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One's Actions "Aging Poorly": An Integrative Egocentric Framework for Understanding Impression Management Errors and the Challenge of Temporal Impression Management

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Abstract

Academic Abstract

Why do people struggle to make positive impressions? Indeed, there are now many documented impression *mis*management effects across the psychological literature, highlighting many ways in which actors make negative impressions on observers despite intending to make positive ones. In this article, we use the process model of egocentrism (i.e., people's tendencies to take others' perspectives by first anchoring on—then insufficiently adjusting from—their own perspective) to integrate and understand actors' errors under a single parsimonious conceptual framework. We then use this framework to advance the literature, highlighting how the same logic of egocentric anchoring and adjustment can help shine novel light on the challenge of *temporal* impression management—that is, how present actors may mistakenly behave in ways that future observers deem negative, even if present observers deem them positive (i.e., one's actions "aging poorly"). We review and integrate diverse support for these ideas and highlight novel research directions.

Public Abstract

This article highlights how people over-attend to their own present states when trying to make positive impressions on others, explaining why people struggle to make them. This problem grows worse over time, leading people to neglect how their present actions might "age poorly" into the future. Strategies that target people's temporal thinking can therefore help people better navigate today's rapidly changing informational landscape. Indeed, the notion of "aging poorly" is of increasing real-world relevance and concern (e.g., in today's online contexts, whereby actors leave concrete digital footprints of their present actions for future observers to discover and judge anew)—this article provides a framework for understanding these issues (e.g., who is more vs. less prone to acting in ways that "age poorly," and when and why is this the case?) and generates a research agenda for studying them, which includes how actors can better navigate their temporal impressions moving forward.

Keywords

egocentrism, self over time, cultural change, social impressions, social cognition

> "It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever."
>
> —Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969, p. 26)

People make negative impressions on others despite intending to make positive ones. Why? The goal of the current article is to help answer this question and provide a unifying framework for enriching the psychological study of it. As we will propose and review, the current article will uniquely highlight the rich temporal dynamics underlying this question—cases in which people in fact succeed in making positive impressions *now*, yet find that those impressions

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turn negative *later*, despite no behavior change (i.e., one's actions "aging poorly").

To accomplish this goal, we will use the process model of egocentrism to organize and advance the existing literature on impression management and impression management errors. Egocentrism is a model of perspective taking that proposes actors take observers' perspectives by first anchoring on—and then insufficiently adjusting from—their own perspective. As we will propose and review, many impression mismanagement effects scattered throughout the literature can be parsimoniously integrated under this umbrella of egocentrism; impression management is a perspective-taking exercise whereby actors' reliance on egocentrism can often lead them astray.

Part I of this article (Organizing the Literature) provides an integrative review of such effects to establish this egocentric framework for understanding impression management errors.

Part II (Advancing the Literature) then uses this egocentric framework to advance theory on impression mismanagement—which traditionally has focused on *temporally immediate* contexts (e.g., present actors being judged by present observers). Yet actors also make errors that only reveal themselves as errors *later* (e.g., present actors being judged by future observers, who look back at actors' actions through evolved social contexts)—at important later costs (e.g., actors may end up causing harm to observers, face unforeseen stigma, experience regret, and so forth). An egocentric framework can accommodate and explain such temporal errors, following the same logic: People anchor on present others when thinking about future others, such that they view the future judgment of their present actions as being overly similar to present judgment—and so assume to act just the same, underappreciating how their present actions can "age poorly."

Part III then highlights new directions for research on this notion of *temporal* impression management—how actors do versus do not consider the lasting nature of their present actions and the full extent of future change that can recontextualize them. This is a growing issue in today's rapidly changing informational landscape, where actors leave concrete digital footprints of their present actions for future observers to discover and judge anew. As Nolan and Lenski (2011, p. xiii) put: "Change—extremely rapid social change—is the most important fact of life today" (see also Gelfand et al., 2024). If actors tend not to fully account for temporal aging before they act in the present, such a tendency indeed poses problems that extend to anyone who seeks to make lasting positive impressions. It can lead people to undermine their reputations and struggle to maintain them. It can also lead people to underappreciate how their present actions can impact others differently now versus later, in ways that can cause inadvertent harm to others down the road.

This notion of "aging poorly" is of increasing real-world concern, yet more research in psychology is needed for discussing and making sense of it under a single parsimonious conceptual framework (e.g., who is more vs. less prone to acting in ways that may "age poorly," and when and why is this the case?). The current article helps provide such a framework and reviews integrative support for it.

Part I: Organizing Impression (Mis)Management Around Egocentrism

Making Positive Impressions

People often want to convey positive impressions to others (e.g., to be liked, respected). A large literature on impression management highlights how actors tailor their actions toward this goal (for reviews, see Goffman, 1959; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980). Actors do this in deliberate, premeditated ways (e.g., planning what to wear at a job interview) as well as in more automatic, spontaneous ways (e.g., smiling upon greeting the interviewer). The impression management literature tends to treat both forms as manifestations of impression management (though some models emphasize one more than the other), which we will do too. Actors are generally attuned to observers' possible responses to their actions, and actors often operate in ways that may prompt favorable ones (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 2003).

Actors' success at conveying positive impressions has many benefits. While one might think that successful impression management lures actors toward manipulative deception, doing it well is seen as an alignment between self and others, as similar core values are usually shared between actors and the groups they seek to impress (Tetlock & Manstead, 1985). Schlenker and Pontari (2000) argue at length that impression management is a fundamental aspect of all social behavior that is neither duplicitous nor selfish. Getting it right matters. Alas, actors regularly get it wrong, such that actors make negative impressions on observers despite intending to make positive impressions—dubbed impression *mis*management (Sezer, 2022; Steinmetz et al., 2017).

To be clear, people do not always care about making positive impressions. Bad actors can simply act selfishly (Galinsky et al., 2006), and good actors can simply act in ways they privately value (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Bodner & Prelec, 2003). People can also have other kinds of impression management goals, like for others to see them as they see themselves (authenticity signaling: Schlenker, 2003; Swann, 2012) or to make impressions for instrumental means (Fontana et al., 1968). In such cases, observers may judge actors negatively—but note that we cannot claim actors are "erring" here since being judged positively is not their intent. Instead, the current article focuses on cases in which actors want to make positive impressions—which, for ease moving forward, we simply refer to as actors engaging in impression management—and conditional on this assumption, the goal of this article is to model the actor's thought process.

This is no small assumption. People, after all, are "by nature a social animal" (Aristotle, *Politics*, 328 BC) who possess evolved motivations to connect with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Manrique et al., 2021; Nowak & Sigmund, 1998; G. Roberts et al., 2021). Engaging in impression management helps serve these motivations (Bolino et al., 2008; Jones, 1964). The behavioral evidence for this kind of impression management is vast. For example, people choose to complete well mastered (vs. newly learned) tasks in the company of comparatively relevant (vs. irrelevant) peers (Goffman, 1959; Good & Shaw, 2021; Sedikides et al., 1998; Urdan & Midgley, 2001); they tailor their declared interests to present (vs. absent) conversation partners (Altman & Taylor, 1973; DePaulo et al., 1996; Jones & Pittman, 1982); they claim allyship with others after others succeed (vs. fail: Cialdini & Richardson, 1980); and they suppress negative (vs. positive) habits and emotions in public (vs. private), especially in self-promotion settings (Baumeister, 1982; Eskreis-Winkler & Fishbach, 2020; Hewitt et al., 2003; Jordan et al., 2011). A large literature in behavioral economics relatedly finds that indirect reciprocity—a form of impression management whereby Person A chooses to help Person B, so that Person C might choose to help Person A—guides when people cooperate and act prosocially (Gallo & Yan, 2015; Gross & De Dreu, 2019; Nowak & Sigmund, 1998; Rand & Nowak, 2013; G. Roberts et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2021). Players in economic games help more when others are (vs. are not) watching (Harbaugh, 1998; Inagaki & Orehek, 2017), act more fairly across repeated (vs. one-shot) trials (Gintis et al., 2001; Milinski et al., 2002), and issue more punishment when doing so can signal high (vs. low) ingroup loyalty (Cushman et al., 2021; Jordan & Rand, 2020).

This kind of impression management is also psychologically ubiquitous. While such behaviors are generally more pronounced within individualistic (vs. collectivistic) cultures (Henrich et al., 2010; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Tracy & Matsumoto, 2008), they exist in both (Sedikides et al., 2003). Moreover, such behaviors develop early, by about age 5 (Banerjee et al., 2020; Good & Shaw, 2021; Silver & Shaw, 2018). For example, 5-year-olds become more likely to share toys when they are monitored by adults (Leimgruber et al., 2012) and when they can be seen by their peers who are (vs. are not) capable of repaying the favor (Engelmann et al., 2013).

When and Why Do Actors Err? An Egocentrism Account of Impression (Mis)Management and an Integrative Review of the Evidence

When and why do actors err in their goal to make positive impressions? Existing theory on impression management is quite broad on this front and often posits something like actor–observer distance, implicating actors' *impression motivations* to get it right as a generally accommodating answer (for two prominent examples of this theorizing, see Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980). When observers are immediate to actors (i.e., the more observers bear on actors' goals), actors are motivated to manage their impressions and can succeed. When observers are distant to actors (i.e., the less observers bear on actors' goals), actors are not so motivated to manage their impressions and are prone to making impression management errors.

Following this broad theorizing, many experiments indeed document the act of actors making impression management errors (Sezer, 2022; Steinmetz et al., 2017)—but they often do so without linking such effects under a single specific process model. Whenever there is actor–observer distance, participants are shown to guess incorrectly in different ways depending on the research topic (e.g., they underestimate X in one paper, they overestimate Y in another paper).

One way to organize these varied impression mismanagement effects, and provide more theoretical precision into how actors are actually thinking that may cause them to err, is through the lens of *egocentrism*. Egocentrism is a prominent process model of perspective taking—and note that impression management is essentially a perspective-taking exercise, whereby the actor must first calculate what "positive" means in the eyes of the observer (and then act accordingly). Some degree of guessing in this way presumably applies to nearly all impression management situations that actors find themselves in. As such, it may be a fruitful exercise to apply the logic of egocentrism toward understanding when and why actors make impression management errors.

Specifically, egocentrism refers to actors' tendencies to base their calculations of observers' perspectives on *their own* perspective (Nickerson, 1999). Relying on egocentric reasoning is useful when actors and observers share access to similar information (Hoch, 1987). More commonly, however, relying on egocentric reasoning can distort actors' perceptions of observers' actual perspectives (Birch & Bloom, 2007; Camerer et al., 1989; Campbell et al., 2014; Ross et al., 1977; Ross & Ward, 1996; Van Boven et al., 2013). For example, consider the "spotlight effect." The spotlight effect refers to the tendency for actors to overestimate the extent to which their actions are literally noticed by observers. This distorted inference is driven by actors' egocentric reasoning, stemming from the fact that actors' own actions are more salient in their own minds than they are to observers (Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999; Gilovich et al., 2000).

