

Impression Management: Impression Conceptual Definition and Model

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Abstract: - This paper contains a conceptual definition of the impression and a conceptual model of the impression formation process and its place and role in a stakeholder's behavior in dealing with products, services or activities. The suggested system approach has been developed from a set of theories originating from decision theory, emotion theory, impression management theory, mathematical psychology and other areas. Assumptions constituting the concept are based on a synthesis and creative interpretation of conclusions found in literature and on the authors' intuition and observations. The approach of including a benchmark set consisting of a reference point, the psychological states of "improvement beyond this point has no additional value" and "completely unacceptable", distinguishes this model from mainstream emotion and impression theories.

Key Words: - impression, pre-emotions, decision theory, emotion theory, impression management theory

1 Introduction

Despite extensive range of literature on impression management theory there is a total lack of a commonly accepted definition, conceptualization and ontology of the term "impression".

The objective of the study is to apply a holistic approach to a set of theories from literature sources from different areas with the aim to construct a conceptual definition of impression and a conceptual model of the impression formation process.

2 Problem Formulation

An impression is a type of mental phenomena related to emotions. The Online Oxford Dictionary [1] defines an impression as "an idea, feeling, or opinion about something or someone, especially one formed without conscious thought or on the basis of little evidence". The aforementioned definition like many other definitions and explanations of impression formation process found in literature is too vague to be used in a research setting.

The same situation may be observed considering the term "emotion". A recent comprehensive overview [2] of the most prominent theories of emotions from both the psychological and philosophical literature shows dissenting views with

regard to the term "emotion" definitions, terms, taxonomy, causation, process description and other fundamental issues.

The authors suspect that this inconsistency and fragmentation of the knowledge are caused by the complexity of the research objects and point to different aspects of those objects.

3 Problem Solution

The literature ([2] - [13] and other sources) provides enough information to locate impression causes, consequences and place in the stakeholders' behavior.

The work [3] is selected as a basis for the conceptual definition of the impression formulation. In contrast to many other similar papers this work provides a holistic view and systematic taxonomy based on a set of theories of emotions and data from developmental psychology, neurobiology, evolutionary biology and sociology; it can "account for the unity of emotions as well as for the plurality of their appearances" [3]. This work will be referred to as "Developmental Account".

3.1 Definition of Impression

Developmental Account introduces "the four developmental stages for emotion: 1. pre-emotions

as unfocussed expressive emotions, 2. basic emotions, 3. primary cognitive emotions, and 4. secondary cognitive emotions which increase in complexity of the emotion patterns relative to the amount of relevant factors constituting them, especially concerning the cognitive content for stages three and four.”

Pre-emotion is not a complicated concept, it’s simply the emotion that we feel at the beginning or before we make a decision. Developmental Account defines pre-emotions as follows: “The first stage of unfocussed Expressive Emotions is constituted by innate pre-forms of emotions, which are not immediate biological reflex reaction programs, but concern expressive interactive behavior. There are two basic non-intentional and unspecific emotional responses of an infant to situations in his environment which are not yet further discerned or subclassified than as being either generally positive or negative. This stands in contrast to the felt body-states which are reactions specific to fine-grained situation input types. The two distinguishable pre-emotions that are not yet specific emotional reaction types are comfort and distress. The pre-emotional stage is thus characterized by just two emotions that enable an infant to make a simple positive–negative distinction in the general and unfocussed evaluation of a given situation. The properties of emotional response are exhibited: physiological arousal, automatic appraisal, physiognomic expression, emotion feeling, interactive orientation enabling more flexible reactions to demanding situations than those of the felt body-states.”

Short explanations of other developmental stages for emotion (borrowed from Developmental Account) are as follows:

- Basic emotions are comprised of fear, anger, sadness, and joy.
- Primary cognitive emotions comprise the first stage of emotions in which a minimal set of cognitive content is present in an emotional pattern.
- Secondary cognitive emotions are the high-level cognitive emotions. This is the stage in which the most complex emotion concepts are exhibited. They are thus complex emotions dependent on cultural information and personal experience. Secondary cognitive emotions develop within the four dimensions of the basic emotions.

Developmental Account provides an example of emotions as constituted by patterns of emotion types: “Once a higher stage is reached, the previous ones can nevertheless be (non-simultaneously)

exhibited; adults thus can have emotions of all four developmental degrees. Take, for instance, an adult walking in a park in a strange and unacquainted area. First, she may experience an unspecific distress that is then replaced by a specific fear of the gloomy guys lingering in the shadow at the next corner.”

According the authors’ initial assumptions, the definition of the term “impression” could be substituted with the definition of “pre-emotions” in the context of current research with precision sufficient for practical purposes. The term “impression” is kept rather than replacing it with the term “pre-emotions” in order to avoid specific psychological terminology usage in a paper dealing with management issues; the term “impression” is more familiar for this paper’s potential audience.

