I Shared What You Did Last Summer: Indirect Impression Management and Subsequent Prosocial Behaviors

Kirk Kristofferson, Arizona State University, USA
Katherine White, University of British Columbia, Canada

This research examines the consequences of an under-studied, yet prevalent indirect impression-management tactic: communicating the prosocial behaviors of others. We find that when individuals publically communicate (vs. think about or privately write about) the positive behaviors of others, this can lead the communicator to behave less prosocially on subsequent tasks.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1020050/volumes/v43/NA-43

[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/.
I Shared What You Did Last Summer: Indirect Impression Management and Subsequent Prosocial Behaviors
Kirk Kristofferson, Arizona State University, USA
Katherine White, University of British Columbia, Canada

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We all know at least one of those people-individuals who post about the positive behaviors of others they are connected to (e.g., sister running a marathon, colleague volunteering at a local charity). What is unclear is the effect that communicating a close other’s positive behavior has on the communicator’s own subsequent behaviour. Does publically communicating the athletic sister’s accomplishment motivate the communicator to behave consistently (e.g., go for a run) or reduce the likelihood to follow through with the behavior (e.g., go for a hamburger)? The current research examines the consumer consequences of publically communicating a close other’s positive behavior and highlights the role impression-management plays in this context.

Consumers have multiple avenues available to present themselves positively to others, such as purchasing products that donate profits to charity (Krishna 2011) or engaging in token support for a social cause (e.g., joining a Facebook group; Kristofferson et al. 2014). However, research shows that explicit self-presentation tactics can lead consumers negatively interpret the target’s actions (Berman et al. 2015; Fein 1996). To mitigate this drawback, consumers can resort to less invasive, or indirect impression-management techniques, such as communicating the positive behaviors of others.

The current research proposes that publically communicating the positive behaviors of another other leads to a subsequent decrease in the communicator’s own positive behaviors. We propose that when the act of communicating the positive actions of another person is done in a very public (vs. private) manner this allows the consumer to feel positively as a result of presenting a positive image of the self to others. As a result, the consumer is less inclined to engage in subsequent positive behaviors themselves. We offer further support for our impression-management view by varying the communication target (close other vs. acquaintance, study 2) and showing that the effect only holds for high public self-conscious consumers (study 3). Finally, we identify a boundary condition for our consequence: accountability for the consumer’s own behaviour (study 4).

A pilot study demonstrated this effect in the domain of a positively-viewed athletic behavior using a dataset taken from a social networking site utilized by a competitive cycling team (76 cyclists, 1,249 communications, 29,516 KM). We recorded and analyzed the communication of fellow cyclists’ achievements and subsequent rides using the group’s Strava account. Athletes can publically communicate a fellow cyclists’ performance by giving ‘kudos’ for the teammate’s performance. As predicted, high communicators cycled significantly shorter distances per ride than low communicators ($F(1,74) = 4.02, p < .05$).

Study 1 tested our predictions in a field study using personal Facebook posts. We recruited individuals ($n=62$) to participate in a short study on Facebook by offering an entry in a draw to win an iPad. Participants were randomly assigned to be asked to write a Facebook post about one of three behaviors: a helpful behavior of a close other, an average, everyday behavior of a close other, or a helpful behavior that they had performed. At the end of the study, participants were offered the opportunity to be helpful by forgoing their entry in the iPad draw in exchange for us making a $10 to the World Wildlife Fund (0 = No, 1 = Yes). Participants who publically communicated a helpful behavior of a close other were significantly less likely to be helpful themselves than participants who publically communicated an average, everyday behavior of a close other ($P_{Close} = 33.3\%$ vs. $P_{Close} = 66.7\%$; $b = -1.39, p < .05$), but no different from those who communicated their own helpful behavior publically ($P_{Close} = 33.3\%$ vs. $P_{Self} = 35.0\%$, NS).

Study 2 replicated the field study in a controlled setting using blogging as the public communication medium, and sought to provide support for our impression-management claim. Undergraduates ($n=132$) were assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Task: Communicate, Introspect) x 2 (Target: Close Other, Acquaintance) design and completed the study in groups of 20-30. Participants in the publically communicate (introspect) conditions wrote a blog post (introspected) about a charitable behavior of either a close other or acquaintance with other participants in the room with them. Shortly after, they indicated how willing they were to volunteer their time. The expected interaction emerged ($F(1,128) = 3.88, p = .05$). Participants who publically communicated the charitable behavior of close other (vs. acquaintance) were less likely to volunteer ($F(1, 128) = 3.82, p = .05$). This group was also less marginally less likely to volunteer than those who introspected about a close other ($F(1, 128) = 3.45, p < .07$).

Study 3 provided further support for our impression-management claim by showing this effect among high public self-conscious consumers. Undergraduates ($n=121$) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in 2 (Communication: Public, Private) x continuous (Public Self-Consciousness) design. Participants in the public condition wrote a blog post about another person’s behaviour as in study 2. Participants in the private condition typed out a description of the others’ positive behaviour, but were told this would not be shared with others. Participants then completed the dependent variable as in study 2. At the end of the study, participants completed the seven-item public self-consciousness scale. Regression results revealed the expected interaction ($b = .43, SE = .17, t = 2.50, p = .01$). Results showed that high (low) public self-conscious participants were less likely to volunteer when they publically (privately) communicated a close other’s behaviour ($HPSC: +1.99SD, B = .68, SE = .34, p = .05$; $LPSC: -.75SD, B = - .38, SE = .19, p = .05$).

Study 4 examined an additional moderator to understand when we might not observe this decrease in self-behaviour when communicating the positive behaviors of others: accountability. Undergraduates ($n=133$) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Communication: Public, Private) x 2 (Accountability: High, Low) design. The procedure and manipulation used in the communication task is identical to that of study 3 with one change. Immediately after communicating the behavior of a close other, participants were told their subsequent responses would be either discussed (high accountability) or be confidential (low accountability). Participants then completed the dependent variable from studies 2 and 3. The 2X2 ANOVA yielded the expected interaction ($F(1,129) = 4.05, p < .05$). When accountability was low, participants publically (vs. privately) communicating the charitable behavior of a close other were less charitable ($F(1, 129) = 3.79, p = .05$), but no differences emerged when accountability was high ($F(1, 129) = 82, p > .35$).

In conclusion, we investigate the consequences that communicating the positive behaviors of others have on our own behavior. We demonstrate that publically communicating the positive behavior of
close others makes consumers less likely to engage in the behavior themselves, and this decrease is driven by the reception of impression-management benefits.

REFERENCES

