

**Special Issue: Teaching, Learning, Assessing, and Researching L2
Pragmatics, in Honor of Prof. Zohreh R. Eslami**

May 2021 – Volume 25, Number 1

**Pragmatics of Self-Praise and Self-Presentation by Iranian EFL
Learners on Instagram**

Azizeh Chalak

Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Isfahan, Iran
<azichalak@gmail.com

Abstract

The advent of social networks has provided a good platform for everyone to share information to present themselves. Instagram is a tool to participate in social reciprocity, not only by the exploration of information but also through self-praise. This study examined the self-praise by Iranian EFL learners on Instagram from a pragmatic perspective. It investigated the perceptions and attitudes of the participants toward self-praise through a descriptive design. To do so, of 100 available students, 60 (45 female and 15 male) students, with the average age of 25 were recruited on a voluntary basis to assess 16 randomly-presented Instagram posts. They were asked to rate three types of self-praise (bragging, complaint, and humblebragging) on two levels (literal and ironic) on three factors (likeability, modesty, and sincerity). The data obtained from the participants' attitudes and perceptions were categorized and analyzed. The findings showed that self-praise, bragging, and humble bragging all created impressions on the audience. While self-praise was found to constitute a weak self-presentation strategy, bragging and humblebragging were actually perceived as negative strategies and the audience had undesirable attitude toward them. The findings could be used by the teachers and practitioners to raise awareness of English learners on how to employ language to observe netiquette and be appropriate and polite. It could also add to an understanding of the pragmatics of self-praise on social media, addressing issues regarding digital media literacy.

Keywords: *Bragging, Humblebragging, Instagram, Modesty, Self-praise, Self-presentation*

The advent of technology has provided a good platform for everyone to share various kinds of information to present their lives, studies, achievements, traits, arts, and activities. Instagram as one of these famous platforms and social networks has received huge acceptance by most people, especially the young in Iran. It is a social media that can be considered a site for self-

presentation and identity negotiation, which facilitates the production and promotion of both individual and collective identities (Papacharissi, 2011). It provides the exchange of information as well as self-presentation. Instagram-posting with captions could refer to many aspects such as personal information, education, good or bad events and experiences, social phenomena, religion, culture. Contrary to the Iranian cultural and traditional norms and scripts in face-to-face interaction, self-praise and self-presentation seem to become more acceptable and even preferred on Instagram and social networking sites (SNSs).

Self-praise is a speech act that involves uttering a positive statement about oneself, and is intended as a face-enhancing act directed at the speaker. From a pragmatic perspective, self-praise is “a speech act that explicitly or implicitly gives credit to the speaker for some attribute or possession which is positively valued by the speaker and the potential audience” (Dayter, 2016, p. 65). In other words, “self-praise or outright ‘bragging’ is one such interactionally risky activity” (Dayter, 2014, p. 91).

Studies of face-to-face communication have shown evidence of a conversational norm against self-praise similar to that regarding compliment responses (Speer, 2012). As stated by Placencia and Eslami (2020), even though self-praise has become a prevalent practice in online environments and social media, it remains a largely underexplored field of study within pragmatics. Therefore, studies on self-praise in different languages and varieties can address the gap in research on this speech act and shed light on a number of aspects of this phenomena.

The current study investigated the research gap by collecting attitudes of Instagram users towards the speech act of self-praise on Instagram posts. It investigated the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners to bragging, complaint, and humblebragging¹ in terms of three factors encompassing likeability, modesty, and sincerity in two literal and ironic levels on SNSs. The study could contribute to an understanding of the pragmatic functions of speech acts such as self-praise and the perception of illocutionary force of the utterance to present positive self in social media. It could also provide information for comparative and cultural studies as an acceptable source of information for the teachers and practitioners in the field to raise awareness of English learners and teach them how to employ language to observe netiquette and be appropriate in social media.

Literature Review

New social media is becoming increasingly popular in our everyday lives under the influence of globalization. These social networks and media provide platforms for people across the world to communicate and interact with each other, exchange messages, share knowledge, and information regardless of the distance that separates them. “The merging of audiences in social media and the variety of participation structures they present, including different audience sizes and interaction targets, pose questions about how people respond to these new communication situations” (Bazarova et al., 2012, p. 121). According to Erza and Hamzah (2018), people who communicate with each other through the Internet and SNSs are receiving huge attention worldwide: “This way of communication has become a phenomenon recently, and one of the most popular social networks is Instagram” (p. 185). Instagram as a medium that provides affordances for self-presentation is one of the major SNSs, numbering over one billion users

¹ Humblebragging: make an ostensibly modest or self-deprecating statement with the actual intention of drawing attention to something of which one is proud.

with a strong millennial demographic which offers features for the strategic presentation and self-marketing of the users (Statista, 2020). Such media reach millions of users worldwide, and many users share personal content with other members. These SNSs have become interesting areas of investigation for many researchers because they enable them to interact “with different audiences and different availability of nonverbal cues that can serve as special lenses for the inquiry into language and social behaviors in both mediated and non-mediated environments” (Walther, 2012, p. 399).

