Misrepresentation in the Consumer Context

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MISREPRESENTATION IN THE CONSUMER CONTEXT

ABSTRACT

Research in social psychology suggests that motives such as self-bolstering and impression management can lead people to engage in deliberate misrepresentations during interpersonal communications. This paper extends our understanding of such behavior to a new domain; that of consumer communications. We draw upon findings from research on both lying and symbolic consumption to suggest that misrepresentation about products and possessions is particularly likely to occur when these products/possessions are used to create a positive self-image in the context of social interaction. Experiments 1 and 2 use a scenario methodology to simulate a social interaction wherein misrepresentation about the purchase price of a product helps participants to manage impressions. A third experiment extends these findings by testing for wealth-related misrepresentation in the context of an interaction wherein participants actually communicate their family's wealth to a recipient. Consistent with predictions derived from existing research on symbolic consumption, all three experiments provide support for the critical importance of recipient status on the likelihood of misrepresentation. The first two experiments additionally examine the role of individual differences and brand differences; results on these dimensions are also supportive of our underlying theoretical premise regarding the antecedents of lying behavior. The implications for research on interpersonal communications, as well as for the literature on symbolic consumption, are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, consumer researchers have investigated a number of interesting issues relating to word-of-mouth communications (e.g., Herr, Kardes and Kim 1991; Brown and Reingen 1987; Reingen and Kernan 1986). However, the possibility of misrepresentation in consumer communications has yet to be explored. For example, in talking to one another, consumers might misrepresent the quality of the product they have purchased, where they purchased the product, whether they bought the product on a deal, etc. The current paper uses an impression management perspective to examine the antecedents of such misrepresentation in consumer communications. In particular, we draw on extant research on symbolic consumption, which suggests that consumers bolster self-esteem and manage impressions by using products/possessions as symbolic cues - a process in which the role of referent others is held to be particularly important (Belk 1981; Bearden and Etzel 1982; Sirgy, Johar, and Wood 1986; Solomon 1983). Taking this theoretical perspective as our starting point, we examine, both conceptually and empirically, the connection that exists between consumer misrepresentation and the symbolic function of one's possessions.

While consumer misrepresentation can relate to various dimensions, the current research focuses largely on its occurrence when discussing whether or not a product was purchased at a discount. The importance of studying this aspect of consumer communications is illustrated by a recent article exploring word-of-mouth communication about various retail dimensions, which found that the most frequently discussed dimension related to whether products were available on deal (Higie, Feick, and Price 1987). Thus, using a scenario methodology, Experiments 1 and 2 simulate social interactions in which consumers might engage in deceptive communication about whether product was purchased at a discount price, or at the regular price. In both experiments, we are able to test a contingency framework where consumer misrepresentation is seen as a function of the status of the referent other (i.e., the recipient of the communication), the nature of the symbolic product being discussed, and

characteristics of the communicator. A third experiment extends this research by testing the influence of referent status on misrepresentation of one's possessions in an actual, non-simulated context. Results from all three experiments are supportive of our underlying conceptualization of the antecedents of misrepresentation, and provide some interesting insights into issues relating to interpersonal communications and symbolic consumption.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Misrepresentation and Self-Bolstering

Recent research on lying in the context of interpersonal communications offers guidelines as to the likely antecedents of consumer misrepresentation. Research in this area derives from a theoretical orientation drawn from perspectives of self-presentation and impression management. According to this orientation, a defining characteristic of deliberate misrepresentation (or lying) is that it is purposefully designed to foster a false impression (DePaulo et al. 1996). Thus, while everyday social intercourse typically entails some form of self-editing in order to emphasize features that are most relevant to a conversation, lying goes a step further in that there is conscious intent to mislead the recipient of the communication. Accordingly, lying can be thought of as an "extreme form of impression management that involves the deliberate fostering of a false impression rather than the judicious editing of a true one" (DePaulo et al. 1996, p 980).

Why do people engage in such misrepresentation? Several researchers have suggested that these extreme attempts at impression management largely derive from a need to increase one's self-esteem through misleading self-presentation. For instance, Turner et al. (1975) asked 130 participants to maintain a record of their natural conversation. These records were used to develop a typology of lying, which revealed that 55% of the lies told in conversation stemmed from the motivation to "save face." Using similar procedures, Hample (1980) found that more than two-thirds of the lies told in social interactions stemmed from self-centered motives, such

as defending one's self-esteem when communicating with economic or social superiors. More recently, DePaulo et al. (1996) also used a diary method to document lying in everyday social intercourse. Apart from recording their lies over a week's period, participants briefly described the reasons for these lies. Findings from two studies revealed that not only were most lies told to benefit oneself, a majority of such self-centered lies were told in the pursuit of "psychic rewards" such as esteem and respect. These lies helped the liar look better (e.g., kinder or smarter) than he/she actually was, or protected the liar from losing face/looking bad.¹

Thus, overall findings from the social psychology literature indicate that misrepresentation is a form of impression management, and is especially likely to occur when the communicator is seeking to bolster his/her self-image through appropriate self-presentation. These findings imply that product-related consumer misrepresentation should be particularly likely to occur when product cues are used by consumers for self-bolstering purposes. Because of its relevance to issues of impression management and self-presentation, we now turn to the consumer literature dealing with various aspects of symbolic consumption.

Product Symbolism and Consumer Misrepresentation

When and how do consumers use products and possessions in order to enhance their self-image? It is generally accepted that products and possessions can contain socially constructed symbolic meaning (Belk 1988; McCracken 1986; Richins 1994a; 1994b). Based on this premise, several research streams have explored the relationship between product symbolism and self-image. In particular, researchers have shown that symbolic product cues can affect the formation and change of the consumer's self-concept (Belk 1988; Fournier 1998; Sirgy 1982; Solomon 1983). Other studies have complemented these findings with evidence that people use cues about products and possessions to draw inferences about the nature of those who use them (Belk 1981; Feinberg, Westgate, and Burroughs 1992; Mick 1986; Sirgy et. al 1986; Wright et al. 1992). For example, observers have been shown to judge others on the basis of their clothing (Holman 1981), and also their food and restaurant choices (Anderson 1978).

Given that people seem to draw inferences about others from the possessions they own and the products they consume, a natural corollary is that consumers might also use product symbols as impression management tools (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Englis and Solomon 1995; Dawson and Cavell 1987; Leigh and Gabel 1992; Solomon 1983). In support of this perspective, the theory of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1986; Mead 1934) has been used in the consumer context to suggest that the products one purchases or possesses often contain important symbolic meaning that express a desired image, aiding impression management (Leigh and Gabel 1992; Solomon 1983). Symbolic interactionism further posits that people form a sense of self via their perceptions of what salient others think of them (Blumer 1962; 1986). Such a process of reflexive evaluation (Solomon 1983) implies that conveying a positive impression has a positive influence on self-esteem as well. Thus, the symbolic meaning contained by products can be used to enhance the consumer's self-esteem, particularly by means of the impression given to salient others. A similar inference may be drawn from research relating to reference group influences on purchase behavior. This research has shown that certain products may be purchased because of a belief that the values expressed by the product will help the consumer meet the requirements for membership in an admired group, thus enhancing the consumer's self-image (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Park and Lessig 1977; Dittmar 1994).

In sum, research relating to the symbolic nature of products suggests that the purchase and possession of symbolic or value-expressive products is part of a social process of impression management and self-bolstering. As reviewed earlier, research in social psychology indicates that these concerns can motivate people to engage in deceitful behavior (DePaulo et al. 1996; Kashy and DePaulo 1996). Bringing these two streams of research together, we arrive at the following general proposition: *Consumer lying is especially likely to occur in social interactions where a product or possession is used for symbolic (value-expressive) purposes in order to enhance the consumer's self-image.*

While misrepresentation may be a part of many different types of consumer communications, in Experiments 1 and 2 we look at a specific type of communication: namely, discussing the price paid for a discount purchase. Not only do consumers frequently talk to each other about discounts (Higie et al. 1987), research has suggested that purchase price can serve as an important symbolic cue (Belk 1981; Higie et al. 1987; Schindler 1998; Sirgy et al. 1986; Wright et al. 1992). A high purchase price can thus serve as a positive symbol of prestige and status, signaling that a consumer can afford expensive products (Leigh and Gabel 1992; Richins 1994). On the other hand, being able to get a discount price for a product may also be associated with desirable images, such as being a “smart shopper” or market maven (Feick and Price 1987; Schindler 1998). Accordingly, it should be possible to create a positive impression (and enhance one’s self-image) by falsely reporting that a product was purchased at the regular price (when in fact it was purchased at a discount), or by falsely reporting that a product was purchased at a discount (when in fact it was bought at the regular price). The former type of misrepresentation is explored in Experiment 1, and the latter in Experiment 2.

