

# A diary study of the impression management strategies utilised by industrial and organisational psychology interns



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**Orientation:** When interns enter a new workplace, they are compelled to create and maintain a good impression through a range of image-enhancing behaviours. Impression management strategies can help interns to do this.

**Research purpose:** This study aimed to understand the strategies used by industrial and organisational (I/O) psychology interns, their goals for using them and the targets of these strategies.

**Motivation for the study:** Interns are generally new to the workplace and, as such, may not be aware of how to play the 'social game' to create positive impressions about themselves, be perceived in a positive light, gain projects to fulfil their internship requirements, and, where possible, gain full-time employment from the organisation.

**Research approach/design and method:** A qualitative design was used. Data were collected from 14 I/O psychology interns in the form of diary entries and semi-structured interviews.

**Main findings:** The thematic analysis revealed eight key impression management strategies, some existing and others novel: ingratiation, self-promotion, rendering favours, exemplification, professionalism, openness to learning, conformity and building strategic relationships.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Industrial and organisational psychologists should develop workshops to assist interns in using impression management skills to create a positive internship experience and advance in their respective organisations.

**Contribution/value-add:** The study adds theoretically (the study of impression management is relatively new in South Africa), practically (findings may help direct future I/O psychology interns to the correct strategies for creating a positive impression at work) and methodologically (diary studies are not common in qualitative organisational research).

**Keywords:** diary study; impression management; industrial and organisational psychology; interns; internship; South Africa.

## Introduction

When individuals begin their careers, they must learn how to adjust their behaviour according to their work environment (Anjum, 2020). This is because employees who are socially competent tend to attain organisational success (Cheng, Chiu, Chang, & Johnstone, 2014). Employees should therefore consider not only their job description as a way of determining whether they are meeting their employers' expectations and producing good work but also pay attention to the impression strategies they display (Kang, Gold, & Kim, 2012). Impression management is a set of strategies that can be used to build a favourable image (Bolino, Klotz, & Daniels, 2014). It is important for building and sustaining social relationships (Roggio, 2013). Some examples of impression management strategies include self-promotion, ingratiation and exemplification (Jones & Pittman, 1982), as well as opinion conformity, apologies and rendering favours (Gardner & Martinko, 1988).

## Problem statement

On the one hand, disadvantages that arise as a lack of insight into impression management include perceived poor workplace performance, lack of strategic relationships that will help with mentorship and access to competency-building opportunities and projects and remaining in lower positions (Crane & Crane, 2002). This may lead to frustration, negative perceptions and

disengagement for an intern. On the other hand, interns who can use impression management strategically can create favourable impressions about themselves, which may lead to career-building and advancing opportunities. The aim of this study is to bring to light the strategies employed by past industrial and organisational (I/O) psychology interns so that future interns may understand which ones are important for building relationships and ultimately career success.

Few studies have been published on the topic of impression management within the South African context. For example, Dondolo and Chinyamurindi (2018) explored the ways and reasons that impression management is enacted in selection interviews. They found that interviewees manage impressions through strategic play and deception for the sake of gaining favour and advantage and eventually securing employment. Similarly, this study will extend existing knowledge on impression management in the context of I/O psychology and explore how I/O psychology interns manage impressions, as well as the reasons for these behaviours. Karam, Sekaja, and Geldenhuys (2016) validated Bolino and Turnley's (1999) Impression Management Scale in the South African context. They found that the scale is valid and applicable in this context, as the items all loaded satisfactorily on all subscales representing impression management strategies, namely ingratiation, supplication, intimidation, self-promotion and exemplification. It was expected that the interns in this study would demonstrate some of these strategies in their internships, further validating the findings of Karam et al. (2016). Mtshelwane, Nel, and Brink (2016) investigated impression management strategies associated with the Zulu culture. They found that an individual's upbringing and culture impacts which strategies they display. Their study was more culturally oriented, however, leaving room for a more organisationally contextualised study. Delpont, Mtshelwane, and Rossouw (2022) took up this challenge by exploring the impression management strategies employed by Afrikaans mixed-race individuals in the work setting. Findings demonstrated that they use impression management strategies such as working hard, expressing opinions and displaying professional behaviour. Thus, this is a relatively unexplored topic and leaves an opportunity to generate knowledge in this field in South Africa, a non-Western, culturally rich context with unique social dynamics that demands its own set of studies to fully appreciate how impression management manifests in its context.

Lastly, current studies on impression management rely on a handful of impression management theories or taxonomies (e.g. Gardner & Martinko, 1988; Jones & Pittman, 1982) to demonstrate what impression management behaviours exist. However, all these strategies combined are not exhaustive and leave room to explore other means of impression management, especially in an internship context in which there is an unequal power dynamic, such as between interns and their senior colleagues, managers and internship supervisors.

## Research objectives

The main objective of this study was to understand the impression management strategies used by South African I/O psychology interns during their internship year. To help meet the main goal, the specific plans were devised, which were to determine:

1. The types of impression management strategies that are utilised when I/O psychology interns interact with various stakeholders
2. The intentions of the interns whilst using these impression management strategies
3. The targets of the impression management strategies.

## Literature review

### Industrial and organisational psychology internship

According to the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA, 2019), I/O psychologists:

[P]lan, develop and apply paradigms, theories, models, constructs and principles of psychology to issues related to the world of work in order to understand, modify and enhance individual, group and organisational behaviour well-being and effectiveness. (p. 3)

However, before they can enter and operate in the profession, they must acquire adequate training up to the master's level through an accredited university and then convert the theoretical knowledge they have gained into professional practice by applying 'newly acquired practical knowledge and skills, under the supervision of a senior Industrial Psychologist' (HPCSA, 2019, p. 3) at an approved internship site for a period of a year. Once an intern has demonstrated competencies related to diagnosis, design, assessment and interventions at an individual, group and organisational level, the intern can take the national board examination and, upon passing, register as an I/O psychologist.

