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Review

Impression (mis)management: When what you say is not what they hear

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Abstract

Impression management is a fundamental aspect of social life. From self-promotion to feedback giving, from advice seeking to networking, people frequently find themselves in situations where they need to make a positive impression on others. Despite the long-term benefits of making a favorable impression, impression management attempts can backfire in unintended ways. In this article, I review recent research on self-presentation, social cognition, and communication to explain when and why people have misguided intuitions about their impressions on others, document common impression management mistakes, and propose more effective strategies to minimize actor-target asymmetries in social interactions. This review provides a theoretical framework to understand the psychology of impression (mis)management, as well as the risks and rewards of different self-presentation strategies.

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An inherent characteristic of social life [9], impression management is an essential skill, as myriad social and material rewards depend on others' impressions [4,24]. From occupational to relationship realms, making a favorable impression influences important long-term outcomes, such as getting a coveted job, being promoted, inking a deal, building networks, or starting a romantic relationship [18,20]. Moreover, attempting to make a favorable impression can help individuals boost their self-esteem, trigger positive emotions, and achieve self-fulfillment [43,50]. Given the importance of impressions in both professional and social interactions, people engage in a variety of impression management strategies.

However, presenting oneself effectively is not an easy endeavor. Consider a candidate who is asked about their biggest weakness in a job interview. How can they reveal a weakness but still signal that they can succeed in the job? How can a manager who needs to offer critical feedback to an employee be supportive and helpful without seeming condescending or hurtful? Or think about new graduates who are trying to connect with individuals at networking events. How can they be memorable without seeming awkward? And how can an employee who beats out coworkers for a promotion share the news while protecting their work friendships?

In these interactions, there is an inherent tension between trying to make a favorable impression while avoiding seeming arrogant and protecting relationships [9,31]. A lack of effective impression management can be costly if it leaves observers unaware of the actor's accomplishments or their benevolence and caring for the target [9]. At the same time, people who engage in impression management tactics risk appearing conceited, inconsiderate, or self-interested [17,41]. Managing impressions is a balancing act, and fulfilling all these goals simultaneously can be quite complex.

Despite the difficulty of striking the right balance, people do have common intuitions about how to approach these situations. Impression (mis)management or the strategies that people think will lead to a favorable impression are common in everyday life but often backfire in unintended ways. While previous research on self-presentation has mainly focused on successful attempts to convey a desired impression, this article highlights systematic impression management failures. I integrate research on self-presentation, social cognition, and communication to document these mistakes and explain when and why people systematically mismanage the impressions that they make on others. This article sheds light on the psychology of impression (mis)management and provides new insights into the trade-offs that individuals face in this domain.

Why do people make impression management mistakes?

Why do people fail to make a favorable impression? There are two distinct processes, interpersonal and intrapsychic motives — that can lead individuals to

engage in impression (mis)management behaviors. Interpersonal motives are focused on obtaining reactions and rewards such as liking, approval, belonging, achievement, status, and respect from other people. Interpersonal motives lead to impression (mis)management behaviors when self-presenters err in their assessments of how they can achieve their dual goal of eliciting liking and respect at the same time. On the other hand, intrapsychic motives involve managing psychological states. People often attempt to attain a particular cognitive or emotional state and observe other people's emotional states. However, when self-presenters mispredict their partners' emotional responses or erroneously project their feelings onto their interaction partners, they get the self-presentation trade-off wrong and engage in systematic impression management failures.

Interpersonal motives

The fundamental desires to be liked and respected at the same time

The desire to be viewed positively by others is fundamental and a powerful driver of human behavior [15,52]. The motives underlying impression management emerge from one of two key objectives: the desire to be perceived as warm and to be liked; and the desire to convey competence and be respected [15]. People strive to be perceived as warm and competent because these two dimensions determine social judgments. Research on social perception has shown that social evaluations indeed involve two basic, universal, and independent dimensions, such as agency and communion, intellectual or social desirability, or warmth and competence [15]. Although these constructs have different definitions, their conceptualizations are similar in that warmth dimensions (communion, social desirability, and warmth) are related to the interpersonal goal of liking, whereas the competence dimension (agency, intellectual desirability, and competence) relates to the interpersonal goal of respect. In everyday life, these two goals — the desire to be liked and respected — coexist, and people care about validation by others on both dimensions [40,45].

