Misguided Self-Presentation: The Ironic Consequences of Humblebragging, Backhanded Compliments and Namedropping

Misguided Self-Presentation: The Ironic Consequences of Humblebragging, Backhanded Compliments and Namedropping

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Abstract

The ability to present oneself effectively to others is one of the most essential skills in social and organizational life. In this research, I identify unexamined yet ubiquitous self-presentation strategies—humblebragging, backhanded compliments and namedropping—that people use in an effort to manage the delicate balancing act of self-presentation. Using datasets from social media and diary studies, I document the ubiquity of these strategies in real life across several domains. In laboratory and field experiments, I simultaneously examine the underlying motives for these self-presentation strategies and others' perceptions of these strategies—allowing for an analysis of their efficacy—as assessed by the opinions targets hold of the would-be self-presenter. I provide evidence from both lab and field to show that humblebragging, backhanded compliments and namedropping backfire, because they are seen as insincere and as reflective of a concern with one's self-image.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom and dad, Oksan Sezer and Vecdi Sezer for their incredible love and support, always.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on the many ways in which people attempt to accomplish a critical goal—managing the impression that they make on others—with a particular focus on misguided self-presentation strategies. My work centers on three questions: What strategies do people deploy when attempting to convey a desired image to others? What factors prompt people to select particular strategies? And, when and why do self-presentation strategies succeed and fail? I examine the social and organizational consequences of (botched) self-presentation attempts, using a multi-method approach including laboratory and field experiments, surveys, archival datasets, and diary studies.

From Aristotle to Goffman, scholars of social life have studied self-presentation. Presenting oneself effectively is a vital skill in both social and professional life, with significant rewards—from promotions to dating success—depending critically on conveying desired, positive impressions to others. Prior research has identified several self-presentation strategies from bragging to complimenting to complaining, which shape others' perceptions in interpersonal, social, and organizational contexts—such as in interviews and performance reviews. I focus on *misguided* self-presentation. I offer a theoretical framework for understanding both when and why people deploy different self-presentational strategies, and when and why those strategies are more likely to succeed or fail. In short, people select strategies to be both liked and perceived as competent – in a delicate balancing act – but their targets view such calculated efforts with considerable skepticism.

In this dissertation, I offer the first empirical investigations of three impression

management tactics: *humblebragging*, or bragging masked by a complaint or humility; *backhanded compliments*, or praise that draws comparison with a negative standard, and *namedropping*, or the casual mentioning of close social ties with high status people. Using datasets from social media, surveys, and diary studies, I document the ubiquity of these strategies in real life across several domains. In laboratory and field experiments, I simultaneously examine the underlying motives for these self-presentation strategies and others' perceptions of these strategies. My dissertation contributes to the study of self-presentation by identifying and unpacking ubiquitous yet previously unexamined strategies, generating theory about the motives underlying self-presentation strategies, as well as social and behavioral consequences of them.

CHAPTER 1.

HUMBLEBRAGGING: A DISTINCT—AND INEFFECTIVE—SELF-PRESENTATION STRATEGY

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Abstract

Self-presentation is a fundamental aspect of social life, with myriad critical outcomes dependent on others' impressions. We identify and offer the first empirical investigation of a prevalent, yet understudied self-presentation strategy: humblebragging. Across seven studies including a week-long diary study and a field experiment, we identify humblebragging—bragging masked by a complaint or humility—as a common, conceptually distinct, and ineffective form of self-presentation. We first document the ubiquity of humblebragging across several domains, from everyday life to social media. We then show that both forms of humblebragging—complaint-based or humility-based—are less effective than straightforward bragging, as they reduce liking, perceived competence, and compliance with requests. Despite being more common, complaint-based humble-brags are less effective than humility-based humblebrags, and are even less effective than simply complaining. We show that people choose to deploy humblebrags particularly when motivated both to elicit sympathy and impress others. Despite the belief that combining bragging with complaining or humility confers the benefits of each strategy, we find that humblebragging confers the benefits of neither, instead backfiring because it is seen as insincere.

Keywords: humblebragging, impression management, self-presentation, interpersonal perception, competence, liking, sincerity

HUMBLEBRAGGING: A DISTINCT—AND INEFFECTIVE—SELF-PRESENTATION STRATEGY

"Nothing is more deceitful than the appearance of humility. It is often only carelessness of opinion, and sometimes an indirect boast."

—Jane Austen, "Pride and Prejudice"

Self-presentation is an inherent and defining characteristic of social interaction (Goffman, 1959). The ability to present oneself effectively to others is one of the most essential skills in social life: countless material and social rewards depend on others' perceptions of us (Baumeister, 1982; Hogan, 1983; Schlenker, 1980). From romantic relationships to occupational success, making a favorable impression influences many important long-term outcomes (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Leary, 1995; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1975; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Tedeschi, 1981; Wayne & Ferris, 1990; Wayne & Kacmar, 1991; Wayne & Liden, 1995). Moreover, engaging in self-presentation and trying to make a favorable impression can help individuals achieve self-fulfillment (Cohen, 1959; Rogers & Dymond, 1954), boost self-esteem (Jones, Rhodewalt, Berglas, & Skelton, 1981), improve self-evaluations (Baumeister, 1982; Schlenker, 1980), and trigger positive emotions (Scopelliti, Loewenstein, & Vosgerau, 2015).

Given the importance of self-presentation, people attend closely to how they present themselves in social interactions (Goffman, 1959) and engage in a variety of tactics to manage their impressions (Jones, 1990; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1980). Anecdotal evidence from presidential debates to job interviews to

social networking sites (Alford, 2012; Filler, 2015) suggests that humblebragging—bragging masked by complaint or humility—has become a distinct and pervasive form of self-presentation, as in the following examples: "It is so exhausting to keep up with the media requests after I published in JPSP!" "I am so tired of being the only person that my boss could trust to train the new employees." "Just been asked to give a talk at Oxford. I'm more surprised than you are." "I can't believe they all thought of me to nominate for this award and want me to give a talk in front of thousands of people."

The increasing ubiquity of humblebragging suggests that people believe it will be effective; we suggest that it often backfires. Across seven studies, we investigate the psychology and effectiveness of humblebragging as a self-presentation strategy. Although previous research on self-presentation has identified strategies that are specifically aimed at attempting either to be liked or gain respect (Jones & Pitman, 1982; Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984), much less is known about strategies that are aimed at eliciting both. We identify humblebragging as a self-presentation strategy that aims to fulfill this dual purpose simultaneously: people believe that humblebragging allows them to highlight their positive qualities and convey competence with a brag, while enabling them to elicit liking by masking their self-aggrandizing statements in a complaint or humility.

Building on the self-presentation and social perception literatures, we conceptualize that humblebragging is used to generate liking and convey competence simultaneously, but fails to do both, because humblebraggers may overlook the impact of the strategy on another critical dimension of social evaluation: sincerity. Perceived sincerity is a critical factor in determining the success of self-presentation, with perceived

insincerity driving negative evaluations (Crant, 1996; Eastman, 1994; Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1986; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Nguyen, Seers, & Hartman, 2008; Turnley & Bolino, 2001). In short, we suggest that despite its prevalence, humblebragging may be ineffective in making a favorable impression due to the perceived insincerity it generates—with this lack of perceived sincerity driving lower evaluations.

Fundamental Desires to Be Liked and Respected

Self-presentation is an attempt to establish a favorable image in the eyes of others (Goffman, 1959; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Schlenker, 1980). The motive to be viewed positively by others is a fundamental, powerful, and important driver of human behavior (Baumeister, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Sedikides, 1993; Tetlock, 2002), as countless social and material rewards (social approval, friendships, career advancement, status, self-esteem, material rewards, performance evaluations) depend on others' impressions (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Leary, 1995; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1975; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Tedeschi, 1981; Wayne & Ferris, 1990; Wayne & Kacmar, 1991; Wayne & Liden, 1995). In his seminal work, Goffman (1959) recognized self-presentation as an integral aspect of social interaction, arguing that individuals consciously alter their self-presentation to match their audience and meet distinct goals.

