

FRONT STAGE AND BACK STAGE : A POTRAIT OF THE SELF PRESENTATION OF PART-TIME WORKING STUDENTS

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Abstract

College students who study while working part-time face the demand of presenting themselves differently across two domains—academic and occupational. This study describes the self-presentation of part-time working students, covering front stage and back stage self-management, impression management strategies, influencing factors, and impacts of navigating dual roles. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, the research involved four part-time working students as primary informants and four secondary informants for triangulation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive model. Findings show all informants displayed a front stage oriented toward friendliness and responsibility, while their back stage served as a private space for concealing exhaustion. Impression management was grounded in honesty and consistency, shaped by need for approval, self-awareness, personality, social context, personal goals, and social interaction. Self-presentation brought positive impacts like improved communication and work readiness, alongside negative impacts including fatigue and burnout risk.

Keywords: ; front stage; back stage;

INTRODUCTION

Student life today is no longer confined to a single role. Most students now inhabit two worlds at once: the lecture hall, which demands academic performance, and the part-time workplace, which demands professionalism. Moving between these two stages, every part-time working student is, in effect, engaged in what Erving Goffman (1959) called a performance of the self—a process of impression management adapted to whoever the audience happens to be. On campus, the student appears as a learner; at work, they must appear as a competent, polite, and reliable employee. This shift between roles is not merely a daily routine but a complex psychological and social process, one that Goffman explained through the concept of dramaturgy: social life as a theatrical stage, complete with a front stage, a back stage, and impression management strategies.

The phenomenon of students who study while working is not new, but its prevalence continues to grow alongside rising economic needs and the demand for early work experience. A case study of Guidance and Counseling students at Universitas Sriwijaya found that students who study while working experience difficulties dividing their time, physical fatigue, and reduced learning focus, requiring them to adopt strategies such as setting priorities and maintaining communication at work to keep both roles in balance. In a similar vein, research on part-time working students in broader populations has also highlighted the academic stress students face when they must juggle coursework alongside employment (Nerona et al., 2024; Thomas & Singh, 2023). This dual burden indirectly pushes part-time working students to manage

more carefully how they present themselves in each context, since failing to present oneself appropriately on one stage can affect evaluations on the other—whether in academic grades or job continuity.

The urgency of examining self-presentation in this group is further reinforced by the employment conditions faced by Indonesian university graduates. Data from the Indonesian Central Statistics Agency (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024) point to conditions that warrant attention among higher-education graduates, where the absorption of educated labor does not always correspond directly to the academic qualifications held. This gap has, in various studies, been linked to weak mastery of soft skills, with the ability to work in teams, communicate effectively, and think critically and creatively considered a key differentiator among job candidates with similar academic qualifications. Self-presentation, as the skill of managing impressions in front of others, is a concrete manifestation of this soft skill—and part-time working students are, in effect, “practicing” this skill every day as they shift between the classroom and the workplace.

Interestingly, the continuous management of impressions also carries psychological risks. Research on emotional labor shows that the demand to consistently present a professional image can trigger emotional exhaustion that affects both physical and mental health (Chen et al., 2023)(Kariou et al., 2021) Contemporary dramaturgical scholarship likewise explains that when the image presented on the front stage does not align with the authentic expression of the back stage, or when audiences interpret messages differently, potential conflict, social pressure, or stress can emerge ((Dahm, n.d.)Harrigan et al., 2022) . This underscores that self-presentation is not merely a neutral, adaptive strategy but a psychological aspect that deserves attention within campus guidance and counseling services, particularly for students navigating dual roles.

