THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF INFERENCES OF IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT IN CONSUMPTION

by

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Abstract

Observers frequently make inferences of what consumers are like based on the products they use. The general view in social cognition is that the consumption behavior of others is taken at face value, where observers do not question the image being portrayed by product users. This assumption persists even though it is well known that consumers use products to manage the images they create. This dissertation aims to enrich our understanding of this issue by arguing that, under certain conditions, observers will make the inference that consumers use products to deliberately try to create certain impressions (i.e., perceptions as being phony, fake, or a poseur). Specifically, these inferences will undermine the impression, creating more negative attitudes towards the consumer. In fact, this dissertation argues that this inference can also play an important role in consumer decision making, impacting product evaluations directly (i.e., when consumers avoid products because they are concerned that others will infer they are impression managing). Five experiments examined elements of the product, the target, the situation, and the observer themselves to better understand the causes and effects of inferences of impression management. Taken as a whole, this dissertation highlights the central roles of the product’s contribution towards the target’s appearance, the attractiveness of their appearance, product functionality and feelings of observer threat in shaping IM inferences. In doing so, it contributes to the impression management and impression formation literatures, both in marketing and more broadly, by offering an organizing theoretical framework for understanding the bases of impression management judgments.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Research Question and Approach

Consumers often use products and brands to convey a desired image to others. In turn, people also observe the consumption behaviour of others and frequently make inferences of what consumers are like based on the possessions they use. These phenomena have been well documented in the identity expression literatures, where consumers use products to convey a particular symbolic meaning to others (Levy 1959; Belk 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005; Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993) as well as the impression formation and appearance-based judgment literatures (Macrae and Quadflieg 2010; Uleman et al. 2008; Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, and Morris 2002).

However, much of the research in these areas assume that the particular symbolic meaning is shared by others and that observers do not question the veracity of the image being portrayed by product users, instead believing that people are the way they appear (e.g., motorcyclists are rebellious). The prevailing assumption about these judgments persists even though it is well known, based on impression management (IM) theory (Leary 1995; Schlenker and Weigold 1992), that consumers use products to deliberately create certain impressions (Ashworth, Darke, and Schaller 2005; Argo, Dahl, and Manchanda 2005; White and Dahl 2006). This raises two important questions: what
might cause an observer to infer that a consumer is using a product to manage their impression? And what are the consequences of such inferences?

This dissertation argues that, under certain conditions, observers will form IM inferences, meaning observers infer that a consumer is using a product to deliberately try to create certain impression (i.e., observers infer that a target is impression managing). This is consistent with anecdotal evidence that people may pejoratively refer to others as phony, fake, or poseurs. One of the central ideas of the current work is that observers are likely to infer products are being used for impression management purposes when they perceive the product contributes to the target’s appearance and believe the appearance to be attractive to potential others. The current work also predicts that such IM inferences are likely to be relatively insensitive to other factors that could explain product use, especially product functionality. This suggests a cognitive bias exists where observers will draw IM inferences based on appearance in contexts where such inferences are not warranted. This dissertation argues that these IM inferences will undermine the impression, create more negative attitudes towards the consumer, and under certain circumstances, negatively impact attitudes towards the product itself. By exploring the effects of various aspects of targets' appearance, the contexts in which products are used, as well as individual observer differences, this thesis develops a broad framework for understanding the formation of IM inferences and the consequences for consumers, product attitudes and brand valuations.

1.1.1 Impression management (IM) inferences
This dissertation argues that an impression management inference will be based primarily on the target’s appearance (i.e., how they look). This is consistent with existing impression formation models (Kenny 2004), which support that first impressions are dominated by appearance-based criteria, where observers initially anchor judgments on assumptions of physical appearance and personal stereotypes about that appearance. This thesis proposes that observers are likely to rely on their perceptions of the product’s contribution to the target’s appearance to conclude whether it was used for appearance purposes. It predicts that an IM inference will occur when a target uses a product that the observer believes contributes to an appearance others would view positively. In other words, observers perceive that if the product makes them look good to others, the target must be using the product to look good. In addition, this thesis predicts that such inferences are relatively insensitive to other factors that could explain product use, such as the product's functionality (i.e., the extent to which product use can be explained by the situation). This suggests that observers will draw inferences of IM even in contexts where such inferences are not warranted (i.e., product use is explained by functionality).

Why might this occur? One possibility is that observers may tend to assume that others are motivated to look good (consistent with research that has shown people are often motivated to look good; Baumeister 1982). Consequently, a target’s appearance and behavior, including product use, which is consistent with an attractive appearance to others is likely to be attributed to such a motivation. The observer does not personally have to find the target attractive, but they may predict that someone else would find them
visually appealing. Conversely, when a target appears generally unattractive, the IM inference is less likely because observers are less likely to perceive that someone is deliberately trying to look that way. This bias in the inferential process persists where the target’s potentially positive appearance is consistent with the observer’s beliefs about appearance motives.

Research also indicates that observers are relatively insensitive to situational causes of behavior (Jones and Harris 1967) as viable alternative explanations. The tendency to undervalue situational influence has been conceptualized as the fundamental attribution error (Ross 1977a) as well as the correspondence bias (Gilbert and Malone 1995). In the current product usage context, this suggests that observers will tend to ignore functional explanations for product use because product functionality depends on the situation (e.g., wearing sunglasses because it is sunny vs. because they make the target look good). Overall, the predictions developed in this thesis suggest that observers will spontaneously infer IM when product use makes the target look good to potential others, and that these judgments should persist even in contexts where product use can be explained by the situation.

Situational factors are likely to only become meaningful for discounting the IM judgment when they are made salient. People tend to ignore situational explanations based on a general lack of awareness of situational constraints, whereby “one can only implicate situational forces as causes on when one is aware that such forces exist in the first place” (Gilbert and Malone 1995, p. 25). Gilbert and Malone (1995) suggest this is
based on an ‘invisibility problem’, where the construct of the situation often has no physical manifestation. In the current context, product functionality may still serve as a means of discounting IM inferences, but this is likely to occur as a more effortful correction process after already heuristically evaluating person-based elements (Brewer 1988; Gilbert 1989, Trope & Alfieri 1997; Fiske and Neuberg 1990; Kenny 1994; Kenny 2004). Consistent with Kelley (1967), if the observer was made aware of the reasons that motivated the target’s current behavior, they would serve as legitimate reasons for product use and observers would discount potential IM inferences (Gilbert 1994; Kardes et al. 2004).

1.1.2 Brands and IM inferences

One of the product characteristics that is likely to be important in terms of exacerbating these inferences would be branding. The prominence of brand logos can reflect different signaling intentions of the owner (Han, Nunes and Dreze 2010). Research has also demonstrated a strong link between the ostentatious display of a brand (e.g., physically showing the brand off) and observer inferences of IM (Ferraro et al. 2013). Brand choice can send social signals to other consumers about the type of person using that brand (Wernerfelt 1990). While a prominently-displayed prestigious brand can potentially offer a more effective signal of status or coolness, it may also be seen as crass because the signal is being sent so loudly. Simply put, while there are positive inferences to be made by wearing or using an attractive brand, this positivity is likely reduced when observers infer that consumers are deliberately using the brand this way. This is
consistent with recent findings from Ferraro et al. (2013), where observers infer that a consumer engaged in conspicuous brand usage, conceptualized as using behaviours to draw attention to the brand (i.e., flaunting or name-dropping), is driven by ulterior motives of impression management. The current work builds on the work of Ferraro et al. (2013) in several important ways. First, by identifying the theoretical underpinnings of what leads to impression management inferences, this thesis further explicates the process by which brand dilution can occur from everyday product use. For example, the topic of conspicuousness, referring to attention-grabbing behavior, currently does not articulate what it is about the consumption behavior that actually grabs attention and provokes thoughts about ulterior motives. This research extends existing work beyond overt, flamboyant behaviors by investigating how appearances or even products themselves can manifest IM inferences. Second, this thesis shifts away from the predominant focus in prestige goods to examine the role of both luxury and non-luxury brands on the formation of IM inferences. This perspective allows for more nuanced managerial insights for emerging brands, foreign brands, and brands not typically positioned on luxury (i.e., convenience, affordability, selection). Third, by concurrently testing the roles of brand prominence and brand attractiveness with relevant inferential dependent variables, the current work integrates extant literatures on conspicuousness to create a broader theoretical framework to understand the role of branding on IM inferences.

1.1.3 Motivated IM inferences
This thesis also examines the role of individual differences in processing the perceptions of others. Inferences about others' motives are often attributed to accuracy motivation, where observers want to be able to forecast what people are like in the event of a future interpersonal interaction (Kenny 1994; 2004). However, observers are not only accuracy motivated, but also defense motivated whenever the observer feels threatened (Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, Ingerman 1987). Based on social comparison theory (Festinger 1954; Tesser 1991), this thesis suggests it can be threatening to an observer, under certain conditions, to assume that a target is not actually impression managing. In other words, the target really is as they appear. If an observer feels threatened, an IM inference could help protect against the negative self-thoughts resulting from an upward social comparison by undermining the target’s appearance. In short, under conditions of threat, the IM inference is predicted to function as a tool to protect and maintain observer self-esteem. However, if given the opportunity to affirm themselves in another capacity, this thesis predicts that attitudes towards the target can be bolstered.

1.2 Intended contribution

This dissertation, by drawing from the extensive literatures on impression formation, impression management, and skepticism, enriches our understanding of people’s judgments of other consumers. It also contributes more generally to the impression management literature, both within marketing and in the broader social psychology literature. With regards to marketing, this work identifies the impression
management inference as an important basis for attitudes towards both other consumers and the products they use and, in doing so, helps explain how and when observers are likely to infer that consumers are impression managing. This thesis responds to recent calls for new developments in person perception based in a consumption context, where the “more fruitful agenda for the field would be to identify the specific visual cues that people use when they draw inferences from appearances …” (Olivola and Todorov 2010, p. 323). This work identifies two distinct elements of the appearance (i.e., perceived appearance attractiveness and perceived product use functionality) that drive observers to question the targets’ motives, and by extension, identifies conditions under which the appearance of others are more or less likely to inspire impression management inferences. Furthermore, it examines the underlying process for why these elements of the appearance are important for observer IM judgments. This thesis also identifies biases that are inherent in the inferential process based on an insensitivity to situational factors, which can lead observers to instead anchor their judgments based on the product’s overall contribution to their appearance.

Also, by extending the core idea presented in the conceptual framework to consider the role of branding, this work offers critical insight about the consequences of this impression management judgment for consumer decision-making, with implications for marketing practitioners. These findings suggest that this inference can impact product evaluations directly, as consumer may avoid products and brands because they are concerned others will infer they are impression managing. The impact on consumer
choice highlights the implications of the current framework for product and brand signaling. Insights from this work can help create a foundation for future research into how well products actually convey their intended signals. This work, specifically on inferences drawn based on the presence or absence of perceived functionality in product features, can also help inform marketing practitioners regarding their strategic choices about product aesthetics. This work contributes insights from a person perception and product usage perspective to literature examining consumer skepticism in marketing, which up to this point, has generally been limited to the persuasion knowledge model in sales contexts.

In addition to the more specific contributions to the marketing literature on impression management, this dissertation also offers several meaningful insights about questioning the veracity of appearances to a broader audience in social psychology. First and foremost, this work offers an organizing framework for understanding the basis of impression management judgments, one that explicitly investigates the relationships between key constructs that have been previously identified as important to impression management, but not examined together (e.g., product functionality, appearance attractiveness). In doing so, the framework clarifies the nature of these relationships and, by extension, challenges many of the assumptions that underlie, or are even embedded into, many of the dominant theories of impression formation. These contributions will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.
1.3 Primary literatures

This thesis begins by reviewing existing work. The purpose of this review is to highlight the dominant theoretical perspectives that are typically used to understand people’s perceptions of others and to consider how the underlying assumptions have shaped the field’s current thinking. This thesis uses the terms *signaler* or *target* interchangeably to refer to the focal person who emit signals about unobservable qualities / target of observer evaluations. This is derived from both the communications literature in anthropology and biology as well as the person perception literature in social psychology. In addition, the terms *receiver* or *observer* are used interchangeably with regard to people who observe the focal person / receive the signal from the focal person.

The review first discusses the existing work on how people form impressions and make inferences about the behavior of others. This research predominantly falls in the domain of appearance-based judgments and person perception, which provide insights into the way people process and form impressions. Appearance-related cues seem to offer a wealth of visual information that is potentially relevant for forecasting the dispositions of others in anticipated social interactions (Fiske and Neuberg 1990; Ambady, Hallahan, Rosenthal 1995), where first impressions are processed spontaneously with minimal cognitive effort (Carlston and Skowronski 2005; Carlston and Mae 2007; Gilbert and Malone 1995). This section also briefly draws upon signaling theory to help provide a general framework for understanding the fidelity of signals. Based on this research on the inferential process, observers indeed interpret the purchasing behavior of others as a display of dispositional characteristics (Gosling et al. 2007).
This review reveals that the impression formation literature generally either assumes that observers’ inferences are accurate or the research examines situations where observers are unlikely to doubt the truthfulness of the conveyed impression (Ham and Vonk 2011). As a result, surprisingly little attention has been paid to observers’ inferences of product use motives and the conditions under which they are formed.

Following this review of existing theories on impression formation, the dominant theoretical perspectives of impression management are drawn upon to understand why the prevailing theories on impression formation and interpretation of signals are incomplete. Specifically, the presumption from an impression formation perspective is that observers of signals interpret them as sincere and truthful messages about what the signaler is really like. However, signals, especially in the domain of product and brand consumption, can be deliberate and strategic tools to have others form a particular impression. This dissertation reviews impression management research from its roots in both psychology (e.g., Schlenker 1980) and sociology (e.g., Goffman 1959) and highlights that this body of research has focused generally on the reasons why people seek to create an impression for others as well as the tactics people use to do so. The identity signaling literature is also incorporated into this section, highlighting that people buy products not only for what they do, but for what they symbolize with regard to constructing and expressing identities (e.g., Levy 1959; Belk 1988). These tactics, evident in many common consumer contexts, share the common idea that consumers will
manipulate a variety of their own consumption decisions to strategically influence others' perceptions (Ashworth, Darke, and Schaller 2006; Argo, Dahl, and Manchanda 2005; White and Dahl 2006).

1.4 Structure of the thesis

In the next Chapter, the relevant literature on impression formation and impression management will be reviewed, which help develop the central hypotheses. More specifically, this thesis will start by reviewing what is known about how people form impressions, based on the appearance-based judgment literature and signaling theory. The limitations of these literatures are discussed with respect to questions regarding the veracity of the impressions formed. The impression management literature is then integrated in the review, incorporating knowledge that people often strategically alter the impressions they make. The literature on skepticism in judgment formation and attribution theory will be briefly discussed to help understand how observers can form IM judgments. This review then incorporates literature on people’s general insensitivity to situational factors to predict biases in how consumers can anchor on the product’s contribution to appearance. The thesis then extends its theoretical model with additional hypothesis after integrating the concepts of branding and identity threat. In Chapter 3, the method and results of the studies are outlined with respect to testing the hypotheses presented in Chapter 2. Finally, Chapter 4 presents a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications and highlights the dissertation’s contributions, limitations and avenues for future research.
Chapter 2

Literature Review and Conceptual Development

2.1 Impression formation

Most of the information people want to know about other people, including their intentions or identity, are qualities that are not directly observable. Instead, people rely on others’ appearances and behavior as indicators of these hidden qualities to understand their motivations. To explore the existing research into how people form impressions, this chapter begins by reviewing research in person perception.

2.1.1 Person perception

In social psychology, person perception is the domain that is broadly concerned with how people form beliefs about others (Jones 1990; Kenny 1994; 2004). Although this area tends to employ ‘zero-acquaintance’ settings, where perceivers have no opportunity to interact with the target, researchers have found that basic appearance-related cues seem to offer a wealth of visual information that is potentially relevant for both person understanding and social interaction (Fiske and Neuberg 1990; Ambady et al. 1995). Numerous lines of research have provided compelling evidence that trait judgments are readily drawn from a person’s physiognomy (e.g. facial features), outer appearance (i.e. clothing), or demeanor (i.e. posture, walking style) (See Uleman et al. 2008 for a review). Usually a mere glance is sufficient for perceivers to draw inferences about individuals' personality and other characteristics from facial features and
expression, hairstyle, body shape, height and posture, gaze direction, head-body orientation, and facial and body movements (Macrae and Quadflieg 2010).

The formation of impressions is fast and simple, not burdened by being premeditated, deliberative, or overly complicated (Uleman et al. 2008). People form impressions spontaneously and with minimal cognitive effort (Carlston and Skowronski 2005; Carlston and Mae 2007; Gilbert and Malone 1995). Uleman et al. (1996) argue that people form trait inferences “as naturally as we extract oxygen from the air” (p. 212). Observers amalgamate information from a number of cues to create an overall impression rather than form target impressions one trait at a time (Gilovich et al. 2000).

Research on appearance-based judgments indicates that cues of possessing a certain characteristic or trait can have far-reaching consequences in many domains of everyday life (Naumann et al. 2009). For example, judgments of a candidate’s competence based on their face are predictive of people’s voting behavior (Todorov et al. 2005) and perceptions of power-related traits in CEO faces are associated with company profits (Rule and Ambady 2008). These brief examples reveal that “despite conventional societal wisdom that it is inappropriate to judge a book by its cover, social perceivers rarely heed this advice” (Macrae and Quadflieg 2010, p. 433).