EXPERIMENT 1: CONCEALING A DISCOUNT PURCHASE

As already mentioned, research in the area of symbolic consumption emphasizes the importance of the referent other (i.e., the communication recipient) in a social interaction wherein product symbolism is used for impression management – thus, the nature of the communication recipient should directly affect the likelihood of misrepresentation. Apart from this factor, research on symbolic consumption identifies two other principal factors which exert an influence on the nature of a symbolic interaction (e.g., Bearden and Etzel 1982; Englis and Solomon 1995; Leigh and Gabel 1992; Solomon 1983; Vigneron and Johnson 1999): a) the communicator (i.e., the individual consumer); and b) the symbol itself (i.e., the product, and the symbolic meaning associated with it). Drawing on this research, we specify below hypotheses

relating to the impact of these three factors– individual differences, recipient differences, and product (brand) differences – on the likelihood of falsely concealing a discount purchase.²

Individual Differences: The Impression Management (Public Self-Consciousness) Tendency

Even in the context of symbolic consumption, some consumers will be less concerned about managing the social interaction successfully than will others. To some extent, therefore, differences in the likelihood of misrepresentation should be based on individual levels of communicator differences. Indeed, Kashy and DePaulo (1996), find significant evidence for the impact of several individual difference variables on deceptive behavior in daily interactions. Of these, we focus here on the impression management variable, both because of its relevance to the context of symbolic consumption and also because the research by Kashy and DePaulo (1996) identifies it as a leading predictor of lying. In their survey, people who were more concerned with the impressions that are being conveyed to other people (as manifested by high scores on the public self-consciousness scale developed by Fenigstein, Scherr, and Buss 1975) were also more likely to lie. Similarly, we propose that people who have a higher need for impression management (e.g., people who possess a greater degree of public self-consciousness) should also be more prone to use aspects of product symbolism to present a more positive image. As Vigneron and Johnson (1999, pg. 5) state, “... the consumption of prestige may vary according to this susceptibility to others.” Specifically, since a perception of greater price paid can lead to positive impressions of status and prestige (Leigh and Gabel 1992; Lichtenstein, Ridgway and Netemeyer 1992; Sirgy et al. 1986), we posit that higher impression managers should be more likely to convey a perception of greater price paid, even at the cost of having to engage in misrepresentation. Formally:

Hypothesis 1: The greater the tendency to manage impressions (as manifested by scores on a scale of public self-consciousness), the greater the likelihood that consumers will misrepresent the fact of having purchased the product at a discount. In other words, the

greater the tendency towards impression management, the less likely it is that the consumer will truthfully reveal that product was purchased at a discount.

Recipient Differences: The Effect of Status

Research on reference group influences suggests that a crucial factor which influences the salience of impression management concerns (and thus the likelihood of misrepresentation) has to do with the nature of salient referents (such as the recipient of the communication). According to this literature, a reference group is defined to be “an actual or imaginary individual or group conceived of having significant relevance upon an individual’s evaluations, aspirations, or behavior” (Park and Lessig 1977, p. 102). The value-expressive influence associated with reference groups reflects the individual’s motive to enhance or support his/her self-concept by associating with positive referents (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Kelman 1961; Lessig and Park 1978; McCracken 1986; Park and Lessig 1977). In other words, the individual’s self-esteem is reinforced by identifying with a referent who is admired (aspiration group; Bourne 1957). In the product context, such a process can be manifested through the ownership and conspicuous consumption of products that are typically associated with aspiration groups (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989; Lessig and Park 1978). For example, an applicant to a country club may believe that the values denoted by ownership of a luxury car (e.g., high status and prestige) helps with admission to the group (Leigh and Gabel 1992).

Research on the reference group influence thus indicates that symbolic consumption helps to boost one’s self-image through identification with an aspiration group. Given our basic premise regarding the link between symbolic consumption and misrepresentation, we suggest that the wish to identify with an aspiration group can lead to lying about product-related aspects. In the particular case of concealing a discount, such misrepresentation helps to convey the impression of a higher socio-economic status,³ since the signal of a higher price having been paid for a product results in more positive perceptions of the communicator’s status (Leigh and Gabel 1992; Richins 1994; Wright et al. 1992). Accordingly, we predict that lying about the

discount is particularly likely to occur if a salient aspiration group (such as the communication recipient) signals that a high socio-economic status is valued.

The above rationale enables us to specify a status-based recipient effect on the likelihood of deliberately concealing the discount. If the recipient of the communication occupies a higher socio-economic status than the communicator, the status difference can lead to the recipient being perceived as an aspiration group. Further, by simply belonging to a higher socio-economic status, the recipient is likely to send the implicit signal of valuing the purchase and consumption of prestigious (status) goods (Coleman 1983; Fisher 1987). In contrast, if the recipient of the communication is perceived to belong to a similar status level as the communicator, the recipient is less likely to function as an aspiration group, nor will s/he convey the implicit signal of valuing the higher socio-economic status that is associated with a more expensive purchase. Accordingly, we predict that consumers are more likely to engage in deceitful behavior to conceal the purchase of a product at a discount when communicating with a higher-status recipient, as compared to an equal-status recipient. However, as we explain below, this recipient effect should be moderated by a brand effect as well.

Brand Differences: The Effect of Expensiveness

While consumers should be more likely to conceal a discount price when communicating with people of higher status, such an effect should not be obtained for all brands. The general proposition we derived earlier suggests that such misrepresentation is only likely to occur when the brand conveys a positive symbolic image. In the current context (concealing a discount price), the positive impression sought to be conveyed is one of wealth and status. Some brands are more likely to be used for such symbolic purposes than others, and it is for such brands that lying should be observed.

In particular, research on product symbolism suggests that brand expensiveness is likely to be a major factor determining a brands' symbolic meaning (e.g., Wright et al. 1992).

Empirical support for this proposition was provided by Belk (1981) who studied various

antecedents of symbolism and found a positive influence of brand price. In regard to the precise nature of the symbolism conveyed by an expensive brand, Leigh and Gabel (1992; see also Groth and McDaniel 1993; Richins 1994; Verhallen and Roben 1994) propose that higher price contributes positively to images of prestige, status, luxury etc. Therefore, such brands are more likely to become a means of identifying with an aspiration group with higher status, whereas relatively inexpensive brands are unlikely to be used for such a purpose. Consequently, we predict that the effect of recipient status on the likelihood of concealing the discount should be moderated by brand expensiveness: while such misrepresentation is more likely to take place when communicating with a person of higher perceived status, this effect should be limited to relatively expensive brands within a product category. Formally:

Hypothesis 2a: For a relatively expensive brand, consumers are more likely to misrepresent the fact of having purchased the brand at a discount when the recipient is perceived to be of a higher status than the communicator (versus equal status).

Hypothesis 2b: For a relatively inexpensive brand, consumers are equally likely to engage in misrepresentation/tell the truth about having purchased the brand at a discount irrespective of the relative status of recipient vis a vis the communicator.

METHOD

Participants

All participants in the current research were recruited from the undergraduate program of a business school at a major Hong Kong university. The use of prestige brands is widespread in Hong Kong (and some other parts of Asia), thus providing fertile ground for the study of issues relating to symbolic consumption (Dubois and Duquesne 1993; Wong and Ahuvia 1998).