But being simultaneously liked and respected — displaying warmth and competence at the same time — is not easy, as communicating these qualities requires distinct impression management tactics [2,15]. To fulfill the desire to be liked, people generally engage in self-presentation strategies that are designed to validate or ingratiate themselves to others [4,41], whereas to be respected, individuals usually use tactics that convince targets of their competence by highlighting their accomplishments [9,43]. These strategies are fundamentally distinct; therefore, achieving likability or respect comes at the expense of the other. That is why achieving success and displaying competence can put people in

precarious situations [15,22,52]. Self-promotion can be perceived as bragging and damage warmth perceptions, a phenomenon known as the 'self-promotion' paradox [4]. Similarly, when people engage in ingratiation strategies to gain likability, observers may regard them as less capable and less competent and respect them less [3,52]. This trade-off between appearing competent and appearing warm exists across all behaviors central to social interactions, such as bragging, thanking, or apologizing [9].

Indeed, people are not oblivious to these risks, which lead them to seek to present their qualities and accomplishments indirectly [38,52]. For instance, when attempting to brag, to avoid the pitfalls of self-promotion and hide their motivation, people often humblebrag — disguising bragging with complaint or humility [45]. People engage in this unique form of impression management in a strategic effort to simultaneously fulfill the desires to be liked and respected and achieve a 'sweet spot' for self-presentation. By masking a brag in complaint ('It is so exhausting to keep up with media requests after I published in JPSP') or humility ('I cannot believe they all thought to nominate me for this award and want me to give a talk in front of thousands of people'), people think that they can highlight their positive qualities (getting attention for publishing at a top journal, being nominated for an award) while eliciting liking and sympathy with complaint (being exhausted) or humility (disbelieving the nomination). However, research shows that humblebragging is a strategic but erroneous strategy, as it makes the actor seem insincere, another dimension critical to social evaluation [18,19]. The insincerity signaled by humblebragging manifests in dislike and lower perceptions of competence, as compared with other direct strategies, such as straightforward bragging or even complaining. Humblebragging is an impression management failure because, despite the common belief that combining bragging with complaining or humility confers the benefits of each strategy and minimizes the costs of straightforward bragging, it offers the benefits of neither.

Another common impression management strategy people use to solve the self-promotion paradox and achieve simultaneous liking and respect is to engage in self-deprecating tactics, strategies used to downplay one's achievements and qualities [44]. To be seen as a 'likable braggart,' individuals sometimes try to 'soften' their brags with self-deprecation [44,56]. Because highlighting accomplishments is associated with insecurity [49], self-deprecators believe they are signaling confidence by downplaying their personal qualities [37]. However, research suggests communicators often miscalculate how observers will interpret these attempts [37]. In particular, observers usually take self-

deprecators' statements at face value [37], believing them without paying attention to the actors' qualities. Self-deprecating statements may help observers feel closer to the self-presenter by reducing the social distance between the actor and audience [36], but they are perceived to be reflections of poor self-esteem and lower competence [37]. Prior research also suggests that self-deprecation does not improve perceptions of likability [57]. Self-deprecating remarks decrease liking even for outperformers, whose skills have been transparently observable [57]. By couching a self-deprecating statement within self-promotion, actors maintain the belief that they have been likable while signaling their competence, but this tactic is often misguided.

