HALO EFFECT IN STUDENTS' EVALUATIONS OF COMMUNICATION ETHICS IN ACADEMIC INTERACTION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF KPI STUDENTS

Windari Syntia [1*], Nurhasanah Lubis [2], Rafi Salim Parinduri [3], Mona Hardinah [4]

[1,2,3,4] Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia
Corresponding author: windari101242121@uinsu.ac.id [*]

Article Info	ABSTRACT
	This study examines the influence of the halo effect on students' evaluations of communication ethics in academic interactions among students of the Islamic Communication and Broadcasting (KPI) study program. The halo effect refers to students' tendency to form initial judgments about lecturers based on first impressions such as appearance, tone of voice, and presentation style. This research employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore students' lived experiences in academic communication. The participants consisted of ten KPI students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth open-ended interviews and analyzed using the phenomenological analysis procedure proposed by Moustakas, which includes horizontalization, thematic clustering, and synthesis of meanings. The findings reveal that the halo effect shapes students' perceptions of lecturers' credibility, competence, and communication ethics, particularly during the early stage of academic interaction. However, these perceptions tend to evolve through continued learning experiences. The study contributes to educational communication research by demonstrating how perceptual bias influences the evaluation of communication ethics in higher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is a fundamental element in the academic environment, particularly in the relationship between lecturers and students (Dahmani et al., 2024; Yuan, 2024). Through communication, the transfer of knowledge, the development of attitudes, and the internalization of academic values and ethics occur. Effective

communication in higher education does not merely function as a medium for delivering information but also reflects professionalism, credibility, and ethical responsibility in the teaching–learning process (Suhendar et al., 2023; Zvereva, 2023). Effendy defines communication as the process of delivering messages from one party to another with the aim of influencing perspectives, attitudes, or behaviors (Fitriani et al., 2025; Mallappiang & Muharram, 2023). In academic settings, communication is therefore inseparable from ethical considerations that guide interactions between lecturers and students.

However, the evaluation of communication ethics in academic interactions is often not entirely objective. Students frequently form early judgments about lecturers based on first impressions, including appearance, tone of voice, or presentation style (Heaviside-Brown & Watkins, 2025; Kettaneh et al., 2023). These initial perceptions can subsequently influence how students interpret lecturers' attitudes, credibility, and communication ethics throughout the learning process. In many cases, students' perceptions of lecturers are not solely based on the quality of teaching but are also shaped by psychological biases that affect the interpretation of social interactions.

One of the most widely discussed cognitive biases related to social evaluation is the halo effect, first introduced (Kerin, 2022; Westbury & King, 2024). The halo effect refers to the tendency of individuals to form an overall evaluation of a person based on a single dominant characteristic or initial impression. In educational contexts, this bias can influence how students perceive lecturers' competence, credibility, and communication behavior. Research in educational psychology has shown that lecturers who create positive first impressions are more likely to be perceived as competent and credible, while less favorable first impressions may lead to negative evaluations even when the lecturer demonstrates professional teaching practices (Lakeman et al., 2022; McNatt, 2022).

Several previous studies have examined communication ethics in academic interactions and lecturer credibility. For example, Wang & Kruk (2024) found that students' perceptions of lecturer credibility are strongly influenced by communication style and classroom interaction. Similarly, Abubakar (2024) emphasized that ethical communication between lecturers and students plays a crucial role in fostering respectful and constructive academic environments. Other studies have also explored

how communication ethics contribute to the development of academic professionalism and mutual trust in higher education settings (Dalimunthe et al., 2024; Marín et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, most existing studies primarily focus on communication ethics as a normative or pedagogical issue, emphasizing the importance of ethical communication without sufficiently examining the psychological mechanisms that shape students' evaluations. In particular, limited attention has been given to the role of cognitive biases, such as the halo effect, in influencing how students interpret lecturers' communication ethics (Jin et al., 2025). As a result, the relationship between cognitive perception biases and evaluations of communication ethics in academic interactions remains underexplored.

This issue becomes particularly relevant in the context of Islamic higher education, where communication ethics are closely associated with both academic professionalism and Islamic moral values (Dalimunthe et al., 2023). Students in the Communication and Islamic Broadcasting (KPI) program are expected not only to understand communication from a technical perspective but also to internalize ethical principles derived from Islamic teachings, such as fairness, respect, and honesty in communication. However, despite this normative expectation, students' evaluations of communication ethics may still be influenced by subjective perceptions and initial impressions.

Understanding the influence of the halo effect in this context is therefore important for explaining how students construct their evaluations of lecturers' communication ethics. Investigating this phenomenon can provide insight into the extent to which initial perceptions shape students' judgments and how these perceptions evolve through academic interaction.

