The Dialectical Nature of Impression Management in Knowledge Work: Unpacking Tensions in Media Use Between Managers and Subordinates

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Abstract

The stage on which impressions are managed is no longer purely a physical one but is increasingly mediated by various communication technologies that offer different affordances. This study examines the interplay of media affordances, impression management, and dialectical tensions in relationships between managers and their subordinates. Based on 91 semi-structured interviews and observations from six project teams operating in the consumer health, insurance, and engineering industries located in Sweden and the United States, we identify and explore three sets of impression management tactics. Our analysis reveals that the actions of managers and subordinates were often in dialectical tension, playing out through multiple media in a tactic–countertactic dynamic that played an important role in shaping manager–subordinate relationships. We discuss how these tactics complement and extend theory on impression management, dialectical tensions, and media use in organizations.

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Managers and subordinates often face conflicting goals, which may generate tensions in their interactions with one another. Although they are often driven by their own personal or role-based goals, they also face needs to acknowledge and accommodate the goals of others to maintain cooperative working relationships (Eisenberg & Witten, 1987). Impression management, defined as efforts by an actor to create, maintain, or alter an image held by others (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997), can help manage tensions arising from conflicting goals, especially in knowledge-intensive settings using various communication technologies (CTs) where roles and assignments are subject to interpretation and expectations are not always clear (Erhardt, 2011; Erhardt, Martin-Rios, & Way, 2009; Ferris, Adams, Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, & Ammeter, 2002; Vaast, 2007b). Impression management allows an actor to display favorable impressions regarding consideration for the interests of others (i.e., the audience), while attending to one’s own goals.

With the proliferation of CTs in the workplace, the stage on which impressions are displayed is becoming increasingly mediated. Impression management tactics are likely to take new forms as managers and subordinates leverage physical face-to-face (FtF) interactions as well as a growing range of CTs to help accomplish their goals. Each medium offers different affordances or possibilities for action (Hiltz & Turoff, 1978; Hutchby, 2001; Rice & Associates, 1984); for example, email allows edited responses, and FtF allows greater transmission of nonverbal cues. These affordances may in fact generate dialectical tensions for users, however (Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013). For instance, while CTs such as email, mobile phones, instant messaging, and videoconferencing may offer greater flexibility and control over work through ubiquitous access and increased information-processing ability, these same affordances are also perceived as creating extra work, stress, and communication overload (Barley, Meyerson, & Grodal, 2011). In addition, different affordances (whether of the same or different media) may also be in tension. We argue that organizational members engage in an array of impression management tactics by drawing strategically on affordances provided by a variety of media, and these communicative practices help to manage tensions that arise from both competing role-based goals and media affordances.

Research suggests that CTs are often used for impression management purposes by organizational members (Birnholtz, Dixon, & Hancock, 2012; Leonardi & Treem, 2012) and that managers and subordinates use media strategically in
the workplace (Leonardi, Neeley, & Gerber, 2012). Yet, we know little about how managers and subordinates engage in impression management practices to manage tensions that arise both in their relationships with one another and in their media use. Impression management is generally framed in organizational studies as an individual phenomenon through a unidirectional actor–audience lens (see Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008, for a review). We contribute to this research by examining impression management as an interactive process composed of tactics and countertactics in which the actions of managers and subordinates recursively shape one another in a dialectical tug-of-war. In this regard, we offer a grounded theory of mediated impression management as a means of managing tensions in knowledge work settings. Following Goffman (1959), we regard impression management as a dramaturgical, social process that involves both actors and audience members (in this case managers and subordinates) who take turns playing each role as they adopt impression management tactics and subsequent countertactics. Our underlying assumption is that managers and subordinates face different goals and needs that produce natural role-based tensions (Eisenberg & Witten, 1987). The proliferation of media use in the workplace may in fact exacerbate such tensions, as well as help to resolve them, as members adopt different CTs to pursue their goals. These tensions are likely to trigger impression management tactics and countertactics as actors attempt to pursue role-based goals while trying to maintain good relationships with counterparts, drawing on a variety of media affordances.

To examine how role-based and media-based tensions shape manager–subordinate relationships, we employ a dialectical impression management lens and draw on interviews and observational data from six project teams in Sweden and the United States to identify and illustrate three sets of tactics and countertactics. Informed by a theoretical framework integrating theory on impression management, media affordances, and organizational dialectics, our analysis reveals that the actions of managers and subordinates were often in dialectical tension, taking place through multiple media in a tactic–countertactic dynamic that played an important role in shaping manager–subordinate relationships.

Theoretical Framework

Impression Management

In his seminal work on self-presentation, Goffman (1959) argued that individuals continuously engage in a process of acting and role-playing in an attempt to portray a desired image of themselves and control others’ impressions of them. He contended,
When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. In line with this, there is a popular view that the individual offers his performance and puts on his show “for the benefit of other people.” (Goffman, 1959, p. 17)

Goffman highlights the fact that our behavior is socially influenced by the perceptions of others. Extending this work, research on strategic self-presentation in the workplace suggests that organizational members may engage in impression management for professional reasons (Bolino et al., 2008), to correct inaccurate or mistaken impressions that colleagues have of them to reap professional rewards (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1991). As individuals attempt to enact desired impressions, others rely on these impressions as a basis to reinforce or alter their views of these individuals. This social process takes place through both verbal and nonverbal communication, including body language, posture, speech, and rank (i.e., status) that may assist in creating favorable (or unfavorable) impressions and provides a key driver for organizational behavior (Bolino, 1999; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Yates, 1993).

Impression management allows the actor to create desired work-related impressions of professionalism, competence, or commitment, while pursuing individual goals that may be at odds with those of others, or with the organization as a whole. As such, impression management requires an actor and an audience, to and by which the impression is displayed and interpreted. This actor–audience relationship often occurs between managers and their subordinates (Barsness, Diekmann, & Seidel, 2005). However, given that the goals of managers and subordinates may be in tension, we situate impression management as not merely a unidirectional process whereby one person displays an impression in front of an audience but an interactive process in which the audience interprets the observed tactic and in turn responds with a countertactic motivated by their own interests. Our focus is on this recursive interaction, in which managers and subordinates both play the role of actors and observers at various times, such that the actions of one provoke counteractions by the other and vice versa.

