Downplaying positive impressions: Compensation between warmth and competence in impression management ☆

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HIGHLIGHTS

► Compensation between warmth and competence occurs in impression management.
► People who want to appear warm (vs. control group) downplay their competence.
► People who want to appear competent (vs. control group) downplay their warmth.
► Compensation does not extend to other dimensions (health, political interest).

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ABSTRACT

The compensation effect demonstrates a negative relationship between the dimensions of warmth and competence in impression formation in comparative contexts. However, does compensation between warmth and competence extend to impression management? Two studies examined whether people actively downplay their warmth in order to appear competent and downplay their competence in order to appear warm. In Studies 1a and 1b, participants selected words pretested to be high or low in warmth and competence to include in an e-mail message to people they wanted to impress. As predicted, participants downplayed their competence when they wanted to appear warm (Study 1a) and downplayed their warmth when they wanted to appear competent (Study 1b). In Studies 2a and 2b, compensation also occurred when participants introduced themselves to another person, as evidenced by the questions they selected to answer about themselves, their self-reported goals, and their open-ended introductions. Compensation occurred uniquely between warmth and competence and not for other dimensions, such as healthiness (Study 2a) and political interest (Study 2b), which suggests that the compensation effect extends beyond a mere zero-sum exchange between dimensions.

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Introduction

People desire to make positive impressions on others. They smile and laugh at social gatherings in the hopes of being liked, and they subtly mention their accolades in order to be respected. Indeed, the top two impressions people seek relate to warmth and competence (Leary, 1995; Nezlek, Schutz, & Sellin, 2007), perhaps because people care about these dimensions the most when making judgments about other people (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Wojciszke, 2005). The warmth dimension reflects traits related to other-profitable intent, such as friendliness, communion, morality,

and trustworthiness; by contrast, the competence dimension captures traits related to self-profitable ability, such as intelligence, agency, and skill (Peeters, 2001). Although both warmth and competence judgments are essential to person perception, warmth judgments account for a greater portion of the impressions people form of others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke, Banzinska, & Jaworski, 1998) and occur prior to competence judgments (Willis & Todorov, 2006). Given the weight of warmth and competence judgments in impression formation, it is unsurprising that people also care deeply about how warm and competent they appear.

People strive to appear warm or competent by displaying certain behaviors that are likely to elicit these attributions from others; in other words, they engage in impression management (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1995; Schlenker & Pontari, 1973). When people want to appear warm, they tend to agree, compliment, perform favors, and encourage others to talk (Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; Jones & Pittman, 1982). When people want to appear competent, they emphasize their accomplishments, exude confidence, and control the conversation (Godfrey et al., 1986; Jones & Pittman, 1982). Although researchers have theorized

that these different self-presentation strategies need not be mutually exclusive, the majority of impression management research has treated the goals of appearing warm and competent as largely separate, each goal associated with different behaviors (e.g., Godfrey et al., 1986; Jones & Pittman, 1982). By contrast, the present research explores the possibility that warmth and competence are fundamentally and inversely linked. Extending work on the *compensation effect* (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Kervyn, Yzerbyt, Judd, & Nunes, 2009) – the negative relationship between warmth and competence found in impression formation – we seek to establish that warmth and competence have a compensatory relationship in impression management. Specifically, we predict that people act less competent in order to appear warm and act less warm in order to appear competent. First, we will review evidence of the compensation effect in impression formation as groundwork for our main hypothesis: People strategically utilize the compensatory[1] relationship between warmth and competence to manage their impressions.

Warmth and competence in impression formation

Many social groups tend to be characterized by ambivalent stereotypes related to mixed warmth and competence. According to the Stereotype Content Model (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Fiske et al., 2007), for example, society views elders as friendly but incompetent and Asians as intelligent but cold. Although some groups are seen uniformly positively or negatively on these two dimensions, a majority of social groups are characterized by ambivalent stereotypes. Cross-cultural data collected from 44 samples around the world revealed that most groups received ratings that were higher on one dimension than the other (Cuddy et al., 2009; Durante, Fiske, Cuddy, & Kervyn, in press).