Studying different speech acts employed by the users and posters in SNSs could provide ample information on social media from a pragmatic perspective. Self-praise is one of the frequently used speech acts in the posts users share on their social media. According to Goffman (1959), self-praise or self-presentation is an inherent and defining characteristic of social interaction. It is an attempt to establish a favorable image in the eyes of others. One of the most essential skills in social life is the ability to present oneself effectively to others. In other words, making a favourable impression on others has always been a long-term goal of people (Sezer et al., 2017; Wayne & Liden, 1995).

To display self in a favourable manner, speakers may choose two strategies: self-promotion and ingratiation. In self-promotion, they present their personal achievements, skills, or unique characteristics by stressing attractive traits of themselves to promote a desirable image. In the course of ingratiation, they try to uplift the hearers or show their similarity to the viewers to be perceived as likable (Tal-Or, 2008). Research suggests that “self-presentation online exhibits a positivity bias” (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014, pp. 97-98) that makes positive forms of self-presentation more likely than negative ones (Chou & Edge, 2012), due to both social norms in online communities and the technical affordances (Qiu et al., 2012) and posters show positivity bias more than negative ones to make positive forms of self-presentation (Chou & Edge, 2012).

From a pragmatic perspective, self-praise can be understood from Brown and Levinson’s (1987) concept of positive face through the manifestation of the desire to be liked or admired and maintain a positive self-image. As indicated above, within this perspective, uttering a positive statement about oneself in the form of self-praise is a risky activity and potentially “face-threatening and disruptive and can only occur when certain conditions prevail” (Dayter, 2018, p. 184). The concept of self-praise violates Leech’s (1983) Modesty Maxim in which expression of praise of self should be minimized, and the expression of dispraise of self should be maximized. Moreover, self-praise could be compared with the concept of complimenting in a sense that a compliment is uttered to develop positive face for the hearer, while self-praise is directed toward the speaker, “making the speaker both the subject and the object of the positive assessment” (Speer, 2012, p. 56).

The use of self-praise on SNSs is a highly selective and strategic activity in Computer-Mediated-Communication (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Lee-Won et al., 2014). Users in CMC environment avoid unfavourable impressions or social disapproval by omitting unwanted comments (Rui & Stefanone, 2013) or gain favourable approval or positive impression such as presenting their achievements (Lee-Won et al., 2014). It can be achieved in/directly by presenting one’s accomplishments or through bragging, humblebragging, or retelling third-party compliment to self. It is a frequently-used speech act on social networks and is positively related to the size of the audience.

From a psychological perspective, etiquette manuals generally condemn bragging, but a survey of the literature at hand does not show a homogenous attitude towards it. There is growing evidence that SNSs such as Instagram has become a platform for excessive self-display. A large body of psychological literature shows that activities such as frequent selfie posting on Instagram are correlated with narcissism and the main reason for posting selfies on Instagram was found to be attention-seeking. (Moon et al., 2016; Sung et al., 2016; Weiser, 2015).

From a linguistic perspective, self-praise is introduced as a relatively unexplored phenomenon (Matley, 2020). Using conversation analysis, Speer (2012) examined self-praise in face-to-face interaction and suggested that self-praise is an interaction and speakers employ some strategies such as disclaimers and qualifications on self-promoting talk to prevent being accused of bragging. Otherwise, their identity or image will be at risk. Research studies (such as Dayter, 2014, 2018; Matley, 2018, 2020; Sezer et al., 2017) have provided some insights into the pragmatics of self-praise in online communities, studying key affordances of digital technologies such as hashtagging and text-image interactions. Dayter (2014) studied Twitters of an online community ballet students and dancers and showed that they were using self-praising in a strategic manner accompanied by some mitigating devices such as self-disapproval, scorn, or complaint. Through self-praise, the members established solidarity among themselves to protect the face-threatening aspect of self-promotion.