Impression Management and Media Affordances

Organizational research on impression management has been conducted mainly in FtF settings, with an emphasis on the use of physical cues to manage impressions (e.g., Leary & Kowalski, 1990), and has paid only cursory
attention to impression management in mediated contexts. As CTs become more ubiquitous in organizations, the stage on which managers and subordinates “perform” is no longer just a physical one, but it is increasingly mediated as well. This adds complexity to how and when impression management is enacted, as CTs may provide different affordances for managing impressions (Rice, 1987). Despite the established link between impression management and CTs in interpersonal contexts (e.g., Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Gottschalk, 2010), research has provided few insights regarding such links in organizational contexts.

The term “affordance” was originally coined by J. J. Gibson (1979) to explain the ways in which different species of animals orient to objects in their environment, and later extended to the realm of human-centered design to explain how users interact with media devices and other everyday objects (Norman, 1990). Hutchby (2001) defined technological affordances as “functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object” (p. 444). An affordance lens finds a middle ground between social constructivist and realist perspectives by explaining how a technology’s material features combine with subjective perceptions and goals of users to determine its use. Different as well as the same CTs may thus provide different affordances (Leonardi, 2009). Rather than being the baseline or ideal medium, FtF communication has strengths and weaknesses for impression management, as do other CTs. Indeed, all CTs may offer unique affordances for impression management. We refer to these as media affordances here, as we are interested in the differential affordances provided by a range of media, including FtF.

The notion that CTs provide certain affordances that make them particularly suitable for impression management is not new (e.g., Hiltz & Turoff, 1978; Rice & Associates, 1984). More recently, Walther (2007) noted that text-based computer-mediated communication in particular offers several advantages in terms of impression management. First, it is editable, and as such, there is more room for controlling how the message will be interpreted. Second, its asynchronicity allows individuals more time to think about responses to messages and carefully craft and refine messages before sending them. Third, there are fewer behavioral cues that could be inadvertently sent off. As Goffman (1959) puts it, more identity cues are “given” rather than “given off.” As such, text-based channels (i.e., email, instant messaging) offer affordances that reduce nonverbal “leakage” of communication and allow users to better control presentation of desired impressions through “selective self-presentation” (Walther & Burgoon, 1992). Finally, individuals devote fewer cognitive resources to environmental scanning (monitoring feedback of others) and managing their nonverbal expressions, and can thus
focus more on the message itself. However, they also risk sacrificing understanding of the recipient as well as their own impression of others (e.g., misreading intention or tone). This results in more malleable self-presentation online than in FtF communication (Walther, 1993). The hyperpersonal perspective (Walther, 1996) suggests that this strategically edited and carefully controlled, optimized self-presentation may lead to exaggerated or idealized impressions of relational partners, due to overattribution of the minimal cues that are present (Sherblom, 2010).

The limited cues in CTs provide affordances such as invisibility and control of unwanted information, which may be beneficial in face-threatening situations. O’Sullivan (2000) found that when self-presentation concerns were threatened, individuals used mediated channels strategically because they had fewer social cues. Rather than being deficient and unsuitable for complex communication situations, leaner channels were reportedly preferred in face-threatening situations due to their capacity to ambiguate, or completely obscure, unattractive, or embarrassing information and give one’s partner greater control over when and how to respond (O’Sullivan, 2000). A more recent study found that both media features and individuals’ social skills combined to enable them to regulate and restrict the flow of social information in face-threatening situations (Feaster, 2010).

Several empirical studies have extended Goffman’s framework to mediated work contexts by examining the fragmented or continuous nature of self-presentation in occupational online forums (Vaast, 2007a), microblog disclosure (Walton & Rice, 2013), and the effects of video-mediated interactions among MBA students (Fayard, 2006). Birnholtz et al. (2012) demonstrated that organizational members may appropriate CTs to achieve their own objectives, contending that

... people in social settings exploit ambiguities afforded by media to craft sometimes-deceptive explanations for behaviors that might otherwise seem rude or anti-social (e.g., texting “I’m on my way” before one has actually left home to explain impending tardiness). (p. 1029)

Leonardi and Treem (2012), drawing on Goffman’s approach, explained why organizational knowledge management technologies may not effectively capture individual expertise, due to their use as a stage upon which individuals engage in strategic self-presentation by enacting performances of desired, rather than actual, expertise. This suggests that some knowledge workers may be motivated by impression management concerns in their media use.
Research that has explicitly distinguished between status levels (i.e., manager and subordinates) remains limited, however, with a few exceptions. Westerman and Westerman (2010) found that managers adopted face-saving messages by avoiding email and using FtF interactions to deliver negative feedback. Moreover, research on subordinates’ use of impression management suggests that physical proximity may play a role in how impression management tactics are adopted. For example, Barsness et al. (2005) found that when employees spent more time working remotely from their supervisors, they tended to increase their use of both supervisor-related (e.g., complementing the supervisor) and job-focused (e.g., self-enhancement activities) impression management. Finally, Sosik and Jung (2003) examined managers’ charismatic leadership and found that the nature of self-awareness impacted managers’ use of different tactics (ingratiation, self-promotion, intimidation, exemplification, and supplication). This stream of research suggests that managers and subordinates are likely to use different tactics to engage in impression management; however, until now, research has focused primarily on one actor or the other, and thus the ways in which these tactics are mutually constituted or in tension have rarely been studied. Furthermore, we know little about the ways in which managers and subordinates draw on different media affordances to engage in these impression management tactics.

**Impression Management as a Dialectical Process**

Organizational members are typically motivated to achieve multiple goals, some of which may be individually motivated, and this has implications for media use (Romm, 1999). Yet, managers and subordinates are interdependent by virtue of their organizational roles, in managerial work such as delegating, providing feedback, and assessing performance and subordinates’ responding to assigned tasks and delivering results. Each party relies on the other to fulfill its role-based duties and maintain a cooperative relationship (Rousseau, 1995); preserving good working relationships is in their mutual interest (Sheer & Chen, 2003). While managers and subordinates may share common interests, role-based priorities and needs lead to tensions if they are not shared (Barley et al., 2011; Xin & Pelled, 2003). Role-based impression management tactics—whether conscious or subconscious—attempt to mask opposing interests while maintaining a favorable public image.

Dialectical theory originated with Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogism and was developed by Baxter and Montgomery (1996) to explain dialectical tensions in interpersonal relationships. According to the theory, a dialectic is the opposition between two poles (goals or needs) that are both contradictory and mutually desired. It does not involve a simple either/or choice between the
two, but a tension in which both poles must be attended to simultaneously. For example, manager–subordinate relationships often involve tensions between autonomy and connectedness, in that each party desires both independence from the other (to tend to individual role-based goals) and interdependence with their counterpart (requiring cooperation) for the relationship to be fulfilling (Janz, Colquitt, & Noe, 1997).