Remarkably, personality impressions can be quite accurate, even when based on minimal information. People can accurately predict the personality, behavior, intelligence, and liking of people they barely know (e.g., Borkenau and Liebler 1992, 1993, 1995). This growing body of research suggests that people have a natural talent for
judging one another. In fact, a mere 100ms exposure to an unfamiliar face is sufficient for participants to draw likeability, trustworthiness, competence, and aggressiveness inferences about the target that are similar to those generated under longer viewing times (Willis and Todorov 2006). While person perception highlights how appearance-based judgments are adaptive as a quick, short-term strategy for evaluating others, it is also important to explore other related theoretical frameworks that explore how observers interpret the cues they see.

2.1.2 Signaling theory

Signaling theory suggests that observers may not always assume that appearance cues are reliable indicators of what people are like, supporting the idea that observers can make IM inferences based on the behavior of others. Signaling theory has its origins in evolutionary biology and economics, and has recently been applied to the consumer context, providing a framework for understanding the fidelity and reliability of signals. In order to understand how observers might conclude that a signaler is attempting to manipulate the image they are conveying, it is important to first understand how signals acquire their meaning to account for potential misinterpretation in analyzing the signaling process. Judith Donath (2012, p. 3) succinctly articulates how signaling theory relates to perceptions of reliability:

“Much of human signaling is conventional signaling, where the relationship between signal and meaning exists by convention, rather than a tightly coupled structural relationship. Such signals are open to deception, for there is no
inherently greater cost paid by dishonest signalers. However, the receiver or the
community at large can impose costs on dishonest signalers to maintain
reliability.”

The current thesis suggests that an IM inference is one way that observers
interpret signals (i.e., the appearance of another consumer) when they believe they are
unreliable. By definition, signals are perceivable indicators of otherwise hidden qualities,
which the individual intentionally uses to communicate a particular message. The implicit
assumption with regard to signaling is that everyone understands the signals to have a
certain meaning. Yet communication is more complex and misinterpretations are
common. Signals can be subtle, context-dependent, vary across cultures and be highly
changeable over time (e.g., Levy 1959; McCracken 1988). As Donath (2012, p. 21)
states, “in order for a signal to have its intended effect, the receiver must both understand
(i.e., the receiver's interpretation is what the signaler intended) and believe the signal (i.e.,
the receiver's assessment of the signal's truth).”

The purpose of a signal is communication and its goal is to alter the receiver’s
beliefs or behavior. As such, signaling theory tends to focus on the informational value of
cues. This dissertation leverages this literature to help examine cases where observers
interpret a consumer’s appearance as deliberately trying to create a particular impression.
Since this research is focused on when observers are likely to infer targets are
deliberately attempting to create a particular impression, this thesis ignores the actual
intentions of a signal and focuses more on how observers draw the inference that an
appearance was deliberately created or signaled. Based on this logic, it is entirely possible that observers can infer that a target is deliberately trying to create an impression, whether or not that was the signaler’s actual intent. The current work focuses on observer inferences of signaling (i.e., that they are deliberately trying to look a certain way) and the effects of such inferences.

2.1.3 Product use in impression formation

Based on this perspective of inferring IM, it is argued that products can function simultaneously as a trait signal (i.e., the target is communicating information about their values and beliefs to others) as well as a signal of signaling (i.e., they are intentionally trying to communicate this image). This research focuses on instances where observers infer that products are displayed because of their signaling ability (i.e., observer perceptions that the target is trying to communicating something about themselves), regardless of the signaler’s intentions.

Applying person perception to a consumer context, there is evidence that suggests observers draw inferences from the consumption decisions of others. The impressions observers make depend on their interpretation of the cues that others emit, in particular with regard to their appearance and behavior (Uleman and Saribay 2012). Observers indeed interpret the purchasing behavior of others as a display of dispositional characteristics: people who wear glasses are perceived as more intelligent (Manz & Lueck 1968), those who wear black are perceived as more aggressive (Frank & Gilovich 1988), and people who smoke cigars are seen as more confident (Callison et al. 2002).
People do indeed infer aspects about others (e.g., identities and other preferences) based on their purchase decisions (Calder and Burnkrant 1977; Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982). In the context of inferences observers make from individual possessions, Gosling et al. (2002) proposed that observers use a two-step inference process. According to their model, observers first infer behavior based on physical evidence, and then infer disposition based on that behavior. The findings of Gosling et al. (2002) suggest that an observer who has briefly examined an individual’s living or working environment will form personality impressions. Moreover, these impressions have been shown to be remarkably consistent with both targets' self-reports and other observers’ impressions. This is suggestive that, even in the absence of viewing the target individual, observers will form inferences about their motivations and dispositions based on their possessions alone.

2.1.4 Limitations of existing impression formation research

Existing impression formation models that allow observers to infer the unobservable states of others are based directly from their observable actions (Tversky and Kahneman 1974; Quattrone 1982; Trope 1986; Fiske and Neuberg 1990; Gilbert 1998; 2002). Each impression formation strategy can be broken down into three stages: categorization, characterization, and correction. First, observers classify the target’s behavior. This is followed by a characterization in terms of enduring behavioral predisposition. Finally, they might correct these inferences with information about external influences on behavior. Gilbert (2002, p. 184, italics added) explains: “How do
we [understand others] so easily, so often, and (at least sometimes) so well? … One small piece of the answer is that we readily believe the claims that actions make about actors, and only later, with time and attention, consider the possibility that these claims are unfounded.” Even more recent impression formation models (Kenny 2004) do not address the possibility of immediately perceiving deliberateness in others’ appearances.

Research on impression formation has tended to ignore the existence of spontaneous IM inferences, which is partially based on the type of contexts in which impression formation has been studied. There are two key reasons for this occurring. The first reason is that the majority of the work on person perception does not examine whether observers assess the accuracy of their own judgments, with limited discussion of meta-cognitions of accuracy or confidence (Petty, Brinol, Tormala, and Wegener 2007). This would be an important theoretical construct to examine, where the confidence or belief in one’s evaluations can undermine or bolster downstream effects. In a recent, well-cited summary of the state of meta-cognition in social judgment, Petty et al. (2007, p. 256) discuss the possibility of assessing meta-cognitive judgments about others, referred to as third-order cognition, but that the idea has not been empirically examined:

“It is possible to consider third-order cognition in which people make metacognitive judgments of another. Thus, after asking about the evaluation of a particular thought, one can ask about the confidence in that evaluation. Or, after asking about the confidence in one’s thoughts, one can ask whether this
confidence is appropriate. To our knowledge, no research to date has systematically examined third-order cognition.”

Ultimately, this lack of research on third-order cognition has limited the discussion whether observers believe the outward impression of the target is consistent with what the person is really like.

The other main reason why IM inferences have not been explicitly examined is that many of the contexts in which impression formation is studied tend to be situations that are unlikely to invoke IM motives in targets (i.e., personality judgments) (e.g., Funder 1995). Moreover, many of the impression judgment dependent variables that are studied are likely to either already account for or be immune to IM inferences – for example, the susceptibility of personality impressions (Funder 1995). When the primary dependent variable is an evaluation of one’s personality, assessments of intentionality are already factored into these judgments (Malle and Holbrook 2012). Any doubts an observer might have about a target's sincerity are likely to already be reflected and incorporated into their personality assessments (e.g., Funder 1995), disguising whether these doubts did or did not influence the impression. Beyond the measured variables, the contexts explored are also generally constrained to observing a targets’ private possessions (e.g., Gosling et al. 2002), which specifically excludes motivations for impression management in social contexts. For that reason, it may simply be less likely that observers would even consider that the target is engaging in IM. The impression formation literature has largely ignored examining contexts where observers may doubt
or question these signals. As Ham and Vonk (2011, p. 466) describe it, “the general view in social cognition is that, without any effortful thought, behavior is typically taken at face value ...”

Consistent with this, little attention has been paid to observers’ inferences of product use motives and the conditions under which they are formed. There are two main exceptions to this. One exception is Ham and Vonk (2011), who find evidence of spontaneous suspicions of ulterior motivation, or as they refer to it, impressions of impression management. Using written behavioral descriptions, they find evidence for the following (p. 466): “If perceivers regularly observe particular styles of self-presentation, and if they engage in systematic corrective processes each time they do, these corrections may become proceduralized and occur spontaneously.” In other words, questioning these initial judgments can become a part of automatic processes relating to observers’ assessments of others. The other exception is recent work from Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly (2013), which argues that observers infer that a consumer is engaged in conspicuous brand usage driven by an ulterior motive of impression management. However, it focuses on conspicuous brand usage, as conceptualized as using behaviours to draw attention to the brand, which includes physically posing or flaunting along with name-dropping. The current thesis integrates these findings on blatant and flamboyant displays within a broader theoretical framework to understand the role of the product and usage context on inferences of impression management.
While the existing impression formation literature provides many insights into the motivations and mechanisms by which observers make inferences about consumers, there is limited examination of the extent to which observers question what they are seeing or assess the veracity of their impressions of others. In contrast to this, the impression management literature (detailed in the following section) highlights the fact that individuals have incentives to manage their impressions, which implies that observers also have incentives to figure out when others are managing their impression. This relationship between impression formation and impression management will be detailed further in the next section.

2.2 Impression management

The study of impression management (IM) is broadly concerned with strategic attempts to influence the evaluations of others, a topic which has been of interest to psychologists (e.g. Schlenker 1980), sociologists (e.g. Goffman 1959), and even economists (e.g., Veblen 1899) for more than 50 years. IM generally involves controlling and manipulating personal expressions, appearances, and behaviors in order to affect the opinions of others (Schlenker and Weigold 1992; Leary and Kowalski 1990; Leary 1995).

The majority of academic research on IM has focused on two broad domains: the reasons why people seek to create an impression on others and the tactics people use to create those desired impressions. The goals of IM have classically been associated with attempts to maximize social approval and receive material outcomes (Leary 1995),
enhance and maintain self-esteem (Tesser 1991), and validate the self through confirming self-beliefs (Baumeister 1982). Consumers often choose to emphasize particular aspects of their identities in different scenarios (Levy 1959; Belk 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005; Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993), and sometimes use products for exactly this purpose (Berger and Heath 2007). For example, an undergraduate student may want to be perceived as a professional for potential employers, a thoughtful partner to his significant other, or a party animal among his peers. In these circumstances, the student will likely tweak and manipulate his appearance and behaviors to be perceived in a desired way. Products have been shown to be one tool that impression managers use to signal their identity to others (Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Wernerfelt 1990): for example, using a Blackberry and wearing business attire at a recruiting event, buying flowers or making homemade goodies on an anniversary, and consuming alcohol at fraternity parties respectively. Impression management goals can also be pursued through a variety of other tactics including conforming to others’ beliefs (Asch 1951), expressing similar attitudes to others (Tetlock and Manstead 1985), ingratiating one’s self (Jones and Wortman 1973), altering expressions of emotions (Lanzetta et al. 1976), inflating self-descriptions (Leary 1995), engaging in helping behavior (Deutsch and Lamberti 1986), and in some cases, even engaging in aggressive behaviors (Baumeister 1982). People even go so far as engaging in deception in order to convey a desired image (Argo, White and Dahl 2006).
Being deceptive can often be quite beneficial for impression managers in a myriad of life contexts, either helping land a first (or second) date, make friends, or get a job offer. The consequences for observers can range from hiring the wrong person for a job, befriends an untrustworthy individual, or just being fooled in understanding what a person is actually like. In other words, if an observer falls prey to a particularly deceitful impression manager, the cost can be rather large. The consumption of products and services by signalers offer ways to circumvent the costs involved in a seemingly reliable signal (i.e., youth, height, wealth, marital status). Often with low perceptual salience, it is difficult for observers to recognize marketplace offerings and products that mimic reliable signals (i.e., plastic surgery, elevator shoes, luxury car rentals, and wedding bands). As Gangestad and Scheyd (2005, p. 538) note: “humans have found innumerable ways of modifying their bodies... A wide range of methods, from the quotidian (diet and exercise) to the absurd (e.g., buttock implants), may be understood as techniques of enhancing the strength of signals.”

In marketing, IM is prevalent in the consumer behavior domain, where consumers actively make product choices (or avoid particular products) to signal something about themselves to others: avoiding products linked to dissociative reference groups (White and Dahl 2006), choosing higher quality products in the presence of others (Argo et al. 2005), and avoiding money-saving opportunities to evade impressions of cheapness (Ashworth, Darke, and Schaller 2005). Consistent with existing research on impression management, product and brand usage might be employed by targets as a deliberate and
strategic tool to have others form a particular impression. The common finding is that the presence of others plays an important role in consumer contexts, where consumers may feel that they are being evaluated on what is appropriate social behavior. These investigations share the common idea that people can manipulate a variety of their own expressions and behaviors to strategically influence the perceptions of others.

This dissertation next draws on related literature in skepticism, suspicion, persuasion knowledge, deceit detection and authenticity to describe conditions under which observers might question the veracity of their appearance-based judgments of others.

2.3 Skepticism in impression formation

The literatures relating to skepticism offer unique insights into how observers question the veracity of the behavior of others. While this literature typically focuses on contexts outside of consumer psychology, the findings from each domain contribute to the theoretical model developed in this thesis.

2.3.1 Deceit detection

Research in deceit detection, typically conducted in criminal and legal contexts, highlights the cues people use to infer when someone is not being totally truthful (Vrij 2000). Deceivers are aided, at least to some degree, by the everyday presumption of innocence: Observers tend to assume that others are telling the truth, sometimes, even helping them support their claims unless there is reason to suspect deceit (DePaulo et al. 1985; Goffman 1959). However, perceivers will begin to question the veracity of one’s
claims when non-verbal behaviour (i.e. fidgeting, gaze aversion) violates observer’s normative expectations (Bond et al. 1992; Bond & DePaulo 2008). The current investigation does not focus on blatant lying, but rather perceptions of strategic product use. The current research also focuses on appearance-related cues to draw inferences, not behavioral mannerisms associated with hiding the truth. In short, deception research helps inform the importance of atypical actions as inferential cues, but the current research question is conceptually distinct from the accuracy of lie detection. The deceit detection’s corresponding literature in marketing theory is persuasion knowledge, whereby consumers attempt to decipher the veracity of the claims from salespeople.

2.3.2 Persuasion knowledge

Skepticism of inferences in a marketing context has generally focused on how observers respond to persuasion attempts and the subsequent discounting based on their ‘persuasion knowledge’ (Friestad and Wright 1994). According to Kirmani and Campbell (2009, p. 298), “persuasion knowledge consists of theories and beliefs about how persuasion agents attempt to persuade, including beliefs about marketers’ motives, strategies, and tactics.” This topic relates to the application of suspicion, which is a “dynamic state in which the individual actively entertains multiple, plausibly rival hypotheses about the motives or genuineness of a person’s behavior” (Fein 1996, p.1165). Suspicion, in this sense, causes observers to hesitate to take behavior at face value. While the prototypical context for studying persuasion knowledge is the salesperson-customer
interaction, this type of assessment of motive is likely to occur in other interpersonal contexts.

Deceptive appeals in advertising have also been linked to significant negative consequences for the firm, leading to defensive processing of future messages and a general state of consumer distrust of marketers (Pollay 1986; Darke and Ritchie 2007; Main, Dahl, and Darke 2007). Persuasion knowledge research supports that consumers infer the motives of others and generally resist persuasion attempts and guard against unwanted marketing persuasion (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Kirmani and Campbell 2009), but related to the current thesis, it does not outline the types of cues observers use to infer persuasion. In other words, it does not directly address when observers would infer that another person is deliberately trying to affect their appearance. In a sales context, it is also clear to consumers that the marketer has an incentive to persuade them (i.e., make a sale for commission) – this incentive is either less salient or less likely to occur in other interpersonal contexts.

2.3.3 Authenticity

Another concept associated with the veracity of impressions is authenticity. Authenticity is a characteristic valued by perceivers, where authentic appearances are those that are believed to reflect the target’s true self, not simulated or manipulated to achieve a particular effect (Trilling 1972; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Beverland and Farrelly 2010). This research stream tends to adopt a sociocultural perspective to understand the value and negotiation of what is real in consumption experiences rather
than the current exploration into the specific factors that affect observer inferences. In this paradigm, authenticity has evolved from a classic definition based on objective truth to a socially-constructed, negotiable concept, where both consumers and producers may impart authenticity to a given artifact (Littrel, Anderson and Brown 1993; Cohen 1988; Lewis and Bridger 2000; Peterson 1997). Authenticity is also not deemed inherent in the object or event, but it is rather a socially agreed-upon construct in which the past is to be (mis)remembered (Halbwachs 1992). A key takeaway from this literature is the common need for observers to seek out and value authenticity, characterized as a quest for personal authenticity that impacts their own identity (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006). This need has even been theorized as a visceral factor, an innate desire to seek out the truth to be used as ingredients in forming one’s own self-image (Peterson 1997; Holt 2002). In other words, observers actively seek out authenticity in their daily lives and value perceptions of veracity and truth in their interpersonal interactions.