3.2 Impression model

In the following subsection impression’s place and role in a stakeholders’ behavior in dealing with products, services or activities will be discussed. This model is shown in Figure 1. The explanation is based on a synthesis and creative interpretation of conclusions found in the literature ([2] - [13] and other sources) and also on the authors’ observations.

Stimuli are aspects of products, services or activities design and implementation as well as events in the internal and external environment that influence a person’s behavior.

Benchmarks are aggregated data objects which don’t influence a person’s behavior by themselves. Each benchmark has several properties related to an individual’s mental representation of subaggregated important negative and positive aspects of a respective psychological state. Those properties provide background information for stimuli evaluation in the context of a current situation.

Stimuli and benchmarks provide inputs which raise several parallel conscious and subconscious processes in the stakeholder’s mind. The quickest and first process is the impression formation. This statement correlates with the widely cited part of Daniel Goleman’s fundamental work “Emotional Intelligence” [13]: “Other research has shown that in the first few milliseconds of our perceiving something we not only unconsciously comprehend what it is, but decide whether we like it or not; the “cognitive unconscious” presents our awareness with not just the identity of what we see, but an opinion about it.”

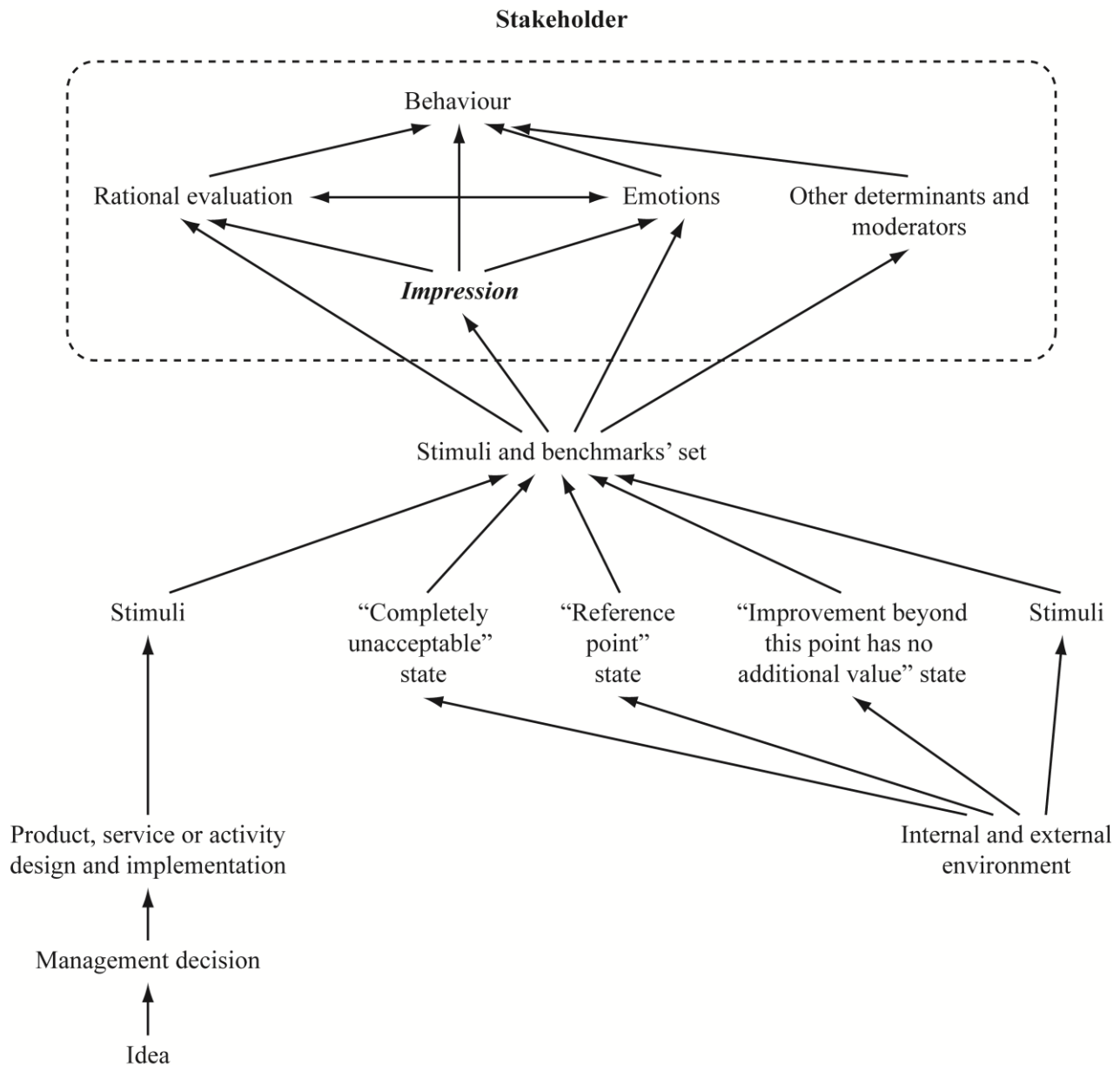


Fig. 1. Simplified workflow of product (service, activity) and the origin of a stakeholder's behavior