According to Hurst, Good, and Gardner (2012), organisations evaluate interns during the internship period for the purpose of establishing fitness to enter the profession and hold post-internship full-time employment. This is yet again an opportunity for the interns to display impression management behaviours to help them gain such employment.

### Theoretical framework on impression management

The most prominent theoretical frameworks on impression management are Jones and Pittman's (1982) taxonomy of impression management and Gardner and Martinko's (1988) eight verbal impression management strategies. Whilst some individual strategies within each taxonomy have been further investigated, others have remained untouched in recent research. Jones and Pittman (1982) proposed that individuals use five impression management strategies to maintain their desired image:

*Ingratiation* is about seeming to be likeable to others, gaining their approval and getting favourable outcomes

(Jones & Pittman, 1982). To achieve this, an individual will compliment others, do them favours, and agree with what they say and do (Erdogan & Liden, 2006). One issue with ingratiation has been termed the ingratiation's dilemma. It states that people tend to use ingratiation in the same situations in which their targets are likely to be wary of the ingratiation's motives. This suggests that ingratiation works only when targets are not aware that this strategy is being used on them. One way to mitigate against this would be to express different views to the target on less significant issues and reserve agreements for the more important ones (Jones, 1990). A study by Sun, Guo, Wang, Sun, and Wang (2021) found that managers tend to have a more positive view of ingratiation that is performed outside of the organisation. Moreover, when controlling for ingratiation that is performed within the organisation, they found that ingratiation performed externally was positively related to the manager's decisions about bonus allocations and promotions. In another study, Fitriastuti, Larasatie, and Vanderstraeten (2021) found that using ingratiation as an impression management tactic strengthens the effects of perception of organisational politics on job satisfaction.

However, there is a dark side to ingratiation behaviour (Bolino, Klotz, Turnley, & Harvey, 2013). Using it can have negative unintended consequences, according to Turnley and Bolino (2001), and be a catalyst to unethical behaviours by the employees (Keeves, Westphal, & McDonald, 2017). This, in turn, can cause employees' depletion in time, energy and financial resources, thereby making the employees susceptible to temptation to perform deviant acts. Klotz et al. (2018), for instance, postulated that using ingratiation every day at work forces employees to use their self-control resources. Ingratiation can contravene an employee's meritocratic value and put their positive self-regard at risk, thereby bring about subsequent resentment towards their supervisors. Today, ingratiation has become one of the most important impression management strategies used by employees towards their managers because of the power imbalance that exists between them (Yan et al., 2020) in much the same way as a power imbalance exists between an intern and his or her internship supervisor or manager exists.

*Self-promotion* can be used to show off one's competence, abilities, knowledge, skill, intelligence and high level of performance (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). When employees perceive that they are seen as incompetent, they are more likely to make use of the self-promotion impression management strategy (Bolino, Long, & Turnley, 2016). Individuals who use this strategy unsuccessfully can be perceived as arrogant, self-justifying and even manipulative (Christopher, Morgan, Marek, Keller, & Drummond, 2005), even though the intended goal of this strategy is to attain a respectable image.

When the target of self-promotion tactics receives these behaviours well, it can bring about relational closeness

between the target and the impression manager (Lynch, Meisel, Campbell, & Van Dellen, 2019). However, like ingratiation, the use of self-promotion can elicit negative consequences for interpersonal relationships. Whilst those individuals who use this tactic may initially be well-liked, this fondness depletes over time (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). In addition, the repeated use of self-promotion may cause users of this tactic to be perceived as deceitful and lead to a decline in trust and acceptance from others. Over time, ad nauseam self-promotion may lead subordinates to evaluate their superiors in a less positive light (Ong, Roberts, Arthur, Woodman, & Akehurst 2016). Lastly, the over-promotion of self, according to Czarna, Leifeld, Śmieja, Dufner, and Salovey (2016), will not lead to a loss of friendships per se, but rather to a slower gain in friendship when compared with peers who excessively self-promote.

*Exemplification* is used when the individual wishes to exhibit personal dedication and excellent work ethic. Employees engage in assistance, commitment, hard work, self-discipline and self-sacrifice in order to execute this strategy, and in so doing, make co-workers feel guilty for not being as dedicated (Jones & Pittman, 1982). To the authors' knowledge, no studies have been conducted on exemplification. However, a study by Mendick, Allen, and Harvey (2015) on young people's perceptions of hard work and achievement found that young people should invest strongly in ethics and the value of working hard to attain and enjoy any success. It stands to reason that the higher one's competence is and the more effort they exert in a task, the better the results they will achieve in their task performance (Antosz, Rembiasz, & Harko Verhagen, 2020).

*Supplication* is used by individuals in order to be viewed as needy (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Supplicators minimise themselves, let their shortcomings be known and accentuate their inaptitude, thereby making others believe that their help is crucial (Fant & Lundell, 2019). To the authors' knowledge, there is a dearth of organisational studies on supplication, which is generally more common in religious settings.

Lastly, when individuals wish to be seen as powerful, they can use *intimidation*. Here, the individual engages in aggressive, threatening, coercive and harassing behaviours (Jones & Pittman, 1982) to get others to assist them at work (Bolino & Turnley, 1999; Gallagher, Harris, & Valle, 2008). Intimidation at work is not commonly researched as an impression management strategy, but rather as part of bullying or harassment (cf. Wu, He, Imran, & Fu, 2020b).

Similar to Jones and Pittman's (1982) taxonomy, Gardner and Martinko (1988) developed eight verbal impression management strategies. They can be summarised as follows:

The strategy of *self-descriptions* is when one uses descriptive statements about oneself and is useful in circumstances in which individuals do not know a person well (Tice, Butler,

Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). Individuals also attempt to impress others through the use of *organisational descriptions*, where they give details about their organisation and describe different segments of the organisation with which they are associated.