Perhaps due to the prevalence of ambivalent stereotypes, people form inferences about both warmth and competence even when they have information only about one dimension. In a series of studies conducted by Judd et al. (2005), participants learned about two fictive groups that differed in warmth or competence. One group was described as being high on one dimension and the other group was described as being low on the same dimension. Although participants primarily received information about just one of the dimensions, they inferred information about the unmanipulated dimension as well. Specifically, they saw the high-competence group as less warm than the low-competence group, and the high-warmth group as less competent than the low-warmth group. The compensation effect also manifests in behavioral confirmation (Kervyn et al., 2009). Participants learned about two fictive groups that were high or low on warmth or competence. Consistent with the compensation effect, participants preferred to ask questions that were low on the unmanipulated dimension to members of the high group and questions that were high on the unmanipulated dimension to members of the low group.

People perceive compensation between warmth and competence even when evaluating ingroup members. After taking a fake psychological test, participants were categorized as members of the Green group. The Green group was allegedly higher in competence or warmth compared with the Blue group. Regardless of group membership, participants perceived the high-competence group as less warm than the low-competence group and the high-warmth group as less competent than the low-warmth group. Membership in actual social groups also demonstrates compensation. For example, Belgian and French participants perceive each other in terms of ambivalent stereotypes (Yzerbyt, Provost, & Corneille, 2005). French and Belgian participants described their group as being higher in one of the dimensions but lower in the other dimension, whereas they viewed the other group as the reverse.

Furthermore, compensation in impression formation extends beyond groups to perceptions of individuals. Judd et al. (2005; Study 3) asked participants to form impressions of either two groups or two individuals who were described as being high or low in competence. Consistent with compensation, participants saw high-competence targets to be less warm than low-competence targets, regardless of whether the targets were groups or individuals. These results occurred despite the researchers finding a significant positive correlation between warmth- and competence-related traits in pretests, consistent with prior research on the halo effect (Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968; Thorndike, 1920). Behaviors that were deemed positive on one dimension were also seen positively on the other dimension. Results from a later study reconciled these seemingly discrepant results by revealing that the comparative context of two targets leads to compensatory judgments whereas evaluations of single targets lead to a positive correlation between judgments (Judd et al., 2005; Study 4). In addition, omitting a dimension causes people to infer negativity on that dimension (Kervyn, Bergsieker, & Fiske, 2012), which parallels the work showing that stereotypes about groups have changed over the last century to accentuate each group's positive dimension and omit its negative dimension (Bergsieker, Leslie, Constantine, & Fiske, 2012).

Warmth and competence in impression management

Given that people perceive a trade-off between warmth and competence in impression formation, do they also utilize this pattern when cultivating their own impressions? Several findings suggest compensation in impression management. People become overly critical (i.e., low warmth) when they want to appear highly competent (Amabile & Glazebrook, 1982; Gibson & Oberlander, 2008). Although criticism may signal intelligence, it also entails being unfriendly or disagreeable. Participants given the goal of appearing smart by having to interact with a doctoral candidate or assistant professor became more critical of the attitude objects under discussion (Amabile & Glazebrook, 1982). Moreover, participants given the goal of appearing smart were more likely to choose a discussion topic that fostered disagreement with their interaction partner, compared with participants in the control conditions (Gibson & Oberlander, 2008). These studies provide initial evidence that people act less warmly through hypercriticism when they want to appear competent.

People also downplay their competence when they want to appear likable. The most common reason to "play dumb" is to increase one's desirability and relational value to someone who might be threatened by competence (Leary, 2010). People who are sensitive about being the target of a threatening upward comparison (STTUC; Exline & Lobel, 1999) experience distress when they feel that others are making envious upward comparisons against the self. To reduce their distress, they may engage in self-deprecation or conceal their superior performance. Although this phenomenon is stereotypically associated with women behaving in ways to appeal to men, men tend to report playing dumb to a greater extent than do women (Gove, Hughes, & Geerken, 1980; Thornton, Audesse, Ryckman, & Burckle, 2006). Downplaying competence, then, is not confined to a particular gender but stems from warmth-related motives, such as affiliating with others and appeasing others' feelings of threat.

Despite preliminary evidence of the compensation effect in impression management, one limitation of the aforementioned work is that the researchers examined only one dimension – warmth or competence – at a time. To test our predictions regarding compensation, we need to examine whether people who want to appear warm downplay their competence and whether people who want to appear competent downplay their warmth relative to participants in control conditions. To our knowledge, only one prior study (Godfrey et al., 1986) examined both dimensions simultaneously. Pairs of unacquainted participants engaged in unstructured interactions, which served as the baseline control of

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[1] Although compensation can also be defined as attempts to offset shortcomings in one area through excellence in another (e.g., Bäckman & Dixon, 1992), we use the definition of compensation consistent with prior work in impression formation (e.g., Kervyn et al., 2009).