Like research on impression management, research on egocentrism assumes there is psychological distance between actors and observers—again, an actor's own self-perspective is inherently more immediate to them than anyone else's perspective is. Adding to research on impression management, it further proposes a *specific way* in which actors work to traverse this distance: via a process of anchoring and adjustment (for reviews, see Ames, 2004; Epley et al., 2004; Nickerson, 1999). When an actor tries to take the perspective of an observer, they first focus on the information that is

most salient to them—that is, *their own* perspective (anchoring). The actor then looks for any available knowledge about the observer to suggest the observer may view things differently, and incorporates that knowledge into their perspective-taking calculation (adjustment). For example, when a person is trying to figure out what an out-of-town friend may enjoy while visiting, the person may start by bringing to mind the salient anchor of their own personal favorites (e.g., "I bet they'll love my favorite café!")—and then adjust from the anchor depending on what they know about the friend (e.g., "Well, I know they're more of a tea person than a coffee person, and this is a coffee-centric café. . .maybe this isn't the best option"). The rub is that people tend to adjust insufficiently due to the anchor's salience (e.g., ". . .But I still think they'll like *this* café, though!"). Indeed, actors' reliance on egocentric reasoning is negatively correlated with their explicit individuating knowledge of observers' reactions—with the "error" being that actors assume their egocentric anchor is nonetheless a sufficient substitute (Ames, 2004; Epley et al., 2004; O'Brien & Ellsworth, 2012a; Robbins & Krueger, 2005; Vazire, 2010).

This process model of egocentric anchoring and adjustment offers a conceptual umbrella for organizing impression management errors. Put simply, it predicts that actors should be more likely to make impression management errors whenever anchoring is easy and adjusting is hard.

Our reading of the egocentrism literature is that it often highlights two broad classes of inputs that feed into easy anchoring and hard adjusting: Actors tend to insufficiently adjust from their anchor, and thereby are more prone to making perspective taking errors, when (a) observers are unfamiliar (vs. familiar) to actors, and/or when (b) observers are cognitively demanding (vs. undemanding) for actors to process. As such, the same effects should be found in the impression management literature. Actors should be more likely to make impression management errors when observers are unfamiliar and/or when observers are cognitively demanding to process—in which cases actors should become more prone to making impression management errors, such that actors over-assume similarity between their own perspective and observers' perspectives.

This is the case. Below, we review evidence for this idea that many impression mismanagement effects can be organized around the process model of egocentrism. We review how actors err more when (a) observers are unfamiliar (vs. familiar) to actors, and/or when (b) observers are cognitively demanding (vs. undemanding) for actors to process. Consistent with egocentrism, actors are found to err essentially whenever anchoring is easy and adjusting is hard.

Actors Err More When Observers are Unfamiliar (vs. Familiar) to Actors—Consistent With Egocentrism. Numerous impression mismanagement effects can be explained by such a reliance on egocentric reasoning, leading actors to over-broadcast their own "likes" and under-broadcast their own "dislikes" during interactions that entail easy anchoring and hard adjusting—such as when actors interact with unfamiliar observers (e.g., strangers) versus familiar ones (e.g., friends).

In terms of actors over-broadcasting their own "likes," studies in this literature have instructed participants to craft personal profiles and conversation topics in ways they think will most impress a new lab partner when paired up to chat. A consistent finding is that participants predict these others will be most impressed by whatever they themselves are most impressed by (e.g., actors imagining observers: "They'll love hearing about my epic vacation!"), and so they broadcast those features (e.g., actors add that vacation story to their list of conversation topics)—even when doing so worsens others' impressions (e.g., observers reacting to actors: "What a braggart!": Li et al., 2023; Cooney et al., 2014; Scopelliti et al., 2015). Similar inferences guide actors' excessive communication of positive self-traits (Weaver et al., 2012) and misuse of self-deprecating humor (O'Donnell et al., 2016) and back-handed compliments (Sezer et al., 2019).

In terms of actors under-broadcasting their own "dislikes," actors are found to hide goal failures from new lab partners (for example) because they worry such observers would react harshly to these self-felt embarrassments—even when observers react kindly (Brooks et al., 2019; John et al., 2016; Klein & O'Brien, 2017; Steinmetz, 2018). Research on conversations finds that actors withhold personal details they worry will make them look bad, and generally avoid conversations with strangers and end them quickly (Epley & Schroeder, 2014; Kardas et al., 2022)—yet observers judge actors more positively when actors instead share personal details and stick around to chat more (Collins & Miller, 1994; Kardas et al., 2022; Leary et al., 1986).

More generally, other findings suggest actors default to drawing on their own private lay beliefs when working to impress novel or otherwise unknown observers. For example, actors commonly face decisions to impress strangers by signaling either their horizontal prowess (e.g., warmth) or their vertical prowess (e.g., competence). Actors tend to choose horizontal signaling, based on their own private lay belief that people prefer interacting with others who possess such traits (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Hauke & Abele, 2020; Ybarra et al., 2012)—critically, actors do this even when it is erroneous. For example, actors use impression management tactics like ingratiation (e.g., offering favors and flattery) and paternalistic protection (e.g., hiding enviable news) even though observers often dislike such tactics (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Liu et al., 2014; A. R. Roberts et al., 2021). In a field study that assessed a real-world competitive job interview (Stevens & Kristof, 1995), interviewees' straightforward tactic to directly promote themselves was found to be a stronger independent predictor of successful interview outcomes as compared to interviewees' tactic of ingratiation—however, on average, interviewees utilized a mix of these tactics. Actors' default reliance on horizontal signaling in this way

can lead them to mistakenly dilute their self-promotions (e.g., by downplaying their achievements [O'Donnell et al., 2016]; by "humblebragging" rather than simply communicating news of their success as is [Sezer et al., 2018]; for reviews, see Chaudhry & Loewenstein, 2019; Sezer, 2022).

Finally, spanning across such findings, actors have been found to make correspondingly fewer impression management errors when adjusting is easier, whereby actors possess clearer knowledge of the observer's preferences (as opposed to guessing about less known observers, e.g., a new lab partner). For example, actors are less likely to over-broadcast their own "likes" when they interact with friends rather than strangers, and so make fewer impression management errors (e.g., successfully appearing more modest: Tice et al., 1995). Likewise, interventions that alert actors to the fact that things look differently through an observer's eyes (and that specify how exactly they look differently) indeed lead actors to account for them when engaging in impression management, and in turn they err less (e.g., they choose to advertise more observer-centric observations and preferences, leading those observers to like them more: Li et al., 2023).

Actors Err More When Observers Are Cognitively Demanding (vs. Undemanding) for Actors to Process—Consistent With Egocentrism. Another source of actors' erroneous impression management is highlighted by more transient situational states that work against actors' perspective-taking abilities—all of which, in effect, render anchoring easy and adjusting hard.

Successful impression management requires self-regulatory resources (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Situational constraints on actors' available resources should therefore lead actors to make more impression management errors—and they do (for reviews, see DePaulo et al., 1987; Uziel, 2010). For example, in one series of studies (Vohs et al., 2005), participants first completed tasks designed to be psychologically taxing (e.g., in one study, the Stroop task; in another study, an emotion-suppression task), then completed impression management tasks (e.g., chatting with a stranger). As compared to no-taxing-tasks control participants, these participants ended up making more impression management errors (e.g., talking about more boring topics). In another series of studies (Lalwani, 2009), participants were randomly assigned to complete impression management survey items while put under high versus low cognitive load; the former participants responded in ways that made them look worse. Providing parallel evidence, it has also been shown that the mere act of engaging in impression management is itself psychologically taxing and undermines actors' performance on subsequent unrelated tasks (Critcher & Ferguson, 2014; Karremans et al., 2009; Slepian et al., 2012).

This same logic can be applied from an individual-difference perspective as well. That is, other findings highlight how actors' individual differences in perspective-taking abilities—which again, in effect, render adjusting hard—are associated with erroneous impression management. For example, actors with lower trait self-awareness and self-monitoring tendencies tend to make more impression management errors (Harris et al., 2007; Turnley & Bolino, 2001). Actors with higher trait social anxiety also tend to make more impression management errors (Schlenker & Leary, 1982), as this can heighten actors' self-focus to such a degree that it can blind them to relevant observer cues (Tissera et al., 2021). Similar links are found between actors' impression management abilities and actors' differences in neuroticism (more neurotic actors tend to err more: Peeters & Lievens, 2006), introversion (more introverted actors tend to err more: Lee et al., 2014), self-esteem (lower self-esteem actors tend to err more: Riggio et al., 1990), and depressive tendencies (more depressed actors tend to err more: Segrin, 2000). Steinmetz et al. (2017) review other such individual differences that are further consistent with a process of egocentric anchoring and insufficient adjustment (e.g., more narcissistic actors tend to err more).

Finally, research on the "multiple audience problem" also bears on this point. The multiple audience problem refers to self-presentation situations in which actors must convey different impressions to different observers simultaneously (e.g., consider being caught at a social event that includes one's partygoing friend as well as one's stern boss), which can be difficult for actors to navigate (Binder et al., 2009; Fleming, 1994; Leary & Allen, 2011). The presence of different additional observers impedes actors' abilities to think carefully about any one observer's view, increasing actors' likelihood of making impression management errors. Despite this challenge, actors are found to be overconfident in their abilities to navigate the multiple audience problem, driven by a "misalignment between actual and perceived shared knowledge" held among actors toward observers (Van Boven et al., 2000, p. 620)—which, stated differently, represents another example of the process model of egocentrism as proposed here.

To sum Part I: Existing effects converge to paint impression management as an actor-focused process of perspective taking, whereby the actor first tries to calculate what a target observer will find favorable (then acts accordingly). In this way, many impression management errors can be parsimoniously understood as a function of the process of egocentric anchoring and adjustment. Conditions that amplify actors' reliance on egocentric reasoning (i.e., conditions that make for easy anchoring and hard adjusting) increase actors' proneness to making impression management errors. Many existing impression mismanagement effects can be understood under this umbrella of egocentrism. Actors engaging in impression management bring to mind what *they themselves* prefer, then over-anchor on this self-state when trying to discern what observers might prefer (e.g., "I'd react like this, so you will react the same")—namely when (a) observers are unfamiliar (vs. familiar) to actors, and/or when (b) observers are cognitively demanding (vs. undemanding)

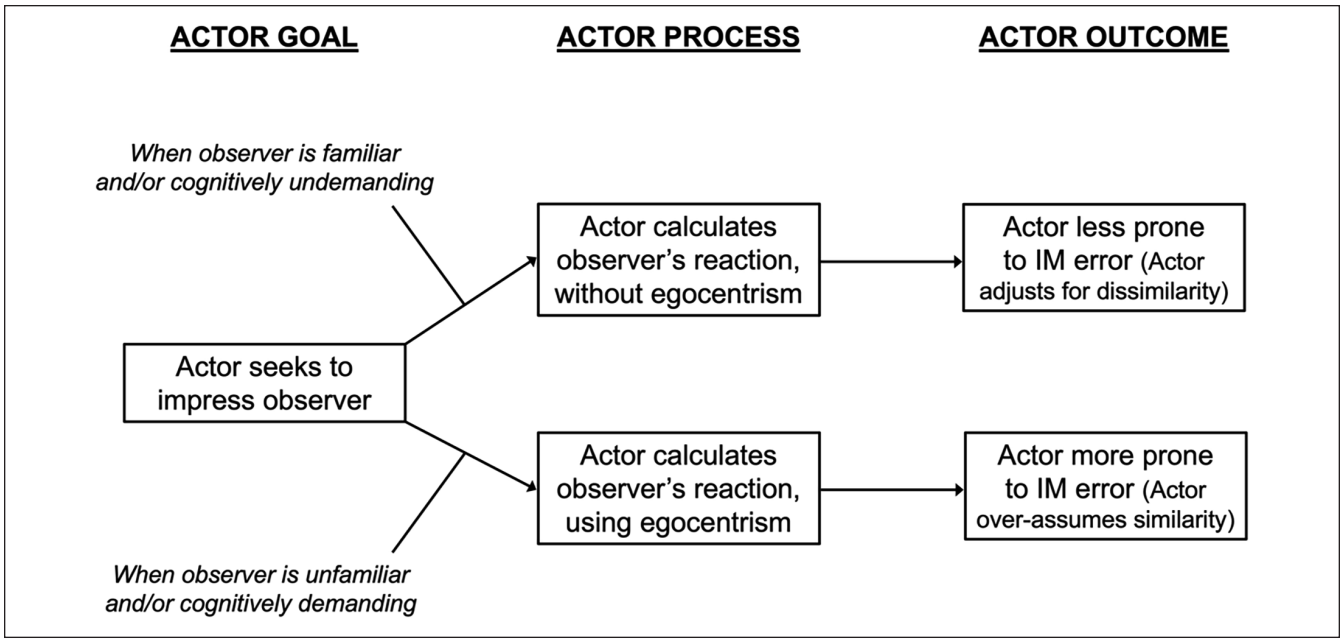

Figure 1. Impression (mis)management as a function of actors' reliance on egocentric reasoning.
Note. In the figure, "IM" stands for impression management.

for actors to process. Figure 1 depicts this process model in simple visual form.

