



# Self-presentation styles in self-reports: Linking the general factors of response styles, personality traits, and values in a longitudinal study<sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 7 March 2014

Received in revised form 3 September 2014

Accepted 7 September 2014

Available online 29 September 2014

### Keywords:

Self-presentation

Personality

Values

Response styles

General factor

Score correction

## ABSTRACT

We investigated how response styles, personality traits, and values can be taken as manifestations of self-presentation styles in self-reports, and how self-presentation affects other self-report measures over time. Data on values and character traits at three time points across five years collected among a national representative sample in the Netherlands were utilized. A general response style factor consisting of extreme, socially desirable, and midpoint responding, a general factor of personality from the International Personality Inventory, and a general value factor from the Rokeach Value Survey were extracted, all of which showed scalar invariance across time. A latent self-presentation factor underlying the three general factors at each time point, and its stability and changes across time points was modeled. All three general factors loaded positively on the self-presentation factor. The latent mean of the self-presentation factor became smaller over time, yet effects of its impact on the relationships among various psychological variables remained small and stable over time. We conclude that survey respondents show a similar self-presentation style across domains and over time. Score corrections to deal with response styles are not recommended.

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## 1. Introduction

Most social interactions, including attitude expression and change, can be analyzed through the lens of self-presentation (Baumeister, 1982). Self-presentation is the use of behavior as a means of communicating information about (or an image of) oneself to others. Depending on personal dispositions and specific contexts, people exhibit preferred self-presentation styles, such as being assertive or defensive, acquisitive or protective, and active or passive. Response styles, defined as respondents' systematic tendencies to respond to questionnaires on some basis other than the target constructs (Paulhus, 1991), can be considered an essential indicator of self-presentation styles in survey responses (e.g., Smith, 2004). We are interested in response styles that affect self-report Likert scales in different domains; more specifically, we set out to examine whether individuals show a similar self-presentation style across measures of personality (i.e., personal style) and values (i.e., normative function), and to what degree this style changes over time. The novelty of our study is that we use a variety

of psychological measures to investigate self-presentation across psychological domains in a longitudinal study.

### 1.1. Response styles and their integration

The most studied response styles include acquiescent response style (ARS), extreme response style (ERS), midpoint response style (MRS), and socially desirable responding (SDR). Traditionally, these response styles are viewed as sources of common method bias that should be controlled for. Recent evidence, however, suggests that response styles may have a substantive meaning, as they are found to share trait variance with personality and values. For example, ERS was positively associated with extroversion, conscientiousness, and individualistic values, SDR with extroversion and conscientiousness, ARS with agreeableness and compliance, and MRS with modesty (e.g., Austin, Deary, & Egan, 2006; Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995). To integrate these findings, He and van de Vijver (2013) confirmed that a general response style (GRS) can subsume these four response styles, with ERS and SDR as positive indicators and ARS and MRS as negative indicators. This integrated GRS was interpreted by the authors as a preferred communication style that represents the tendency of response amplification versus moderation.

<sup>☆</sup> This article is a Special issue article – “Young researcher award 2014”.

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## 1.2. Response styles, personality, and values

Johnson (1981) suggested that response styles and the expressions of personality and values share some commonality, possibly all related to one's self-presentation styles. In line with this suggestion, the general factor of personality derived from the Big Five personality traits, interpreted as a basic personality disposition integrating the most general non-cognitive dimensions of personality (Musek, 2007), was found to be positively correlated with GRS (He & van de Vijver, 2013). Bye et al. (2011) reported that personal values, associated with ARS, were related to intended impression management. If a general factor of values were to be extracted (e.g., Podsakoff & Organ, 1986), we expect this factor to be indicative of individuals' self-presentation styles.

## 1.3. Stability and change in self-presentation styles

Little has been done on the stability and changes of self-presentation styles. Yet, the stability of response styles over time has been demonstrated. Weijters, Geuens, and Schillewaert (2010) used different item sets at two time points to measure response styles over a one-year period. They modeled time-invariant and time-specific response style factors, and found that response styles showed considerable stability. We expect temporal stability of self-presentation styles. Furthermore, in this study items common to all data collection points are used as indicators of response styles, and expressions of personality and values, thus both the stability and the changes of their integration over time could be tested.

