

Self-presentation concerns may contribute towards the understanding of athletes' affect when trialling for a new sports team

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Abstract

A vignette-based experimental manipulation was used to examine the impact of self-presentation concerns on athletes' affect and cognitive appraisal. Others' reactions were described, so as to emphasize or de-emphasize self-presentation concerns. Athletes given cause to believe that they were generating unfavourable impressions experienced more negative affect and reported more threat-based appraisal. Athletes exposed to information de-emphasizing self-presentation concerns experienced more positive affect and reported more of a challenge-based appraisal. The findings indicate a potential opportunity (e.g., de-emphasising self-presentation concerns, providing a supportive interpersonal environment) that others (e.g., coaches and teammates) could act on to improve athlete experiences during sports trials.

Keywords: Impression management; competitive; perceptions; social; anxiety

RESEARCH NOTE: Self-presentation concerns may contribute towards the understanding of athletes' affect when trialling for a new sports team

There is a lay view that it is critical to make a “good” first impression in one’s initial interactions. This view is supported by research findings that indicate that first impressions are likely to be relatively enduring (Anderson, 1965; Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004) and that when making first impressions (i.e., when interacting with unfamiliar others), individuals tend to employ a self-presentational pattern characterised by self-enhancement (as opposed to modesty; Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). Self-presentation is not limited to interactions with unfamiliar others (for example, interactions between friends may include self-presentation; Tice et al., 1995), but given the importance of initial interpersonal interactions, it is likely that information that pertains to the success (or otherwise) of making a good first impression will have affective consequences for self-presenters. That is, self-presenters’ interpretation of whether they are being viewed favourably or unfavourably in interactions with unfamiliar others is likely to influence how they feel. Theory, as well as findings from the sport psychology literature, provide some support for this view.

Leary and Schlenker theorized a link between social anxiety, an example of an adverse affective experience, and self-presentation concerns (Leary, 2001; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Self-presentation concerns refer to concerns regarding others’ evaluations and perceptions of the self (Baumeister, 1982). These theorists proposed that social anxiety occurs when individuals perceive others to be devaluing their relationship, or at least not to be valuing the relationship to the extent desired. Relevant sport psychology work supports the view that self-presentation concerns (e.g., regarding physical appearance, performance/composure inadequacies, appearing to be fatigued, lacking in energy, or athletically untalented) can have a detrimental effect on athletes’ trait-level affective experiences (e.g., may prompt anxiety; cf. Wilson & Eklund, 1998). Research also indicates that athletes’ state-based affect may be more positive when sport-related

1 self-presentation concerns are de-emphasised and more negative when self-presentation
2 concerns are emphasised (Howle & Eklund, 2013).

3 Given that the aforementioned sport psychology work has focused on sports
4 competition, potential links between sport self-presentation concerns and athletes' affect in other
5 relevant sports situations have not been fully considered. For example, although Howle and
6 Eklund (2013) used vignettes that were focused on sport competition to emphasise or de-
7 emphasise self-presentation concerns, they noted the potential for this type of research design to
8 be expanded to consider other goal-relevant and potentially [stressful](#) situations. One such under-
9 explored situation is the trialling (or try-out) process that athletes may undertake so as to gain
10 selection to a sports team. The desire to manage one's impression is likely to be elevated in this
11 situation given that athletes may be interacting with a number of unfamiliar others (i.e., new
12 teammates, coaches, and support staff) and because sports trials are a type of situation in which
13 one's self-presentational success or failure has implications for one's social and material
14 outcomes (e.g., status and prestige from team selection, salary, university scholarship). Leary and
15 Kowalski (1990) note that the drive to obtain social and material outcomes represents a primary
16 type of self-presentation motivation for individuals.

17 In the context of trialling for a new sports team, the actions of others (and one's
18 interpretation of those actions) may be particularly pertinent for one's self-presentation concerns
19 and likely to impact upon one's affective experiences. For example, making a mistake in a sport
20 drill and observing the coach subsequently shake his head may invite concern on the behalf of
21 the athlete that he/she is being perceived unfavourably (i.e., lower relational value) and prompt
22 the experience of negative affect (e.g., being upset). Conversely, having a coach respond to such
23 a mistake with a reassuring statement advising the athlete not to dwell on it is likely to invite a
24 lower level of self-presentation concern, indicate far less of a negative effect on relational value,
25 and prompt a less adverse affective reaction from the athlete.