The motives underlying self-presentation emerge from one of two key motives (Baumeister, 1982; Newcomb, 1960; Zivnuska, Kacmar, Witt, Carlson, & Bratton, 2004): the desire to gain favorability and be liked (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Buss, 1983; Heider, 1958; Hill, 1987; Jones, 1964) and the desire to convey competence and be respected (Baumeister, 1982; Baryla, 2014; Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010;

Jones, Gergen, Gumbert, & Thibaut, 1965; Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; Pontari & Schlenker, 2006; Rubin, 1973; Wayne & Liden, 1995; Wojciske, Abele, & Baryla, 2009). Indeed, the Sophists established schools to train young people in the strategy of making a good impression, teaching them how to elicit both *pathos* (by appealing to emotions) and *ethos* (by demonstrating reputation and credibility; Aristotle, 1959; Koolschijn, 1996). Indeed, social perception research suggests that social judgments involve two basic, universal and independent dimensions (Asch, 1946; Abelson, Kinder, Peters, & Fiske, 1982; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, Xu, 2002; Lydon, Jamieson, & Zanna, 1988; Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekenanthan, 1968; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005; Wojciszke et al., 2009), such as agency and communion (Bakan, 1966), competence and morality (Wojciszke, 2005), intellectual and social desirability (Rosenberg et al., 1968), competence and warmth (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger, 2011). Although these related constructs have distinct definitions, these formulations are similar (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005), in that one dimension (communion, social desirability, morality, warmth) is related to the interpersonal goal of liking, while the other (agency, intellectual desirability, and competence) is related to the interpersonal goal of respect.

In everyday life, there are many settings where both strategic goals coexist and both desires are fused (Godfrey et al., 1986), but validation by others on each dimension is of critical importance to people (Schlenker, 1980; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Understandably, individuals are generally concerned about how others perceive them on multiple dimensions (Leary, Allen, & Terry, 2011), because observers simultaneously judge targets on more than one dimension (Cialdini & DeNicholas, 1989). But being

simultaneously liked and seen as competent is not easy; indeed, projecting likeability and communicating competence entail different strategies (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Joiner, Vohs, Katz, Kwon, & Kline, 2003; Rudman, 1998). To fulfill the desire to be liked, people generally engage in an array of self-presentation tactics that are designed to validate others or elicit sympathy from them (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Wayne & Liden, 1995; Zivnuska et al., 2004), while to be respected, individuals usually employ strategies to convince their targets of their competence (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Jones et al., 1965; Godfrey et al., 1986; Wayne & Liden, 1995).

Strategies in the Pursuit of Liking

People care deeply about being liked (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and engage in a variety of strategies to be perceived as likeable and elicit sympathy from others (Bell & Daly, 1984; Buss, 1983; Byrne, 1971; Daly & Kreiser, 1994; Hill, 1987; Kaplan & Anderson, 1973; Markus, 1980; Veroff & Veroff, 1980; Zivnuska et al., 2004). Most self-presentation strategies that are designed to inspire liking from a target are other-focused tactics (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008; Jones, 1964; Jones & Pitman, 1982; Schlenker, 1980; Wayne & Liden, 1995; Zivnuska et al., 2004). For instance, people often use other-enhancement statements, such as flattery or praise (Jones & Pitman, 1982; Kacmar, Bozeman, Carlson, & Anthony, 1999), to encourage recipients to view them in a favorable light (Chan & Sengupta, 2010; Fogg & Nass, 1997; Gordon, 1996; Vonk, 2002; 2007; Wayne & Kacmar, 1991; Westphal & Stern, 2007). Similarly, people may engage in other target-focused behaviors such as performing favors or agreeing with others' opinions to elicit liking (Bohra & Pandey, 1984; Zivnuska et al., 2004). In their seminal work, Jones and Wortman (1973) categorized these other-focused strategies in pursuit of

liking as ingratiation—strategic behaviors that are designed to influence another person regarding the attractiveness of an individual's personal qualities that concern his likeability. According to their taxonomy, ingratiating behaviors include other-enhancement, praise, rendering favors, opinion conformity, and various indirect forms of self-descriptions of attributions for achievement, including displaying humility.

Humility. Indeed, displaying humility is a common self-presentation strategy, which is both other-focused and can inspire liking from targets (Davis, Worthington, & Hook, 2010; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Weidman, Cheng, & Tracy, 2016). To appear humble, people may glorify the accomplishments of others and give credit to them (Cialdini, Finch, & DeNicholas, 1990; Stires & Jones, 1969; Tetlock, 1980), or shift credit for their successes away from themselves to external factors, such as luck or help from others (Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1979; Zuckerman, 1979). Importantly, prior research suggests that attempts to appear humble indeed can be used as an effective self-presentation tactic to increase liking (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Schlenker & Leary, 1982): when actors underrepresent their positive qualities or accomplishments (Cialdini & DeNicholas, 1989) or when they defer credit for success (Hareli & Weiner, 2000; Tetlock, 1980), they are better liked (Baumeister & Ilko, 1995; Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982; Forsyth, Berger, & Mitchell, 1981; Schneider, 1969; Wosinka et al., 1996).

Lack of superiority in assessment of one's abilities and strengths, ability to acknowledge limitations, and lack of self-enhancement and egotism about one's successes constitute the core characteristics of humility (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Van Tongeren, Davis & Hook, 2014; Davis et al., 2010; Gregg, Hart, Sedikides, & Kumashiro, 2008; Kesebir, 2014; Kruse, Chancellor, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2014;

Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Saroglou, Buxant, & Tilquin, 2008; Tangney, 2000; Weidman et al., 2016). Such displays of humility are often perceived positively by recipients and observers, because the humble self-presenter reduces any threat by avoiding self-aggrandizing statements and displaying his willingness to recognize others' accomplishments (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2004; Davis et al., 2010; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Tangney, 2000). In other words, when actors are humble, they reduce the risk of social comparison or threat that observers may feel – thereby inspiring liking (Brickman & Seligman, 1974; Schlenker & Leary 1982; Tetlock, 1980; Wosinka et al., 1996). Appearing humble can also send a desirable prosocial signal to others (being other-oriented and unselfish; Davis & Nook, 2014), which in turn promotes likeability (Davis et al., 2013). In short, humility is a highly valued virtue in society (Ben-Ze'ew, 1993; Schneider, 1969; Wosinka et al., 1996), which yields interpersonal benefits (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013, p. 819; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Complaining. People also use complaints as a strategic means of achieving self-presentational goals (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Kowalski, 1996; 2002). Although people who repeatedly complain are labeled as "chronic complainers" and face negative interpersonal consequences (Yalom, 1985), when used infrequently, complaining can provide self-presentational benefits. First, complaining can be used to solicit sympathy, and communicate a likeable image (Alicke et al., 1992; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Kowalski, 1996; 2002); for example, people may complain about being tired, feeling sick, or being overwhelmed, which can allow them to gain sympathy and receive help from others (Leary & Miller, 1986; Skelton & Pennebaker, 1982; Smith,

Synder, & Perkins, 1983; Snyder & Smith, 1982). Second, complaining can also be used to express relational intimacy, which in turn conveys a level of closeness and trust – and thus engenders liking (Kowalski & Erickson, 1997). Indeed, because people typically complain to their close friends or partners, complaining can signal a level of special closeness in a relationship (Kowalski, 2002). Finally, complaining can be used as a social bonding tool; for example, if Brad complains to Jane about their boss, Jane may also complain to express similarity, thereby inducing liking (Brehm, 1992; Kowalski, 2002).

In sum, the desire to seem likeable leads individuals to engage in variety of "other-focused" tactics (Baumeister, 1982; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Jones & Pitman, 1982; Wayne & Liden, 1995). Most relevant to the present research, appearing humble and complaining – the two means by which people attempt to mask their bragging when deploying a humblebrag – can be used strategically to inspire liking from a target.

Strategies in the Pursuit of Respect

In addition to attempting to elicit liking, individuals are also deeply concerned about whether perceivers think highly of them: attempting to gain respect for one's competence is a fundamental driver of social behavior (Epstein, 1973; Jones et al., 1965; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991; Tetlock & Manstead, 1985). This motivation is distinct from the desire to be liked (Gardner & Martinko, 1988; Godfrey et al., 1986) and necessitates different self-presentation strategies (Godfrey et al., 1986; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Tedeschi & Norman, 1985). In particular, these strategies aim to enhance observers' view of one's competence and elicit their respect (Zivnuska et al., 2004).