Part II: Advancing Impression (Mis)Management to Accommodate *Temporal* Errors

A useful feature of an egocentrism account of impression mismanagement is that it can accommodate any conditions that entail easy anchoring and hard adjusting—both including what has been strictly studied to date within impression management studies (e.g., differences across the *spatial* dimension, as reviewed, whereby present actors over-assume similarity with present observers) and going beyond it. Part II highlights such an application to the *temporal* dimension (e.g., present actors over-assuming similarity with future observers). We do so because the notion of "aging poorly" is of increasing real-world concern, yet more research in psychology is needed for discussing and making sense of it under a single parsimonious conceptual framework (e.g., who is more vs. less prone to acting in ways that may "age poorly," and when and why is this the case?).

Indeed, impression (mis)management as it actually unfolds in everyday life is rarely a one-shot effect, even though many of the aforementioned study designs have bottled it that way (e.g., measuring actors' real-time actions and observers' real-time reactions—with "errors" being defined as an *immediate* mismatch). In everyday life, an actor's present actions can *also* be seen and judged by those same and/or new observers in the *future*. Existing theories of impression management (such as those that broadly emphasize actors' impression motivations: Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980), combined with the process model of egocentrism in driving errors (as we proposed in Part I), can help accommodate and explain these dynamics.

Put another way, Part I begs the question: What kinds of observers are (a) especially unfamiliar to actors and (b) especially cognitively demanding for actors to process? Because those are the observers who will draw actors into impression management problems, due to the recruitment of actors' egocentrism. Here in Part II, we review how *future observers* fit this bill.

Future Observers Are Unfamiliar and Cognitively Demanding to Process

. . .Because Future Observers Are Less Immediately Pressing. A large experimental literature on present bias shows that when participants are given the choice between present rewards (e.g., $100 today) versus bigger future rewards (e.g., $150 next year), they tend to choose the former (for reviews, see Frederick et al., 2002; O'Donoghue & Rabin, 1999). Present bias is often attributed to the lures of immediate gratification (e.g., Ainslie, 1975; Frijda, 1988; Mischel et al., 1989; Netzer, 2009), leading people to value bigger future rewards at a discount. Going further, present bias leads people to forget about future rewards altogether when left to their own devices, absent some experimenter presenting the choice;

people not only forgo future rewards but also forget to look for them. This is evidenced by phenomena like the "hidden zero effect" (Magen et al., 2008; Read et al., 2017) and "opportunity cost neglect" (Frederick et al., 2009).

Future observers often are less immediately pressing for present actors. When targets of judgment are less immediately pressing, the above research shows people not only discount their value—people are also less likely to spontaneously bring them to mind in the first place. Here, also reconsider the aforementioned "spotlight effect," such that present actors exaggerate the gaze of present observers (Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999; Gilovich et al., 2000). If actors feel watched by present observers, then future observers likely seem even less pressing.

. . .Because Future Observers Are Less Certain. People think about outcomes differently also as a function of perceived certainty: More-certain outcomes (e.g., the thought of definitely winning or losing $100; being told one will actually perform an embarrassing task) tend to be more psychologically engaging (they capture more attention, elicit more emotion, and so forth) than equivalent but less-certain targets (e.g., the thought of maybe winning or losing $100; being told to simply imagine performing an embarrassing task: for reviews, see Barberis & Xiong, 2012; Van Boven et al., 2013). This distinction contributes to present bias. The present is real while the future is hypothetical. If people think the future will never materialize, the rational inference that follows is to forgo and forget it (McGuire & Kable, 2013; Parfit, 1984).

Future observers often are less certain for present actors. When targets of judgment are less certain, people are less likely to spontaneously bring them to mind (Kardes et al., 2022; Slovic et al., 1978; Taleb, 2007; Wakslak et al., 2006). The "What You See Is All There Is" principle (Kahneman, 2011) succinctly summarizes such findings: It states that people attend to presently known information (here: present observers) but stop there, before asking themselves whether there is other related information that is presently unknown (here: future observers).

. . .Because Future Observers Are Harder to Simulate. In addition, the future is almost always less known than the present, making it harder to imagine and predict. Lay individuals are generally poor social forecasters (Tetlock & Gardner, 2016), in part because they often must simulate the future without access to the richer bottom-up details and comparison points of an experience that are needed for judgment accuracy (Newby-Clark & Ross, 2003; Ramos et al., 2022). Mental representations of present experiences are vivid, complex, and concrete; mental representations of future experiences are duller, simpler, and more abstract (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2003). In one study (Kane et al., 2012), participants reported duller simulations of the same reward merely when imagining it in the future. Such effects have been linked to present bias (Kable & Glimcher, 2007; Kassam et al., 2008; Peters & Büchel, 2010).

Future observers often are harder to simulate for present actors. When targets of judgment are harder to simulate, people are less likely to spontaneously bring them to mind (Gabaix & Laibson, 2017; Golman et al., 2017; Kool et al., 2010; Schwarz & Clore, 2007).

. . .Because Present Actions Feel Decontextualized From Time (Temporal Realism). Finally, people rarely stop to think "in time" at all. In principle, one could imagine that present actors are hyper-sensitive to the ever-changing contexts around them and regularly reflect on their temporal movement (and how their present point will look at later points). In practice, this is not the case.

One reason is logistical: People are too busy doing things to reflect on them (Eccleston & Crombez, 1999; Fiedler et al., 2019; Kahneman, 1973). Another reason runs psychologically deeper: The contexts of people's actions, which include temporal contexts, are often hidden from conscious view—even from one's own (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Ross & Ward, 1996). People's phenomenological experience of the present feels as if events are simply occurring "as they are," even though every event is always embedded within a multitude of fleeting contexts. Sometimes, the temporal context of an event can be made more salient due to its momentous nature. For example, research on "anticipated nostalgia" finds that major life events such as having a child can prompt people to take a broader temporal perspective than they would have taken otherwise (e.g., to think about how they will miss the child's baby stage once it passes: Cheung et al., 2020). Yet such examples are notable because they deviate from typical thinking. In everyday life, people do not "stop to smell the roses" in this way (Gregory et al., 2023; Van Dam et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2014). When contextual information (which includes temporal information) is not made explicitly clear, people tend not to summon it on their own (Jones & Nisbett, 1972).

The difficulty of appreciating temporal contexts is also suggested by research on dynamic memory. One influential theory of how people encode the temporal locations of their experiences argues they do not; if our minds do specify an event's temporal location, this occurs only after we bring the event to mind and work to specify it (Friedman, 1993). This default mode has been called "atemporal [mental] representation" (Gilbert et al., 2002, p. 430) and is echoed in research on selection biases in autobiographical recall (Belli, 1998; Bradburn et al., 1987).

Temporal Impression Management

From this more temporally informed view of the traditional framework of impression management, actors are at risk of insufficiently considering future observers in their impression management calculations—in which cases this can

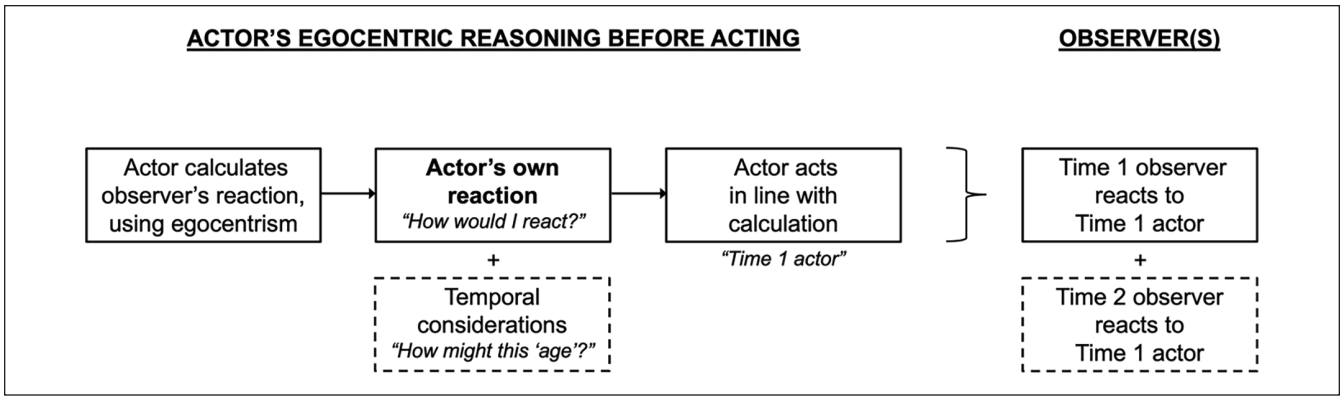

Figure 2. A temporally informed view of impression (mis)management, as the same function of actors' reliance on egocentric reasoning—here *over time*.
Note. The dotted boxes reflect considerations that actors do not fully distinguish in their calculations before they decide to act in the present.

foster unique unforeseen errors that only reveal themselves as errors later (such that actors end up getting it wrong even after they get it right). Indeed, these dynamics map well onto the logic of egocentric anchoring and adjustment. For example, anchoring on the known and salient present is easy, whereas adjusting for the unknown and distant future is hard; if multiple present audiences are hard to navigate, then navigating boundless future audiences is harder still. Temporal egocentrism suggests actors do not fully appreciate this difficulty (e.g., as in people's overconfidence in navigating the multiple-audience problem). Future audiences may be neglected for the same conceptual reasons that distant present audiences are. Highlighting this more temporally informed view of the traditional framework thus enriches its usefulness for understanding impression management errors. It is as if actors assume their present actions are seen by present eyes alone; yet in reality, their present actions can *also* be seen by *future* eyes—that may see things differently, and not so favorably.[1]

For clarity moving forward, we will call actors in the present "Time 1 actors"; observers in the present "Time 1 observers"; and observers (either those same or new ones) in the future "Time 2 observers." Thus, to re-state the point with a concrete example: Imagine you are giving a talk at a conference. To make a good impression, you could consider who is in the audience that day and tailor the talk to them. However, you could *also* consider who will be watching the talk next year (e.g., perhaps it is being recorded and posted online[2]), and so tailor the talk to still make sense to (and be favorably judged by) them as well. You are the Time 1 actor; the people in the audience that day are Time 1 observers; the people watching next year are Time 2 observers. Temporal egocentrism highlights how you may tailor your talk to Time 1 observers (e.g., fill it with contemporary references or make jokes that are currently socially acceptable) at the cost of Time 2 observers (e.g., perhaps they will not get your references or will find the jokes offensive).

