



Marketing Science Institute Working Paper Series 2019  
Report No. 19-130

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**Self-Effacing versus Self-Enhancing Brand Appeals:  
The Influence of Impression Management Styles on Consumption Behavior**

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Submission Date: May 8, 2019

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“Those who are silent, self-effacing and attentive become the recipients of confidences.”

- *Thornton Wilder*

In 2018, the Forbes Agency Council released a commentary suggesting that companies should share positive news and achievements with their customers using modest tones to avoid appearing arrogant (Forbes 2018). However, a closer look reveals conflicting advice given within this same article as some contributors recommend and state throughout that companies should not worry about being boastful. In the midst of such opposing views, it is unclear which approach brands should employ, and most importantly, why and under which circumstances. Thus, given the lack of clear guidance on the implications of these distinct approaches, some marketing managers continue to use boastful marketing communications that overstate their brand’s virtues, while others elect a more modest approach and understate their brand’s merits. For instance, we see brands such as Berry Bros & Rudd take a modest tone in advertisements (“Not the greatest wine ever made, but still very good”) whereas Starbucks takes a boastful tone (“If your coffee isn’t perfect, we’ll make it over. If it’s still not perfect, make sure you’re in a Starbucks”). In this research, we attempt to provide marketers with clearer recommendations by comparing the effects of both modest, self-effacing and boastful, self-enhancing marketing communications on consumers’ judgments and decisions. We do this by first exploring how these communication approaches are used as impression management styles in human interactions and then we extrapolate this information into the domain of brand-related communications.

People often use either modest or boastful communication approaches in order to manage others' impressions. That is, people intentionally adopt behaviors that are congruent with how they want to be perceived by others (Trudel 2019). Although both approaches are used in an attempt to be viewed positively, these constitute two different and contradictory types of impression management strategies which are referred to as self-effacement (e.g., modest) and self-enhancement (e.g., boastful; Chen et al. 2009) and they allow us to exert some control over others' inferences regarding who we are as a person.

Typically, research explores these opposing impression management strategies in the context of human behavior, but it is evident that brand managers are also using these strategies in their brand's marketing communications. For instance, the Swedish brand, Oatly, has established a strong global market presence using unassuming marketing messages that contain phrases and taglines such as, "We are not a perfect company, not even close, but our intentions are true." While brands such as Oatly employ a modest, effacing approach, others take a more boastful, enhancing style, as is the case of the pain-relieving brand, Advil, whose marketing communications boasts, "Nothing works faster, stronger, longer" (see Appendix 1). In this paper, we shift the focus of impression management goals from human-to-human communications to brand-to-consumer interactions in order to understand better how consumers react to brands presented as self-effacing or self-enhancing.

Although research in psychology shows that people respond more favorably to modest compared to boastful others (Wosinska et al. 1996), it remains unclear how consumers will react to brands that efface versus enhance. Brands with features and attributes that are enhanced or presented in a boastful manner might convey greater assurance of such features in the eyes of the consumer and thus be viewed positively. On the other hand, presenting a brand in a boastful,

enhancing manner could also cause skepticism, resulting in lower consumer trust, and ultimately leading to negative outcomes throughout the decision-making process. Further, there may be instances in which the most appropriate impression management strategy changes based on the particular nature of the product or target market. This begs the questions of which impression management strategy will yield more positive brand attitudes, and most importantly, under which circumstances the strategies align best with consumers' perceptions in order to result in more favorable outcomes.

Given the more (less) favorable social responses and attitudes when judging self-effacing (self-enhancing) people (Hoorens 2011), we anticipate that consumers will feel greater (lesser) brand trust and more (less) positive attitudes toward brands that use effacing (enhancing) messages. Borrowing from the persuasion knowledge model (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Friestad and Wright 1994), we suggest that this occurs because self-effacing (self-enhancing) messages lead to less (more) skepticism about the brand's true intent, thus leading to higher (lower) brand trust and brand-related attitudes. However, when consumers assign greater value to the product's efficacy, a self-enhancing as opposed to a self-effacing brand-communication approach could lead to positive consumption outcomes for the brand.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, we establish the critical differences between self-effacing and self-enhancing impression management styles in the context of interpersonal relationships. We then extend this understanding into the branding domain and make predictions of how these two strategies may differentially affect judgments and decisions when used in brand communications. To assess such predictions, we present two empirical studies to demonstrate the main effects of impression management message type on brand attitudes and provide evidence of the proposed serial mediation of skepticism and trust on brand

attitudes. We then introduce two behavioral studies that assess the downstream consequences of impression management strategy on consumers' actual brand-related decisions and behaviors. One study involves purchase decisions with real monetary trade-offs while the other involves trial and choice. Finally, we outline theoretical and managerial implications and provide future research recommendations that can help expand the knowledge of brands' use of these two impression management strategies.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### *A Comparison of Self-Effacement and Self-Enhancement*

People self-efface by underrepresenting accomplishments, traits, and expectations (Cialdini and de Nicholas 1989) in order to increase others' positive attitudes (Kopalle and Lehmann 2001). Conversely, with self-enhancement, people are motivated to elevate others' opinions of their personal worth (Epstein 1973; Swann et al. 1987) by exaggerating, potentially to compensate for weaknesses or a lack of self-confidence or to be regarded as superior even when not necessarily deserving the merit (Sedikides, Hoorens, and Dufner 2015). Research in psychology finds evidence that presenting one's attributes in a self-effacing or indirect and modest manner as opposed to a self-enhancing and boastful manner is more effective in creating a favorable impression on others (Wosinska et al. 1996). Using a self-effacing impression management strategy in interpersonal relationships results in more favorable views of the self-effaced individual, thereby leading to more positive evaluations (Bond, Leung, and Wang 1982). In fact, even within friendly or familiar circles, a modest self-presentation is more effective in

increasing recall of interactions (Tice et al. 1995) and, generally, people consider modest individuals more authentic than those who boast (Robinson, Johnson, and Shields 1995).

Conversely, self-enhancing through bragging and claims of superiority leads observers to respond negatively toward self-enhancers. Scopelliti, Loewenstein, and Vosgerau (2015) found that self-enhancing strategies often backfire, causing observers to hold self-enhancers in a less favorable light and regard them as braggarts.

Research on impression management strategies predominantly focuses on interpersonal relationships, however, researchers have recently begun to explore these impression management strategies in the marketing domain (Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2013; Sekhon et al. 2015; Packard, Gershoff, and Wooten 2016). Packard, Gershoff, and Wooten (2016), for instance, find that product reviews are less persuasive when consumers are cued to distrust a self-enhancing review writer. Conversely, when cued to trust a self-enhancing review writer, consumers consider the writer knowledgeable and subsequently find the product review more persuasive. Further, Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly (2013) explain that when consumers mention luxury and reputable brands in social media, others perceive them as braggarts, leading to negative inferences about the social media user. This occurs because observers view these brand mentions as a way for users to communicate or brag about their wealth and cultural capital (i.e., taste, expertise, and brand knowledge), rather than as occurring out of a genuine interest in the brand. Building on these recent and important marketing-related findings, we shift the focus from a person as the message source to a brand as the message source. This enables us to explore and contrast the effects of self-effacing versus self-enhancing impression management strategies on consumers' brand attitudes and to investigate their implications on consumption behavior.

