What Will They Think of Me?: Anticipated Impressions and Product Decisions

Laurence Ashworth, Queens University, Canada
Margaret Matear, Queens University, Canada
Matthew Philp, Queens University, Canada

Consumers frequently use products to manage impressions, yet it is not clear whether these attempts work. The current work showed consumers often overestimate the impact of products on their impression and will sometimes misjudge observers' evaluations of them. These (mistaken) beliefs have a substantial impact on product attitudes and valuation.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017807/volumes/v42/NA-42

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/
What Will They Think of Me? Anticipated Impressions and Product Decisions
Laurence Ashworth, Queen’s University, Canada
Margaret Matear, Queen’s University, Canada
Matthew Philp, Queen’s University, Canada

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Individuals’ purchase decisions are often influenced by the desire to create or avoid particular impressions (e.g., White & Dahl 2006). Much of the research on this topic assumes that these are adaptive decisions (Leary, 1995; Schlenker 1975). Individuals are generally assumed to be quite good at adjusting their behaviors (e.g., by selecting or avoiding particular products) to create favorable impressions and avoid unfavored ones. It is difficult to generalize from such conclusions, though, because the research has not explicitly investigated how consumers anticipate their impression and, therefore, when they are likely to be accurate (vs. not). Moreover, there is work in other domains that has highlighted considerable discrepancies between how individuals think others view them and how they are actually viewed (e.g., Epley & Caruso, 2009; Gilovich et al., 2002; Savitsky et al., 2001; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979).

This paints a somewhat contradictory picture of individuals’ impression management abilities. On the one hand, impression managers are portrayed as adaptive decision makers, capable of choosing behaviors that create optimal impressions. On the other, it seems that they may often fail to understand exactly how they come across to other people. The current work attempts to shed light on this apparent contradiction by investigating the processes by which individuals form beliefs about the effects of their consumption behaviors on others.

The current research is based on the idea that individuals are likely to be heavily influenced by their own perspective when contemplating others’ reactions (Epley & Caruso, 2009; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). This has potentially important implications for impression management behaviors, as it suggests that at least part of how individuals determine the effects of their impression management attempts on others might be by referring to their own perceptions of the attempt. In terms of the impression consumers’ anticipate creating, because the product is likely to be very much more salient to a potential purchaser than it would be to an observer of a product user, we expect consumers to generally overestimate how much a considered product will contribute to their impression. In contrast, how favorably individuals expect to be evaluated by others – ultimately, the basis of their impression management decisions – should depend on their own evaluation of the impression, which is likely to depend on their unique self-presentation goals. Because observers are unlikely to know or care about the particular ways in which individuals would like to be seen though, we predict that consumers will be most inaccurate about the favorability of others’ reactions when the impression is highly relevant to consumers’ self-presentation goals.

Three experiments examined these ideas, using a product that was expected to contradict some consumers’ self-presentation goals, but not others. Specifically, we used the color pink as a product feature designed to be relevant to an impression of femininity (Frasanito & Pettorini, 2008), which we expected to primarily contradict male consumers’ self-presentation goals. We predicted both male and female consumers would tend to overestimate the effect of the product on their impression, but that only men would foster mistaken beliefs about how favorably they would be evaluated by others.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 examined men and women’s reactions to a product associated with a feminine impression (vs. a neutral impression), and compared these reactions to those of observers. Participants were asked to either consider a pink (Feminine) or black (Neutral) MP3 player for their own use or they were shown a picture of a male consumer (using either a pink or black MP3 player) and asked to respond to it. We found that both male and female consumers overestimated how feminine they would look relative to observers’ actual impressions. However, only men overestimated how negatively observers’ would perceive them (see Figure 1).

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 was designed to investigate the reason consumers overestimated the impact of a product impression on their own impression. We predicted that consumers would anchor on the product impression when considering their own, and adjust insufficiently for other features of their person to which observers would also be exposed. We tested this by priming other features of consumers’ person to increase the likelihood that consumers would adjust for these features. When other features of consumers’ person were primed, we found that both men and women expected to create a less feminine impression. As expected, this helped alleviate men’s impression concerns, but not women’s (because they did not expect others to react negatively anyway).

Experiment 3

Experiments 3 was designed to extend the findings to judgments related to consumers’ actual impression management decisions – in this case, product attitude and valuation – and to a different type of product (luggage in this case vs. an MP3 player previously). Participants bid on either a pink or black duffel bag and answered questions about their anticipated impression, the product impression, and their impression concerns. We found that men bid substantially less for the pink (vs. black) bag, and that this was due to their impression concerns. Women’s bids were unaffected by the color of the bag. We also found that both men and women appeared to infer their own outward impression from their impression of the bag, making hardly any adjustment.

Discussion

Consumer choices are frequently and importantly impacted by beliefs about the impressions that products will create. Yet existing research has largely overlooked the origin and accuracy of these beliefs. The current research was based on broad ideas that individuals frequently come to understand others’ reactions by consulting their own. In the context of product-related impression management decisions, we reasoned that consumers’ would rely on their own beliefs about how a product would make them appear and their own evaluation of the favorability of that impression when assessing others’ reactions. Consistent with this, we found that consumers overestimated how much a product impression would affect their impression, and, under certain circumstances, misjudged how negatively others would evaluate them. These (unwarranted) concerns affected product attitudes and valuation.
REFERENCES