Figure 2 depicts this process, showing an assumed temporal immediacy underlies actors' egocentric calculations (e.g., "I'd react like this *now*; you [*even future you*] will react the same").

Tailoring one's actions to the present is not always erroneous, just like egocentrism more generally is not always erroneous (such as when actors and observers share access to similar information, as reviewed). Indeed, Time 1 actors may still want to (or need to) impress Time 1 observers in the meantime, regardless of any Time 2 observers; if you tweak your talk to be more timeless for Time 2 observers, but you do so in a way that loses its immediate punch for Time 1 observers, then it may not survive into the future in the first place (in Part III, we will return to the potentially negative consequences following from actors investing too much in temporal impression management). But also like egocentrism, errors may arise because people do not always realize they are making a tradeoff. Indeed, there need not be such a tradeoff (e.g., you could make tweaks to better satisfy audiences at *both* times)—and even when there is, it is not always obvious that Time 1 observers should be who actors prioritize. Time 2 (vs. Time 1) observers can be just as important for Time 1 actors to keep in mind. For example, perhaps the video of your talk ends up being seen by many more Time 2 observers than Time 1 observers had happened to witness in real time, diverting your net career trajectory. There are many other examples of Time 2 offering similar value as Time 1—Time 1 actors' neglect of this value is both common and consequential (see Part III for more). For example, young social media users share posts that damn their adult selves (e.g., with future employers discovering them via online searches); intellectuals and other creatives (e.g., authors, filmmakers, architects) seek to create things that stand the test of time, yet over-cater to current norms; and politicians and other such leaders seek to leave a lasting legacy, yet design policies that over-cater to immediate popularity.

Thus, to revisit Figure 2: The figure more fully models the actor's thought process, indicating actors' default to the solid-line path. This is often a reasonable strategy that works; after all, psychological resources are limited, and observers at Time 1 often must be dealt with first. Yet even perfectly calculating immediate observers do not fully avoid problems posed by temporal observers who also exist and matter at Time 2. We refer to this dotted-line path as the actor's *temporal* impression. In such cases, actors may want to think more "in time" than they do by default—to construe their actions as "Time 1 actions" judged separately in different contexts, not just in singular contemporary ones. By defaulting to the solid-line path, actors miss change (O'Brien, 2024).

Two final clarifications round out this framework. First: When does Time 1 officially become Time 2? We operationally define temporal impression as, *how an actor's present actions are regarded by observers in a distinct future with different norms*. Thus, the critical trigger is context replacement (i.e., a new social context replacing a current one) as opposed to literal chronological time (i.e., the length of time passing between Time 1 and Time 2), keeping with existing models of present versus future distinctions (e.g., Hershfield & Maglio, 2020). We propose that, due to temporal egocentrism, Time 1 actors tend to poorly account for Time 2 whether it ends up occurring in a far future (e.g., years from their present actions) or in a proximate future (e.g., days from their present actions). Second: Who are the Time 2 observers? They could be anybody (either individuals or groups)—from fully new generations/cohorts of observers (e.g., a yet-unknown person at Time 2 who watches one's Time 1 talk, who had not seen it before nor experienced those Time 1 contexts) to familiar/repeat observers (e.g., a lifelong friend at Time 2 who watches one's Time 1 talk, who was also in the audience that day and experienced the same contexts). We propose that, due to temporal egocentrism, Time 1 actors tend to poorly account for how *any* sets of eyes might one day look back at their present actions anew through Time 2.[3]

Actors Thus Act in Ways That Over-Assume Present-Future Similarity

Up to this point, readers may wonder about research from elsewhere suggesting people indeed think about the future a great deal, as found for example in experience sampling experiments on mental time travel (Baumeister et al., 2020) and mind wandering (Spronken et al., 2016), as well as in theory and research on pragmatic prospection (Baumeister et al., 2016).

Here, however, we expand on nuances to such research as they bear on the current article. Per our framework, even if Time 1 actors in fact bring to mind Time 2 observers, they will tend to overestimate how similar those Time 2 contexts will be to present Time 1 contexts. In effect, Time 1 actors can appreciate how their Time 1 actions may *survive* into the future more than how their Time 1 actions may *age* into the future (consistent with our egocentrism account)—and therefore mistakenly assume Time 2 observers will view them just as Time 1 observers do.

This distinction between "thinking about a *distinct* future" from "thinking about *the future*" thus helps bridge our current claims with this other research on people's proclivities to think about the future in general. Indeed, people often contemplate their future selves (Albert, 1977) and possess an entire region of brain structures that is largely recruited for episodic future thinking (Buckner et al., 2008). Rich cultural examples suggest people should be well equipped to recognize "history will remember them," from the widespread virtues of filial piety found in Confucian culture (e.g., respect for ancestors: Hwang, 1999), to the generational folklore and tales of immortal heroes dating back to oral traditions of pre-literate societies (Vansina, 1985), to the notion of "judgment day" found in world religions (Brandon, 1967). That actors care about observers' future judgment of their present actions is also implied by the very evolution of social norms; as social animals who depend individual cooperation for group success, people have long benefitted from keeping tabs on each other's actions (Gavrilets & Richerson, 2017; Klein, 1989).

Critically, however, these ideas are silent (to our knowledge) on whether Time 1 actors easily account for observers in *distinct* future contexts—that is, the Time 2 observers highlighted in the current article (observers who look back at the actor's Time 1 actions at distinct Time 2's). Temporal egocentrism suggests people are not very good at appreciating dissimilar futures in this way and tend to imagine future contexts as resembling present ones. Because Time 1 actors effectively view future observers as informed contemporaries, they assume to act just the same.

Evidence for Actors Over-Assuming Present-Future Similarity. As reviewed, the future is almost always less known than the present. Tailoring present actions to yet-unknown future observers is hard. To navigate this black box, research suggests people will substitute the problem with an easier solution (Kahneman & Frederick, 2002). Applied here, this means people could simply assume the future will not be so different from the present after all. This is the case. For example, the "end of history illusion" (Quoidbach et al., 2013) refers to the finding that people underestimate how much more their personalities could still change over time, relative to how much they recall their personalities having changed to the same point. The illusion is exhibited by adults of all ages (Quoidbach et al., 2013), although older adults are more likely to predict imminent declines (e.g., in health: Harris & Busseri, 2019). People can account for other such "known" future changes (e.g., people predict, presumably accurately, that they will enjoy stereotypically old activities

more as they grow old: Bauckham et al., 2019; O'Brien, 2015a; Renoult et al., 2016). In general, however, it is hard to predict tomorrow—and so people infer that however things are today will mostly stay that way (even when this is untrue). It is as if the vivid present turns to "black and white" quicker than Time 1 actors realize from today's view.

One can extrapolate this research on perceived *self*-stability to perceived *context*-stability. Research on beliefs about long-term attitude change shows that when Time 1 actors do think Time 2 contexts will differ from Time 1 (if at all), it is that they think observers who presently disagree with them will have finally come around to their own Time 1 views (e.g., the "belief in a favorable future": Rogers et al., 2017; see also Newby-Clark & Ross, 2003; O'Brien, 2013, 2022a).

In addition, and also as reviewed, present experiences are more immediately accessible than future ones. Consistent with egocentrism, people thereby perceive the future through a less-contextualized lens altogether. For example, people are more likely to commit the fundamental attribution error when imagining a present behavior in the future (i.e., they are more likely to attribute future behaviors to internal dispositions vs. situational contexts: Nussbaum et al., 2003; Pronin & Ross, 2006; Pronin et al., 2008). This example echoes other research suggesting people may perceive future contexts as similar to present ones due to a "curse of knowledge" (Camerer et al., 1989) of what is right in front of them (here: the salient present). Indeed, people tend to assume stability in themselves and their circumstances unless they see definitive evidence of change (Ross, 1989; see also McAdams, 2013; O'Brien & Kardas, 2016; Wilson & Ross, 2003). In turn, people's perceived (lack of) change in themselves wields an assimilative influence on their perceived (lack of) change in the world (Eibach et al., 2003), leading to the erroneous belief that things will not change as much as they do ("robust presentism": Gilbert et al., 2002, p. 441).

Other lines of research further highlight this tendency for people to assume current contexts will persist into unrelated future contexts (e.g., "empathy gaps": Loewenstein, 1996; Loewenstein et al., 2003; O'Brien & Ellsworth, 2012a; Van Boven et al., 2013; e.g., "focalism": Buehler & Griffin, 2003; Kahneman et al., 2006; O'Brien et al., 2018; Schkade & Kahneman, 1998; Wilson et al., 2000). As Gilbert and Wilson (2007, p. 1354) describe: "Research shows that people often do not consider the potentially significant differences between contextual factors at T1 and T2 . . . They ignore the fact that the contextual factors that are presently exerting an influence at T1 [authors give examples] will not exert the same influence at T2 . . . They ignore the fact that the contextual factors that will exert an influence at T2 [authors give examples] are not presently exerting an influence at T1." Temporal anchoring (and insufficient adjustment) can also help explain the "future-is-now bias." Put by Givi and Galak (2019, p. 1): " . . . When people forecast whether the future will (vs. will not) be like the present . . . people are systematically biased toward expecting the future to be like the present, even when the probabilities of future outcomes make such a belief unfounded." Put by Eidelman and Crandall (2012, p. 270): "The principle rule of induction is that we expect the future to be like the past . . . We expect stasis."

Neglecting Dissimilar Futures Can Foster Impression Management Errors

Ample observational evidence shows Time 1 actors' underappreciation of Time 2 observers can indeed cause various problems down the road. Consider contexts that have clearly changed over time, such as when comparing history to today—and how they have aged confusingly. For example, a longstanding mystery in linguistics entails how certain languages of the past had sounded when spoken; the best we can do is guess. Ancient Egyptians appear to have shared dictionary-type lists of hieroglyphic consonants (akin to sharing content), yet such lists (as best uncovered to date) do not include verbs or phonetic spellings (akin to *not* sharing context)—making it impossible for us today to decipher what their language sounded like (Bouchard-Côté et al., 2013). But note that, from *their* perspective, it presumably seemed obvious to *not* share instructions for speech with fellow speakers. The mystery is ours, not theirs.

Or consider Shakespeare. Much of the writer's prose suggests a relative presentism—replete with references that his contemporary audiences would have easily understood, but that dumbfound today's readers without academic translation (Bara, 2014). That writers write to their present audience seems reasonable—from their perspective, at the time (present audiences may even actively dislike over-explaining—as it, spoils "inside jokes": Martin, 2007). Yet doing so comes at the neglect of *future* audiences. Many writers of the past, as riveting as Shakespeare, may be lost to history due to their writing that fails to speak to us today.