It is known that consumers perceive brands as possessing human traits and characteristics, facilitating their evaluation of brands in a manner akin to how they would evaluate another person (Aaker 1997; Fournier 1998; Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986). This can happen through the process of anthropomorphism, which suggests that consumers assign human-like qualities and traits to brands and as such, evaluate them as if they were indeed, human (Puzakova, Kwak, and Rocereto 2009; Aggarwal and McGill 2007). Since people can choose to present themselves using either impression management strategy, it follows that brand managers can also use either self-effacing or self-enhancing messages to communicate their brands' qualities and attributes to consumers. Marketers may choose to employ self-effacing brand messages by promoting product features in a modest way as is done by Oatly, or they may choose a self-enhancing approach, such as in the case of Advil, which boasts the brands' virtues in an attempt to persuade consumers of its value and stimulate consumption.

We anticipate that consumers will evaluate self-effaced or self-enhanced brands in a manner reflective of how they view self-effacing or self-enhancing people. Because individuals tend to react more negatively toward people who self-enhance rather than self-efface (Hoorens 2011), we expect that consumers will develop less favorable attitudes toward brands with self-enhancing marketing communications relative to brands with self-effacing marketing communications. Formally:

H1: Self-effacing compared to self-enhancing brand messages will lead to more positive consumer attitudes toward the brand.

*Persuasion Knowledge and the Mediating Role of Skepticism and Brand Trust*



Persuasion knowledge theory suggests that consumers try to figure out the motives behind marketers' attempts to influence their consumption preferences and choices (Friestad and Wright 1994), which can subsequently reduce marketing strategy effectiveness (Brown and Krishna 2004; Morales 2005). When consumers become aware of the marketer's intent to persuade, persuasion knowledge is activated (Kirmani and Zhu 2007). With persuasion knowledge activated, consumers question the brand as they attempt to establish which tactics the marketers are using to persuade. Through this process, consumers become skeptical of advertising messages or claims, which negatively affects their attitudes toward the advertisement and potentially, the brand itself (Campbell and Kirmani 2000).

Related research shows that people may become suspicious of the motives of consumers who engage in conspicuous consumption by using a brand as part of an impression management strategy to signal a desired identity that amplifies the consumer's successes (Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2013). People may therefore perceive self-enhancing individuals as over-compensating for a lack of self-confidence, which increases their skepticism about the self-enhancer's true merits (Sekhon et al. 2015). In contrast, self-effacing is used to downplay one's own accomplishments as a means to appear humble and modest, even when knowing that the strength and value of these accomplishments is high. This is met favorably by observers who experience more positive attitudes toward those who self-efface (Diekmann, Hafner, and Peters 2015). We therefore borrow from the persuasion knowledge literature to provide a more comprehensive examination of the effects of impression management strategies in brand communications on consumers' brand-related judgments and decisions.

Since brand managers can use either of these impression management strategies in an attempt to persuade, consumers may become skeptical of the brand's motive. This is especially

true when using self-enhancing appeals because people's perceptions of self-enhancing individuals (or in this case, brands) is often that they are trying to compensate for something they lack, which can raise doubts about the true virtues and accomplishments of the self-enhanced (Wosinska et al. 1996; Hoorens 2011; Miller and Maples 2012; Sedikides, Hoorens, and Dufner 2015). Campbell and Kirmani (2000) remind us that messages that make a brand's intent to persuade more salient will activate consumers' persuasion knowledge and raise their feelings of skepticism. Thus, we expect consumers to generally experience greater skepticism and less trust toward the self-enhanced brand, thereby negatively affecting consumers' brand attitudes.

On the contrary, self-effacing messages increase likeability and favorable attitudes toward those who efface (Robinson, Johnson and Shields 1995). In fact, literature in organizational behavior finds that modesty is a facet of agreeableness, which in interpersonal relationships elevates perceptions of trustworthiness, such that modest team members are considered highly trustworthy (Mooradian, Renzl, and Matzler 2006). On this basis, we propose a serial mediation process in which consumers are less (more) skeptical of brand communications that use self-effacing (self-enhancing) messages, leading consumers to feel higher (lower) levels of brand trust and in turn, more (less) positive attitudes toward the brand. See Figure 1, following the references. Formally:

H2: Skepticism toward brand communications and brand trust sequentially mediate the relationship between impression management style and brand attitudes such that self-effacing brand messages are viewed with (a) less skepticism which leads to (b) greater brand trust and subsequently more positive brand attitudes relative to self-enhancing brand messages.

### *Downstream Effects of Message Type on Purchase Behaviors and Choice*

It is helpful for brand managers to know whether consumers view brands more positively when they use a self-effacing rather than a self-enhancing message and the associated underlying process that explains why this occurs. However, attitudes alone do not provide sufficient guidance on whether these differential messages are capable of affecting or changing consumption behavior (Morales, Amir, and Lee 2017). Therefore, beyond measuring and comparing consumers' attitudes toward self-effacing and self-enhancing brand messages, we assess subsequent consumption consequences when either impression management strategy is used in marketing communications and how these translate into actual purchases when real monetary trade-offs are involved.

We propose that when self-effacing as opposed to self-enhancing brand messages are used, consumers will be more likely to purchase the brand and among those who make a purchase, a greater quantity will be bought.

H3: Consumers will be more likely to purchase from brands with self-effacing rather than self-enhancing messages.

H4: Among consumers who make a purchase, the quantity purchased will be greater for brands with self-effacing rather than self-enhancing messages.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Across four studies, two online and two in-person with direct behavioral measures, we find support for our hypotheses that self-effacing and self-enhancing impression management strategies differentially affect consumer's brand attitudes (studies 1 and 2) and that this process is

mediated by skepticism and brand trust (study 2). We also observe the downstream consequences that result from the use of these impression management strategies, specifically, purchase decisions when real monetary tradeoffs are involved (study 3) and product choice (study 4). Collectively, findings from these studies provide theoretical clarification of the effects of these impression management strategies in the context of brand communications by establishing that self-effacing brand messages will lower skepticism and lead to higher brand trust, brand attitudes, and purchase compared to self-enhancing messages

### ***Study 1: Influence of Impression Management Strategy on Trust and Brand Attitudes***

Study 1 served two primary objectives. The first objective was to assess the effect of the impression management strategy used in brand communications on consumers' brand attitudes. Specifically, we explored whether consumers' brand attitudes were more positive when a brand was associated with a self-effacing as opposed to a self-enhancing advertising message. The second objective was to assess the mediating effect of brand trust on brand attitudes.

