

Misrepresentation in the Consumer Context

Jaideep Sengupta

*School of Business and Management
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology*

Darren W. Dahl

*School of Business and Management
University of Manitoba*

Gerald J. Gorn

*School of Business and Management
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology*

Research in social psychology suggests that motives such as self-bolstering and impression management can lead people to engage in deliberate misrepresentations during interpersonal communications. This article extends our understanding of such behavior to a new domain; that of consumer communications. Drawing on research on lying behavior and symbolic consumption, we suggest that misrepresentation about products and possessions is particularly likely to occur when these products or possessions are used to create a positive self-image in the context of social interaction. Experiments 1 and 2 simulate a social interaction wherein misrepresentation about the purchase price of a product helps participants to manage impressions. A third experiment extends these findings by testing for wealth-related misrepresentation in the context of an interaction wherein participants actually communicate their family's wealth to a recipient. Consistent with predictions derived from existing research on symbolic consumption, all 3 experiments provide support for the critical importance of recipient status on the likelihood of misrepresentation. The first 2 experiments additionally examine the role of individual differences and brand differences. Results on these dimensions are also supportive of our underlying theoretical premise regarding the antecedents of lying behavior.

Over the years, consumer researchers have investigated a number of interesting issues relating to word-of-mouth communications (e.g., Brown & Reingen, 1987; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). However, the possibility of misrepresentation in consumer communications has yet to be explored. For example, in talking to one another, consumers might misrepresent where they purchased the product, the quality of the product, whether they bought the product on a deal, and so forth. Consistent with research in psychology on the antecedents of lying behavior (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, & Wyer, 1996; Kashy & DePaulo, 1996), this article uses an impression

management perspective to examine the antecedents of such misrepresentation in consumer communications.

Although consumer misrepresentation can relate to various dimensions, we focus largely on its occurrence when discussing whether a product was purchased at a discount. The importance of studying this aspect of consumer communications is illustrated by research exploring word-of-mouth communication about various retail dimensions, which found that the most frequently discussed dimension related to whether products were available on deal (Higie, Feick, & Price, 1987). Thus, Experiments 1 and 2 of the current research simulate social interactions in which consumers might engage in deceptive communication about whether a product was purchased at a discount price or at the regular price. A third experiment then extends our findings by investigating misrepresentation about one's possessions in an actual, nonsimulated context. Results from all three experiments are supportive of our un-

derlying conceptualization of the antecedents of misrepresentation and provide some interesting insights into issues relating to interpersonal communications and symbolic consumption.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Recent research on lying in the context of interpersonal communications offers guidelines as to the likely antecedents of misrepresentation (DePaulo et al., 1996). According to this research, whereas everyday social intercourse typically entails some form of self-editing in order to emphasize features that are most relevant to a conversation, lying goes a step further in that there is conscious intent to mislead. In other words, lying can be thought of as an “extreme form of impression management that involves the deliberate fostering of a false impression” (DePaulo et al., p. 980). These extreme attempts at impression management seem to largely derive from a need to increase one’s self-esteem through misleading self-presentation. Thus, findings from DePaulo et al.’s (1996) studies, which used a diary method to document lying in everyday social intercourse, revealed that not only were most lies told to benefit oneself, a majority of such self-centered lies were told in the pursuit of “psychic rewards” such as esteem and respect. These lies helped the liar look better (e.g., kinder or smarter) than he or she actually was, or protected the liar from losing face or looking bad (see Turner, Edgely, & Olmstead, 1975, for similar findings regarding lying antecedents).

Findings from the social psychology literature thus imply that product-related consumer misrepresentation should be particularly likely to occur if such misrepresentation enables the consumer to create a positive impression, consequently boosting his or her self-image. Pertinently, researchers in the area of symbolic consumption have long suggested that various aspects of products and possessions contain symbolic meaning, and may therefore be used to express a particular self-image (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Belk 1981; Solomon 1983). Further, because observers have been shown to form impressions of others based on the possessions they own and the products they consume (Belk 1981; Mick 1986), judicious misrepresentation of symbolic product-related aspects should help in an impression management goal.

Although such misrepresentation may be a part of many different types of product-related communications, in Experiments 1 and 2 we look at a specific type of communication: namely, discussing the price paid for a discount purchase. Research has suggested that a high purchase price can serve as a positive symbol of prestige and status (Leigh & Gabel, 1992). On the other hand, being able to get a discount price for a product can also be associated with desirable images, such as being a “smart shopper” (Feick & Price, 1987; Schindler, 1998). Accordingly, it should be possible to create a positive impression (and enhance one’s self-image) by falsely reporting that a product was purchased at the regular price (when in fact it was purchased at a discount), or by falsely reporting that a product was pur-

chased at a discount (when in fact it was bought at the regular price). The former type of misrepresentation is explored in Experiment 1, and the latter in Experiment 2.