*Opinion conformity* is when an individual attempts to gain approval of someone else by agreeing with them. When using opinion conformity, an individual may express beliefs, perspectives or values that are similar to those of the target audience, thereby increasing fondness (Lievens & Peeters, 2008). When individuals conform to an opinion held by a majority, even if they do not hold the same opinion, it is called compliance. When they do the same because they believe the opinions of others are more correct or more informed than their own, it is called private acceptance (Mallinson & Hatemi, 2018).

Verbal impression management can also include *accounts*. Giving accounts includes making excuses, defending oneself and justifying behaviour (Gardner & Martinko, 1988). Giving accounts is therefore classified as a defensive verbal tactic, as individuals attempt to use excuses in order to preserve their self-image (Lievens & Peeters, 2008; Peeters & Lievens, 2006). *Apologies*, in the verbal impression management framework, means expressing remorse and regret for an undesirable action or event with the intention of attaining forgiveness (Gardner & Martinko, 1988). On the strategies of accounts and apologies – when an individual breaks a social code of conduct that is intended to govern acceptable behaviour amongst people, he or she may offer an apology, excuse or justification, which is collectively referred to as explanations. An apology may include the acknowledgement of wrongdoing, expression of regret and acceptance of responsibility (Mroz & Aleen, 2020) whilst excuses are self-seeking and lack the moral component of an apology and only serve to reduce personal responsibility for the transgression.

When an individual engages in *acclaiming*, they give favourable explanations of events with the intent of creating desirable consequences for themselves (Gardner & Martinko, 1988). According to Guadagno and Cialdini (2007), acclaiming pertains to individuals' associating themselves with positive occurrences.

*Rendering favours* happens when one performs acts of good with the aim of gaining approval (Gardner & Martinko, 1988). When rendering a favour, subordinates tend to offer assistance to someone of influence, such as a supervisor (Colella & Varma, 2001). High self-monitoring employees are likely to use this tactic to gain popularity and avoid ostracism (Wu, Kwan, Liu, & Lee, 2020a).

Lastly, verbal impression management also includes the aspect of *other enhancement*. One way of doing this is engaging in flattering acts. This can be a persuasive tactic in interpersonal relations. As found by Cavazza and Guidetti

(2018), flattery or enhancing others leads to a more positive candidate evaluation in the context of a speech or a meeting by those being flattered and those observing the flattery.

It is evident that the impression management strategies contained within these taxonomies bear some similarities. For example, *ingratiation* under Jones and Pittman (1982) contains elements of *opinion conformity*, *rendering favours* and *other enhancement* from Gardner and Martinko (1988). Any cross-taxonomy similarity may point to the preference and effectiveness of these strategies by working individuals in creating favourable impressions about themselves. The more of such similarities that can be found in research, the better social scientists can theorise about the impression management strategies that yield the most favourable results for employees.

The given strategies from the two taxonomies can be further categorised into self-focused and other-focused strategies. Self-focused strategies are ones where the individual speaks about themselves in a positive manner in order to gain admiration whilst in other-focused strategies, the individual's behaviours are directed at another person in order to attain some action in return that favours the individual. For example, exemplification and self-promotion can be seen as self-focused, whilst favour rendering and ingratiation are other-focused strategies (Peck & Levashina, 2017). Table 1 details the categorisation of all the impression management strategies mentioned here.

## Research design

### Research approach

In this study a qualitative research approach was used, as it enabled to convey stories of the participants. Qualitative researchers seek to understand the motivations and actions of individuals (Myers, 2013). In the case of the present study, of interest were the motivations for impression management behaviours that are used by interns in their natural organisational settings. Social constructivism, that is, an individual's creation of meaning through interactions with others (Zhao, 2020), seemed to be a fitting paradigm for the study. Interns create meaning and manage impressions

**TABLE 1:** Focus of impression management strategies.

Impression management strategy	Taxonomy	Self- or other-focused?
Ingratiation	Jones and Pittman (1982)	Other-focused
Self-promotion	Jones and Pittman (1982)	Self-focused
Exemplification	Jones and Pittman (1982)	Self-focused
Supplication	Jones and Pittman (1982)	Other-focused
Intimidation	Jones and Pittman (1982)	Other-focused
Self-descriptions	Gardner and Martinko (1988)	Self-focused
Organisational descriptions	Gardner and Martinko (1988)	Self-focused
Opinion conformity	Gardner and Martinko (1988)	Other-focused
Accounts	Gardner and Martinko (1988)	Other-focused
Apologies	Gardner and Martinko (1988)	Other-focused
Acclaiming	Gardner and Martinko (1988)	Self-focused
Rendering favours	Gardner and Martinko (1988)	Other-focused
Other enhancement	Gardner and Martinko (1988)	Other-focused

as they interact with their colleagues and leaders in the organisations.

## Research strategy

For the research strategy, the generic qualitative approach was selected, which is suitable in instances in which the focus of the study is outward – based on the real-world subjective experiences, opinions and actions – as opposed to inner feelings (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). This was fitting, as the impression management strategies exhibited by the participants would be outward, subjective actions.

## Research method

### Research setting

The interns under study were posted at various organisations in Gauteng, including consultancies, banks, police services and companies in the automotive, security and mining industries. In keeping with best-practice of qualitative research (and for the convenience of the interns), the interviews were carried out in private offices at the interns' places of employment. One participant was uncomfortable meeting with researchers at work and therefore opted to conduct the interview at a coffee shop after hours when it was more quiet and when there was more privacy. In all the settings, the participants appeared to share their experiences without inhibitions.

### Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The researchers were both responsible for collecting data – the first author (N.A.M.) during her master's degree and the second author at a later stage as she was preparing the manuscript for publication. The authors sent emails to invite the participants to partake in the study, explicating the purpose, objectives and ethical considerations of the study, as well as their expectations of them. The authors considered themselves as the research instruments and outsiders. As they wanted to understand the subjective experiences of the interns, it was important to demonstrate empathy, sensitivity and openness. We had to be observers and listeners and probe the interns until the phenomenon of impression management was thoroughly understood (Råheim et al., 2016).

### Research participants and sampling methods

The population from which the sample was drawn was I/O psychology interns in South Africa. In order to draw from this population and fulfil the research objectives and maintain rigour in this study, the authors used purposive sampling, as they wanted the sample to possess a set of pre-defined characteristics that would help to answer the research questions (Campbell et al., 2020b). The inclusion criteria that made the participants eligible for the study were as follows: They needed to be currently completing or have completed their I/O psychology internship in the previous year (so that their behaviours were still fresh in their minds). Seventeen interns participated in study, but three did not return their

diaries and were therefore excluded, leaving a final sample of 14 interns who participated in the study (see Table 2 for biographical data). The number of participants was ultimately based on data saturation.

Participants were between the ages of 23 and 28, of various races and from several different industries. The sample was clearly biased towards female interns. This bias can be explained by the fact that the I/O psychology profession, as demonstrated by the membership of the Society of I/O Psychology of South Africa, is dominated by women. Moreover (from the authors' anecdotal experience), I/O master's programmes are dominated by female students.

### Data collection methods

To gather the data, a combination of diaries and semi-structured interviews was used. The sole use of documents, such as diaries, in qualitative research is not sufficient and must be complemented with another source of data, usually an interview (see Cao & Henderson, 2020; Debreli, 2011).

Initial interviews were conducted with each participant before the diary study stage. According to Radcliffe (2013), collecting data in this order allows the researchers to establish rapport with their participants, to ascertain the participants' biographical and other background information, and to spell out the researchers' expectations for the completion of the diary study portion of the research (e.g. the sort of events on which to report and ensuring that there was adequate depth to the entries). Semi-structured interviews were chosen, as this format allowed the researchers ask the base questions but also probe for clarity when necessary. The same questions asked in the interview were contained in the diary brief and included 'What did you do to impress the people you work with?' and 'What did you do to shape the way they perceived you?' These were followed by the questions 'Who was the action directed at?', 'What was your goal for doing this?' and 'Please give me more examples'.

The advantage of a diary study lies in its ability to enable the participants to reflect on the day's events as they happen or soon after (Radcliffe, 2013). The researchers asked the interns

**TABLE 2:** Characteristics of industrial and organisational psychology intern participants.

Participant No.	Age	Industry	Gender	Race
1	23	Police services	Female	White
2	23	Police services	Female	White
3	25	Automotive	Female	White
4	24	Consulting	Female	White
5	24	Security	Female	White
6	25	Mining	Male	Mixed race
7	27	Automotive	Female	Indian
8	25	Banking	Female	Mixed race
9	23	Consulting	Female	Black
10	28	Consulting	Female	Black
11	24	Consulting	Female	Black
12	23	Banking	Female	White
13	24	Education	Female	Indian
14	27	Consulting	Female	Black

to record their impression management behaviours, objectives, and targets everyday for a period of 10 working days. This period of time is in keeping with the advice of Fetvadjev, Meiring, Van de Vijver, Nel, Sekaja, and Laher (2018), who maintain that a two-week period is not uncommon for diary studies. Participants recorded their diaries in electronic (Microsoft Word) format. The researchers instructed the interns to complete diary entries every day either after work or, preferably, as soon as they had utilised an impression management strategy, so that the details thereof were still fresh in their minds. The participants were asked to set a recurring reminder to aid in remembering and prompt them to complete their diary entries. As an additional measure to make sure they entered the data into their diaries, every few days the researchers initiated communication with the participants, asked how the entries were progressing, and provided clarification where needed, all of which served to remind the participants to complete their diary studies.

### Data recording

The interviews were audio-recorded using the recording function on the researchers' laptops. The audio recording was important for capturing all the data shared by the participants to allow for accurate transcriptions and subsequently, more meaningful data analysis.

### Strategies employed to ensure quality data and integrity

Trustworthiness was maintained, as per guidelines by Forero et al. (2018). Credibility was maintained through peer debriefing. The authors met on a regular basis to debrief on the data collection and analysis processes. Moreover, they maintained investigator authority as the second author trained the first author on how to carry out semi-structured interviews and manage the diary study, and conducted checks throughout this process as part of the first author's master's research. Dependability was ensured through the compilation of a rich description of the methods and protocol of the study. Confirmability was ensured through two types of triangulation. First, two sources of data were used, namely, interviews and diaries. This meant that we were able to source data from the diaries that they were not able to obtain from a one-time interview. Second, there were two investigators in this study, both of whom analysed the data (see Campbell, Goodman-Williams, Feeney, & Fehler-Cabral, 2020a). Lastly, transferability was ensured through using purposive sampling (see Campbell et al., 2020b) and making sure that the gathering of data stopped only once data saturation was reached.

### Data analysis

In order to analyse the data, we made use of Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis guidelines. The thematic analysis process we undertook is detailed in Table 3.