*Pretest.* We created an advertisement for a fictitious brand of juice that was presented in either a self-effacing or a self-enhancing manner. To ensure that the advertising messages were perceived in the intended manner, we conducted a pretest through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) (N = 75; 47.6% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 38.8$ ). Participants saw either the self-effacing or the self-enhancing version of the advertisement and then indicated whether they felt the advertised brand appeared self-enhancing or self-effacing using 7-point bipolar measures ( $\alpha = .84$ ): “pompous - modest,” “arrogant - humble,” “pretentious - unpretentious,” “over-confident - not over-confident,” “bolstering - undermining.” Results indicated that the advertisements significantly varied on self-effacement and self-enhancement as intended ( $M_{\text{eff}} = 4.26$ ,  $SD =$

1.46,  $M_{\text{enh}} = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ;  $t = -2.12$ ,  $p = .036$ ). The pretest showed that our manipulations aligned with our expectations, so we proceeded to the main study.

### *Method*

*Participants and Design.* One hundred and ten Amazon MTurk workers (50.5% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 36.6$ ) completed the study, which used a single factor, two level (impression management strategy: self-effacing vs. self-enhancing) between-subjects design in exchange for nominal monetary compensation.

*Procedure.* Participants were randomly assigned to evaluate either the self-effacing or self-enhancing juice advertisement, depending on condition (see Appendix 2). After viewing the advertisement, participants completed manipulation check questions to ensure that the self-effacing (self-enhancing) advertisement was considered self-effacing (self-enhancing) by indicating how strongly they agreed or disagreed (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) that the brand appeared self-effacing (“modest,” “humble,” “unpretentious,” “not over-confident,” “undermining”) and self-enhancing (“pompous,” “arrogant,” “pretentious,” “over-confident,” “bolstering”).<sup>1</sup>

Next, participants indicated how much they trust the advertised brand by indicating their level of agreement with five statements adapted from Erdem and Swait (2004): “This brand will deliver what it promises; it is dependable,” “This brand’s product claims are believable,” “This brand is reliable,” “This brand is trustworthy,” “This brand doesn’t pretend to be something it isn’t” (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Participants then indicated their attitudes

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<sup>1</sup> To ensure no differences in health perceptions, participants also evaluated the advertised brand on the degree of perceived healthiness using four items (“all natural,” “organic,” “non-GMO,” “healthy”) measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). As intended, results revealed no significant differences between conditions,  $M_{\text{eff}} = 5.79$ ,  $SD = .85$ ,  $M_{\text{enh}} = 5.50$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ;  $F(1, 102) = 1.90$ ,  $p = .171$ .

toward the brand by specifying how much they agreed or disagreed with four statements: “I really like it,” “It is very appealing to me,” “I think I would enjoy drinking it,” “My feelings toward it are favorable” (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Finally, participants completed demographic questions.

### *Results*

*Manipulation Checks.* The five self-effacing measures loaded onto a single factor and were averaged together to form a composite measure of self-effacement ( $\alpha = .74$ ). The five self-enhancing measures also loaded onto a single factor and were averaged together to form a composite measure of self-enhancement ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Results reveal that the self-effacing advertisement was indeed perceived as significantly higher in self-effacement ( $M_{\text{eff}} = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ,  $M_{\text{enh}} = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ;  $F(1, 109) = 47.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ) compared to the self-enhancing advertisement, which was rated significantly higher in self-enhancement ( $M_{\text{enh}} = 4.30$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ,  $M_{\text{eff}} = 2.81$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ;  $F(1, 109) = 30.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

*Attitudes toward the Brand.* The four brand attitude items loaded onto a single factor and were averaged together to form a composite measure of brand attitude ( $\alpha = .94$ ). A one-way ANOVA on brand attitude revealed a significant main effect of impression management strategy ( $F(1, 109) = 4.25$ ,  $p = .042$ ). Participants in the self-effacing condition reported significantly more positive attitudes toward the advertised brand ( $M_{\text{eff}} = 6.52$ ,  $SD = 3.25$ ) than did participants in the self-enhancing condition ( $M_{\text{enh}} = 5.31$ ,  $SD = 2.89$ ).

*Trust.* The five brand trust items loaded onto a single factor and were averaged together to form a composite measure of trust ( $\alpha = .94$ ). A one-way ANOVA on brand trust revealed a significant main effect of impression management strategy ( $F(1, 109) = 8.61$ ,  $p = .004$ ). That is,

participants in the self-effacing condition reported significantly greater trust for the advertised brand ( $M_{\text{eff}} = 5.13$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) compared to those in the self-enhancing condition ( $M_{\text{enh}} = 4.43$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ).

*Mediation Analysis.* We conducted a mediation analysis using PROCESS macro Model 4 (Hayes 2018), with impression management as the independent variable (coded 0 = self-effacing, 1 = self-enhancing), brand attitudes as the dependent variable, and brand trust as the mediator. Findings demonstrate that trust mediated the effect of impression management style on brand attitudes ( $\beta = -1.13$ ,  $SE = .38$ , 95%  $CI = -1.89$  to  $-.40$ ) such that self-effacing (self-enhancing) marketing appeals lead to higher (lower) brand trust, thereby positively (negatively) influencing consumers' attitudes toward the brand.

### *Discussion*

Results of study 1 provide support for our main hypothesis (H1) that impression management strategies in brand communications differentially affect consumers' brand attitudes. Specifically, brands with self-effacing messages benefit from more positive brand attitudes relative to brands with self-enhancing messages. These results also highlight brand trust as an important mediator in this process, such that self-effacing (self-enhancing) messages lead to higher (lower) trust, which subsequently results in more (less) favorable brand attitudes.

### ***Study 2: Serial Mediation by Skepticism and Brand Trust***

While study 1 results show that trust mediates the relationship between impression management styles in brand communications and brand attitudes, we have yet to evaluate the role of skepticism in this relationship. Thus, the primary objective of study 2 is to assess the

proposed serial mediation process of consumer skepticism and brand trust. Specifically, we propose that self-effacing (self-enhancing) brand communications lead consumers to experience less (more) skepticism, which subsequently leads to higher (lower) levels of brand trust, thereby resulting in more (less) positive brand attitudes. Additionally, we aim to increase the generalizability of the effect by using different marketing media. We do this by moving from print advertising as the brand communication medium to social media messages.

