The Influence of Self-Presentation Concerns on Online Reviews

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Self-presentation goals are shown to influence reviewer’s ratings in consumer online communities. Members of these communities adopt different self-presentation tactics in order to be perceived as knowledgeable by others, which dynamically influences the valence of the reviews they provide. The result is that reviewers’ ratings become increasingly negative over time.

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Self-Presentation in Online Word of Mouth
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Paper #1: The Influence of Self-Presentation Concerns on Online Reviews
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Paper #2: Social Acceptance and Social Sharing
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Paper #3: Unintended Consequences of Indirect Impression-Management
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Paper #4: Bliss is Ignorance: Happiness, Naïveté, and Exploitation
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“Mostly, we talk to impress.
And sometimes we shut up to impress, too.”—N. Al-Araby

SESSION OVERVIEW
Strategic self-presentation is ubiquitous and is an important driver of word of mouth communication (Schlenker 1980, Berger 2014). Yet, many unanswered questions remain about what drives individuals to select a specific self-presentation tactic while pursuing their self-presentation goals, as well as the behavioral consequences of consumers’ self-presentation efforts. Moreover, the proliferation of online outlets for consumers to discuss their purchases, ranging from online rating communities such as Yelp and TripAdvisor to social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, raises the important question of when and how self-presentation concerns influence online WOM. The four papers in this session address a set of related questions focused on the drivers and consequences of strategic self-presentation in online contexts.

The first two papers in the session explore factors that influence consumers’ choice of self-presentation tactics given a specific self-presentation goal. Valsesia, Nunes and Ordanini document how members of online rating communities such as Yelp.com are concerned about being perceived as knowledgeable by others community members. Moreover, their ratings record affects the particular self-presentation tactic they choose to adopt in order to appear knowledgeable: displaying their ability to make good choices early on and exhibiting critical skills later, which results in their ratings becoming increasingly more negative. Chen focuses instead on how self-presentation goals and tactics vary depending on the target of the self-presentation effort. She shows WOM is often driven by a desire for social acceptance and that people take different approaches (tactics) to fulfill this goal when sharing with strangers versus friends. Individuals self-enhance when communicating with strangers in order to form relationships, but alternatively focus on connecting socially when sharing with friends in order to maintain existing ties.

The second two papers of the session shift the emphasis to the consequences of individuals’ self-presentation efforts. In particular, Kristofferson and White focus on the behavioral consequences for the self-presenter of an indirect impression-management tactic: communicating the prosocial behaviors of others. They find that when individuals publically communicate the positive behaviors of others, the communicator tends to behave less pro-socially on subsequent tasks. Finally, Barasch, Levine and Schweitzer look at consequences of self-presentation efforts for the receivers of WOM communication. They examine whether the magnitude of emotional displays (e.g., happiness) affects social judgment and interpersonal behavior, and find that very happy people are perceived to be naïve and thus are exploited more frequently. This effect is driven by the common belief that overly positive communicators shelter themselves from negative information.

Taken together, this combination of research sheds light on important factors affecting how consumer choose to present themselves both online and offline, as well as the consequences of individuals’ self-presentation efforts, both for the self-presenter and for the targets of their efforts. We expect this session to generate interest among researchers studying impression management and self-presentation, social influence and social judgment, online and offline word of mouth, as well as consumer decision-making more broadly.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
It is a truism that the Internet allows individuals to freely express opinions uninhibited by concerns about the impressions they make on others. A common assumption is that opinions regarding products and services found in online rating forums (e.g., Angie's List, com, TripAdvisor.com, Yahoo Local, and Yelp.com) are unaffected by reviewers’ concerns about what readers will think of them, and therefore more reliable. The belief that opinions expressed online are unfiltered is supported by academic research, and the primary argument in support of this is that individuals are protected by the anonymity granted by the web (Sussman and Sproul 1999; Kiesler and Sproull 1999; Dubrovsky, Kiesler and Sethna 1991).

Yet, the most popular consumer opinion platforms have moved away from the notion of “strict” anonymity. Instead, they now encourage social interaction and compel users to build and maintain a reputation within their communities. Consider, for example, Yelp. Each reviewer (“Yelper”) has a public profile page on which, at the extreme, they can use their real name and an actual photograph. The profile summarizes their rating record, including designations of any reviews seen as especially “useful,” “funny,” and/or “cool” by visitors to the site. Further, Yelpers can “befriend” and “follow” other Yelpers, and publicly compliment them on their profile page. The “best” Yelpers are rewarded publicly by Yelp with status by being designated an “Elite Member.” The presence of reputation systems adds a social dimension to online reviewing and has been credited with stimulating participation by promoting accountability (Resnick et al. 2000; Dellarocas 2003). We propose that the absence of absolute anonymity, caused in part by the inclusion of reputation systems on opinion sites such as Yelp and TripAdvisor, results in reviewers who are concerned with what others think about them.