Authenticity as a construct has recently been examined within the experimental paradigm as well. Ferraro et al (2010) used authenticity as a moderator between conspicuous brand signaling and target traits. While their findings demonstrate the negative effect that perceptions of inauthenticity can have on attitudes towards a target, the design of their studies expressly informed participants that the focal individual was intentionally trying to create a particular impression. Observers do not have access to this type of information and rely on what they can see to create these inferences (i.e. product
factors, target factors, environmental factors). This begs the question: in the absence of such information, how do observers form inferences about the target’s intentions?

2.4 Perceived appearance in impression management inferences

As discussed in the impression formation section, research demonstrates that observers form several judgments based on visual cues during encounters (Macrae and Quadflieg 2010). This is particularly true during initial encounters when making first impressions, where preexisting knowledge is limited (Kenny 2004). In the context of first impressions, this thesis posits that an impression management inference would be based on the idea that the appearance being created is one that someone is expressly trying to create. Anchoring on appearance for first impressions is consistent with existing impression formation models (Kenny 2004), where observers first base their judgments on assumptions of physical appearance and personal stereotypes. Subsequently, this work suggests that there are specific elements of one’s appearance that are important in forming an IM inference.

2.4.1 Perceived attractiveness of appearance

2.4.1.1 The importance of attractiveness in social cognition

What might observers believe people are trying to signal with their appearance (i.e., what “look” do observers think targets are trying to create)? To understand the types of appearances others would be motivated to create, observers integrate information from several sources, including their own beliefs as well as meta-perceptions (i.e., the observer’s prediction of others’ perception of a target) (Kenny 2004). Literature from
evolutionary psychology (e.g., Buss 1991, Schaller 2008, Neuberg, Kenrick, and Schaller 2010) suggests that appearing attractive is a central motivation to achieve reproductive fitness goals. In rare circumstances, people may want to create unfavorable appearances, attempting to appear cold (Holoien and Fiske 2012) or incompetent (Leary 2010), if they feel there is a benefit to do so. However, one of the most fundamental and transcendent appearances people are concerned with, especially in zero-acquaintance contexts, is to look good. Since Vernon and Allport’s (1931) Study of Values, aesthetics has been one of the primary value possessses by individuals. This is consistent with Townsend and Sood (2012, p. 416), who state that “while the relative importance of various values differ across individuals, it is accepted that aesthetics is a universal value common to all.”

People generally want to be seen as attractive, but not as if they are trying to be attractive. Jones and Wortman (1973) refer to this as the ‘ingratibrator’s dilemma’, whereby “one tries to present an attractive image of oneself, but at the same time, seeks to deny that that is what one is trying to do” (Baumeister 1982, p. 20). Being attractive is associated with several positive outcomes including heightened social approval (Leary 1995), material benefits (Leary 1995), and enhanced self-esteem (Tesser 1991)(see Eagly et al. 2001; Langlois et al. 2000 for meta-analytic reviews). Observers can perceive others as attractive (i.e., being visually appealing) based on the aesthetics of the products they use, the status they convey, or a variety of other non-product factors including facial symmetry, signals of youth, or physique (e.g. Eagly et al. 1991). Like other animals,
people intentionally signal their strength, status, and the features that make them attractive to potential mates (Buss 1991).

Attractiveness has long been a topic of interest and controversy. Much of the empirical work in social psychology does not attempt to formally define attractiveness (see Langlois, Kalakanis, Rubenstein, Larson, Hallam, and Smoot 2000 for discussion), but for this thesis, attractiveness is conceptualized as the observer’s meta-perception that the target is visually appealing to potential observers. For example, while one observer may not personally be attracted to a target, they may predict that someone else would find them visually appealing. In order to infer impression management, the target’s appearance needs to be perceived as being attractive to potential observers. As such, for the purpose of this thesis, this research utilizes attractiveness as the primary way observers infer that a target is perceived positively by potential others, but will discuss potential limitations of this perspective in the general discussion (Chapter 4). In order to explore the role of attractiveness further in an IM inference, it is necessary to examine the notion of perceived deliberateness and intentionality in their motivation.

2.4.1.2 Attractiveness as an intention heuristic

It is clear that observers explain behavior, at least in part, by inferring what a target’s intentions were (Epley and Waytz 2009; Malle and Holbrook 2012). In their development of the folk concept of intentionality, Malle and Knobe (1997) demonstrated that the inference of intentional behavior is based on four key factors: desire, belief, skill, and awareness. The first factor is the desire for a particular outcome. In this thesis, desire
would be based on a perception that the target wants to be seen as attractive. The second factor is the perceived belief about the action causing the outcome. This would mean that the observer perceives that the target is using a product(s) to achieve the goal of looking good. The third factor, skill to perform the action, would mean that the target is perceived to look good to potential others. The final factor, awareness of fulfilling the intention, would mean the observer perceives them as knowing they are attractive to potential others.

This thesis argues that observers are likely to use the target’s appearance attractiveness as a way of determining the extent to which the product was used for that purpose. The attractiveness of one’s appearance can satisfy the factors of desire, belief, skill, and awareness, which leads to an inference of intentionally looking attractive. As discussed earlier, the desire or motivation to be seen as attractive is universal (Buss 1991). Fashion is based on the ability to choose from many different products to wear and use to facilitate expressing an identity, often being used to fulfill individuals' appearance-related goals. For the skill factor, if the target indeed looks attractive, observers will presumably infer that the target is able to look attractive. Awareness is less relevant in this context as consumers make choices regarding their appearance in public, for which they must be aware. In other words, based on the criteria established for inferring intentionality, this work proposes that if an observer perceives the target individual as attractive, then observer will believe that the target is likely to have made some effort to look good. This also relates back to insights from the persuasion knowledge model,
where observers might start with the assumption that the target (i.e., salesperson) has an incentive to look good – in that context, looking good involves making the product appear favourably in the mind of the consumer. Therefore, an attractive appearance is more likely to lead to inferences of IM.

Observers may not be sensitive to the particular cause of the target’s attractive appearance. Consistent with Gestalt psychology, the perception of a stimulus is relatively holistic (Kimchi 1993), meaning that the whole (i.e., target consumer) is initially more salient than individual components (i.e., articles of clothing, accessories). Observers are unlikely to distinguish between situations where the product makes the user attractive and when other cues (i.e., their physiognomy) make them attractive. This implies that the attractiveness of the appearance can be altered based on the person or the product, even in the absence of a specific target user. When observers believe that a target is creating an attractive impression to potential others, they are likely to perceive that they are deliberately trying to create this impression. Because the product is assumed to be deliberately used, and because people are assumed to be motivated to look attractive, when the product is perceived to contribute to the target’s attractiveness, observers assume that the product was used for this purpose.

**H₁:** Perceptions of attractiveness to potential others (based on the product’s contribution to the target’s appearance) will increase inferences of impression management when compared to low attractiveness.
2.4.1.3 Product salience in contributing to attractiveness

What is the role of the product in appearance attractiveness? This work argues that the product salience in creating an attractive appearance can bolster IM inferences. If it is obvious in that the products being used or worn are responsible for making them look good, then it is more likely to be perceived as impression management. When the product is salient as the cause of the appearance, observers will assume that it is being used for that reason.

The concept of product salience is related to visibility, or the extent to which the product is noticed by an observer, which plays an important role in the identity signaling process (Berger, Ho, and Joshi 2011). People tend to communicate identity in publicly visible domains (Belk 1988; Berger and Heath 2007). This, in turn, increases the likelihood that observers make desired inferences about the target consumer. For example, underwear generally will not signal particular impressions about an individual since observers cannot detect what type one is wearing. However, if someone wears sagging pants that reveal the target’s underwear, a cultural trend (BBC News 2007), it is likely to signal new information to an observer, which is subsequently processed.

Visible cues in public contexts would likely be linked to the assumption that the target is deliberately displaying them (i.e., attempted to use as a signal). Consumption alone does not ensure desired signal recognition: as consumption visibility increase, observers should be more likely to see the product as a signal. This idea translates into
the branding domain with regards to brand prominence (e.g., wearing a shirt with small vs. large insignia). Explicit markers should be more effective signals of the brand to the general public since more obvious brand names and logos should be easier for the majority of observers to see and identify. Conspicuous signaling of the brand should also increase the likelihood that observers will infer that the brand is deliberately being used in this way.

2.5 Perceived functionality in impression management inferences

Not every person creating an attractive appearance is going to be automatically associated with an impression management motive. There are factors that should theoretically moderate the aforementioned attractiveness hypothesis. Observers are less likely to question the motives behind product use when it is perceived as normative (Hastie 1984; Pyszczynski & Greenberg 1981; Weiner 1985; Wong and Weiner 1981). Consistent with Kelley’s covariation model (1967), if there was a rival causal explanation that motivated the target’s current behavior and it was salient to the observer, it should serve as a means to legitimate the product use and observers would subsequently discount potential IM inferences (Gilbert 1994; Kardes et al. 2004). This section articulates how a lack of product functionality can exacerbate IM inferences, as well as the conditions where functionality can act as a situational explanation for mitigating IM inference, but why observers are generally prone to be insensitive to situational factors.

2.5.1 Questioning the motives of product use
What other ways might lead observers to question the motives of another’s consumption behavior? Existing work suggests that observers question the causes of a target’s behavior when that behavior is novel or surprising. Several studies support the conclusion that unexpected actions of an actor are more likely to elicit attributional processing than expected actions (Pyszczynski and Greenberg 1981; Wong and Weiner 1981; Weiner 1985). It is normal and perhaps even adaptive to consider another person’s motives, intentions, or circumstances when their actions surprise us (Weiner 1985).

Observers are more likely to consider the intentions of others when they are spontaneously compelled to ‘ask why’, which is termed attributional search (Wong and Weiner 1981). Several studies have found that perceivers tend to give more thought to “why” questions under special circumstances, such as when observer expectations are disconfirmed or if the observer self-image is threatened (Hastie 1984; Pyszczynski & Greenberg 1981; Weiner 1985; Wong and Weiner 1981). Inconsistencies between the target stimuli and the expectations of the observer are likely processed as information about the target. In short, appearances and behaviours that are unexpected will lead observers to spontaneously ask why they are engaging in that particular behaviour. In the context of product usage, this suggests that observers should be most likely to question usage when elements of the usage cannot be explained by the function of the product. When product usage cannot be explained by the product function and when the usage is perceived to positively contribute to an attractive appearance, observers will likely infer IM.
2.5.2 The role of perceived functionality on impression management inferences

2.5.2.1 Trading off product functionality with identity signaling

Berger and Heath (2007) argue that people are more likely to see domains as identity relevant whenever choice is based less on function. In this case, observers should be more likely to attribute someone’s choice to individual characteristics when the choice does not produce obvious functional benefits (Kelley 1967). Berger and Heath (2007, p. 132, italics added) highlight the following on the relationship between functionality and identity signaling:

“Backpacks and pens have an obvious functional component that is missing from music… A functionality illuminates which product attributes are more likely to serve as appearance-oriented signals to observers. Clothes are functional, but their color and style are less functional. A spike-laden motorcycle jacket is a good signal of identity because a plain brown one is equally warm. Individual tastes can also identify themselves as identity relevant by strategically reducing functionality.”

If consumers actively managing their impressions for others based on the type of products they choose, people are likely to adopt a similar logic in observing others. In other words, observers may be more likely to infer IM with certain categories or types of products that are more strongly associated with their ability to signal, based on a reduction in functionality. The strategic reduction of functionality from a product may send a stronger signal to observers about the target’s identity than a functionally superior product, but it also amplifies the cues observers use to infer deliberateness in appearance.
manipulation. Non-functional products, product features, or product usage contexts may be useful for identity signaling, but this also suggests that this ability to signal can also trigger impression management inferences on the part of the observer.

The relationship between functionality and signaling is rooted in the topic of conspicuous consumption. In 1899, economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen wrote *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, where he argued that the accumulation of wealth is not really what confers status, but rather the evidence of wealth, which requires wasteful exhibition (described as conspicuous consumption). Consumers will pay a higher price for a functionally equivalent good because they crave the status brought about by such material *displays* of wealth (Bagwell and Bernheim 1996). He noted that such displays must be of goods or services that go beyond practical because a utilitarian reason could explain its use. He proposed that seemingly irrationally excessive acts and expenditures functioned as displays of status, wealth and power. This means that these displays of wealth using products would emphasize non-functional elements to achieve the goal of wasteful exhibition (i.e., signaling).

People signal wealth (which can be a component of attractiveness) by displaying expensive possessions (Veblen 1899). Driving an extravagantly expensive car and wearing a lot of jewelry are costly signals that indicate the owner of these goods has sufficient money that it can be wasted on such non-functional goods. A poorer person who tried to emulate this display would face the prohibitive cost of either simply not having the money, or being unable to afford basic necessities. It is not surprising that
people tend to value efficiency over waste (e.g., Fiske and Taylor 1991), yet “seemingly wasteful displays are everywhere, from the exuberant colors of a peacock’s tail to the shiny chrome and deep hum of an expensive sports car” (Donath 2012, p. 6). This work argues that sometimes, these displays will not work. The key idea in Veblen’s theory was the target’s “wastefulness” as an integral part of the display. There is an additional cost associated with going beyond what one would spend for reasons of utility – it amplifies the signal that the target is deliberately trying to appear a certain way.

Observers also judge functionality relative to the context. For example, if a person is wearing a scarf outdoors during a chilly winter season, the inference would be more likely about a desire to keep warm rather than signaling an impression to others. However, this same scarf worn inside a warm and popular building during the summer months is much more likely to be associated with a desire to create a certain impression, and observers may be more likely to make such IM inferences. Observers understand that manufactured products are designed for a particular function (Noseworthy and Trudel 2011), and product functionality can often be inferred from an object’s physical appearance (Matan and Carey 2001; Malt and Johnson 1992).

When a product possesses features that are inconsistent with the inferred function or the product is used in context where functionality does not explain its use (e.g., wearing sunglasses at night), observers are likely to question why it is being used and assume it is for signaling purposes. When observers conclude that the use of a product is motivated by a desire to affect their outward image, either positively or to achieve a
particular look, they are concurrently concluding that the consumer has deliberately attempted to affect their impression.

**H₂**: The effects of appearance attractiveness on impression management inferences will be stronger for low functionality products, product features, or product usage situations.

2.5.2.2 Alternative explanations and observer insensitivity to situational factors

It can be challenging for observers to determine whether target product use is motivated by signaling benefits or by functionality benefits because product use often involves both communication and utility. This concept is also referred to as attributional ambiguity (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa and Major 1991). Donath (2012, p. 17) highlights the difficulty ascribing the purpose of one’s action:

“Two people can perform the same action but with different motivations: Jake may be walking down the street in a t-shirt to show off his muscles while Jack is doing the same thing because it is a warm day and he’s on his way to the store. People often endeavor to minimize the impression of the signaling benefit they hope to derive from their actions: we claim to wear their clothes because they are comfortable, not because they want others to think they are cool; people say they contribute to a charity because they want to help, not because they want others to think of them as generous.”
Both of these examples highlight the relationship between attributional ambiguity and the discounting principle, where it can be difficult to account for the situational influence on a signaler’s behavior. There may, of course, be other reasons why the target is using the product besides IM. However, without additional information, those reasons are all but invisible to the observer. For example, a consumer may be wearing sunglasses indoors because their eyes are sore / sensitive to light, but a typical observer would not know this unless they were privy to additional information that suggested specific and viable explanations (e.g., seeing a bottle of aspirin, observing the individual exiting from a doctor’s office). Consistent with Kelley (1967), if the observer did have insight into the reasons that motivate the target’s current behavior, it is anticipated that observers would serve as legitimate reasons for product use and discount potential IM inferences (Gilbert 1994; Kardes et al. 2004). When alternative explanations are present and are salient to the observer, they will factor them into their judgments and discount appropriately.

However, even in light of functionality inferences stemming from situational elements, there is good reason to believe that observers are relatively insensitive to situational causes of behavior. This has been demonstrated in many different areas of social psychology literature. In the familiar three-stage models of person perception (Brewer 1988; Gilbert 1989, Trope & Alfieri 1997; Fiske and Neuberg 1990; Kenny 1994; Kenny 2004), the theoretical chain of events is as follows: behavior is identified or categorized in trait terms; the actor is then characterized; and a controlled attributional inference or correction that takes situational context into account.
Social psychologists demonstrate that observers do not tend to factor the situation into their judgments as much as they should (Jones and Harris 1967). The correspondence bias (Gilbert and Malone 1995) and the fundamental attribution error (Ross 1977a) are two phenomena that are often explained as failures to discount dispositional causes sufficiently in light of situational constraints. Gawronski (2004) argues that people have theories of situational causes and believe that situations affect behavior, but they may fail to apply these theories if the situation is not salient enough, or sometimes, they will deliberately neglect situational causes to form desired inferences. Dispositional attributions tend to engender a sense of control and predictive power. Therefore, there is a propensity to underestimate the power of situations, since circumstances are generally invisible in attributions and people tend to underestimate the capacity of the situation to alter behavior (Gilbert 1994).

According to PERSON, the impression formation model put forth by Kenny (2004), with little or no behavioral information in a zero-acquaintance context, impressions are primarily based on salient categorical information. Categorical information includes appearance (e.g., physical attractiveness and height) and some demographic features (e.g., age and gender). Other theories of person perception (Brewer 1988; Fiske & Neuberg 1990; Jones 1990) also emphasize that perceivers often use categorical information in forming perceptions. As behavioral information becomes available, judges incorporate such individuating information into their impression, but PERSON predicts simple heuristics will dominate initial impressions. This means
inferences of IM based on appearances are more likely for first impressions, when categorical knowledge is high.