Research has adapted this theory to explain organizational tensions, relying on the premise that tensions are a ubiquitous feature of organizing and are not necessarily detrimental; rather, they enable diverse, opposing goals to coexist within organizational contexts among organizational stakeholders (Jian, 2007; Putnam, 2003; Tretheway & Ashcraft, 2004). For example, research on global team interaction has found that tensions and ambiguity can be productive in global organizing and that tensions of autonomy–connectedness, inclusion–exclusion, and empowerment–disempowerment are enabling (particularly for managers) by allowing for competing goals and interests to coexist (Gibbs, 2009). In the same way, we theorize that impression management tactics maintain a balance between managerial and subordinate goals that may be at odds with one another. We further theorize that media use is likely to create additional tensions as managers and subordinates draw on media affordances that are in tension with one another and engage in impression management tactics and countertactics to manage such tensions. In this sense, tactics and countertactics represent communicative responses that arise out of the broader dialectics in the relationship and help to manage these tensions. We frame impression management as a social process and examine the tactics and countertactics adopted by managers and their subordinates and the ways in which they are both mutually constituted and dialectically related, and how affordances of various communication media (including FtF) contribute to the tactics employed. As such, our fieldwork begins with one central research question:

**Research Question 1:** How are impression management tactics and countertactics between managers and subordinates enacted through various media affordances?

**Method**

**Research Setting**

We adopted a qualitative case-based approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003) to explore how impression management tactics between managers and their subordinates are enacted through various media affordances. We
collected data from six project teams in companies operating in Sweden (three teams from a large insurance company and two teams from a small engineering company) and in the United States (one team from a large consumer health product company). These cases were chosen based on two criteria before actual fieldwork was conducted—teams that (a) engaged in knowledge work involving abstract and conceptual tasks in which judgment was central and (b) utilized various media (including FtF) to communicate. The size of the project teams ranged from 5 to 12 members and teams were in the mid to late stages of their projects at the start of the fieldwork. Team membership varied from highly cross-functional (e.g., Flashlight and Beginning projects) to more functional teams (e.g., ILR, AQP, Power Box, and Exhaust projects). Each team had a formal leader, a project manager who was ultimately responsible for the final deliverables. See Table 1 for a description of the teams studied.

**Data Collection**

Although our participants worked in project teams, we conducted our analysis at a dyadic level. We collected a rich, multi-method data set consisting of formal and informal interviews with managers and subordinates, observations of both formal (e.g., team meetings) and informal (e.g., lunch gatherings) interactions, and archival information such as team charters, memos, and PowerPoint presentations. The first author conducted all data collection, completing 16 months of fieldwork to the stage of “theoretical saturation,” in which similar instances are seen over and over again and “no additional data are . . . found whereby the (researcher) can develop properties of the category” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 65). For this study, we drew primarily on the in-depth interviews and observations of physical and teleconference meetings.

**Interviews.** After gaining background information, each case was initiated by interviewing the project manager to get an overview of the project, its members, overall goals, timeline, nature of work, etc. We then conducted a total of 91 formal and informal in-depth interviews (12 with managers and 79 with subordinates). Each manager and most team members were interviewed twice to allow for follow-up questions. Interviews were semi-structured and ranged from 40 to 75 minutes (averaging an hour). Both initial and follow-up interviews were conducted on-site, in or near the participant’s office, except for some follow-up interviews, which were conducted by phone. Interviews in Sweden were conducted in Swedish (the first author is fluent in the language). Interview questions ranged from broad (“describe the project you are
Table 1. Description of Case Data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case/characteristics</th>
<th>Flashlight</th>
<th>ILR</th>
<th>AQP</th>
<th>Beginning</th>
<th>Power Box</th>
<th>Exhaust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project objective</strong></td>
<td>Develop and launch a novel, stand-alone medical device based on computerized image sensory technology</td>
<td>Implement private insurance policy documents (property, motor, and personal) on new print platform</td>
<td>Develop web-based service involving moving insurance products from paper to Internet</td>
<td>Develop new product (i.e., insurance) policy tailored for teenagers’ specific needs (e.g., mopeds, laptops)</td>
<td>Develop multi-function electronic utility box with various outlets and applications for industrial use</td>
<td>Design safety break point for a sliding mechanism that captures engine exhaust for indoor industrial use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task complexity</strong></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Functional diversity</strong></td>
<td>High: Marketing, IT, Electrical Engineering, Research, Finance, Manufacturing</td>
<td>Moderate: Business Operations (marketing, customer service, and telephone sales) and IT</td>
<td>Moderate: IT, Internet, Marketing</td>
<td>Low: High: Product development, Marketing, Internet, IT, Sales, Training</td>
<td>Low: High: Engineering, Sales, Manufacturing, Knowledge Management</td>
<td>Low: High: Engineering, Sales, Manufacturing, Knowledge Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree of geographical dispersion</strong></td>
<td>Moderate: Two locations (10 in the United States, 2 in France)</td>
<td>Moderate: Two locations (8 in one city, 2 in another city)</td>
<td>Moderate: Two locations (5 in one city, 1 in another)</td>
<td>Moderate: Split between three locations (3 cities)</td>
<td>Moderate: Split between three locations (3 cities)</td>
<td>Low: All on the same site, in two buildings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td>The United States/France</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Size of team</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>% of team interviewed</strong></td>
<td>83</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FtF team meetings</strong></td>
<td>High (weekly)</td>
<td>High (weekly)</td>
<td>High (weekly)</td>
<td>Low (monthly)</td>
<td>Low (monthly)</td>
<td>Low (monthly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teleconferences</strong></td>
<td>High (weekly)</td>
<td>Moderate (biweekly)</td>
<td>Low (monthly)</td>
<td>Moderate (biweekly)</td>
<td>Very low (less than once per month)</td>
<td>Very low (less than once per month)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. of individual telephone calls/day</strong></td>
<td>Very high (more than 20)</td>
<td>High (more than 15)</td>
<td>Moderate (5-10)</td>
<td>Moderate/high (10-15)</td>
<td>Low (less than 5)</td>
<td>Low (less than 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Email use per day</strong></td>
<td>Very high (more than 30)</td>
<td>Very high (more than 30)</td>
<td>High (more than 20)</td>
<td>Moderate (more than 10)</td>
<td>Low (less than 10)</td>
<td>Low (less than 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of project</strong></td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>8 months</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>8 months</td>
<td>9 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project stage</strong></td>
<td>Two thirds completed</td>
<td>Two thirds completed</td>
<td>Midpoint</td>
<td>Three fourths completed</td>
<td>Three fourths completed</td>
<td>Midpoint</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
working on,” “what is the purpose of the project?”) to more specific (“when and why do you use a particular medium?”). Follow-up interviews allowed us to delve deeper into emerging themes that surfaced in initial field notes and coding (Trochim, 1989). For example, responses such as “timing of emails,” “danger of email,” “avoiding FtF meetings,” “trying to appear engaged,” “careful editing,” “saving emails for later,” and “need to think about appearance” were regarded as indicators of impression management tactics that were further explored in follow-up interviews. Each interview was recorded on a laptop using Microsoft OneNote™ software, which allowed us to create flags and codes to generate a thematic summary of significant statements across all interviews.