The impression formation process provides an output as an evaluation of a given situation in terms of “positive–negative” or states in between, including the neutral one. As it is shown in Figure 1, the output of an impression in some cases (when impression intensity is higher than a predetermined threshold) could provide an immediate impact on our behavior (just imagine your immediate reaction when you are walking in the street and behind the building corner you catch a glimpse of a lion...) or could act as one of the inputs for rational (cognitive) evaluation and emotion process.

Impression has a very specific and exclusive role in the rational (cognitive) evaluation and emotions process: “emotional reactions are not just another input into the evaluation of an alternative; they

occur before a summary evaluation and determine which alternatives remain in the choice set that is evaluated” [6]. Thus, impression provides an initial frame, within which the decision process occurs, for this reason, impression evaluation is important in management practice.

During the subsequent appraisal processes, mutual interference between rational (cognitive) evaluation and different stages of emotions (see previous section) occurs. Of course, those processes are affected by many other determinants and moderators, for example: desire, personality, social influence, facilitating conditions, gender, age, voluntariness of use, obligations, liabilities, sense of duty, mental state, enforcement, awareness, etc. As a result the final decision and real behavior could be

determined by the multifactor appraisal processes approximate equilibrium after several iterations. It could be the case that the combinations of internal and external inputs are too inconsistent, as such the approximate equilibrium couldn't be achieved and the decision couldn't be made without additional stimuli from the external environment. Sometimes this decision making process could go into an infinite loop: such cases are familiar to mental health specialists.

The above-mentioned benchmark set includes the following benchmarks:

- The reference point.
- Psychological state “improvement beyond this point has no additional value”.
- Psychological state “completely unacceptable”.

The concept of the reference point is one of the most important in the Prospect Theory [7]. The essence of the Prospect Theory is the acknowledgement that our evaluation of an activity depends on the direction and value of changes this activity makes relative to a reference point that defines zero on our personal gain-loss scale, rather than from the objective value of the results this activity brings. Kahneman and Tversky [7] illustrated this phenomenon with the following thought: “The same level of wealth, for example, may imply abject poverty for one person and great riches for another – depending on their current assets”. This acknowledgement could be fully applied to impression formation process.

In the prevailing number of cases the reference point is the status quo, but in every case the reference point should be chosen individually. The reference point could be one of or a combination of the following parameters [6]:

- A state to which one has adapted.
- A set of social norms and expectations.
- A level of aspirations.
- The status quo.

The impression formation process correlates with the meaning of desirability. We assume the desirability evaluation as an important part of the impression formation process. The Desirability function, first introduced by Harrington [5] in 1965, provides a psychologically realistic desirability evaluation and has passed the test of time. According to the above-mentioned work, the psychological states “improvement beyond this point has no additional value” and “completely unacceptable” are included in an individual's benchmark set as they provide the parameters necessary for desirability evaluation. The definitions

of the aforementioned extreme psychological states are developed in the context of current research as follows:

- Psychological state “improvement beyond this point has no additional value” is a situation without any losses and with maximum gains.
- Psychological state “completely unacceptable” is a situation with maximum losses and without any gains.

It is commonly known that impressions, especially the first one, are long lasting. In the case of a dissonance between an impression and real behavior the result over a long period of time is not predictable: we can't speak about a sustainable situation. According to our conclusions, impressions could determine a frame for about 80% (by Pareto Principle) of what people will actually tend to do. With relation to such situations Rudolfs Blaumanis, one of the greatest writers in the Latvian history, wrote [14]: "... feelings easily climb over the fence, built by the mind".

4 Conclusion

The summary of the aforementioned discussion is as follows:

- Impression occurs as the first and quick stage in the decision making process.
- Impression provides a frame within the later decision process, but sometimes the final decision and real behavior could appear outside the initial frame provided by an impression.
- Definition of impression is close to the definition of “pre-emotions” provided in [3] in the context of current research with the degree of precision sufficient for practical purposes.
- Stakeholders' impression depends on stimuli and a benchmark set.

The approach of including the benchmark set, consisting of the reference point, psychological states “improvement beyond this point has no additional value” and “completely unacceptable” distinguishes this model from mainstream emotion and impression theories.

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