A study analyzing self-praise in the form of humblebrags on Twitter showed that complaint-based humblebrags were a combination of bragging and complaining, but humility-based humblebrag was a combination of bragging and an attempt to appear humble (Sezer et al., 2017). Their study showed that self-praise humblebragging was bragging masked by complaint or humility and was less effective than straightforward bragging because the use of humblebragging reduced the elicitation of ‘liking’ by viewer. In other words, “humblebragging was negatively correlated with liking” (p. 6) Against the common belief that conjoining bragging with complaining or humility augments the merits of each strategy, they found that “humblebragging confers the benefits of neither, instead backfiring because it is seen as insincere” (p. 1).

A study conducted by Matley (2018) examined how Instagram posters shared photos using the brag and humblebrag hashtags in interaction with positive im/politeness strategies. By focusing on hashtags, he found that these brag and humblebrag hashtags appeared to have a metalinguistic function in the illocution of self-praise. The hashtags were found to have a strategic function in helping to negotiate an appropriate level of positive self-presentation. Instagram users showed their personal achievements through visual and textual means while trying to improve their status by mitigating the face-threatening nature of self-praise. They engaged in self-enhancing behaviour that violated norms against self-praise in FTF settings. Matley (2018) argued that self-praising posts on Instagram labeled with brag and humblebrag hashtags and such posts presented unmitigated self-praise, often regarding everyday achievements. Suggesting evidence of a renegotiation of norms against self-praise in some SNSs, Matley concluded that in spite of “the face threat that self-praise theoretically involves, there are some indications that it may perform different functions in online communication” (p. 2).

Dayter (2018) examined self-praise in a small-scale corpus of *WhatsApp* chats and showed that self-praising episodes made up around five percent of the corpus messages. Her findings showed that within *WhatsApp* chats, the conversational constraint against self-praise was

reduced and knowing suitable behaviours and other linguistic forms such as humor or irony could develop a relationship and improve the quality of interaction. She stated that self-praise is present in many different social networking contexts, and posters are employing this speech act in a relaxed fashion.

The majority of literature on self-praise has focused on strategies people use to fulfill and elicit respect by bragging, expressing humility to provoke liking or complaint. While some studies have shed light on self-praise in online communities, little attention has been paid to the pragmatic function of the affordances of this digital media. There has thus far been little research into self-praise on social media and despite its presence there, self-praise remains an under-researched topic both from linguistic, psychological, and pragmatic perspectives (Dayter, 2016; Matley, 2020; Placencia & Eslami, 2020; Sezer et al. 2017).

It would appear that there have been few studies conducted in Iran on self-praise in social media platforms like Instagram. The studies on Instagram are mainly concentrated on other speech acts such as compliments and compliment responses (Chalak & Derakhshan, in press; Dehkordi, & Chalak, 2015; Eslami et al, 2020; Sharifian et al. 2019; Derakhshan et al. 2020), gender differences in presentation of self (Hashemi Monfared & Rabiee, 2016; Kousari & Einifar, 2020), and identity representation (Basirian & Nahvi, 2016; Sadeghi & Leng, 2020). None of the above-mentioned studies have focused on self-praise from the viewers' perspective to investigate the concept of modesty and sincerity. Modesty has long been regarded as one of the values of Iranian culture, which implies that it is important to communicate in a polite manner. Many Iranians still cherish humbleness and disparage themselves because they believe that through modesty, they gain a positive self-image. However, as a result of the advent of SNSs and social media, these norms and scripts are gradually changing among younger generations, and they tend to use language patterns on the net that differ from their routine life (for example, Hosseinpour & Mousavi, 2021).

Self-praise and self-presentation are becoming very common on SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Addressing an activity that appears at the present time to be rapidly gaining ground online, and its functions could shed light on another aspect of this speech act.

Research Questions

This study investigated the pragmatics of self-praise and self-presentation speech act by Iranian EFL learners on Instagram from a pragmatically discourse-anchored perspective. Therefore, the following questions were posed:

1. What is the distribution of Iranian EFL learners' responses to bragging, complaint, and humblebragging in self-praise presented in Instagram posts?
2. What is the distribution of their responses in terms of likeability, modesty, and sincerity in two literal and ironic levels?

Method

Design and Context of the Study

This study employed a descriptive, non-experimental research design. The naturalistic inquiry was employed to collect the data through the voluntary cooperation of the participants. The study was conducted during autumn 2020 in online sessions in Isfahan, Iran. The participants of the study were selected based on convenience sampling, and it took two months to collect

and analyze the data. The online procedure was chosen due to the Covid-19 pandemic and health crisis.