**Observation.** In addition to interviews, we triangulated data through observation (Mathison, 1988). Observations of team-based knowledge work in action included five team meetings (two from ILR, one from Flashlight, one from Exhaust, and one from AQP), each between 60 and 120 minutes long. These meetings allowed us to compare and validate self-reported data from the one-on-one interviews. To further strengthen validity, the first author also listened in on three teleconference meetings, sitting next to one team member while the meeting transpired (from Flashlight, Beginning, and ILR projects). This offered additional insights into how these meetings were conducted, the structure of the meetings, the sound quality, the level of participation, the language used, and the observation of impression management tactics (e.g., multitasking while on the phone). Together with the interviews, this added up to over 70 hours of recorded data.

While we did not observe all teams in action, the observations and teleconferences provided helpful evidence of issues to further probe during interviews (e.g., asking informants what they were doing during the conference call after they hit the mute button). They also helped bolster the relatively low number of interviews conducted with managers, by providing further insight into their relationships with subordinates. Due to confidentiality issues, audio recording of meetings and teleconferences was not possible, but detailed notes were taken during and after each team meeting and later explored during follow-up interviews. Moreover, we were able to observe the office layouts and numerous informal interactions among team members.

**Coding and Analytic Strategy**

In keeping with the canons of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we adopted a threefold inductive procedure of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to unpack the impression management tactics used by
managers and subordinates (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which has been used in research on knowledge work (e.g., Anand, Gardner, & Morris, 2007). During the coding process, we used the constant comparison method to craft our working theory from the data. This technique involves ongoing comparisons between the working theory, the data, and emerging categories and themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first author conducted the initial open coding, whereby a first set of codes was generated based on the data. Individual statements, reflections, and notes from team observations were coded line by line to identify instances reflecting impression management, generating a total of 96 initial codes. Examples of initial codes were risk avoidance, accountability, message sensitivity, silence, role deference, and intermediaries.

Next, to make sense of these initial codes, both authors engaged in axial coding involving sorting and refining the initial codes into meaningful broader categories reflecting impression management tactics, such as “dodging response” (which included risk avoidance, accountability avoidance, and message sensitivity). This coding process was highly iterative (Pettigrew, 1997) and focused on conditions that would provide evidence for a category and the context in which it was embedded (Kendall, 1999). Confusing or problematic categories were separated in analysis and eliminated once they were confirmed to have no shared meaning.

At this stage, we began to note differences between managers and subordinates and observed that their actions and counteractions were often dialectically related, in that the actions of one group would motivate a counterresponse from the other group in an ongoing tug-of-war. The final step, selective coding, involved integrating and refining the dialectical tactics into broader themes (such as “dodging response vs. exerting social pressure”) that would serve as the basis for our grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this step, our theoretical structure emerged when codes and categories were related (Kendall, 1999).

Findings

Our analysis revealed that media affordances (of a variety of CTs including FtF) differentially enabled the ways in which impression management tactics were enacted to pursue individual goals while preserving cooperative manager–subordinate relationships. Interestingly, we observed that tactics arising from individual goals often triggered countertactics. Our emergent theoretical framework integrates these findings into three sets of tactics and countertactics, which represent communicative responses to broader underlying dialectics in the manager–subordinate relationship: dodging response versus
exerting social pressure, multicommunicating versus singular communicating, and promoting oneself versus giving credit to all. We now unpack these tactics and countertactics, the media affordances used to enact them by managers and subordinates, and the underlying tensions. Figure 1 outlines these tactics, their underlying goals, and media affordances.

**Dodging Response Versus Exerting Social Pressure**

As is common in many organizations, managers and subordinates faced pressures to manage their time. The nature of knowledge work conducted by subordinates meant that they often needed to ask managers for input and directives. To deal with the barrage of requests from employees, managers often addressed such requests through an impression management tactic we refer to as *dodging response*, with the intention of protecting their time and avoiding pinning themselves down, while maintaining good working relationships with their direct reports. In turn, subordinates engaged in *exerting social pressure* as a countertextic to procure the responses they needed.

Managers’ reluctance to provide clear answers was evident in slow, partial, or nonresponse to subordinates’ emails, afforded by its asynchronicity. At times, managers were strategically ambiguous (Eisenberg, 1984, 2007) by skillfully ignoring emails or responding selectively to only certain questions raised. Managers often commented on the need to protect their time and avoid “micromanaging” their direct reports; for example, during an informal conversation, John, the manager for the Flashlight project, made it clear “some team members are just too needy and want to be micromanaged.” Others did not perceive email as an urgent medium; Ulf, a manager in the AQP project, stated, “Sure, I don’t respond instantly. A lot of the issues that I see and read [in emails] aren’t that urgent. I would think if you really need something, you’d pick up the phone.” This strategic behavior by managers was verified in several team meetings as they acknowledged intentionally delaying response to subordinates; for instance, Henrick, manager of the ILR project, responded at one point in a team meeting, “Yeah, I guess I owe you a response to your email, haha!” The asynchronicity affordance decreased the perceived urgency of email and allowed for selective response to its content.