1 In this study, we considered the impact of emphasising or de-emphasising self-
2 presentational concerns on athletes' positive and negative affect by using a vignette-based
3 experimental manipulation. [In relation to potential application](#), our intent was to provide insight
4 for practitioners as to whether the affective experiences of individuals trialling for a team are
5 more positive or negative when self-presentation concerns are lowered or heightened,
6 respectively. We hypothesised that athletes who read a script emphasizing self-presentational
7 concerns (i.e., *high self-presentational concerns* group) would report more negative affect whereas
8 athletes who read a script de-emphasizing self-presentation concerns (i.e., *low self-presentational*
9 *concerns* group) would report more positive affect. Guided by work on the generalized other
10 (Mead 1934, 1938; Martin & Sokol 2011), we focused on individuals' generalized self-
11 presentation concerns rather than concerns that were directed at specific (hypothetical) others.

12 In addition to considering athletes' affective reactions to the experimental scenarios, we
13 also sought to investigate whether the manipulation would shape athletes' cognitive appraisal of
14 the situation. Individuals are considered to appraise a situation more as a threat when they
15 perceive the demands of the situation to outweigh their resources to cope with the situation.
16 Conversely, a challenge-based appraisal is established when an individual perceives their available
17 coping resources to outweigh the situational demands (Tomaka, Blascovich, Kelsey, & Leitten,
18 1993). Sport psychology researchers have discussed challenge and threat appraisal as important
19 influences on sport performance (Jones, Meijen, McCarthy, & Sheffield, 2009), for example,
20 noting that challenge and threat states may be associated with distinct patterns of physiological
21 (i.e., neuroendocrine and cardiovascular) and emotional responses that are more (i.e., challenge
22 appraisal) or less (i.e., threat appraisal) adaptive in nature.

23 By considering athletes' appraisals we sought to provide insight into whether the
24 hypothesised between-group affective differences were produced along with (or in the absence
25 of) accompanying differences in athlete cognitions. Howle and Eklund (2013) found that
26 emphasising self-presentation concerns resulted in more of a threat-based appraisal of a

1 hypothetical sport competition, whereas a more challenge-based appraisal was reported when
2 self-presentational concerns were de-emphasised. Similarly, we expected that in the context of
3 trialling for a new sports team, emphasising self-presentational concerns would prompt more of
4 a threat based appraisal relative to de-emphasising self-presentation concerns. We also expected
5 that this difference would be due to differences in athletes' perception of the situation (i.e.,
6 demand appraisal) rather than personal resources (i.e., resource appraisal). We made this
7 prediction because manipulating the reactions of others to emphasise/de-emphasise self-
8 presentation concerns represents an important change to the nature of the interpersonal situation
9 but not one's personal capabilities.

10 Method

11 *Participants*

12 Following approval from the relevant Human Research Ethics Committee, the lead
13 author contacted sports team coaches, sports team members, and presidents of the respective
14 sports clubs to provide information about the nature of the project and to invite athletes to
15 participate. Sixty-three participants (male $n = 20$, female $n = 43$), aged 17-30 agreed to participate
16 and provided their informed consent. Participants were current collegiate-level athletes who
17 competed in basketball ($n = 26$), netball ($n = 28$), and American football ($n = 9$).

18 *Procedure*

19 Participants were provided with a link to access an online version of the survey. After
20 providing informed consent, participants were allocated to either the *low self-presentation concerns*
21 *group* ($n = 31$) or a *high self-presentational concerns* ($n = 32$) group (i.e., between-subjects design) via
22 computerised random assignment. With the exception of the experimental manipulation (see
23 below), participants in both groups received the same material and completed the same
24 measures. All participants were debriefed on the purpose of the investigation and provided with
25 contact information for the lead author (should they have any questions) via a webpage that
26 appeared automatically upon completion of the survey.

1 *Experimental Manipulation*

2 All participants were provided with a written script (available from the lead author)
3 focusing on the initial trial session for joining a new sports team. The scripts were designed to be
4 related to general experiences when trialing for a new team and to be generic enough to apply to
5 each sport whilst maintaining an instructional consistency (Williams, Cummings, & Balancos,
6 2010). That is, we developed scripts designed to be relevant for basketball, netball, and football
7 athletes rather than developing separate basketball, netball, and American football scripts (e.g.,
8 by describing a passing drill in a general sense rather than a sport-specific drill). Script format
9 and content was guided by the competition-based vignettes used by Howle and Eklund's (2013)
10 to manipulate athletes' self-presentation concerns, but were adapted to suit the sports trial
11 context. Before using these scripts, we collected pilot information by asking basketball, netball,
12 and football athletes to read the scripts and to comment on the appropriateness of the scenarios
13 in light of their first-hand experiences. The comments were reviewed by the lead author so that
14 any issues identified by athletes (e.g., events within the scenario not being appropriate for their
15 sport) could be identified and resolved through subsequent revision. Athletes in the pilot
16 indicated that they believed the scripts were appropriate, so no changes were made for the scripts
17 used in the main study.