Product Category

It is important to note that not all products are purchased or consumed for symbolic reasons. Research has suggested that certain product categories are more likely to serve a

symbolic (value-expressive) purpose, as compared to other product categories which primarily serve a non-symbolic (utilitarian) purpose (Aaker 1997; Johar and Sirgy 1991; Wright et al. 1992). For example, less conspicuous products such as televisions or video recorders are less likely to serve a symbolic purpose than relatively conspicuous products such as wristwatches (Bearden and Etzel 1982). In light of our focus on social interactions wherein product and possessions are used for symbolic purposes, our paper is restricted to the study of misrepresentation in the context of symbolic product categories. As described below, an appropriate product category was chosen on the basis of pretesting with our participant population.

Manipulations

Our framework outlining the antecedents of lying behavior was tested in a 2 x 2 between-subjects experimental design. The two factors used in the design were the status of the communication recipient (equal and higher status) and the expensiveness of the brand in the chosen product category (expensive and inexpensive). Appropriate manipulations for these factors were identified on the basis of extensive pretesting.

A focus group with representative participants was first conducted to better understand the conditions under which one would discuss discount prices, and also to identify relevant symbolic products, brands, and status groups. Participants were asked to describe their idea of product symbolism and to identify symbolic products. Participants were also asked to define what constituted a realistic, good sized discount (in percentage terms), identify who they would talk with about price discounts, and describe what they typically would say while discussing discounts.

The focus group responses were used to arrive at a pool of symbolic product categories. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Sirgy et al. 1986; Wright et al. 1992), respondents indicated that conspicuous products such as watches, handbags, clothing items etc., which can be used for purposes of self-expression and image management, could be classified as symbolic products.

From this set of products, the category of watches was identified as an appropriate symbolic product category, because of its relevance to both males and females in our participant pool.

The focus group discussion was also used to define an appropriate manipulation for the status of the communication recipient. The focus group indicated that business executives working at prestigious local firms were admired and viewed to have high status, while undergraduate students at other Hong Kong universities were viewed as a peer group possessing equal status. The distinction between the two groups was validated by three pretests. In the first pretest, participants answered a seven-point semantic differential scale (lower status/higher status) for each of the two reference groups. As expected, business executives were shown to have a significantly higher status rating (mean = 5.69) than the university students (mean = 3.93, $t(90) = 15.55$, $p < .001$). In the second pretest, participants answered a seven-point scale (not at all admired/very admired) for each of the two reference groups. Again, business executives were found to score significantly higher (mean = 4.71) than university students (mean = 3.38; $t(47) = 3.22$, $p < .01$), showing that the former was more likely to be perceived as an aspirational group. This result was validated by a third pretest in which participants responded to various referent groups on a seven-point scale anchored by “Probably similar to how I would not like to be” and “Probably similar to how I would like to become”, and a midpoint of “Probably similar to how I see myself currently”. Business executives were shown to be close to the end-point of the scale (mean = 5.37) and had a significantly higher score ($t(29) = 3.48$, $p < .01$) than the university students who were rated closer to the midpoint of the scale (mean = 4.13).

Additionally, a pretest was conducted to provide some assurance that business executives give a strong implicit signal of valuing high price products. Thirty-four subjects were asked to indicate on a seven-point semantic differential scale how important (not important/very important) they thought the possession of high price products was for business executives versus university students. Possession of high price products was perceived to be more important for

the executives (means: business executives = 5.62, university students = 4.62, $t(33) = 4.94$, $p < .001$).

Finally, within the identified symbolic product category it was necessary to identify brands that were expensive and inexpensive. Our focus group indicated that participants were very familiar with Rolex (perceived to be an expensive brand) and Swatch (perceived to be an inexpensive brand). Another pretest was conducted to confirm these price perceptions. Participants answered a seven-point semantic differential scale (not at all expensive/very expensive) for the two different brands. As expected, Rolex (mean = 6.37) was rated as more expensive than Swatch (mean = 3.63, $t(37) = 14.91$, $p < .001$).

Study Overview

Eighty-eight undergraduate participants were randomly assigned to one of the four different conditions resulting from the combination of our two between subject factors: the status of the recipient as compared to the communicator (equal and higher status) and the expensiveness of the brand (expensive and inexpensive). Cell sizes ranged from 21 to 23.

The procedure employed in this study presented something of a challenge. It was not logistically feasible to create an actual experimental situation where participants could be questioned about products that they had actually bought on discount, with the added difficulty of incorporating the recipient and brand factors into such a situation. Thus, we used a scenario method (e.g., Darke and Freedman 1993; Fisher 1993) for this experiment, wherein participants responded to the key dependent variable after perusing a scenario describing the communication situation.

Further, given the sensitive nature of the research (admissions of lying), the scenario had to be presented in such a way as to avoid socially desirable responses, wherein participants might not hide the discount price in any condition. Thus, we chose to adopt the third person projective technique, in which respondents are presented with a verbal situation and are asked to relate the beliefs and attitudes of a third person (similar to themselves), rather than directly

expressing personal beliefs and attitudes (Kassarjian 1974; see also Kitayama et. al 1997). By responding in the third person, the social pressure to give an acceptable or appropriate answer is reduced (Simon and Simon 1975). Our operationalization of the third person technique follows that outlined by Fisher (1993), who tested the effectiveness of indirect questioning by asking student participants to describe how a “typical college student ” would respond to a set of questions. These responses were then compared to answers obtained through direct questioning. Findings indicated that indirect questions are an effective technique for removing social desirability bias when the questions asked are socially sensitive in nature.

The need to use an indirect (third-person) technique in our specific context was further reinforced by a pilot test in which participants were exposed to exactly the same scenario as the one used in the main study, with the only difference being the use of a first-person (rather than the third-person) technique – i.e., pilot subjects were asked to imagine themselves in the scenario, rather than a fellow student. As might be expected with the first person technique, where subjects would want to present themselves in a favorable light in a hypothetical situation, extremely low misrepresentation scores were obtained across conditions. These findings thus bolstered the case for using a third-person projective technique in order to document deliberate misrepresentation.

Procedure

Following Fisher (1993), all participants in our study were asked to read a short written scenario. Each scenario described the actions of a fellow student at the same University (the protagonist) attending a University Open House event. The use of a fellow student as the protagonist was intended to enable the participants to relate to, and project themselves into, the situation described. Evidence is presented later which suggests that participants did indeed engage in such projection.

The scenario used for the expensive brand/high-status recipient is provided below, with the other level of each factor (inexpensive brand/low-status recipient) specified in italics. In the

actual scenario, “XXX” was replaced by the name of the University where the research was conducted:

We would like you to imagine the following situation:

A student at XXX is attending a University Open House event, to which many people from across Hong Kong have been invited. The student is in conversation with a few executives from a prestigious local firm (*few students from another local University*). The conversation turns to a new Rolex (*Swatch*) watch the XXX student is wearing. One of the executives (*students from the other University*) comments on how nice the watch looks, and asks the XXX student how much the watch had cost. The XXX student had recently purchased the Rolex (*Swatch*) watch at a 20% discount off the regular price.⁴

Immediately following their reading of the above scenario, participants were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale whether they thought the fellow student would have a tendency to misrepresent the product’s discounted price. The categories were as follows: would be very likely to give the discount price (1), would be likely to give the discount price (2), would be somewhat likely to give the discount price (3), would be equally likely to give the discount price or the regular price (4), would be somewhat likely to give the regular price (5), would be likely to give the regular price (6), and would be very likely to give the regular price (7). Thus, the likelihood of deliberate misrepresentation regarding the discount can be contrasted by comparing mean scores on this scale – higher numbers (lower likelihood of revealing the discount price) indicate a greater likelihood of misrepresentation. The use of such a scale offers a fairly stringent test of misrepresentation since any deviation from the truth will count as a misrepresentation. It is, however, consistent with research on lying which posits that even an intentional act of omission – whereby the communicator manages impressions by not telling the whole truth – counts as a lie (DePaulo et al. 1996). Further, it should be noted that motivations such as a fear of social proscriptions against lying (DePaulo et al. 1996; Hample 1980) can act as countervailing forces against a tendency to engage in deliberate misrepresentation. The presence of these strong forces suggests that we may not detect high absolute levels of misrepresentation. Rather, we are seeking to uncover conditions which make it relatively more likely that consumers will lie – or, in other words, less likely that they will tell the truth.