People engage in similarly complex and indirect strategies when they need to give feedback. Not only is delivering critical feedback unpleasant [8,31], but it has negative impression management consequences for the feedback giver [29]. Research on performance feedback documents that when people receive a bad review, they judge the evaluator negatively [21]. These judgments can be consequential for feedback givers; when the feedback disconfirms their self-concept, recipients may even reshape their networks to avoid the feedback giver in the future [21]. Similarly, delivering positive feedback can confront individuals with a self-presentational dilemma as they try to strike a delicate balance between wanting to be liked and maintaining status [15]. Gaining or maintaining status in a group is such a fundamental driver of social behavior [34] that people engage in various communication tactics, such as using jargon [7], to mark their place in the hierarchy. This desire to maintain status also exists when individuals in high-status positions give positive feedback. For instance, giving compliments and offering praise can be costly for status owing to social comparisons [52] stating that someone is excellent at a task may imply that the recipient is better than the feedback giver at this task, which may cause both the recipient and observers to view the feedback giver as inferior to the recipient [10,41]. Moreover, status-related judgments follow a zero-sum principle: people who see others as high status are perceived to be of lower status themselves [10]. Most problematic, because increasing one's status can require highlighting one's superiority relative to others [56], such efforts often conflict with the goal to be liked. At the same time, efforts to increase liking by giving compliments often conflict with the goal to attain status and respect. In fact, insults such as 'sucking up to the boss' reveal the potential decreases in status that come with efforts to increase liking [56].

Recent research shows that individuals attempt to solve this dilemma in feedback settings by giving backhanded compliments — seeming praise that draws a comparison with a negative standard [47]. Backhanded compliments are common in the workplace ('For a young woman, your

speech was great'), in social interactions ('You are smart for someone without a college degree'), and even in academia ('You are actually nice, for an economist'; 'This seems pretty rigorous, from a social psychologist'). People believe that delivering the compliment part of a backhanded compliment will garner the benefits of flattery for liking, whereas the backhanded part will allow them to avoid being seen as lower status; in fact, recipients grant them neither.

This interpersonal dual goal is particularly misleading for self-presenters in close relationships because the fundamental goals of self-presentation and relationship maintenance often conflict. Individuals systematically engage in impression (mis)management behaviors owing to their relationship maintenance motives. For example, an employee who gets a promotion may be concerned about how friends will react to this news. These concerns are indeed valid, as self-promotion can create social comparisons [52], lead to envy [6], and damage social harmony [1]. Highlighting positive traits can be particularly threatening when there is a close relationship between the self-presenter and the target [59]. Indeed, people are aware of the potential risks and approach these instances with trepidation. For example, individuals often try to act more modest when they are with friends than with strangers [53].

However, common intuitions about how to navigate this tension between protecting relationships and sharing accomplishments can often be misguided. Recent research has shown that one common strategy people use in these instances is 'hiding success' — [40]. Despite its ubiquity, this strategy is damaging for relationships because it violates norms of self-disclosure in close relationships [16]. Moreover, what people choose to say or not say in relationships not only offers information about their competence and qualities [24] but also provides information about the relationship between the self-presenter and the target. In general, hiding information leads to a number of negative reactions. For example, when self-presenters hide information, targets tend to assume that the hidden information is more negative than it really is [25]. But hiding success is even more damaging than hiding any other information. Hiding success signals that the self-presenter expects the recipient to feel envious instead of happy. When good news is hidden in close relationships, people perceive it to be a paternalistic attempt by the self-presenter to regulate the target's emotional reaction, namely, to prevent them from feeling threatened or envious [40]. In other words, hiding one's success to protect the relationship ironically causes recipients to feel less close to and more insulted by self-presenters who hide their success than those who share their success. Hiding accomplishments is an insult and damages trust [40]. In addition to relational consequences, hiding success comes with impression

management costs — causing self-presenters to be perceived as less warm and less competent. Despite good intentions of relationship maintenance, hiding success backfires.

Paternalistic motives, the intention to help the target based on assumptions about target's best interest [33], stem from a desire to maintain and protect relationships but are perceived to be insulting. Even when people recognize the good intentions behind them, targets still find them offensive because paternalistic motives reflect negative assumptions about target's emotional resilience and character [42,48]. Research shows that targets perceive paternalistic behavior as unethical even though self-presenters may believe hiding with good intentions is ethical [33]. In other words, self-presenters' well-intended interpersonal emotional regulation [55] comes with costs. When self-presenters deliberately withhold positive information to improve the targets' emotional welfare and to protect their relationship, the prosocial intent hurts rather than helps the relationship, leading to emotional, impression management, and relational costs. Inferences of paternalistic motives lead to actor-target asymmetries. Sometimes paternalistic motives can be perceived through what the actor says [30], and sometimes it can be perceived through what the actor hides [40].