18 For both scripts, we endeavored to describe the sports trial process in vivid detail (i.e.,
19 describing entering the training facility, preparing for the trial, and the trial itself) without
20 compromising brevity. Brevity was attended to (i.e., both scripts less than 200 words) in the
21 interests of maintaining participant attentiveness to all information. The events described in both
22 scripts were the same, with the only difference being the extent to which self-presentation
23 concerns were emphasized (i.e., *high self-presentational concerns* group) or de-emphasized (i.e., *low self-*
24 *presentational concerns* group). For example, statements common to both scripts included, "the
25 coach arrives and begins a basic warm-up...you notice that they are very athletic players", "the
26 first drill is a passing drill, you are split into groups of two". Differences between scripts

1 included, “the ball is fumbled several times in the drill...you look to your partner and enjoy a
2 small laugh... you both know these were silly mistakes...the coach looks over and says ‘don’t
3 worry, these are things that can be improved within training’...” compared with “you fumble the
4 ball several times... your partner shakes their head...you wonder if your mistakes were
5 irritating...The coach looks over, says nothing, and writes in the notebook before walking
6 away...”. Participants were asked to read their assigned script carefully, imagine themselves in
7 the scenario depicted in the scripts, and to avoid thinking about their own past experiences.
8 After carefully reading through the scripts, participants were asked to recall the three most
9 important emotions or cognitions they experienced when imagining themselves in the scenario.
10 Responses to this listing task were used as a check for ensuring participants were able to, and
11 invested effort in, imagining the scenarios rather than for further analysis.

12 ***Measures***

13 ***Manipulation Check (Self-presentation Concerns)***. Four items (e.g., “performing to
14 an adequate standard”) were used as a check on effectiveness of the experimental manipulation
15 in effecting self-presentational concerns. The items were drawn from Williams and colleagues
16 “Concern over others’ impressions” measure (Williams, Hudson, & Lawson, 1999) developed
17 for the sport domain and used by Howle and Eklund (2013) in their vignette-based self-
18 presentation concerns study. The stem used was, “In this imagined situation, I was worried
19 about...”, and participants were asked to respond to the items using a scale ranging from 1 (*not*
20 *at all*) to 4 (*very much so*). The Cronbach’s alpha for the measure was 0.88.

21 ***Challenge/Threat Appraisal***. Two items, originally used by Tomaka et al. (1993), were
22 modified so as to assess cognitive appraisal relative to the vignette scenario. Participants’ demand
23 perceptions were assessed using the item “how stressful do you expect the upcoming trial to
24 be?” Resource perceptions were assessed using the item “how able are you to cope with the
25 upcoming competition?” Participants were asked to respond using a ten-point scale with anchors
26 of 1 (*not at all*) and 10 (*very much*). Consistent with Tomaka et al.’s work, a cognitive appraisal ratio

1 was calculated by dividing the demand score by the resource score for each individual. A ratio
2 greater than 1 was interpreted as a threat appraisal. A ratio less than 1 was interpreted as a
3 challenge appraisal.

4 **Affect.** The 20-item Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, &
5 Tellegen, 1988) was used to assess participants' reported positive affect (e.g., "excited") and
6 negative affect (e.g., "nervous"). Construct validity of this instrument has been reported by
7 Crawford and Henry (2004). Consistent with Watson et al.'s recommendations, the stem was
8 modified so as to suit the present vignette scenario (i.e., "Thinking again about the scenario,
9 please circle the correct response regarding the emotions you experienced during the reading of
10 the script"). Participants were asked to respond on a scale anchored at 1 (*very slightly or not at all*)
11 and 5 (*extremely*). Cronbach's alphas were 0.89 for both scales.

12 **Results**

13 Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1 for the positive and negative affect,
14 appraisal, and manipulation check (i.e., self-presentation concerns) variables. An independent t
15 test indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the experimental groups
16 in reported self-presentation concerns, $t(61) = -3.85, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .97$. An inspection of
17 the means for the *low self-presentation concerns* group ($M = 6.83, SD = 1.79$) and *high self-presentation*
18 *concerns* group ($M = 8.44, SD = 1.52$) group indicated that this difference was in the intended
19 direction.