Participants

The target population of the study was Iranian EFL learners, and the sample was comprised of available volunteers at Islamic Azad University (IAU). The participants were 60 (45 females and 15 males) Iranian graduate students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), studying at IAU, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch. Their mother tongue was Persian, and their target language was English. They were all the researcher's students in TEFL with an average age of 25. The number of female students inadvertently exceeded that of males since typically, females outnumbered males in the English classes. Moreover, females showed more interest in participating voluntarily in the process of data collection. Appropriate consent was obtained from all the participants, both those taking part in the evaluation procedure and those who permitted the researcher to use their pictures. Table 1 presents the demographic background of the participants of the study.

Table 1. Demographic Background of the Participants.

Number of Participants	60
Average Age	25
Gender	(45 Females, 15 Males)
Nationality	Iranian
Native Language	Persian
Target Language	English
Year	2020

The participants were briefly informed of the study, but not of the detailed purpose. Because getting informed consent was a prerequisite for all research involving identifiable participants, they were assured that their confidentiality will be observed and no private information will be published. Therefore, anonymity and privacy of the participants were assured, and ethical issues were strictly observed during all the stages of the data collection. The participants who took part in the study were all volunteers and were invited through a request addressed to them via the *WhatsApp* application. The participants were asked to look at 16 photos and provide their reactions to speech act performances involving self-praise.

Corpus of the Study

As for the corpus of the study, the researcher selected 20 recently-published photos from her student-followers on Instagram and collected permission from the posters to show the pictures to the volunteer participants. They were informed that any identifying information, account number, or private information would be excluded before being used. Sixteen agreed to let the pictures be used in the study, and so, the other four were left out. Of those 16 posts, eight were selected as *literal* and the other eight as *ironic self-praise*. Accordingly, for each category, the total number of cases was 480. Figure 1 presents one sample of a picture used in a post employed:



Figure 1. Sample of Instagram Posts Presented to the Participants.

Study Platform

The platform through which the data were collected was Instagram. The reason for collecting the data from this social media was because of its popularity among Iranian young people. The availability of Instagram, its user-friendliness to carefully select images, edit texts, and align oneself through hashtags allow users to release personal information in a fashioned and constructed manner (Chou & Edge, 2012). The nature of Instagram, such as the removal of unwanted comments on images, helps the users gain social approval by shaping a positive impression through the presentation of achievements and successes (Casale et al., 2015) and by avoiding disapproval.

The other platform used in this study was *WhatsApp* through which communication with the students took place, student consents were collected, and messages were sent. The reason for using this application was because of the availability and popularity of *WhatsApp* in Iran due to its voice and video-call feature which, unlike *Telegram*, is not blocked by the government.

Finally, the platform used for collecting the participants' ratings of the Instagram posts was *Adobe Connect*. It is a suite of software for remote training, web conferencing, presentation, and desktop sharing through which the pictures were shown to the participants in a randomized selection and were asked to assess them. The reason for choosing this platform was because of the familiarity of the participants with the software, availability and user-friendliness which made it easier for the researcher to collect the data.

Coding Frameworks

The frameworks employed in the study were adopted from Matley (2020) and selected because of their validity in the literature regarding SNSs. These frameworks are presented in Table 2 and Table 3:

Table 2. Reactions of EFL Participants Regarding Instances of Self-Praise.

Factors	Self-Praise	Mean	Median	SD
Likeability	Literal			
	Ironic			
Modesty	Literal			
	Ironic			
Sincerity	Literal			
	Ironic			

Here, self-praise is classified as literal (bragging, lack of text-image incongruity) and ironic self-praise (humblebragging, text-image incongruity) on three factors, including likeability, modesty, and perceived sincerity. Table 3 summarizes the coding framework of self-praise as literal and ironic on perceived illocution of the utterance as bragging, complaint, or humblebragging.

Table 3. Respondents' Perceptions of Speech Acts by Self-praise Type.

Factors	Self-Praise	Mean	Median	SD
Bragging	Literal			
	Ironic			
Complaining	Literal			
	Ironic			
Humblebragging	Literal			
	Ironic			

The other instrument employed in the study was a questionnaire collecting the demographic background of the respondents followed by items on assessing the six factors presented in the frameworks, including likeability, modesty, sincerity, bragging, complaining, and humblebragging.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

To collect the data, first, a request message was sent by the researcher to all her graduate students in TEFL at IAU, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch and they were asked to participate in the process of data collection. Of 100 available students, 60 were recruited on a voluntary basis, and all the data were gathered anonymously based on informed consent received via the *WhatsApp* application. It should be mentioned that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the researcher had access to all the students via the application to share posts and files. This made the process of data collection easier.