Following the misrepresentation measure, participants were also asked to complete a seven-item impression management scale (Fenigstein et al. 1975; see also Kashy and DePaulo 1996). Scale items consisted of a statement (e.g., “I am concerned about what people think of me”; etc.) and a seven-point semantic differential scale anchored by “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree” ($\alpha = .78$).

Subsequently, participants rated the status of the two differing communication recipients on seven-point semantic differential scales (low status/high status). They then rated the prestige of the experimental brand on a seven-point scale (very prestigious/not at all prestigious). This measure checked whether the expensive brand really signaled higher socio-economic status. Participants then completed an open-ended question that asked them what they thought the study was about. Finally, participants were asked to indicate their gender, age, area of study, approximate family income, their degree of liking/dislike for the product, and whether they actually owned the product -- responses to these items had no effect on the results reported below and therefore are not discussed further.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

Confirming the effectiveness of the status manipulation, participants rated the status of the business executive significantly higher (mean = 4.95) than the university students (mean = 4.06, $t(87) = 6.89$, $p < .001$). As expected, Rolex was perceived to be more prestigious (mean = 5.95) than Swatch (mean = 3.63, $t(86) = 9.61$, $p < .001$) by the participants.

Tests of Hypotheses

Mean scores for misrepresentation along with standard deviations are presented in Table 1. Operationally, a greater tendency to misrepresent the discount is tantamount to a lower likelihood of truthfully revealing that the product was purchased at a discount.

----- Insert Table 1 here -----

Hypothesis 1: Individual Differences. The first hypothesis suggested that the greater the individual's tendency to manage impressions, the greater the likelihood of lying about whether or not the product was purchased on discount. Consistent with this hypothesis, a correlation analysis indicated a significant correlation between mean scores on an impression management inventory (Fenigstein et al. 1975) and the reported likelihood of misrepresentation ($r(88) = .231, p < .05$). Thus, higher impression managers displayed a greater inclination to conceal the product's discounted price. Importantly, the finding that greater impression managers did score higher on our misrepresentation scale provides evidence that participants were successful in projecting themselves into the experimental scenarios. This finding thus provides validity to the third person methodology employed.

Hypotheses 2a and 2b: Recipient and Brand Differences. The second set of hypotheses was tested in the context of a full model ANCOVA based on the 2 (recipient status: equal vs. higher than communicator) x 2 (brand expensiveness: expensive vs. inexpensive) between-subjects experimental design, with the impression management score used as a covariate. Confirming the correlation finding above, the covariate term was found to be significant ($F(1, 83) = 4.97, p < .05$). Further, the covariate did not interact with either of the experimental factors.

The ANCOVA investigated the impact of the status of the communication recipient and the expensiveness of the brand on the likelihood of misrepresentation.⁵ As expected, a significant interaction effect was obtained, with the highest level of lying (mean = 4.09) being realized in the higher status/expensive brand condition ($F(1, 83) = 3.64, p < .05$). None of the other effects from the overall ANOVA attained significance. Given the significant interaction effect, we proceeded to examine each of the specific hypotheses with planned contrasts.

Hypothesis 2a suggested that for an expensive brand (Rolex), consumers would be more likely to misrepresent the fact of having purchased the product on discount when the communication recipient was of higher status (versus equal status). Supporting this hypothesis,

a planned contrast indicated that when compared to a recipient of equal status, communication with a recipient of higher status would be more likely to involve misrepresentation (means: higher status = 4.09, equal status = 3.05, $t(87) = 1.90$, $p < .05$).

Hypothesis 2b predicted that for an inexpensive brand (Swatch), consumers would be equally likely to lie/tell the truth about having purchased the brand irrespective of the relative status of the recipient vis a vis the communicator. Consistent with this prediction, a planned contrast indicated no difference in the likelihood of misrepresentation with a recipient of higher status versus a recipient of equal status (means: higher status = 3.22, equal status = 3.62, $t(87) = 0.79$, $p > .10$).

The fact that recipient status affected truth telling for the expensive brand (Rolex) but not the inexpensive brand (Swatch) is supportive of participants not responding on the basis of any experimental demand. Had participants felt that they were supposed to respond by saying that the watch cost more when the recipient was of higher vs. equal status, they would likely have done so for the Swatch watch in addition to the Rolex watch, which was not the case. In addition, responses to the question related to the perceived purpose of the study suggested that no participants were aware of any of the experimental hypotheses, and none suspected that the study had anything to do with the symbolic nature of products.

DISCUSSION

Results from Experiment 1 identify conditions under which consumers are likely to misrepresent the fact of having purchased a product at a discount price. Specifically, we show that within a symbolic product category (watches), such deliberate misrepresentation is particularly likely to occur when communicating with a higher-status (aspiration) group as compared to an equal-status peer group. This effect is restricted to the case of an expensive brand, a finding consistent with the notion that expensive brands are more likely to convey positive symbolic images of socio-economic status. Also, consistent with our overall theoretical

framework, we show that the impression management tendency is an important predictor of lying behavior.

Our results support the treatment of lying as a form of impression management, which people engage in to enhance their self-image in a social interaction. In the context of symbolic consumption, the literature on reference group influences has shown that consumers often seek to enhance their self-image by using consumption-related aspects to identify with an aspiration group. Thus, the current results, which show that concealing a discount price for an expensive brand is more likely to occur while communicating with a higher-status aspiration group (versus an equal-status group), are consistent with extant research on lying as well as on symbolic consumption.

A central assumption underlying the theoretical framework for Experiment 1 findings is that a high purchase price carries positive symbolic connotations. This assumption is supported by research on symbolic consumption showing that high price is often associated with positive images of wealth and status (Belk 1981; Leigh and Gabel 1992). Consequently, concealing a discount price (and conveying a higher purchase price) enables the consumer to identify with the higher-status aspiration group specified in the scenario, thus enhancing the consumer's self-image.

However, conveying the impression of a high purchase price may not be the only way price information is used to create a positive image and bolster self-esteem. In particular, being able to buy a product at a discount can also carry positive symbolic overtones and convey a positive impression of the purchaser. Indeed, recent research suggests that increasingly, the image of being a "smart shopper" – i.e., someone who gets good value for money – is a desirable one (Higie et al. 1987; Feick and Price 1987). If the desire to portray oneself as a smart shopper were to be made salient, this would clearly counteract the motivation to conceal a discount price, creating a situation where the consumer would be likely to reveal the true purchase price. Indeed, the salience of the smart shopper image may actually lead consumers to report that a

product was purchased at a discount, even when the purchase had actually been made at the regular price.

EXPERIMENT 2: CONCEALING THE REGULAR PRICE

Experiment 2 focuses on the type of misrepresentation that occurs when consumers choose to conceal that a product was purchased at a regular price, instead reporting a discount price. Since reporting a discount purchase enables the communicator to present the image of a smart shopper who knows where to get a discount, we suggest that consumers will be motivated to engage in this type of lying when the existence of a smart shopping opportunity is made salient. Given the influence that the communication recipient can exert on the symbolic interaction, one way by which this type of purchasing opportunity can be made salient is through the signal that the recipient may convey. In particular, in the type of scenario detailed in Experiment 1, the recipient can highlight knowledge of a smart shopping opportunity by making an explicit statement suggesting that the product can be bought at a discount. Once a smart shopping opportunity is made salient, we suggest that the communicator may seek to enhance (or defend) his/her self-image by seeking to portray himself/herself as being aware of the opportunity to be a smart shopper. This can be done by concealing the fact that the purchase was made at the regular price and falsely reporting that a discount price was paid.

