Much Ado About Nothing: Avoiding Products Because of the Negative Impressions They Never Create

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The current work demonstrated that consumers’ desire to avoid creating a particular impression exerted an important influence on their attitudes and ultimately their willingness to pay for a product. Consumers considerably overestimated the impact of product usage on the impressions they created though. Both men and women thought the use of a feminine colored product would affect others’ impressions, although only men thought this would lead to a negative impression. In contrast, impressions of another person were not affected by the color of the product, suggesting that concerns that products will create a negative impression are sometimes unwarranted.

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Individual behaviour is often motivated by self-presentation or impression management concerns (Tedeschi 1981). Impression management involves controlling personal expressions and behaviors in order to influence the opinions and responses of others (Leary 1995). Research in marketing has shown that personal possessions affect observers’ impressions (Gosling et al. 2002) and that consumers will strategically buy and display products for this reason (Burroughs, Drew, and Hallman 1991). Recent work has also shown that consumers will avoid products that might cause them to be perceived as members of dissociative reference groups (White and Dahl 2006). The current work extends the existing literature in two ways: first, by demonstrating that product attitudes and willingness to pay are importantly influenced by the extent to which products help consumers achieve or avoid certain impressions; second, by investigating the validity or accuracy of impression management concerns. We show that consumers tend to overestimate the extent to which products are likely to create an undesired impression, as evidenced by a discrepancy between their impression of other consumers using a particular product and their own beliefs about the impression they would create using the same product.

Study 1

Study 1 explored whether impression management concerns influenced product evaluation and willingness to pay. We chose an item that was likely to be used in public (an MP3 player) and manipulated its color to evoke impression management concerns. Specifically, we predicted that when the product was offered in a feminine color, men— but not women—would worry about the impression it conveyed.

**Method**

Ninety-eight students (47 men, 51 women) participated in a 2 (product color: pink vs. black) x 2 (gender) between-subjects factorial design. Participants placed bids in an actual auction for either a pink or a black MP3 player. To ensure participants bid their true willingness to pay (WTP), the auction winner paid only the amount tendered by the second highest bidder. After placing sealed bids, participants completed a survey to assess product attitude ($r = 0.81$), liking of the color, and the extent to which they would be concerned about using the product in public (impression management concerns, $a r = 0.91$).

**Results**

There were significant interactions between product color and gender on all dependent variables ($F$’s(1, 94)=19.34, 10.44, 21.98, and 45.53, $p$’s<.01). Men bid less for the pink player ($M’$=$84.20$ vs. $84.43$; $F(1, 94)=22.54, p<.001$), liked it less ($M’$=1.27 vs. 2.13; $F(1, 94)=12.38, p<.001$), liked the color less ($M’$=.25 vs. 2.48; $F(1, 94)=44.62, p<.001$), and were more concerned about their impression ($M’$=1.29 vs. 2.95; $F(1, 94)=73.17, p<.001$). No differences were significant for women ($F$’s<1). Mediation analyses (Baron and Kenny 1986) of the men’s results found that the effect of product color on WTP was mediated by impression management concerns (product color–WTP: $β’$=.52, $p<.001$; product color and impression management–WTP: $β’$=.08 and .58, $p>.66$ and $p<.001$), but not liking of the color (product color and liking of color–WTP: $β’$=.35 and .22, $p’$=.09 and .29). Identical effects were found for attitudes.

Study 2

Study 2 examined the accuracy of consumers’ impression management concerns by comparing their beliefs about the impression they would create using a product to impressions of another consumer using the same product.

**Method**

Ninety-one students (37 men, 52 women, 2 unspecified) participated in a 2 (product color: pink vs. black) x 2 (gender) x 2 (target: self vs. other) between-subjects factorial design. Participants were told that they would be participating in a study about people’s impressions of one another. In the “self” conditions, participants saw an MP3 player (embedded in a variety of other products) and rated what they thought other people would think of them if they were seen using this product. In the “other” conditions, participants saw a picture of a male in a gym setting who happened to be wearing an MP3 player. The MP3 player was either pink or black. All participants completed two items ($r=.53$) designed to assess the positivity of the impression they thought they would convey [their impression of the other person], as well as ratings of how masculine and feminine (reverse scored) they thought they would be perceived [they perceived the other person] ($r=.46$). All items were embedded in a general trait assessment inventory.

**Results**

The general impression measure showed the predicted three-way interaction ($F(1, 81)=6.98, p<.01$). Men, but not women, thought they would be perceived significantly less positively wearing a pink player ($M’$=2.08 vs. 3.35; $p<.001$). However, both men and women’s impressions of the other person were unaffected by the color of the player (overall $M’$=3.71). A significant color x target interaction ($F(1, 81)=10.65, p<.01$) on the masculinity/femininity measure demonstrated that both men and women thought the color of the MP3 player would have a stronger effect on others’ perceptions of them than it did on their own perceptions of another person. In short, both men and women appeared to overestimate the impact the color of the player would have on others’ perceptions of their masculinity/femininity. Only men, though, believed this would have a negative impact on others’ perceptions. Importantly, there appeared to be no basis for such concern, given that impressions of a third party were unaffected by the color of the MP3 player.

**General Discussion**

The current work demonstrated that consumers’ desire to avoid creating a particular impression exerted an important influence on their attitudes and ultimately their willingness to pay for a product. Consumers’ concerns, however, appeared to be somewhat unwarranted. Both men and women overestimated the impact the product would have on the impressions they created. In the current context, these

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