The participants were given a questionnaire documenting demographic background information such as age, gender, nationality, native language, target language, and familiarity with and frequency of use of Instagram. The second part of the questionnaire was based on a Likert scale of 1-5 (1=not at all, 5=very much) and required the participants to answer the questionnaire distributed on an online platform through *Adobe Connect* software. The volunteers were shown 16 PDF slides (presenting each photo) and were asked to assess the six factors in their questionnaires. The images were shown in a randomized order with a randomized selection of the form of the accompanying sentence. Each slide was shown to all the students, and they were given one minute to respond in terms of likeability, modesty, and sincerity in two literal and ironic levels.

The factors encompassed likability (How much do they like this person?), modesty (How modest do they think this person is?), sincerity (How sincere do they think this person is?). They were also asked to provide their responses to bragging, complaint, and humblebragging in self-praise presented on Instagram posts. Bragging (To what extent is this person bragging?), complaining (To what extent is this person complaining?), and humblebragging (To what extent is this person humblebragging?). To avoid ambiguity, humblebragging was briefly explained to the participants as boasting or showing off in the guise of a complaint. Wittels (2012) defines humblebragging as

a specific type of brag that masks the boasting part of a statement in a faux-humble guise. The false humility allows the offender to boast about their achievements without any sense of shame or guilt. Humblebrags are usually self-deprecating in nature. (p. xi)

This definition and elaboration were shared with the help of an example in their *WhatsApp* group made for the purposes of this study before the start of assessing the pictures.

The participants had the opportunity to send their responses in a separate room through Breakout Rooms. Because each *Adobe Connect* session was limited to a maximum of 20 Breakout Rooms and there was not an option to increase the number, in order to have 60 Breakout Rooms, three *Adobe Connect* sessions were run simultaneously, and all the participants managed to answer their questionnaires at the same time. They did not have the chance to see the other participants' answers or go back to their answers to edit them. With the introductory note, and thanking statement, the whole procedure took about 25 minutes.

To analyze the data, descriptive statistics were employed. First, for each factor, the mean and the standard deviation were calculated and tabulated in the tables. As the distribution of responses for attitudinal factors was highly skewed, the median was also reported as an indicator of the middle value. The result of the data analyses will be reported in the following section.

Results

To investigate the distribution of Iranian EFL learners' responses to the speech act of self-praise on Instagram posts reflected in the form of bragging, complaint, and humblebragging as well as their attitudes in terms of likeability, modesty, and sincerity in two literal and ironic levels, 16 photos were selected and shown to 60 participants, and they were asked to assess their perception on these six factors through a questionnaire taken from Matley (2020), then, the data were categorized and tabulated as follows:

Table 4. Perceptions of Participants Towards Attitudinal Factors in Self-Praise.

Factors	Self-Praise	Mean	Median	SD
Likeability	Literal	2.05	2	1.15
	Ironic	1.95	2	1.10
Modesty	Literal	1.53	1	0.97
	Ironic	1.45	1	0.89
Sincerity	Literal	3.15	3	1.04
	Ironic	2.70	2	1.03
Total Number of Cases			N= 480	

Table 4 shows that regarding likeability and modesty, although ironic self-praise had the lowest mean value in all the three situations, there was no significant difference between attitudes towards posters of literal and ironic self-praise (mean = 2.05 and 1.95, respectively) and the median values for likeability for literal and ironic self-praise were both 2.00. There was no significant difference between attitudes towards literal and ironic self-praise in modesty as well (mean = 2.05 and 1.95, respectively), and the median for modesty for literal and ironic self-praise was the same (median= 1), suggesting that both literal and ironic types self-presentations were viewed as less modest. The difference in scores for perceived sincerity between literal and ironic self-praise was significant (mean= 3.15 and 2.70, respectively), and the median was different (median= 3 for literal and 2 for ironic).

Table 5. Respondents' Perceptions of Speech Acts by Self-praise Type.

Factors	Self-Praise	Mean	Median	SD
Bragging	Literal	4.35	5	0.87
	Ironic	4.36	4	0.81
Complaining	Literal	0.88	0.5	0.46
	Ironic	1.94	1	1.31
Humblebragging	Literal	1.54	0.5	1.22
	Ironic	4.19	5	1.16
Total Number of Cases			N= 480	

As Table 5 shows, there was no significant difference between the perception of viewers toward bragging between literal and ironic self-praise, suggesting that deliberate context incongruity was not a successful strategy in terms of guising the self-praising act, because the mean and median values for both types were high (mean= 4.35 and 4.36, respectively) and the median was also high (median= 5 and 4, respectively). In the case of complaining, ironic self-praise was perceived significantly higher than literal in the cases (mean= 0.88 and 1.94, respectively). This was also reflected in the median showing that the median of literal self-praise was half of

the ironic ones ((median= 0.5 and 1, respectively). For humblebragging, there was a large and significant difference in the perception of participants toward humblebragging, showing that they could notice the attempts of the posters to affect the viewers' ideas. (mean = 1.54 and 4.19, respectively) and the median for ironic was 10 times more than ironic (median= 0.5 for literal, and 5 for ironic).