As before, we hold that misrepresentation is a form of impression management. Accordingly, the impression management tendency should be a crucial antecedent of the tendency to engage in deliberate misrepresentation of the purchase price. Specifically, individuals who possess a greater tendency to manage impressions should be more likely to conceal the fact of having bought the product at the regular price. Formally, we predict:

Hypothesis 3: When the recipient group highlights the opportunity for a smart shopping purchase, the impression management tendency should be positively linked

with the likelihood of reporting that the purchase was made at a discount, even when the purchase was made at the regular price

Recipient differences should also exert an influence on the likelihood of concealing the regular price. Consistent with our earlier theorizing, we propose that a key motivation for consumer misrepresentation is the desire to bolster self-esteem by identifying with an aspiration group. Thus, in Experiment 1, we theorized that the higher status of the aspiration group (executives) conveyed an implicit signal that the group valued high socio-economic status. Accordingly, claiming that an expensive brand was purchased at the regular price (instead of a discount price) facilitated identification with the aspiration group. However, it is possible for an implicit signal of socio-economic status to be outweighed by an explicit signal of valuing the smart shopping ability. In the current context, where the recipient explicitly highlights the importance of smart shopping, the (false) claim that the brand was purchased at a discount price can facilitate identification with a recipient group.

Experiment 2 thus studies the case of lying in terms of concealing the regular price, when the recipient sends the explicit signal of valuing the smart shopping ability. Importantly, in support of our premise that misrepresentation is particularly likely to occur when it enables the communicator to identify with an aspiration group, we predict that once again, misrepresentation regarding the regular price is particularly likely to occur when communicating with a higher-status recipient group rather than an equal-status group, even when both recipient groups convey the same explicit signal regarding the value of smart shopping.

By examining the nature of lying in a context which allows both recipient groups to send the same signal, Experiment 2 provides a clearer picture of the antecedents of a deceitful communication. In Experiment 1, not only was the higher-status recipient group more likely to function as a salient aspiration group (compared to the equal-status peer group), the former group was also more likely to emit the implicit signal of valuing higher socio-economic status

than the latter. Accordingly, the findings of Experiment 1 do not allow us to identify which of these two factors (aspirational nature of recipient vs. signal conveyed) was responsible for the greater lying observed in the higher-status condition. Experiment 2 offers a narrower test by separating the aspirational nature of the recipient group from the signal conveyed. If it is simply the signal sent by any recipient group that determines whether the communicator will engage in misrepresentation, no recipient differences should be observed in Experiment 2. If, however, the desire to identify with an aspiration group is a key antecedent of lying, greater misrepresentation should be observed when communicating with the higher-status group versus the equal-status group, even when both groups send the same explicit signal.

While we expect recipient differences to parallel those observed in Experiment 1 – namely, misrepresentation is more likely to be observed for the higher status recipient – we do not expect a moderating effect of brand expensiveness. In Experiment 1, we predicted that recipient differences in misrepresentation would only occur for the expensive brand, because such brands are likely to be used for the symbolic purpose of conveying high socio-economic status– which was the image that was sought to be conveyed by misrepresentation. However, such is not the case with the image that is sought when concealing the regular price by falsely reporting a discount price. The motivation (to portray oneself as a smart shopper) that drives this type of lie should be just as salient for an inexpensive brand as it is for an expensive brand. This would be particularly likely if the aspiration group simply sends out the signal that it values the smart-shopping ability per se, independent of the expensiveness of the brand. In such a case, consumers should be motivated to identify with the aspiration group by concealing the purchase of the product at regular price, whether or not the brand is expensive or inexpensive. Thus, we suggest that the effect of recipient differences will not be moderated by brand expensiveness. Formally:

Hypothesis 4: Under conditions when the recipient group sends an explicit signal of valuing the smart shopping ability, consumers are more likely to misrepresent the fact of

having purchased the brand at the regular price when the recipient is perceived to be of a higher status than the communicator (versus equal status), irrespective of brand expensiveness.

METHOD AND RESULTS: EXPERIMENT 2

Study Overview

Study 2 used the same 2 x 2 between-subjects experimental design as that used in Study 1 (i.e., status of the communication recipient (equal vs. high) x expensiveness of the brand (expensive vs. inexpensive). Ninety-eight undergraduate participants were randomly assigned to one of the four different experimental conditions. Cell sizes ranged from 23 to 26.

Procedure

In the second study we again utilized a short written scenario involving the third person projective technique (Fisher 1993). Similar to Study 1, the scenario described the actions of a fellow student attending an open house event for their university. One of the scenarios used in the study (higher-status/expensive brand) is provided below, with the other levels of the factors in italics. As before, “XXX” refers to the University at which the research was conducted.

We would like you to imagine the following situation:

A student at XXX is attending a University Open House event, to which many people from across Hong Kong have been invited. The student is in conversation with a few executives from a prestigious local firm (*few students from another local University*). The conversation turns to a new Rolex (*Swatch*) watch the XXX student is wearing. One of the executives (*students from the other University*) mentions that this watch can be quite overpriced, but it can usually be found at about a 20% discount off the regular price. The executive (*student from the other University*) then asks the XXX student whether the watch had been purchased at the regular price, or at a discount price. The XXX student had recently purchased the Rolex (*Swatch*) watch at the full regular price.

After reading the scenario, participants were first asked to indicate on a seven-point scale whether they thought the fellow student would have a tendency to hide the fact that the product was purchased at a regular price. The categories were as follows: would be very likely to give the regular price (1), would be likely to give the regular price (2), would be somewhat likely to give the regular price (3), would be equally likely to give the regular price or a discount

price (4), would be somewhat likely to give a discount price (5), would be likely to give a discount price (6), and would be very likely to give a discount price (7). Thus, the likelihood of falsely reporting a discount purchase can be contrasted by comparing numbers on this scale – higher numbers (lower likelihood of revealing the regular price) indicate a greater likelihood of misrepresentation. As in Study 1, participants were then asked to complete the seven-item impression management scale (Fenigstein et al. 1975, $\alpha = .823$).

To check the manipulation of recipient status, participants rated the status of the two differing communication recipients on seven-point semantic differential scales (low status/high status). They then rated the prestige of the experimental brand on a seven-point scale anchored by very prestigious/not at all prestigious. Next, participants completed an open-ended question that asked them what they thought the study was about. Finally, participants were asked to indicate their gender, age, area of study, approximate family income, their degree of liking/dislike for the product, and whether they actually owned the product – responses to these items had no effect on the results reported below and therefore are not discussed further.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

Confirming the effectiveness of the status manipulation, participants rated the status of the business executive significantly higher (mean = 5.07) than the university students (mean = 4.19, $t(97) = 6.10$, $p < .001$). As expected, participants perceived Rolex to be more prestigious (mean = 6.19) than Swatch (mean = 3.92, $t(96) = 9.84$, $p < .001$). Responses to the question related to the perceived purpose of the study were also examined. No participants were aware of the experimental hypotheses, and none suspected that the study had anything to do with the symbolic nature of products.

Tests of Hypotheses

Mean scores for misrepresentation along with standard deviations are presented in Table 2. Operationally, a greater likelihood of lying is tantamount to a lower likelihood of truthfully revealing that the product was purchased at a regular price.

----- Insert Table 2 here -----

Hypothesis 3: Impression Management. The third hypothesis indicated that the greater the individual's tendency to manage impressions, the greater the likelihood of lying about whether or not the product was purchased at a regular price. Consistent with this hypothesis, a correlation analysis indicated a significant correlation between mean scores on the impression management inventory (Fenigstein et al. 1975) and the reported likelihood of misrepresentation ($r(98) = .184, p < .05$). Thus, higher impression managers displayed a greater inclination to conceal the fact of having purchased the product at the regular price.

Hypothesis 4: Recipient Differences. The fourth hypothesis was tested in the context of the full model ANCOVA based on the 2 (recipient status: equal vs. higher than communicator) x 2 (brand expensiveness: expensive vs. inexpensive) between-subjects experimental design, with the impression management score as the covariate. As expected, the covariate was significant ($F(1, 93) = 3.50, p < .05$) and did not interact with either of the experimental factors. Further, the conclusions derived from the presented results do not differ if the covariate is excluded from the analysis.