People often emphasize positive attributes through self-promotion in order to convey competence (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Schneider, 1969). For example, individuals may brag about their accomplishments, successes and unique characteristics (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1986), may bring their superior qualities, talents and strengths to others' attention (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Leary et al., 2011), and may assign favorable traits and abilities to themselves by publicly making internal rather than external attributions for achievements (Joiner et al., 2003; Quattrone & Jones, 1978; Schlenker, 1975). Such self-promotion is particularly common in situations where an audience does not know about an actor's qualities and successes (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Schlenker, 1975); for example, people consistently present themselves in a self-promoting way when they interact with a target for the first time (Jones & Wortman, 1983; Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). People engage in self-promotion to appear competent (Godfrey et al., 1986; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Rudman, 1988), to augment their perceived status (Holoien & Fiske, 2013; Swencionis & Fiske, 2016) and to earn others' respect (Baryla, 2014; Bergsieker et al., 2010; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Pontari & Schlenker, 2006; Wojciske et al., 2009).

Individuals highlight, emphasize, or exaggerate their successes in a self-enhancing manner in a number of ways (Hoorens, Pandelaere, Oldersma, & Sedikides, 2012; Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Schlenker, 1980; Stevens & Kristof, 1985). In addition to bragging, they may provide biographical narratives, social anecdotes, and other forms of conversation as evidence of their success (Dayter, 2014; Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997; Emler, 1994), or increase their perceived responsibility for a favorable event by claiming credit, a self-presentation strategy known

as entitlement (Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi & Norman, 1985). Because self-promotion in response to a question is perceived to be more appropriate and favorable than direct bragging (Tal-Or, 2010), people may even create contexts to boast by directing the conversation in a direction that makes it appropriate to highlight accomplishments. In short, people use a variety of tactics to convey their competence and gain respect.

Combining Bragging with Complaint or Humility

Given that appearing humble, complaining and bragging offer distinct self-presentational benefits, it seems possible that combining them offers a "sweet spot" for self-presentation, as in these examples of combining bragging with humility, "Hair's not done, just rolled out of bed from a nap, and still get hit on, so confusing!" and "I can't believe they all thought of me to nominate for this award and want me to give a talk in front of thousands of people," and in these examples of combining bragging with complaining, "Graduating from two universities means you get double the calls asking for money/donations. So pushy and annoying!" and "I am so tired of being the only person that my boss could trust to train the new employees."

This unique form of self-presentation—humblebragging—seemingly allows actors to highlight positive qualities (getting hit on, being nominated for an award, graduating from two universities, being the person that the boss can trust) while attempting to elicit liking and sympathy by masking these positive qualities in humility (feeling confused, disbelieving nomination) or in a complaint (feeling annoyed, being tired). In addition to eliciting liking (through appearing humble or complaining) and respect (through bragging) simultaneously, humblebragging may also help self-promoters reduce the risks of possible negative consequences or direct self-promotion, since people

who brag may be perceived as conceited or arrogant (Powers & Zuroff, 1988; Tice et al., 1995).

As noted above, eliciting liking and communicating competence to earn respect are two fundamental goals of actors in any social interaction; appearing humble and complaining have been shown to elicit the former, and bragging the latter. And humblebragging has become pervasive, suggesting that people believe it will be effective.

The Role of Sincerity: Self-Presentation as a Balancing Act

However, successful self-presentation involves maintaining a delicate balance between being liked and conveying competence (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). A lack of self-promotion can be costly if it leaves observers unaware of the actor's accomplishments or positive qualities (Collins & Stukas, 2008; Farkas & Anderson, 1976; Tice et al., 1995; Vohs, Baumeister & Ciarocco, 2005). At the same time, people who brag run the risk of appearing conceited or self-promoting (Powers & Zuroff, 1988; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Tice et al., 1995): emphasizing positive qualities and successes can lead observers to regard an actor as competent but less likable (Carlson & Shovar, 1983; Forsyth et al., 1981; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Powers & Zuroff, 1988; Sadalla, Kenrick, & Vershure, 1987), especially when people volunteer favorable statements about themselves that are unsolicited (Holtgraves & Srull, 1989).

Given the difficulty of striking the right balance, people often seek to present their qualities and accomplishments indirectly (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). We identify humblebragging as an understudied yet ubiquitous indirect strategy that attempts to mask a brag in the guise of a complaint or humility: we propose that people combine bragging and complaining or humility in an effort to simultaneously fulfill their fundamental

desires to be liked and respected, thereby managing the delicate balancing act. We suggest, however, that humblebragging in fact does not create more favorable impressions than either bragging or complaining, due to humblebraggers' failure to realize that the strategy impacts perceptions on another dimension critical to social evaluation: perceived sincerity.

Indeed, research suggests that people can prize sincerity even above competence and warmth in others, as moral character predominates person perception and determines the overall impression that people form of another person (Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). Research suggests that sincerity is desirable and is seen as particularly fundamental to people's identity (Brambilla, Ruscioni, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011; Goodwin et al., 2014; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). In the context of self-presentation, perceived sincerity exerts significant weight in impression formation (Jones & Pitman, 1982; Liden & Mitchell, 1988). For instance, research in organizational contexts highlight the importance of three qualities for individuals to garner favorable impressions: benevolence, the quality that reflects an individual's desire to help others (related to liking), ability, the quality that reflects an individual's competence and skills (related to respect and perceived competence) but also integrity, the quality that reflects an individual's reputation for honesty (Brambilla et al., 2011) (related to perceived sincerity) (Butler, 1991; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995).

In fact, the success of self-presentation efforts often hinges on the perceived sincerity of that attempt (Eastman, 1994; Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1986): when targets feel that actors' efforts to elicit desired impressions are insincere, self-presentation efforts

can fail (Crant, 1996; Nguyen et al., 2008; Turnley & Bolino, 2001). The actor needs to conceal the ulterior motive to be liked or perceived as competent, or to make a favorable impression, to be seen as sincere (Jones & Pittman, 1982).

In sum, we explore whether humblebragging—a strategy that appears to achieve the desired balancing act in self-presentation of electing liking and respect—in fact may backfire due to its negative impact on perceptions of an overlooked dimension: sincerity.

Overview of Research

We tested our account in seven studies. We first document the ubiquity of humblebragging across several domains: a nationally representative United States sample (Study 1a), a week-long diary study (Study 1b), and in social media (Study 1c). We provide evidence for the construct, documenting that humblebragging appears in complaint-based and humility-based forms. Study 2 explores the effectiveness of humblebragging against bragging, and demonstrates that humblebragging influences behavior, causing individuals to be treated less positively compared to straightforward bragging. Study 3a shows that both forms of humblebragging—complaint-based or humility-based—are less effective than straightforward bragging, as they reduce liking and perceived competence. Interestingly, complaint-based humble-bragging (despite being the most common type of humblebragging) is even less effective than humility-based humblebragging, simply bragging or even simply complaining (Study 3b). Study 4 explores whether people choose to humblebrag in a strategic effort to elicit both liking and respect, and again assesses the effectiveness of that choice. Across the studies, we assess the mechanisms underlying humblebragging, investigating whether

humblebraggers are liked less than complainers and braggers because they are seen as less sincere.

Study 1a: Humblebragging in Everyday Life

Study 1a documents and differentiates types of humblebrags deployed in everyday life. First, we expected humblebragging to be common. Second, we examined whether—as our definition suggests—humblebrags take two forms: bragging masked by either complaint or humility.

Method

Participants. We recruited six hundred and forty six participants (M_{age} = 45.53, *SD* = 14.43; 49.5% female) from a United States nationally-representative sample from a Qualtrics research panel.

Design and procedure. Participants read initial instructions welcoming them to the study and answered demographic questions (gender and age). Participants were then informed that they would answer a few questions about humblebrags, and were provided with the following examples: “I am tired of people mistaking me for a model.” “I can’t believe they wanted me to be a spokesman for the group.” “I work so fast that I am bored the rest of the day.” “Why do people hit on me even without make up?”

After offering these examples, we asked participants whether they could think of someone they know (a friend, family member, acquaintance, coworker) who engaged in a humblebrag. We informed them that the humblebrag might have been said in person, on a phone call, typed in an email, or posted on social media (Facebook/ Twitter/ Instagram/ etc.) If participants reported that they could recall a humblebrag, we asked them to write down the example of the most recent humblebrag that they heard.

We asked five independent coders—blind to our hypotheses—to analyze the content of the participants' open-ended responses and identify whether humblebrags were complaint-based or humility-based. We provided coders with the definition of complaint and humility, based on the prior literature: A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction or annoyance (Alicke et al., 1992; Alberts, 1988; Kowalski, 2002); humility is a lack of superiority in assessment of one's abilities and strengths (Davis, Wortington, & Nook, 2010; Kesebir, 2014; Kruse et al., 2014; Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Saroglou, Buxant, & Tilquin, 2008; Weidman, Cheng, & Tracy, 2016). The coders agreed 95.2% of the time about the type of humblebrag (615 out of 646) and resolved disagreements through discussion. We also asked coders to identify thematic categories of humblebrags. When coders decided on a final set of categories, they reread responses and indicated which category best suited each response.