EXPERIMENT 1: CONCEALING A DISCOUNT PURCHASE

Research on symbolic consumption identifies three principal factors that exert an influence on the nature of a symbolic interaction (e.g., Solomon, 1983; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999): (a) the communicator (i.e., the individual consumer); (b) the communication recipient; and (c) the symbol itself (i.e., the product, and the symbolic meaning associated with it). Drawing on this research, we now formulate, hypotheses relating to the impact of these three factors on the likelihood of falsely concealing a discount purchase.

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

Prior research in social psychology has identified the impression management tendency as a key personality predictor of lying behavior (Kashy & DePaulo 1996). Like these authors, we seek to capture the impression management tendency through the public self-consciousness scale (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). People who are publicly self-conscious typically care more about what other people think, and are likely to want to create a good impression (Ickes, Reidhead, & Patterson, 1986). One of the ways in which they can do this is through lying. In the current context, given that a perception of a greater price paid can lead to positive impressions of status and prestige (Leigh & Gabel, 1992; Lichtenstein, Ridgway, & Netemeyer, 1993), we posit that public self-consciousness should be positively correlated with the likelihood that consumers will seek to convey a higher price than was actually paid, even at the cost of having to engage in misrepresentation. Formally,

- H1: The greater the tendency to manage impressions (as manifested by scores on a scale of public self-consciousness), the greater the likelihood that consumers will misrepresent the fact of having purchased the product at a discount.

Recipient Differences: The Effect of Status

Research on reference group influences suggests that a crucial factor that influences the salience of impression management concerns (and thus the likelihood of misrepresentation) has to do with the nature of salient referents (such as the recipient of the communication). In particular, an individual’s self-esteem can be reinforced through the ownership and conspicuous consumption of products that are typically associated with an admired person or

group (i.e., aspiration group), thus enabling the individual to identify with the aspiration group (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Lessig & Park, 1978). Because self-bolstering is a crucial antecedent of misrepresentation, we suggest that lying about a product-related aspect (such as price) is particularly likely to occur when doing so enables the communicator to identify with an admired and salient referent, such as the communication recipient.

In the context being studied, because the signal of a higher price having been paid for a product results in more positive perceptions of the communicator's status (Leigh & Gabel, 1992; Wright, Claiborne, & Sirgy, 1992), the deliberate concealment of a discount will help to convey the impression of a higher socio-economic status. Accordingly, we predict that consumers are more likely to conceal the fact of having purchased a product at a discount when communicating with a higher status recipient as compared to an equal status recipient, because lying to the former group will enable the communicator to identify with an aspired group. As explained below, however, this recipient effect should be moderated by a brand effect as well.

Brand Differences: The Effect Of Expensiveness

Although consumers should be more likely to conceal a discount price when communicating with people of higher status, such an effect should not be obtained for all brands. The positive impression sought to be conveyed by concealing a discount is one of higher wealth and status. Some brands are more likely to be used for such symbolic purposes than others, and it is for such brands that lying should be observed. In particular, research on product symbolism suggests that expensive brands (rather than nonexpensive brands) are more likely to be used to convey images of prestige and status (Leigh & Gabel, 1992; Wright et al., 1992). Accordingly, expensive brands are more likely to be a means of identifying with an aspiration group with higher status, whereas relatively inexpensive brands are unlikely to be used for such a purpose. We predict, therefore, that the effect of recipient status on the likelihood of concealing the discount should be moderated by brand expensiveness: Although such misrepresentation is more likely to take place when communicating with a person of higher perceived status, this effect should be limited to relatively expensive brands within a product category. Formally,

H2a: For a relatively expensive brand, consumers are more likely to misrepresent the fact of having purchased the brand at a discount when the recipient is perceived to be of a higher status than the communicator (versus equal status).

H2b: For a relatively inexpensive brand, the relative status of the recipient vis a vis the communicator should not

affect the likelihood of consumers' misrepresenting the fact of having purchased the brand at a discount.

Method

Our framework outlining the antecedents of lying behavior was tested in a 2×2 between-subjects experimental design. Eighty-eight undergraduate participants from a major Hong Kong university were randomly assigned to one of the four different conditions resulting from the combination of our two between-subject factors: the status of the recipient as compared to the communicator (equal vs. higher status) and the expensiveness of the brand (expensive vs. inexpensive).¹ Cell sizes ranged from 21 to 23.