This research is the first to document the influence of self-presentation concerns – and the desire to appear knowledgeable (i.e., competent, skilled and intelligent) in particular – on ratings and reviews published on less than strictly anonymous user-generated review sites. We show these concerns have meaningful downstream consequences, significantly influencing the valence of ratings dy-
namically over time. The causal mechanism proposed and validated is as follows. Reviewers are more positive early on because, while new to a community, they are more concerned with being seen as having made good choices as a way to display their knowledgeability as reviewers. As the number of reviews in their rating record grows, reviewers become increasingly concerned with being seen as possessing the critical skills necessary to discriminate between experiences, and therefore relatively more negative. The result is a meaningful negative trend in ratings based on the number of past ratings in a reviewer’s profile.

Three laboratory studies and the analysis of real world data provide compelling evidence in support of the proposed causal mechanism. In study 1A, we asked 126 college students to rate a song, with the aim of either showing they make good choices or are critical and discriminating. Reviewers concerned with showing they make good choices gave consistently higher ratings than reviewers concerned with displaying critical skills ($M_{GoodChoice} = 5.68$ vs. $M_{Critical} = 3.98$, $F(1,124)=19.83$, $p < .01$). In study 1B, we show how the relative importance of these two self-presentation concerns evolves over time, as a function of a reviewer’s rating history, in turn influencing the valence of reviewers’ ratings. We asked 90 college students to rate 2 songs with the goal of showing: (1) they make good choices (Good Choice condition), (2) are critical and discriminating (either Critical condition), or, (3) more broadly, are knowledgeable reviewers (Knowledgeable condition). Respondents rated the 1st song as if they just joined an online community of music lovers and the 2nd song, after a significant time delay, as if it were the 81st rating they provided. Among respondents giving their first rating, those assigned the goal of showing knowledgeability behave no differently from those in the Good Choice condition ($M_{Knowledgeable} = 6.07$ vs $M_{GoodChoice} = 5.73$, $F(2,87)=.65$, $p=.52$), but differently from those in the Critical condition ($M_{Critical} = 4.66$, $F(2,87)=5.11$, $p < .01$). The opposite occurred when giving their 81st rating. They behaved no differently than those in the Critical ($M_{Knowledgeable} = 4.97$ vs $M_{Critical} = 4.24$, $F(2,87)=1.45$, $p=.24$), but differently from those in the Good Choice condition ($M_{GoodChoice} = 6.00$, $F(2,87)=5.55$, $p < .01$). The results reveal a declining trend in ratings for reviewers who want to appear knowledgeable ($M_{First} = 6.07$ vs. $M_{EightyFirst} = 4.97$, $F(1,87)=4.61$, $p=.03$).

We find additional support for our explanation by moderating the effect of declining ratings in Study 2. Consistent with our proposed causal explanation, we document how the effect of providing more positive reviews early on manifests only for reviewers who are high in public self-consciousness (concerned with how they present themselves to others – Fenigstein et al 1975), and not for those low in in public self-consciousness ($\beta_{PreviousRating}=.58$, $p < .01$).

Finally, in study 3, we examine real-world data from Yelp consisting of 190,065 reviews by 48,108 individual reviewers. As expected, the data reveal a significant negative trend in ratings as a function of the number of businesses rated previously, controlling for other factors ($\beta_{PreviousRating}=-.0031$; $p=.003$). Lending additional support, written reviews tend to be more positive early in a reviewer’s rating history ($\beta_{PreviousRating}=.540$; $p=.003$).

Using a multi-method approach, this research contributes to the literature on both impression management and word of mouth. First, we identify specific self-presentation tactics that individuals adopt in order to appear knowledgeable. Second, and more importantly, we show that an individual’s use of different tactics evolves over time in a predictable fashion. In the context of online ratings, this implies the same individual can be more or less critical in their opinions with the same self-presentation goal in mind – appearing knowledgeable. Third, we demonstrate that reviewers express online are influenced not only by the rating behavior of other community members (Schlosser 2005), but also by reviewers own past ratings behavior.