*Pretest.* We conducted a pretest using Amazon MTurk (N = 413, 64.9% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 36.43$ ) in which participants evaluated a social media message said to have been posted by a brand. No mention was made of the brand's product category, but participants were told that the real brand name was disguised with a fictitious name, Aqin (brand adapted from Puzakova and Kwak 2017). Participants saw one social media message that had been designed to appear either self-effacing or self-enhancing, depending on condition. After seeing the message, participants indicated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) the extent to which they agreed that the message appeared self-effacing ( $\alpha = .90$ ): "modest," "humble," "unpretentious," "not over-confident," and self-enhancing ( $\alpha = .94$ ): "pompous," "arrogant," "pretentious," "over-confident." Results are depicted in Table 1, following the references.

*Participants and Design.* One hundred and fifty-three Amazon MTurk workers (48.4% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 35.8$ ) completed the study in exchange for nominal monetary compensation. The study used a single factor, two level (impression management strategy: self-effacing vs. self-enhancing) between-subjects design

*Procedure.* Participants saw a set of three of the pretested messages said to have been posted by a snack bar brand on social media (see Appendix 2). The messages varied to be either the self-effacing or self-enhancing social media posts, depending on condition. After reading the



social media posts, participants completed manipulation checks by rating the posts on the degree to which they appear either self-effacing or self-enhancing, using the same pretest measures.

Next, participants indicated their level of skepticism toward the advertised brand's social media posts using a scale adapted from Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998): "I know I am getting the truth from these messages," "The aim of the messages is to inform the consumer," "I believe these messages are informative," "These messages are truthful," "These messages are reliable sources of information about the quality of the product," "These messages are truth well told," "The messages present a true picture of the product being advertised," "I feel I've been accurately informed," "These messages provide consumers with essential information about the product" (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Then, participants completed the same measures of brand trust and brand attitudes used in study 1. Finally, participants answered demographic questions.

### *Results*

*Manipulation Checks.* The four self-effacing measures loaded onto a single factor and were averaged together to form a composite measure of self-effacement ( $\alpha = .93$ ). The four self-enhancing measures also loaded onto a single factor and were averaged together to form a composite measure of self-enhancement ( $\alpha = .96$ ). Results indicate that the social media posts designed to appear self-effacing were perceived as significantly higher in self-effacement ( $M_{\text{eff}} = 4.92$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ,  $M_{\text{enh}} = 2.46$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ;  $F(1, 152) = 119.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ) compared to the posts designed to appear self-enhancing, which were rated significantly higher in self-enhancement ( $M_{\text{enh}} = 5.28$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ,  $M_{\text{eff}} = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ;  $F(1, 152) = 143.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

*Attitudes toward the Brand.* The brand attitude items loaded onto a single factor and were averaged to form a composite measure of brand attitude ( $\alpha = .93$ ). A one-way ANOVA on brand attitude revealed a significant main effect of impression management strategy ( $F(1, 152) = 9.22, p = .003$ ). That is, participants in the self-effacing condition reported significantly more positive attitudes toward the advertised brand ( $M_{\text{eff}} = 4.17, SD = 1.24$ ) than did participants in the self-enhancing condition ( $M_{\text{enh}} = 3.52, SD = 1.39$ ).

*Consumer Skepticism.* The skepticism items loaded onto a single factor and were averaged together to form a composite measure of skepticism ( $\alpha = .96$ ). A one-way ANOVA on skepticism revealed a significant main effect of impression management strategy ( $F(1, 152) = 22.68, p < .001$ ). Participants in the self-effacing condition reported significantly less skepticism of the brand's messages ( $M_{\text{eff}} = 4.12, SD = 1.18$ ) compared to those in the self-enhancing condition ( $M_{\text{enh}} = 5.10, SD = 1.36$ ).

*Brand Trust.* The brand trust items also loaded onto a single factor and were averaged to form a composite measure of trust ( $\alpha = .94$ ). A one-way ANOVA on brand trust revealed a significant main effect of impression management strategy ( $F(1, 152) = 55.25, p < .001$ ). Participants in the self-effacing condition reported significantly greater brand trust ( $M_{\text{eff}} = 4.83, SD = .96$ ) compared to participants in the self-enhancing condition ( $M_{\text{enh}} = 3.50, SD = 1.23$ ).

*Serial Mediation Analysis.* To test the underlying process (H2a and H2b), we conducted a serial mediation analysis using PROCESS macro Model 6 (Hayes 2018), with impression management as the independent variable (coded 0 = self-effacing, 1 = self-enhancing) and brand attitudes as the main dependent variable. Skepticism toward the messages and brand trust served as the sequential mediators in the model. Findings revealed that skepticism and brand trust sequentially mediated the effect of impression management strategy on brand attitudes ( $\beta = -.27,$

SE = .09, 95% CI = -.50 to -.13), such that self-effacing (self-enhancing) brand messages lead to less (more) skepticism toward the message, resulting in more (less) brand trust and subsequently, more (less) positive attitudes toward the brand.

### *Discussion*

Results from this study provide support for our proposed serial mediation model (H2), which posits that impression management strategies in brand communications differentially affect consumers' brand attitudes and this relationship is mediated first by skepticism (H2a) and then by brand trust (H2b). Self-effacing (self-enhancing) brand messages result in lower (higher) skepticism toward the message, leading to more (less) brand trust, which, in turn, results in more (less) positive brand attitudes.

The previous studies enabled us to assess the effect of impression management style in brand communications on brand attitudes and to explore the roles of message skepticism and brand trust in the underlying process. Next, we extend from brand-related attitudes to actual consumption decisions. Specifically, in the next two studies, we assess the downstream consequences of these impression management strategies in brand-related marketing communications. To do this, we conduct two behavioral studies to evaluate both purchase decisions (study 3) and choice (study 4) when real consequences, including monetary tradeoffs, are involved.

### ***Study 3: Actual Purchase with Monetary Trade-offs***

The primary objective of study 3 is to evaluate the effect of self-effacing versus self-enhancing brand messages in real purchasing contexts that involve actual monetary tradeoffs.

Specifically, we address the important question of whether the increased brand trust and attitudes consumers experience for brands with self-effacing as opposed to self-enhancing messages in our previous studies translate into greater purchase likelihood and greater quantity purchased.

In this study, participants evaluated a snack bar brand that varied to have either self-effacing or self-enhancing messages and each participant received money as a token of appreciation for their time. When participants received payment, they saw boxes of the advertised brand of snack bars in three flavors displayed in a manner representative of a retail context. Participants had the option to make no purchases or to purchase any flavor(s) in the quantity of their choosing. We anticipate that participants will be more inclined to purchase and will purchase more from the brand when it is associated with self-effacing as opposed to self-enhancing messages.

*Pretest.* A pretest with undergraduate students ( $N = 25$ , 40.0% female,  $M_{age} = 22.24$ ) found that the snack bar's brand name, Bearded Brothers, was seen as neither self-effacing nor self-enhancing and confirmed that \$2.00 would constitute a reasonable purchase price.