Given the sensitive nature of the research (admissions of lying), wherein participants might not hide the discount price in any condition because of a desire to present themselves as being truthful, a third person scenario method was used in order to avoid socially desirable responses. Participants were presented with a written situation and were asked to relate the beliefs and attitudes of a third person (similar to themselves), rather than directly expressing personal beliefs and attitudes (Fisher, 1993; Kassarjian, 1974).

Manipulations. Appropriate manipulations for the experimental factors were identified through extensive pretesting. First, in light of the premise that product-related misrepresentation is more likely to occur in the context of symbolic consumption, we sought to identify a product category that does serve a symbolic purpose (i.e., is not solely functional), and is relevant to both males and females. A set of pretests revealed the following: (a) watches would be an appropriate product category for our subject pool, and (b) within watches, Rolex was perceived to be an expensive brand, while Swatch was perceived to be an inexpensive brand—both brands were highly familiar to respondents. Another set of pretests revealed that business executives working at prestigious local firms were admired and viewed to have high status, while undergraduate students at other universities were viewed as a peer group possessing equal status.

Procedure. Participants were first asked to read a short written scenario describing the actions of a fellow student at their University attending a University Open House event. The use of a fellow student as the protagonist was intended to enable the participants to relate to, and project themselves into, the situation described. The scenario used for the expen-

¹This study was initially part of a larger (between-subjects) design investigating additional phenomena. The results of the 2×2 design reported here remain unaltered when analyzed as part of the larger design.

sive brand–high-status recipient is provided in the following, with the other level of each factor (inexpensive brand–low-status recipient) specified in italics. In the actual scenario, “<school name>” was replaced by the name of the university where the research was conducted:

We would like you to imagine the following situation:

A student at <school name> is attending a University Open House event, to which many people from across Hong Kong have been invited. The student is in conversation with a few executives from a prestigious local firm (*few students from another local University*). The conversation turns to a new Rolex (*Swatch*) watch the <school name> student is wearing. One of the executives (*students from the other University*) comments on how nice the watch looks, and asks the <school name> student how much the watch had cost. The <school name> student had recently purchased the Rolex (*Swatch*) watch at a 20% discount off the regular price.²

Immediately following their reading of the above scenario, participants were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale whether they thought their fellow student would have a tendency to misrepresent the product’s discounted price. The seven scale categories were as follows: would be very likely to give the discount price (1), would be equally likely to give the discount price (2), would be somewhat likely to give the discount price (3), would be equally likely to give the discount price or the regular price (4), would be somewhat likely to give the regular price (5), would be likely to give the regular price (6), would be very likely to give the regular price (7). The likelihood of deliberate misrepresentation regarding the discount can be contrasted by comparing mean scores on this scale—higher numbers (lower likelihood of revealing the discount price) indicate a greater likelihood of misrepresentation. It should be noted that motivations such as a fear of social proscriptions against lying act as strong countervailing forces against a tendency to engage in deliberate misrepresentation. Thus, we do not expect to detect high absolute levels of misrepresentation. Rather, we are seeking to uncover conditions which make it relatively more likely that consumers will lie—or, in other words, less likely that they will tell the truth.

Following the misrepresentation measure, participants were also asked to complete a 7-item public self-consciousness scale (Fenigstein et al., 1975) as a measure of the impression management tendency. Scale items consisted of a statement (e.g., “I am concerned about what people think of me”, etc.) and a 7-point semantic differential scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*; $\alpha = .78$ for the seven scales). Next, participants rated the status of the two different communication recipients on a 7-point semantic differential scale ranging from 1 (*low status*) to 7 (*high status*). Similarly,

the prestige of the experimental brand was rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all prestigious*) to 7 (*very prestigious*). Subsequently, participants completed an open-ended question that asked them what they thought the study was about. Finally, they were asked to indicate their gender, age, area of study, approximate family income, their degree of liking or dislike for the product, and whether they actually owned the product—responses to these items had no effect on the results reported here and therefore are not discussed further.

Results

Manipulation checks

Confirming the effectiveness of the status manipulation, participants rated the status of the business executive significantly higher ($M = 4.95$) than the university students ($M = 4.06$, $t[87] = 6.89$, $p < .001$). As expected, Rolex was perceived to be more prestigious ($M = 5.95$) than Swatch ($M = 3.63$, $t[86] = 9.61$, $p < .001$) by the participants. Responses to the question related to the perceived purpose of the study suggested that no participants were aware of any of the experimental hypotheses, and none suspected that the study had anything to do with the symbolic nature of products.