Social Acceptance and Social Sharing

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers are increasingly sharing product experiences online with both strangers and friends. Despite the prevalence of Word of Mouth (WOM), little is known about how and why WOM differs based on whether people are talking to strangers or friends. The current paper theorizes that WOM behavior is driven by an overarching goal of gaining social acceptance.

Research in interpersonal relationships theorizes that relationships move primarily through two stages: the formation stage and the maintenance stage (Clark and Beck 2011). At the formation stage, where people are strangers to one another, potential partners engage in evaluation processes where they attempt to assess the worthiness of each other. In this stage, one important task is to signal one’s attractiveness as a potential partner (i.e., make one seem worthy as a potential friend, Clark and Beck 2011). For those who move beyond this initial phase, the relationship moves into the maintenance stage and that people are fully engaged in an interpersonal relationship and are motivated to stay socially connected to one another (Clark and Lema Jr. 2010).

Given that people’s need for social acceptance is fundamental and active in most everyday situations (Baumeister and Leary 1995), it is reasonable to expect this motivation to drive WOM decisions. When communicating with strangers – or people at the initiation stage of the relationship – one’s goal is to make oneself appear attractive as a potential friend going forward and so WOM is likely driven by the desire of self-enhancement. When communicating with friends – or people in the maintenance stage of a social relationship – one’s goals shifts away from self-enhancement since the relationship has already commenced. In this case, WOM is likely shared to socially connect with others, which helps maintain existing relationships. These ideas are tested and confirmed in a series of six methodologically diverse studies.

Studies 1A and 1B show that self-enhancement is an important driver of sharing with strangers. Prior research suggests that being responsible for a good consumption is self-enhancing because it allows people to signal expertise and competence ( Wojnicki and Godes 2013) and Study 1A shows that being responsible (vs. not responsible) for a good purchase increases people’s willingness to share their purchase experience more with strangers than friends. Study 1B looks at the impact of transparent incentives (i.e., incentives that are easily observed by the WOM recipient, e.g., “tell the hairdresser I told you about him”) on sharing. Transparent incentives may be viewed as image-damaging since one could appear avaricious/opportunistic. Consistent with our predictions, the presence of image-damaging transparent incentives (vs. no incentives and non-image-damaging incentives) reduced WOM more with strangers than friends.

Testing the second half of our framework, Study 2 examines whether social sharing among friends fulfills connection goals. Participants were asked to write about a negative personal experience to either a friend or a stranger. If our predictions are correct in that social sharing with friends achieves the goal of maintaining connection, then the act of writing about an experience should generate stronger feelings of social connection when the audience is composed of friends than strangers. To elucidate the connection mechanism, half of participants were instructed to write the WOM with a social connection goal in mind. Based on our theory, explicitly
activating (vs. not activating) this goal before sharing WOM should make people feel more connected to strangers but it should have little effects on friends since the goal of establishing social connections is naturally activated when people share WOM with friends. These predictions are confirmed in Study 2.

Study 3 tests our overall framework and shows mediation. Building on the ideas that positive WOM is often shared to self-enhance (De Angelis et al. 2012; Wojnicki and Godes 2013) and negative WOM is often shared to connect (Pennebaker, Zech and Rimé 2001), we show that people are relatively more likely to share positive (vs. negative) WOM with strangers than friends. Moderated mediation analysis confirms that the relative preference for sharing positive WOM with strangers is driven by self-enhancement concerns and that the preference for sharing negative WOM with friends is driven by social connection concerns.

If Study 3 results are driven by the fundamental desire for social acceptance as we hypothesize, then these effects should attenuate when social acceptance concerns are less salient. To test this, we experimentally reduce social acceptance concerns by manipulating the word of mouth setting in Study 4. In most WOM contexts (e.g., Facebook, Yelp), people can interact with each other in the form of posting replies, asking questions, etc. We theorize that by removing this ability to interact with each other (i.e., people can only post WOM, but not have the opportunity to receive responses from others) social acceptance concerns are reduced since there is little opportunity for having future social interactions/relationships with WOM receivers. Consistent with this line of thought, we show in Study 4 that Study 3 results are mitigated when social acceptance desires are reduced experimentally.

Study 5 provides a final test of our framework and examines people’s sharing behavior in the context of an online product platform. Building on the ideas that individuals are more likely to offer help when attempting to self-enhance (since it signals compassion and competence) and seek help when making connections (since it shows vulnerability, Beck and Clark 2009; Clark and Beck 2011), results reveal that relative to strangers, people are less likely to offer (vs. seek) advice to friend than strangers on online platforms.