*Participants and Design.* One hundred and eighty undergraduate students (50% female,  $M_{age} = 19.92$ ) participated in the study in exchange for extra course credit. Fourteen participants reported snack bar-related dietary restrictions and were removed from the analysis, leaving 166 participants (50% female,  $M_{age} = 19.86$ ). The study used a single factor, two level (impression management strategy: self-effacing vs. self-enhancing) between-subjects design.

*Procedure.* Participants were randomly assigned to either the self-effacing or the self-enhancing brand message condition. This study used the same social media posts from study 2. After reading the three social media messages, which varied to be self-effacing or self-enhancing depending on condition, participants read that as a token of appreciation, they would receive \$10

for participating in the study. They also read that the advertised snack bars were available for purchase at a cost of \$2.00 each and had a normal retail price of \$2.00 to \$2.50. Next, participants walked to the research assistant, received \$10, and indicated if they would like to purchase any bars. Three snack bar display boxes sat on a table near the research assistant, each with a different flavor (chocolate, blueberry vanilla, and coconut mango). Participants who chose to buy one or more bars made the purchase with the research assistant and took the purchased bars and any remaining money back to their seat to finish the study. Those who did not make a purchase also returned to their seats with their money to complete the study. After returning to their seats, participants completed a manipulation check with 7-point bipolar measures (“Pompous – Modest,” “Arrogant – Humble,” “Pretentious – Unpretentious,” “Over-Confident – Not-Overconfident”). Next, they completed an unrelated filler task followed by a variety seeking measure (adapted from Durante and Arsena 2014) before reporting their overall liking of snack bars. Finally, participants reported whether they had any dietary restrictions that would prevent them from eating most snack bars and answered demographic questions.

## *Results*

*Manipulation Checks.* The four bipolar measures of self-effacement/self-enhancement loaded onto a single factor and were averaged together ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Results from an ANOVA revealed that the social media posts designed to appear self-effacing were perceived as more self-effacing compared to those designed to appear self-enhancing, which were rated as more self-enhancing ( $M_{\text{enh}} = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ,  $M_{\text{eff}} = 5.25$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ;  $F(1, 165) = 190.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

*Purchase Behaviors.* Next, we conducted a regression analysis with purchase of snack bars as the dependent variable (coded 0: no purchase and 1: purchase), impression management

strategy as the independent variable, and variety seeking and liking of snack bars as covariates. A significant positive main effect emerged ( $\beta = 1.39$ ,  $SE = .36$ ,  $Wald(1) = 15.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ), revealing that participants in the self-effacing condition were significantly more likely to purchase bars compared to participants in the self-enhancing condition.

To assess whether purchase quantity differed as a function of the brand messages consumers viewed, we evaluated purchase quantity only among those participants who made a snack bar purchase (125 participants; 50.4% female,  $M_{age} = 20$ ). We conducted an ANCOVA with impression management strategy as the independent variable, the number of purchased bars as the dependent variable, and variety seeking and general liking of snack bars as covariates. Results revealed that among those who made a purchase, participants in the self-effacing condition purchased significantly more bars compared to participants in the self-enhancing condition ( $M_{enh} = 1.03$ ,  $SD = .157$ ,  $M_{eff} = 1.15$ ,  $SD = .38$ ;  $F(1, 124) = 4.74$ ,  $p = .031$ ). Importantly, these findings reinforce that among participants who chose to make a purchase, those who saw the brand's self-effacing marketing messages purchased more units relative to those who saw the self-enhancing messages. See Figure 2, following the references.

### *Discussion*

The results of study 3 reveal that consumers are more likely to purchase the advertised brand when it is associated with self-effacing as opposed to self-enhancing messages (H3). Further, among those who made a purchase, they bought a greater quantity when the brand was presented in a self-effacing rather than a self-enhancing manner (H4). Together, the results show that the different impression management strategy not only influences brand-related attitudes, but also purchase decisions in situations with real consequences and actual monetary trade-offs.

***Study 4: Actual Choice with Efficacy Importance as a Moderator***

While our previous studies highlight benefits to presenting brands in a self-effacing manner, in study 4 we build on our previous findings by evaluating a situation in which self-enhancing brand communications can lead to positive brand outcomes. Thus, the primary objective of this study was to assess the moderating role of efficacy importance on consumers' actual choice as a function of whether a brand is presented in a self-effacing or self-enhancing manner. That is, while people generally show more positive attitudes toward self-effacing brands, when product efficacy is of great personal importance, they may be more inclined to choose a brand presented as self-enhancing than they are to choose one presented as self-effacing. Thus, we explore the moderating role of efficacy importance in the context of actual choice and present the following hypotheses:

H5: Efficacy importance will moderate the effects of impression management style on product choice such that:

- (a) when product efficacy is considered more important, brands with self-enhancing (self-effacing) messages will be more (less) likely to be chosen relative to an unknown brand
- (b) when product efficacy is considered less important, brands with self-enhancing (self-effacing) messages will be less (more) likely to be chosen relative to an unknown brand

Further, to ensure the generalizability of our results, we extend from food and beverages into a self-care product category, specifically, hand lotion. Using a personal-care product enables us to explore the effect of impression management style in brand communications for a product category where consumers may place different levels of importance on efficacy-related

attributes. That is, some consumers may highly value efficacy-related attributes in their hand lotion selections whereas other consumers may place less importance on these same attributes. In addition, we assess the use of self-effacing or self-enhancing brand messages within a website to examine the effects in a context other than traditional advertising or social media. This enables us to have further support that the observed effects are persistent across a variety of marketing contexts and product categories.

*Participants and Design.* Two hundred and twelve undergraduate students (42.7% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.7$ ) participated in a 2 (impression management strategy: self-effacing vs. self-enhancing) x 2 (product encounter: control vs. product trial) between-subjects design in exchange for extra course credit.

*Procedure.* Participants were randomly assigned to either the self-effacing or the self-enhancing brand message condition. We do not have reason to believe that evaluations will differ based on whether there was product sampling prior to evaluating the brand, but we acknowledge that marketing stimuli often affect actual experiences (Yan, Sengupta, and Wyer Jr. 2014) so we include both a control (no sample) and a sample condition in this study. Accordingly, participants were also assigned to either the control or the product trial condition. Participants read that two different brands of hand lotion (labeled M and P) were being evaluated. However, participants in all conditions were told they would be evaluating Brand M.

Participants in the control condition (no trial) saw a screenshot of the fictitious hand lotion brand's website with messages that varied to make the brand appear either self-effacing or self-enhancing, depending on condition (see Appendix 2). They then evaluated the brand on four 7-point bipolar measures: "bad – good," "unfavorable – favorable," "dislike very much – like very much," "I would not enjoy this product – I would enjoy this product." Participants in the



product trial condition, on the other hand, saw the website screenshot, sampled the advertised brand, and then evaluated the product based on everything they knew about the brand, including their actual experience.