Tests of hypotheses

H1: Individual differences. The first hypothesis suggested that the greater the individual’s tendency to manage impressions, the greater the likelihood of lying about whether the product was purchased on discount. Consistent with this hypothesis, there was a significant correlation between impression management tendencies (as measured by scores on the public self-consciousness scale) and the reported likelihood of misrepresentation ($r[88] = .231$, $p < .05$). Although this correlation is not high in absolute terms, it is comparable with equivalent correlations between lying and public self-consciousness obtained for two different samples (.122 and .262, respectively) in earlier research (Kashy & DePaulo, 1996).

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Misrepresentation:
Experiment 1

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

Note. Higher means indicate greater likelihood of misrepresentation.

²Focus group discussions indicated that a 20% discount would be perceived to be a “good deal.”

H2a and 2b: Recipient and brand differences. The second set of hypotheses was tested in the context of a full model analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) based on the 2 (recipient status: equal vs. higher than communicator) \times 2 (brand expensiveness: expensive vs. inexpensive) between-subjects experimental design, with the impression management score used as a covariate. Mean scores for misrepresentation along with standard deviations are presented in Table 1. As expected, the ANCOVA yielded a significant interaction effect for the two experimental factors, $F(1, 83) = 3.64, p < .05$. Further, the covariate was also shown to be significant, thus providing additional support for H1, $F(1, 83) = 4.97, p < .05$. None of the other effects from the overall ANCOVA attained significance.

Supporting H2a, a planned contrast indicated that for an expensive brand (Rolex), subjects were more likely to misrepresent the fact of having purchased the product on discount when the communication recipient was of higher status ($M = 4.09$) than equal status ($M = 3.05; t[87] = 1.90, p < .05$). On the other hand, consistent with H2b, a planned contrast suggested that for an inexpensive brand (Swatch), participants were equally likely to lie or tell the truth about having purchased the brand on discount irrespective of the relative status of the recipient relative to the communicator (M s: higher status = 3.22, equal status = 3.62, $t[87] = 0.79, p > .10$).

Discussion

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

A central assumption underlying the theoretical framework for Experiment 1 findings is that a high purchase price carries positive symbolic connotations. Consequently, concealing a discount price (and conveying a higher purchase price) enables the consumer to identify with the higher status aspiration group specified in the scenario, thus enhancing the consumer's self-image. However, conveying the impression of a high purchase price may not be the only way price information is used to create a positive image and bolster self-esteem. Recent research suggests that increasingly, the image of being a "smart shopper"—that is, someone who gets good value for money—is a desirable one (Higie et al., 1987; Feick & Price, 1987). If the desire to portray oneself as a smart shopper were to be made salient, this would clearly counteract the motivation

to conceal a discount price. Indeed, the salience of the smart shopper image may actually lead consumers to report that a product was purchased at a discount, even when the purchase had actually been made at the regular price.

EXPERIMENT 2: CONCEALING THE REGULAR PRICE

Experiment 2 focuses on the type of misrepresentation that occurs when consumers choose to conceal that a product was purchased at a regular price, reporting a discount price instead. Since reporting a discount purchase enables the communicator to present the image of a smart shopper who knows how to get a discount, we suggest that consumers will be motivated to engage in this type of lying when the value of smart shopping is made salient. Given the influence that the communication recipient can exert on the symbolic interaction, one way by which the importance of smart shopping can be highlighted is through the signals that the recipient may convey. In particular, the recipient might make an explicit statement asserting that the product can be bought at a discount. Once the value of smart shopping is made salient in this manner, the communicator can seek to enhance (or defend) his or her self-image by portraying himself or herself as being a smart shopper. This can be done by concealing the fact that the purchase was made at the regular price and falsely reporting that a discount price was paid.

As before, we hold that misrepresentation is a form of impression management. Accordingly, the impression management tendency should be a crucial antecedent of the tendency to engage in deliberate misrepresentation of the purchase price. Formally, in the particular context under study (in which the importance of smart shopping is made salient), we predict

- H3: The greater the tendency to manage impressions (as manifested by scores on a scale of public self-consciousness), the greater the likelihood that consumers will misrepresent the fact of having purchased the product at the regular price.