The correspondence bias ultimately reveals that even when the situation indicates a product is being used functionally, observers still might infer IM. This may occur because the general use of that product category tends to be for appearance-related purposes rather than serving functional goals. In other words, using products from product categories that are serve appearance goals as much or more than functional goals, observers may ignore situational factors. In the current product usage context, this suggests that observers may underestimate or ignore situational determinants of the functionality judgment. Observers can draw inferences of IM even from high functionality product use because they will tend to attribute the products that affect appearance to appearance motivations, even if it can be explained by the situation. However, this thesis predicts that when alternative explanations are made salient to observers, they are likely to discount in the appropriate direction. However, observers are still unlikely to adjust sufficiently based on the anchoring-and-adjustment to their visual appearance (Tversky and Kahneman 1974).

**H₃:** When alternative explanations for product use (i.e., non-attractiveness explanations) are made salient, observer inferences of impression management will be mitigated.
2.6 Consequences of IM inferences

It has been demonstrated in a variety of contexts that when people believe someone is not who they appear to be, it generally leads to negative outcomes. Being caught misrepresenting one’s characteristics, abilities, or personal history typically reduces people’s relational value and the likelihood of acceptance (Leary 2001). Campbell and Kirmani (2000) found that if an observer infers that the salesperson is motivated by persuasion, the consumer is likely to perceive the salesperson as less sincere. Similarly, Grayson and Martinec (2004) found that consumers become wary if they discover that the standards of veracity have been manipulated for the purpose of making a profit. Similar to perceptions of veracity and sincerity, this dissertation argues that inferences of an IM motive will undermine the image conveyed by the target, decreasing overall attitudes towards the consumer.

People don’t want others to know their true motives (i.e., avoid observer inferences of ulterior motives) because this will undermine the effectiveness of their actions in terms of achieving their goals. Masking one’s true motives relates back to the ingratiorator’s dilemma (Jones and Wortman 1973) as well as Donath’s (2012) suggestion that people often try to minimize impressions of signaling or intentionality in their appearance. In the current consumer context, consumers go through great pains and efforts, trying so hard to appear good-looking ‘without even trying’. This is evident through both rigorous beauty and cleaning regimens before going out in public as well as consuming products that make you look natural (i.e., ‘Bedhead’ hair gel that makes it look like you just got out of bed).
Being perceived as impression managing tends to undermine attitudes formed of the target individual. Godfrey et al. (1986) found that people tend to dislike others who boast or engage in self-presentation. This is also consistent with past research from impression management theory (Leary 1995) as well as more recent work into assessments of ulterior motives (Ham and Vonk 2011; Ferraro, Kirmani, Matherly 2013). The current thesis hypothesizes that being perceived as impression managing will be associated with a broad range of negative outcomes regarding attitudes and anticipated behaviors towards the target.

**H4A**: Inferences of impression management will decrease attitudes towards the target person.

Based on the negative implications that IM inferences are associated with, it is likely an important goal for observers to distance themselves from buying products that they predict others would associate with deliberately impression managing. People seem to alter or even abandon their tastes, not for internal reasons, but for social concerns about how others might see them (Berger and Heath 2008). For example, men were less likely to choose a small steak when it was labeled as a “ladies cut,” especially when they thought others would see their choice (White & Dahl 2006).

The current work also posits that inferences of IM will, under certain conditions, also effect attitudes towards the product itself. Ferraro et al. (2013) find that the negative
impression of a brand user can transfer to the brand itself under conditions where observers demonstrate a low self-brand connection and assess an ulterior motive. This is suggestive that the behavior of everyday consumers can dilute brand image (Ferraro et al. 2013). The current thesis predicts that this rub-off effect on the product is more nuanced, whereby this negative effect is contingent on the product’s specific contribution to their appearance. If a product has inherent strategically-reduced functionality (i.e., presence of appearance-oriented features over functional features) that triggers IM inferences, the negative associations of impression managing will rub off on attitudes towards the product. An example here would be wearing shuttered sunglasses or glasses with ostentatious colors or logos. The logic here is, because observers associate the target’s product use with IM, they are likely to assume other observers would conclude the same motive if they themselves used that same product, based on the false consensus effect (Ross 1977b). This IM carryover is also enhanced based on the spotlight effect (Gilovich et al. 2000), where observers have a tendency to overestimate the extent in which others notice aspects of their appearance or behavior and to what extent they are aware of it. The spotlight effect also makes people believe that they will be judged harshly based on their product choices (Ashworth and Matear 2007). In other words, observers will subsequently dislike products they believe will lead to a similar inference if they used it.

However, if the IM inference is based on the target using a regular product in an irregular context (e.g., regular black sunglasses at night), then it is more likely that the subsequent negative product attitudes are mitigated because the impetus of the
impression management is attributed to the user and not the product. In other words, when the product is responsible for the IM inference, there will be a dilution of product attitudes (i.e., ‘that product is so over-the-top’), whereas when the target is responsible for the IM based on using functional products in strange contexts, this mitigates negative product attitudes (i.e., ‘why are they using that?’).

\textbf{H4B}: Inferences of impression management will decrease attitudes towards the target product when the product itself is perceived as responsible for the target’s appearance (as opposed to the target’s usage of a product).

The current thesis also expects that a key mediating mechanism in explaining the product’s contribution to appearance on overall attitudes towards the person are the IM inferences observers make about the motive for using a particular product. A variable is referred to as a mediator “to the extent that it accounts for the relation between the predictor and the criterion” (Baron and Kenny 1986, p. 1176). This prediction is consistent with Brunswik’s (1956) lens model, which explains how elements observed in the environment can serve as a lens through with observers indirectly perceive underlying constructs. Observers infer a target’s motivation from environmental cues, from which observers infer disposition and form impressions (e.g., Gosling et al. 2002). More recently, Malle and Holbrook (2012) demonstrated that intentionality inferences occur first, in both likelihood and speed of inference. This pattern is also consistent with models
that describe trait or attitude inferences as relying on prior goal inferences (e.g., Reeder 2009). In the current work, the inference of a consumer’s goals (i.e., trying to create a certain impression) will mediate the relationship between the observer’s perception of product contribution to the target’s appearance and their overall attitudes towards that particular consumer.

**H₅:** Inferences of impression management will mediate the relationship between the product’s contribution to appearance and attitudes towards the target person.

### 2.7 Brands

Brands facilitate the signaling process for observers by recognition of visible logos and explicit patterns, where “Nike’s swoosh, Burberry’s plaid, and the Apple logo all facilitate communication and allow others to make desired inferences about the wearer” (Berger and Ward 2010, p. 555). Brands represent certain characteristics and signal clear values that can be purchased to help consumers manage the impressions they emit. As such, there are positive inferences to be made by using an attractive brand, but this thesis argues that this positive effect is reduced when it is symbolically ‘shouted’ at observers (i.e., very prominent logos). The symbolic meaning observers derive from a particular brand is often based on associations between the brand and its users or the “type” of consumer who buys that brand (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Consumers are influenced by their own group (Bearden and Etzel 1982); those they aspire to (Escalas
and Bettman 2003) and those they want to avoid being associated with (White and Dahl 2006; 2007). Today, anyone can own a purse, a watch, or a pair of shoes, yet specific brands of these products are a distinguishing feature for certain classes of consumer (Han et al. 2010). Brands and signaling have been investigated in the prominence domain, which focuses on the extent to which the product has visible marketing that help ensure observers recognize the brand.

With regard to brands in the signaling process, Wilcox, Kim, and Sen (2009) found that products without logos are less apt to serve the social functions of self-expression and self-presentation. Han, Nunes and Dreze (2010) conceptualized the construct of brand prominence, which refers to the relative conspicuousness of a brand’s mark or logo, and highlighted that the prominence can reflect different signaling intentions of the owner. Brand choice can send meaningful social signals to other consumers about the type of person using that brand (Wernerfelt 1990). The prominent prestigious brand is a more effective signal of status or coolness. The problem is, there remains a confound. Because of the large logo, everyone knows you are wearing a luxury brand (i.e., Gucci). However, it may also be seen as crass because it is being said so loudly.

Lastly, it is predicted that the context of brands appears to alter the nature of the relation between IM and overall attitudes towards the product. A strong brand image is developed over long durations and based on multiple exposures (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). A single exposure to a target person using a brand for IM is unlikely to
significantly erode prior attitudes towards their brand’s products. It is predicted that attractive brands (i.e., high prestige) will be insulated from the damaging downstream effects of inferences that one is trying too hard.

**H₆**: Perceptions of brand attractiveness will moderate H₄B, where highly attractive brands are insulated from the discounting associated with the impression management inference.

### 2.8 Observer-related differences

The theorizing in this thesis up to now has generally focused on understanding the specific product, environmental, target, and brand cues that consumers use to infer when someone else is attempting to create a certain impression. An additional gap in the literature revolves around the personal differences that may impact these interactions. In other words, there has been little discussion of the role of self (observer) processes in the perceptions of others. Individual differences are integral components of marketplace interactions (Bennett and Hill 2012). This section reviews two key topic areas: the role of self-threat and the role of self-affirmation on mitigating the effects of feeling threatened and why such feelings might relate to perceptions of target IM motives.

This thesis predicts that observer-level factors can exacerbate the probability of this IM motive inference. In some cases, social comparisons can be threatening and that inferring IM might be one way for observers to lessen threat. The tendency to infer an IM
motive in others is based on accuracy, where observers want to be able to forecast what people are like in the event of a future interpersonal interaction. However, this motivation to draw an IM inference can shift away from an accuracy basis in cases where the observer feels threatened. Defense motives have been acknowledged in information processing when a person faces threatening information (Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly 1989).

2.8.1 Self-threat

As mentioned in the review on attributional search, several studies have found that perceivers tend to give more thought to “why” questions when their expectations are disconfirmed or their self-image is threatened (Hastie 1984; Pyszczynski & Greenberg 1981; Weiner 1985; Wong and Weiner 1981). While the notion of expectancy disconfirmation was discussed in detail to understand the tradeoff between functionality and signaling, this section will detail how threat towards the observer’s self-image can provoke defensive reactions.

One of the founding theories oriented around self-threat is social comparison theory. Social comparison theory is centered on the belief that people are motivated to get accurate self-evaluations, comparing themselves to others to judge their relative performance or uniqueness (Festinger 1954; Suls and Wills 1991). Conditions for threat often arise when confronted with a similar other on who performs better on a relevant task (Tesser 1991). Social comparison threatens one’s identity, through either judgments of relative performance or uniqueness. It has also been demonstrated that temporary,
contextual threatening information about an aspect of social identity can lead to the avoidance of products associated with that identity (White and Argo 2009).

It can be threatening to an observer, under certain conditions, to assume that a target is not actually impression managing – in other words, the target really is as beautiful or cool or good as they appear. Based on social comparison processes (Tesser 1991), relative to them, the observer feels threatened and is motivated to reduce this discomfort. When the target is perceived as a threat, perceivers are more strongly motivated to maintain positive attitude towards the self (e.g. Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model), caring less about being valid in their judgments and more about protecting their self-concept (ego defense motivation). As such, hostile self-protective reactions are likely to occur (Smith & Kim 2007). Self-image threat may lead people to engage in prejudicial evaluations of others and their motives and these negative evaluations can, and often do, make people feel better about themselves (Fein and Spencer 1997). In the current context, the source of self-image threat could be the attractiveness of a similar other. If an observer feels threatened, this work predicts that they would be more likely to draw IM inferences and question the validity of the appearance of another.

H7: Observers who feel threatened are more likely to infer impression management in the appearance of others that are observers who do not feel threatened.

2.8.1.1 Susceptibility to Normative Influence (SNI)
It is also predicted that the role of observer self-threat on impression management will be moderated by the observer’s susceptibility towards normative influence. Consumers’ susceptibility to normative influence (SNI) is defined as the need to identify with others or enhance one’s image with products and brands or the willingness to conform to others’ expectations regarding purchase decisions (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989; Wooten and Reed 2004). Research has found SNI to predict concerns about public appearances and efforts to gain social acceptance. For instance, high SNI consumers value conspicuous benefits more than do their low SNI counterparts (Batra, Homer, and Kahle 2001). SNI predicts concerns about others’ opinions, compliance with others’ expectations, and tendencies to emulate others (Wooten and Reed 2004). Most relevant to the current thesis, Batra et al. (2001) found the importance of conspicuous attributes increases with corresponding increases to SNI. This thesis argues that high SNI observers are simply more likely to assume targets are trying to IM because they would be themselves.

These findings suggest that SNI reflects a desire to fit in—a concern often associated with protective self-presentation (Wolfe, Lennox, and Cutler 1986). Social disapproval can occur when individuals fail to convey desired impressions or when they successfully convey impressions that are undesired by their target audiences. Wooten and Reid (2004) ultimately find that protective tendencies are a function of high SNI because SNI is inversely related to tendencies to make contestable or noticeable self-presentations that may result in social disapproval or losses of approval.
It is predicted that observers who are high in SNI are more likely to infer impression management even when threat is low compared to low SNI individuals. As SNI increases, consumers place greater emphasis on highly visible attributes like style and reputation as opposed to less visible attributes when evaluating conspicuous products like clothing (Batra et al. 2001). It appears as though high SNI consumers are more concerned about approval in general, and avoiding losses of approval in particular, than are low SNI consumers. In other words, high SNI individuals are already fixated with style and genuine concern for what others think.

**H₈:** The relationship between self-threat and impression management inferences will be moderated by the observer’s susceptibility to normative influence, such that high SNI individuals are more likely to form IM inferences even under low threat conditions.

### 2.8.2 Self-affirmation

To the extent observer IM inferences are designed, in part, to mitigate threatening social comparisons, self-affirmation should provide some buffer against threat. In other words, self-affirmation provides one way of demonstrating that the reason for the observer IM inference was to ameliorate threat. This means that prejudicial processing can be self-affirming: “By using available resources to justify and act on biases, individuals may be able to reclaim for themselves a feeling of mastery and self-worth,
often saving themselves from having to confront the real sources of self-image threat” (Fein and Spencer 1997, p. 31).

Self-affirmation theory (Steele 1988; Steele, Spencer, & Lynch 1993) suggests that every person strives for positive self-regard and, to achieve it, draws on successes in important domains in her or his life. These domains constitute aspects of individual identity, including important social roles, abilities, and beliefs. It is reasonable to predict that if self-worth is maintained, the tendency to avoid products associated with a threatened aspect of identity should be attenuated. Research demonstrates that if the individual is given the opportunity to restore feelings of self-worth by an alternative means, self-protective reactions to threatening circumstances are mitigated (Steele 1988). For example, when people are given the opportunity to self-affirm (i.e., acknowledge values that are important to the self), tendencies to hinder a close other's performance after a threatening upward social comparison (Tesser & Cornell 1991) and to derogate others when threatened (Fein & Spencer 1997) are reduced.

Self-affirmation seems to enable an individual to more objectively evaluate information that would otherwise evoke a defensive reaction (Correll, Spencer, and Zanna 2004). Fein and Spencer (1997) demonstrated that when individuals evaluated a member of a stereotyped group, they were less likely to evaluate that person negatively if their self-images had been bolstered through a self-affirmation procedure, and they were more likely to evaluate that person stereotypically if their self-images had been threatened by negative feedback. This suggests that prejudicial perception may be a
common means to maintain one’s self-image (Fein and Spencer 1997). Prejudicial judgments often serve a self-affirming function for individuals, and providing people with other means of self-affirmation should reduce their desire to make prejudicial evaluations.

**H9:** Providing observers with the opportunity to self-affirm will increase overall attitudes towards the individual by mitigating IM inferences.

**Figure 1 – Conceptual Model**
Chapter 3

Studies – Experimental Design and Results

This dissertation consists of five studies. The five studies are all experiments, each designed to test a specific aspect of the conceptual framework. Similar to more recent research in the area of impression formation, this thesis predominantly relies on the method of digital image manipulation based on Adobe Photoshop to create the experimental manipulations (e.g., Tanner and Maeng 2012). After viewing the visual stimulus of either a product or someone using a product, participants are then asked to respond to a consistent battery of measures (discussed in more detail in the first study).

Study 1 served as an initial test of the idea that observers do form impression management inferences and also to test the appearance attractiveness hypothesis based on the specific product features (H₁). This study also examined how the appearance attractiveness factor would interact with alternative explanations for using the product based on perceptions of product functionality through its usage context (H₂).

Study 2 further explored the role of perceptions of product functionality by varying the presence or absence of non-functional features in a car evaluation context. The purpose was to test whether observers were more likely to infer IM by the product owner when the product had lower perceived functionality (based on the presence of non-functional features) than when the same product had no non-functional features (H₂). In addition, this experiment provided a test of the discounting hypothesis (H₃). Specifically, observers were expected to discount their inferences of IM when an
alternative explanation for the non-functional product features was made salient (i.e., an explanation that did not involve IM), but not when no such explanation was explicitly provided. This study also tested the downstream consequences of IM inferences, predicting a negative effect on the attitude towards the target (H_{4A}) as well as the attitude towards the focal product (H_{4B}). This study also examined how IM inferences can explain the relationship between perceptions of a product’s contribution to a target’s appearance and overall attitudes towards that person (H_{5}).