### Reporting style

The authors chose to make use of the narrative style of writing since this style demonstrates how individuals, such as the interns, display different characters in specific social

**TABLE 3:** Thematic analysis of data.

Phase	Description of process in study
Transcribing, reading and familiarisation	We transcribed the audio recordings from the respective interviews verbatim so that we had written data from both the diaries and the interviews to code. We read and then re-read the transcripts and the diaries. This helped us become familiar with the text. At this point, we could already mentally note text that would be of interest in the coding process.
Coding	We combed through the data and selectively and manually coded data of interest based on the main and specific objectives. It was important that the codes derived during this process captured the essence of the data as it pertained to impression management. Data that did not speak to impression management was not coded.
Searching for themes	We then examined the codes, organised like codes together and starting thinking about the salient features in the data in order to derive themes. It became evident that some themes aligned to existing literature whilst others emerged from the data.
Reviewing themes	We reviewed the themes to make sure they captured the essence of codes. This involved re-reading the coded data to ensure it fit into the preliminary themes. We then refined the themes by breaking up themes that had multiple meanings and combining themes that shared meaning.
Defining and naming themes	We provided names for the final themes identified. These names were sufficiently different from one another. Thereafter, we defined each of them according to what they meant in the context of the study.
Writing the report	In this stage, we drew up the findings section, narrating how the impression management strategies were used and supporting this with evidence from the data. The final themes aligned to the objectives as set out, and we were able to relate them back to literature, by which we found some strategies already existed and some were novel.

Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2013)

situations. The interns' stories are presented through verbatim accounts and convey a series of events important to the research objectives.

### Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Departmental Research Ethics Committee of the University of Johannesburg. Before obtaining consent from the participants, they were informed about the study, its objectives, the nature of their involvement, as well as their rights. They were assured that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time without explanation or negative consequences. Lastly, they were informed that their identity and confidentiality would be protected through the use of pseudonyms. Their data were stored in password-protected computers. Permission to audio record interviews was sought before proceeding with the interviews. No incentives were offered for participation in this study.

### Findings

The thematic analysis derived eight themes, which were, in fact, the impression management strategies. Some of the strategies were those already documented in existing literature (i.e. ingratiation, self-promotion, rendering favours, exemplification), whilst others were novel (i.e. professionalism, openness to learning, conformity and building strategic relationships).

### Theme 1: Ingratiation

Ingratiation can be described as a strategy that interns utilise for the purpose of being more liked and accepted. The interns engage in actions such as being warm and agreeable and using flattery. They acted in a friendly manner by demonstrating kind and supportive behaviour. They did so

with different actions in order to accentuate their display of being friendly, as well as verbal behaviour through which interns depicted themselves as being personable and conversational. One participant stated, 'I like to come across as a people's person if possible' (P1, 23, female, white). Another participant drew on her positive, outgoing nature when interacting with her colleagues. As she stated, 'I was completely myself, being bubbly, positive and friendly' (P3, 25, female, white).

The interns boosted the egos of their senior colleagues by giving them compliments and made managers feel knowledgeable through their praise. For instance:

'After the internship presentation, I made sure that I emailed [Manager], praising him, and telling him that I thought the presentation was well received, which it was. I think it's more valuable when you compliment people, no matter how trivial their achievement is.' (P4, 24, female, white)

## Theme 2: Self-promotion

Self-promotion involves individuals' seeking to appear as though they are competent. Above all other strategies, this is the strategy the interns utilised to try to 'shine', pointing to the importance they placed on this strategy, its affiliated tactics and how it could help them advance in their careers. In the study, demonstrating competence meant displaying knowledge, expertise and talent in the organisation. An example of competence mentioned by a participant entailed her wanting to make an impression on the Human Resources Director by showing that she could execute a task well. She stated: 'Obviously I wanted to make an impression on all of them, so, the task that they gave me I made sure I completed to 100% of my ability' (P3, 25, female, white). Participant 8 (25, female, mixed race) did the same: 'I set out firstly to produce work that speaks to my ability and have others learn about it for themselves then ask them for work again'. She gave a variety of examples in which she had put her knowledge to good use, such as, 'I sought to impress by answering questions when the speaker posed questions and also through explaining concepts that my fellow interns weren't familiar to them'.

Initiative was another self-promotion strategy. Through this behaviour, interns sought to give the impression that they took responsibility for their own internships, as opposed to waiting for others to do so for them. One intern exhibited the quality of taking initiative when she took charge of her own internship programme:

'For me personally, if I need to get things done within the premise of the programme, I go and speak to people. ... You can't just sit there and go, "Hey this is going to fall onto my plate."' (P5, 24, female, white)

Dependability was deemed as being trustworthy and reliable when completing tasks. Interns wanted to create an image of being responsible through being in constant communication that allowed managers and supervisors to know that they were still delivering, especially when working from home or from a client's premises, such as in the following statement:

'First thing in the morning today... I sent [Manager] an email, updating her on the survey statuses of a really big project we're running. Because I had been out of the office the whole week, and only in contact every now and then, I gave her a quick update of the week's events too.' (P4, 24, female, white)

## Theme 3: Exemplification

The impression management strategy of exemplification relates to being the model employee who is committed to their work and who goes the extra mile. This may make others around them feel inadequate and guilty.

Another intern had relayed how she put in extra effort when compared with other colleagues. She decided that she would not go home after a training session such as the other interns. Instead, she opted to return to the office so that she could be perceived as being hardworking and dedicated: 'In order to shape the manner in which individuals perceived me, I informed my fellow interns that after training I would return to work and continue working' (P8, 25, female, mixed race). Other interns decided that they would volunteer and do more work than was actually required:

'By volunteering to do more than what I am expected to do, I believe that my colleagues and boss will perceive me as an asset as I am hardworking and will go above and beyond.' (P3, 25, female, white)

Yet another participant observed that interns can convince other people to have confidence in their abilities, even when they themselves are not certain. They just need to do what it takes to get the work done:

'They thought I was on top of things, I have it all together, like "wow, she got this," and they have a lot of confidence in me. But I was keeping up pretences because I didn't know. ...I made a plan and made it work. ...You've got to do what you can.' (P13, 24, female, Indian)

She had other tactics for times when she was uncertain:

'I was helping implement a change management strategy and I thought back to the model we learnt in our Organisational Development class in master's and I built[on what] I know from this class. [Lecturer] said this, and [Lecturer] said that, and I used it. Our theoretical knowledge built into my practical knowledge. When I don't know, I often think back to my master's class, and this has helped me a lot.' (P13, 24, female, Indian)

## Theme 4: Rendering favours

Rendering favours is the act of doing something that goes beyond the norm and exhibits elements of kindness. In order to appear as being helpful, the interns offered their services, did small favours and rendered little acts of kindness. A participant was asked by a colleague to assist with some of her administrative duties because the colleague was unable to do it on her own: 'She needed someone to help because she couldn't do it on her own, so we just agreed to assist her' (P2, 23, female, white). Another made an offer of help to someone of influence: '[I offered] to prepare my manager's slides for him' (P1, 23, female,

white). Participant 4 (24, female, white) captured the intention behind the acts of kindness succinctly: 'The more seeds I plant, as small as they may be, the more I will reap at the end of the day'. So important was the need to do favours for important colleagues that it was actually a sacrifice to do so. One intern put aside her own work to help a consultant who required assistance with their work. This was evident when she stated, 'I just made myself entirely available, even if I have a mountain of work and a consultant asks me, "Can you quickly do this for me?", I will do it' (P4, 24, female, white).

### Theme 5: Professionalism

The novel theme of professionalism pertains to representing the profession and oneself well through behaviours and physical appearance. As Participant 7 (27, female, Indian) aptly put it, 'On a daily basis I come to work early, dress neatly and try to project a professional image because I am a professional'. Other participants shared the same sentiment. Participant 6 (25, male, mixed race) ensured that he impressed his colleagues through his dress code for a training session that they had to attend:

'I dressed really well. Better than the usual jeans and tekkies [*sneakers/trainers*]. I had smart shoes, pants and a good T-shirt. I also took the time to shave my stubble.'

Participant 10 (28, female, black) stated, 'You become even more conscious when you go to clients and dress the part'. Participant 9 (23, female, black) stated, 'I am always punctual, always really early', whilst Participant 11 (24, female, black) observed that looking organised gives a positive impression: 'I put conscious effort into being organised. Not only does it look attractive, but I also need to prove myself'.

### Theme 6: Openness to learning

Openness is an individual's willingness to embrace new knowledge. Participants were accepting of different perspectives, which invited favourable impressions. For example, One intern wanted to take in as much learning as she possibly could from her supervisor whilst she still could. She stated:

'My supervisor is knowledgeable, she is seasoned. I learn a lot from her, but I need to know how I fall under her. Even when I can shine, I don't want to be in the sun, I first want to stand in her shade.' (P14, 27, female, black)

Related to asking for feedback was the concept of active listening. One intern in particular had used reflective listening skills when she was required to assist in developing a competency-based interview guide:

'My internship supervisor needed help from myself and two other junior consultants with developing a training session, a resource guide and an interview guide for behavioural competencies for the client. In our meeting, I used a lot of reflective listening and asked a lot of questions.' (P4, 24, female, white)

The interns in the study attempted to capitalise on the learning opportunities they found during their internships. This was evident when Participant 5 (24, female, white) suggested that one should 'go and learn something new, so, just try and show them that you are there and willing to learn, you want to add value and make a difference'. Participant 6 (25, male, mixed race) demonstrated his broadmindedness by taking others' viewpoints into consideration. He suggested this by writing, 'I know I need to keep an open mind and perhaps my idea is not great or perfect'. Lastly, Participant 9 (23, female, black) showed her willingness to learn by asking questions around some of her internship activities: 'I asked a lot of questions. After an observation session with clients, I asked a lot of questions to appear interested and that I want to learn'.

### Theme 7: Conformity

Conformity is indicative of a conscious alignment of perspectives and values to those of influential others for the purposes of fitting in. The interns indicated that they felt the need to make their behaviours congruent with the standards set by the organisation and exhibited by the other respected employees:

'It was my first meeting in this new team – although I didn't understand a lot of what was going on (there were specific references made to certain clients which I lacked context to), I watched others to see what they were doing, and conducted myself accordingly.' (P4, 24, female, white)

Another intern had also aligned her behaviour accordingly when she completed work for the managers and teams. This can be seen in the following excerpt: 'I try to adapt my working style to my managers. So if I am working for a team that is structured, I will be structured' (P7, 27, female, Indian). Participant 8 (25, female, mixed race) was in agreement and depicted as much in a diary entry that read, 'I sought to impress my fellow colleagues by seeking to abide by the status quo of the organisation and the organisational unwritten rules'. However, Participant 11 (24, female, black) saw things differently: 'I won't always agree and I am not afraid to disagree'.

### Theme 8: Building strategic relationships

To build strategic relationships, it was important for the interns to make themselves visible and construct and nurture relationships with people of influence. As Participant 11 (24, female, black) stated:

'We had a networking session. It was optional but I went. It is important to maintain visibility in certain spaces. I want to be kept in mind when there is a project. These relationships with senior people are important because they do not know me from a bar of soap.'

Similarly, Participant 10 (28, female, black) explained:

'The first time I meet you, I will read the situation, whether it takes me a few minutes, days, or weeks. Then I decide how I will

act around you. Especially those I know I will need later on. If I really do need you, I will probably need to have a good relationship with you, so I need to get to know you and I have to strategise how I will deal with you.'

Participant 1 (23, female, white) felt the same, as she stated, 'I offered to assist another colleague with her admin so that she would be willing to help us in future with other projects'.