Recipient differences should also exert an influence on the likelihood of concealing the regular price. Consistent with our earlier theorizing, we propose that a key motivation for consumer misrepresentation is the desire to bolster self-esteem by identifying with an aspiration group. Earlier, we posited that deliberately concealing the fact of a discount purchase should enable the communicator to identify with a higher status aspiration group, because higher purchase price typically conveys the connotation of higher status. However, if the aspiration group (the communication recipient) explicitly highlights the importance of smart shopping, reporting a high purchase price should no longer facilitate identification with the recipient. Rather, such identification should be en-

hanced by the (false) claim that the brand was purchased at a discount price. This argument, in conjunction with our basic premise that misrepresentation is particularly likely to occur when it enables the communicator to identify with an aspiration group, leads to the prediction that misrepresentation regarding the regular price is more likely to occur when communicating with a higher-status (aspiration) recipient group rather than an equal-status (peer) recipient, when both recipient groups convey the same explicit signal regarding the value of smart shopping.

Whereas we expect recipient differences to parallel those observed in Experiment 1—namely, misrepresentation is more likely to be observed for the higher status recipient—we do not expect a moderating effect of brand expensiveness. In Experiment 1, we predicted that recipient differences in misrepresentation would only occur for the expensive brand, because such brands are likely to be used for the symbolic purpose of conveying high socioeconomic status—which was the image that was sought to be conveyed by misrepresentation. However, such is not the case with the image that is sought when concealing the regular price and falsely reporting a discount price. The motivation (to portray oneself as a smart shopper) that drives this type of lie should be just as salient for an inexpensive brand as it is for an expensive brand. Thus, for a context in which the importance of smart shopping is made explicit, we arrive at the following prediction:

- H4: Consumers are more likely to misrepresent the fact of having purchased the brand at the regular price when the recipient is perceived to be of a higher status than the communicator (versus equal status), irrespective of brand expensiveness.

Method and Results

Study 2 used the same 2×2 between-subjects experimental design as that used in Study 1. Ninety-eight undergraduate participants were randomly assigned to one of the four different experimental conditions. Cell sizes ranged from 23 to 26.

Procedure. Similar to Study 1, a scenario was used to describe the actions of a fellow student attending an open house event at the participants' university. One of the scenarios used in the study (higher status—expensive brand) is provided here, with the other levels of the factors in italics.

We would like you to imagine the following situation:

A student at <school name> is attending a University Open House event, to which many people from across Hong Kong have been invited. The student is in conversation with a few executives from a prestigious local firm (*a few students from another local University*). The conversation turns to a new

Rolex (*Swatch*) watch the <school name> student is wearing. One of the executives (*students from the other University*) mentions that this watch can be quite overpriced, but it can usually be found at about a 20% discount off the regular price. The executive (*student from the other University*) then asks the <school name> student whether the watch had been purchased at the regular price, or at a discount price. The <school name> student had recently purchased the Rolex (*Swatch*) watch at the full regular price.

After reading the scenario, participants were first asked to indicate on a 7-point scale whether they thought their fellow student would have a tendency to hide the fact that the product was purchased at a regular price, ranging from 1 (*would be very likely to give the regular price*) to 7 (*would be very likely to give a discount price*). Other measures were the same as in Study 1.

Results

Manipulation checks

As in Study 1, participants rated the status of the business executive significantly higher ($M = 5.07$) than the university students ($M = 4.19$, $t[97] = 6.10$, $p < .001$), and perceived Rolex to be more prestigious ($M = 6.19$) than Swatch ($M = 3.92$, $t[96] = 9.84$, $p < .001$). Further, no participants were aware of the experimental hypotheses, and none suspected that the study had anything to do with the symbolic nature of products.

Tests of hypotheses

H3: Impression management. The third hypothesis indicated that the greater the individual's tendency to manage impressions, the greater the likelihood of lying about whether the product was purchased at a regular price. Consistent with this hypothesis, a correlation analysis indicated a significant correlation between mean scores on the impression management inventory (Fenigstein et al., 1975) and the reported likelihood of misrepresentation ($r[98] = .184$, $p < .05$).

H4: Recipient differences. The fourth hypothesis was tested in the context of the full model ANCOVA based on the 2 (recipient status: equal vs. higher than communicator) \times 2 (brand expensiveness: expensive vs. inexpensive) between-subjects experimental design. As in Study 1, the mean score of the impression management inventory was included as a covariate. The covariate was shown to be significant, thus providing additional support for the third hypothesis, $F(1, 93) = 3.50$, $p < .05$.