The current work makes three important contributions. First, it provides an overarching framework to understand how and why people share WOM (to achieve social acceptance). Second, it shows how seemingly unrelated findings from prior research (which are rooted in the stranger context) can be synthesized to show the same thing: people attempt to self-enhance with strangers. Third, the current work shows that previously established drivers of social sharing (found in the stranger context) may not hold in the friend context given the shift in relationship goal from formation to maintenance.

Unintended Consequences of Indirect Impression-Management

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 behavior. Does publically communicating the athletic sister’s accomplishment motivate the communicator to behave consistently (go for a run) or reduce the likelihood to follow through with the behavior (go for a hamburger)? This 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 (joining a Facebook group; Kristofferson et al. 2014). However, research shows that explicit self-presentation tactics can lead others 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.

We propose 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 public (vs. private) manner this allows the consumer to feel positively from presenting a positive image 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 claim by varying the communication target (close other vs. acquaintance, S2) and showing this effect among high public self-conscious consumers (S3). Finally, we identify a boundary condition: accountability for the consumer’s own behavior (S4).

A pilot study demonstrated this effect in the domain of positively-viewed athletic behavior using a dataset taken from a social networking site (Strava) of a competitive cycling team (76 cyclists, 1,249 communications/kudos, 29,516 KM). Athletes can publically communicate a fellow cyclists’ performance by giving ‘kudos’ for the teammate’s performance. As predicted, high communicators cycled significantly shorter average distances 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 Facebook study by offering an entry in a draw to win an iPad. Participants wrote a Facebook post about one of three behaviors: helpful behavior of a close other, 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 communicated an average behavior of a close other (P_other-helpful=33.3% vs. P_other-control=66.7%; b =−1.39, p < .05), but no different from those who communicated their own helpful behavior (P_other-helpful=33.3% vs. P_self-helpful=35.0%).

Study 2 replicated the field study using blogging as the public communication medium, and supported our impression-management claim. Undergraduates (n=132) were assigned to conditions in a 2 (Task: Communicate, Introspect) x 2 (Target: Close Other, Acquaintance) design and completed the study in groups. Participants in the publicically communicate (introspect) conditions wrote a blog post (introspected) about a charitable behavior of either a close other or acquaintance with other participants (~20) 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 further supported our impression-management claim by investigating public self-conscious consumers. Undergraduates (n=121) were assigned to conditions in 2 (Communication: Public,
Private) x continuous (Public Self-Consciousness) design. Participants in the public (private) condition wrote a blog post (confidential reflection) about another person’s behavior as in study 2 and completed the dependent variable as in study 2. At the end of the study, participants completed the seven-item public self-consciousness scale. The expected interaction emerged (b=+.43, SE=.17, t=.250, p=.01). Results showed that high (low) public self-conscious participants were less likely to volunteer when they publicly (privately) communicated a close other’s behavior (HPSC: +1.99SD, B=.68, SE=.34, p=.05; LPSC: -.75SD, B=-.38, SE=.19, p=.05).

Study 4 examined a boundary condition: 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 expected interaction was significant (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)=8.2, 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.

Bliss is Ignorance: Happiness, Naïveté, and Exploitation

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Social media has become a ubiquitous channel of communication. Each day, people share billions of items online, including photos and text, and this trend is only increasing (Facebook 2013; Systrom 2014). Through this content, people convey different sentiments to their audience. For example, people might post a happy photo of themselves on vacation or an angry story about bad customer service.

Prior research has shown that individuals automatically infer personality traits from others’ emotional expressions (Frijda 1986; Parkinson 1996). For example, scholars have found that expressions of happiness signal affiliation and warmth, whereas expressions of anger signal dominance and competence (Knutson 1996; Tiedens 2001). As a result, emotional expressions have powerful effects on cooperation/competition and bargaining (Dehghani, Carnevale, & Gratton 2014).

Although extant research has advanced our understanding of how valence and other dimensions of emotion (e.g., certainty) influence trait inferences, we know surprisingly little about how a single emotion expressed at different levels of intensity is perceived. But the emotional expressions on social media vary in magnitude, and are oftentimes extreme in nature (e.g., an extremely happy photo or an enraged story). In fact, due to selection in what people post, sentiments in these contexts tend to be more extreme than what people experience more generally (Chou & Edge, 2011). Thus, it is important to understand how the magnitude of emotional displays affects social judgment and interpersonal behavior.