Managers also reported avoiding email due to its affordance of persistence—the documenting and enduring nature of digital information (boyd, 2010)—so as not to pin themselves down on issues about which they were unsure. As Henrick stated, “It’s true, I don’t respond sometimes for my own benefit. Emails don’t give you much flexibility. Once it’s sent, it’s a permanent record. You better be sure it’s right!” Having a written confirmation left no doubt about decisions and commitment. Some managers hinted that they
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Dialectical Tensions</th>
<th>Countertactic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dodging Response</td>
<td>• Protecting one’s time and accountability (managers)</td>
<td>Exerting Social Pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Media Affordances:</td>
<td>• Securing response and clarity (subordinates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Asynchronicity</td>
<td>Media Affordances:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Nontraceability</td>
<td>• Synchronicity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Persistence</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Multiplexity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multicommunicating</td>
<td>• Attending to multiple communicative activities (subordinates)</td>
<td>Singular Communicating</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Media Affordances:</td>
<td>• Obtaining full engagement from subordinates (managers)</td>
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<td>• Invisibility</td>
<td>Media Affordances:</td>
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<td>• Multiplexity</td>
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<td>Promoting Oneself</td>
<td>• Enhancing one’s self image (subordinates)</td>
<td>Giving Credit to All</td>
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<td>Media Affordances:</td>
<td>• Acknowledging everyone’s contributions (managers)</td>
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<td>• Editability</td>
<td>Media Affordances:</td>
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<td>• Asynchronicity</td>
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**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework: Dialectical tensions, impression management tactics, and media affordances.
had more to lose if they were wrong. The codified or persistent nature of email had political implications as it left little “wiggle room” for managers to avoid accountability for decisions and time commitments and to protect themselves from potential legal issues (see also Romm, 1999). They thus often preferred FtF or phone conversations for their nontraceability.

Although time management and reluctance to document communication were clear concerns among managers, they also noted that they could not simply ignore their subordinates, which would undermine their role as a manager. Our data suggest that managers’ dodging tactics (such as limiting their response to urgent or important matters or avoiding difficult questions in email) were strategic maneuvers to maintain a balance between protecting their time and face and attending to the needs of their subordinates. This way, managers were able to ultimately attend to subordinates’ needs, while protecting their own interests and maintaining good working relationships with their employees. Follow-up interviews confirmed that this tactic was mainly based on time considerations but also a reluctance to respond in writing to questions that they deemed “uncomfortable.”

Having to wait for answers to their requests slowed down subordinates’ work, which triggered the countertactic of exerting social pressure to push for timely responses from managers. Subordinates were motivated to move forward with their tasks, which required clear and timely responses from their managers. Some employees corroborated the managers’ perception of email as less urgent than more synchronous media such as phone or FtF, indicating that they would turn to more synchronous media when they needed a quick response. Ingrid, a team member from the ILR project, pointed out,

If I need prompt action, I run down to my colleague or I just pick up the phone. Sending an email is useful, but when things are urgent I need an answer right away, I need to talk to them live.

Her response indicated a preference for media with synchronous affordances for urgent matters requiring a quick response.

Others utilized an arsenal of communication channels involving both multiple media and multiple co-workers to apply social pressure to engage managers and obtain their commitment or response, acknowledging this as part of their job. As Stephanie, a marketing team member from Flashlight, stated,

Prodding my boss is part of my daily work. I use email, voice mail, and text messages on top of the help from my admin and Mary [another team member] . . . we do what we can to get things done.
Subordinates would involve multiple co-workers as intermediaries, as well as multiple media, to counter managers’ nonresponse, expressing concerns about respecting status or power differences so as not to impair cooperative relationships with their manager if they came across as too aggressive or pushy. Thus, rather than approaching a manager with repeated direct requests, subordinates would mobilize other members to “push” for action in an indirect manner by sending reminders through email requests or in passing in the hallway, with the intention to more subtly call the manager to action.

Michael, a member of the Flashlight project representing the IT function, explained how this intermediary tactic was used behind the scenes to push his manager to move things along:

I must have Richard [Manager and VP of Product Development] send materials to the design agency since I won’t be here, so now I have to make sure that Richard follows through since he doesn’t always read emails. So, I left him a VM [voice mail], and I will follow up with Mary [a project member] since I know that she is extremely responsive and will get it done. If she and Ken don’t get something from Richard after some gentle prodding, which happens frequently . . . I’ve also cc’d my admin on the note so that she will know to push him as well when she sees him. As a last resort, I will call Richard myself to remind him if I don’t hear progress by next Wednesday night.

This quote reveals that subordinates engaged in countermoves by drawing on multiple media with affordances of synchronicity and multiplexity to relay messages through multiple people to exert social pressure on superiors to respond. Using multiple media and people to get responses was a way of ensuring that one’s needs to accomplish work were met, while respecting the higher status of managers and maintaining good relationships with them.

Multicommunicating Versus Singular Communicating

Whereas response dodging by managers was countered by exerting social pressure from subordinates, at other times, the tables were turned and managers were the ones who needed subordinates to be engaged, while subordinates were motivated to protect their time and attend to other needs. This involved a tension between multicommunicating versus singular communicating. This set of tactics involved employees’ use of multimedia to electronically multitask or multicommunicate (Stephens, 2012; Stephens & Davis, 2009) by using mobile devices such as smartphones and laptops to attend to multiple communicative activities during meetings. This was countered by managers’ subtle indirect countertactic of discouraging multicommunicating in an attempt to foster full engagement and focus in meetings.
Employees’ use of multicommunicating was motivated by the need to attend to individual tasks—both work-related and personal—while creating the impression of being an engaged team player to maintain good standing with one’s manager. Subordinates often felt that meetings (FtF or virtual) required more time than they had, as Malin, a training specialist in the Beginning project, expressed, “We have been in team meetings all day. I can’t find any time to work!” The norm of working late hours, which was consistent across most teams (with the exception of the Power Box and Exhaust projects), triggered coping mechanisms to accomplish one’s work. For example, during the observed telephone conferences (and further supported by interview data), employees would leverage the affordance of invisibility of cues to mute the phone and read and draft emails and text messages, while appearing present in the conversation. Hands-free devices were popular tools used to multitask, such as while driving from work to off-site meetings. During team meetings, members would use laptops and smartphones to check email and stay “online” to maintain virtual presence. Others would call in and work at their desk as Fredrik, a software developer in the AQP project, explained,

> When the meeting is in this building, of the five sitting in the building, four would call in [from their desks]. The reason, I think, is that time is valuable; you can hit mute on the phone and work on emails and other things.