Based on this background, this study aims to examine the influence of the halo effect on students' evaluations of communication ethics in academic interactions among students of the Communication and Islamic Broadcasting (KPI) study program. By exploring students' lived experiences and perceptions, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how cognitive biases influence ethical evaluations within academic communication and contribute to the development of more reflective and objective academic interactions.

2. RESEARCH METHODE

This study employs a qualitative approach using a phenomenological method to explore students' lived experiences and perceptions regarding the influence of the halo effect on evaluations of communication ethics in academic interactions (Ghasemi, 2022). Phenomenology was selected because the study seeks to understand how students interpret their initial impressions of lecturers and how these perceptions shape their evaluations during academic communication processes.

The research participants consisted of ten students from the Communication and Islamic Broadcasting (KPI) study program at an Islamic university. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on several inclusion criteria: (1) students who had experienced direct academic interaction with lecturers in classroom settings, (2) students who had completed at least two semesters of study to ensure sufficient exposure to academic communication dynamics, and (3) students who were willing to share their experiences and perceptions openly during the research process.

Data were collected through in-depth phenomenological interviews using open-ended questions designed to explore students' experiences related to their initial impressions of lecturers and how these impressions influenced their evaluation of lecturers' communication ethics. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted individually to allow participants to express their experiences freely and reflectively. The interviews focused on several themes, including perceptions of lecturers' appearance, communication style, credibility, and ethical interaction in the classroom.

Data analysis followed the phenomenological analysis procedure proposed by Moustakas (1994). The analysis involved several stages: (1) horizontalization, where significant statements related to students' perceptions were identified; (2) meaning unit formulation, where statements were grouped into thematic categories; (3) textural description, describing what participants experienced in academic communication interactions; and (4) structural description, explaining how those experiences shaped students' evaluations of communication ethics (Aguas, 2022). The

final stage involved synthesizing these descriptions to capture the essence of the phenomenon under study.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study employed data validation techniques, including member checking and data triangulation. Member checking was conducted by confirming key interpretations with selected participants to ensure that the findings accurately reflected their experiences. Triangulation was applied by comparing responses among participants to identify consistent patterns of perception related to the halo effect in academic communication.

Through these procedures, the phenomenological approach enabled the study to capture students' subjective experiences and reveal how cognitive bias in the form of the halo effect shapes the evaluation of communication ethics in academic interactions.

3.   RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of in-depth interviews with students from the Communication and Islamic Broadcasting (KPI) study program, this study finds that the halo effect significantly influences students' evaluations of lecturers' communication ethics during the early stages of academic interaction. Students tend to form immediate judgments about lecturers based on visible characteristics such as appearance, tone of voice, and presentation style. These first impressions shape how students initially interpret lecturers' credibility and ethical communication behavior in the classroom.

One of the most frequently mentioned aspects influencing students' initial perceptions is the lecturer's appearance. Several informants explained that lecturers who appear neat, confident, and professional tend to generate positive impressions during the first meeting. One participant stated:

> *"When a lecturer comes to class with a neat appearance and looks confident, we tend to assume that they are professional and ethical in communicating with students." (Informant 3).*

Another student expressed a similar perception:

"At the first meeting, appearance really affects how we judge the lecturer. If the lecturer looks convincing and calm, we automatically feel that they will communicate well in class." (Informant 6)

From a phenomenological perspective, these statements reflect how students construct meaning from visual cues in their lived academic experiences (Kahu & Picton, 2022). The initial perception formed through appearance functions as a cognitive shortcut that helps students quickly evaluate lecturers' credibility. This phenomenon corresponds with the halo effect theory, which explains that individuals often generalize a positive evaluation of a person based on a single observable trait (Laham & Forgas, 2022). In academic communication, such early impressions may influence how students interpret subsequent communication behaviors.

In addition to appearance, lecturers' manner of speaking and presentation style were identified as significant factors shaping students' evaluations. Informants emphasized that lecturers who communicate clearly and engage students actively tend to be perceived as more ethical and trustworthy communicators. One informant explained:

"Lecturers who speak clearly and explain the material in a structured way make us feel comfortable. It gives the impression that they respect students and communicate ethically." (Informant 2)

Another student highlighted the importance of communicative delivery:

"Sometimes the material may be difficult, but if the lecturer explains it in an interactive way, we see them as professional and respectful toward students." (Informant 7)

These findings indicate that verbal communication plays a central role in shaping students' perceptions of communication ethics. Students interpret clarity, tone, and interaction style as indicators of lecturers' respect, openness, and professionalism. This observation aligns with previous research showing that communication style significantly affects perceptions of lecturer credibility and ethical interaction in the classroom (Hou, 2024; Wang & Kruk, 2024).