Next, participants indicated how long ago they heard the humblebrag (within the last 3 days, between 3 and 7 days ago, between one week and one month ago). Then, participants reported their relationship to the person whose humblebrag they recalled, and identified this person's age and gender.

Results

Frequency of humblebragging in everyday life. Humblebragging was ubiquitous in everyday life. The majority of participants could recall a humblebrag: 70.1% of participants (453 out of 646) reported a humblebrag.

Types of humblebrags. Coders identified that 58.9% of humblebrags (267 out of 453) were complaint-based and conveyed dissatisfaction or annoyance, while 41.1% of

humblebrags (186 out of 453) were humility-based in which speakers expressed lack of superiority in their assessments of their abilities and strengths.

Topics of humblebrags. Table 1a shows the categorization of complaint-based and humility-based humblebrags, with examples. Across both types of humblebrags, eight distinct topic categories emerged: looks and attractiveness (36.6%), money and wealth (13.9%), performance at work (13.7%), achievements (11.3%), intelligence (8.4%), skills (6.6%), personality (6.6%), and social life (2.9%).

Relationship with the humblebragger. Participants received both types of humblebrags from other people in their lives across many different contexts. The majority of humblebrags were from friends (36.9%), followed by coworkers (20.3%), family members (20.1%), acquaintances (18.8%), and others (4.9%).

Demographic characteristics of the humblebragger. Participants reported that 51% of the humblebrags (231 out of 453) that they heard were from men, while 49% (222 out of 453) of the humblebrags were from women. The average age of the person who engaged in humblebragging was 38.38 (SD = 12.38).

Recency of the humblebrag: 24.3% of the humblebrags were heard within the last 3 days, 29.1% between 3 and 7 days ago, 18.4% between one week and one month ago, and 28.1% from more than a month ago.

Discussion

These findings offer initial evidence that humblebragging is common in everyday life across several domains, and offer support for our conceptual definition: humblebragging is bragging masked by either complaint or humility.

Study 1b: Humblebragging in a Diary Study

Although Study 1a suggests that humblebrags are common, it relies on memory of previous conversations. To gain an even finer-grained picture of the ubiquity of humblebragging, Study 1b used an experience-sampling procedure, asking participants if they witnessed a humblebrag on each day – Monday through Friday – of one week. We also further validated the distinctiveness of the two types of humblebrags by asking raters to code them on the extent to which the target was bragging, complaining, and trying to appear humble.

Method

Participants. One hundred and thirteen participants (M_{age} = 33.93, *SD* = 11.06; 68.4% female) from a research panel completed the study. Participants needed to be older than 18 years of age, proficient in English and owner of a smartphone with web access. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted recruitment of approximately 100 individuals by the end of the week, based on our intuition that this would provide us with sufficient examples of humblebrags. 3 participants did not fill out the survey on Wednesday and Friday, leaving us with 110 data points for those days; 1 participant did not fill out the survey on Thursday, giving us 112 data points for that day.

Design and procedure. In the experience-sampling phase, participants received a text message on their mobile phones via a web-application (Surveysignal.com; Hoffman & Patel, 2013). Participants received one daily signal via smartphone at 4:00 PM, local time. Once they clicked the link on the text message on their phones, participants were informed that they would answer a few questions about humblebrags. Similar to Study 1a, without giving any definition, we provided them with some examples of humblebrags: “I am tired of people mistaking me for a model.” “I can’t believe they

wanted me to be a spokesman for the group." "I work so fast that I am bored the rest of the day." "Why do people hit on me even without make up?"

We asked participants to think back over the last 24 hours and identify whether they witnessed someone that they knew (a friend, family member, acquaintance, coworker, etc.) engage in a humblebrag in that time. We informed them that they might have said it in person, on a phone call, typed it in an email, or posted on social media. If so, we asked participants to write down the example of the humblebrag that they witnessed on that day. If not, we asked them to enter three items that they ate and drank for lunch on that day, in order to control for time spent whether they entered a humblebrag or not. Participants followed the same procedure Monday through Friday.

We asked three independent coders to analyze the content of the participants' open-ended responses and identify whether humblebrags were complaint-based or humility-based. The interrater reliability was high (Cohen's kappa $\kappa > .80$). The coders agreed 94.8% of the time about the type of humblebrag (239 out of 252 entries) and resolved disagreements through discussion. We again asked coders to identify thematic categories of humblebrags. When coders decided on a final set of categories, they reread responses and indicated which category best suited each response.

To analyze the extent to which the speakers were trying to brag, complain or appear humble, we recruited four additional coders. They independently rated responses to the following questions on 7-point scales: "To what extent do you think this person is bragging?" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*); "To what extent do you think this person is complaining?" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*) and "To what extent do you think this person is trying to appear humble?" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). We averaged ratings

to create composite measures for bragging, complaining and trying to appear humble (αs = .60, .77, and .70).

Results

Frequency of humblebragging over the course of a week. Humblebragging was common over the course of the week: the average percentage of participants reporting witnessing at least one humblebrag that day across all days was 45.09%, ranging from 30.9% (on Friday) to 60.2% (on Monday). And, the average number reported by participants across the week was 2.12, with only 8.85% of participants failing to report a single humblebrag over the course of the week.

Types of humblebrags. As in Study 1a, the majority of the humblebrags were complaint-based: 59.1% compared to 40.9% humility-based.

Topics of humblebrags. Table 1b shows the categorization of complaint-based and humility-based humblebrags, with examples. Across both types of humblebrags, seven distinct topic categories emerged: looks and attractiveness (32.1%), performance at work (17.`%), achievements (15.1%), social life (10.7%), personality (9.5%), and skills (7.9%), money and wealth (7.5%).

Bragging. Ratings of bragging did not vary significantly across complaint-based (M = 5.45, SD = .86) and humility-based humblebrags (M = 5.56, SD = .79), $t(250)$ = 1.07, p = .29, d = .13, suggesting that both were seen equally as bragging.

Complaining. Ratings of complaining varied significantly across different types of humblebrags, $t(250)$ = 15.92, $p < .001$, d = 1.99. Complaining ratings for complaint-based humblebrags (M = 4.52, SD = .89) were higher than ratings for humility-based humblebrags (M = 2.51, SD = 1.11).

Trying to appear humble. Ratings of trying to appear humble varied significantly across different types of humblebrags, $t(250) = 15.84$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.03$. Ratings for humility-based humblebrags ($M = 4.28$, $SD = .93$) were higher than ratings for complaint-based humblebrags ($M = 2.39$, $SD = .93$).

Discussion

These findings support our previous findings that humblebragging is common in everyday life and takes two distinct forms: complaint-based and humility-based.

Study 1c: Humblebragging on Social Media

In Study 1c, we examined humblebragging in the channel where it seems most ubiquitous: online (Alford, 2012; Buffardi & Campbell, 2008), where people employ a wide array of strategies to construct a positive image (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007; Schau & Gilly, 2003). We analyzed a dataset of statements categorized as "humblebrags" on Twitter, predicting that the complaint-based humblebrags would be a combination of bragging and complaining, while humility-based humblebrags would be a combination of bragging and an attempt to appear humble.

Method

Procedure. We constructed our dataset of humblebrags using a webpage (http://twitter.com/Humblebrag) that lists tweets categorized as humblebrags between June 2011 and September 2012 for the book *Humblebrag: The Art of False Modesty* (Wittels, 2012). This resulted in a dataset of 740 tweets; 68.4% were made by males (seven tweets lacked gender information). Examples include: "I hate when I go into a store to get something to eat and the staff are too busy hitting on me to get my order right

:(so annoying!" and "Just been asked to give a talk at Oxford. I'm more surprised than you are."

We asked two independent coders—blind to our hypotheses—to analyze the content of the participants' open-ended responses and identify whether humblebrags were complaint-based or humility-based. We again provided coders with the definition of complaint and humility, based on the prior literature. Interrater reliability was high (Cohen's kappa $\kappa > .90$); coders agreed 97.1% of the time about the type of humblebrag (719 out of 740) and resolved disagreements through discussion.