One need not look so far back, nor restrict such problems to mere observer confusion. Other examples highlight how Time 1 actors' underappreciation of Time 2 observers can cause far more than confusion—they also cause actors problems throughout their own everyday lives, not only in ways that undermine their own reputations but also in ways that can harm present others and future others looking back (for reviews, see Clark, 2020; Ng, 2020; Ronson, 2016).

In the world of contemporary comedy, for example, consider the popular American comedian Jimmy Kimmel. In 2020, Kimmel found himself under newfound scrutiny for his past impersonations of the basketball star Karl Malone, which he did back in the 1990s. Kimmel (a White man) had impersonated Malone (a Black man) in televised sketches in which Kimmel wore makeup so as to appear Black. These same sketches looked different—and clearly more offensive—to more of Kimmel's audience in 2020 than they did to his audience in the 1990s (Itzkoff, 2020). Supporting

the current account, 1990s-Kimmel had appeared to fail to consider this future contextual change. In an apology statement, Kimmel (2020) reflected (italics added):

> "On KROQ radio in the mid-90's, I did a recurring impression of the NBA player Karl Malone. In the late 90's, I continued impersonating Malone on TV. We hired makeup artists to make me look as much like Karl Malone as possible. *I never considered that this might be seen as anything other than an imitation of a fellow human being*. . .I've done dozens of impressions of famous people. . .In each case, *I thought of them as impersonations of celebrities and nothing more*. Looking back, many of these sketches are embarrassing, and it is frustrating that these *thoughtless moments* have become a weapon used by some to diminish my criticisms of social and other injustices."

Likewise, in contemporary politics, consider Andrew Cuomo—the once-prominent governor of New York who resigned from office in 2021 amidst present-breaking news of past sexual harassment. Upon resigning, Cuomo (in) famously reflected (Glueck, 2021; italics added):

> "I thought a hug and putting my arm around a staff person while taking a picture was friendly, but she found it to be too forward. I kissed a woman on the cheek at a wedding and I thought I was being nice, but she felt that it was too aggressive. I have slipped and called people 'honey,' 'sweetheart' and 'darling,' I meant it to be endearing. But women found it dated and offensive. . .In my mind I've never crossed the line with anyone, *but I didn't realize the extent to which the line has been redrawn*. There are generational and cultural shifts that *I just didn't fully appreciate*. And I should have. No excuses."

Time 1 actors' poor accounting of temporal change can thus foster important impression management problems both offline and online alike. Below, we add two further points of contact.

First, business research on companies' reputation management efforts documents a "paradoxical pattern" (e.g., Aula & Mantere, 2020; Hutton et al., 2001; Strang & Macy, 2001). Companies invest many millions of dollars annually toward making positive reputations—and this often works, for a given investment year (e.g., by year's end, companies that had invested more in reputation management are ranked higher on that year's list of *Fortune's* "Most Admired Companies"). Yet the prediction often breaks down over time (e.g., those companies are no more likely to be ranked higher on *next* year's "Most Admired Companies"). Hutton et al. (2001, p. 253–257) call this "a bit perplexing," explaining: "Despite repeated claims in articles by *Fortune*, the *Wall Street Journal* and other publications that reputation scores appear to have great staying power, that does not appear to be the case. . . corporate reputations may turn out to be too fickle to be particularly useful as a management concept." The current framework resolves this paradox: The apparent fickleness of the concept may instead reflect people's temporally myopic pursuit of the concept. What Time 1 actors assume to advertise may look good at Time 1 but not at Time 2.

Second, clinical research documents that a common source of rumination (and associated negative emotions like shame and regret) is an unexpected change to a person's social standing, such that the person did not realize how much their actions had hurt others until after the fact (e.g., Cheung et al., 2004; Clark & Wells, 1995; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Mor & Winquist, 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; Orth et al., 2006; Robertson et al., 2018). Consider descriptions like the following: "Some of these soldiers even received high decorations for individual valor as a result of their actions. Yet, in hindsight, they viewed their past actions as morally wrong and suffered shame and remorse" (Atuel et al., 2021, p. 162); "One component [of people's regrets for past transgressions] is the simple wish that you had chosen differently. . . The other component is *self-recrimination* or *repentance* or *self-blame*—the state of mind you have when you come to believe that a previous decision involved an error of judgment, that it was wrong at the time you made it" (Sugden, 1985, pp. 78–79). Such examples can be fruitfully understood under the current framework, as they essentially highlight the ill effects of Time 1 actors poorly accounting for how their Time 1 actions would come to be differently socially regarded in Time 2 contexts.[4]

Better Appreciating Dissimilar Futures Can Reduce Impression Management Errors

On the flip side of the current framework: If Time 1 actors better account for Time 2 observers before they act, other research shows this can reduce impression management errors.

For example, manipulations that help people simulate future contexts in more detail help calibrate affective forecasts (e.g., Ayton et al., 2007; Buehler & McFarland, 2001; Hoerger et al., 2010; O'Brien & Roney, 2017; O'Brien et al., 2018; Sevdalis & Harvey, 2009; Ubel et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 2000). In one study (Wilson et al., 2000, Study 3), sports fans wrongly predicted being just as thrilled about a big win a week later; however, predictor-participants who were first prompted to write out exactly what they would be doing during that future—on that day, hour by hour, in detail—made more accurate forecasts ("Oh, right—I'll be back at work and worried about other things; the game won't seem so big in that context"). Similar calibrations occur when instructing people to more closely reflect on the fact that emotions wane over time (e.g., Ubel et al., 2005, Study 2). Beyond affective judgments, the act of simulating future contextual detail more broadly improves people's self-predictions (Kahneman & Lovallo, 1993; Kruger & Evans, 2004; Zauberman & Lynch, 2005) and social predictions (e.g., Klein & O'Brien, 2018, 2023).

When people simulate the future in more relevant personal detail, they change their present behavior accordingly (e.g., Hershfield, 2011; Hershfield et al., 2011; Kuo et al., 2016; Lang et al., 2013; Lewis & Oyserman, 2015; Mellers & McGraw, 2001; O'Brien, 2015b; Oyserman & Destin, 2010; van Gelder et al., 2013; Zeelenberg et al., 1996). In one laboratory study, Hershfield et al. (2011) found that participants in their 20s who interacted with well-rendered digital avatars of their 70-year-old selves then behaved more prudently in real time, such as by allocating more money to their current retirement savings. In a field study, Shah et al. (2022) found that bank customers who vividly imagined their future circumstances (e.g., via guided reflection tasks designed to make their future selves more salient) became more likely to sign up for automatic savings accounts (moving the 1% take-up rate among control customers to a 3% take-up rate). Such examples essentially highlight Time 1 actors acting in ways that "age better"—as a function of Time 1 actors better accounting for temporal change before they act. One can extrapolate corresponding impression management benefits, leaving Time 2 observers to better understand where the actor had come from (e.g., Barden et al., 2005) and judge actors' Time 1 actions more charitably (e.g., Klein & O'Brien, 2017; Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011).

Across these ideas, note their connections to Part I and the logic of egocentrism: In effect, conditions that make anchoring easier and adjusting harder (e.g., those in which the present is salient and the future is unclear) indeed lead to worse temporal impression management, and conditions that make anchoring harder and adjusting easier (e.g., those that imbue actors with clearer contextual details about the future) indeed lead to better impression management.

Temporal Impression (Mis)Management: Putting the Framework to Use

Last, here in Part III, we highlight other contributions of this framework and use it to generate further insights and a testable agenda for research moving forward.

This article has proposed a parsimonious egocentric account for why actors make impression management errors; we then applied this account to highlight novel *temporal* errors. The current framework can thus be leveraged to generate unique insights into getting it right and wrong from this temporal view (e.g., who is more vs. less prone to acting in ways that may "age poorly," and when and why is this the case?). We turn to these next (see Table 1 for a summary).

Novel Sources of Temporal Impression (Mis) Management

The current framework situates impression management as a function of actors' temporal egocentrism ("How might this action age?"). Variables that are known to promote (vs. impede) egocentric anchoring and adjustment should thus hurt (vs. help) actors' impression management in the long run, even if actors avoid the traditional pitfalls in the short run. As reviewed, actors rely more on egocentric reasoning when observers are unfamiliar (vs. familiar) and cognitively demanding (vs. undemanding) to process. Per this logic, below we derive some temporally informed factors that should contribute to actors' temporal impression mismanagement.

Effects of Stimulus/Task Type. Per the current framework, actors should be less (vs. more) calibrated in their impression management for stimuli/tasks that make present anchors even more salient and thus force temporal comparisons even less top of mind. This means there should be more cases of "aging poorly" on tasks that demand high attention to present observers (e.g., interactive tasks like conversations and live presentations) and fewer cases of "aging poorly" on tasks that demand low attention to present observers (e.g., reflective tasks like journaling).

Likewise, research on construal level theory (e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2003) shows that time discounting and its reversals depend on actors' levels of construal of the outcomes at hand, with low-level features of an outcome often discounting steeply over time and high-level features often remaining potent over time (e.g., Trope et al., 2021). This means there should be more cases of "aging poorly" on tasks that prompt attention toward concrete, low-level characteristics (e.g., specific beliefs, intentions, behaviors) and fewer cases of "aging poorly" on tasks that prompt attention toward higher-level characteristics (e.g., values, ideologies, overarching goals).

Effects of States/Events. Different kinds of states/events can render change less or more salient to actors within the moment of judgment. For example, as reviewed in Part II, people indeed account for blatantly known future differences (Bauckham et al., 2019; Renoult et al., 2016). Time 1 actors who are told as fact they will face Time 2 audiences that value Y over X presumably should become more likely to act in Y-ways. However, such definitive knowledge is rare. More common is experiencing momentary temporal markers like endings, which also increase actors' temporal thinking relative to baseline (e.g., Kurtz, 2008; Carstensen et al., 1999; Winet & O'Brien, 2023). This means there should be more cases of "aging poorly" when temporal markers are absent and fewer cases of "aging poorly" when temporal markers are made salient (especially for markers that signal a changing nature to time; e.g., "If I do this now, what will this mean looking back?").

This latter example suggests a more general moderator of emotion. In general, emotions reduce actors' appreciation of context and turn actors more inward toward their "hot" present anchor (and disrupt their abilities to adjust for a "cooled" future: Loewenstein, 1996). As such, there should be more cases of "aging poorly" among Time 1 actors who act in high-emotion states and fewer cases of "aging poorly" among Time 1 actors who act in low-emotion states.

Table 1. Research Questions and Predictions That Can be Derived From the Current Framework.