The interviews also reveal that self-confidence and classroom management contribute to students' early evaluations of lecturer competence. Students tend to associate confident communication with professionalism and ethical authority. One participant noted:

"If the lecturer is confident and able to control the class, we feel that they know what they are doing and communicate properly with students." (Informant 5)

However, students also demonstrated awareness that first impressions do not necessarily represent lecturers' actual competence. Some participants acknowledged that their early judgments could change after multiple learning sessions. One informant explained:

"Sometimes our first impression is not accurate. After several meetings, we can see whether the lecturer is really competent or not." (Informant 1)

This statement reflects the dynamic nature of perception in academic interactions. Although the halo effect influences initial evaluations, students gradually revise their judgments based on continued learning experiences. In phenomenological terms, students' perceptions evolve as they accumulate new experiences that reshape their understanding of lecturers' communication ethics.

Furthermore, the findings show that first impressions also influence students' openness toward lecturers' explanations and opinions during early meetings. Students reported feeling more receptive to lecturers who create positive initial impressions. One informant stated:

"If the lecturer gives a good first impression, we tend to listen more carefully and trust what they explain." (Informant 4)

This finding suggests that the halo effect affects not only students' personal evaluations but also the dynamics of classroom communication and interaction. Early perceptions shape the level of trust and attentiveness that students bring into the learning process.

Within the context of the Communication and Islamic Broadcasting (KPI) program, communication ethics are also interpreted through the lens of Islamic values and academic responsibility. Students expressed awareness that ethical communication involves respect, honesty, and fairness in academic interaction. However, despite this normative understanding, their evaluations during the initial stage of interaction remain influenced by subjective perceptions.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings reinforce the concept of perceptual bias in communication, where individuals rely on cognitive shortcuts to interpret social interactions (Shin, 2025; Zhou, 2023). The halo effect functions as one of these

shortcuts, allowing students to rapidly evaluate lecturers based on limited information. While such evaluations help students navigate new academic environments, they may also introduce bias into the assessment of communication ethics.

Overall, the phenomenological analysis reveals that students' perceptions of lecturers' communication ethics emerge through a complex interaction between initial impressions, communication experiences, and evolving academic relationships. Although the halo effect shapes early perceptions, sustained interaction allows students to reassess their judgments more objectively. This process highlights the importance of reflective awareness among students in evaluating communication ethics within academic interactions.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the halo effect significantly influences students' evaluations of lecturers' communication ethics during the early stages of academic interaction. Students tend to construct initial judgments based on visible and communicative characteristics such as lecturers' appearance, tone of voice, and presentation style. These first impressions shape how students interpret lecturers' credibility and ethical communication behavior in the classroom. However, the findings also reveal that these perceptions are dynamic. As academic interactions continue, students gradually reassess their evaluations based on lecturers' consistency, mastery of subject matter, and sustained communication practices.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the field of educational communication studies by highlighting how perceptual bias influences the evaluation of communication ethics in academic environments. While previous studies have emphasized the importance of ethical communication and lecturer credibility, this study demonstrates that students' assessments are not formed purely through rational evaluation but are also shaped by cognitive shortcuts such as the halo effect. This finding enriches the understanding of communication processes in higher education by integrating perspectives from communication ethics and perceptual bias theory,

showing that students' judgments of ethical communication are influenced by both experiential interaction and psychological perception mechanisms.

Practically, the findings provide important implications for lecturers and educational institutions. For lecturers, awareness of the halo effect suggests that the initial stage of classroom interaction plays a crucial role in establishing trust and credibility with students. Professional appearance, clear communication, and respectful interaction can help create positive first impressions that facilitate effective learning communication. For educational institutions, these findings underline the importance of strengthening communication ethics training and reflective learning practices that encourage students to evaluate academic interactions more objectively. By fostering awareness of perceptual bias in academic communication, universities can promote more ethical, professional, and reflective learning environments.

Overall, this study underscores the importance of understanding how perceptual bias shapes communication dynamics in higher education. Recognizing the role of the halo effect in students' evaluations of communication ethics can contribute to the development of more reflective academic interactions and enhance the quality of communication between lecturers and students.

References

Abubakar, A. (2024). Integration of ethics and morals in educational communication. *International Journal on Advanced Science, Education, and Religion*, *7*(3), 349–364.

Aguas, P. P. (2022). Fusing approaches in educational research: Data collection and data analysis in phenomenological research. *The Qualitative Report*, *27*(1), 1–20.