In a sense, meeting virtually even when members were co-located allowed them to keep their actions “invisible,” allowing them to attend to multiple communication needs simultaneously. While multicommunicating was reportedly a tactic to juggle work-related commitments, our informants also noted the work–life benefit of simply calling in via cell phones while attending their children’s after school activities.

Many subordinates noted the delicate balance between attending a meeting, virtually or physically, and handling other commitments, while pleasing the boss by appearing engaged. The use of multiple media while engaged in virtual meetings has been noted elsewhere (Majchrzak, Rice, Malhotra, King, & Ba, 2000). Managers were, however, resistant to this practice due to the perceived limits it placed on team members’ engagement in meetings. Managers consistently commented on their frustration with employees’ lack of focus during virtual meetings. Because employees were not physically visible during teleconferences, keeping track of who said what could be a challenge, especially in larger projects. During longer conference calls lasting several hours, it was not uncommon for subordinates to call in and leave the conference without introducing themselves or letting others know they had ended the call—maintaining a sense of ambiguity that allowed them to appear
present while being absent. This led to frustrations, as Anders, a project manager for the Beginning project, emphasized,

The norm is different in teleconferences. I was talking for a while to the team and at one point I asked Tim if he had anything to add. Tim? Hello? Well, I guess he had decided to leave the conversation.

Managers struggled to focus and engage multitasking subordinates. As Ulf, the AQP manager, elaborated on the topic of teleconferences, “It’s pretty obvious that people aren’t fully engaged, especially when I have to ask the same question two or three times for the person to get it.” The invisibility afforded by the lack of visual cues (such as eye contact and head nods) during teleconferences—although beneficial for surreptitious multitasking—made it difficult for managers to ensure that individuals were present and fully involved in knowledge work.

A managerial countertactic, singular communicating, was to use subtle expressions of frustration with CT to limit multicommunicating and foster full engagement among subordinates. Many managers acknowledged the busy schedules their subordinates faced, many of whom were working on several other team projects and reporting to more than one manager. However, they viewed the practice of being virtually present at two places at once as stifling subordinates’ participation, which was at odds with managerial goals of collaborative engagement and problem solving. For a countertactic, they attempted to encourage subordinates to attend FtF meetings by deploying subtle hints and signals. For example, they made comments about the distracting nature of CTs, sending a message of disapproval about multicommunicating. As Paula, a concept marketing representative in ILR, explained,

I used to use this hands-free device in my ear. I thought it was great. I could drive or sit at my desk and work while listening to a call. But my boss told me later after a conference call that it picked up a lot of noise in the surroundings.

Rather than outright banning CT use, most managers used less overt tactics to manage this tension such as indirect comments (as in Paula’s case) or requiring members located in the same building to call in to a teleconference from the same room to discourage members from sitting alone at their desks and multitasking. Interestingly, nonverbal cues were also used to hint at one’s disapproval of CT use. During one observation of an ILR team meeting, the facial expressions of the manager further validated this point, subtly displaying disapproval and annoyance by staring at the subordinate who was repeatedly checking email after receiving silent but noticeable vibrating notifications.
The use of such indirect countercountactics seemed motivated by the desire for mutual face-saving to maintain good relationships with direct reports. While managers acknowledged their employees’ busy schedules and lives outside work, their full engagement was critical at times. Instead of establishing explicit policies prohibiting laptops and smartphones in team meetings through a top-down management directive, simply alluding to media limitations left subordinates with the impression that they had better attend FiF meetings without being told. This softer approach was strategic in helping maintain impressions of both compassionate leadership and subordinate empowerment, and thus managing role-based tensions between disengagement and engagement. Interestingly, the mere physical presence of others seemed to operate as a secondary layer of concertive control (Barker, 1993) that exerted social pressure to engage in team meetings, as employees could no longer hide behind the mute button.

We noticed, however, that some managers were not against the use of CTs for multicommunicating for their own purposes in other team meetings. A few managers acknowledged drawing on the invisible affordances of CTs such as smartphones and laptops to multitask during meetings and attributed their more relaxed attitudes toward checking email during these meetings to the fact that they were not leading the meeting themselves and were thus in the role of “team member” rather than “team leader,” supporting the notion that tactics to engage and multicommunicate were in large part role-driven.

Promoting Oneself Versus Giving Credit to All

Our third and final dialectic involved impression management tensions in promoting oneself versus giving credit to others. Analysis suggests that subordinates leveraged the affordances of email to enhance their reputation and visibility, while managers adopted countercountactics to downplay their actions to acknowledge others on the team who were left out, resulting in tensions between self-face and other-face preservation. We refer to this tactic and countercountactic as promoting oneself versus giving credit to all.

In contrast to physical labor that results in a tangible product, the outputs of knowledge work are often more “invisible,” making it more difficult to judge performance and competence (Erhardt, 2011; Erhardt et al., 2009). As such, subordinates displayed motivation to not only ensure their invisible work would be noted and recognized but also enhance their individual professional reputation and maintain good working relationships with their managers. Given the affordances of editability and asynchronicity (Treem & Leonardi, 2012), subordinates often turned to email, which allowed them to manage their appearance through “selective self-presentation” (Walther &
Burgoon, 1992) with strategic timing and careful construction of messages. Some subordinates sent email late at night, on the weekend, or during their vacation to display dedication and commitment. This was a strategic way to get electronic “face time,” as Joe, an IT associate in the Flashlight project, explained, “Email could be a way to get in front of the manager. It’s similar to face time; you want your boss to think you’re a rock star. So you can’t screw up.” Tim, a sales representative in the Power Box project, noted, “I do think carefully about how I write to my boss. I don’t care if I send it to my co-workers as much. But I want to come across as professional.”

Given the invisible nature of knowledge work, self-promotion was often deemed necessary by subordinates. While subordinates were also interested in maintaining collegial relationships with co-workers by recognizing their work and contributions, at times, their desire to promote themselves took precedence, intentionally or unintentionally. Self-promotion tactics could involve sending a manager an update email without copying another involved team member, or proactively scheduling a one-on-one meeting with the manager without inviting other relevant team members to join or at a time when one knew the other person would not be able to attend. However, these self-promotion tactics carried the risk of potentially alienating and straining relationships with other team members—something that did not go unnoticed by several managers. One manager commented,

Some team members are of course better at what they do than others, and they often make it clear that I know that, but it can upset the dynamics in the team, so I make sure to give credit to everyone, even if some people deserve more credit.