## 1.4. The present study

The literature suggests that response styles and the expressions of personality and values may all be part of self-presentation styles. The stability and changes of self-presentation styles over time, in turn, may affect the associations among self-report measures. We used a general factor of response styles derived from socially desirable, extreme, and midpoint responding, a general factor of personality based on the Big Five personality traits, and a general factor of values based on six value dimensions across three time points (T1, T2, and T3), and we extracted a time-specific self-presentation factor from these three general factors at each time point to model its stability over time.

The effects of changes in the self-presentation factor over time could be demonstrated through comparing correlations of this factor with external psychological measures and intercorrelations among these external psychological measures with and without this factor corrected for at each time point. Well-established measures, such as self-esteem, life satisfaction, and positive and negative affect, were used as external measures. Researchers found that self-esteem, life satisfaction, and positive affect are positively related to each other, whereas negative affect shows a negative association with self-esteem and life satisfaction (Preisendorfer & Wolter, 2014; Robins, Fraley, Roberts, & Trzesniewski, 2001). If individuals indeed prefer a similar style across domains and time, we expect that the correction of the self-presentation factor would result in similar changes (or lack of changes) in correlations with external variables and intercorrelations among external variables over time.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample and procedure

In this paper use is made of data of the LISS (Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences) panel administered by CentERdata

(Tilburg University, The Netherlands). The LISS panel is a representative sample of Dutch individuals who participate in monthly Internet surveys. The panel is based on a true probability sample of households drawn from the population register by Statistics Netherlands. Households that could not otherwise participate are provided with a computer and internet connection. A longitudinal survey is fielded in the panel every year, covering many domains.

We used five waves of data on value and character traits collected from 2008 to 2012, in which measures of the same constructs including affect, cognition, mood, personality, survey attitude, self-esteem, social desirability, trust, and values, in total 183 items, were administered. Each year, over 8000 selected household members were invited to participate, and the numbers of respondents ranged from 5321 to 6806 (response rates ranging from 69.9% to 79.6%). In 2010 and 2012, the complete questionnaire was only administered to non-respondents of the previous wave; therefore we used data in 2008 as T1, combined data in 2009 and 2010 as T2, and those in 2011 and 2012 as T3. The demographics of respondents in the consolidated three time points are presented in the upper panel of Table 1.

Respondents who participated at all three time points ( $n = 3879$ ) were older ( $M = 51.43$  years,  $SD = 15.71$ ) than those who only took part in one or two time points ( $M = 44.38$ ,  $SD = 18.36$ ),  $t(7569) = 17.91$ ,  $p < .01$ , Cohen's  $d = .41$ . The education level differed slightly, the majority (49.5%) of those who participated at all three time points had an intermediate or higher vocational education level compared with 41.7% of those who participated once or twice. The difference of gender distribution between the two groups was nonsignificant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 7571) = .07$ ,  $p = .80$ .

**Table 1**  
Demographics and scale properties at each time point.

	T1	T2	T3
<i>Demographics</i>			
N of participants	6766	6980	6734
Mean age (SD)	45.89 (15.95)	47.51 (17.30)	48.94 (17.54)
Level of education (percentage)			
Primary school	11	12	12
Intermediate secondary education	26	26	25
Higher secondary education	10	11	11
Intermediate vocational education	24	22	22
Higher vocational education	22	22	22
University	7	7	8
Percentage of males	46	46	46
<i>Reliability of scales (Cronbach's <math>\alpha</math>)</i>			
Extreme response style	.81	.82	.82
Midpoint response style	.57	.63	.66
Socially desirable responding	.52	.52	.52
Agreeableness	.80	.80	.80
Conscientiousness	.77	.79	.78
Extroversion	.86	.86	.87
Emotion stability	.79	.79	.80
Openness	.77	.76	.77
Prosocial Concern	.90	.90	.90
Self-Directed Competence	.78	.79	.78
Restrictive Conformity	.81	.82	.81
Universal Maturity	.90	.90	.90
Stimulation/Comfort	.79	.80	.80
Self-Esteem	.89	.89	.90
Life Satisfaction	.88	.88	.89
Positive Affects	.87	.87	.87
Negative Affects	.92	.93	.93

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