Another example of hiding behavior occurs in concealment of identities. Recent research has shown that individuals often systematically conceal high-status identities and sacrifice their status to preserve social harmony [1,39]. For instance, individuals who graduated from a high-status university were more likely to hide the university's status when interacting with a friend from a lower-ranked university than when interacting with a friend from a peer-ranked university. High-status identity concealment occurs not only to prevent envy but also to preserve social harmony, avoid threatening the other party, and increase belonging. Specifically, by engaging in this strategy, individuals are aiming to form a commonality to protect their relationship. These concealment behaviors not only lead to impression management costs [40] but also jeopardize the relationship [1] and have important downstream consequences. High-status identity concealment may trigger feelings of inauthenticity [18] that prevent high-status individuals from pursuing interactions with lower-status peers [1,23], leading to homophily, which deprives lower-status individuals of valuable resources, such as mentorship, knowledge, social capital, and other professional opportunities for career advancement [23].

Concerns about simultaneous liking and respect cause individuals to either take shortcuts and engage in these sophisticated forms of impression management (such as humblebragging backhanded compliments and self-

deprecating tactics) or attempt to find balance between sharing achievements and protecting their relationships (such as hiding success, paternalistic strategies, and concealing high-status identities), but these strategies backfire in unintended ways. What the person communicates or fails to communicate can make or break their reputation and their relationships.

Intrapsychic motives

Projection of own feelings onto others and mispredictions of emotional responses

Impression management failures are also caused by intrapsychic motives. In social interactions, people not only attempt to regulate their own emotions but also try to manage their targets' emotional response, because they think they know how the other side feels. People have an intuition about how their interaction partners would feel in a situation. But limitations in managing psychological states and emotional perspective taking lead to systematic impression management failures [43,50]. Understanding other people's emotional reactions to a given situation is a critical factor in determining the success of impression management efforts [42,55]. However, emotional perspective taking is a challenging task, requiring both an estimation of how one would respond to a situation that is different from the current state and a prediction of how another person would react to the same situation [54]. This difficulty in understanding how others would feel in a situation leads to social projection bias and empathy gaps [13]. Therefore, people tend to underestimate the differences between their own and others' emotional responses and to use their own emotional state to project it onto others [43,50,54]. Scopelliti, Vosgerau, and Lowenstein (2019) have shown that this emotional perspective-taking failure is particularly likely when people try to instill a positive image in others. By erroneously projecting their own positive feelings onto others, actors not only overestimate the extent to which targets of their self-promotion will feel happy for them but also underestimate the extent to which targets will feel annoyed, causing their self-promotion attempts to backfire.

Projections of positive emotions can also be problematic in advice-exchange domains. For example, sometimes advice recipients have to endure hearing the familiar phrase from an advice giver whose advice was ignored, 'I told you so [46].' The phrase not only prompts recipients not to follow the advice and hinder their learning but it also comes with impression management costs for the advice giver. Because interpersonal aspects in advice exchange are as important as the quality of advice, the impressions that advisors make are quite consequential, as they impact advisors' perceived credibility and confidence [49]. Saying 'I told you so' leads advice givers to be perceived as condescending. Notably,

despite these negative consequences, people still choose to say it. This mistake comes from another fundamental emotional motive: it feels good to be right [55]. Evidence for this comes from an experiment in which we showed that when participants found out they were right and their partner was wrong in an estimation task, they could either send a neutral message or a message that included the phrase ‘I told you so.’ Most participants chose to send the ‘I told you so’ message at least once across multiple rounds. Despite not liking hearing the statement themselves, people nonetheless choose to say this universal phrase when given a chance.