Discussion

Summary of Findings

This study aimed at investigating the viewers' reactions to literal and ironic self-praise appearing on Instagram posts. To do so, the perceptions and attitudes of 60 Iranian EFL learners were investigated through a descriptive, non-experimental design. They were asked to rate three types of self-praise (bragging, complaint, and humblebragging) on two levels (literal and ironic) on three factors (likeability, modesty, and sincerity). Using descriptive statistics, the data were analyzed and reported. As the findings showed, participants' perceptions were higher for literal as compared to ironic self-praise, with sincerity receiving the highest rating, followed by likability and modesty. Modesty received the lowest value indicating that although people frequently use self-praise and self-presentation on Instagram, it is not viewed as an appropriate or acceptable norm in Iranian culture.

With regard to the second question, the findings showed that the ironic forms received higher values compared to the literal ones; bragging and humblebragging were recognized by the participants to a large extent, indicating that they could notice the attempts of the posters to mask their statements in a guise even if they were self-deprecating in nature.

It turned out that context incongruity made little difference in the attitudes towards the discourse used by posters of self-praise. Both literal and ironic self-praise were assessed negatively by the participants in terms of likeability and modesty, and bragging and humblebragging made no significant difference in their attitudes.

Limitations

The results of this study should be considered with caution because of its small scope which was limited to the Iranian EFL students due to availability and practicality issues. Moreover, posters might use hashtags different than the ones studied here. Therefore, the size, type of the platform, virtual context of the study, and the number of pictures used in this study created some limitations for further generalization. Moreover, this study did not focus on linguistic features and gender issues which might present interesting differences.

Interpretation

The findings of the study showed that although many posters were employing self-presentation on Instagram, self-praise was regarded as a weak strategy, and bragging or humblebragging could not be viewed as appropriate strategies to present self. Humblebragging was not viewed as sincere by the viewers suggesting that humblebragging similar to bragging was a poor strategy because they both created poor impressions on the audiences. In terms of the perception of the speech act, the findings also showed that ironic self-praise could not influence the perception of bragging. The findings of this study are in line with those of Sezer et al. (2015), and Matley (2020) which showed that humblebragging made Instagram posters more insincere to the viewers. This might be due to the virtual nature of social media or psychological

features attached to the phenomena. The negative impressions of bragging and humblebragging on the Iranian audiences might be because of the Persian cultural scripts and the attached norms in which modesty is viewed as a value and signifies politeness even on SNSs. Although these norms and scripts are gradually changing, especially among younger generations, many Iranians still value humbleness, disparage themselves, and try to gain a positive self-image through modesty.

Suggestions for Future Research

Due to the limitations and delimitations of the study mentioned above, future studies are suggested to investigate different corpus with different audience sizes and other forms such as understatement or reported compliment. It is also suggested to study different SNSs rather than Instagram. Further research on the acceptability of self-praise in online contexts and on different social media, its comparison with offline settings in different communities, and with different participants might present different findings. Furthermore, focus on linguistic features, texts, digitalk, and investigating disclaimers and qualifications on self-promoting talk might reveal interesting findings. Studying self-presentation from a psychological perspective, investigating the attitudes of the audience toward excessive self-display and frequent selfies posted on Instagram, and gender differences might be other venues for further research.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this paper could provide some information on the use of self-praise on SNSs. The study could contribute to the understanding of the pragmatic functions of self-praise and self-presentation and provide insight for the posters and users of social media to gain information on how to create a positive image and avoid unfavourable impressions or social disapproval. It could also be a good source of information for the teachers and practitioners in the field to raise awareness of learners and teach them how to use appropriate verbal and non-verbal cues to observe netiquette and be appropriate in SNSs.