As in Study 1b, we recruited three additional independent researcher assistants—also blind to hypotheses—to rate each statement on the following dimensions on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*): (1) "To what extent do you think this person is bragging?" (2) "To what extent do you think the person is complaining?" and (3) "To what extent do you think the person is trying to appear humble?" The raters evaluated each statement based on its text alone, without receiving any additional information about the tweeter. We averaged the ratings for each item ($\alpha = .75$, .85, and .62).

Results

Types of humblebrags. As before, we found that the majority of the humblebrags were complaint-based (61.2%), while 38.8% were humility-based.

Bragging. Ratings of bragging did not vary significantly across complaint-based ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.52$) and humility-based humblebrags ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.40$), $t(738) = 1.27$, $p = .21$, $d = .09$, again suggesting that both were seen equally as bragging.

Complaining. Ratings of complaining varied significantly across different types of humblebrags, $t(738) = 18.38$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.44$. Complaining ratings for complaint-

based humblebrags ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.65$) were higher than ratings for humility-based humblebrags ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 1.15$).

Trying to appear humble. Ratings of trying to appear humble varied significantly across different types of humblebrags, $t(738) = 15.22$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.13$. Ratings for humility-based humblebrags ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.04$) were higher than ratings for complaint-based humblebrags ($M = 2.94$, $SD = .97$).

Discussion

Consistent with Studies 1a and 1b, these results suggest provide further construct validity consistent with our conceptual account that humblebragging is bragging masked by complaint or humility.

Study 2: The Behavioral Costs of Humblebragging

Study 2 begins to explore the efficacy of humblebragging as a self-presentation strategy, compared to another common and typically negatively-viewed strategy: straightforward bragging. In a field experiment, we investigated the consequences of face-to-face humblebragging (versus bragging) followed by a request to sign a petition, examining whether humblebragging—in Study 2, in a complaint-based form—would lead to lower compliance.

Method

Participants. One hundred and thirteen college students (55.8% female) in coffee shops near colleges in a Northeastern city participated in the experiment. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted recruitment of approximately 150 individuals, based on what we thought was feasible given the setting; indeed, we ended with one hundred and thirteen participants because the same participants began to appear in the

coffee shops over the course of the three days. One participant was excluded from the data analysis, as she signed the petition form without being assigned to any experimental condition; this participant was in a rush to catch an Uber. For our main variable of interest, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of Cramér's V = .24 with achieved power of .73.

Design and procedure. A female confederate who was blind to our hypothesis approached one hundred and thirteen college students, one at a time, in eight coffee shops near colleges in a Northeastern city and requested their signature for a petition. The study was conducted over the course of three days in May 2016. The confederate approached students who were alone in coffee shops. Depending on the location of the coffee shop, the confederate was wearing the sweatshirt of the closest college.

The confederate explained that she was collecting signatures in support of a new student-run food truck during the summer on campus. Once she explained the reason for the petition, she asked "What are you up to this summer by the way?" The confederate then waited for the participant's response, and alternated the script that she used across the individuals that she approached. The confederate either delivered a brag about her summer plans, "That's cool! I got my dream internship and got funding to travel to Paris," or a humblebrag: "That's cool! I got my dream internship and got funding to travel to Paris. Ugh it's so hard to decide which one to choose." We pre-populated the petition form with the same three signatures to ensure that all participants were exposed to the same version of the form that asked them to write their name, email address and signature (Figure 1). After participants signed or not, the confederate informed them that her email address was on the petition form and they could send her an email if they had

any questions or wanted to follow up; no participants did so. Participants who signed the form were debriefed the following day via email about the purpose of the study.

We recorded the date, the time, the coffee shop, gender of the participant, and whether or not participants signed the petition form. We used the decision to sign the petition form as our behavioral measure of liking.

Results

Petition signing as a behavioral measure. Participants in the humblebragging condition were less likely to sign the petition than did participants in the bragging condition: 85.7% (48 out of 57) volunteered to give their signature in support of the petition, compared to 64.9% (37 out of 57) of the participants in the humblebragging condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 113) = 6.56$, $p = .01$, Cramér's V = .24. In addition, we conducted a logistic regression with petition signing as our dependent measure, and self-presentation condition (humblebragging vs. bragging), gender, day, time, and location as independent variables. We observed a significant effect of condition on the propensity to sign the petition, B = 1.17, Wald = 5.92, df = 1, $p = .015$, but no effect of gender ($p = .85$), day ($p = .67$), time ($p = .24$) or location ($p = .85$).

Discussion

Results from this field study reveal that a face-to-face humblebrag causes self-presenters to be treated less positively compared to a straightforward brag: people were less likely to volunteer a signature for a petition when the request came from a confederate who humblebragged than bragged. These findings offer initial evidence that, despite its generally negative connotation, straightforward bragging can produce better outcomes than humblebragging.

Study 3a: Complaint-Based and Humility-Based Humblebragging

Study 2 demonstrates that deploying a complaint-based humblebrag causes individuals to be treated less positively compared to a straightforward brag. Study 3a has three primary goals. First, we investigate people's perceptions of the two distinct types of humblebrags identified in Studies 1a-1c—complaint-based and humility-based. Second, whereas Study 2 used only single brag and humblebrag, in Study 3a we use larger set of stimuli to generalize beyond single cases. Third, whereas Study 2 used a behavioral outcome measure, in Study 3a we measure perceptions of braggers and humblebraggers on our key theoretical constructs: liking, competence, and sincerity. We predicted that humblebraggers would be evaluated more negatively than braggers, and that these negative perceptions would be driven by perceived insincerity. Moreover, the design allows us to determine which types of humblebrags are least effective: complaint-based or humility-based.

Method

Participants. We recruited four hundred and three participants (M_{age} = 36.73, *SD* = 12.18; 44.9% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid them $1 for completing the survey. We included two attention filter questions to ensure that participants paid attention and eliminated eight participants who failed these checks. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted recruitment of approximately 400 individuals (100 per condition). For our main variables of interest, liking and perceived competence, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of η_p^2 = .08, and η_p^2 = .07, respectively, with achieved power of .99.

Design and procedure. Participants read initial instructions welcoming them to the study and answered two reading and comprehension checks. If participants failed either of the comprehension checks, they were not allowed to complete the study. Once they passed both checks, participants were informed that they would be evaluating five different statements from different individuals. We randomly assigned participants to one of four between–subjects conditions in a 2 (content: complaint-based vs. humility-based) X 2 (self-presentation style: brag vs. humblebrag) experimental design. In each condition, participants evaluated either complaint-based humblebrags (e.g., *"So I have to go to both Emmy awards!!... Two dresses!!!?!?!"*), straightforward brags based on these complaint-based humblebrags (e.g., *"I am going to both Emmy awards"*), humility-based humblebrags (e.g., *"I just received an award for my teaching!?!? #Whaaaaaaat?"*) or straightforward brags based on these humility-based humblebrags (e.g., *"I just received an award for my teaching"*). We used humblebrags from the Twitter dataset in Study 1c; we selected the five statements that were the most typical of being complaint-based (the ones that were highest on complaint but lowest on humility), and the five most typical of being humility-based (the ones that were highest on humility but lowest on complaint). . Participants rated each of five statements in each condition, in random order.

In the complaint-based humblebrag condition, participants evaluated the following statements:

"So I have to go to both Emmy awards!!... Two dresses!!!?!?!"
"I hate when first class is no different than coach. #wasteofmoney"
"Maids leave my house so I can go workout!!! #Takingforever"
"I wish these hotel employees would stop staring at me like they've never seen a skinny woman before. Err, or haven't they?"
"My attempt at wearing pants so I won't get hit on is failing miserably."

In the corresponding straightforward brag condition, participants evaluated straightforward brags; these messages were designed to convey the same information as the corresponding humblebrags, but retaining the brag and removing the complaint component.

"I am going to both Emmy awards."
"I'm flying first class."
"I have maids."
"Hotel employees are staring at me like they've never seen a skinny woman before."
"I am getting hit on."

In the humility-based humblebrag condition, participants evaluated the following five humility-based humblebrags:

"Just getting to Book Review section – forgot I had a book out! Seeing it on New York Times bestseller list is a thrill (it is pretty funny)"
"Thanks for the love from everyone who watched my random episode of Curb Your Enthusiasm last night. Totally forgot about that, sorry no notice."
"I just received an award for my teaching!?!? #Whaaaaaaat?"
"Huh. I seem to have written one of Amazon.com's top 10 books of 2011 (so far). Unexpected."
"Seriously? 2 headlines in 1 day? Only me. I should enter a contest."

