

# Borderline Personality Features, Relationship Satisfaction, and Self-Presentation Styles

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## Abstract

Borderline personality features have been associated with poorer interpersonal functioning and lower relationship satisfaction, yet factors that may help explain this association remain unclear. The present study examined whether three presentation styles, positive impression management, distress-oriented self-presentation, and defensive presentation (acknowledging fewer negative psychological experiences), mediated the relationship between borderline personality features and relationship satisfaction among 91 university students currently involved in romantic relationships. Participants completed measures of borderline personality features, relationship satisfaction, and presentation styles. Analyses indicated that borderline features were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. Among the presentation styles examined, only defensive presentation demonstrated a significant indirect effect. Essentially, findings suggest a path whereby individuals with more borderline personality features report less defensive presentation, which in turn is associated with lower relationship satisfaction. The results and possible explanations are discussed.

**Keywords:** Borderline personality; Relationship satisfaction; Self-presentation; Guardedness; Romantic relationships; Mediation

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## 1. Introduction

Borderline personality is characterized by emotional instability, identity disturbance, impulsivity, and persistent difficulties in interpersonal relationships [1,2]. Although borderline personality disorder represents the clinical manifestation of these characteristics, borderline personality features exist on a continuum and can be observed within nonclinical populations [3]. Elevated borderline features have been associated with greater emotional distress, interpersonal conflict, insecure attachment, and poorer social functioning, suggesting that even subclinical manifestations may have meaningful consequences for psychological and relational well-being [2,4].

One domain consistently related to borderline features is romantic relationship functioning. Individuals with elevated borderline features often report greater instability of intimate relationships, heightened sensitivity to rejection, difficulties regulating emotions during interpersonal interactions, and lower relationship quality [4,5]. Relationship satisfaction represents a particularly important indicator of

romantic relationship functioning because it reflects individuals' overall evaluation of the quality and success of their intimate relationships. Previous research has generally found that borderline pathology is associated with lower relationship satisfaction and greater relational distress, although the mechanisms underlying this association remain incompletely understood [4,6]. Individuals with borderline features tend to report dysfunctional, less satisfying relationships [7].

One potentially relevant mechanism involves self-presentation tendencies. Self-presentation refers to characteristic ways individuals portray themselves, their experiences, and their psychological functioning when interacting with others or responding to self-report measures [8]. Although often discussed in the context of socially desirable responding, self-presentation encompasses a broader range of tendencies, including favorable self-description, minimization of psychological difficulties, and endorsement of unusual or distress-related experiences [8,9]. Such tendencies are often observable by others [10] and may influence not only how individuals describe themselves but also how they evaluate and report on the quality of their interpersonal relationships. Research suggests that self-presentational tendencies often reflect broader patterns of interpersonal regulation rather than simple response distortion [9]. Consequently, presentation styles may help explain associations between borderline features and relationship satisfaction.

The present study examined three presentation styles: impression management, distress-oriented self-presentation, and defensive presentation [11]. Impression management reflects a favorable or socially desirable presentation style characterized by positive self-description. Distress-oriented presentation reflects endorsement of unusual or improbable negative experiences and has been conceptualized as a distressed or exaggerated negative presentation style. Defensive presentation reflects guardedness and hesitance in presenting unpleasant psychological experiences. These dimensions reflect distinct approaches to self-presentation that may be relevant to interpersonal functioning and relationship evaluations [12].

Several theoretical considerations suggest that presentation styles may be associated with both borderline features and relationship satisfaction. Borderline tendencies are frequently characterized by intense emotional experiences, heightened sensitivity to interpersonal events, and increased attention to distress-related thoughts and feelings [1,13]. These experiences may be related to difficulty in relationships and influence evaluation of relational functioning. Borderline features may also correspond to fears of relationship loss [14]. The combination of such tendencies may partly explain findings of indirect communication styles and relational strain in close relationships among individuals with more borderline features [15].

Individuals with more defensive presentation or inclined toward impression management may be less likely to acknowledge relationship problems, potentially reporting greater relationship satisfaction. While sharing of experiences and emotion is often linked to relationship satisfaction, in some contexts being self-protective while maintaining trust of one's partner may be beneficial [16]. Also, individuals who present more positively may perceive their relationships more favorably, a sort of "rose colored glasses" phenomena. They also may present to their partners using more positive styles which could foster relational health [17].