Study 3 provided a conceptual replication of the non-functional features prediction from Study 2, but also examined whether the nature of the product itself (without the addition of non-functional features) could increase inferences of consumer impression management. It examined the role of perceptions of product practicality, whereby products that are perceived as being less practical are associated with prioritizing appearance-attractiveness goals over functional goals, in a similar car evaluation context. The findings of studies 2 and 3 together suggest that consumer product use that appears to be a deliberate attempt to convey a certain impression tends to reflect negatively on the product user as well as the product.

Study 4 continued to examine the appearance attractiveness hypothesis, extending the context to branding. Adapting the operationalization away from products and towards brands allowed for the testing of whether attractiveness of the brand itself would have similar effects on inferences of an IM motive while protecting the product user from decreases in attitudes (H_{6}). This study also provided the opportunity to see whether more
prominent brand insignia are not only more effective signals of status, but also inherently linked to increased IM inferences.

The final study, Study 5, examined the effects of observer-level differences on the inferences they would make about others. Specifically, Study 5 examined whether observers who felt threatened in a social comparison context were more likely to form IM inferences based on the appearance of another (H7). This study also examines the individual-difference moderating effect of the observer’s susceptibility to normative influence (H8). In addition, this study also explored the role of self-affirmation as a factor to increase attitudes towards the person (H9).

Before presenting the specific details of each study, it is important to consider how they relate to the broader conceptual framework. Study 1 was an exploratory study of how the product’s contribution to one’s appearance would influence IM inferences. Studies 2 and 3 focused exclusively on establishing whether perceived product functionality is importantly related to impression management judgments. As such, these studies examine visual product cues relating to functionality that are expected to vary in the extent to which they lead to these inferences as well as dispositional attributions regarding the product user and the focal products they are using. Study 4 shifts the focus of the appearance away from inherent product characteristics towards branding to help explain the relationship with downstream consequences. Finally, as IM inferences are not only influenced by the signals the target emits based on their product usage but also the observer motivation, the final study shifted away from visual cues towards observer-level
differences to examine the predicted moderating role of self-threat on the formation of these judgments. Taken together, these studies offer a comprehensive examination of the proposed conceptual framework.

In what follows, each of these completed studies is discussed in detail. In the following chapter, this dissertation will discuss the theoretical and managerial implications associated with these results.

3.1 Study One

3.1.1 Rationale

The purpose of Study 1 was to serve as an initial test of the idea that observers do form impression management inferences and also test whether product features relating to its attractiveness are involved in this process (H₁). In this study, participants were asked to evaluate the motivations of either a target using a scarf under different conditions. It was hypothesized that the degree to which the observer believes that the use of the product contributes to a positive appearance would bolster IM inferences. For this study, the positivity of the appearance was manipulated based on the attractiveness of the scarf, with the target either being pictured wearing a very attractive scarf or a less attractive scarf. This study also examined how product attractiveness would interact with alternative explanations for using the product based on perceptions of product functionality through its usage context (H₂). To manipulate this, participants were either shown an image of the target wearing the scarf outside and were explicitly informed it was during the winter (i.e., where using a scarf would be quite functional), or shown an
image of the target wearing the scarf inside and were explicitly informed it was during the summer (i.e., where the use was less functional).

3.1.2 Method

One hundred and sixty three business students at Queen’s University participated in the study in exchange for bonus credit to be allocated to one of their courses. Participants were recruited through the faculty research pool and run in group sessions ranging in size from twenty-five to sixty-five people. They were asked to bring their laptop to a classroom on campus in order to complete the study. After a reviewing the letter of information and informed consent, participants were provided with a web link to access the study.

The design of this study was a 2 (Product Attractiveness: low vs. high) X 2 (Product Functionality: low [scarf used inside] vs. high [scarf used outside]) between-subjects factorial design. On the first page of the study, participants were told a cover story for the study, which was that the University was conducting a brief survey to see what types of pictures they should include in their upcoming brochure. Students were told that as a part of this investigation, a student was randomly approached on campus and asked to take their photo. On the following page, participants were shown an image of the target wearing a scarf (See Appendix C).

The first manipulation was of the appearance attractiveness, where in this study, this was manifested through the attractiveness of the product, which was a scarf. In an earlier pre-test, participants had rated eight different scarves with regard to their
attractiveness and their conspicuousness (i.e., attention-grabbingness). Attractiveness was built into a composite based on three items (α = .92), which were ‘I like the look of this scarf’, ‘I like the design of this scarf’, and ‘this scarf looks good’. The conspicuousness was based on ‘This scarf is loud’ and ‘This scarf is attention-grabbing’. The two scarves that were selected for Study 1 were statistically different with regard to attractiveness ($F(1,26) = 53.14, p < .05$) ($M_s = 5.58$ vs. $2.83$), but not different with regard to conspicuousness. Participants were either exposed to a target wearing the high attractiveness scarf or the low-attractiveness scarf.

The second manipulation was product functionality, which was manipulated with regard to the usage context of the product. The image revealed that the person was either using the scarf inside (low functionality) or outside (high functionality). This contextual information was made even more salient because observers were also explicitly informed via text that accompanied the picture that it was taken during the summer (i.e., July) or during the winter (i.e., December). It was predicted that based on the ‘invisible’ nature of situations, the product functionality based on usage context would not be factored in unless it made salient to the observer. Using a scarf indoors during the summer is presumably less functional because the primary function of a scarf would be warmth. In the summer, it is already quite warm, making the use of a scarf less necessary. A confederate helped pose in these photos to help ensure experimental control across conditions. Participants then responded to a series of questions regarding an assessment
of their motives, their perceptions of the attractiveness of the scarf, and demographic information.

3.1.3 Measures

Considering that there is no existing scale to measure the inference of impression management motives in others, a measure was created based on the theoretical constructs of past impression management research (Schlenker and Leary 1992), adapted for an observer perspective. To capture the inference of impression management, a measure was constructed out of six items (based on seven-point scales). The items in the measure are: this person is – trying to gain the approval of others; trying to impress other people; trying to show off to others; wants others to look at them favorably; trying to look cool; and trying hard to look a certain way. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to identify the underlying factor structure of these variables. This revealed that all items loaded on a single underlying factor and that the items showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .85$). This same composite was employed in each of the subsequent studies to measure impression management inferences.

3.1.4 Results

3.1.4.1 Manipulation checks

The manipulation checks provided evidence that this study was able to manipulate the theoretical constructs. First, an ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of the product functionality manipulation on perceptions of functionality (i.e., a composite of ‘this scarf is functional’ and ‘this scarf does its job well’) ($F(1,159) = 64.28, p < .05$).
This meant that using a scarf inside was perceived as significantly less functional than using a scarf outside ($M_s = 3.15$ vs. $4.81$). There was also a significant main effect of the product attractiveness manipulation on perceptions of product attractiveness ($F(1,159) = 11.62$, $p < .05$), as assessed with three items, including ‘this product is attractive’, ‘this product looks good’, ‘this product looks nice’. The manipulated attractive scarf was perceived as significantly more attractive than the unattractive scarf ($M_s = 4.53$ vs. $3.74$).

3.1.4.2 Impression Management Inferences

To test whether IM inferences differed based on product attractiveness and product functionality, an ANOVA of Product Attractiveness and Product Functionality on IM inferences was conducted. It revealed a significant interaction ($F(1,159) = 4.20$, $p < .05$). When the product was not functional (i.e., used indoors), there was a significant effect of attractiveness on IM inferences, with the attractive scarf leading to increased IM inferences as compared to the less attractive scarf ($M_s = 4.49$ vs. $3.91$) ($F(1,68) = 6.28$, $p < .05$). However, when the product was functional (i.e., used outdoors), there was no significant difference ($M_s = 3.87$ vs. $3.98$) ($F(1,91) = .22$, $p > .05$).

Figure 2 – Study 1: ANOVA results of Product Functionality and Product Attractiveness on Inferences of Impression Management
3.1.5 Discussion

Study 1 demonstrated that IM inferences can be influenced by a product’s contribution to appearance. More specifically, the attractiveness of the product and the product functionality shape these judgments. Observer IM inferences were inflated when the product was attractive and there was no functional explanation to mitigate these inferences (i.e., the product was used indoors in the summer). This seemed to suggest to observers that the product was being used for appearance purposes. However, when the product was functional (i.e., used outdoors) and this information was made salient to observers, there was no significant difference.

While this study did demonstrate the basic effect of a product’s contribution to appearance influencing observer perceptions of IM inferences, there were two limitations. First, this study did not examine whether these IM inferences have meaningful
downstream consequences on the attitude towards the product user, the product, or the brand. Therefore, based on this study alone, it is difficult to conclude what the impact this inference of IM has on general attitudes or behaviours. Second, there was no non-salient condition in this experiment (i.e., contextual information about when the product was being used was made available to all participants). However, as theorized previously, this is not how observers naturally process information, which is subject to the correspondence bias. These issues were addressed in Study 2.

3.2 Study Two

3.2.1 Rationale

The purpose of this experiment was to continue to explore the idea that particular product features associated with its use are integral in impression management assessments. This study examines one of the central elements underlying the framework, which is that perceptions of low product functionality can lead to impression management inferences (H2). The more specific purpose of this study is to test whether the presence or absence of non-functional features based on product function lead to these inferences. This tested the prediction that products with lower perceived functionality based on the presence of non-functional features leads to increased IM inferences when compared to an identical product with no non-functional features. In addition, this experiment tested the idea that people would discount for alternative reasons, but only when those reasons were made salient to them, discounting IM inferences for the low perceived functionality conditions (H3). This study also tested the
downstream consequences of IM inferences, predicting a negative effect on the attitude towards the target ($H_{4A}$) as well as the attitude towards the focal product ($H_{4B}$). Finally, this study tested whether IM inferences mediated the effects of perceived functionality on product and target attitudes ($H_5$).

3.2.2 Method

One hundred and thirty nine business students (61% female) at Queen’s University participated in this study in exchange for bonus credit to be allocated to one of their courses. Participants were recruited through the faculty research pool and run in group sessions ranging in size from thirty to sixty-five people. They were asked to bring their laptop to a classroom on campus in order to complete the study. After a reviewing the letter of information and informed consent, participants were provided with a web link to access the study.

The design of this study was a 2 (Non-functional Features: present vs. absent) X 2 (Reasoning for Product Use: bought new vs. bought used) between-subjects factorial design. In this study, the reasoning for product use acts as a salience of alternative explanation manipulation. At the start of the study, participants were informed they would be completing a study on cars and the people who drive them. On the first page of the study, participants were given a brief scenario, which contained a very short description of the image they were about to see, which also functioned as the reasoning for product use manipulation. The scenario read: “On the next page, you will see a picture of a car. The owner of this car [purchased it new and customized it / purchased it
second-hand and did not customize it] at a fair price.” This salient alternative explanation for product use could theoretically make the user less responsible for their appearance (i.e., the second-hand owner is not responsible for the irrelevant features). The logic may be that they just wanted a decent vehicle for a good price. Participants were then shown an image of a truck, independent of any visual information about the owner (See Appendix D). The truck was a grey 1996 Nissan Frontier that was either stock (no non-functional features) or modified with black flame decals and spoked rims (non-functional features). The image was digitally manipulated in Adobe Photoshop, a popular image-editing package. This image was identical in all other respects, controlling as many other elements of the image between conditions (i.e., lighting, positioning, and size). It was expected that the product with non-functional features (i.e., the modified truck) would be more likely to draw IM inferences. Observers will not naturally generate alternative explanations, but they will account for them by discounting when they are made salient. In this study, making participants aware that they are buying it second-hand and not customizing it themselves would mitigate the IM inferences formed. After viewing the image, participants then responded to a series of questions regarding their attitudes towards the driver, their motives for owning the car, their perceptions of the car, and demographic information.

3.2.3 Measures

All items were measured using 7-point scales unless described otherwise. The IM composite created from Study 1 based on six items ($\alpha = .95$) was reliable.
Attitude towards the driver was measured with 3 items (α = .89): I feel favorably towards this person; I feel positively about this person; I think I would like this person. Attitude towards the product was measured with three items (α = .96): I feel favorably towards this car; I feel positive towards this car; and overall, I like this car.

3.2.4 Results

3.2.4.1 Manipulation checks

Participants correctly remembered whether the vehicle was bought second hand or new (χ²(1) = 63.99, p < .05). An ANOVA of non-functional features on perceptions of functionality revealed a significant main effect (F(1,138) = 4.17, p < .05). The vehicle with non-functional features was perceived as being significantly less functional than an identical vehicle without those features (Ms = 5.27 vs. 5.70).

3.2.4.2 Impression Management Inferences

H₂ predicted that products perceived as having low functionality will increase inferences of impression management compared to products perceived as having high functionality. To test this, an ANOVA of the independent variables was conducted (Non-functional Features and Reasoning for Product Use) on the IM composite variable. There was a significant main effect of non-functional features on IM inferences (F(1,135) = 86.15, p < .05), where a product with non-functional features had higher IM inferences than identical products that did not have non-functional features (Ms = 5.35 vs. 3.67), supporting H₂.
H3 predicted that the presence of reasons that explain why the target is using the product will moderate H2, where reasons allows observers to discount the impression management inference made when product use is perceived as having low functionality. In this same ANOVA reported above, the main effect of non-functional features was qualified by an interaction ($F(1,135) = 4.22, p < .05$). When observers were informed that the consumer purchased the car with non-functional features second-hand and did not customize it, they significantly discounted IM inferences ($M_s = 5.06$ vs. $5.64$) ($F(1,68) = 12.26, p < .05$). Providing this same reasoning for the car with no non-functional features had no effect ($M_s = 3.75$ vs. $3.59$) ($F(1,67) = .252, p > .05$). This finding suggests that observers will discount IM inferences in the appropriate direction if a reason for the product use is provided. However, they do not appear to account for this reasoning.
sufficiently, as there is still a significant difference between stock and modified second-hand vehicles ($Ms = 3.75$ vs. $5.06$) ($F(1,68) = 25.59, p < .05$).

3.2.4.3 Downstream effects

$H_{4A}$ predicted that perceptions of low product use functionality (i.e., non-functional features) would decrease attitudes towards the target person compared with high product use functionality. An ANOVA on the attitude towards the driver composite revealed a significant main effect of non-functional product features ($F(1,136) = 29.08, p < .05$), where the presence of non-functional features decreased attitudes towards the driver ($Ms = 4.38$ vs. $3.49$). This effect was qualified by a significant interaction with product use reasoning ($F(1,136) = 7.37, p < .05$). When observers were informed that the consumer purchased the car with non-functional features second-hand and did not customize it, attitudes towards the driver were higher ($Ms = 3.77$ vs. $3.21$) ($F(1,68) = 8.08, p < .05$), supporting $H_{4A}$. Providing this same reasoning for the car with no non-functional features had no effect on attitude towards the driver ($Ms = 4.22$ vs. $4.54$) ($F(1,68) = 1.52, p > .05$). Ultimately, this pattern on attitude towards the driver was the reverse of inferences of IM, consistent with the predictions.

Figure 4 – Study 2: ANOVA results of Non-Functional Features and Product Use Reasoning on Attitude towards the User
H_{4B} focused on attitudes towards the product and predicted that perceptions of low product use functionality will decrease attitudes compared with perceptions of high product use functionality. An ANOVA on the product attitude composite demonstrated a significant main effect of non-functional product features ($F(1, 136) = 15.75, p < .05$). When the product was modified to have decals and rims, observers liked the product significantly less than the stock model ($M_s = 3.27$ vs. $2.40$), supporting H_{4B}. An interaction with product use reasoning on attitude towards the vehicle was neither expected nor found because, while reasoning might influence how observers see the owner of the product, the reason why someone else purchased a product should not theoretically alter their own perceptions of that product.

Figure 5 – Study 2: ANOVA results of Product Functionality and Product Use Reasoning on Attitude towards the Product
3.2.4.4 Mediation Analyses

H₃ predicted that inferences of impression management would mediate the relationship between perceptions of product functionality and attitudes towards the target person. To test this, the PROCESS macro for SPSS was run (Hayes 2013). The model used (Model 7) estimated the indirect effects of the presence of non-functional Features (X) on attitudes towards the driver (Y) through inferences of impression management (M), moderated by Product Use Reasoning (W). The first-stage moderation model was selected based on the prior theorizing supporting H₃. The reasoning behind one’s product use was predicted to alter the perceptions of the target’s motivations, not having a direct relationship to the attitudes towards the person. This model generates bias corrected 95% bootstrap confidence intervals for the indirect effects using 1,000 bootstrap samples.