20 Having found support for the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation, we
21 subsequently sought to examine support for the experimental hypotheses. First, we examined the
22 effect of the manipulation on affect using univariate tests with experimental condition as the
23 independent variable and positive and negative affect as the dependent variables. We adopted
24 this approach because we were interested in the univariate effects of the manipulation, rather
25 than the multivariate effect on the linear combinations of dependent measures (Grice & Iwasaki,
26 2007). Significant differences between conditions were observed for positive affect, $F(1, 61) =$

1 15.04, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .97$, and negative affect, $F(1, 61) = 36.04$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.51$.
2 Visual inspection of the means for positive and negative affect (see Table 1) revealed that they
3 diverged in the expected direction. Second, we sought to examine the challenge/threat appraisal
4 ratio. A significant between-group difference was observed, $t(61) = -2.49$, $p < .02$, Cohen's $d =$
5 $.62$. The *low self-presentation concerns* group ($M = .76$, $SD = .37$) reported more of a challenge
6 appraisal state, whereas more of a threat appraisal state was reported by the *high self-presentation*
7 *concerns* group ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 2.27$). Visual inspection of the means indicated that this
8 difference appeared to be driven primarily by differences in the groups' demand (i.e., $M = 4.84$,
9 $SD = 1.71$ for the *low self-presentation concerns* group; $M = 7.19$, $SD = 1.70$ for the *high self-*
10 *presentation concerns* group) rather than resource appraisal (i.e., $M = 7.00$, $SD = 1.87$ for the *low self-*
11 *presentation concerns* group; $M = 6.13$, $SD = 2.33$ for the *high self-presentation concerns* group).

12 Discussion

13 The aim of the present study was to explore the effect of self-presentation concerns on
14 athletes' affect and cognitive appraisal in the context of trialling for a new sports team. We
15 predicted that athletes who were exposed to vignette scenarios that emphasised these concerns
16 would report greater negative affect and lower positive affect relative to athletes exposed to a
17 scenario in which self-presentation concerns were de-emphasized. The findings supported these
18 predictions. In addition, the findings revealed that athletes in the high self-presentation concerns
19 condition had a larger cognitive appraisal ratio, indicating that they perceived the scenario as
20 more of a threat (and less of a challenge) relative to athletes in the low self-presentation concerns
21 group. This finding indicates that the self-presentation concerns manipulation shaped athletes'
22 affect along with (and not in the absence of) athletes' cognitions. Taken together, the results
23 reveal the importance of the situation, particularly relating to individuals' perceptions of others'
24 reactions, in influencing athletes thoughts and feeling states when interacting with unfamiliar
25 others.

1 In relation to theory, the present findings support the view that self-presentation
2 concerns are linked to affective states. Although previous work has focused on influences of
3 self-presentation concerns on social anxiety (i.e., a negatively valenced affective experience), the
4 present findings indicate that de-emphasizing self-presentation concerns may also shape positive
5 affect. In relation to Leary and Schlenker's theorizing that social anxiety is a result of perceptions
6 of relationship devaluation (Leary, 2001; Schlenker & Leary, 1982), the present study indicates
7 that perceptions of relationship valuation may also produce positive affect. This finding is
8 consistent with previous sport psychology findings that athletes' affect may be more positive
9 when sport-related self-presentation concerns are de-emphasised and athletes' affect more
10 negative when self-presentation concerns are emphasised (Howle & Eklund, 2013). This being
11 said, it is noteworthy that a stronger effect size was observed in relation to negative affect as
12 compared to positive affect. One possible explanation is that this finding is a reflection of the
13 general principle proposed by Baumeister (2001) that "bad is stronger than good". That is, that
14 bad events (e.g., experiences that indicate relationship devaluation) have more impact on oneself
15 than good events (e.g., experiences that indicate relationship evaluation).

16 In relation to the possible applied applications, the results implicate the role of others as
17 being important in shaping affect when individuals interact with unfamiliar others, such as
18 attending sports trials. This type of situation is likely to be of importance to individuals given
19 evidence that there is a general desire to self-enhance, considering findings that first impressions
20 seem to be relatively enduring, and given that social and material outcomes (i.e., a primary self-
21 presentational drive) may result from one's success or failure at sports trials (Anderson, 1965;
22 Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). In the manipulations used in the present
23 study, others' reactions (e.g., sharing a laugh with one's partner as compared to having one's
24 partner shake his/her hand after a mistake) were a key point of difference between the
25 experimental groups. Based on our findings, we suggest that one's group members, such as

1 athletes' sport coaches, teammates, and team staff, can shape the affective experiences of athletes
2 by influencing athletes' self-presentation concerns.