H4 stated that, irrespective of brand expensiveness, when an explicit signal of valuing a smart shopping ability is indicated, consumers are more likely to falsely report a discount purchase if the recipient of the communication is of high status (versus equal status). Supporting this hypothesis, the ANOVA yielded only a significant main effect for the recipient factor (M s: high status = 4.02, equal status = 3.31, $F[1, 93] = 3.29, p < .05$). Mean scores for misrepresentation along with standard deviations are presented in Table 2.

Discussion

Experiment 2 investigated how the three factors specified earlier (impression management tendency, brand expensiveness, and recipient status) may affect the likelihood of consumers' concealing a regular price purchase and falsely reporting a discount purchase when the importance of smart shopping is highlighted. As in Experiment 1, higher impression managers were found to be more likely to engage in misrepresentation (falsely reporting a discount purchase), indicating that, under these specific conditions, portraying oneself as a smart shopper helps the communicator to convey a positive impression.

Unlike in Experiment 1, however, as predicted, the effect of recipient status on lying was not moderated by brand expensiveness. As discussed earlier, the rationale underlying the brand expensiveness effect in Experiment 1 (namely, that the deliberate inflation of purchase price to convey higher status is more likely to occur for the expensive brand, because these brands are more likely to be purchased to convey higher status in the first place) did not hold for the Experiment 2 context—thus, the lack of a brand effect in Experiment 2 is not surprising. However, one might also argue that consumers should derive greater satisfaction from being able to report a 20% discount off an expensive watch (such as Rolex) than a nonexpensive watch (Swatch), because the absolute savings amount would clearly be greater in the former case. This argument would predict a significant brand expensiveness effect for Experiment 2 as well, with greater misrepresentation

for the more expensive brand. The lack of such an effect leads to the speculation that the “smart shopper” image derives more from the percentage discount that the consumer is able to obtain off the list price, rather than the absolute amount of savings obtained. Clearly, however, a test of this speculation awaits further research.

Although the effect of brand expensiveness differed between Experiment 1 and Experiment 2, the effects of recipient status obtained in these two experiments are strikingly similar. In both cases, misrepresentation was more likely to occur for an aspirational (higher status) recipient group as compared to an equal status group, even though the nature of the lie in the two experiments was completely different (falsely reporting a regular price vs. falsely reporting a discount price). This commonality of results serves to illustrate the importance of aspiration group identification as an underlying motive for product-related impression management.

Importantly, Experiment 2 results also help to address a potential limitation of the rationale provided for Experiment 1 results. It could be argued that in the Experiment 1 scenario, communicators simply sought to achieve identification with whichever recipient group they were interacting with. When interacting with the higher status group, such identification may be achieved by conveying higher wealth (falsely reporting regular price), while such a lie may not be necessary in order to identify with the peer group. Thus, Experiment 1 results did not provide clear support for our basic premise that it is the wish to identify with an aspiration group that motivates consumers to engage in misrepresentation—these results could instead be explained by a motivation to simply identify with whatever recipient group one happens to be interacting with. Experiment 2 clarified this issue by ensuring that the two recipient groups both emphasized the same value (smart shopping); thereby differing only in their aspirational nature. If consumers are simply motivated by an urge to identify with the recipient group, equal degrees of lying should have been obtained in the two conditions. However, as described above, a greater likelihood of misrepresentation was obtained for the aspirational group, thus supporting our proposed mechanism.

Experiment 3 was carried out to extend our findings regarding reference group effects to a more general context than discount purchases. The notion that product features can contribute to self-image may be thought of as a specific instance of the broader proposition that possessions in general can influence self-image (Belk, 1988). Accordingly, just as people may lie about product-related aspects in order to bolster the self, such misrepresentation should also be observed for possessions that are tied closely to the self-image one wishes to portray. Specifically, an individual's wealth has been shown to be a key contributor to his or her self-image (e.g., Mason, 1992)—thus, in accordance with the premise that misrepresentation is likely to occur in the context of communications that are related to one's self-identity, we expect that misrepresentation may be observed in the context of wealth-related communications. As with reporting a higher

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations of Misrepresentation:
Experiment 2

Brand Expensiveness	Status Level of Communication Recipient			
	Equal Status (University Students)		High Status (Business Executives)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Expensive brand (Rolex)	3.26	1.84	4.04	1.97
Inexpensive brand (Swatch)	3.35	2.02	4.00	2.04

Note. Higher means indicate greater likelihood of misrepresentation.

price paid for a product, lying about one's wealth can help to convey a higher socioeconomic status. Therefore, people may be tempted to report a higher level of personal wealth in an attempt to identify with an aspiration group and boost their self-image. Experiment 3 was designed to test this prediction, using a direct technique in order to observe actual lying or misrepresentation, rather than the scenario method used thus far.