These mispredictions are also an inherent aspect of difficult conversations, conversations that may cause discomfort to the target [31]. For example, when delivering critical feedback, people significantly overestimate the magnitude of harm to the recipient [13,31]. Owing to this mistaken belief, actors often avoid being honest by omitting information or skipping the interaction altogether [33,51]. People even engage in suboptimal strategies such as ‘prosocial lies’ to benefit the target [33] by providing false hope or comfort [32]. Because people tend to focus on the negative information they need to deliver, they fail to accurately estimate their own and their targets’ emotional reactions [31]. These strategies stem from good intentions [32,33] owing to limitations in emotional perspective taking but have unintended consequences for impression management for the communicator. That is, in these interactions, people focus on how to navigate the tension between honesty and benevolence, yet attempting to manage target’s emotional response results in impression management costs. For example, research has shown that prosocial lies harm perceptions of integrity and character, a critical antecedent of interpersonal trust [32]. Even though individuals engage in these forms of well-intended deceptions to prevent discomfort to the target, these strategies harm their reputation and damages interpersonal trust. Navigating difficult conversations comes with impression management costs, even when it is not the communicator’s fault. Research has found that individuals are prone to disparaging those who tell them what they do not want to hear, and likability penalty is imposed on bearers of bad news [26]. To solve this problem, when delivering bad news or negative feedback, individuals use the strategy known as ‘sandwich feedback’ in which the communicator inserts criticism (or bad news) between two positive remarks [11]. However, even though people think this commonly used well-intentioned strategy is a humane way to deliver critical feedback, it actually undermines feedback, harms the relationship, and decreases liking [11].

Even positive social interactions are not immune to these misforcasts. For example, interacting with strangers make people feel better than they anticipated, yet they are often anxious about these interactions [14]. Similarly,

despite desiring meaningful and deep connections, people often underestimate how interested strangers will be in their disclosures [27]. But even in interactions with people they know, individuals often mispredict how others will react. These mispredictions do not necessarily prompt people to engage in misguided impression management strategies but cause them to fail to make a favorable impression by omission. For example, when expressing gratitude, people underestimate how positive and surprised the recipient will feel [30]. Furthermore, people underestimate the value of their compliments. Recently, Zhou [58], Bohns et al. [5] showed that individuals systematically underestimate how positive their compliment will make someone feel and overestimate how uncomfortable and bothered the recipient will feel. These inaccurate emotional response forecasts reduce the likelihood of these communicative prosocial behaviors, such as expressing gratitude or giving compliments, leading to missed opportunities for meaningful communication and impression management failures by omission. That is, the emotional forecasting errors do not damage interpersonal perceptions but cause individuals to miss out on relatively easy and costless opportunities to make a favorable impression.

Finally, miscalibrated predictions about the target occur even in simple everyday conversations. In a recent study, Mastroianni et al (2021) [35] have shown that conversations almost never end when both parties want them to and rarely end even when one of them wants them to. More interestingly, individuals do not have an accurate estimation of when their partners want to end the conversation and underestimate how different their partners’ preferences are from their own. Once again, these types of perspective-taking failures cause interaction partners to forego connection and an opportunity to make a good impression. These impression management mistakes by omission can be consequential not only for everyday conversations [35] but also for high-stakes interactions, such as networking [17], causing individuals to shy away from cultivating professional connections, feeling awkward or inauthentic [1,17]. The intrapsychic explanations that emerge from self-presenters’ own feelings and their emotional perspective-taking failures lead to mispredictions about how the other side feels or what the other side wants. These communication strategies are suboptimal because they make people refrain from engaging in effective behaviors, eventually missing out on the chance to create a favorable impression and undermining social connection.

Conclusion

Self-presentation research has shown just how difficult it is to solve self-presentation paradox [9,20,45]. People often try to take ‘short-cuts’ to form a favorable impression of what they say or choose not to say. Two distinct processes, interpersonal and intrapsychic

motives, can lead individuals to engage in impression (mis)management behaviors. One way to avoid these mistakes would be to pay attention to perceived sincerity, because the success of any impression management strategy depends critically on target's perceptions of sincerity and lack of ulterior motive from the actor. Perceived sincerity and perceived intent are fundamentally important in social judgments, and strategies that signal insincerity, lack of emotional care, or paternalism have increased risk of impression (mis) management.

Conflict of interest statement

I confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication, and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

I confirm that I have given due consideration to the protection of intellectual property associated with this work and that there are no impediments to publication, including the timing of publication, with respect to intellectual property. In doing so, I confirm that we have followed the regulations of our institutions concerning intellectual property.

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