Hypothesis 4 stated that, irrespective of brand expensiveness, when an explicit signal of valuing a smart shopping ability is indicated, consumers are more likely to falsely report a discount purchase if the recipient of the communication is of high status (versus equal status). Supporting this hypothesis, the ANOVA yielded only a significant main effect for the recipient factor (means: high status = 4.02, equal status = 3.31, $F(1, 93) = 3.29, p < .05$). Thus, irrespective of brand expensiveness, consumers are more likely to misrepresent the fact of

having purchasing the brand at a regular price when the recipient of the communication is perceived to be of a higher status than the communicator.

DISCUSSION

Experiment 2 investigated how the three factors specified earlier (impression management tendency, brand expensiveness and recipient status) may affect the likelihood of consumers' concealing a regular-price purchase and falsely reporting a discount purchase. Under conditions where the recipient group highlights the importance of smart shopping, we predicted that concealing a regular-price purchase would enable consumers to boost their self-image by identifying with the aspiration group. Results from this experiment were again supportive of our predictions. Higher impression managers were found to be more likely to engage in misrepresentation (falsely reporting a discount purchase), indicating that, under these specific conditions, portraying oneself as a smart shopper helps the communicator to convey a positive impression. Importantly, such lying was more likely to occur when communicating with a higher status group rather than an equal status group, thus supporting our basic premise that identification with an aspiration group enables consumers to heighten self-image in the context of symbolic consumption. Finally, also as predicted, the effect of recipient status on lying was not moderated by brand expensiveness. Thus, an equally positive impression seems to be conveyed by portraying an ability to "shop smart" for a relatively inexpensive brand, as for an expensive brand.

While the effect of brand expensiveness differed between Experiment 1 and Experiment 2, the effects of recipient status obtained in these two experiments are strikingly similar. In both cases, misrepresentation was more likely to occur for an aspirational (higher status) recipient group as compared to an equal status group, even though the nature of the lie in the two experiments was completely different (falsely reporting a regular price vs. falsely reporting a discount price). In Experiment 1, misrepresentation was more likely to be obtained for a reference group belonging to a higher socio-economic status (executives) than a more equal

socio-economic status group (other University students). By virtue of belonging to a higher socio-economic status than the recipient, we argued that the former group sent out an implicit signal of valuing the possession of prestige products. Thus, conveying the (false) impression that a full price had been paid for an expensive product enabled the communicator to achieve identification with this group. In Experiment 2, the same aspirational group sent out an explicit signal of valuing the smart shopping ability. Therefore, in this case, conveying the impression that a product had been bought at a discount enabled the communicator to achieve identification with the aspiration group.

This commonality of results serves to illustrate the importance of aspiration group identification as an underlying motive for product-related impression management, an issue that is explored further in Experiment 3. Importantly, Experiment 2 results also help to address a potential limitation of the rationale provided for Experiment 1 results. As discussed earlier, the higher status group in Experiment 1 conveyed the signal of valuing prestige products. Thus, the equal-status group in Experiment 1 differed from this group not only because it was not an aspirational group, but also because it did not send out such a signal. Accordingly, it might be argued that for both these conditions, communicators simply sought to achieve identification with whichever recipient group they were interacting with. When interacting with the higher status group, such identification may be achieved by conveying higher wealth (falsely reporting regular price), while such a lie may not be necessary in order to identify with the peer group. Thus, Experiment 1 results did not provide clear support for our basic premise that it is the wish to identify with an aspiration group that motivates consumers to engage in misrepresentation – these results could instead be explained by a motivation to simply identify with whatever recipient group one happens to be interacting with. Experiment 2 clarified this issue by ensuring that the two recipient groups provided the same signal (valuing smart shopping); thereby differing only in the nature of their aspirational nature. If consumers are simply motivated by an urge to identify with the recipient group, equal degrees of lying should

have been obtained in the two conditions. However, as described above, a greater likelihood of misrepresentation was obtained for the aspirational group, thus supporting our proposed mechanism.

While the results from our first two experiments are highly supportive of our theoretical framework, these experiments do suffer from a methodological limitation: namely, the use of the scenario method. As explained earlier, this method was employed because it would be quite difficult to create a “real” situation wherein participants had actually purchased products at a certain price (discount or regular), and then to study the impact of our various factors (e.g., recipient and brand differences) on lying behavior in such a situation. The use of a scenario method to study situations that are difficult to explore using more direct techniques has considerable precedence in the literature (e.g., Darke and Freedman 1993; Gourville and Soman 1998; Sen and Johnson 1997), as does the use of the third-person projective method for studying socially sensitive behaviors (Fisher 1993; Kassarian 1974; Kitayama et al. 1997).

However, valid though the scenario method is, a more direct demonstration of misrepresentation would strengthen and add to the findings reported. Experiment 3 was carried out in order to provide such a demonstration, and also to extend our findings regarding reference group effects to a more general context than discount purchases. The notion that products (or product-aspects) can contribute to self-image may be thought of as a specific instance of the broader proposition that possessions in general can influence self-image (Belk 1988). Accordingly, just as people may lie about product-related aspects in order to bolster the self, such misrepresentation should also be observed for possessions that are tied closely to the self-image one wishes to portray. The specific domain we chose to study was lying about one’s wealth. An individual’s wealth is often a key contributor to his/her self-image (e.g., Diener and Diener 1995; Diener, Horwitz and Emmons 1985; Mason 1992) – thus, in accordance with the premise that misrepresentation is likely to occur in the context of communications that are related to one’s self-identity, we expect that misrepresentation may be observed in the context

of wealth-related communications. As with reporting a higher price paid for a product, lying about one's wealth can help to convey a higher socio-economic status. Therefore, people may be tempted to report a higher level of personal wealth in an attempt to identify with an aspiration group and boost their self-image. Experiment 3 was designed to test this prediction, using a direct technique in order to observe actual lying/misrepresentation.

EXPERIMENT 3

Overview and Pretesting

This experiment sought to test the effects of recipient's aspirational level (higher-status group vs. equal-status group) on participants' communications about their family wealth. In order to examine direct lying behavior, recipient status was manipulated by giving participants a brief written description of the experimenter (a confederate), at the beginning of the experiment. The question about family wealth was then asked in the context of other demographic questions. The basic prediction was that people are likely to report a higher level of wealth (than is true), when doing so enables them to identify with an aspirational reference group.

In order to test this prediction, we first needed to create two recipient (confederate) descriptions: an aspirational (high-status) description, as well as a peer (equal-status) description. The descriptions were created with several factors in mind. The basic premise we were trying to test is that lying is motivated by a desire to identify with an aspiration group. In the particular case of inflating one's wealth, the lie helps to convey the impression of a higher socio-economic status, since higher wealth/income is positively related to socio-economic status (Coleman 1983; Solomon 1996). Accordingly, a (false) inflation of wealth should occur when communicating with a person who is perceived to belong to a higher socio-economic status as compared to an equal-status person who does not have such claims. Since education and occupation are two important facets of socio-economic status (Coleman 1983; Gilbert and Kahl 1982; Solomon

1996), status was manipulated on the basis of these two dimensions: the experimenter in the higher status condition was described more positively in terms of these two dimensions than in the equal status description.

Since wealth/income is another key component of socio-economic status, our two descriptions could also have differed along this dimension – the experimenter could have been described as being wealthy in the higher status condition, but not the equal-status condition. However, doing so would have introduced an alternate explanation for the predicted finding of greater reported wealth in the former condition. Simply, one explanation of such a finding could be that participants adjust their reported wealth to fit with that of the experimenter, in both conditions. Thus, a higher level of wealth might be reported in the “higher status/higher wealth” experimenter condition than in the “equal status/lower wealth” condition, not because of a desire to identify with an aspirational recipient per se, but rather because of a desire to identify with any recipient, irrespective of condition.

Thus, while we wanted to induce status differences in the two conditions, we did not try to do so based on a difference in wealth perception. Rather, we sought to induce status perceptions via descriptions of education and occupation. After extensive pretesting, the following descriptions were judged to be suitable:

“Higher-Status Description”: Vivian did her undergraduate degree in Computer Science at <school name> (Dean’s List). She recently completed a special one-year course in business management at Harvard University. Vivian comes from a wealthy family. Nevertheless, she wanted to fund her Harvard education by herself. She achieved this by winning a prestigious academic scholarship from Harvard which paid for all her expenses. Vivian obtained outstanding grades at Harvard. She has now been offered a permanent position with McKinsey as a marketing consultant. While she decides whether to take the job, Vivian is collaborating with <school name> Marketing faculty on several market research projects.