Dahmani, N., Ali, W., Aboelenein, M., Alsmairat, M. A. K., & Faizi, M. (2024). From classroom interaction to academic success: tracing the mediating role of effective communication in faculty-student dynamics. *Cogent Education*, *11*(1), 2377847.

Dalimunthe, M. A., Pallathadka, H., Muda, I., Manoharmayum, D. D., Shah, A. H., Prodanova, N. A., Mamarajabov, M. E., & Singer, N. (2023). Challenges of Islamic education in the new era of information and communication technologies. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, *79*(1), 8608.

Dalimunthe, M. A., Syam, A. M., Suhendar, A., & Al-Mujtahid, N. M. (2024). Deconstructing Islamic Cyberculture: Mitigating Inferiority and Cancel Culture in

Virtual Space. *OPINI: Journal of Communication and Social Science*, *1*(2), 12–26.

Fitriani, F., Basri, B., & Yahya, S. (2025). Communication Strategies of Islamic Education Teachers in Instilling Islamic Values in Fourth-Grade Students at SDN 2 Bugi, Sorawolio District, Baubau City. *Journal of English Language and Education*, *10*(2), 298–303.

Ghasemi, F. (2022). A phenomenological analysis of teachers' perceptions of ethical factors affecting the teacher–student relationships. *Ethics & Behavior*, *32*(6), 549–561.

Heaviside-Brown, H. J., & Watkins, L. (2025). First impressions matter: the effects of third-party reports, experience, and qualifications on students' expectancies of a lecturer's competency. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1–19.

Hou, G. (2024). Correlation among teacher ICT teaching, teacher immediacy behaviors, teacher–student rapport, and student engagement in smart classroom teaching. *Sustainability*, *16*(21), 9592.

Jin, E., Jiang, X., & Wang, X. (2025). Halo effect and psychological contracts in student evaluations of teaching: a case study from a leading Chinese Liberal Arts University. *Cogent Education*, *12*(1), 2504216.

Kahu, E. R., & Picton, C. (2022). Using photo elicitation to understand first-year student experiences: Student metaphors of life, university and learning. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, *23*(1), 35–47.

Kerin, T. (2022). Which eye are you looking through? The impact of cognitive bias on process safety. *Process Safety Progress*, *41*(1), 101–105.

Kettaneh, C. A., Chung, W. T., & Chung, K. C. (2023). First Impressions: Setting the Stage for Better Relationships. *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery*, *152*(4), 693–698.

Laham, S. M., & Forgas, J. P. (2022). Halo effects. In *Cognitive illusions* (pp. 259–271). Routledge.

Lakeman, R., Coutts, R., Hutchinson, M., Lee, M., Massey, D., Nasrawi, D., & Fielden, J. (2022). Appearance, insults, allegations, blame and threats: an analysis of anonymous non-constructive student evaluation of teaching in Australia. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *47*(8), 1245–1258.

Mallappiang, N., & Muharram, M. (2023). Communication Techniques for Persuasion of Students and Lecturers In Shaping Behavior. *SITEKIN: Jurnal Sains, Teknologi Dan*

Industri, *20*(2), 920–927.

Marín, M. A., Jorge, V., Gaiazzi, P., Zinoni, M. J., & Casiello, F. A. (2025). Exploring Ethical Competence in Academia: SNA of Informal Communication Among Professors to Foster Ethics Education. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, *23*(3), 919–945.

McNatt, D. B. (2022). The biasing impact of positive instructor reputation on student evaluations of teaching. *The International Journal of Management Education*, *20*(1), 100607.

Shin, D. (2025). Seeing through the fake: how users detect and interpret deepfakes. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1–19.

Suhendar, A., Syam, A. M., & Ritonga, A. R. (2023). Efektivitas Instagram Sebagai Ruang Motivasi Hijrah Mahasiswa IAIN Lhokseumawe. *KomunikA*, *19*(02), 12–20.

Wang, Y., & Kruk, M. (2024). Modeling the Interaction between Teacher Credibility, Teacher Confirmation, and English Major Students' Academic Engagement: A Sequential Mixed-Methods Approach. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, *14*(2), 235–265.

Westbury, C., & King, D. (2024). A Constant Error, Revisited: A New Explanation of the Halo Effect. *Cognitive Science*, *48*(12), e70022.

Yuan, L. (2024). EFL teacher-student interaction, teacher immediacy, and Students' academic engagement in the Chinese higher learning context. *Acta Psychologica*, *244*, 104185.

Zhou, Q. (2023). A framework for understanding cognitive biases in technical communication. *Technical Communication*, *70*(1), 22–40.

Zvereva, E. (2023). Digital ethics in higher education: Modernizing moral values for effective communication in cyberspace. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, *13*(2), e202319.