Research question	Example variable(s)	Example hypothesis(es)
Novel sources of temporal impression (mis)management	Stimulus/task differences	More cases of "aging poorly" on interactive tasks (vs. reflective tasks)
	State/event differences	More cases of "aging poorly" in high-emotion (vs. low-emotion) states
	Individual differences	More cases of "aging poorly" among present-oriented (vs. future-oriented) actors
	Cultural differences	More cases of "aging poorly" within individualistic (vs. collectivistic) cultures
	Developmental differences	More cases of "aging poorly" among younger (vs. older) actors
	Dimension differences	More cases of "aging poorly" for actors' horizontal (vs. vertical) signaling
Conditions needed for actors to run into temporal problems	Observer effects	New (vs. repeat) Time 2 observers increase chances of temporal problems
	Timescale effects	Far (vs. proximate) Time 2's increase chances of temporal problems
Further applications	For explanation and prediction	Explains reputational conundrums
	Theoretical connections	Suggests limits to first impressions and legacy management; explains cheating
	Idea generation	Predicts novel sources of social conflict between actors versus observers over time
	Practical applications (actors' behavior change)	Suggests interventions for changing how policymakers vote
	Practical applications (actors' well-being)	Predicts growing problems for actors' mental health in today's information age and online sharing
What to do about it?	Reflecting on unknowns	Asking oneself targeted questions about potential unknowns promotes aging well
	Reframing time	Taking a bird's eye view of time promotes aging well
	Estimating Time 2 change	Crowdsourcing promotes aging well
	Exploiting observers' memory	Ending well promotes aging well
	Thinking evergreen	Mindful inaction promotes aging well

Actors' Individual Differences. Time perspective refers to people's relative focus on the past versus present versus future when making decisions (Bluedorn, 2002; Holman & Silver, 1998). An individual's preferred time perspective is generally stable (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). As such, there should be more cases of "aging poorly" among present-oriented Time 1 actors (i.e., actors who consider immediate costs and benefits only—here, Time 1 observers but not Time 2 observers) and fewer cases of "aging poorly" among future-oriented Time 1 actors (i.e., actors who also consider more distant costs and benefits—here, both Time 1 and Time 2 observers). Evidence for this prediction is suggested by research that tracks associations between a person's time perspective and their own outcomes. For example, present-oriented individuals are found to experience more health-related issues over time as compared to more future-oriented individuals (e.g., Keough et al., 1999; Rothspan & Read, 1996)—in effect, their present actions "age worse."

Related variables should operate the same. For example, there should be more (vs. fewer) cases of "aging poorly" among actors who score lower (vs. higher) on trait sensation seeking (Zuckerman, 1994) and the tendency to consider future consequences (Strathman et al., 1994).

Other Individual Differences Among Actors. There should be more (vs. fewer) cases of "aging poorly" among actors who are generally less (vs. more) focused on the contextual layers underlying their behavior. For example, Time 1 actors with a bent toward absolute thinking—such as those who endorse moral or cultural absolutism (vs. relativism: Forsyth, 1985; Kohlberg, 1981; Perry, 1970), are cognitively rigid (vs. flexible: Leary et al., 2017; Oreg, 2003), or have diminished perspective taking abilities (Chopik et al., 2016)—should be especially prone to impression mismanagement, as they may tend not to consider the transient temporality of their present actions before acting (e.g., perhaps they see little need to include clarifying context on their social media posts—despite future audiences needing such context). Some scholars have argued people are absolute thinkers by default, at least in popular Western thought (e.g., Haidt, 2001)—which hints at a large scale to the temporal problems reviewed here.

These ideas further suggest actors' explicit beliefs about differences in the speed of change in the environment may lead them to change their behavior accordingly, such that actors are less temporally mindful in purportedly stable versus in purportedly variable environments—but note the challenge of getting actors to accept explicit knowledge about variable environments, as people naturally operate in today. Instead, one could also consider individual differences in these beliefs, such as differences in attitudes toward change between liberals versus conservatives in American politics (e.g., Jost et al., 2003)—being closed to change may lead actors to act in ways that age more poorly, as they may assume today's actions will hold up to tomorrow's standards.

Actors' Cultural Differences. People from individualistic cultures tend to be less sensitive to context than their collectivistic counterparts are (Kitayama et al., 2003; Nisbett et al., 2001). For example, the former are more susceptible to change blindness. In one study (Masuda & Nisbett, 2001), American and Japanese participants described what they saw in a movie (e.g., a movie of swimming fish). Japanese participants tended to report the focal object (e.g., "I see fish. . ..") plus many contextual features (e.g., ". . .swimming in large green plants, at the bottom of a bright blue sea"), whereas American participants tended to report the focal object and stop there (e.g., "I see fish"). In another study (Masuda & Nisbett, 2006), American and Japanese participants watched a movie in which contextual features were subtly changed from start to finish, then reported how many changes they noticed. American participants noticed fewer. In another study (Ji et al., 2001), Chinese participants tended to believe streaks of behavior would eventually revert to the opposite direction, whereas American participants tended to believe the streaks would stay the course—the Americans were less likely to perceive a fleeting present and changing future. As Masuda et al. (2008, p. 366) succinctly summarize: "People raised in the Western European tradition find it easy to isolate an object from its context; East Asians do not."

As such, there should be more cases of "aging poorly" within individualistic cultures and fewer cases of "aging poorly" within collectivistic cultures.

Actors' Developmental Differences. On average, younger adults tend to be less sensitive to context than their older counterparts. For example, people in their late teens and early 20s often take strong stances about current events and quickly form decisive opinions (while also frequently changing their minds: Samter, 2003; Vijayakumar & Pfeifer, 2020). People around middle age (late 30's through late 60's) often express more tempered stable views that account for more context, evidenced by their increased perspective taking tendencies (Bailey et al., 2008; Labouvie-Vief, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2002), their engagement in dialectical reasoning (Baltes & Smith, 2008; Basseches, 1980; Grossmann et al., 2010), and their lower proneness to dispositional judgment (Blanchard-Fields & Abeles, 1996; Follett & Hess, 2002).

As such, there should be more cases of "aging poorly" among younger populations and fewer cases of "aging poorly" among older populations (at least for those around middle age).

Dimension Differences. Consider the aforementioned dimension differences between horizontal signaling (e.g., goals to act warm) versus vertical signaling (e.g., goals to act competent). Research in this literature posits that the horizontal dimension is more context-sensitive than the vertical dimension. As Abele et al. (2021, p. 300) write: "Vertical ratings

are rooted in culturally defined 'objective' differences, for instance in formalized titles, tested achievements, or access to resources and positions in society. Thus, these tend to be more evidence-based, obvious, consensual, and stable across time and contexts than Horizontal ratings." As such, there should be more cases of "aging poorly" whenever Time 1 actors engage in horizontal signaling—which is actors' default strategy. If what counts as horizontal changes more in culture than what counts as vertical, then the former actions are more prone to age poorly (e.g., today's polite actions may be less likely to seem polite tomorrow, relative to the likelihood that today's impressive actions seem impressive tomorrow).

This idea further suggests there may be more (vs. fewer) cases of "aging poorly" among Time 1 actors with a high (vs. low) bent toward interpersonal self-disclosure. Personality types like extraverts and narcissists enjoy immediate social benefits from their animated self-sharing tendencies (Feiler & Kleinbaum, 2015; McCain & Campbell, 2018)—but may undermine their impressions in the long run by having communicated more to age poorly (vs. more introverted or more private actors, who suffer more at Time 1 but may also circumvent such issues at Time 2).

Conditions Needed for Actors to Run into Temporal Problems

Independent of whatever actors themselves do, it is important to acknowledge that one's actions cannot "age poorly" in a vacuum. Instead, aging poorly necessarily depends on at least three conditions being met: (a) Time 2 contexts indeed manifesting, (b) Time 2 contexts indeed casting a newfound negative (rather than a positive) light on actors' Time 1 actions, and (c) Time 2 observers indeed bringing to mind actors' Time 1 actions in those Time 2 contexts.

To the first condition: As reviewed, we assume this is a straightforward assumption, as today's world and its social norms for evaluating behavior are changing rapidly (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2024; Nolan & Lenski, 2011). We thus assume this first condition is indeed commonly met.

To the second condition: This article has focused on how actors' good actions now can look unexpectedly bad later, but readers may wonder if unseen change works the other way too. If one's present bad actions will later count as good, then Time 1 actors can simply act selfishly so long as they can tolerate any rebuke until then (e.g., an athlete may face present stigma for "ring chasing" [Hoffman, 2017]—yet future fans may simply look back at them as champions). Unsung heroes may take solace in perceiving themselves as ahead of their time ("This too shall pass"). Yet in reality, a large literature on negativity dominance demonstrates that bad reputations stay bad for longer than good reputations stay good (e.g., Fiske, 1980; Klein & O'Brien, 2016; O'Brien & Klein, 2017; Reeder & Coovert, 1986; for reviews, see Baumeister et al., 2001; O'Brien, 2020; Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Time 1 good acts may thus be more prone to change over time than Time 1 bad acts, absent actor intervention (see our later section "What to Do About It?"). We thus assume this second condition—whereby Time 2 contexts cast a newfound negative light on actors' Time 1 actions—is indeed commonly met too.

To the third condition: Readers may wonder how common this third condition is, at least for most actors in typical everyday life. The chances that Time 2 observers bring to mind an actor's Time 1 actions may indeed be high for actors who have sustained social relevance (e.g., performers, politicians, other public figures), but what about for the rest of us? There is reason to assume this condition too is at least somewhat commonly met in everyday life. As reviewed, Time 2 observers may share later stories or memories of an actor's Time 1 actions, as keeping social tabs in such ways is central to everyday cooperative living (Gavrilets & Richerson, 2017; Klein, 1989). Moreover, as we will detail more soon, today's online contexts make it possible for anyone's present actions to be preserved for future eyes to see and judge—even for actors who make no Time 1 impact to begin with. One's past may not matter until it suddenly does, such as when an employer decides to look into one's social media history before making a hiring decision ("cybervetting": Berkelaar, 2014). Thanks to today's online contexts, Time 2 parties can now readily summon any nondescript actor's Time 1 actions.

Observer and Timescale Effects. The points above raise secondary questions about non-actor effects in the equation, such as who evaluates the actor at Time 2 (e.g., new vs. repeat others; *observer effects*) and when they do (e.g., at far vs. proximate Time 2's; *timescale effects*).

As discussed, the goal of this article is to model the actor's thought process while they engage in impression management. Non-actor characteristics do not bear on our core egocentric proposition that actors neglect temporal change—how their present actions are seen by *any* Time 2 observers, at *any* Time 2 points. However, they do bear on the severity of actors' problems when Time 2 arrives, and so warrant some comment here. (More research should independently model the full thought process of how Time 2 observers make sense of Time 1 actors, which extends beyond our scope; for example, consider today's debates over social canceling and how observers should treat presently-deemed offenses from the past: Alter & Harris, 2023.)

So: How *do* observer and timescale effects fit in the current framework? The framework assumes Time 2 observers can only work with the Time 1 information available to them and that they care to remember in the first place, as we discussed in the conditions needed for temporal problems (e.g., condition three). We can thus make predictions for how observer and timescale effects should bear on actors' temporal impression *mis*management. In terms of "aging poorly," the current framework predicts the following: When Time 2

observers judge the actor's Time 1 action, variables that decrease (vs. increase) their abilities or motivations to access/incorporate further Time 1 details into their judgments should render Time 1 actors' poor accounting of time to be more (vs. less) problematic. Time 2 observers who cannot as easily remember and situate the actor's Time 1 action back in its Time 1 context should be harsher to judge the actor relative to those who can. Table 2 derives other inputs that follow from this rationale, for further testing.

Further Applications of the Framework

Using the Framework as a Tool for Further Explanation and Prediction. Future research can continue to use this framework to explain temporal conundrums (e.g., the surprising lack of stickiness of business reputations, as reviewed) and to predict new ones like those here. Phenomena like time discounting are thoroughly investigated across the social and behavioral sciences, but usually in terms of how people treat tangible outcomes like money (although, as reviewed, some research has assessed more social and emotional outcomes: e.g., Loewenstein, 1996). That similar temporal dynamics apply to impression management outcomes invites new ways to integrate yet-unintegrated literatures (e.g., as how the current framework highlights the relevance of the present bias literature for the impression management literature, and vice versa).