We examine this question in the context of expressed happiness. While prior work has shown that conveying moderate happiness can increase individual’s perceived attractiveness, competence, and liking (Harker & Kelmer 2001), we document one cost of displaying happiness at the extreme. Specifically, people perceive very happy individuals to be more naïve than moderately happy individuals. These perceptions reflect the belief that very happy individuals limit their exposure to negative information and use biased information processing strategies to maintain their positive feelings (Isen 1984; Batra & Stayman 1990). As a result of these inferences, individuals are more likely to take advantage of very happy people by offering them biased advice.

Five studies test these propositions with a variety of manipulations, measures, and paradigms. Study 1 (n=390) used a subtle, controlled manipulation of emotion: a target’s response on an emotional inventory (similar to the “quiz results” people often post on social media). Participants viewed one of five conditions showing the results of this inventory for another individual, ranging from neutral (6 on an 11-point happiness scale) to moderate happiness (8 of 11) to extreme happiness (10 of 11), and then rated the individual on a 4-item Naïveté scale. Individuals who displayed high levels of happiness were perceived as more naïve than individuals who displayed moderate levels (B=.24, SE=.06, t(387)=3.91, p <.01). These perceptions also followed a curvilinear trend (B=.11, SE=.04, t(387)=2.94, p <.01), suggesting that inferences of naïveté are particularly strong at extreme levels of happiness. We observed this pattern of results for both male and female targets.

Study 2 (n=209) replicated these naïveté findings (F(2,206)=4.95, p <.01) and explored the underlying mechanism. Focusing on three of the five happiness levels from the previous study, a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of emotion on a 7-item scale measuring perceptions of Biased Processes (F(2,206)=4.88, p <.01). Participants believed that the individual engaged in more biased search and inference processes when he/she was very happy (M=4.47) than when he/she was moderately happy (M=3.99, t(139)=2.71, p <.01) and when he/she was neutral (M=3.98, t(135)=2.73, p <.01). In addition, this belief mediated the link between expressions of happiness and perceived naïveté (95% CI=[0.053,0.238]). We also ruled out two alternative mechanisms: perceptions that very happy people do not set challenging goals for themselves and that very happy people are overly optimistic.

Study 3 (n=239) replicated these findings using facial expressions in photographic stimuli: male and female targets expressing different levels of happiness (naïveté: F(2, 236)=9.62, p <.01; biased processes: F(2,236)=9.38, p <.01; 95% CI=[0.078,0.240]). We also demonstrated that inferences do not extend to perceptions of very happy individuals’ general competence or likeability.

Study 4 (n=216) identified a boundary condition. Using a 2 (Emotion: happy; very happy) x 2 (Seeks-information: control; high) between-subjects design, we also manipulated whether the target seeks out negative information about a neighbor’s house that just burned down. A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction on naïveté (F(1,212)=4.92, p <.03), such that we replicated the effect of happiness magnitude in the control condition (F(1,212)=7.91, p <.01), but when very happy individuals sought out negative information, emotion expressions no longer influenced perceptions of naïveté (F(1,212)=1.11, p <.74). Inferences about biased processes again mediated the effect on naïveté (95% CI=[0.193,0.775]).

Study 5 (n=115) demonstrated a behavioral implication of expressed happiness. We used a conflict of interest paradigm (Sah & Loewenstein, 2012) in which participants gave advice to a partner for an estimation task (guessing how much money was contained in different jars of coins) and could financially benefit if their partner overestimated the amount. We calculated the percentage by
which participants’ advice deviated from the median estimate of each jar’s contents, and found that people gave more biased advice to very happy partners ($M=2.46$) than to happy partners ($M=1.46$; $F(1, 113)=8.01$, $p<.01$). This was mediated by perceptions of naïveté (95% CI=[0.021,0.608]). In other words, people took advantage of the opportunity to profit from very happy individuals by giving them biased, self-serving advice. Presumably, they expected very happy individuals to be naïve enough to believe it.

Our research underscores the importance of examining emotional expressions at different magnitudes, and has important implications for self-presentation. People who express high levels of happiness on social media may convey the impression that they are naïve and thus may be prone to exploitation. This disadvantage of expressing happiness should also inform “display rules” that prescribe expressions of happiness in many contexts, such as customer-employee interactions and sales (Barger & Grandey 2006; Pugh 2001). By demonstrating the impact of emotion magnitude on impression management, social cognition, and conflicts of interest, the present research offers novel insights for psychology and consumer research and would be of interest to a wide audience at ACR.

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