In the corresponding straightforward brag condition, participants evaluated brags that were based on these humility-based humblebrags but removed the humility component:

"My book is a New York Times bestseller."
"My episode of Curb Your Enthusiasm was on last night."
"I just received an award for my teaching."
"I have written one of Amazon.com's top 10 books of 2011."
"2 headlines in 1 day. Only me."

For each of these statements, participants rated how much they liked the target on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Next, they answered a two-item measure of perceived sincerity, also on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*): "How

sincere do you think this person is?" and "How credible do you think this person is?" (α = .92; Chan & Sengupta, 2010). Then, they rated how competent they found the target on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Because the inter-rater reliabilities for the five statements were high in each condition (α's for liking = .80; α's for perceived competence = .84; α's for perceived sincerity = .83), we averaged the within-subjects ratings for each item.

Next, as manipulation checks, participants rated the extent to which they thought the person was bragging, complaining and trying to appear humble on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). We averaged ratings to create composite measures for bragging, complaining and trying to appear humble; inter-rater reliability for the three ratings across conditions: α's for bragging = .64; α's for complaining = .68; α's for trying to appear humble = .81

Finally, participants answered demographic questions.

Results

Table 2 provides means for all dependent measures by condition.

Manipulation checks. An ANOVA with self-presentation style (brag vs. humblebrag) X content (complaint-based vs. humility-based) as the independent variables showed that there was no main effect of self-presentation style on ratings of bragging, $F(1, 399) = 1.40$, $p = .24$, $\eta^2 = .004$: targets in the humblebrag condition ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.20$) received equal ratings of bragging as targets in the brag condition ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.03$). Consistent with our definition of humblebrags, both brags and humblebrags were perceived as bragging. Interestingly, ratings in the complaint-based condition were significantly higher ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.13$) than those in the humility-based condition (*M*

= 4.97, *SD* = 1.08, $p < .001$), $F(1, 399) = 12.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. There was no interaction, $F(1, 399) = .76$, $p = .38$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$.

Complaining ratings in the humblebrag condition were higher ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.77$) than in the brag condition ($M = 2.15$, $SD = .96$), $F(1, 399) = 85.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$. More importantly, ratings of complaining were significantly different between complaint-based vs. humility-based statements, $F(1, 399) = 313.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .44$: Complaint-based statements received higher ratings ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.49$) than humility-based statements ($M = 1.74$, $SD = .84$). We also observed a significant interaction, $F(1, 399) = 111.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .22$, reflective of the fact that ratings of complaining were higher in the complaint-based humblebrag condition—the one condition that contained an actual complaint—than in the other conditions (Table 2).

Finally, ratings of trying to appear humble ratings also varied significantly depending on the self-presentation style, $F(1, 399) = 29.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$: ratings were significantly higher in the humblebrag ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 1.46$) than in the brag condition ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.03$). We also observed a main effect of content (complaint-based vs. humility-based) on ratings of trying to appear humble: ratings were significantly higher in the humility-based conditions ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.31$) than the complaint-based conditions ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.16$), $F(1, 399) = 49.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. There was a significant interaction, $F(1, 399) = 24.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$, reflective of the fact that ratings of trying to appear humble were highest in the humility-based humblebrag condition—the one condition that contained an effort to appear humble—compared to the other conditions (Table 2).

Liking. As predicted, we observed a significant main effect of self-presentation style on liking, $F(1, 399) = 33.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$: participants liked targets who humblebragged less ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.26$) than targets who deployed straightforward brags ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.02$). The main effect of content was also significant $F(1, 399) = 83.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$: participants who viewed complaint-based statements liked their targets less ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.12$) than those who viewed humility-based statements ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.05$). There was no interaction, $F(1, 399) = 2.39$, $p = .12$, $\eta_p^2 = .006$.

Perceived competence. Consistent with our predictions, we observed a main effect of self-presentation style on perceptions of the target's competence, $F(1, 399) = 29.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$: participants rated those who deployed humblebrags as less competent ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.38$) than those who bragged ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.07$). The main effect of complaint-based vs. humility-based content was also significant, $F(1, 399) = 78.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$: targets who made complaint-based statements were perceived as less competent ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.21$) than those who made humility-based statements ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.13$). There was no interaction, $F(1, 399) = .05$, $p = .82$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$.

Perceived sincerity. We also observed a main effect of self-presentation style on our mediating construct, perceived sincerity, $F(1, 399) = 36.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$: Consistent with our hypothesis, ratings of perceived sincerity were lower in the humblebrag conditions ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.23$) than in the brag conditions ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.04$). Perceptions of sincerity varied across complaint-based and humility-based conditions, $F(1, 399) = 43.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$: participants rated complaint-based

statements to be less sincere (M = 3.61, SD = 1.17) than humility-based statements (M = 4.33, SD = 1.09). There was no interaction, $F(1, 399) = .08$, $p = .77$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$.

Mediation. A path analysis revealed that perceived sincerity mediated the relationship between self-presentation style and liking. Humblebragging led to lower perceived sincerity, which led participants to find targets as less likeable. When we included perceived sincerity in the model, predicting liking, the effect of humblebragging was reduced (from $\beta = -.61$, $p < .001$, to $\beta = -.08$, $p = .28$), and perceived sincerity was a significant predictor of liking ($\beta = .80$, $p < .001$). A 10,000-sample bootstrap analysis revealed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [-.72, -.35], suggesting a significant indirect effect size of .06 (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelly, 2011).

Perceived sincerity also mediated the relationship between humblebragging and perceived competence. The effect of humblebragging was significantly reduced (from $\beta = –.63$, $p < .001$, to $\beta = –.01$, $p = .88$) when we included perceived sincerity in the model, and perceived sincerity was a significant predictor of perceived competence ratings ($\beta = .93$, $p < .001$). A 10,000-sample bootstrap analysis revealed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [–.84, –.41], suggesting a significant indirect effect of .06 (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelly, 2011).

Discussion

Individuals who humblebrag—couching a brag in a complaint or humility—are liked less and perceived to be less competent than those who straightforwardly brag. Complaint-based humblebrags are viewed more negatively than humility-based

humblebrags. Moreover, insincerity plays a critical mediating role: while people do not rate braggers highly, they at least see them as more sincere than humblebraggers, such that perceptions of insincerity drive negative evaluations of humblebraggers.

Study 3b: Comparing Humblebragging to Complaining

Studies 2 and 3a demonstrates that bragging is a more effective than humblebragging as a self-presentation strategy. In Study 3b, we tested the relative efficacy of complaint-based humblebragging not only against straightforward bragging, but also against another seemingly negative subcomponent: straightforward complaining. In line with our overall account, we predicted that humblebrags would be less effective at inducing liking than both complaints and brags because although complaints and brags are not necessarily viewed positively, they are at least perceived as sincere. We therefore again assessed perceived sincerity as a mediator of the relationship between humblebragging, liking and perceived competence.

Method

Participants. In order to ensure that we selected statements that distinctively reflected complaining, bragging, and complaint-based humblebragging, we pretested our paradigm by recruiting two hundred and ninety nine participants (M_{age} = 33.74, *SD* = 9.94; 43.1% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk in exchange for $.50. We included several comprehension checks to ensure that participants paid attention and eliminated four participants who failed these checks. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 200 individuals (100 participants per experimental condition).

For the main study, we recruited three hundred and one participants (M_{age} = 36.14, *SD* = 10.78; 39.2% female) through Amazon's Mechanical Turk to participate in an online study in exchange for $0.50. All participants passed attention checks. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 300 individuals (100 participants per experimental condition). For our main variables of interest, liking and perceived competence, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of $\eta^2 = .10$ and $\eta^2 = .04$, respectively, with achieved power of .99 and .93.

Design and procedure. In both the pretest and the main study, we told participants that they would be evaluating another person. All participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions—humblebrag, brag, or complain— in a between-subjects design. Participants in the humblebrag condition viewed the following statement from the target: "I am so bored of people mistaking me for a model." Participants in the brag condition viewed the brag portion of the humblebrag: "People mistake me for a model." Participants in the complain condition viewed the complaint portion: "I am so bored." In the pretest, as manipulation checks, participants rated the extent to which they thought the person was complaining, bragging, and humblebragging on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

In the main study, after viewing one of these statements, participants rated how much they liked the target and how competent they found the target on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Then they answered a two-item measure of perceived sincerity, also on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*): "How sincere do you think this

person is?" and "How credible do you think this person is?" (α = .92; Chan & Sengupta, 2010). Finally, participants answered demographic questions.