Further Theoretical Connections and Research Questions. As for other points of integration, for example: Research on first impressions canonically emphasizes their lasting power over time (e.g., Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992), but such research may not fully capture *distinct* time periods. Students' ratings of teachers at the start of the semester may correlate with end-of-semester ratings (a canonical finding)—but note that chances of significant contextual change in this study set-up are low (i.e., Time 1 changing into Time 2). First impressions may fade quicker than this literature has assumed, if the typical study design fails to capture distinct change over time (see also Ferguson et al., 2019; Ybarra, 2001). Or consider other professional contexts. Academics may seek to publish papers that stand the test of time—yet mistakenly fill them with Time 1 references (e.g., consider how papers that mention "Zoom" [which now include this one] may confuse readers in 20 years—if not much sooner). One could analyze citation counts over time with the hypothesis that papers with more (vs. fewer) timely references show steeper declines in annual citations, even if they make a bigger splash in the immediate present. Or consider business domains that entail producing long-lasting content (e.g., authors who write books; filmmakers who make films; architects who design buildings), or where consumers seek content they hope will provide lasting value (e.g., by adopting popular trends, making renovations to one's home or look)—in many such cases, things may "age" more quickly than people realize before investing in them.

A neglect of dissimilar future others more generally suggests people may run into trouble managing their lasting legacies (Wade-Benzoni et al., 2008, 2012; Zaval et al., 2015), despite having shored up positive reputations in the meantime. The current framework suggests people may overestimate how long reputations last. This implication may also explain behaviors like cheating. Time 1 actors may think they can pull it off so long as they trick Time 1 observers—failing to realize how Time 2 observers, looking back in new contexts, could crack it.

Or consider applications to research areas like interpersonal conflict—and potential self/other differences at Time 2 upon looking back at Time 1. Table 2 from earlier suggests an actor–observer asymmetry over time, as actors at Time 2 (vs. observers at Time 2) should have higher abilities and motivations to access and incorporate their own Time 1 details (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). Actors at Time 2 may recall their now-offensive Time 1 content and think they "*couldn't* know better," whereas observers at Time 2 may think the actor "*should've* known better"—revealing a novel temporal source of conflict. Even if past contexts fade on actors too (as suggested by the aforementioned rumination literature; see also Elsbach, 2003), they may fade less than for observers simply due to differences in their accessible knowledge of present versus past states.

Practical Applications for Behavior Change. As reviewed in Part II, getting actors to better consider dissimilar temporal observers can lead them to act differently in the present. One could apply this idea to important behaviors like policy making (e.g., perhaps reminding policymakers of yet-unknown evaluators changes their policy votes), cheating (e.g., perhaps reminding students of yet-unknown evaluators changes their cheating decisions), and social media dynamics (e.g., perhaps reminding users of yet-unknown evaluators changes how, what, and whether they post).

Practical Applications in Today's Information Age. The current framework is especially relevant in today's information age, whereby concrete "receipts" of actors' present behavior are now widely shared and stored online in perpetuity. Consider the 10 hr of YouTube videos, 1,000 Instagram photos, 10,000 Tweets, 15,000 TikTok uploads, and 50,000 Facebook posts that are now generated by users *every second* (Statista, 2025)—with one estimate suggesting that upward of 80% of such content reflects users' own immediate opinions and reactions to current events (Naaman et al., 2010). The storage of behavior is increasing, combined with the fact that social norms for evaluating behavior are rapidly changing (Nolan & Lenski, 2011; see also Gelfand et al., 2024), predicts growing problems for actors. Our framework suggests today's actors readily broadcast Time 1 content (absent its full context) that persists into many Time 2's, for anyone, at any time, to find.

Table 2. Non-Actor Effects at Time 2 That Should Cause Time 1 Actors to Age More Poorly.

Context at Time 2	Variable	Prediction	Supporting evidence
Time 2 *abilities* to access/ incorporate further Time 1 details	Chronological distance	Time 2 observers at more-distant (vs. more-proximate) Time 2's = Time 1 actors age more poorly	e.g., Brown et al. (2007); Gamoran et al. (2020); Underwood (1957)
	Experience	Time 2 observers who were absent (vs. present) at Time 1 = Time 1 actors age more poorly	e.g., Kardas and O'Brien (2018); O'Brien (2019); Van Boven et al. (2013); Wald and O'Brien (2022)
	Expertise	Time 2 observers with less (vs. more) expertise about Time 1 = Time 1 actors age more poorly	e.g., Mitchell and Tetlock (2023); Ross (1989)
	Cognitive resources	Time 2 observers with less (vs. more) available resources = Time 1 actors age more poorly	e.g., Gilbert et al. (1988); Yovetich and Rusbult (1994)
	Shared knowledge	Smaller (vs. larger) networks of Time 2 observers = Time 1 actors age more poorly	e.g., Almaatouq et al. (2020); Barrett et al. (2012); Shteynberg (2015)
Time 2 *motivations* to access/ incorporate further Time 1 details	Ingroup versus Outgroup	Time 2 observers from the actor's outgroup (vs. ingroup) = Time 1 actors age more poorly	e.g., Hewstone (1989); Ostrom and Sedikides (1992); Pettigrew (1979)
	Liking	Time 2 observers who dislike (vs. like) the actor = Time 1 actors age more poorly	e.g., Finkel et al. (2002); Karremans and Aarts (2007); Regan and Totten (1975)
	Subjective state (e.g., emotion)	Time 2 observers in more (vs. less) negative states = Time 1 actors age more poorly	e.g., Bodenhausen et al. (1994); Fischer and Roseman (2007); Lerner et al. (1998)
	Beliefs about change	Time 2 observers who view Time 2 as more (vs. less) "right" than Time 1 = Time 1 actors age more poorly	e.g., Kammrath and Peetz (2012); Martin and Heiphetz (2021); O'Brien (2022b); Pizarro and Tannenbaum (2012)
	Actor relevance (social, cultural, personal)	Time 2 observers who view Time 1 actors as more (vs. less) presently relevant = Time 1 actors age more poorly	e.g., Carpenter (1988); Eylon and Allison (2005); Klein and O'Brien (2017); Kristal et al. (2019); Tetlock (1983a)

A common refrain is past mistakes now "live forever" online (Hill, 2021). Positive actions at Time 1 may violate Time 2 standards—and these actions, now mistakes, are starkly preserved for Time 2 eyes to see and admonish. In this way, our framework predicts that actors underestimate the future risks of their digital footprints (Hofstetter et al., 2017).[5]

Making matters worse for actors, other research finds actors are especially likely to engage in impression management on social media (vs. other settings: Krämer & Winter, 2008; Zhao et al., 2008), where they prefer to share their experiences via more permanent (vs. more temporary) channels (Anlamlier & Ulu, 2022). The current temporal account may thus provide a causal answer to why actors' social media use is negatively correlated with their mental health (e.g., Huang, 2017; Kross et al., 2013; Tromholt, 2016; Twenge et al., 2018): Users likely share Time 1 content without sufficiently accounting for how it may age (poorly) into Time 2 contexts.

What to Do About It?

What can actors do to avoid aging poorly and instead age well?[6]

To be clear, this is a vast pragmatic challenge to overcome. The degree of cognitive resources needed for actors to model boundless futures is steep, if not impossible to achieve in some ways. The heuristics that help actors navigate the immediate present will not be easily overridden, nor should they. Perhaps actors are better off simply focusing on their present goals alone, with the burden to solve these temporal issues being put on external interventions instead. For example, a social media company may offload some of actors' cognitive burdens by setting social media posts to autodelete, by making privacy settings the default, and/or by using AI-driven nudges to prompt users to reflect to temporal aging before they post—such as by asking users "Are you sure you want to post this?" (plus some key future-oriented questions), akin to Pennycook and Rand's (2022) accuracy prompts that help reduce the spread of misinformation. Likewise, perhaps Time 1 actors should just let the future unfold however it will; if things "age poorly," the more realistic approach may be to intervene in the minds of Time 2 observers at that point (e.g., via empathy interventions to contextualize an actor's past misdeeds).

We encourage such interventions. In addition, some additional thinking from Time 1 actors may help more than none, even if actors cannot solve the problem on their own. Exerting the effort to predict what Time 2 observers will see favorably (and then acting that way) may also help Time 1 actors make it so, leading actors to enjoy other long-term benefits like feelings of self-assurance—as compared to more randomly stumbling on a favorable Time 2 status or legacy, which is hard to rely on and may make actors feel like unfit flukes (Neeley & Dumas, 2016).

The current article suggests one particular path forward for potential actor strategies: Per the logic of egocentrism, actors can better manage their temporal impressions if they better break from their present anchor and adjust for a new future. We generate some such strategies below.

Reflecting on Unknowns. Present contexts are fleeting. Actors could pay more attention to how present norms are changing, to better appreciate today's soon-coming "black-and-whiteness." Of course, many unknowns are truly unknown. But cultivating mere awareness of this fact may help. Simply admitting one's limits of perception has been linked with wiser thinking (Ardelt, 2003; Lilienfeld et al., 2009). Time 1 actors could put more weight on future randomness in their Time 2 calculations (Kahneman & Lovallo, 1993; Simonton, 2003). When debaters face explicitly unknown (vs. known) audiences, *and* feel free from (vs. wedded to) their own current stance, they become more likely to anticipate and adjust for potential objections (dubbed engaging in *preemptive self-criticism*: Tetlock, 1983b).

Actors could stop to ask themselves targeted questions such as "Will be my actions be recorded and accessible in the future?"; "What is the chance of unforeseen future scrutiny?"; "Do I want to make a present-specific statement now vs. a more general statement?"; "Is this environment one of rapid or slow change?"; "Is this action understandable in isolation, or will it need context?"; and "If things 'age poorly,' what is my room to remedy them with an apology?" (e.g., via accounting tactics: Schlenker, 1980; Schumann, 2018)—all before actors decide to act.

Reframing Time. Another strategy for actors could entail viewing their past, present, and future as a single collective—dubbed taking a "bird's eye view of time" (Mogilner et al., 2018). Taking such a view is designed not only to draw people's attention to the future and how it connects to the present, but also to how these future pieces *differ* from the present. In this way, it resembles self-distancing tasks used for emotion regulation, whereby the goal is to help people break out of their own egocentric view and see an event from a new perspective (e.g., via third-person vs. first-person simulations: Libby & Eibach, 2011; via "fly on the wall" simulations: Kross & Ayduk, 2011). Kristal et al. (2019, Study 4) found that a temporal reframing task influenced felt emotions in the present, whereby participants were guided to consider how they will feel about an event in the distant future looking back at it. Peetz and Wilson (2013, Studies 1 and 2) found that drawing participants' attention to a future temporal landmark led them to predict greater change from now to then, relative to control participants who judged that same future point but without a landmark. Magen et al. (2008, Study 1) found that explicitly framing future opportunity costs as being at odds with present consumption decisions helps reduce present bias.

Estimating Time 2 Change. As we reviewed earlier regarding dimension differences, what counts as a horizontal (vs. vertical) action is more prone to change over time. Time 1 actors could be especially mindful before engaging in horizontal signaling—like by crowdsourcing how such actions might age. Crowdsourcing has been shown to improve forecasts even for complex social changes (e.g., Mellers et al., 2014) and matters of taste (e.g., Müller-Trede et al., 2018).