EXPERIMENT 3

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

In order to test this prediction, we first needed to create two recipient (confederate) descriptions: an aspirational (high-status) description, as well as a peer (equal-status) description. Because education and occupation are two important facets of socioeconomic status (Coleman, 1983; Gilbert & Kahl, 1982), status was manipulated on the basis of these two dimensions: The experimenter in the higher status condition was described more positively in terms of these two dimensions than in the equal status description.³ After extensive pretesting, the following descriptions were judged to be suitable, with the higher-status description rating higher than the equal-status description on both status and admiration, but not (as intended) on wealth:

"Higher-Status Description": Vivian did her undergraduate degree in Computer Science (Dean's List) at <school name>. She recently completed a special 1-year course in business management at Harvard University. Vivian comes from a wealthy family. Nevertheless, she wanted to fund her Harvard education by herself. She achieved this by winning a prestigious academic scholarship from Harvard which paid for all her expenses. Vivian obtained outstanding grades at Harvard. She has now been offered a permanent position with McKinsey as a marketing consultant. While she decides whether to take the job, Vivian is collaborating

with <school name> Marketing faculty on several market research projects.

"Equal-Status Description": Vivian did her undergraduate degree in Marketing at <school name>. Vivian comes from a wealthy family. They wanted to send her for a special 1-year course in business management at a private university in the United States, but Vivian's English is not very good. Because of her poor English, Vivian did not feel confident enough to go to school in the United States. Instead of going abroad, Vivian decided to look for a job in Hong Kong. Her work experience includes a sales position with Giordano. She is currently employed at <school name> as a research assistant. This job involves basic research activities such as running experiments and doing data entry.⁴

Method

Procedure and results. Forty-six undergraduate Marketing students at a major Hong Kong university were randomly assigned to one of two recipient conditions (admired/nonadmired), and studied one at a time. As each participant entered the lab, he or she was directed by the experimenter to "first read an *Introductory Note* before beginning the experiment." The note explained that, as a result of recent changes in experimental policies at the University, students participating in any experiment now had to be provided with some background details of the experimenter. In line with this regulation, the introductory note listed the experimenter's name, office phone number, email address, and finally, a brief biodata. The biodata contained one of the two experimenter descriptions pretested earlier.

After participants had finished reading the note, the experimenter told them that she needed to fill out some demographic details on a form she had with her, before proceeding to the main questionnaire. The experimenter then commenced by asking participants their age and writing down the answer on the form. The next question referred to the key dependent variable (wealth), and was asked as follows: "What is your best guess about how rich or poor your family is? The scale goes from 1 to 9, where 1 stands for poor and 9 for rich; please tell me which number I should circle for you."⁵ Following the wealth measure,

³Because wealth or income is another key component of socioeconomic status, our two descriptions could also have differed along this dimension. However, this would have introduced an alternate explanation for the predicted finding of greater reported wealth in the former condition. Specifically, a higher level of wealth might be reported in the "higher status/higher wealth" experimenter condition than in the "equal status/lower wealth" condition, not because of a desire to identify with an aspirational recipient per se, but rather because of a desire to identify with any recipient, irrespective of condition.

⁴The specific descriptions used were based on the perceptions of students at the University where this research was conducted, where for example, a major in Computer Science (Marketing) and Harvard (their own university) carried higher (lower) status connotations. Further, standards of spoken English were fairly low in our participant pool—thus, describing the experimenter as possessing poor English contributed to the "equal status" operationalization.

⁵Note that the wealth measure related to the family, instead of the individual. This was done for two reasons: First, for students, individual wealth is probably less salient than family wealth; and second, given the Confucian culture in which the study was run, the distinction between the family and the individual is unlikely to be a very marked one. Thus, the family's level of wealth is more likely to contribute to the individual's self-image in this culture than in more Western cultures (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998).

and after noting gender, the experimenter then handed out the “main” questionnaire booklet to the participant. This booklet, which was irrelevant to our experiment, asked participants to evaluate a new tennis racquet based on a product description. The final question in the booklet asked participants to indicate what, in their opinion, had been the purpose of the study. Only two participants mentioned that the experiment had something to do with how the experimenter description could influence other answers. These participants were not included in the analyses, although their inclusion did not change the results.