“Equal-Status Description”: Vivian did her undergraduate degree in Marketing at <school name>. Vivian comes from a wealthy family. They wanted to send her for a special one-year course in business management at a private university in the US, but Vivian’s English is not very good. Because of her poor English, Vivian did not feel confident enough to go to school in the US. Instead of going abroad, Vivian decided to look for a job in Hong Kong. Her work experience includes a sales position with Giordano. She is currently employed at <school name> as a research assistant.

The specific descriptions used were based on the perceptions of students at the University where this research was conducted. Specifically, in this school, the Computer-Science major was perceived to be very prestigious; as was being placed on the Dean’s List. The brand

names “Harvard” and “McKinsey” also carried high status connotations. Thus, these items were incorporated in the higher status description. On the other hand, in light of the fact that this study was conducted with undergraduate Marketing participants at the University, the equal-status description mentioned that the experimenter had also completed her degree in Marketing at the same University. Further, standards of spoken English were fairly low in our participant pool – thus, describing the experimenter as possessing poor English also contributed to the “equal status” operationalization. The mid-level position of Giordano (a local clothing retailer) was in line with students’ expectations of a typical job after graduation.

The success of our manipulation was borne out through a final set of pretests. In response to a question asking pool participants ($n = 19$) to indicate on a seven-point scale whether they perceived the person as occupying lower status or higher status than themselves (1 = lower status; 4 = equal status; 7 = higher status), the former description scored higher (mean = 5.33) than the latter (mean = 4.00, $F = 10.23$, $p < .01$). Further, the former description also scored higher (mean = 5.11) than the latter (mean = 3.80; $F(1, 17) = 4.01$, $p < .05$) on a seven-point admiration scale (1 = not at all admired; 7 = very admired). Finally, a separate pretest with 24 participants revealed that, on a seven-point scale measuring perceived family wealth (not at all rich/very rich), the person in the higher-status description was not perceived as belonging to a wealthier family (mean = 5.00) than the person in the equal-status description (mean = 4.75, $F(1, 22) < 1$, ns).

METHOD

Procedure and Results

46 undergraduate Marketing students at a major Hong Kong university took part in the experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two recipient conditions (admired/non-admired), and studied one at a time. As each participant entered the lab, s/he was directed by the experimenter (a female student assistant unaware of the experimental

hypothesis) to a desk on which a sheet of paper entitled “Introductory Note” had been placed. In each case, the experimenter asked the participant to read the note “before I begin the experiment”. The note explained that, as a result of recent changes in experimental policies at < school name >, students participating in any experiment now had to be provided with some background details of the experimenter. In line with this regulation, the introductory note listed the experimenter’s name, office phone number, email address, and finally, a brief bio-data. The bio-data was in the form of a short paragraph, and contained one of the two experimenter descriptions pretested earlier.

The introductory note concluded with a sentence (at the bottom of the sheet) telling participants to inform the experimenter if they had finished reading the note, since she could then begin the experiment. Once the experimenter was so informed, she told the participant that before beginning, she would fill out some personal details on a form she had with her, and then proceed with the main questionnaire. The experimenter then commenced by asking participants their age and writing down the answer on the form. The next question referred to the key dependent variable (wealth), and was asked as follows: “What is your best guess about how rich or poor your family is? I need to circle a number on a scale for you. The scale goes from 1 to 9, where 1 stands for poor and 9 for rich; please tell me which number I should circle for you.” Note that the wealth measure related to the family, instead of the individual. This was done for two reasons: first, for students, individual wealth is probably less salient than family wealth; and secondly, given the Confucian culture in which the study was run, the distinction between the family and the individual is unlikely to be a very marked one. Thus, the family’s level of wealth is more likely to contribute to the individual’s self-image in this culture than in more Western cultures (Wong and Ahuvia 1998).

Following the wealth measure, the experimenter noted the participant’s gender, and also asked the participant whether s/he was an exchange student. As the last item on the “Personal Information” form, participants were asked whether they owned a tennis racquet –

this question provided a segue into the main questionnaire. After this form had been completed, the experimenter handed the “main” questionnaire booklet to the participant. The first page of the booklet informed participants that they would be asked to provide a careful evaluation of a new tennis racquet “Lightning”, based on the description provided. The next page contained a description of the racquet, followed by a series of attitude and intention questions, which were of no relevance to the experiment. After these measures, participants were presented with a final question asking them to write down what, in their opinion, had been the purpose of the study. Almost all participants focused on their evaluations of the racquet as the study’s purpose. Only two participants mentioned that the experiment had something to do with how the experimenter description could influence other answers. These participants were not included in the analyses, although their inclusion did not change the results.⁶

Apart from the two experimental conditions described above, a separate control condition was also run with 18 participants from the same subject pool. These participants were not exposed to any experimenter description. Rather, they simply filled out a set of demographic questions, among which the wealth question was also embedded. This control group was run in order to provide a baseline measure of wealth. Our prediction is that participants in the higher-status condition should (falsely) inflate their wealth scores, while participants in the equal-status condition should be more likely to report true scores. This would imply that that participants in the higher-status condition should report higher wealth levels than participants exposed to the equal-status description – and the wealth score in the latter condition should not differ significantly from the average score in the control condition.

Our analysis of the reported wealth scores produced results strongly supportive of our prediction. Participants exposed to the higher status (aspirational) description reported a higher wealth score (mean = 5.52) than participants exposed to the equal-status description (mean = 4.86; $F(1, 42) = 4.01, p < .05$), as well as participants in the control group (mean = 4.88; F

(1,40) = 4.71, $p < .05$). Further, the scores in the latter two conditions did not differ ($F < 1$, ns). These results support the idea that the equal-status description did not cause participants to lie about their wealth; however, as predicted, the higher-status description seems to have led participants to report inflated wealth scores.

Discussion

Results from Experiment 3 are supportive of our premise that the desire to seek identification with an aspirational reference group/person can be a key motivation for lying behavior in regard to one's material possessions. Thus, while people may tell the truth about their wealth when communicating with individuals of equal-status, lying behavior is more likely to be observed in when such lying helps the communicator to identify with a higher-status (aspirational) recipient.

Not only are findings from this experiment consistent with our earlier experiments depicting greater lying/misrepresentation to higher status groups rather than those of equal-status, they also extend our earlier results. The inclusion of a control group enables a measure of lying behavior in a context absent of a referent other. Comparisons between individuals in the control group and individuals exposed to the higher-status manipulation show strong evidence of misrepresentation for the manipulated condition. Interestingly, however, those individuals exposed to the equal-status manipulation show equivalence in behavior to the control group. The match in the behavior of these two groups indicates little if any effort to use lying behavior to manage impressions towards an equal status reference group.

Additionally, the current results extend the domain of lying behavior from price-related communication to a related, but different domain; that of personal wealth. In light of our premise that lying is a way of boosting self-image, these findings provide support for Belk's (1988) postulation that our possessions are intimately linked with our self-image – thus, communications regarding these possessions can reflect on our self-image.

Finally, Experiment 3 depicts lying behavior using a direct method, rather than the indirect scenario technique used in the prior experiments. In doing so, this experiment provides a strong test of our propositions by placing experimental subjects in a real-world context, and demonstrating a lying pattern that matches the hypothesized effects.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current research presents what we believe to be the first investigation of deliberate misrepresentation in communications about products and possessions. The first two experiments use a third-party scenario method to explore conditions under which consumers are likely to lie about a product being purchased on discount. Two types of discount-related misrepresentations are investigated; falsely reporting the regular price when the product was purchased at a discount (Experiment 1), and falsely reporting a discount price when the product was purchased at the regular price (Experiment 2). Even though these two types of misrepresentations may be thought of as being mutually opposed, our results indicate that their antecedents may be quite similar. Misrepresentation is more likely to occur when the communication recipient is a member of a higher-status (aspirational) group than when the recipient is from an equal-status (peer) group. A direct examination of lying behavior in Experiment 3 provides further validation for this premise, albeit in a different substantive domain: lying about wealth.