**Figure 6 – Study 2: Mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes 2013) of Non-Functional Features and Product Use Reasoning on Attitude towards the User through Inferences of Impression Management**
Notably, the confidence intervals surrounding the indirect effect of IM inferences did not span zero, consistent with an interpretation of a statistically significant indirect effect (Bought Used point estimate: -.62; CI95%: -.94 to -.38; Bought New point estimate: -.97; CI95%: -1.42 to -.63). This means that there is an indirect effect on attitude towards the driver, such that an non-functional features leads to significantly higher IM inferences than an identical product lacking those features. There were no significant direct effects of non-functional features on attitude towards the driver once impression management inferences were accounted for (Direct Effect point estimate: -.07, p > .05). This suggests that the effect on attitudes towards the product user was mediated by IM inferences. The significant mediation by IM inferences, even in the case of when the car was purchased second-hand, is of particular importance. This is consistent with the prior theorizing that observers seemed not to adjust their inferences sufficiently, even when faced with information regarding product usage. Ultimately, observers still attributed some IM inferences to the product owner, even when product features could be perfectly explained by the situation.
3.2.5 Discussion

This study tested whether low product functionality (i.e., non-functional features) would increase inferences of impression management compared to high product functionality (i.e., no non-functional features). When observers were informed that the consumer purchased the car with non-functional features second-hand and did not customize it, they significantly discounted IM inferences. This finding suggests that observers will discount IM inferences in the appropriate direction if a reason for the product use is provided. However, they do not appear to account for this reasoning sufficiently, as there is still a significant difference between stock and modified second-hand vehicles. This is consistent with the primary idea that, even accounting for other influences, appearance cues remain a driving force in the formation of IM inferences.

With regard to downstream consequences, when observers were informed that the consumer purchased the car with non-functional features second-hand and did not customize it, attitudes towards the driver were higher. This pattern was consistent, but the reverse of IM inferences; in the follow-up analyses, this interaction on attitudes towards the user was found to be mediated by IM inferences. Even though the consumer is driving the same product, when the observer knows they did not go out of their way to customize and modify the product, and rather bought it used for a good price, they like them more. However, they still do not like them as much as when they had purchased the stock version of the truck. For attitudes towards the truck itself, when the product was modified to have decals and rims, observers liked the product significantly less than the stock model.
3.3 Study Three

3.3.1 Rationale

The purpose of Study 3 was to replicate whether the presence of non-functional features would increase IM, but to also extend these findings to another dimension of product functionality. It was predicted that the nature of the product itself could also increase IM inferences in the absence of seeing the product user. As theorized earlier, products that are perceived as less practical are often associated with prioritizing appearance-related goals. This study aims to test the prediction that even products that do not possess auxiliary product modifications can still increase inferences of impression management. This prediction is consistent with Veblen’s (1899) foundation of conspicuous consumption; vehicles equivalent on the central domain (i.e., transportation) that either cost more (i.e., expensive) or offer less in terms of practicality (i.e., storage, fuel economy) can stimulate these thoughts.

3.3.2 Method

Ninety-six students (52% male) at Queen’s University participated in the study in exchange for bonus credit to be allocated to one of their courses. The general procedure for recruitment and introduction was the same as in Study 1 and 2. The design of this study was a 2 (Non-Functional Features: present vs. absent) X 2 (Product Practicality: low vs. high) between subjects factorial design. On the first page of the study, participants were told they were responding to a car evaluation study. On the next page, participants were shown one image of a car (See Appendix E). The first manipulation
was the car itself; participants were either exposed to a 2011 Ford Fiesta (high product practicality) or a 2011 Ford Mustang (low product practicality). Keeping the brand consistent helped control for natural variance of brand positioning and pre-existing attitudes and focus the manipulation on the practicality of the vehicle. The second manipulation was the presence or absence of non-functional features, similar to Study 2: participants either viewed a stock model (non-functional features absent) or a modified model with decals and rims (non-functional features present). In this study, images were not edited in Photoshop, but rather were actual options available for customization on the Ford website. All other aspects of the image (i.e. car color, background, positioning) were kept identical. Participants then responded to a series of questions regarding their attitudes towards the driver, their motives for owning the car, their perceptions of the car, and demographic information.

3.3.3 Measures

The same IM measure (α = .95), attitude towards the driver (α = .95), and attitude towards the product (α = .97), from Study 1 were used.

3.3.4 Results

3.3.4.1 Manipulation checks

An ANOVA of non-functional features on perceptions of attention-grabbingness (a composite of ‘the car is loud’ and ‘the car is attention-grabbing’) revealed a significant main effect ($F(1,90) = 18.57, p < .05$). The product with non-functional features was perceived as being significantly more attention-grabbing than an identical product.
without those features ($M_s = 5.19$ vs. $4.07$). An ANOVA of product practicality on perceptions of functionality (a composite of ‘the car is functional’ and ‘the car does its job well’) demonstrated a significant main effect ($F(1,92) = 18.61$, $p < .05$). The high practicality car (i.e., Fiesta) was viewed as more functional than the low practicality car ($M_s = 5.32$ vs. $4.46$). There was no significant main effect or interaction effect of non-functional features on perceptions of functionality, highlighting that these features alter perceptions of appearance, but not functionality.

3.3.4.2 Impression Management Inferences

H$_2$ predicted that product use perceived as having low functionality will increase inferences of impression management compared to product use that is perceived as having high functionality. To test this, an ANOVA was conducted with the independent variables (Non-Functional Features and Practicality) on the IM composite variable. Consistent with Study 2, there was a significant main effect of non-functional features on IM inferences ($F(1,92) = 21.84$, $p < .05$), where a product with non-functional features had higher IM inferences than identical products that did not have non-functional features ($M_s = 5.21$ vs. $4.21$), supporting H$_2$.

Figure 7– Study 3: ANOVA results of Non-Functional Features and Product Practicality on Inferences of Impression Management
The secondary manipulation of functionality was with regard to the product itself. This ANOVA also revealed a significant main effect of product practicality on IM inferences \((F(1,92) = 36.94, p < .05)\), where a product with low practicality had higher IM inferences than products with high practicality \((M_s = 5.37 \text{ vs. } 4.06)\), providing further support for H2. Interestingly, both of these main effects were qualified by an interaction of product practicality and non-functional features \((F(1,92) = 4.94, p < .05)\). For the high practicality product, the addition of non-functional features increased IM inferences substantially \((M_s = 4.80 \text{ vs. } 3.32)\) \((F(1,54) = 21.48, p < .05)\). However, for the low practicality product, this difference was smaller, although still significant \((M_s = 5.63 \text{ vs. } 5.10)\) \((F(1,38) = 4.46, p < .05)\).

3.3.4.3 Downstream effects

H4A predicted that perceptions of low product use functionality (i.e., non-functional features) would decrease attitudes towards the target person compared with
high product use functionality. An ANOVA on the attitude towards the driver composite revealed a significant main effect of non-functional product features \((F(1, 92) = 7.25, p < .05)\), where the presence of non-functional features decreased attitudes towards the driver \((M_s = 4.28 \text{ vs. } 3.70)\). This effect was qualified by a significant interaction with the nature of the product itself \((F(1, 92) = 4.57, p < .05)\). When the low practicality product was modified, attitudes towards the driver were significantly lower than when it was not modified \((M_s = 4.38 \text{ vs. } 3.33)\) \((F(1, 38) = 11.06, p < .05)\), supporting \(H_{4A}\). However, when the high practicality vehicle had been modified, attitudes towards the driver were no different than when it had not been modified \((M_s = 4.18 \text{ vs. } 4.06)\) \((F(1, 54) = .17, p > .05)\).

**Figure 8 – Study 3: ANOVA results of Non-Functional Features and Product Practicality on Attitude Towards the Driver**
H₄B predicted that perceptions of low product use functionality will decrease attitude towards the product compared with perceptions of high product use functionality. An ANOVA on the product attitude composite demonstrated a significant main effect of non-functional product features ($F(1,92) = 12.52, p < .05$). When the low practicality product was modified to have decals and rims, observers liked the product significantly less than the stock model ($M_s = 4.57$ vs. $2.88$) ($F(1,38) = 11.07, p < .05$), supporting H₄B. However, for the high practicality car, there was no significant difference between being stock or modified with regard to attitudes towards the product ($M_s = 4.03$ vs. $3.55$) ($F(1,54) = 1.66, p > .05$).

Figure 9—Study 3: ANOVA results of Non-Functional Features and Product Practicality on Attitude Towards the Product

3.3.5 Discussion
Study 3 examined the product-oriented cues which are suggestive of a motive of IM, supporting that the practicality of the product used as well as the presence of non-functional features can lead to inferences of underlying motives for behaviour as well as dispositional attributions regarding the product user. For the high practicality product, the addition of non-functional features increased IM inferences drastically. For the unmodified low-practicality product, IM inferences were higher than the unmodified high-practicality product. These findings suggest that either the presence of non-functional features or simply owning a less practical product, both appearance-oriented features, can lead to IM inferences. This study also offers a unique insight into the customization options that retailers make available for their products. Although consumers may be interested in adding appearance-oriented features to their vehicle to bolster how others see them, this study suggests that observers interpret these cues as the target deliberately trying to convey a certain impression. Ultimately, these IM inferences undermine the overall impression towards the user, likely having the inverse effect from what the product user intended. Thus, marketing managers may face an interesting juxtaposition: while they may be able to increase their marginal revenue per customer by offering appearance-based features, these very features can alter how observers (and potential future buyers) perceive the product and the type of people who consume that product.

3.4 Study Four

3.4.1 Rationale
The purpose of Study 4 was to apply the framework to branding, and specifically, the role of brand attractiveness and prominence in product design. It was argued that the prominent prestigious brand is a more effective signal of status. Because of the prominence of the logo, everyone knows you are wearing a luxury brand (i.e., Gucci), which bolsters the effectiveness of the luxury signal strength. However, because of the prominence of the logo, the display may also be seen as excessive. In other words, this work predicts that while there are positive inferences to be made about a target by using a cherished brand and this effect can be reduced by opposing inferences of IM.

This study also aimed to examine the role of prominence (i.e., non-functional features) for non-luxury brands. It was predicted that brands that are positioned on convenience, affordability or selection are less likely to be associated with IM inferences because their brands are not as strongly associated with a positive appearance. Therefore, based on the theorized model, increasing the prominence of logos of non-luxury brands would actually decrease IM inferences because these products are not even perceived to enhance one’s appearance. This study suggests a unique moderating effect of the attractiveness of the brand on existing research into brand prominence and signaling.

3.4.2 Method

Eighty-eight students at Queen’s University participated in the study in exchange for bonus credit to be allocated to one of their courses. The general procedure for recruitment and introduction was the same as in Study 1, 2, and 3. The design of this study was a 2 (Brand Attractiveness [prestige]: Low vs. High) X 2 (Brand Prominence:
Low vs. High) between subjects factorial design. On the first page of the study, participants were told they were responding to a sunglasses evaluation study. On the next page, participants were shown an image of a pair of sunglasses (See Appendix F). The image was digitally manipulated in Adobe Photoshop, which permitted everything about the sunglasses to be identical across conditions except for the two manipulations. The first manipulation was the brand itself; participants were either exposed to either Shoppers Drug Mart Premium (low brand attractiveness) or Gucci (high brand attractiveness) glasses. Gucci was selected as it is well recognized as a luxury fashion brand (Han et al. 2010), and Shoppers Drug Mart was selected because of its recognition as Canada’s largest retail pharmacy chain. Shoppers Drug Mart is a well-respected brand and sells many products under private label, but lacks the cachet of a luxury brand. The Shoppers Drug Mart brand manipulation was adapted to include the word Premium to suggest that this product is of superior quality and mitigate plausible rival quality-based hypotheses.

The second manipulation was the prominence of the branding information. In the low prominence condition, the brand logo was only displayed on the inner arm of the sunglasses, making the brand not visible to observers. In the high prominence condition, the brand logo was large and positioned on the outer arm of the sunglasses frame. Participants then responded to a series of questions regarding their attitudes towards the user of the sunglasses, their motives for wearing the sunglasses, their perceptions of the sunglasses themselves, and demographic information.
3.4.3 Measures

The same IM measure (α = .95), attitude towards the user (α = .91), and attitude towards the product (α = .96), from Study 1 were used.

3.4.4 Results

3.4.4.1 Manipulation checks

An ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of brand prominence on a brand prominence composite (‘the brand is really obvious on these sunglasses’, ‘the brand is really noticeable on these sunglasses’, and ‘the brand on these sunglasses really stands out’) ($F(1,86) = 16.55, p < .05$), such that the glasses that had the large logo were seen as standing out more than the low prominence condition ($M_s = 5.54$ vs. $4.04$). In addition, an ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of the brand attractiveness manipulation on perceptions of brand attractiveness (‘brand is a status brand’ ‘brand is a luxury brand’) ($F(1,86) = 621.64, p < .05$), such that the manipulated high attractive brand was perceived as being more luxurious than the low attractive brand ($M_s = 6.41$ vs. $1.85$).

3.4.4.2 Impression Management Inferences

$H_1$ predicted that perceptions of attractive appearances would increase inferences of impression management when compared to low appearance attractiveness. A significant main effect of brand attractiveness was found ($F(1,88) = 71.27, p < .05$), where Gucci lead to higher inferences of IM than Shoppers Drug Mart Premium ($M_s = 5.78$ vs. $3.74$). This main effect was also qualified by a significant interaction of Brand Attractiveness and Brand Prominence ($F(1,88) = 6.32, p < .05$). Increasing the
prominence of the low-attractiveness brand significantly decreased IM inferences ($M_s = 4.24$ vs. $3.25$) ($F(1,48) = 6.39$, $p < .05$). There was no difference based on prominence for the high attractive brand ($M_s = 5.90$ vs. $5.67$) ($F(1,36) = 1.19$, $p > .05$).

**Figure 10 – Study 4: ANOVA results of Brand Prestige and Brand Prominence on Inferences of Impression Management**

3.4.4.3 Mediation Analyses

H$_5$ predicted that inferences of impression management would mediate the relationship between perceptions of product functionality and attitudes towards the target person. To test this, the PROCESS macro was used (Hayes 2013). This particular model (Model 7) estimates the conditional indirect effects of brand prominence (X) on attitudes towards the product user (Y) through inferences of impression management (M), moderated by brand attractiveness (W). This model generates bias corrected 95%
bootstrap confidence intervals for the conditional indirect effects using 1,000 bootstrap samples.

**Figure 11 – Study 4: Mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes 2013) of Brand Prominence and Brand Prestige on Attitude towards the User through Inferences of Impression Management**

Notably, for the low attractiveness brand (i.e., Shoppers Premium), confidence intervals surrounding the indirect effect of IM inferences did not span zero, consistent with an interpretation of a statistically significant indirect effect (point estimate: -.14; CI<sub>95%</sub>: -.34 to -.03). This means that there is a conditional indirect effect on attitude towards the user, such that high brand prominence leads to significant decreases in attitude towards that user for a low attractiveness product. However, when presented with the high attractiveness brand, the confidence intervals do span zero, representative of a non-significant indirect effect (point estimate: .03; CI<sub>95%</sub>: -.03 to .11).

3.4.4.4 Downstream effects
For attitudes towards the user, there was a significant main effect of brand attractiveness \( (F(1,84) = 34.36, p < .05) \), where Gucci lead to more positive attitudes towards the user than Shoppers Drug Mart Premium \( (Ms = 4.91 \text{ vs. } 3.74) \). This main effect was also qualified by a significant interaction of Brand Attractiveness and Brand Prominence \( (F(1,84) = 5.96, p < .05) \). Increasing the prominence of the low-attractiveness brand significantly decreased attitudes towards the user \( (Ms = 4.06 \text{ vs. } 3.42) \) \( (F(1,48) = 5.34, p < .05) \). There was no difference based on prominence for the high attractive brand \( (Ms = 5.09 \text{ vs. } 4.74) \) \( (F(1,36) = 1.46, p > .05) \).

**Figure 12 – Study 4: ANOVA results of Brand Prestige and Brand Prominence on Attitude towards the User**

For attitudes towards the sunglasses, the pattern was quite similar to attitudes towards the user. There was a significant main effect of brand attractiveness \( (F(1,84) = \)
87.96, \( p < .05 \)), where Gucci lead to more positive attitudes towards the product than Shoppers Drug Mart Premium (\( M_s = 4.94 \) vs. 2.61), supporting H_6. This main effect was also qualified by a significant interaction of Brand Attractiveness and Brand Prominence (\( F(1,84) = 5.52, p < .05 \)). Increasing the prominence of the low-attractiveness brand significantly decreased attitudes towards the product (\( M_s = 2.90 \) vs. 2.32) (\( F(1,48) = 3.84, p = .05 \)). There was no difference based on prominence for the high attractive brand (\( M_s = 5.23 \) vs. 4.65) (\( F(1,36) = 1.99, p > .05 \)).

Figure 13 – Study 4: ANOVA results of Brand Prestige and Brand Prominence on Attitude towards the Product

3.4.5 Discussion

The purpose of Study 4 was to test the framework, and specifically, the role of attractiveness, in a branding context. The original prediction was that prominent prestigious brand is a more effective signal of status. Because of the prominence of the logo, everyone knows you are wearing a luxury brand (i.e., Gucci), which bolsters the
effectiveness of the luxury signal strength. For the luxury brand in this study, there was no significant increase in IM inferences based on prominence – this was likely due to a ceiling effect, where any user of a Gucci product would be perceived as impression managing. The interesting results for prominence were found through the low prestige brand (i.e., Shoppers Premium). As the logo size increased for this brand, IM inferences were significantly lower. This is consistent with the attractiveness argument – as the target increases the loudness of the signal for an unattractive brand, consumers do not think they are possibly impression managing because it doesn’t represent a positive appearance.

