

The Irresistible Costs of Impressing Others: Managing Impressions and Regulating Behavior

by

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Noah, John, Paul, and Joe are college students, and they have been roommates for several years. They all perform well in their classes, earning mostly A's or B's. As part of a fitness course and a new commitment to living a healthier lifestyle, the four roommates have agreed not to eat junk food such as sugary desserts, potato chips, pizza, and so on.

While on their way to a weekend party for students and their friends, the four young men discuss their excitement for seeing classmates and meeting new people. They are all motivated to make good impressions on other party-goers, so they individually think about how they will present themselves.

Noah immediately finds several classmates from a psychology course he is taking. There are few psychology majors at Noah's college, so they all know each other very well. The students begin talking about their course research projects. "I have a great project," Noah tells his peers. "The results are really going to change the way psychologists think about the development of violent tendencies during childhood. Professor Smith has already told me that she wants to present my findings at a national conference where there will be a lot of big-name psychologists. I will be able to write my ticket to any graduate school that I want!"

Meanwhile, John is talking to a young woman he has never met. Finding her attractive, John decides not to talk too much about himself or his accomplishments. "I get decent grades in my classes here, but I think I'm just lucky. If it weren't for my roommates helping me study, I probably wouldn't be getting the grades I get. I'm just your everyday average guy." He chooses not to mention his dream of becoming a lawyer someday—a dream that has been encouraged by his professors.

On the other side of the room, Paul talks to some of his teammates about their upcoming track competition. Although his teammates predict that Paul will win all of his individual races, Paul reminds them that some of his

competitors are faster and stronger than he is. "Don't forget about Josh from the Cougars. He's won every race this season, and I don't know that I'll be able to run faster than he can. You are making me out to be a lot better than I actually am."

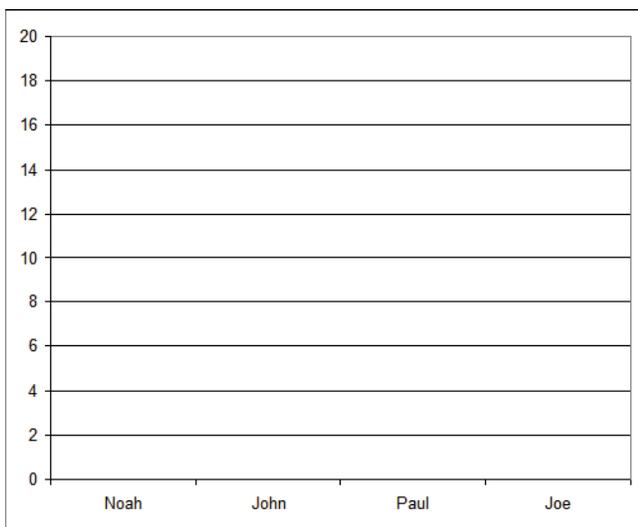
Joe meets a new student who has just transferred to the college. As Joe and this student get to know each other, Joe reveals that his family is very wealthy. "We spend every summer in a country that we have never visited. I insist that we stay only at the most luxurious hotels, so that we get the best treatment. Hey you're pretty lucky—most students at this party think I'm the most popular and successful person on campus. Being seen with me will definitely help you out on campus!"

After their respective conversations end, the four roommates meet in the kitchen where they find a table full of cookies. Even though they have committed to avoiding sugary desserts, they are certainly tempted by the smell of the chocolate chunk cookies that were freshly baked. They can see the chocolate oozing from the cookies. As they stand around the table talking to each other, Noah, John, Paul, and Joe all begin to think about how wonderful the cookies would taste.

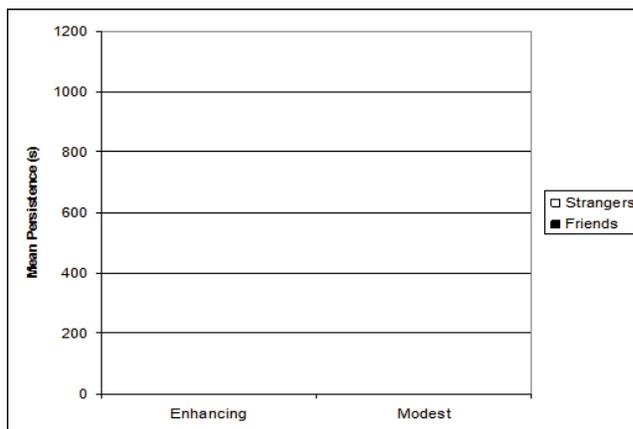
Questions

1. Which impression management strategies were used by Noah, John, Paul, and Joe, respectively? What evidence could you use to justify your answer?
2. Managing impressions can require a lot of energy in that we must carefully regulate our behaviors. We have to think about the impression we want to create, think about ways to achieve that impression, and then regulate our behavior to achieve our goal. Some impression management strategies require more energy and effort than do others. Looking at the strategies you identified in the previous question, which strategies do you think require a lot of energy, and which ones require very little?

- How would you describe the audience for which each man is managing an impression? For example, you might describe how well each man knows the audience to whom he is talking.
- Do you think that these different kinds of audiences would affect how much energy or effort is required to successfully manage the impressions the men are trying to make? Justify your response.
- Create a bar graph to show an estimate of how many cookies you predict each man will eat, given the effort required for him to manage his impressions. Be prepared to justify your predictions.



- How do your predictions compare with the patterns found in experiments that test similar phenomena?



- Do you see any problems with the use of impression management and self-regulation theories in predicting the men's behavior in this case? That is, can you think of exceptions to the patterns of results that are presented in this case or the source article?

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