The similarity in the results obtained in our three experiments is not surprising in light of our underlying theoretical framework, which is based on DePaulo et al's (1996) investigation of lying behavior. According to this conceptualization, lying, or misrepresentation, is a form of impression management that springs from a need to bolster one's self-image. Various streams of research on symbolic consumption suggest that consumers do indeed use products and possessions to create and convey a particular self-image. In particular, research on reference group influences indicates that one way of self-bolstering is through using the product (or

possession) to associate oneself with an aspiration group. Based on this rationale, lying about a product-aspect (or about more general possessions, such as wealth) should be particularly likely to occur when such misrepresentation enables the communicator to achieve identification with an admired referent group, which is also salient at the time (e.g. the communication recipient).

This prediction is supported in all our experiments: we find a greater likelihood of misrepresentation when communicating with a higher-status group rather than an equal-status group. Further, in each case, the direction of the misrepresentation is consistent with an underlying motivation to identify with the aspiration group. Thus, when the aspiration group sends the implicit signal of valuing higher status, concealing the discount helps the communicator to identify with this aspiration group (Experiment 1). Conversely, when the same aspiration group sends an explicit signal of valuing the smart shopping ability, concealing the regular price helps to identify with the aspiration group (Experiment 2). In Experiment 3, providing an inflated report of wealth helps the participant to identify with an admired recipient who is wealthy and occupies a high socio-economic status.

Overall, our findings are both consistent with and add to the existing research on lying behavior in an interpersonal context. The literature on interpersonal communications (DePaulo et al. 1996; Camden et al. 1984; Hamble 1980; Turner et al. 1975) provides good evidence that people frequently lie to one another in their daily communications, and suggests that much of this behavior stems from motives related to self-bolstering and impression management. Not only does our research use this premise to study misrepresentation in a new domain (communications about products and possessions), it extends earlier research substantively as well as methodologically. While earlier research on lying has focused on communicator-specific antecedents of lying (Kashy and DePaulo 1996), our research identifies and tests factors relating to the recipient as well as the subject of the communication (i.e., the product/brand), apart from the communicator. From a methods perspective, the experimental

nature of this research differs from prior work in this area, which followed a survey based self-report method of documenting lying (DePaulo et al. 1996; Camden et al. 1984).

Our findings, particularly those from the first two experiments, also tie in well with research in the area of reference group influence (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Park and Lessig 1977). Work in this area has shown that people can engage in symbolic consumption in order to boost their self-image by identifying with salient aspirational groups. Typically, this research suggests that consumers seek to identify with such reference groups through the purchase or ownership of exclusive product categories (e.g., yachts) or upmarket brand names, such as Rolex watches (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Leigh and Gabel 1992; Mason 1981; Vigneron and Johnson 1999). Our findings, while supportive of this research, also suggest that owning upmarket, expensive brands, may not be the only way to identify with an aspiration group. Specifically, Experiment 2 demonstrates that, depending on the consumer's perception of what is valued by the aspiration group, a product feature such as price may be used in different ways in order to achieve identification with the group.

Finally, the finding that consumers may lie about product-related aspects carries implications for word-of-mouth communications, which have assumed increasing importance in the consumer context (Chakravarthi 1989; Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991). A major reason why word-of-mouth is thought to be an effective and persuasive form of communication has to do with issues of credibility: consumers are often more likely to believe another consumer than an interested third party such as the advertiser or salesperson (Engel, Blackwell, and Kegerries 1969). However, our results show that consumers may lie to one another about product features. Thus, word-of-mouth may not always be reliable, which suggests that consumers should be careful about the trust they place in such communications, and also that marketers cannot always rely on word-of-mouth as a substitute for advertising. For example, consumers may sometimes be hesitant about telling someone else that a product is available at a discount.

Limitations and Future Research

While the current results are encouraging, they should be interpreted within the context of various limitations relating to the specific manipulations and methods employed in our experiment. For instance, although the experimental technique employed in the current research provides interesting insights into the specific contexts under investigation, the specificity of this technique also serves to restrict the scope of our investigation. Future research should seek to supplement our exploration of lying behavior using more naturalistic techniques (e.g., in-depth interviews), which might provide richer data and implications regarding lying behavior.

Another limitation of our work stems from our use of a student sample. Students are typically in a state of role transition, and tend to be easily influenced by reference groups (Englis and Solomon 1995; Park and Lessig 1977). It remains to be seen whether our results generalize to other populations as well. In the same vein, the results obtained in this research may be linked with the culture/country to which participants belonged. Research on the use of luxury goods has commented not only on the unprecedented demand for such goods in many Asian countries (including Hong Kong), but also on the different motivations for the use of luxury goods across cultures (Dubois and Laurent 1994; Wong and Ahuvia 1998). It is possible that Asians are likely to attach more positive connotations to the ownership of luxury brands, as compared to some of their Western counterparts (Wong and Ahuvia 1998). Such cultural differences could well result in different findings being obtained in Western cultures, compared to those documented here. For example, in some countries, the ability to shop smart and purchase products at a discount could well be a more central value than being able to afford full price for a luxury item. When faced with an Experiment 1 scenario (wherein a luxury item has been purchased at a discount), consumers in such countries may then be very likely to tell the truth (instead of lying) about the discount purchase in order to achieve identification with an admired recipient – since the default value in the culture attaches a positive connotation to “getting a deal”.

However, while specific results might thus differ across cultures, the underlying conceptualization should be culture-invariant. For instance, while aspiration groups in different cultures might have different values, this would only yield a difference in the specific communication the consumer chooses to make in order to identify with the aspiration group. Such a difference would not negate the basic premise that identification with an aspiration group helps to boost the communicator's self-image, and that the desire to achieve such identification can direct whether the consumer misrepresents or tells the truth. With this in mind, it would be interesting to extend the current research to other cultures, both to test for specific differences and also to further generalize the current framework.

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ENDNOTES

¹ For example, one participant reported telling a friend that “Ted and I still like each other when really I don’t know if he likes me at all”; the reason given for this lie: “Because I am ashamed of the fact that he doesn’t like me any more” (DePaulo et al. 1996).

² Analogously, research on the functional nature of attitudes (Shavitt 1989; Shavitt et al. 1992) identifies three broad sets of factors that impact the relative importance of symbolic vs. utilitarian reasons in determining attitudes towards an object: person, object and situation factors.

³ Socio-economic status refers to social stratification and distinction based in achievement related status dimensions (e.g., wealth, education, occupation) (Coleman 1983; Solomon 1996).

⁴ The focus group discussion indicated that a 20% discount would be perceived to be a “good deal”.

⁵ The conclusions derived from the presented results remain the same if the covariate is excluded from the analysis.

⁶ We also attempted to obtain a measure of impression management tendencies by administering the Fenigstein et al. scale in the context of a questionnaire for an unrelated study several weeks later – the impression management inventory was not taken at the time of the main study because of extremely rigid time constraints. Unfortunately, however, only 4 of the participants who took part in the main experiment filled out these delayed scales. This low rate of response, probably fueled by the fact that the questionnaire was administered in the last week of the semester, unfortunately prevented us from testing any predictions relating to the effect of impression management on lying in this new context.

TABLE 1
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF
MISREPRESENTATION: EXPERIMENT 1

	Status Level of Communication Recipient	
	Equal Status (University students)	High Status (Business executives)
Brand Expensiveness		
Expensive brand (Rolex)	3.05 (1.73)	4.09 (2.00)
Inexpensive brand (Swatch)	3.62 (1.99)	3.22 (1.70)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses; higher numbers indicate greater likelihood of misrepresentation.

TABLE 2
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF
MISREPRESENTATION: EXPERIMENT 2

	Status Level of Communication Recipient	
	Equal Status (University students)	High Status (Business executives)
Brand Expensiveness		
Expensive brand (Rolex)	3.26 (1.84)	4.04 (1.97)
Inexpensive brand (Swatch)	3.35 (2.02)	4.00 (2.04)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses; higher numbers indicate greater likelihood of misrepresentation.

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