Immediately following the product evaluation, participants in all conditions learned that as a token of appreciation, they would choose and bring a travel-size container of either the brand of hand lotion they evaluated (Brand M) or a different brand of hand lotion (Brand P) with them at the end of the study. Next, they indicated on a piece of paper which of the two brands they would like to take. Participants' choice of the advertised (Brand M) versus an unknown, non-advertised (Brand P) brand is the main dependent variable in this study. Finally, participants completed a series of measures to assess variety seeking preference (adapted from Durante and Arsenau 2014), uncertainty avoidance (Jung and Kellaris 2004), and frequency of lotion use in an average month. These three variables were used as covariates in the analysis. As a measure of efficacy importance, participants indicated how much they agreed that it is important that their hand lotion "work quickly," "moisturizes skin," "protects skin," "repairs skin," and "is long lasting" (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Finally, participants responded to demographic questions.

### *Results.*

*Product Evaluation.* The four product evaluation items loaded onto a single factor and were averaged together to form a composite measure of product evaluation ( $\alpha = .91$ ). A 2 (impression management) x 2 (product encounter) ANOVA on product evaluation revealed no significant main effect of product encounter ( $F(1, 211) = 2.17, p = .142$ ) but a significant main effect of impression management ( $F(1, 211) = 11.16, p = .001$ ), and a significant interaction

( $F(1, 211) = 9.41, p = .002$ ). As expected, these results suggest that participants' brand-related evaluations do not differ based on whether they sampled the product. A t-test then revealed that participants in the self-effacing condition evaluated the advertised product significantly more positively ( $M_{\text{eff}} = 4.97, SD = .87; t = 3.34, p = .001$ ) than did participants in the self-enhancing condition ( $M_{\text{enh}} = 4.50, SD = 1.17$ ). These results support our earlier findings that consumers, in general, have more positive attitudes toward self-effaced, than self-enhanced brands.

Then, we conducted a regression analysis with brand choice (coded 0: *P*, not advertised brand and 1: *M*, advertised brand) as the dependent variable, product encounter and impression management strategy as the independent variables, and variety seeking, uncertainty avoidance, and frequency of lotion use as covariates. As expected, results from this analysis revealed no significant differences between conditions ( $\beta = .11, SE = .56, \text{Wald}(1) = .039, p = .84$ ) and no significant main effects for impression management ( $\beta = .15, SE = .40, \text{Wald}(1) = .145, p = .71$ ) or for product encounter ( $\beta = -.069, SE = .40, \text{Wald}(1) = .030, p = .86$ ). Since the analysis revealed that there were no significant main effects or interactions with product encounter for choice or brand evaluations ( $p$ 's > .05), we collapsed the cells across product encounter conditions for the following analyses.

Next, we conducted a regression analysis with brand choice (coded 0: *P*, not advertised brand and 1: *M*, advertised brand) as the dependent variable, efficacy importance and impression management strategy as the independent variables, and variety seeking, uncertainty avoidance, and frequency of lotion use as covariates. A significant positive main effect emerged ( $\beta = 1.33, SE = .31, \text{Wald}(1) = 18.49, p < .001$ ), revealing that when efficacy is of high importance, participants in the self-enhancing (self-effacing) condition are significantly more likely to choose the advertised (non-advertised) brand. The main effects of efficacy importance ( $\beta = -.627, SE =$

.21, Wald(1) = 9.14,  $p = .002$ ) and impression management strategy ( $\beta = -6.78$ , SE = 1.67, Wald(1) = 16.56,  $p < .001$ ) were also significant.

Delving deeper into these results, we conducted a spotlight analysis (PROCESS Model 1, Hayes, 2018) to assess the moderating role of efficacy importance. See Figure 3, following the references. This analysis revealed that participants who do not highly value hand lotion efficacy ( $-1$  SD) were significantly more likely to choose the advertised brand when the brand was presented in a self-effacing manner (65%) than when it was presented in a self-enhancing manner (37%;  $\beta = -1.18$ ,  $Z = -2.69$ , CI: -2.04, -.321,  $p = .007$ ). In contrast, participants who highly value hand lotion efficacy ( $+1$  SD) were significantly more likely to choose the advertised brand when the brand used self-enhancing messages (72%) than when it used self-effacing messages (33%,  $\beta = 1.62$ ,  $Z = 3.66$ , CI: .753, -.249,  $p < .001$ ). See Figure 3.

### *Discussion.*

Results from this study support that the observed effects of impression management strategy on brand attitudes (study 1 through study 3) persist even when consumers sample the product prior to evaluating it. Specifically, participants who sampled the lotion did not demonstrate any significant difference in their brand-related evaluations compared to those who did not try a sample.

Furthermore, this study's findings demonstrate the predicted moderating role of efficacy importance (H5). When hand lotion efficacy was of little personal importance, participants showed preference for brands with self-effacing communications. Specifically, participants were more likely to choose the advertised brand rather than an unknown brand if it was associated with self-effacing messages than if it was associated with self-enhancing messages. When the

brand was associated with self-enhancing messages, they were less likely to choose the advertised brand, instead, choosing an unknown brand. Importantly, the results of this study identify a situation in which participants show preference for brands associated with self-enhancing communications. When participants place high value on product efficacy, they show greater preference for self-enhancing rather than self-effacing brands. That is, participants were more likely to choose a brand if it was presented in a self-enhancing manner but if it was presented in a self-effacing manner, then they were more likely to take their chance with an unknown brand. Together, these findings demonstrate an important boundary condition regarding the use of impression management strategies in brand communications.

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Brand communications and advertisements, both in online and offline settings, contain textual information used to persuade consumers to purchase the promoted brand, product, or service. Much research has been devoted to understanding consumers' reactions and attitudes toward these communications, thereby illuminating how sensitive consumers are to the framing and tone of these messages. In this research, we focus on two opposing approaches commonly used when communicating brand features and virtues: a modest, self-effacing approach or a boastful, self-enhancing approach. Given the contrasting nature of these approaches and based on earlier psychology research that indicates the differential outcomes when using either impression management approach, we sought to investigate how these strategies affect consumer judgments and decisions when used in brand-related marketing communications.

Indeed, findings from our studies reveal that attitudes are more positive for brands with self-effacing as opposed to self-enhancing communications (study 1) and this relationship is mediated first by skepticism and then by brand trust (study 2). Specifically, self-effacing (self-enhancing) brand messages lead to lower (higher) skepticism, which then leads to higher (lower) brand trust and ultimately more (less) positive brand attitudes. Through two behavioral studies, we observed how consumers' purchase decisions and choices are affected by these impression management strategies. In study 3, we evaluated actual purchase behavior when monetary trade-offs are involved. We find that self-effacing brand communications lead to greater purchase likelihood and among those who make a purchase, a significantly greater quantity is purchased when the brand uses self-effacing as opposed to self-enhancing brand communications. While we identify several benefits of using a self-effacing impression management strategy in brand-related communications, our results also indicate that product efficacy importance acts as a boundary condition. Specifically, we evaluated whether the observed effects persist or diminish among consumers who place greater value on product efficacy. Results revealed that when choosing between an advertised and unknown brand, people who consider product efficacy to be more (less) important are more (less) likely to choose the advertised brand when it is associated with self-enhancing (self-effacing) brand messages (study 4).