Results

Table 3 provides means for all dependent measures by condition.

Manipulation checks from the pretest. An ANOVA with condition (complain vs. brag vs. humblebrag) as the independent variable revealed a significant effect on ratings of complaining, $F(2, 299) = 104.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .41$. Post-hoc tests (with Bonferroni corrections) indicated that ratings of complaining were higher in the complain condition ($M = 5.67$, $SD = .99$) than in the brag ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.64$, $p < .001$) and humblebrag conditions ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 2.18$, $p < .001$). Consistent with our definition of humblebrags, ratings of complaining were higher in the humblebrag condition than in the brag condition ($p < .001$).

Ratings of bragging varied significantly, $F(2, 299) = 352.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .70$. Post-hoc tests revealed that bragging ratings in both the brag ($M = 6.22$, $SD = 1.10$) and humblebrag ($M = 5.97$, $SD = 1.40$) conditions were higher than those in the complain condition ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.27$, $ps < .001$); again consistent with our definition, the brag and humblebrag conditions did not differ, $p = .51$.

Finally, humblebragging ratings also varied significantly, $F(2, 299) = 103.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .41$. Post-hoc tests indicated that humblebragging ratings were significantly higher in the humblebrag condition ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.62$) than in the brag condition ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 2.06$, $p < .001$) and the complain condition ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.62$, $p < .001$).

Liking. As predicted, an ANOVA revealed a significant effect on liking, $F(2, 298) = 17.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$. Participants in the humblebrag condition liked the target

less (M = 2.36, SD = 1.26) than did participants in the brag condition (M = 3.04, SD = 1.41; p = .001) and the complain condition (M = 3.41, SD = 1.18; p < .001). Liking ratings in the complain condition did not differ significantly from ratings in the brag condition (p = .13).

Perceived competence. An ANOVA revealed that perceived competence varied across conditions, $F(2, 298) = 12.89$, p = .001, η^2 = .04. Participants in the humblebrag condition perceived the target to be less competent (M = 2.94, SD = 1.39) than did participants in the brag condition (M = 3.41, SD = 1.42; p = .05) and the complain condition (M = 3.64, SD = 1.32; p = .001). Perceptions of competence in the complain condition did not differ significantly from the brag condition (p = .69).

Perceived sincerity. Participants' perception of sincerity varied across conditions, $F(2, 298) = 31.02$, p < .001, η^2 = .17. Consistent with our hypothesis, ratings of perceived sincerity were lower in the humblebrag condition (M = 2.64, SD = 1.53) than in the brag condition (M = 3.20, SD = 1.57, p = .03) and the complain condition (M = 4.29, SD = 1.44, p < .001). Participants in the brag condition rated targets as less sincere than participants in the complain condition (p < .001).

Mediation. To examine whether sincerity mediated the effect of humblebragging on liking, we followed the steps recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). The first and second criteria specify that the independent variable should significantly affect the dependent variable and the mediators. The prior analyses showed that these two criteria were met, as humblebragging had a significant effect on liking and sincerity. To assess the third and fourth criteria, we conducted a hierarchical ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression analysis (including a dummy variable for the bragging

condition), predicting liking from the independent variable of the humblebragging condition (Step 1) and sincerity (Step 2). The third criterion specifies that the mediator should significantly predict the dependent variable while controlling for the independent variable. The results met this criterion: controlling for the humblebragging and bragging conditions, we found that sincerity significantly predicted greater liking (β = .58, t = 17.02, p < .001). To complete the test of mediation for sincerity, the fourth criterion holds that the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable should decrease after controlling for the mediator. After controlling for sincerity, the effect of humblebragging on liking decreased significantly (from β = -.86, p < .001 to β = -.22, p = .06). To test whether the size of the indirect effect of humblebragging on liking through sincerity differed significantly from zero, we used a bootstrap procedure to construct bias-corrected confidence intervals based on 10,000 random samples with replacement from the full sample (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval excluded zero (–.88, –.41), indicating a significant indirect effect size of .08.

A path analysis also revealed that perceived sincerity mediated the relationship between humblebragging and perceived competence. When we included perceived sincerity in the model, predicting perceived competence, the effect of humblebragging was reduced (from β = -.59, p = .001, to β = .09, p = .48), and perceived sincerity was a significant predictor of perceived competence (β = .61, p < .001). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [–.93, –.44], suggesting a significant indirect effect size of .09 (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher &

Kelly, 2011). Humblebragging lowered perceptions of sincerity, which led participants to find their targets less competent.

Discussion

Individuals who engage in complaint-based humblebragging—couching a brag in a complaint—are viewed more negatively than those who straightforwardly brag or even than those who complain. Moreover, as in Study 3b, insincerity plays a mediating role: while braggers and complainers are not well-liked, they are at least seen as more sincere than humblebraggers.

Study 4: The Antecedents and Consequences of Humblebragging

Studies 2, 3a, and 3b show that people who humblebrag are generally disliked and perceived as insincere, yet Studies 1a-1c show that humblebragging is ubiquitous. Study 4 investigates the antecedents of humblebragging: what beliefs lead people to deploy an ineffective strategy? As discussed in the Introduction, both eliciting warmth—being liked—and conveying competence—being respected—are fundamental social goals (Baumeister, 1982; Buss, 1983; Hill, 1987; Zivnuska et al., 2004). In Study 4, we asked people to choose a self-presentation strategy that would achieve the goal of eliciting sympathy, the goal of eliciting respect, or both goals. We suggest that faced with the task of meeting both goals, people will select humblebragging in the erroneous belief that—unlike complaining (which might elicit sympathy and induce liking) or bragging (which might elicit respect and perceptions of competence)—humblebragging would elicit both. Study 4 simultaneously examines recipients' perceptions of these strategies—allowing for an analysis of their efficacy. We predicted that although self-presenters would select humblebragging to gain sympathy and respect, it would accomplish neither goal, because

recipients view it as insincere.

Method

Participants. We recruited three hundred and five participants (M_{age} = 35.69, *SD* = 11.31; 41.6% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk in exchange for $.50 for a manipulation check. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 200 individuals (100 participants per experimental condition). The goal of the manipulation check was to validate that the complaint, brag and humblebrags used in the main experiment met our criteria.

For the main study, we recruited six hundred and eight individuals (M_{age} = 36.29, *SD* = 11.64; 45.6% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk to participate in an online study in exchange for $.50. One participant failed to pass the attention checks and were dismissed from the study. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 600 individuals (100 participants per experimental condition). For our main variable of interest, liking and perceived competence, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of an effect size of η^2 = .10 and η^2 = .05, respectively, with achieved power of .99 and .94.

Design and Procedure. In the pretest, as manipulation checks, participants rated the extent to which they thought the person was complaining, bragging, and humblebragging on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

In the main study, we randomly assigned participants to one of six between-subjects conditions using a 2 (role: sender vs. receiver) X 3 (self-presentation goal: sympathy vs. impress vs. sympathy and impress) experimental design. We asked participants in the sender role to choose a message to another person. All senders were

randomly assigned to one of three conditions in which they were given a different purpose: eliciting sympathy from the other person, impressing the other person, or eliciting sympathy and impressing. Participants in the sympathy condition were told: "Your goal is to choose the message that will make the recipient feel the most sympathetic toward you." Participants in the impress condition were told: "Your goal is to choose the message that will make the recipient feel the most impressed by you." Participants in the sympathy and impress condition were told: "Your goal is to choose the message that will make the recipient feel the most sympathetic toward you and the most impressed by you." We provided participants with a multiple-choice question in which they chose to send either a complaint ("I am so exhausted"), a brag ("I get elected to leadership positions"), or a humblebrag ("I am so exhausted from getting elected to leadership positions"). We did not provide participants with the name of the category. The order of the multiple-choice options was counterbalanced; order did not affect our results.

Receivers were told that they would be evaluating another person. All participants were randomly assigned to one of three statements— humblebrag, brag, or complain that senders had to choose from— in a between-subjects design. Participants in the humblebrag condition viewed the following statement from the target: "I am so exhausted from getting elected to leadership positions." Participants in the brag condition viewed the brag portion of the humblebrag: "I get elected to leadership positions." And participants in the complain condition viewed the complaint portion: "I am so exhausted."

After viewing one of these statements, similar to Study 3b, senders rated how much they liked the target and how competent they found the target on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Then they answered the same two-item measure of perceived sincerity, also on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*): "How sincere do you think this person is?" and "How credible do you think this person is?" ($\alpha = .85$; Chan & Sengupta, 2010).