Some managers recognized that giving credit to co-workers was simply a good management practice for the collective good to maintain a healthy and productive team dynamic. Ulf, the manager in the AQP project, mentioned in one interview,

... it’s important to recognize people in my team, as a manager ... I have been a team member many times myself, and when someone doesn’t give you credit for your work, it’s really demotivating. My role is to give credit as much as possible; if you don’t, well, you won’t be an effective manager.

One manager explained,

If I receive an email and I think someone is missing in the correspondence or should have been copied, I reply and make sure to copy that person and thank their joint effort—something like, “thanks John and Steve for your great work.”
Another manager explained that copying a missing person in a reply email message to the self-promoter further stressed the importance of giving credit to others. Other managers noted the importance of re-direct information to omitted subordinates. As Henrick, manager of the ILR project, noted, “If I notice that someone isn’t copied, I just forward it to this person as an FYI.” Probing on this further, Henrick explained that it served two functions, “...to make sure people that are involved are in the loop, but also to acknowledge the importance of each team member and that they are part of making decisions.” In this way, managers countered subordinates’ self-promotion attempts by expanding the audience of emails to promote inclusivity.

The different role-based goals created a tension between recognizing individual contributions while promoting collegiality within the team. This played out through a battle of self-face versus mutual face preservation among subordinates and managers. Interestingly, both tactics and countertactics relied primarily on email, but the same medium was used to provide differing affordances: subordinates relied on its editability and asynchrony to control when and how they presented themselves to managers, who in turn relied on its replicability (ability to forward) and broadcastability through the carbon copy feature to include and acknowledge others. In this sense, the final dialectic involved a tug-of-war over control of the audience included in specific messages, whether individual or collective. Subordinates drew on email to make themselves stand out, while managers used it to downplay or diffuse individual contributions to give credit to all.

Discussion

In contrast to past organizational research, which has framed impression management as an individual phenomenon occurring primarily FtF, our study provides insight into impression management as a process involving social interaction between two parties (i.e., managers and subordinates) that proceeds through different media affordances. Specifically, our emergent theory suggests that competing role-based goals and media affordances produce dialectical tensions in manager–subordinate relationships that are then managed through impression management tactics and countertactics.

Theoretical Implications

Our findings offer several theoretical contributions for theory on impression management. Building on research on impression management processes online (Ellison, Gibbs, & Heino, 2006; Feaster, 2010; O’Sullivan, 2000; Walton & Rice, 2013) and in organizations (e.g., Barsness et al., 2005;
Birnholtz et al., 2012; Bolino & Turnley, 1999), we extend this research to explain impression management practices among managers and subordinates involved in knowledge-intensive work who rely on a range of communication media. Our findings reveal that impression management is motivated by tensions related to diverse goals and enabled by a variety of media affordances. The tactics used to manage impressions in organizational settings were influenced by role-based goals and varied between managers and subordinates, drawing on affordances of both FtF and mediated channels. Moreover, affordances of mediated channels also triggered tensions, which were managed through a range of impression management tactics and subsequent countertactics. Our findings reconceptualize impression management from an individual phenomenon driven by self-interest, as it has often been studied in organizational research (e.g., Bolino et al., 2008), to a social process that is constructed in interaction (Goffman, 1959) and expand the focus from one actor to the actor–audience relationship, accounting for the ways in which both parties recursively shape one another.

Our findings also have implications for the application of dialectical theory in organizational settings. They suggest that impression management in manager–subordinate relationships is a dialectical process with opposing role-based goals and media affordances. Impression management tactics and countertactics reflect a process of managing dialectical tensions in the relationship, as each action from each party attends to one pole of the opposition. Implications for tension management go beyond responses identified in the literature such as selection, vacillation, and integration (Seo, Putnam, & Bartunek, 2004) at the individual level, and highlight the interactive nature of responses. Although we draw a sequential distinction between tactic and countertactic to better capture the actor–audience relationship, this relationship is not unidirectional but is better characterized as mutually constitutive (as is evident in Figure 1), in that the actor shifts and the “countertactic” in turn provokes the “tactic” in a constant process of back and forth. In this sense, this dialectical process constitutes an ongoing dynamic in the relationship that helps to maintain overall balance between competing goals and media affordances. Overall, managers and subordinates had similar sets of goals (managing their time, attending to others, etc.) and used a similar set of communication media; they just often used them at different times or in different ways in particular situations.

These competing tactics are reflective of the broader tension between autonomy and connectedness that is often negotiated in both interpersonal and work relationships (e.g., Baxter, 2011; Gibbs, 2009; Putnam, 2003), with dodging response, multicommunicating, and promoting oneself reflecting needs for autonomy, while exerting social pressure, singular communicating,
and giving credit to all reflect counterneeds for connection and affiliation. Managers and subordinates were driven by differing goals to emphasize different poles (autonomy vs. connection) at different times, which created tension between them, but ultimately kept team interaction in balance by allowing both groups to accomplish their goals. Our findings thus highlight the dialectic of control (Giddens, 1979; Howard & Geist, 1995) that characterizes the dyadic manager–subordinate relationship and the role it plays in shaping media use in the context of knowledge work, and situate both media use and knowledge sharing processes as contested sites of struggle. This provides further insight into the ways in which new technologies engender dialectical tensions for workplace users, extending research on social media and communicative management of tensions (Gibbs et al., 2013) and the ways in which smartphones bring about tensions by allowing for more engagement and connection while also providing distance and disengagement from others (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2005). Our findings have important implications for managing the underlying dialectics in managing one’s time and attending to multiple communicative activities while engaging with others that are inherent in information-intensive knowledge work.