Based on these findings, the interns employed a wide range of impression management strategies. As may be seen from the given interview quotations and diary excerpts, the targets included their supervising I/O psychologists; line managers; other senior managers and consultants; other people of influence, such as administrative assistants (who can provide assistance when needed); clients; and even other interns. For instance, for one participant, many of her impression management strategies were directed at senior colleagues: 'I am cognisant of the language that I use when engaging with senior colleagues. I try to use vocabulary that is not colloquial/slang' (P12, 23, female, white). For another participant, she directed some of her behaviours to her line manager, in her words, 'to make my boss see that she can always rely on me' (P8, 23, female, black).

The objectives they were trying to meet were to give a positive impression and build relationships that would help them meet future objectives, such as landing future projects to enable the completion of the internship, securing future employment and having favours reciprocated. For example, one intern made an effort to build strategic relationships to further her objectives. She explained, 'I need to build a relationship with her and I am hoping to connect on [a] deeper level outside of just work-related stuff' (P10, 28, female, black). A different sentiment was expressed by another participant, who stated:

'I completed the work I did well and on time, delivering as quickly and doing quality work so that I could maintain relations with them both and be first in mind when future tasks and projects are available.' (P11, 24, female, black)

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to ascertain the impression management strategies utilised by I/O psychology interns, at whom their strategies were directed and their goals for doing so. All the interns actively adapted their behaviours to the demands of the environment (see Fetvadjev et al., 2018). Jones and Pittman (1982) identified five strategies used in impression management, namely intimidation, supplication, ingratiation, self-promotion and exemplification. The latter three strategies featured prominently as intern impression management strategies in the present study.

Apart from the need to belong, ingratiation also have the need to be liked by others. Ingratiation was a widely used strategy by the nearly all-female intern cohort because it helped them reach their desired goals. This is supported by Lamm's (2018) study, in which he determined that female

ingratiators find this strategy to be useful. Its usefulness lies in its ability to elicit likeability and thus career success (e.g. promotions, salary increases and even job offers), rewards, enhanced appraisals and performance ratings and support for innovative ideas (Hageman, Arnold, & Sutton, 2009). However, when used in the incorrect setting, it may produce undesirable results. Individuals may deem the ingratiation deceptive, undependable and calculating, resulting in the opposite outcome of the intended effect (Yan et al., 2020). This is because individuals want to believe that the ingratiation does not have a hidden agenda. Ingratiation comes more naturally to individuals who are genuine about their feelings or requirements (Cole & Rozell, 2011).

Similar to findings by Lindeman, Durik and Dooley (2019), the interns in the present study deemed self-promotion important for career advancement. Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) suggested that in addition to making their achievements, talents or credentials be known, employees also reveal their high performance ratings. However, a study by Smith and Huntoon (2013) demonstrated that women feel uncomfortable self-promoting, which leads to reduced promotion success. Our study contradicts this finding, as the interns consciously utilised this strategy as a means of getting ahead. Perhaps the reason for this is that the women in this study were in a high-stakes situation – being an internship – and thus needed to self-promote in order to secure more projects and possibly employment at the end of the internship.

The dimensions of exemplification listed by Turnley and Bolino (2001) included making others aware of work ethic, working for long durations, taking on additional work and seeming busy. According to Schulte (2014), employees like to let it be known that they seldom take time off and tend to wear their busyness as a badge of honour in what is referred to as the work martyr complex. Shellenbarger (2014) made a similar observation that some employees take fewer or shorter vacations, and when they do, remain available for work matters, all for the objective of career progression. Long (2017) suggested that by engaging in exemplification, employees, much like interns are trying to send the message that they are dedicated and going the extra mile, which they hope will have a bearing on their career success.

Another strategy covered in the literature – one of the eight of Gardner and Martinko's (1988) verbal impression management strategies – is that of rendering favours, which may be considered a form of organisational citizenship behaviour. According to Thompson, Bergeron and Bolino (2020), women are more prone to exhibiting organisational citizenship behaviour and feel more obliged to do so, regardless of whether their organisation supports them. As the interns felt the need to stand out, this was an obvious go-to strategy. Doing favours for others in the context of internships is what may be termed competitive altruism (Curry et al., 2018), that is, individuals tend to be kind to others if they believe it will enhance their status.

The data also uncovered novel themes in the form of professionalism, openness to learning, conformity and building relationships. Collier (2012) listed one of the behaviours associated with professionalism as reliability, that is, being accountable, punctual and organised, which is in keeping with the findings of this study. Furthermore, according to Price (2014), people judge others before they have spoken a single word. Thus, paying attention to one's attire and appearance is an important way to manage impressions and maintain a certain level of professionalism besides showing competence and other expected behaviours (Campbell & Taylor, 2008). For Delpont et al. (2022), displaying professional behaviour also meant that employees should not gossip and always endeavour to put their best foot forward. Goffman (1956) made reference to ceremonial roles, one component of which is the concern of individuals with their manner of dress because one's attire creates a sense of respect for a particular role. The interns' opinions on workplace attire are therefore consistent with the literature because they attempted to express a professional image through their attire and appearance, especially when attention would be on them (e.g. when they had to deliver a training session) or when professional bodies visited their organisation.

Linked to the notion of professionalism is openness to learning, because wanting to learn and improve and seeking feedback are behaviours that improve an individual's ability to act professionally. To be a successful professional, individuals need to keep abreast of developments in their field, partake in life-long learning, seek feedback and reflect (Collier, 2012) – all behaviours that interns in the present study used as impression management strategies.