Relatedly, akin to Rawls' (1971) classic thought experiment that asks people to assume a "veil of ignorance" about *where* they are in society (before they take a policy position), Time 1 actors could assume such a veil about *when* they are in society (before they engage in impression management). This exercise forces Time 1 actors to consider what actions they could take that maximize chances of impressing [$Time_1$ . . . $Time_n$] Observers. Some answers may be gleaned from research on hedonic adaptation, and the kinds of experiences to which people are slower to adapt (e.g., O'Brien, 2021; O'Brien & Kassirer, 2019). Other answers may be gleaned from research on long-lasting cultural products (e.g., heritage brands: Urde et al., 2007). Time 1 actors could think more about what makes something timeless and then work to emulate those features.

Actors could also engage in "backward planning" (Wiese et al., 2016) or even conduct a "premortem" (Gallop et al., 2016): They could imagine their actions going as badly as possible and then try to understand why—*before* acting. Such strategies are supported by the constructive episodic simulation hypothesis (Schacter et al., 2007), which proposes that effective simulations of the future entail drawing on bits of related past events and reconfiguring them in novel ways.

Impressing Observers' Remembering Selves. Time 1 actors could tailor their actions to observers' *remembering* selves in addition to observers' experiencing selves—meaning they could exploit known memory biases to their temporal advantage. For example, human memory tends to inflate the informational value of an experience's ending (e.g., Kahneman & Riis, 2005); Time 1 actors could thus strategically end an act of impression management on their strongest timeless note. Not only might Time 1 observers enjoy this in real time (O'Brien & Ellsworth, 2012b), but this is also what they will most likely recall when looking back in Time 2 contexts.

Thinking Evergreen. More generally, actors may want to think in "evergreen" terms—to assume their Time 1 actions are permanent and so consider how they may look from all sorts of Time 2 angles. This could mean adding more context to one's Time 1 communications for aiding Time 2 observers' interpretations (while still attempting to maintain appeal to Time 1 observers). This could also mean knowing when not to act at all (e.g., being more selective on social media), realizing a picture of preserved content will be worth a thousand words of later-explained context. The biographer Hamilton (2008, pp. 256–257) warns: "Is it worth imposing a political agenda on the finale of a great biography . . . ? . . . Posterity and cultural interests are fickle, and an impassioned appeal in one era can seem silly in the next."

This advice may be especially apt in today's information age. Consider again the growing practice of "cybervetting"—employers' use of online content for personnel selection (Berkelaar, 2014). One estimate suggests over 70% of hiring managers (spanning varied industries, e.g., IT, retail, manufacturing) use cybervetting to make hiring decisions (CareerBuilder, 2018). Perhaps as a result of this, "record erasing"—whereby people pay to scrub their past misdeeds from the Internet—is a booming business (Schiffer, 2019). The landmark "Right To Be Forgotten" Law, which allows people to request the removal of personal online content, was passed in 2014 by the European Union and has only grown in relevance with the rise of AI technologies (Zhang et al., 2023). In addition to such protections, encouraging actors to be more wary of today's age of "Time 2's" may help. For example, actors care more about impression management as they face larger (vs. smaller) audiences (Barasch & Berger, 2014)—perhaps reminding online users of the unbounded pool of unknown future eyes that could one day see their present content motivates them to act in ways that age better. It may also help to remind actors about the potential for others to record one's own present actions and post them online, even if one posts carefully oneself.

Putting such ideas into practice, the University of Edinburgh offers a "Managing Your Digital Footprint" program that encourages students to be more mindful and selective regarding how they self-present online (Osborne & Connelly, 2015), which was recently adapted into a Massive Open Online Course; see Coursera (2025) for the course link.

IV. Concluding Thoughts

Over-Catering to the Future? A Cautionary Addendum

We end by revisiting the premise that engaging in temporal impression management is something that indeed applies to people in general, or whether it instead mainly applies to people in specific roles, such as people whose livelihoods depend on producing timelessly appealing content. For example, a film director may lose future work if future generations no longer enjoy their present films, and a politician may lose re-election in 4 years if those future constituents deem their present policies out of touch. The current article surely applies to such cases, arguably especially much. People who plan to take actions that might "age well" might especially benefit from this article's prescriptions. Yet everyday people likely premeditate less in this way, and perhaps for good reason. Should Time 1 actors across typical everyday life cater their actions to Time 2 observers?

As we sought to highlight throughout, engaging in temporal impression management could help even everyday actors navigate today's rapidly changing world, offering them benefits and helping them avoid costs as observers keep tabs over time. Even if actors have no present concerns for future judgment, they cannot know whether and which Time 1 actions can resurface in a recontextualized Time 2, when they will in fact want to be judged favorably—not least due to today's widespread online documentation of the present for any motivated future party to find. If given the choice between taking an action that will impress present observers (but not future observers) versus taking a similar action that will impress present observers (and also future observers), all of us would choose the latter. The current article encourages readers to consider that the latter may be more attainable than actors realize.

In practice, however, actors could also invest too much in temporal impression management. For example, over-worrying about future judgment may lead actors to tweak their present content in ways that make it fail to survive for any Time 2 consumption in the first place (e.g., over-explaining the presently obvious context of present events, in order to aid future others' understanding, may bury one's message from the get-go). Likewise, over-worrying about future judgment may lead actors to make no impact in the present (e.g., actors may decide to act in generic ways that fail to connect with current events), or to get lost in their own heads trying to solve for future unknowns and so "check out" (e.g., to just stay quiet and take no action, due to fears of future retribution)—all of which may undermine other goals (e.g., to do things that matter right now; to take risks that may unexpectedly pay off). Indeed, people often regret their past inactions when looking back from afar (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995), suggesting that engaging in temporal impression management may help actors cater to future observers but also harm actors in other ways. An ever-respected elder may look regret not having more mindless fun in their youth. This cautionary note is echoed in research on the problem of hyperopia, whereby people sometimes worry so much about future logistics that they never stop to enjoy the present (Hagen & O'Brien, 2025; Kivetz & Keinan, 2006; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002; Shu & Gneezy, 2010; Zauberman & Lynch, 2005).

This article highlights various contexts in which temporal impression management may benefit actors, whereby their present actions may be viewed positively by *both* present and future observers. Nonetheless, the net value of this goal could be diluted by other effects of attaining it.

Statements of Generality, Citations, and Positionality

The current article assumed its central claims regarding time and change are psychologically universal, as all people live and change over time. We also assumed the notion of making positive impressions is generally known and relevant across social life. At the same time, there may have been constraints in terms of the typical participants that were included in the empirical studies we cited throughout the article; for example, many studies across psychological science are constrained by relying on convenience samples that draw from highly educated and other select demographic variables (Henrich et al., 2010). We discussed theoretical boundaries of our framework, but our conclusions may be constrained by select samples. Likewise, we sought to cite and discuss research from diverse expert perspectives (e.g., not only from scholars in psychology but also from sociology, philosophy, history, and law) that spanned multiple decades (e.g., dating as far back as the 1940's, to as recently as today) and world regions (e.g., from both Western and Eastern traditions), but our literature search was constrained by not systematically examining non-English and unpublished sources. Similarly, our reading of the relevant literatures was filtered through our own lens of being American, English-speaking social psychologists in the year 2025. Scholars in more explicitly different contexts from ours (e.g., scholars with entirely different background trainings; scholars who operate in future states of the world that are more or less fast-changing than our present state) may approach these issues differently and see things we missed.

Article Summary and Take-Home Points

People have been striving to make positive impressions on others long before scholars took interest in them doing it. Impression management is a "fundamental feature of social life" (Schlenker, 2003, p. 513) that is "characteristic of much social interaction as it occurs in natural settings in our society" (Goffman, 1959, p. 153). The current article has provided an integrative egocentric framework for understanding when and why actors can err in these goals. Moreover, this framework can fruitfully utilize the logic of egocentric anchoring and adjustment to advance the literature as well—as we have done here within the context of actors making *temporal* errors.

One's actions in the present are not only judged now, in relation to contemporary standards; those same actions can also be judged later, in relation to yet-unknown future standards. As we have reviewed throughout, temporal egocentrism dictates that actors are less well attuned to the latter judgment even when it is no less a part of their global standing. We hope the value of this article thus lies in organizing and integrating at least two large literatures (i.e., on impression management, and temporal cognition/judgment) and generating an extensive set of theoretically grounded research questions we hope can be generative for future inquiry.

Indeed, this shift in impression management concerns from the spatial to the temporal highlights exciting avenues for cross-disciplinary study. In summarizing the spatial approach, Hilbe et al. (2018, p. 12241) write: "This framework assumes that members of a population routinely

observe and assess each other's social interactions. Whether a given action is perceived as good depends on the action itself, the context, and the social norm used by the population. Behaviors that yield a good reputation in one society may be condemned in others." The current article emphasizes that such societies also come from new times beyond today, which present actors may struggle to account for. New times are emerging quickly in today's information age, presenting distinct challenges for actors now vs. later. Actors may sometimes find benefits from recognizing the future is presently judging them ("It's not what you say, but *when* you say it").

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Notes

1. Indeed, the idea that people are psychologically "stuck" in the present has a rich history in psychological science. A core tenet of social psychology is that behavior is determined by the immediate situation—the "here and now"—which was initially proposed by Kurt Lewin (e.g., Lewin, 1943), then referred to as the "power of the situation" (e.g., Ross & Nisbett, 1991), then recently restated in terms of "proximate construal" (e.g., Wilson, 2022). We expand on this idea in the context of impression (mis)management.
2. Online contexts are just one example—a timely and important one (see Part III)—of the basic dynamic that occurs across everyday life. Offline, for example, actors could consider observers' later stories or lasting memories of one's present actions, which may look different when looking back. The framework applies both offline and online alike.
3. Differences in chronological time and observer-type nonetheless do bear on the actor's Time 2 *consequences*. Far (vs. proximate) Time 2 observers, and new (vs. repeat) Time 2 observers, may be harsher to judge Time 1 actors for now-deemed bad actions assuming the former observers cannot as easily situate the actor's Time 1 action in its Time 1 context. We return to this idea—which secondarily reflects the *observer's* perspective, and how Time 2 observers look back to reconstruct the actor's Time 1 action—in Part III. For now, note that the goal of this article is to model the *actor*'s perspective (building on existing models of impression management)—how Time 1 actors think ahead to how their present actions might "age." Temporal egocentrism suggests actors poorly account for this before they act.
4. In Part III, we return to this idea of potential actor–observer effects over time (e.g., how Time 2 actors may look back at their own Time 1 actions similarly vs. differently than how Time 2 observers look back at actors' Time 1 actions).
5. This idea is echoed by the differential rates of evolutionary versus societal change. Even in a world where one realizes future norms will change, the thought that one's Time 1 actions can be preserved in their full original integrity (e.g., via a video) for anyone in that new future to see (e.g., online)—all without full context—is unprecedented in our ancestral history (Shariff et al., 2021). Today's online actors may thus especially run into these temporal problems.
6. We reiterate that "aging well" is not the only impression management goal (among other goals) actors can have. As reviewed, for example, actors could seek to act in ways that express their "true self" at the time, regardless of other consequences (Schlenker, 2003). Here we discuss answers for when actors might indeed want to "age well."

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