Despite extensive research linking borderline pathology to interpersonal dysfunction, relatively little attention has been given to the potential role of presentation styles in understanding relationship outcomes. Examining these variables may provide additional insight into how individuals with elevated borderline features perceive and report on their romantic relationships. Therefore, the present study examined whether impression management, distress-oriented presentation, and defensive presentation statistically mediated the relationship between borderline personality features and relationship satisfaction among university students involved in romantic relationships. Consistent with prior literature, borderline features were expected to be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. Given limited prior research directly examining these presentation styles in relation to borderline features and relationship satisfaction, analyses involving the individual mediators were considered

mostly exploratory, but it was expected that positive presentation would relate with relationship satisfaction.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 Participants and Procedure**

Participants included 91 university students (54 women, 36 men, 1 unidentified) recruited from various undergraduate courses and student organizations. Participants were required to be currently involved in a romantic relationship. Average age of the sample was 19.92 years ( $SD = 3.80$ ).

Participants provided informed consent prior to questionnaire completion. The study followed guidelines of the Helsinki Declaration of 2000. Participants completed questionnaires as hard copies in small group settings. Data were entered manually and double-checked for accuracy.

### **2.2 Measures**

#### **2.2.1 Borderline Personality Features**

Borderline personality features were measured using the 10-item McLean Screening Instrument for Borderline Personality [18]. A sample item is, "Have you been extremely moody?" Responses are based on a True-False scale. Responses endorsed as true were summed, with higher total scores indicating more borderline personality features. Adequate psychometric properties have been reported [18,19].

#### **2.2.2 Relationship Satisfaction**

Relationship satisfaction was measured using the 7-item Relationship Assessment Scale [20]. A sample item is, "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?" Responses are based on a 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) scale. Higher summed responses indicate more relationship satisfaction. Adequate psychometric properties have been reported [20,21].

#### **2.2.3 Presentation Styles**

Presentation styles were operationalized using the Virtuousness, Unlikeliness, and Guardedness Scales [22]. Each scale consists of 4 items. The Virtuousness, Unlikeliness, and Guardedness scales assess self-presentation tendencies in self-report contexts. Virtuousness reflects impression management, e.g., "Bad habits are something I just don't allow myself to have", unlikeliness reflects distress-oriented experiences, e.g., "I see things in plants and animals that others do not," and guardedness reflects defensive presentation of negative psychological experiences e.g., "I have never felt any better in life than I do right now." Responses are based on a 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree) scale. Higher summed responses indicate more virtuousness, unlikeliness, or guardedness as appropriate. Adequate psychometrics have been reported [22,23].

### **2.3 Data Analysis**

Data analysis was done using SPSS for Windows (IBM Corp., Armonk, N.Y., USA). Pearson correlations were used to examine relationships between scales. The PROCESS macro for SPSS, Model 4 [24], was used to examine presentation styles as parallel mediators with borderline features as the predictor and relationship satisfaction as the outcome variable. Indirect effects of mediations were considered statistically significant if 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals (10000 resamples) did not include 0. Results were considered significant if  $p < .050$  (two-tailed).

## **3. Results**

Descriptive statistics of variables are presented in Table 1. Preliminary examination of sociodemographics found that age was not significantly correlated with any variable,  $r_s < .20$ ,  $p_s > .06$ . Similarly, gender was not significantly associated with any variable,  $t_s < 1.75$ ,  $p_s > .080$ . Consequently, age and gender were not included as covariates in subsequent analyses. Table 1 also presents correlations between variables. Borderline features were significantly negatively related to relationship satisfaction and defensive presentation and positively related to distress-oriented presentation.

Impression management was not significantly related to borderline features. Relationship satisfaction was significantly positively related to defensive presentation.

Variable	1	2	3	4	M	SD
1. Borderline Features					2.89	2.39
2. Relationship Satisfaction	-.27**				25.56	6.36
3. Virtuousness	.12	.14			12.88	4.16
4. Unlikeliness	.46**	-.12	.19		8.21	3.49
5. Guardedness	-.49**	.34**	-.06	-.47**	15.35	4.52

Note: N = 91. \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01.

Table 2 presents PROCESS mediation models using borderline features to predict relationship satisfaction. After accounting for the presentation style mediators, the direct effect of borderline features on relationship satisfaction was no longer statistically significant. The only significant indirect effect was through defensive presentation. Higher borderline personality features were associated with lower defensive presentation, and lower defensive presentation was associated with lower relationship satisfaction. Consequently, a significant negative indirect effect emerged through defensive presentation.

Mediator	B	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Virtuousness	0.05	0.08	-0.051	0.264
Unlikeliness	0.00	0.15	-0.303	0.285
Guardedness	-0.36	0.16	-0.708	-0.083
Direct effect: B = -0.41, SE = .32, t = 1.32, p = .192				

#### 4. Discussion

The present study examined whether three presentation styles, impression management, distress-oriented presentation, and defensive presentation of negative psychological experiences, mediated the relationship between borderline personality features and relationship satisfaction among university students. Consistent with previous research, borderline features were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, supporting evidence that elevated borderline pathology is linked to poorer interpersonal functioning and less favorable evaluations of romantic relationships [2,4,5]. When the presentation styles were examined simultaneously, however, only defensive presentation demonstrated a significant indirect effect. Specifically, borderline features were associated with lower levels of defensive presentation, whereas greater defensive presentation was associated with higher relationship satisfaction. These findings suggest that defensive presentation may partly explain the association between borderline personality features and lower relationship satisfaction.