Conclusions

This paper was an attempt to contribute to an understanding of the pragmatic function of self-praise and self-presentation on Instagram by Iranian EFL learners. It provided evidence to show that Instagram posters are engaged in face-threatening acts that violate norms against self-praise in FTF settings. Instagram users post images with bragging, complaint, or humblebragging as a politeness strategy to mitigate the effect of their presentation to create positive and boastful disclosures. A distinction could be made under the umbrella of self-praise between acquisitive and protective types of self-presentation, that is, seeking approval or avoiding disapproval. In sum, depending on what functions self-praise has, when, where, on which platform it takes place, what influence it has on which size of the audience, our understanding of this speech act might differ. It is concluded that self-presentation and self-praise could be achieved directly or indirectly through different speech acts and could arouse different attitudes. However, positive self-presentations via profile pictures shared on Instagram is favoured by viewers more than negative ones. Therefore, the audience and viewers of these posts might assess and evaluate them differently. Considering the linguistic behaviours surrounding self-praise including bragging, complaint, and humblebragging, the conclusion is that self-praise is a risky interactional act. Overall, this study suggests that self-praise functions as a strategy that negotiates an appropriate level of positive presentation, and due to the lack of

large research on self-praising behaviour, naturally occurring data or real-world stimuli are required for further research.

Finally, it should be mentioned that this study, similar to any other study, is not complete by itself and might have some limitations which might be due to the time, place, facilities, or instruments employed in this study. As stated by Placencia and Eslami (2020), self-praise is a strategy that is rapidly becoming more popular and accepted online, and the various functions it performs require further study and thorough investigation.

About the Author

Azizeh Chalak is an Associate Professor of TEFL at the English Department of Islamic Azad University, Isfahan Branch, Iran. She is teaching English at graduate and undergraduate programmes in face-to-face and virtual English campuses. She is the editor-in-chief of *Research in English Language Pedagogy* (RELP) published at IAU, Isfahan. Her research interests include discourse analysis, intercultural communication, e-mail communications, computer-mediated communication (CMC), and teaching English with technology.

To cite this article:

Chalak, A. (2021). Pragmatics of Self-Praise and Self-Presentation by Iranian EFL Learners on Instagram. *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ)*, 25(1). <https://tesl-ej.org/pdf/ej97/a10.pdf>

References

- Basirian Jahromi, H. & Nahvi Nezamabadi, M. (2016). Semiology of representation elements of online identity: Study of highly followed Iranian users on Instagram, *Rasaneh*, 27(4), 5–28.
- Bazarova, N, Taft, J. G., & Choi, Y. H. (2012). Managing impressions and relationships on Facebook: Self-presentational and relational concerns revealed through the analysis of language style. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 32(2) 121–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X12456384>
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Casale, S., Fioravanti, G., Flett, G. L., & Hewitt, P. L. (2015). Self-presentation styles and problematic use of Internet communicative services: The role of the concerns over behavioral displays of imperfection. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 76, 187–192. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.12.021>.
- Chalak, A., & Derakhshan, A. (in press). Response to compliments given by Iranian EFL learners on the social network of Instagram. *Iranian Journal of Sociolinguistics*.

- Chou, Hui-Tzu Grace, and Nicholas Edge. (2012). They are happier and having better lives than I am': The impact of using Facebook on perceptions of others' lives. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15(2), 117–21. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2011.0324>
- Dayter, D. (2014). Self-praise in microblogging. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 61, 91–102. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ip.00009.day>
- Dayter, D. (2016). *Discursive self in microblogging: Speech acts, stories and self-praise*. John Benjamins.
- Dayter, D. (2018). Self-praise online and offline: The hallmark speech act of social media? *Internet Pragmatics* 1(1), 184–203. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ip.00009.day>.
- Dehkordi, Z. & Chalak, A. (2015). English compliment response strategies on social networks by Iranian EFL learners. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research (JLTR)*, 2(6), 452–459. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0602.28>
- Derakhshan, A., & Eslami, Z., & Chalak (2020). A systematic review of compliments among Iranian Persian speakers: Past, present, and future directions. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning*, 12(26), 85–123. <https://dx.doi.org/10.22034/elt.2020.11468>
- Erza, S., & Hamzah, H. (2018). Impoliteness used by haters on Instagram comments of male-female entertainers. *E-Journal of English Language and Literature*, 7(1), 184–195. <http://ejournal.unp.ac.id/index.php/jell>
- Eslami, Z., Yang, L., & Qian, C. (2020). A comparative study of compliment responses among Chinese Renren users and American Facebook users. In M. E. Placencia & E. Eslami, (Eds.). *Complimenting behavior and (self-)praise across social media* (pp. 21–47). John Benjamins.
- Geurin-Eagleman, A., & Burch, L. (2016). Communicating via photographs: A gendered analysis of Olympic athletes' visual self-presentation on Instagram. *Sport Management Review*, 19(2), 133–45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2015.03.002>.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Penguin.
- Hashemi Monfared, A. & Rabiee, A. (2016). A case study on presentation of self in Instagram users. *Social Sciences*, 24(78), 157–194. <http://doi.org/10.22054/qjss.2017.12011.1293>
- Hosseinpour, R. M., Mousavi, Z. S. (2021). Politeness on Instagram: The employment of gratitude speech act by male and female English and Persian users. *Research in English Language Pedagogy (RELP)*, 9(1), 1–23. <http://doi.org/10.30486/relp.2020.1897275.1197>
- Kousari, M. & Einifar, M. (2020). How Iranian women express themselves through social media photos: A case study of Instagram. *Journal of Cyberspace Studies*, 4(1), 1–26. <http://doi.org/10.22059/jcss.2020.289643.1040>
- Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. Longman.
- Lee-Won, R.J., Shim, M., Joo, Y. K., Park, S.G., (2014). Who puts the best “Face” forward on Facebook? Positive self-presentation in online social networking and the role of self-consciousness, actual-to-total friends' ratio, and culture. *Computer, Humanity, & Behavior*, 39, 413–423. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.08.007>.