Research on self-presentation and Goffman’s dramaturgy has been conducted extensively, though with varied focuses. First, a study of Social Studies Education students at UIN Malang found that students engage in various forms of impression management on Instagram—such as editing photos, visiting viral locations, and maintaining a particular demeanor in front of the camera—in order to be seen as ideal figures by their followers, positioning Instagram as the front stage and its supporting activities as the back stage (Luky et al., 2022). Second, a similar study of students at Universitas Negeri Malang found that “setting” relates to photo and feature selection, “personal front” relates to feeds, stories, and captions, while the back stage relates to real-life situations outside the digital stage (Putri et al., 2023). Third, in the realm of dramaturgical studies among students of differing backgrounds, a study of santri (Islamic boarding school) students found that they were able to play different roles between the pesantren environment and the campus environment without losing their core identity (Dzikri Aljasiri & Fikri Setiaji, 2023). Fourth, a recent theoretical review of the dramaturgical concept affirms that the front stage is understood as a public space of interaction where individuals display behavior adjusted to audience norms and expectations, while the back stage is a private space that allows individuals to express themselves more freely, without social pressure ((Dahm, n.d.)Harrigan et al., 2022). Fifth, from a different social-phenomenon perspective, dramaturgical theory has also been applied to read the self-presentation strategies of child puppeteer buskers who navigate dual identities as students and informal workers (Muhammad Ashabul Kahfi et al., 2026). illustrating the broad applicability of this theory across social contexts. Sixth, from the field of international media psychology, a

review of pandemic-era self-presentation research affirms that, over the six decades since Goffman introduced the notion of self-presentation in everyday life, the concept has developed into an empirically tested perspective for understanding how individuals create, modify, or maintain the impressions perceived by others (Bailenson, 2021). Seventh, recent theoretical work on self-presentation in the digital era argues that Goffman's dramaturgical model needs to be enriched with new approaches, since the term self-presentation remains theoretically open and allows for various interpretations (Gran, 2025). Eighth, in the domain of well-being among students juggling dual roles, a study of the relationship between work-life balance and subjective well-being among part-time working students in Surabaya found a significant positive correlation between the two (Astuti & Nurwidawati, 2022).

This mapping of prior research reveals a clear gap. Most dramaturgical and self-presentation studies of Indonesian students concentrate on the digital space—particularly social media such as Instagram—as the primary stage for self-performance, while studies of part-time working students generally stop at issues of time management and academic stress without delving deeply into how their identity and self-image are managed differently across two real-world spaces with contrasting demands: the academic space and the work space. No study to date has specifically traced the dynamics of front stage, back stage, and impression management among part-time working students as a unified lived experience spanning two role contexts at once, using a phenomenological approach that draws meaning from the subjects' own perspectives.

Building on this gap, the present study offers novelty in the form of a comprehensive and contextual portrayal of self-presentation among part-time working students—not confined to a single digital stage, but encompassing impression management across two real-world stages (academic and occupational) at once, complete with the influencing factors and accompanying psychological impacts, through a qualitative phenomenological approach grounded in Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework. Based on the foregoing, this study aims to describe the self-presentation of part-time working students, encompassing self-management on the front stage and the back stage, the impression management strategies employed, the factors influencing this process, and the impacts experienced by subjects as they navigate the dual role of student and worker. The findings of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of self-presentation research within Guidance and Counseling, as well as to serve as an empirical foundation for developing guidance services relevant to the needs of students who navigate dual roles.

1 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach, chosen because the study of self-presentation among part-time working students constitutes a subjective, dynamic, and contextual psychosocial phenomenon that cannot be reduced to statistical figures. The qualitative approach gives the researcher room to explore, in depth, the meaning, motivation, and self-presentation strategies from the informants' own perspectives, consistent with the nature of qualitative research, which positions the researcher as the key instrument and emphasizes meaning over generalization (Sugiyono, 2023).

The research type used was descriptive qualitative with a phenomenological design. Phenomenology was chosen because its aim is to describe the meaning of individuals' lived experience of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018)—in this case, how part-time working students experience, interpret, and manage their self-presentation as they shift between the academic environment and the work environment. Throughout the research process, the researcher sought to apply bracketing (*epoché*)—setting aside prior assumptions and theoretical preconceptions—in order to describe the informants' experiences as authentically as possible (Moustakas, 1994).