### *Theoretical and Practical Contributions*

Our findings contribute to the impression management and persuasion knowledge literature streams. Previous impression management literature has focused on the role of these strategies in interpersonal communications. We extend the impression management literature into brand-related marketing communications and assess not only consumers' attitudes toward

brands that are presented as self-effacing versus self-enhancing, but also how these strategies differentially affect consumers' actual purchase decisions and choices. Additionally, impression management literature typically highlights the negative effects of self-enhancing behaviors.

While we too find negative effects of self-enhancing brand communications, we also identify a situation in which self-enhancing brand communications can have a positive effect; specifically, when product efficacy is highly valued.

From a theoretical perspective, our findings contribute to the persuasion knowledge literature. Previous research shows that persuasion knowledge is activated when consumers become skeptical about the true intent of brand marketing appeals. Although this research stream is largely established, we add to it by showing that impression management strategies can also activate persuasion knowledge, leading to differential effects on skepticism, trust, and brand attitudes depending on whether marketers present their brands as self-effacing or self-enhancing.

While brands currently use both impression management strategies, to our knowledge, marketing and brand managers have been provided with little to no guidance on the potential differential effects of these strategies on consumers' judgments and decisions. Therefore our research also provides contributions on a practical, managerial level. Our research provides marketing managers with empirical affirmation that when consumers need a product to be efficacious, they will respond better to self-enhancing, bolstering marketing messages. However, when consumers do not place great importance on product efficacy or when efficacy is not relevant to the product category, consumers will respond better to self-effacing, modest marketing messages.

Marketing managers can use this information in conjunction with their knowledge of whether efficacy plays a role in their brand's product category and, if so, efficacy's importance

to the brand's target market. When efficacy is relevant not only to the product category, but also to the target consumer, our findings suggest that marketing managers do not need to shy away from using self-enhancing brand communications. However, when that is not the case, then self-effacing marketing messages will more effectively increase purchase intentions and consumption. For instance, these findings suggest that although Advil's marketing is boastful and enhancing, this strategy is indeed appropriate, given that for this particular product, it is expected that consumers will value its efficacy. Collectively, our findings also provide marketing and brand managers with guidance regarding building and maintaining consumer trust and the effect of self-effacing and self-enhancing message strategies on consumers' brand-related judgments and decisions.

#### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

As with all lab-based studies, one should exercise caution when extending beyond the tested product categories. While we look at products for which efficacy is not important (food and beverage) and where it is important (hand lotion), these are all relatively substantive rather than symbolic products. It is possible that in product categories where consumers make choices in order to portray a particular image (i.e., symbolic products) that the effect of impression management strategies on consumers' judgments and decisions may differ. If a brand is used to signal a desired identity to others, for instance, then it is possible that self-enhancing communications could be more effective even if efficacy does not play a role – such as for prestige or luxury brands. The products used across our studies are also relatively inexpensive so it is possible that results will vary for products with premium pricing. That is, when consumers are spending considerable amounts of money, they may welcome enhancing rather than effacing brand messages. While we highlight this as a possible limitation, we also consider this a potential

research avenue that could deepen our understanding of how effacing and enhancing brand messages affect a diverse set of consumption contexts.

Individual differences in one's own tendency to self-efface or self-enhance may also moderate or affect results. People who tend to efface (enhance) their own accomplishments may relate more to, feel a stronger connection with, and prefer self-enhancing (self-enhancing brands), potentially without regard for product efficacy considerations. Similarly, people with careers that require them to portray confidence, such as pilots or doctors, may relate more to and prefer self-enhancing brands, either in general or in the context of their professions.

Finally, our results show that brands associated with self-enhancing messages are preferred when efficacy importance is critical, but we do not know precisely why this happens. Is it that in these cases, consumers consider the brand confident rather than arrogant? That the self-effacing brand is seen as weak rather than modest? This presents another avenue by which future research can seek to understand the positive side of enhancing brand messages.



**APPENDIX 1:**  
**Examples of Self-Effacing and Self-Enhancing Brand Communications in the Marketplace**

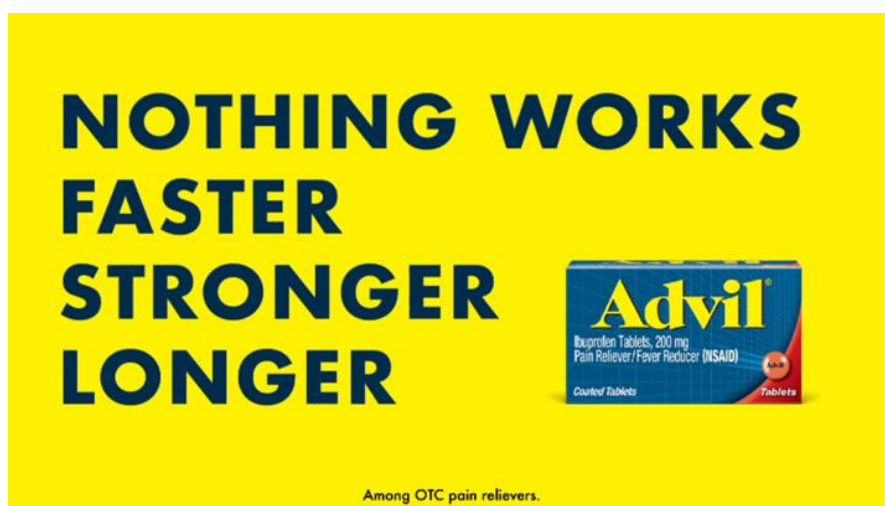
*Self-effacing brand: Oatly*




**We promise to be  
a good company.**

- ☛ We are not a perfect company, not even close, but our intentions are true. We would like to be judged by the good we do and not just the pretty words we say.
- ☛ Our goal is to always deliver products that have maximum nutritional value and minimal environmental impact.
- ☛ We believe we should eat stuff that we can grow instead of growing stuff to feed animals and then eat them.
- ☛ No GMOs. One more time. No GMOs.
- ☛ We promise to be a good company which means that our drive to help people upgrade their lives always comes before the reckless pursuit of profit.

*Self-enhancing brand: Advil*



**NOTHING WORKS  
FASTER  
STRONGER  
LONGER**



Among OTC pain relievers.

## APPENDIX 2: STIMULI

### Study 1

#### *Self-effacing advertisement*



#### *Self-enhancing advertisement*



### Study 2 and Study 3

#### *Self-effacing social media posts*

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There are many brands just as good as ours. Click below to compare.  
 Many brands are similar to Aqin. We hope you give us a try to compare.  
 When you choose Aqin, you are choosing a good product.