3 Given the adverse effect that heightened self-presentation concerns had on cognitive
4 appraisal and affect, and in light of the subsequent possible implications for athletes'
5 performance (Jones et al., 2009), one application of the present work is to direct efforts to lower
6 athletes' self-presentation concerns during sports trials. Although some comparison with others
7 seems likely to occur within these trials due to the nature of the selection process, the present
8 work indicates that it may be possible to limit self-presentation concerns (e.g., statements that
9 focus on moving on from mistakes). Additionally, self-presentation concerns tend to be lower
10 when individuals are in the presence of more familiar same-sex others (Leary, Nezlek, Downs,
11 Radford-Davenport, Martin, & McMullen 1994). In competitive team-sport environments
12 (which are often same-sex), it may be that sport psychologists could employ efforts (e.g., provide
13 opportunities that emphasise interpersonal interaction) to help teammates and coaches get to
14 know each other in an effort to reduce self-presentation concerns.

15 Although the results are important in terms of both theory and application, we
16 acknowledge that there are inherent limitations with drawing ecologically valid interpretations
17 from written scenario-based manipulations (Hughes, 1998; Hughes & Hurby, 2002). Even
18 though the scripts were constructed to be vivid, appropriate, and realistic, the participants were
19 not able to change or manipulate the situation/environment, and so were entirely constrained to
20 the external stimulation. We encourage the use of field-based studies to address this limitation
21 and further test the effects observed in this study. We also acknowledge that potentially
22 confounding variables, such as gender, were not statistically or methodologically controlled for in
23 the present work. Although some concern here may be alleviated by the experimental nature of
24 the study and the use of random allocation to assign participants to experimental group, this
25 remains a limitation that could be addressed in future work. Additional limitations include the
26 brevity of the measures employed (i.e., for self-presentation concerns, appraisal, and affect).

1 Although brevity minimises participant inconvenience and was deemed appropriate given the
2 research note format, further insight would be gained by employing measurement tools that are
3 able to provide additional coverage of the constructs studied. Similarly, expanding the participant
4 pool both in terms of number and representativeness (e.g., athletes of other age groups, sports,
5 and experience levels) would be useful in considering the robustness of the findings observed.

6 It would also be interesting to extend the present line of research by considering the
7 ongoing effects of one's initial self-presentational efforts (and the resulting affective and
8 cognitive responses) in team sports trials. For example, it may be that more negative initial self-
9 presentational experiences with a team may adversely shape one's future interactions within the
10 team (e.g., greater hesitancy to engage with others and more apprehension over prospective
11 negative evaluations from others). In contrast, a more positive self-presentational experience may
12 have more favorable repercussions (e.g., feeling confident and comfortable to engage with others
13 and perform without a fear of negative evaluation).

14 This study extends our understanding of self-presentation concerns within the sporting
15 domain beyond competition (i.e. the focus of previous work) to a new type of situation (i.e.,
16 trialling for a new sports team). The results add to theory and extant evidence that indicate that
17 self-presentation concerns may shape athletes' affective experiences and cognitive appraisal.
18 Importantly, the results indicate that acting to de-emphasise self-presentation concerns (e.g., by
19 providing a supportive interpersonal environment) may be a useful mechanism to improve affect
20 and appraisal. This suggests that even in an unfamiliar and inherently evaluative interpersonal
21 situation, social structures may be put in place to reduce the extent of individuals' self-
22 presentational concerns and improve one's experiences within the situation.

23

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and effect sizes for study variables.

Variable	Low Self – presentation Concerns		High Self – presentation concerns		Cohen's <i>d</i> Effect Size
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Self-presentation Concerns (Manipulation Check)	6.83	1.79	8.44	1.52	0.97
Appraisal Ratio	0.76	0.37	1.77	2.27	0.62
Positive Affect	3.78	0.54	3.15	0.74	0.97
Negative Affect	1.83	0.60	2.80	0.67	1.51

Note. Self-presentation concerns response scale ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much so*). Appraisal ratio was calculated by dividing the demand score by the resource score for each individual. A ratio greater than 1 was interpreted as a threat appraisal. A ratio less than 1 was interpreted as a challenge appraisal. The positive and negative affect response scale ranged from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).