The negative association between borderline features and relationship satisfaction is consistent with contemporary conceptualizations of borderline pathology emphasizing emotional instability, interpersonal sensitivity, fears of abandonment, and chronic difficulties maintaining stable and satisfying relationships [1,2]. Individuals with elevated borderline features often report greater conflict, insecurity, and dissatisfaction within close relationships [5,6]. Although this association has been documented previously, less attention has been given to factors that may influence how individuals with borderline characteristics perceive and report relationship experiences. The present findings suggest that presentation styles, particularly defensive presentation, may represent one such factor.

The most notable result was the significant indirect effect through defensive presentation. Individuals reporting higher borderline features tended to report lower defensive presentation, and lower defensive presentation was associated with lower relationship satisfaction. At first glance, this finding may appear unexpected because individuals with elevated borderline features are sometimes assumed to respond defensively to psychologically threatening information. However, defensive presentation in the present study reflects reluctance to acknowledge unpleasant psychological experiences. Consequently, lower scores may indicate greater willingness to recognize and report distress, personal difficulties, and relationship problems. This is partly substantiated by the negative relationship between defensive presentation and distress-oriented presentation.

Individuals with elevated borderline features frequently experience intense emotions and heightened awareness of interpersonal difficulties [2,13]. Extrapolating from the current data, individuals with more borderline features may be less inclined to minimize distress and more willing to present negative experiences occurring within their relationships. Depending upon how this is manifested with partners, expression of negative factors may lead to increased relational strain. Viewed from this perspective, the observed indirect pathway appears theoretically plausible and consistent with broader descriptions of borderline pathology emphasizing emotional intensity and interpersonal sensitivity [15].

An alternative explanation concerns the nature of defensive presentation itself. Individuals high in defensive presentation may be more likely to minimize difficulties, suppress acknowledgment of distress, or maintain a favorable self-concept. Research on impression management suggests that such presentations often reflect broader forms of interpersonal self-regulation rather than simple deception [9]. Consequently, individuals with higher defensive presentation may report greater relationship satisfaction because they are less likely to acknowledge relationship problems or interpersonal dissatisfaction. The present findings cannot distinguish between genuine differences in relationship functioning and differences in willingness to report relational difficulties. Nevertheless, the results suggest that self-presentational tendencies may influence reported relationship satisfaction and therefore warrant greater consideration in studies relying heavily on self-report measures.

In contrast, neither impression management nor distress-oriented presentation significantly mediated the relationship between borderline features and relationship satisfaction. Although borderline features were positively associated with distress-oriented presentation, this tendency toward endorsing unusual or distress-related experiences did not contribute uniquely to relationship satisfaction once the other presentation styles were considered. Similarly, impression management was unrelated to borderline features and did not emerge as a significant indirect pathway. These findings suggest that willingness to acknowledge unpleasant experiences may be more relevant to relationship evaluations than broader tendencies toward favorable or distressed self-presentation. Because relatively little research has examined these specific presentation styles in relation to borderline features, replication is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal conclusions. Although mediation terminology was used to describe indirect statistical associations, the temporal ordering of variables cannot be established. Future longitudinal research would be necessary to determine whether presentation styles prospectively influence relationship satisfaction among individuals with elevated borderline features. Second, the sample consisted primarily of young university students, limiting generalizability to older adults, community populations, and individuals meeting diagnostic criteria for borderline personality disorder. Third, all variables were assessed using self-report measures. Because presentation styles directly concern how individuals describe themselves and their experiences, shared method variance may have influenced observed relationships. Similarly, the presentation style measures used in this study have limited validity evidence making it difficult to be certain of what they measure. Future studies would benefit from incorporating partner reports, behavioral observations, or clinician-rated assessments. Finally, the

modest sample size may have limited statistical power to detect smaller indirect effects involving impression management and distress-oriented presentation.

Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to existing literature by identifying defensive presentation of negative experiences as a potential explanatory pathway linking borderline personality features and relationship satisfaction. Contemporary models of borderline pathology emphasize disturbances in emotional and interpersonal functioning as central characteristics of the disorder [2,25]. The present findings suggest that the extent to which individuals acknowledge and communicate unpleasant psychological experiences may also be relevant to understanding relationship evaluations. Future research should examine whether defensive presentation predicts changes in relationship satisfaction over time and whether similar patterns emerge in clinical samples. Such work may help clarify the role of self-presentational processes in the interpersonal difficulties commonly associated with borderline personality pathology.

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