The research was conducted in the City and Regency of Tegal, with four part-time working students selected as research subjects through purposive sampling, using the following criteria: (1) actively enrolled students at a higher education institution in the Tegal City/Regency area; (2) with consistent part-time work experience or independent business activity; (3) willing to serve as informants and to provide information openly; and (4) possessing adequate communication skills to convey their experiences. The four primary informants (coded ZR, AF, NR, and NM) were all female, drawn from different occupational fields (tutoring instructor, franchise restaurant employee, boutique administrator, and independent culinary entrepreneur), with work tenures ranging from six months to three years. To strengthen the credibility of the data, this study also involved four secondary informants as sources of triangulation—close friends of each primary informant.

Data sources were divided into primary data—words and actions of informants obtained directly in the field (Moleong, 2021)—and secondary data in the form of supporting documents. Data collection was carried out through technique triangulation, namely in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, used simultaneously so that the data obtained would complement and confirm one another. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore informants' subjective experiences in managing their self-presentation; observation was used to directly observe behavior, nonverbal expression, and communication style in both academic and work contexts; while documentation included field notes and relevant visual documents, obtained with the informants' consent.

Data validity was ensured through three procedures: (1) source triangulation, by comparing and confirming the findings from primary informants against those from secondary informants; (2) member checking, by returning preliminary findings to informants for accuracy confirmation; and (3) peer debriefing, through discussion with the thesis advisor to obtain an external perspective on data interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of three stages. First, data condensation—the process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data from interview transcripts and field notes, including coding and grouping data according to emerging themes. Second, data display, organizing the data into a descriptive narrative accompanied by direct quotations from the interviews as empirical evidence. Third, conclusion drawing and verification, carried out progressively—from tentative conclusions to final conclusions verified through triangulation and re-confirmation with informants.

2 RESULTS

This study involved four primary informants, students of the Guidance and Counseling Study Program in the City and Regency of Tegal who work part-time: ZR (tutoring instructor, ±3 years), AF (franchise restaurant employee, ±2 years), NR (boutique administrator, ±2 years), and NM (independent culinary entrepreneur, ±6 months), supported by four secondary informants as sources of triangulation. The findings are organized around five main themes.

2.1 Overview Of Self Presentation Among Part-Time Working Students

Self-presentation is generally understood as an individual's effort to control the impression formed in others regarding themselves. People present themselves with the aim of being liked by others, being seen as competent, feared, or possessing integrity, depending on the impression they wish to build in a given social situation (Leary, 2019). In this sense, self-presentation is not merely about appearing "good" in the eyes of others, but an active and conscious process of adjusting one's appearance, attitude, and communication to the demands of the audience and the social context at hand.

The most influential concept of self-presentation was introduced by Erving Goffman in his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), which laid the foundation for understanding self-presentation not merely as a theoretical concept but as an empirically tested process for understanding how individuals create, modify, or maintain the impressions perceived by others, a framework that has stood for six decades (Hong et al., 2023). The term self-presentation itself remains theoretically open: it can be understood as performance, exhibition, or the creation of identity (Gran, 2025).

Goffman likened social interaction to a theatrical performance, in which every individual acts as a performer presenting themselves before an audience. This approach, which uses theatrical language and imagery to depict the subjective and objective facts of social interaction, is what is known as dramaturgy. Through the dramaturgical framework, Goffman's theory becomes relevant for analyzing social conflict, identity incongruence, and communication misunderstandings that arise when the impression presented by an individual does not align with their audience (Harrigan et al., 2022). Everyone holds various roles throughout their life, and in each different context, individuals adjust their behavior, language, and expression to meet the norms and expectations of that role, making individual identity flexible and contextual, shaped through ongoing social interaction.

