction sometimes leads to a more outgoing behavior and fosters self-realization (Suler, 2004). In some cases, being able to ask “dumb questions” anonymously or as a thoroughly designed online persona functions as a “dress rehearsal” (Becker & Stamp, 2005, p. 352) for the real classroom.

However, if massive online education becomes predominant over real classroom interaction, it might hinder social and existential learning and even create a vicious circle for socially anxious students: in the real classroom, the teacher gently pushes them out of their comfort zone. By contrast, MOOCs make it easy to shun the challenges subsistent in interpersonal relations. At first, the advantages are compelling: if students can ensure that they will not risk disapproval and strain in interpersonal relations, they might more actively engage in discussions. But this strategy will mostly foster intellectual learning, and the “immediate advantages are exchanged for the delayed advantages of acquiring interpersonal competencies” (Arkin, 1981, p. 330).

In traditional classrooms, teachers have the responsibility to support students who feel socially insecure. The same is taken for granted in online communities. It is, however, impossible to detect these students; in virtual learning environments, instructors must deal with the image that the student creates. Presenting a self that is not coherent with the actual self is much easier on a massive online campus than on the physical campus. By using pictures, quotes and self-descriptions, students design user profiles that are hard to verify, and sometimes obviously fictive. Teachers of MOOCs might find themselves interacting with science fiction heroines, with Socrates, or simply with a surfboard pictured in front of a tropic beach – at least according to the students’ profile pictures. The golden rule of teaching – you don’t teach a class, you teach a student – is thus impossible to follow in MOOCs: there, you do not teach a student, but an avatar.

Finally, in non-virtual educational environments, students have the opportunity to approach their teachers outside the classroom. Teachers have the option to invite a student to their office if they sense there is an issue that should be addressed in private. In the virtual classroom, however, teachers rather hold back when it comes to challenging students’ online self-presentations. First, it is difficult to gauge a student’s sensitivity by relying on the written word only. Second, the student simply might decide to drop the course as a consequence. In MOOCs, instructors cannot keep in touch with a student once she leaves, whereas at a university or college, they can still reach her via classmates or simply run into her on campus.

Dealing with a MOOC’s heterogeneous and huge student population, teachers run the risk that any remark could touch sensitive issues unknowingly. Without the direct feedback from students by body language and facial expression, it is impossible to correct misunderstandings or to address emotional trouble. In extreme cases, this will lead to students’ announcements of self-harm or suicide. Even such declarations are hard to assess and sometimes function as tool for impression management, too. Most MOOC providers therefore employ specialists to address these cases, and the discussion boards are constantly checked for remarks concerning this matter. Still, triggering acts of self-harm in your students is something you permanently fear as a MOOC teacher.

### **5. The Pedagogic Potential of Impression Management in MOOCs: Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research**

Impression management is a facilitator of all social interaction. It takes place in educational settings as well, and not only in the real classroom, but also in online courses. Yet it has not been thoroughly investigated. Future research needs to address the mediating and moderating

influence of impression management behavior on online learning, discuss the task of the teacher, and develop adequate pedagogic training. This especially holds for courses that in a conventional classroom setting apply a holistic approach and aim at the students' personal development.

However, this does not imply that online courses necessarily are detrimental to existential learning by amplifying the negative outcomes of impression management. Research needs to be undertaken on a variety of effects that computer-mediated mass interactions have on impression management behavior in MOOCs. First, it is possible that students apply *more impression management* in a MOOC than in the real classroom, simply because online communities provide so many opportunities for and little counter-measures against limitless self-presentation. This can be thought to have *positive* as much as *negative effects* on learning: On the one hand, it is easier to present oneself in a way that does not trigger social or cultural prejudices, and being in control over one's image is encouraging for socially anxious participants. In addition, MOOCs can be regarded as safe playground for existential learning, since students are able to create the persona they want to be. Gender, race, nationality, looks, attitudes etc. can become subject of identity experimentation – which fosters personal development, especially among young adults. On the other hand, raised opportunities for impression management fortify an evasive behavior. As a result, students do not learn to face their social anxiety or to stand up for themselves as the person they are.

Second, it also needs to be accounted for the contrary: it might as well be that students engage in *less impression management* than they do in the real classroom. Some participants might not care how they are perceived when it does not have any consequences on their non-virtual life. Furthermore, MOOCs provide an extremely huge pool of potential interaction partners. If students get off with the wrong foot with someone, there will be endless opportunities to start afresh with someone else or in another discussion thread. On the one side, this strengthens authenticity and self-confidence, but on the other side, it also gives way to solipsism. In order to successfully build interpersonal relations, we have to learn to calibrate our behavior, expression, and our self-presentation to different contexts and persons. Usually, young students learn to achieve this balance between authenticity and assimilation in the real classroom and with the teachers' support.

In MOOCs it is much more difficult (if not impossible) for the teacher to detect and interpret students' impression management behavior. Albeit this applies to MOOCs of all disciplines and topics, it demands special consideration with regard to teaching philosophy in MOOCs – at least if the same holistic learning goals should be achieved as in non-virtual classes. Also when taught as MOOCs, philosophy courses not only impart knowledge and stimulate intellectual development. They still provide ample opportunities for existential and social learning. These pedagogic opportunities, however, are different from the ones emerging in the conventional classroom. Investigating impression management in MOOCs would be the first step to size these learning opportunities.

In the meanwhile, directly addressing the issue could serve pedagogical purposes: impression management, anonymity, self-presentation, and identity experimentation could be discussed with MOOC students from a philosophical perspective. After all, many writers and philosophers have made use of it. For instance, when teaching existentialism online, one could deliberate Kierkegaard's colorful pseudonyms, and discuss the impression management strategies applied by one of his most notorious figures, "the Aesthete". In such a discussion, the teacher might explicitly invite students to reflect on online self-presentation in general, but also ask them to consider how they wish to be perceived and why. Becoming aware of the unrestricted and limitless opportunities for impression management in a MOOC could, in the famous Kierkegaardian manner, question conventional self-presentation habits, relieve of false confidence, and ultimately stimulate the earnestness for true self-realization (Mannheimer, 1977; Rosenow 1989;). Thus, also in MOOCs, analyzing impression management could turn a philosophy course into what it is at its best: an expedition into the self.

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