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

Supporting this prediction, participants exposed to the higher status (aspirational) description reported a higher wealth score ($M = 5.52$) than participants exposed to the equal status description ($M = 4.86$; $F[1, 42] = 4.01, p < .05$) as well as participants in the control group ($M = 4.88$; $F[1, 40] = 4.71, p < .05$). Further, the scores in the latter two conditions did not differ ($F < 1, ns$). These results support the idea that the equal status description did not cause participants to lie about their wealth; however, as predicted, the higher status description seems to have led participants to report inflated wealth scores.

Discussion

Results from Experiment 3 are supportive of our premise that the desire to seek identification with an aspirational reference group or person can be a key motivation for lying behavior in regard to one’s material possessions. Not only are findings from this experiment consistent with our earlier experiments depicting greater lying or misrepresentation to higher status groups rather than to those of equal status, they also extend our earlier results. The inclusion of a control group enables a measure of communications behavior in a context absent of a referent other. Comparisons between individuals in the control group and individuals exposed to the higher status manipulation show strong evidence of misrepresentation for the manipulated condition. Interestingly, however, those individuals exposed to the equal-status manipulation did not differ from the control group in terms of reported wealth. The match in the communications behavior of these two groups indicates

little if any effort to use lying in order to manage impressions toward an equal status reference group.

These results extend the domain of lying behavior from price-related communications to the more general domain of personal wealth. In light of our premise that lying is a way of boosting self-image, the findings provide support for Belk’s (1988) postulation that our possessions are intimately linked with our self-image—thus, communications regarding these possessions can reflect on our self-image. Finally, Experiment 3 depicts lying behavior using a direct method, rather than the indirect scenario technique used in the prior experiments. In doing so, this experiment provides a strong test of our propositions by placing experimental subjects in a real-world context, and demonstrating a lying pattern that matches the hypothesized effects.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

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

The similarity in the results obtained in our three experiments is not surprising in light of our underlying theoretical framework, which is based on DePaulo et al.’s (1996) investigation of lying behavior. According to this conceptualization, lying, or misrepresentation, is a form of impression management that springs from a need to bolster one’s self-image. Various streams of research on symbolic consumption suggest that consumers do indeed use products and possessions to create and convey a particular self-image. In particular, research on reference group influences indicates that one way of self-bolstering is through using the product (or possession) to associate oneself with an aspiration group. Based on this rationale, lying about a product-aspect (or about more general possessions, such as wealth) should be particularly likely to occur when such misrepresentation enables the communicator to achieve

identification with an admired referent group, that is also salient at the time (e.g., the communication recipient).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although these results are encouraging, they should be interpreted within the context of various limitations relating to the specific manipulations and methods employed in our studies, which also offer opportunities for future research. For instance, a limitation of this research has to do with the fact that results in the first two experiments are based on a single product category. As noted earlier, the product category (watches) was chosen for study in light of our basic premise that product-related lying is more likely to occur when the product is used for symbolic purposes—as is the case with conspicuous products (Bearden & Etzel, 1982) such as watches. A corollary to this premise is that misrepresentation about product aspects is less likely to occur for nonsymbolic product categories, a hypothesis that merits investigation in future research.⁶

Future research should examine the role of individual communicator differences in greater detail. Although this research found some evidence that product-related misrepresentation varies as a function of public self-consciousness, the absolute correlations obtained for this relationship were fairly small. A stronger relation between individual differences and lying behavior may be obtained if the particular personality variable selected for study bears a greater correspondence with the specific type of misrepresentation being studied. Thus, for instance, the product-related impression management scale, which measures the degree to which a consumer is prone to using product-related features for impression management purposes (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989) may be more predictive of product-related misrepresentation than the public self-consciousness scale used here. Similarly, the self-monitoring scale, which has been shown to have significant value in predicting consumer preferences for symbolic versus utilitarian products (Shavitt, Lowrey, & Han, 1992) might also be predictive of product-related lying. Future investigations in this area should study the effects of these personality differences on the likelihood of misrepresentation.

Finally, the results obtained in this research may be linked with the culture or country to which participants belonged. Research on the use of luxury goods has commented not only on the unprecedented demand for such goods in many Asian countries (including Hong Kong), but also on the different motivations for the use of luxury goods across cultures (Dubois & Laurent, 1994; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). It is possible that

Asians are likely to attach more positive connotations to the ownership of luxury brands, as compared to some of their Western counterparts (Wong & Ahuvia). Such cultural differences could well result in different findings being obtained in Western cultures compared to those documented here.

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

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⁶In fact, some data collected in the Experiment 1 context (not reported here for space considerations), revealed that for a nonsymbolic product (camcorders), there was very little concealing of the discount purchase irrespective of recipient status and brand expensiveness levels.

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