Not surprisingly, Gucci lead to more positive attitudes towards the user than Shoppers Drug Mart Premium. Increasing the prominence of the low-attractiveness brand significantly decreased the attitudes towards the user. When the logo prominence became excessive, the target was perceived as effortfully telling others about their poor brand, which subsequently decreased overall attitude towards them as users. In the mediation analysis, the perceptions of IM continued to have a discounting influence on attitudes towards the user (based on the unstandardized beta), but this did not change the fact that high brand prestige products bolstered general attitudes.

The findings from Study 4 contrast the earlier studies because inferences of IM did not substantially decrease attitudes towards the target and product. The context of brands appears to alter the nature of the relation between IM and overall attitudes. Branding appears grant amnesty to consumers in the IM context, allowing consumers to
emit positive, conspicuous signals about their product use, but still manage to insulate themselves from the damaging downstream effects of inferences that one is trying too hard.

3.5 Study Five

3.5.1 Rationale

The purpose of this study was to shift the empirical focus away from moderating variables inherent to the product-usage context (i.e., product functionality, attractiveness) to understand how the nature of the observer can influence IM inferences. As alluded to in Chapter 2, one of the proposed mechanisms that can stimulate drawing an IM inference would be that of feeling threatened. Independently manipulating feelings of observer threat should make them more sensitive to potentially threatening elements of social comparison. In this study, the visual stimuli was controlled across all conditions, but instead varied the presence of feeling threatened as an observer-related difference tool for IM inferences and subsequent downstream consequences on their attitudes towards the product user.

Moreover, certain types of individuals are less responsive to self-threat than others. As theorized earlier, observers high in susceptibility to normative influence are simply more likely to assume targets are trying to IM because they would be themselves. It was predicted that high SNI individuals are more likely to form IM inferences even under low threat conditions.
Observer IM inferences are designed, in part, to mitigate threatening social comparisons. Therefore, self-affirmation should serve as an alternative tool to mitigate the formation of IM inferences, even when the presence of threat is low.

3.5.2 Method

Three-hundred and five students at Queen’s University participated in the study in exchange for bonus credit to be allocated to one of their courses. The general procedure for recruitment was consistent with earlier studies. The design of this study was a 3(Observer Prime: Threatened vs. Neutral vs. Self-Affirmed) X 2 (Susceptibility to Normative Influence: Low vs. High) between-subjects factorial design. Because the construct of threat and the construct of self-affirmation are theoretically distinct, the analysis of the results will compare each construct to the neutral baseline condition, and not against one another.

Participants were primed through a preliminary, brief writing task to either recall a personal memory based on one of the three conditions. The threat condition asked the participant to recall a time when they felt socially rejected and to describe the scenario. The neutral condition asked the participant to recall the shops and buildings they pass on a route they travel regularly. The self-affirmed condition asked participants to recall one of their personal strengths and to detail why it was a strength. The self-affirmation manipulation was adapted from Napper, Harris, and Epton (2009) and the social identity threat manipulation was adapted from White, Argo, and Sengupta (2012). The susceptibility to interpersonal influence was a measured variable of dispositional
individual differences and was developed based on the normative factors of Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel (1989) (e.g., when buying products, I generally purchase those brands that I think others will approve of; it is important that others like the products and brands I buy; I achieve a sense of belonging by purchasing the same products and brands as other people).

Following the memory recall / priming exercise, participants were asked to complete a second, unrelated study on how people form impressions. They were informed that the researchers had recruited a member of the local community, taken their picture, and removed any additional contextual detail, meaning the background was erased and made white (See Appendix G). Participants were then all shown the same image of a young man wearing glasses. This image was actually downloaded from the designer Warby Parker’s website by using their virtual try-on function on one of the models they have on their website. This is a feature marketers are using more increasingly to demonstrate their product in action as opposed to on their own.

Participants then responded to a series of questions regarding their attitudes towards the focal person, their motives for wearing the glasses, their perceptions of the glasses themselves, as well as manipulation checks, individual differences for susceptibility to interpersonal influence, and basic demographic information.

3.5.3 Measures

The same IM measure (α = .77) and attitude towards the user (α = .91) from previous studies were used.
3.5.4 Results

3.5.4.1 Manipulation checks

An ANOVA revealed a significant difference between the threat and neutral conditions on an adapted four-item affirmation composite derived from Napper, Harris, and Epton (2009) (the memory recall task made me think about: positive aspects of myself; things that are important to me; things I like about myself; things I am good at) \((F(1,207) = 22.10, p < .05)\). Participants in the neutral condition responded as feeling significantly higher on this composite variable than those who were in the threatened condition \((M_s = 4.37 \text{ vs. } 3.73)\).

In addition, a similar ANOVA between the self-affirmed and neutral conditions on the same composite revealed a significant difference \((F(1,183) = 36.53, p < .05)\). Participants in the self-affirmed condition responded as feeling significantly higher on the composite variable than those who were in the neutral condition \((M_s = 5.31 \text{ vs. } 4.37)\).

3.5.4.2 Impression Management Inferences

The main prediction for this study was whether the observer feeling threatened would bolster IM inferences and subsequently decrease overall attitudes towards the target. This prediction was also contingent upon the observer’s SNI, which is their natural susceptibility to making decisions based on the anticipated approval of others. It was predicted that observers who dispositionally place high value on normative consumption would not be affected by the prime and already infer IM in the neutral condition.
A regression was performed on IM inferences with independent variables of observer SNI, a dummy variable of whether the observer was exposed to the threat prime or neutral prime, and their interaction. The results showed a significant main effect of Observer Threat, where feelings of threat increase IM inferences ($\beta = -.91$, $SE = .354$, $t = -2.56$, $p < .05$), supporting H7. There was also a significant main effect of SNI, such that high SNI individuals were more likely to infer IM ($\beta = .25$, $SE = .08$, $t = 3.04$, $p < .05$). In addition, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction effect between Threat and SNI ($\beta = .30$, $SE = .11$, $t = 2.66$, $p < .05$). To explore the interaction, the slopes of SNI were examined at 1 standard deviation above and below the mean. The slope of SNI was significant and positive when observers were presented with the neutral prime, while the slope was not significant when observers were faced with the threat prime, supporting H8.

Figure 14 – Study 5: Regression Analysis of Threat Prime and Susceptibility to Normative Influence on IM inferences
3.5.4.3 Downstream effects

Once again, it was important to examine whether the manipulations of threat and SNI would affect the attitudes towards the user through IM inferences. To test this, the PROCESS macro for SPSS was run (Hayes 2013). The model used (Model 7) estimated the indirect effects of the threat prime (X) on attitudes towards the user (Y) through inferences of impression management (M), moderated by susceptibility to normative influence (W). This model generates bias corrected 95% bootstrap confidence intervals for the indirect effects using 1,000 bootstrap samples.

**Figure 15 – Study 5: Mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes 2013) of Threat and SNI on Attitude towards the User through Inferences of Impression Management**

![Mediation diagram](image)

*\( \beta = .30^* \)

*\( \beta = -.25^* \)

*\( \beta = -.25 \)

\( ^* p < .05 \)

Notably, the confidence intervals surrounding the indirect effect of IM inferences did not span zero for observers low in SNI, consistent with an interpretation of a statistically significant indirect effect (Low SNI point estimate: .06; CI\(_{95\%}\): .01 to .21). This means that there is an indirect effect on attitude towards the user, such that for low SNI observers, feelings of threat lead to significantly higher IM inferences than those that
received a neutral prime. There were no significant direct effects of the prime on attitude towards the user once impression management inferences were accounted for (Direct Effect point estimate: -.25, $p > .05$). This suggests that the effect on attitudes towards the product user was mediated by IM inferences.

3.5.4.4 Self-Affirmation

The final prediction tested in this study was whether the completion of a self-affirmation exercise prior to viewing the stimulus of the target would mitigate some of the effect of an IM inference. As such, the predicted result was for a main effect of self-affirmation on decreasing IM inferences, subsequently increasing IM inferences.

A regression was performed on IM inferences with independent variables of observer SNI, a dummy variable of whether the observer was exposed to the self-affirmed prime or neutral prime, and their interaction. There was a significant main effect of SNI, such that high SNI individuals were more likely to infer IM ($\beta = .25, SE = .08, t = 3.03, p < .05$). However, there was no significant main effect of the affirmation prime ($\beta = .19, SE = .36, t = .52, p > .05$). In addition, there was no significant interaction effect between Affirmation and SNI ($\beta = -.15, SE = .11, t = -1.34, p = .18$). Therefore, there was no evidence that the affirmation prime affected IM inferences.

Figure 16 – Study 5: Regression Analysis of Affirmation Prime and Susceptibility to Normative Influence on IM inferences
In addition, it was predicted that the affirmation prime would increase overall attitudes towards the target consumer. A regression was performed on Attitudes towards the User with independent variables of observer SNI, a dummy variable of whether the observer was exposed to the self-affirmed prime or neutral prime, and their interaction. In this analysis, there was a significant main effect of self-affirmation, such that those who were self-affirmed prior to viewing the target held more positive attitudes towards the target than those in the neutral condition ($\beta = 1.29, SE = .54, t = 2.39, p < .05$). There was no significant main effect of SNI ($\beta = .16, SE = .12, t = 1.32, p > .05$). In addition, there was no significant interaction effect between Affirmation and SNI on overall attitudes towards the user ($\beta = -.27, SE = .17, t = -1.60, p = .11$). Therefore, there was supporting statistical evidence that the affirmation prime positively impacted perceptions of attitudes towards the product user.

The analysis for whether the manipulations of affirmation and SNI would affect the attitudes towards the user through IM inferences was also conducted. To test this, the
PROCESS macro for SPSS was run (Hayes 2013). The model used (Model 7) estimated the indirect effects of the affirmation prime (X) on attitudes towards the user (Y) through inferences of impression management (M), moderated by susceptibility to normative influence (W). This model generates bias corrected 95% bootstrap confidence intervals for the indirect effects using 1,000 bootstrap samples.

Figure 17 – Study 5: Mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes 2013) of Affirmation and SNI on Attitude towards the User through Inferences of Impression Management

Notably, the confidence intervals surrounding the indirect effect of IM inferences spanned zero for all observers, which demonstrates no significant indirect effect. This means that there was no statistical support of that the effects of self-affirmation on attitudes towards the user being mediated through IM inferences. This demonstrates partial support for H9, whereby self-affirmation bolsters attitudes towards the user, but not through IM inferences. This suggests that self-affirmation likely affects attitudes through a different process mechanism.

*p < .05
3.5.5 Discussion

Study 5 demonstrated that the observer feelings of threat could increase inferences of IM. As predicted, this was contingent upon the observer’s natural susceptibility to making decisions based on the anticipated approval of others. Findings suggest that observers who dispositionally place higher value on normative consumption are more likely to conclude targets are impression managing, even under neutral conditions.

In addition, when observers completed a self-affirmation exercise prior to viewing the target, overall attitudes towards the person increased in comparison to those who completed a neutral priming task. However, this hypothesis was only partially supported because self-affirmation did not affect attitudes towards the person through IM inferences. This suggests, because self-affirmation and threat are conceptually distinct constructs, that these two variables affect attitudes towards the target through different mechanisms. To the extent observer IM inferences are designed, in part, to mitigate threatening social comparisons, self-affirmation should provide some buffer against threat. This could theoretically align IM inferences from the self-affirmed condition to the neutral condition. Self-affirmation not only enables an individual to more objectively evaluate information that would otherwise evoke a defensive reaction (Correll, Spencer, and Zanna 2004), but also bolster affect and attitudes towards the self (Steele 1988). Future research in this domain should continue to examine the specific process mechanisms that affect attitudinal judgments based on self-affirmation as well as the relationship with IM inferences and evaluations of product user motives.
Chapter 4

General Discussion

Observers frequently make inferences of what consumers are like based on the possessions they use. This ability to spontaneously and rapidly form impressions of others based on their product use underscores the general view from existing social cognition research, specifically impression formation, which assumes that a signal’s symbolic meaning is shared by others. In other words, observers do not question the veracity of the image being portrayed by product users, instead believing that people are the way they appear. This impression formation view persists even though it is common knowledge that consumers use products to deliberately create certain impressions (Ashworth, Darke, and Schaller 2006; Argo, Dahl, and Manchanda 2005; White and Dahl 2006).

This dissertation supports that, under certain conditions, observers will infer that consumers use products to deliberately try to create certain impressions. One of the central contributions of the current work is that observers will infer products are being used for impression management purposes when they perceive the product contributes to the target’s appearance and believes the appearance to be attractive to potential others. The current research also demonstrates that such IM inferences are relatively insensitive to other factors that could explain product use, which is suggestive of a cognitive bias where observers will draw IM inferences in contexts where such inferences are not warranted. These IM inferences will generally undermine the impression, create more
negative attitudes towards the consumer, and under certain circumstances, negatively impact attitudes towards products themselves.

The conceptual framework that was developed in Chapter 2 was examined across five studies, each of which focused on testing a different subset of the proposed model. Generally, there is overarching support for the relationships set out in the conceptual framework. That is, when taken together, the results support the idea that impression management inferences are derived when observers believe that a target’s product use contributes to their appearance and that their appearance is attractive to potential others. These experiments provide evidence supporting that the attractiveness of the appearance and a lack of functionality can lead to these inferences as well as dispositional attributions regarding the product user and the focal products they are using.

Study 1 was an exploratory study that sought to demonstrate the existence of IM inferences and whether the predicted central element of the appearance (i.e., product attractiveness) would influence IM. This study also examined how the product attractiveness factor would interact with alternative explanations for using the product based on perceptions of product functionality through its usage context. The findings from this study demonstrated that observer IM inferences are influenced by the attractiveness of the product where the product is not perceived as functional based on the usage context (i.e., scarf used indoors in the summer).

Study 2 continued to examine the role of perceived product functionality, based on the idea that the presence of non-functional features in a car evaluation context would
IM inferences and decrease attitudes towards the target and product, but would be discounted by the rationale underlying the product use. The findings suggest that observers will discount IM inferences in the appropriate direction if a reason for the product use is provided. However, they do not appear to account for this reasoning sufficiently, consistent with the idea that the nature of the appearance, even in light of alternative explanations, drives the influence of IM inferences.

Study 3 replicated the conceptual results of Study 2, but also extended the scope of functionality to the nature of the product’s appearance itself (not only non-functional features), which would increase inferences of consumer impression management. Products that were perceived as less practical, even when they do not possess auxiliary product modifications, also led to an increase in IM inferences. These findings suggest that either the presence of non-functional features on practical products or simply owning a less practical product can create these inferences. In both instances, consumer product use that appears to be deliberately conveying a certain impression tends to reflect negatively on the product user.

Study 4 tested the branding element of the theoretical framework, and specifically, the role of brand attractiveness and logo prominence. The findings supported the prediction that while there are positive inferences to be made about a target by using a cherished brand, this effect is reduced when the target effortfully “tells” others about it. The results were also consistent with the cognitive bias towards attractiveness— as the target increases the loudness of the signal for an unattractive brand, consumers do not
think they are possibly impression managing because it doesn’t represent a positive appearance. The findings from Study 4 contrast the earlier studies because IM inferences did not substantially decrease attitudes towards the target and product. The context of brands appears to alter the nature of the relation between IM and overall attitudes. Brading appears grant amnesty to consumers in the IM context, allowing consumers to emit positive, conspicuous signals about their product use, but still manage to insulate themselves from the damaging downstream effects of inferences that one is trying too hard.

Study 5 shifted the empirical focus to understand motivated IM inferences and how individual differences between observers can influence IM inferences. When feelings of threat were manipulated, observers are motivated to reduce this discomfort, caring less about being valid in their judgments and more about protecting their self-concept. Self-image threat may lead people to engage in prejudicial evaluations of others and their motives, where negative evaluations can be self-affirming. Conditions of threat seemed to only influence observers with dispositionally low susceptibility to normative influence, whereas high SNI observers are already fixated on style and a genuine concern for what others think because that is what they are concerned with, even under neutral conditions. In addition, participants who completed a self-affirmation exercise prior to viewing the target seem to form more positive attitudes towards the target compared with those in the neutral condition.
Taken together, this work makes several contributions to the understanding of theories of impression formation and impression management. This dissertation challenges several of the assumptions held in how people assess motives in others, and as such, has significant theoretical implications for how people understand and perceive others in the marketplace and more broadly as well. This thesis now turns to discuss each of these respective issues, taking care to discuss any related managerial implications and to highlight associated avenues for future research.

4.1 Implications and Avenues for Future Research

4.1.1 Perception of product’s contribution to appearance

This dissertation find support that an impression management inference will be based primarily on the target’s appearance (i.e., how they look). Observers were likely to rely on their perceptions of the product’s contribution to the target’s appearance to conclude whether it was used for appearance purposes. Observers tended to employ a heuristic that ‘if the product makes them look good to others, the target must be using the product to look good’. As people are often motivated to look good to others (Baumeister 1982), observers tended to assume others are motivated to look good. This bias in the inferential process persists where the target’s positive appearance is consistent with the observer’s beliefs about appearance motives. The findings are suggestive that there are likely other contextual elements beyond solely their appearance that will enhance the likelihood of forming IM inferences.