- Matley, D. (2018). This is NOT a #humblebrag, this is just a #brag’: The pragmatics of self-praise, hashtags and politeness in Instagram posts. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 22, 30–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2017.07.007>
- Matley, D. (2020). Isn’t working on the weekend the worst? #humblebrag’: The impact of irony and hashtag use on the perception of self-praise in Instagram posts. <http://doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.28960.33285>
- Moon, J.H., Lee, E., Lee, J.-H., Choi, T.R., & Sung, Y. (2016). The role of narcissism in self-promotion on Instagram. *Personal Individual Differences*, 101, 22–25. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.05.042>
- Papacharissi, Z., (2011). Conclusion: A networked self. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *A networked self: Identity, community and culture on social network sites* (pp. 304–318). Routledge.
- Placencia, M. E., & Eslami, Z. R. (2020). *Complimenting behavior and (self-)praise across social media*. John Benjamins.
- Qiu, L., Lin, H., Leung, A. K.-Y., Tov, W., (2012). Putting their best foot forward: Emotional disclosure on Facebook. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, & Social Network*. 15(10), 569–572. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2012.0200>
- Reinecke, L., Trepte, S., (2014). Authenticity and well-being on social network sites: A two-wave longitudinal study on the effects of online authenticity and the positivity bias in SNS communication. *Computer, Humanity, & Behavior*, 30, 95–102. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.07.030>
- Sadeghi, S. & Leng, H. K. (2020). Self-presentation of Iranian football players on Instagram during the 2018 World Cup. *Society & Sociology*, 21, 1–9. <http://doi.10.1080/14660970.2020.1832475>
- Sezer, O., Gino, F., & Norton, M., (2015). Humblebragging: A Distinct and ineffective self-presentation strategy. *Harvard Business School Marketing Unit Working*, 15, 2–77. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2597626>
- Speer, S., (2012). The interactional organization of self-praise: Epistemics, preference organization, and implications for identity research. *Social, Psychology Quarterly*, 75 (1), 52–79. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0190272511432939>
- Sharifian, F., Chalak, A., & Dehkordi, Z. (2019). The Persian cultural schema: Compliment response strategies on social networking sites among Persian EFL learners. *The Journal of Applied Linguistics and Applied Literature: Dynamics and Advances*, 7(2), 61–81. http://jalda.azaruniv.ac.ir/article_13978.html
- Statista. (2020). Most popular social networks worldwide as of October 2020, ranked by number of active users. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>
- Sung, Y., Jung-Ah, L., Eunice, K., & Sejung, M. (2016). Why we post selfies: Understanding motivations for posting pictures of oneself. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 97, 260–65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.03.032>

- Tal-Or, N. (2008). Boasting, burnishing, and burying in the eyes of the perceivers. *Social Influence*, 3(3), 202–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15534510802324427>
- Walther, J. B. (2012). Interaction through technological lenses: Computer-mediated communication and language. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 24(1), 36–65. <http://doi:10.1177/0261927X12446610>
- Wayne, S., & Liden, R. (1995). Effects of impression management on performance ratings: A longitudinal study. *Academy of Management Journal*, 38, 232–260. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/256734>
- Weiser, E. (2015). #Me: Narcissism and its facets as predictors of selfie-posting frequency. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 86, 477–81. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.07.007>
- Wittels, H. (2012). *Humblebrag: The art of false modesty*. Grand Central Publishing.

Copyright rests with authors. Please cite TESL-EJ appropriately.