#### *Self-enhancing social media posts*

---

Nobody does it better than us. Click below to find out why people can't stop saying Aqin is the best.  
 The level of perfection that Aqin has reached is incomparable. There's simply is no other brand like  
 ours.  
 When you choose Aqin, you are choosing a perfect product.

## Study 4

### *Self-effacing website messages*

Contact Us | Offers | Where to Buy

Brand M is okay, good, alright, and decent. Find out more.

Search

What's New | Best Sellers | Skin Care | About Us

**There are many brands just as good as Brand M.**

**Click below to compare.**

### *Self-enhancing website messages*

Contact Us | Offers | Where to Buy

Brand M is superb, marvelous, wonderful, and outstanding. Find out more.

Search

What's New | Best Sellers | Skin Care | About Us

**Nobody does it better than us.**

**Click below to find out why people can't stop saying Brand M is the best.**

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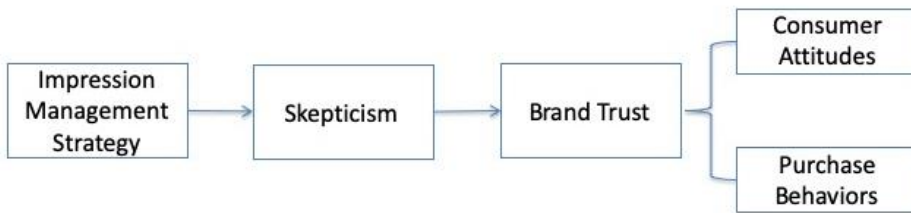
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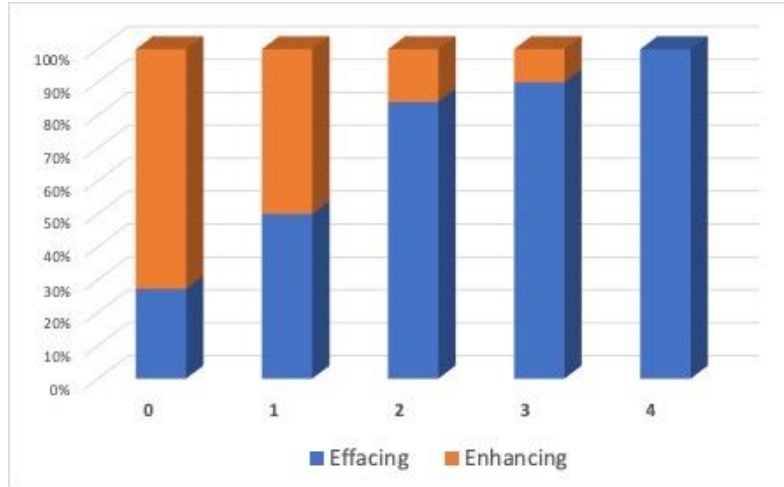


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**FIGURES AND TABLES**

*Figure 1.* Conceptual Model





*Figure 2.* Breakdown of purchased units (%) by condition

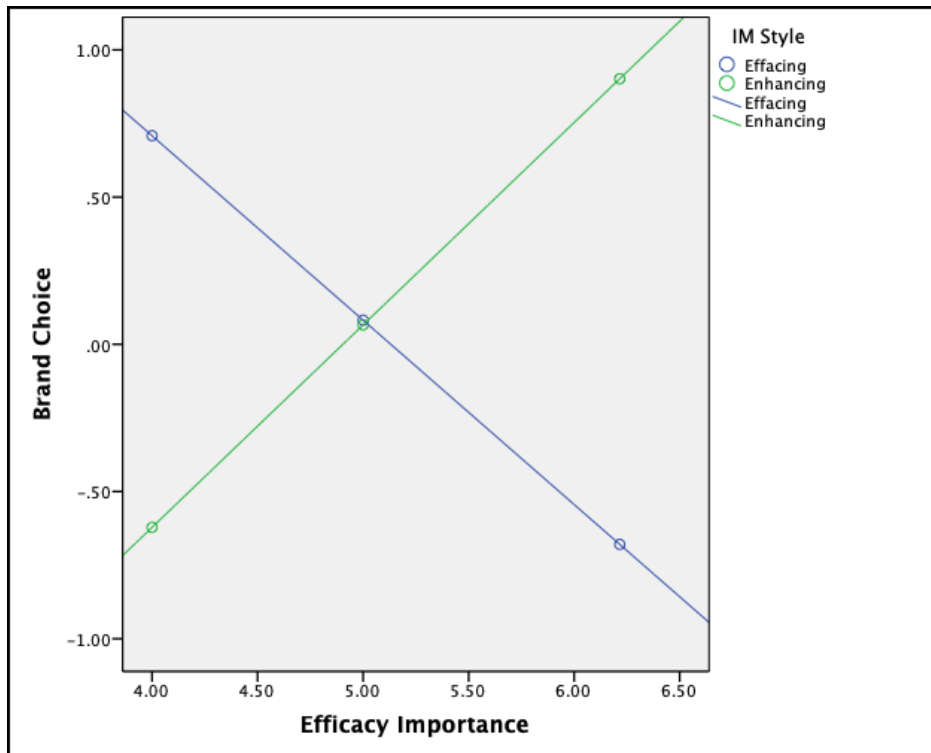


Figure 3. Results from Spotlight Analysis, Study 4

Table 1.

## Results of messages pretested for use in study 2, study 3, and study 4

Brand Message	Self-Effacing		Self-Enhancing		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	M	SD	M	SD		
<i>Self-effacing messages</i>						
There are many brands just as good as ours. Click below to compare.	4.85	1.45	2.79	1.32	-4.87	.000
Many brands are similar to Aqin. We hope you give us a try to compare.	5.42	1.15	2.61	1.49	-7.15	.000
When you choose Aqin, you are choosing a good product.	4.29	1.13	3.29	1.48	-2.61	.013
You said it well: Aqin is okay, good, alright, and decent.	4.73	1.14	3.26	1.62	-4.00	.000
<i>Self-enhancing messages</i>						
Nobody does it better than us. Click below to find out why people can't stop saying Aqin is the best.	2.70	1.01	4.95	1.03	7.23	.000
The level of perfection that Aqin has reached is incomparable. There's simply is no other brand like ours.	2.40	1.30	5.30	1.35	6.95	.000
When you choose Aqin, you are choosing a perfect product.	2.46	1.39	5.47	1.38	7.26	.000
You said it best: Aqin is superb, marvelous, wonderful, and outstanding.	2.82	1.30	4.68	1.43	4.79	.000

Study 2 and study 3 used the first self-effacing and self-enhancing messages. Study 4 used the first and a modified version of the fourth self-effacing and self-enhancing messages.