Finally, our findings have implications for theory on media affordances and use of multiple CTs in work contexts. They highlight the dilemma arising in reconciling conflicting goals (tending to one’s own needs while at the same time showing concern for others) by drawing on particular media affordances to present a favorable impression. In part, tensions arose because managers and subordinates often drew on different media affordances in their impression management tactics: managers often preferred media with more synchronous, nontraceable, nonverbal, visible, and interactive affordances, whereas subordinates made strategic use of media affording more asynchronicity, editability, persistence, invisibility, and multiplexity. More specifically, we observed a tension or “dance of agency” (Pickering, 1995) going on between the affordances of CTs such as email and FtF, such that these media affordances were alternately used to enact tactics or respond to or resist them through countertactics. The dialectical tug-of-war characterizing manager–subordinate relationships was complicated by strategic use of media affordances, suggesting that such affordances may both help resolve these tensions but also contribute to and even exacerbate tensions in work relationships. For example, additional tensions were created when managers and subordinates drew on differing media affordances (e.g., of CTs vs. FtF) to accomplish opposing goals and actions. Ultimately, though, these tensions were managed through tactics and countertactics that helped preserve equilibrium by allowing members to attend to both poles of the opposition.
The affordance lens is also helpful in understanding how the same medium may be used differently due to the affordances it offers different user groups (Leonardi, 2009); for instance, subordinates drew on email’s affordances of “selective self-presentation” to promote themselves to their managers, while their managers in turn drew on the collaborative affordances of email to diffuse individual self-promotion and share recognition collectively. The same users used media affordances to accomplish different goals; for instance, subordinates drew on media multiplexity to engage with their managers when they needed to secure a response, while at other times they drew on multiplexity in meetings to disengage from their managers to attend to other communicative activities. Furthermore, the same media were used to provide visibility at times (e.g., using email to provide “face time” with one’s manager) and invisibility (e.g., surreptitiously checking email during meetings) at others. This highlights technology’s “interpretive flexibility” (Orlikowski, 1992) and the ways its use depends on how particular media affordances are tailored to meet specific goals. A focus on media affordances thus provides a more complex understanding of media use than regarding technologies such as email as monolithic.

Although the literature on CTs has traditionally compared one medium with another, we examined multichannel communication in media use, which is more reflective of contemporary, knowledge-intensive workplaces in which organizational actors leverage multiple media simultaneously (e.g., Ellison, Gibbs, & Weber, in press; Leonardi et al., 2012). The finding of using multiple media to exert social pressure on managers corroborates past findings that using complementary CTs (e.g., combining oral and written channels) to deliver the same message, rather than the same channel repeatedly, is more persuasive and leads to less perceived communication overload (Stephens & Rains, 2011). We also found that subordinates drew on the affordances of more invisible, mobile media to engage in electronic multitasking or multicommunicating (Stephens, 2012; Stephens & Davis, 2009) during meetings, which allowed them to attend to multiple goals simultaneously and manage multiple work-related commitments and work–life balance.

Practical Implications

Both practitioners and scholars generally agree that increased knowledge flow will increase organizational learning and other positive performance outcomes (Erhardt et al., 2009; Zack, 1999). However, our findings illustrate the practical challenges of conducting knowledge-intensive work in teams where members tend to both individual goals and interpersonal concerns. Moreover, the findings highlight managers’ difficulties engaging team members in meetings...
while maintaining distance and protecting their time, as well as employees’ struggles to maintain other work-related commitments and work–life balance amid workplace expectations to always be online and available. Rather than being problematic and derailing team functioning, however, workers’ strategic behavior enabled them to navigate these dilemmas and manage multiple demands at once. The dialectical push and pull of opposing actions served to maintain balance and allow for diverse and opposing goals to be met, supporting the notion that contradictions and tensions can be productive for organizations (e.g., Poole & van de Ven, 1989; Seo et al., 2004).

Managers should recognize the existence of these often competing yet legitimate goals and find creative ways for managers and subordinates to achieve differing goals. One solution may involve establishing flexible communication protocols that take opposing goals into consideration. Our analysis suggests that managers generally avoided heavy-handed approaches such as outright banning use of smartphones and laptops in team meetings that might have had potentially negative interpersonal consequences and undermined collaboration by ignoring the needs of subordinates and possible productive uses of such technologies. With the proliferation of CTs in the workplace, managers may want to foster skillsets geared toward multitasking as a valuable tool to help employees juggle multiple roles and duties common in contemporary matrix organizations to maintain work–life balance and still be productive (Wasson, 2004).

Limitations and Future Research

The study has limitations that merit consideration. While our qualitative approach yielded rich, in-depth data, it included only six project teams in three different industries (consumer health, insurance, and engineering), which suggests caution in generalizing beyond the particular teams studied. A larger sample would permit identification of more dialectics as well as possible relationships among the tactic–countertactic pairs. Future research should consider in more depth how factors such as the degree of virtuality, team composition, individual demographic differences such as age and gender, and organizational and cultural differences influence impression management tactics in media use (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2013; C. B. Gibson & Gibbs, 2006). Although we studied teams in both Sweden and the United States, our data did not allow for meaningful cross-cultural comparisons since all but one of the six teams operated in Sweden. While we did note more occurrences of impression management tactics in the U.S.-based team for both managers and their subordinates, we attributed this to the team size and possibly greater interdependence of the project. However, we suspect that
cultural differences with respect to employment laws and workplace policies (i.e., job security and flexible work arrangements) and power distance may affect the frequency and nature of impression management tactics used. For instance, American workers may have used more impression management tactics due to the relatively more hierarchical nature of their workplace compared to Sweden (requiring more care in maintaining good relationships with superiors) as well as lower job security and work–life balance (requiring more effort to surreptitiously manage one’s work and personal commitments). Workers in Sweden, by contrast, may be more culturally direct and more honest with their managers because they are less concerned about being fired or laid off. Future research should explore cultural differences in workplace impression management.

In conclusion, we have highlighted three related sets of impression management tactics that are enacted differently by managers and subordinates, drawing on a range of communication media. Our findings suggest both parties make strategic use of various media affordances to accomplish different goals in a dialectical tug-of-war. They call attention to the importance of understanding the dialectical tensions in the dyadic manager–subordinate relationship and how they motivate impression management practices through a variety of media in knowledge work, which often involves competing goals. Our approach contributes to a growing body of research that centers on the ways in which media characteristics intersect with intentions and behavior of users (J. J. Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001; Leonardi et al., 2012). It extends this to a knowledge-based context to explain strategic media use by managers and nonmanagers. As we move further into a global knowledge economy, and as our repertoire of CTs continues to evolve and expand to include social media tools with different affordances (e.g., Ellison et al., in press; Treem & Leonardi, 2012), more research is needed to better understand how impression management tactics operate through a broader array of media such as Facebook and LinkedIn, or enterprise social media like Jive or Yammer. It is our hope that this article will stimulate additional research on the various stages upon which impression management is performed and how they intersect.

Authors’ Note
Both authors contributed equally to this study.

Acknowledgments
We wish to thank the editor and the three blind reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. We would also like to thank David Seibold and John Sherblom for their comments on earlier versions of this article.
Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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