2.2 Forms Of Self Presentation

Front Stage

The front stage is the space of public interaction in which individuals display behavior that has been adjusted to norms, social roles, and audience expectations (Amelia & Amin, 2022). The front stage is the area where the performer interacts directly with the audience, and it is here that deliberately managed impressions are put on display. In both digital and face-to-face contexts, the "personal front"—that is, an individual's appearance and demeanor—becomes a key element consciously prepared to support the role being performed on this stage (Putri & Apriadi, 2023).

Back Stage

In contrast to the front stage, the back stage is a private space that allows individuals to express themselves more freely, without social pressure, and where communication becomes more spontaneous, honest, and reflective of a more authentic personal identity (Amelia & Amin, 2022). The back stage functions as the behind-the-scenes area where the performer prepares for their role, sheds the attributes worn on the front stage, and becomes themselves.

Impression Management

Impression management lies at the core of self-presentation practice—it is the overall set of strategies individuals use to direct how they are perceived by others. Jones and Pittman (1982) identified five of the most commonly used impression management strategies: (1) ingratiation, drawing attention by praising oneself or others, agreeing with opinions, and doing favors in order to be liked; (2) self-promotion, highlighting one's abilities or achievements to be seen as competent; (3) exemplification, demonstrating dedication and sacrifice beyond what a task requires in order to be regarded as exemplary; (4) intimidation, projecting an image of power or threat in order to be respected or feared; and (5) supplication, highlighting one's weaknesses or limitations in order to elicit sympathy and help.

2.3 Impacts Self Presentation

Self-presentation carries two-sided impacts. On one hand, appropriate impression management can help individuals gain acceptance within a social group or a given situation and support the achievement of academic and career goals (Debus et al., 2024). On the other hand, excessive self-presentation practices risk generating significant psychological pressure, since the ambition to constantly display an ideal self-image can trigger social anxiety and profound emotional exhaustion (Chen et al., 2023; Kariou et al., 2021). In the long term, sustained false self-presentation can lead to feelings of alienation, loss of self-identity, and personal dissatisfaction, as the individual fails to live authentically (Michikyan, 2022).

3 CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to describe the self-presentation of part-time working students, encompassing self-management on the front stage and back stage, impression management strategies, influencing factors, and the impacts experienced while navigating dual roles. Based on the findings from four informants (ZR, AF, NR, and NM), it can be concluded that all four consistently displayed a front stage oriented toward friendliness, politeness, and responsibility—both in the academic environment and at work—while their back stage functioned as a private space for releasing fatigue and psychological pressure deliberately hidden from their social environment. The impression management strategies used by all four informants were generally grounded in honesty and consistency rather than image manipulation, with variation in the intensity of adjustment influenced by the type of work and each individual's personality characteristics.

The main findings of this study show that the self-presentation of part-time working students is shaped by a complex interaction among six factors—motivation to gain approval, self-awareness, personality characteristics, social context, personal goals, and experience and social interaction—with social context and motivation to gain approval as the most dominant factors. The self-presentation experienced by

informants carries two-sided impacts: on one hand, it improves communication skills, work readiness, self-management ability, and social relationships; on the other, it generates physical and psychological fatigue due to the demand to continuously maintain a positive image across two role domains at once, with burnout risk most pronounced among informants with the highest work intensity. The implication is that this understanding of self-presentation can enrich Goffman's dramaturgical framework within the context of real dual roles, while also serving as a foundation for developing Guidance and Counseling services that are more responsive to the psychological needs of students who work while studying.

Based on these conclusions, this study offers several recommendations. For part-time working students, it is recommended that they build self-awareness of the boundary between maintaining a professional image and meeting their own psychological needs, including becoming more accustomed to opening up to those closest to them about the fatigue they experience. For higher education institutions, it is recommended that they develop Guidance and Counseling services that are more accessible and flexible for students navigating dual roles. For future researchers, it is recommended that they broaden the scope of informants to include greater variation in gender, occupational field, and research location, and that they consider quantitative or experimental approaches to more rigorously test the effectiveness of counseling interventions in helping part-time working students manage their self-presentation in a healthier and more authentic way.

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