4.1.1.1 The role of others in IM inferences
Inherent in the theorized conditions for an IM inference is that the person’s appearance looks attractive to potential others. In this dissertation, attractiveness is assessed based on the observer’s own criteria for attractiveness as well as their meta-cognition about what other people may find attractive. The nature of how this attractiveness judgment is evaluated in the context of IM inferences merits further research. How do the people in the current environment influence these judgments? These contextual factors are likely to shape the attributions with regard to IM inferences based on the idea of the appearance’s perceived efficaciousness (i.e., its impact on others). For example, the efficaciousness of a target’s impression is likely to depend on the number of people present in an environment (e.g. driving in the city vs. country), because it alters the perceived impact of an appearance being viewed favourably by potential others. A target driving an expensive car downtown is likely perceived as expending more effort in conveying their appearance than driving the same car down country roads. An extension of this logic is information sharing and identity signaling over social networks. Much of the information posted and shared by one’s profile is deliberately shared or hidden, whereby behavior online is likely to be perceived as intentional. Because users have so much control over the image they create with their profile, IM inferences are likely to be formed, even from one’s close friends and acquaintances, when one makes an effort to create an attractive appearance. Flaunting one’s experiences and activities over Facebook can be interpreted as deliberateness in trying to convey one of these impressions, which could lead to negative downstream
consequences, especially after repeated exposures of similar behavior. Social networks would also be an interesting context to explore for IM inferences because although one has many friends to which one can signal many different identities, a user profile tends to force a consolidation of all these identities into one. Discrepancies between one’s knowledge of someone and their online identity could also be a source of inspiring IM inferences.

In addition to the number of people who view the appearance, the perceived novelty of the audience witnessing the target is likely to impact IM inferences. The net effect of an impression is likely to be stronger in novel settings with strangers, based on the lack of existing behavioral information, which family and friends would possess and anchor impressions on (Kenny 2004). Further exploration into the efficaciousness of the target’s appearance would provide more insight into how contextual factors unrelated to the target’s appearance or the observer themselves influence IM inferences.

4.1.1.2 Congruity between product use and physical appearance

The notion of consistency in one’s appearance is likely to be related to inferences of deliberately trying to create a certain impression. This idea related to Jones and Wortman (1973) ingratiaotor’s dilemma, where consumers (i.e., targets) try to present an attractive image of oneself, but simultaneously cover up that they are attempting to do so. People can vary their self-presentations effectively, but only within a certain range. From an anthropological perspective, the social world is tolerant of the editing of conveyed
identities, so that they depart only slightly from the social actor's actual experiences rather than the complete fabrication of new identities (e.g. Goffman 1959).

Naturally, if one cannot alter their entire image to fit with a desired image, inconsistencies will often exist. Other non-focal information that may be inconsistent with the individual’s intended image can trigger suspicion of impression management. While it is difficult to change certain aspects of ourselves (i.e. youth, work experience), products and services can facilitate consumer attempts to manage their impressions (i.e. wearing a suit & drinking wine at a conference, casual clothes and a beer at a party, glasses and coffee to class). However, while a student may be pre-occupied by the impact of wearing business attire to a conference to appear professional (based on the spotlight effect; Gilovich et al. 2000), they might pay less attention to the other cues emitting from themselves. When behavior is perceived as IM, it provides the observer with new information about the other person, which is subsequently evaluated. When confronted with inconsistencies, the perceiver may choose to anchor and focus on the less malleable characteristics of the target (i.e. age, attractiveness). By placing more value on the stable traits of the individual, the observer might mitigate partial risk of making an inaccurate attribution, protecting the integrity and validity of their assessment. In other words, people seek out information that validates that their impressions are authentic representation of the other, facilitating a degree of control in any forecasted social interaction with that individual.
Low congruity, which is the perception that the product use does not really match the consumer, is likely to increase doubts about the nature of the consumer’s true self. For instance, a clean-cut young man riding a Harley may be perceived as less authentic than a rugged-looking individual engaging in the same behavior. The magnitude of the inconsistency between images likely enhances the perceived difference between what is being portrayed and what the person is really like. This can be viewed as an illegitimate attempt to infiltrate a look-based social group. Recent research has found that if a consumer appears to be incongruous to the institutionalized brand or product, legitimate product users will conclude that the product is probably fake or that its consumer is a wannabe (Richardson-Gosline 2009).

4.1.2 Perceived attractiveness of appearance

4.1.2.1 A beauty penalty for impression managing

In general, attractive people are seen to possess more desirable characteristics and are treated more positively than their less attractive counterparts (Langlois et al. 2000), a phenomenon labeled the what-is-beautiful-is-good stereotype (Dion, Berscheid and Walster 1972). For consumers, it has been argued that “owning a product that looks nice, regardless of whether it helps or hinders functionality, may make us more attractive to others...” (Townsend and Sood 2012). However, the evidence from the current research indicates the presence of an adverse effect resulting from the beauty premium. Observers were more likely to ascribe an impression management motive to targets that look good overall, based on the heuristic that ‘if they look good, they must be trying to look good’.
Under conditions when alternative explanations are not salient, perceptions of impression management based on their looks actually appear to undermine the initial positive impact of their appearance. Although the literature has demonstrated that attractive people seem better off than unattractive people, by virtue of being rated higher on intelligence, social skills, nurturing, ethical, or competent (see Townsend and Sood 2012 for review), perceptions of deliberately trying to be attractive appear to undermine the positive benefits associated with it.

4.1.2.2 Other appearances that can lead to IM inference

While the operationalization of appearance was based on attractiveness in the studies of this thesis, the theorizing suggests that other appearances that are not perceived as attractive by the observer can also lead to IM inferences if the appearance is perceived as an attempt to create a certain ‘look’. Although a particular look might not be viewed as positive or attractive, when an observer perceives a consumer as conforming to the appearance norms of a subculture (e.g., goth, punk, hipster), this can also increase the likelihood of forming an inference of impression management.

4.1.3 Consequences of IM inference

It has been demonstrated in a variety of contexts that when people believe someone is not who they appear to be, it generally leads to negative outcomes. Being caught misrepresenting one’s characteristics, abilities, or personal history typically reduces people’s relational value and the likelihood of acceptance (Leary 2012). Similar to perceptions of veracity and sincerity, this dissertation suggests that inferences of an IM
motive will undermine the image conveyed by the target, decreasing overall attitudes towards the consumer. Based on these negative downstream consequences, it is generally important for consumers to avoid being perceived as deliberately impression managing.

4.1.3.1 An opportunity for positive associations from IM inference

Individuals generally dislike it when their impressions are being manipulated. The target will often be seen as being deceptive and inauthentic in an effort to curry favor by manipulating their image, leading to attributions of a negative disposition. However, this view neglects contexts where it may be appropriate to actively manage one’s impressions. Under these circumstances, an impression management motive is less likely to be scolded in attributions of disposition. When the observer already understands the reasons why a target would be managing their impression (i.e., on a first date, at a job interview), the IM inference may not undermine the impression to a similar extent. However, this thesis would predict that, although there may be other reasons influencing the target’s behavior and the observer is aware of them, the observer still may not account for them sufficiently. Depending on the extent to which the observer perceives the target as one who cares and respects the observer enough to try and ‘make the effort’ of manipulating their image to please or flatter them, IM inferences have the potential to lead to attributions of a positive disposition. Additional research is required in this area to test the upside of IM inferences.

4.1.3.2 Forecasting the effect of the product on impression formation
Based on the correspondence bias, observers fail to account for other features of consumers’ person that would contribute to their overall appearance besides the product itself. This work somewhat contrasts research on the spotlight effect (Gilovich et al. 1994). While the spotlight effect finds support that consumers will often overestimate the impact their appearance has on others (Ashworth and Matear 2007), this work suggests that, often times, consumers may in fact underestimate the impact the product would have on their impression. When the impression was one consumers wished to portray (i.e., based on the fact that they selected to use these products in a public domain), they might underestimated the extent to which observers would react negatively to the impression. The products in question that trigger these inferences do exist, and can be quite popular. Should people be buying them? Would continue to use these signaling products, if they knew what people really thought? This thesis offers a unique perspective on the effectiveness of identity signaling as well as the conditions under which products are unlikely to create the desired attributions in observers. Marketing practitioners should be concerned with understanding how specific product features can activate impression concerns, especially those related to undesired images for products used in public.

4.1.3.3 Product choice

Products are one of the easiest things to change in order to emphasize personal characteristics. Products are often, but not always, associated with particular images and they can be switched very simply. People have a surplus of choices in the products they purchase, use, incorporate into their public appearance. Observers tend to assume that, if
someone is using a product, they are deliberately using that product. Since there is such a vast quantity of products to choose from and product use is deliberate, observers are likely to infer that using a product means that consumer likes the product, similar to the notion of correspondent inference. It remains difficult to think of products that impact our appearance which are not used deliberately (clothing, accessories, technology, vehicles). Otherwise, observers would infer that they would not use that product. The ability to choose what is displayed helps people read what others are like through their possessions. One blatantly chooses what to wear before going in public, but may be unaware of how that makes them appear to others. The observer attributes volition to their consumption activity. Observers infer that the target made a conscious choice to use/display/consume their appearance in public.

4.1.3.4 Branding

Although branding experts typically advise marketers to ensure that their brand is clearly and prominently displayed on products, this prescription does not always hold. Marketing managers should sometimes emphasize product use and styles that do not foster IM inferences. Because of the prominence of the logo, everyone knows that the target is wearing a particular brand, which bolsters the effectiveness of the signal strength. The interesting results for prominence in the current studies were found through the low attractiveness brand (i.e., Shoppers Premium). As the logo size increased for this brand, IM inferences were significantly lower. This was consistent with the attractiveness argument – as the target increases the loudness of the signal for an unattractive brand,
consumers do not think they are possibly impression managing because it doesn’t represent a positive appearance. This research also has implications for the global expansion of brands, where upon entry to a new market with limited brand knowledge, may not be seen as unattractive, but consumers are unlikely to inherently recognize it as attractive.

Further research is required in the domain of the types of brand perceptions that are more likely to be susceptible to IM inferences. Kervyn, Fiske and Malone (2012, p. 5) recently introduced the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework, which examines how consumers assess a brand’s perceived intentions (i.e., warmth) and ability (i.e., competence): “Warmth includes helpfulness, sincerity, friendliness, and trustworthiness, whereas competence includes efficiency, intelligence, conscientiousness, and skill.” Based on this dissertation’s theorizing, it would be predicted that brands with low warmth or intentions coupled with perceptions of high competence or ability would be most susceptible to inferences of impression management. Kervyn et al. (2012) refer to these brands as ‘envied brands’. Understanding the observer’s knowledge of a brand’s intentions and abilities could unlock additional insight into the relationship between what a brand represents and the likelihood it is associated with deliberately trying to create a particular impression.

The IM inference is also likely relevant in perceptions of a brand’s actions, and more specifically, through their advertising. Often times, television advertisements or magazine print ads will feature their product being used in a unique and afunctional way
to capture the attention of viewers via expectancy disconfirmation. However, this strategy may also lead viewers to question the motives of the brand and why the product is being used in this particular way. By definition, an organization’s integrated marketing communications are a consistent, deliberate, and planned set of actions to get the consumer to associate the brand with certain qualities. It would be fruitful to explore the conditions under which viewers actually perceive the messages as impression management, and the subsequent consequences these ads could have on attitudes towards the brand and their products.

4.1.3.5 Counterfeiting and IM inferences

In the domain of counterfeits, imitation may often be referred to as “the sincerest form of flattery,” but it may also be threatening to real brand owners, based on signal dilution. Recent academic research has also suggested that inauthenticity means that anyone can access the product through purchase, and that posers threaten each legitimate member’s sense of self (Leigh, Peters and Shelton 2006). Counterfeits allow consumers to unbundle the status and quality attributes of luxury goods and pay less to acquire the status by not having to pay for the quality. Counterfeiters serve consumers who aspire to own luxury goods, but who are unable or unwilling to pay for the real thing. Poseurs crave the status associated with prestigious brands, taking cues from signals that are easily decipherable, even to the uninitiated. Consumers who display more conspicuously branded goods that are recognized as counterfeit might bolster IM inferences even further.
4.1.4 Observer-level differences

This thesis also examined motivated IM inferences and how individual differences between observers can influence IM inferences. When feelings of threat were manipulated, observers were motivated to reduce this discomfort, caring less about being accurate in their judgments and more about protecting their self-concept.

An interesting avenue for future research with respect to individual differences would be how gender differences influence IM inferences and their subsequent impact on attitudes towards the target and brand. On the one hand, based on evolutionary psychology and social comparison theory, potentially attractive members of the same gender would be likely to inspire feelings of threat based on intra-sexual competition. In an effort to jockey for position on the social hierarchy to have access to mates, observers may be more willing to infer IM in the appearance of others to mitigate feelings of threat and self-affirm (i.e., can you believe that guy is wearing that?) On the other hand, observers are also likely to find members of the opposite sex more attractive, which could bolster impression management based on the ‘if they look good, they must be trying to look good’ heuristic. Having said that, feelings of genuine attraction to another could mitigate the negative downstream consequences for a target, even if the observer thought they were impression managing. For example, a single man might believe that a particular women is trying too hard with her appearance based on her attractiveness (i.e. IM inference), but might still hold favorable attitudes towards her and would be quite interested getting to know her. However, the products and brands that she uses to create her appearance may be penalized as they may be held responsible for the initial IM
inference (i.e., she’s really pretty, but why is she wearing all that makeup / that jewelry / those sunglasses?).

Another interesting topic to explore would be the social distance between observer and target. Through each of the studies, observers evaluated the target over a computer through a still image of either the target using a product or a product alone that a target uses. Decreasing the social distance (i.e., viewing them in person) could simultaneously increase feelings of threat, but also provide additional sources of information to process about them (i.e., expression, gait, demeanor). Using field experiments to provide observers with an opportunity to either anticipate an interpersonal interaction with a target that they have evaluated or even have them interact with the target would help further articulate the nature of IM inferences and their subsequent consequences in real-world interactions.

4.2 Conclusion

The general view in social cognition is that the consumption behavior of others is taken at face value, where observers frequently make inferences of what consumers are like based on the products they use. This assumption persists even though it is well known that consumers use products to manage the images they create. This dissertation tackles this disconnect, finding that observers will sometimes make the inference that consumers use products to deliberately try to create certain impressions. Specifically, these inferences will undermine the impression, creating more negative attitudes towards the consumer. Five experiments examined elements of the product, the target, the
situation, and the observer themselves to better understand the causes and effects of inferences of impression management. Taken as a whole, this dissertation highlights the central roles of the product’s contribution towards their appearance attractiveness, product functionality and observer threat in shaping observer motive judgments. In doing so, it contributes to the impression management and impression formation literatures, both in marketing and more broadly, by offering an organizing theoretical framework for understanding the bases of impression management judgments.
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Appendix A

General Research Ethics Board (GREB) Approval

November 29, 2010

Mr. Ethan Pancer
Ph.D. Candidate
Queen's School of Business
Goodes Hall, Room 401
Queen's University

Dear Mr. Pancer:

GREB Ref #: GBUS-288-10
Title: "What do our products say about us?"

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "What do our products say about us?" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article 2), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB, if applicable, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (details available on webpage http://www.queensu.ca/ors/researchethic/GeneralREB/forms.html - Adverse Event Report Form). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementations of new aspects into the study procedures on the Ethics Change Form that can be found at http://www.queensu.ca/ors/researchethic/GeneralREB/forms.html - Research Ethics Change Form. These changes must be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or irvingg@queensu.ca prior to implementation. Mrs. Irving will forward your request for protocol changes to the appropriate GREB reviewers and / or the GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, PhD
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

c.c.: Dr. Laurence Ashworth, Faculty Supervisor
Dr. Laurence Ashworth, Co-Applicant
Dr. Jane Webster, Chair, Unit REB
Amy Marshall, c/o Research Office

JS/gi
Appendix B
General Research Ethics Board (GREB) Renewal

November 03, 2011

Mr. Ethan Pancer
Ph.D. Candidate
Queen’s School of Business
Goodes Hall, Room 401
Queen’s University
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6

GREB Romeo #: 6005568
Title: "GBUS-288-10 What do our products say about us?"

Dear Mr. Pancer:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB) has reviewed and approved your request for renewal of ethics clearance for the above-named study. This renewal is valid for one year from November 29, 2011. Prior to the next renewal date you will be sent a reminder memo and the link to ROMEO to renew for another year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period. An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours. Report to GREB through either ROMEO Event Report or Adverse Event Report Form at http://www.queensu.ca/orstereheci/GeneralREB/forms.html.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementation of new aspects into the study procedures. Your request for protocol changes will be forwarded to the appropriate GREB reviewers and/or the GREB Chair. Please report changes to GREB through either ROMEO Event Reports or the Ethics Change Form at http://www.queensu.ca/orstereheci/GeneralREB/forms.html.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

c.c.: Dr. Laurence Ashworth, Faculty Supervisor and Co-Applicant
Dr. Jane Webster, Chair, Unit REB
Amy Marshall, c/o Research Office
Appendix C Study 1 Manipulations

Low Product Functionality

High Product Functionality

Low Product Attractiveness

High Product Attractiveness
Appendix D Study 2 Manipulations

*Bought Used was not displayed on the image, but reflects the additional information provided to participants through the short introductory statement.
Appendix E Study 3 Manipulations

Low Product Functionality

High Product Functionality

Low Product Attractiveness

High Product Attractiveness
Appendix F
Study 4 Manipulations

Low Brand
Prestige

High Brand
Prestige

Low Brand
Prominence

High Brand
Prominence
Appendix G Study 5 Manipulations

Stimulus Image