Opinion conformity is a strategy associated with Gardner and Martinko's (1988) existing eight verbal impression management strategies. However, interns did not only conform in terms of opinion but also in action; hence, this strategy was considered novel. Individuals have a tendency to conform and be more like others when there is social pressure to do so, and they do this out of a desire to be liked by others (Mallinson & Hatemi, 2018). Sometimes individuals conform because they are uncertain of the correct behaviour that is expected in a social context (informational conformity) and at other times to fit in with the majority (normative conformity; Claidiere & Whiten, 2012; Yu & Sun, 2013). It would seem that the interns had a liking for both forms of conformity, given their junior and new status in the organisation. According to Beran, Kaba, Caird, and McLaughlin (2014), conformity can be seen as a modification in one's behaviour in order to align to another individual or group. Conformity in organisations also has implications for gaining recognition from important others (Durand & Kremp, 2016), much in the same way that the interns tried to do.

The interns in this study seemed to place great importance on work relationships. A question that arises, therefore, is

whether these relationships matter as much as the interns believed and as much as their behaviour warranted. According to Mastroianni and Storberg-Walker (2014), they do. Jacobs, De Vos, Stuer, and Van der Heijden (2019) have pointed to the importance of networking for career success – it is a proactive way of accessing social resources that can aid in career development and advancement. This would explain the strategic manner in which the interns chose the people with whom they wished to align – it was specifically those people (e.g. managers) who could offer projects and make important career-related decisions.

Impression management can be seen as a form of self-management, whereby implementing certain behaviour strategies helps people see positive differences in their personal and work lives (see Dhanpat et al., 2021; Sekaja, 2021). As Bolino et al. (2016) affirmed, the appropriate use of impression management strategies can help employees project the image they desire in their personal and professional lives.

The other purpose for this study was to ascertain the interns' aims for using these strategies and who they targeted when doing so. Researchers have documented various motives for the use of impression management behaviours (amongst others, Bolino et al., 2008; Crane & Crane, 2002; Jones & Pittman, 1982). These motives include repairing one's image, preserving one's self-image, depicting competence, illustrating that one has morals and coming across as committed. Similar to the foregoing research, the motives of the interns in the present study almost mirrored those in existing literature.

## Implications

A few implications arise from this study. Firstly, it underscores the importance of self-awareness and self-management by the interns as graduates entering the workplace (see Dhanpat et al., 2021) and how their behaviour and impression management strategies used have a bearing on how they are perceived and treated by others at work and in turn, their future in the organisation. There is a need for I/O psychologists to assist interns to understand and utilise impression management strategies effectively to the benefit of their jobs and careers through, for example, the development of workshops at master's and internship level. It is important for I/O psychology interns to add tools in the form of effective strategies to their toolboxes because they are usually not yet extensively experienced in the field, which makes them particularly susceptible to scrutiny by others. An important consideration was that these strategies were at times not just beneficial to the interns themselves, but also had implications for positive team functioning, for example, when favours were done for others. This may help build group cohesiveness which, in turn, helps establish shared institutional norms (Weng & Chang, 2015).

From a training institution point of view, academics in I/O psychology should pay attention to master's content that

helps their students to identify and use not only profession-specific competencies, but also results-orientated impression management strategies. A study by Pang, Wong, Leung, and Coombes (2019) demonstrated that organisations look for specific competencies in graduates, which will benefit the organisation. The competencies include willingness to learn, customer service orientation, hard work and willingness to go the extra mile and relationship building, which all speak to the impression management strategies of openness to learning, professionalism, exemplification and building strategic relationships, respectively, as was found in this study.

The last implication comes from a methodological viewpoint. Interviews are commonly used as a data-gathering technique in qualitative business research (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Diaries, however, are a less common tool in this discipline, particularly in South Africa. Diaries should feature more prominently, as their longitudinal nature allows a researcher to investigate a phenomenon over a period of time, and allows for different types of data to emerge on a single topic. Had the authors only conducted interviews, they would have missed the emerging strategies and only captured impression management strategies used in the past, some of which may have been forgotten. By also using diaries, the rigour of the study was increased (Herron, Dansereau, Wrathall, Funk, & Spencer, 2019).

### Limitations

This study had a few limitations. Firstly, as the sample comprised significantly more female than male interns, the reflections tended to come from a female perspective. Female individuals are aligned with certain types of impression management strategies. For instance, strategies by women tend to be more interpersonal, whilst those of men tend to be more task-related (Mehdizadeh, 2010). This could explain the observation in this study that ingratiation was the most frequently utilised strategy. The inclusion of more male participants could have potentially yielded alternative impression management strategies.

Secondly, the coding process was not an integrated one. Initially, the data consisted of accounts from nine participants, which were analysed by the first author as part of her master's research. In preparing the manuscript for publication, more data were collected by the second author. Once data gathering was complete, the original data were reanalysed by the second author. Investigator triangulation would have been useful in the coding process, as the two of us could have analysed the data together to make important coding, analysis and interpretation decisions together (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Lastly, the diary-interview method as utilised by Cao and Henderson (2020) would have been the best use of this method. In their study, interviews were used before and after the completion of diaries, where the latter served to clarify

any entries. The authors could not conduct post-diary interviews because of time constraints in the master's study, otherwise they may have been able to elicit richer data from the interns by exploring elements in the entries that were not well explicated.

### Recommendations for future research and conclusion

Given its relative novelty within the South African context, more studies need to explore impression management. South Africa offers a diverse setting consisting of different racial group identities (black, Indian, white and mixed race), and it would be enlightening to establish the types of impression management strategies that are used by each group, especially when individuals from one group must interact and work with colleagues from another. Furthermore, much of workplace interactions now take place online. This offers opportunities for online-based impression management to be used. Lastly, a master's qualification is an important stage in the journey to becoming an I/O psychologist, as this is when other tools for success in the internship are given. Industrial and organisational psychologists should investigate the future research to investigate these phenomena more closely.

For interns, impression management is useful in cultivating a positive professional identity during the important internship year and beyond. Based on the findings, impression management is a skill that, if exercised with consistency and care, allows interns to forge good working relationships that will allow them to enjoy a successful year in their internship and serve them later in their careers.

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### Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study are available within the article.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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