Finally, all participants answered demographic questions.

Results

Table 4 provides means for all dependent measures by condition.

Manipulation checks. An ANOVA with condition (complain vs. brag vs. humblebrag) as the independent variable revealed a significant effect on ratings of complaining, $F(2, 302) = 112.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .43$. Post-hoc tests (with Bonferroni corrections) indicated that ratings of complaining in the complain condition ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.54$) and in the humblebrag condition ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.89$) were higher than those in the brag condition ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 1.28$, $p < .001$). Again consistent with our definition, ratings of complaining were higher in the humblebrag condition than in the brag condition ($p < .001$). Ratings of complaining in the humblebrag and complain conditions did not differ ($p = .09$).

Ratings of bragging also varied significantly, $F(2, 302) = 165.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .52$. Post-hoc tests revealed that bragging ratings in both the brag ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 1.20$) and humblebrag ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.84$) conditions were higher than those in the complain condition ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.36$, $ps < .001$); in this study, ratings in the brag condition were higher than those in the humblebrag condition ($p = .003$).

Humblebragging ratings also varied significantly, $F(2, 302) = 55.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .27$. Post-hoc tests indicated that humblebragging ratings were significantly higher in the humblebrag condition ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.89$) than in the brag condition ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.99$, $p < .001$) and the complain condition ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.67$, $p < .001$).

Self-presentation strategy selection. In the sympathy condition, the majority (85.1%) of participants chose to send a complaint, while 7.9% chose to send a humblebrag and 6.9% chose to brag, $\chi^2(2, N = 101) = 122.04$ $p < .001$. In the impress condition, 66% of participants decided to send a brag, 19% chose to send a humblebrag, and 15% chose to send a complaint, $\chi^2(2, N = 100) = 48.26$, $p < .001$. As we expected, participants in the sympathy and impress conditions favored the humblebrag, reflecting their belief that humblebragging would make the recipient feel both sympathetic and impressed: 50% of participants chose to send a humblebrag, while 39.2% chose to complain and only 10.8% chose to brag, $\chi^2(2, N = 102) = 25.12$, $p < .001$. Most importantly, the percentage of participants who chose to humblebrag was higher in the sympathy and impress condition (50%) than in both the impress (30.3%) and sympathy conditions (12.9%), $\chi^2(2, N = 303) = 50.56$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = .28 (see Figure 2).

Liking. Did humblebrags actually elicit positive perceptions? An ANOVA revealed a significant effect on liking, $F(2, 302) = 17.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$. As predicted, and consistent with the earlier studies, participants who viewed humblebrags liked the target less ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.23$) than did participants who viewed brags ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 1.28$; $p < .001$) or complaints ($M = 4.24$, $SD = .88$; $p < .001$). Liking ratings for targets who complained did not differ from ratings of those who bragged ($p = .38$).

Perceived competence. An ANOVA revealed that perceived competence varied as well, $F(2, 302) = 8.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Participants who viewed humblebrags perceived the target to be less competent ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.39$) than did participants who viewed brags ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.28$; $p < .001$), and as similarly competent as did participants who viewed complaints ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.11$; $p = .08$). Perceptions of competence for complaints and brags did not differ significantly ($p = .15$).

Perceived sincerity. Participants' perception of sincerity also varied, $F(2, 302) = 18.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Replicating Study 3b, ratings of perceived sincerity were lower for targets who humblebragged ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.44$) than those who bragged ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.29$, $p = .005$) or complained ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.03$, $p < .001$). Participants rated targets who bragged as less sincere than targets who complained ($p = .012$).

Mediation. A path analysis revealed that perceived sincerity partially mediated the relationship between humblebragging and liking. When we included perceived sincerity in the model, predicting liking, the effect of humblebragging was reduced (from $\beta = -.79$, $p < .001$, to $\beta = .29$, $p = .007$), and perceived sincerity was a significant predictor of liking ($\beta = .61$, $p < .001$). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [–.71, –.29], suggesting a significant indirect effect size of .08 (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelly, 2011).

Perceived sincerity also mediated the relationship between humblebragging and perceived competence. Including sincerity in the model significantly reduced the effect of humblebragging (from $\beta = -.57$, $p < .001$, to $\beta = -.06$, $p = .63$), and perceived sincerity was a significant predictor of liking ($\beta = .61$, $p < .001$). A 10,000-sample bootstrap analysis revealed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the

indirect effect excluded zero [–.74, –.31], suggesting a significant indirect effect size of .04 (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelly, 2011).

Discussion

These results show that under some circumstances, people choose to deploy straightforward complaints (when seeking sympathy) and brags (when seeking respect). However, when people aim to elicit both sympathy and admiration – which again is a common goal in everyday life – their propensity to choose humblebragging increases. Unfortunately, as in Studies 2, 3a, and 3b, results from recipients again show that the strategy backfires: humblebraggers are viewed as less likable and less competent, because using the strategy makes the humblebragger seem insincere.

General Discussion

The desire to present the self in desired ways is an inherent part of social interaction (Goffman, 1959), with the motivation to make a favorable impression typically stemming from two fundamental desires: to be liked and to be respected (Baumeister, 1982; Zivnuska et al., 2004). The majority of research in the self-presentation literature has focused on an array of tactics people use in an attempt to fulfill one of these purposes—such as bragging to elicit respect, and complained or expressing humility to elicit liking. The current investigation examines a novel self-presentation strategy that aims to fulfill both of these fundamental desires, humblebragging, exploring its typology, antecedents, and consequences.

In seven studies, we demonstrated that despite its prevalence, humblebragging fails to make a favorable impression. Study 1a, Study 1b and Study 1c document that humblebragging is a ubiquitous phenomenon in everyday life and takes two distinct

forms: bragging masked by either complaint or humility. Study 2 shows that compared to straightforward bragging, humblebraggers garner more negative behavioral responses in a face-to-face field setting. Study 3a documents that both complaint-based humblebrags and humility-based humblebrags are less effective than bragging in being perceived as likable or competent, while Study 3b that complaint-based humblebragging is less effective even than straightforward complaining. Study 4 demonstrates that individuals employ humblebragging in a strategic but erroneous effort to elicit sympathy and admiration simultaneously. Studies 2, 3a, 3b and 4 explored the mechanism underlying the link between humblebragging and negative outcomes, demonstrating that perceived sincerity—a key predictor of favorable impressions—is a psychological driver of the ineffectiveness of humblebragging. In sum, the insincerity signaled by humblebragging manifests in dislike.

Theoretical Contributions

Our research makes several theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to the impression management literature by identifying and examining a distinct self-presentation strategy. Prior research has identified several self-presentation tactics that individuals use in an attempt to achieve liking or appear competent, such as flattery, ingratiation, and complaining (Arkin, 1981). Here, we examine a previously undocumented—and common—strategy that aims for both goals, augmenting the literature on impression management. We provide evidence from both the field and laboratory to document the ubiquity of humblebragging, and provide the first empirical examination of why people frequently employ this strategy despite its mixed consequences.

Second, we shed light on the pivotal role of perceived sincerity in impression management. Sincerity plays a critical role in determining the success of four seemingly different self-promotion strategies: humblebragging fails because people perceive it as insincere compared to bragging, or complaining, or expressing humility. These findings build on prior research suggesting that moral character and perceived sincerity (Brambilla et al., 2012; Goodwin et al., 2014; Leach et al., 2007) play a crucial role in determining overall impressions of others, on research that shows people who are perceived to be insincere are more likely to be seen as not likeable and untrustworthy (Jones & Davis, 1965; Stern & Westphal, 2010), and on research in organizational behavior demonstrating the importance of also integrity in eliciting trust (Butler, 1991; Mayer et al., 1995). Here, we show that perceived insincerity also negatively influences perceptions of competence, offering further support for the critical role that sincerity plays in impression formation.

Third, our research advances our understanding of the relevance of indirect speech to impression management. Previous research has identified other indirect means of self-promotion, such as praising close associates (Cialdini et al., 1990; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). We document a novel type of indirect speech that does not divert attention to other people but rather attempts to divert attention from the bragging nature of the claim via a complaint or an attempt to appear humble. Humblebragging is an indirect speech attempt because the intent of the self-presenter (to self-promote) is couched in other language, rather than directly stated (Pinker, Novak, & Lee, 2008; Lee & Pinker, 2010). Our research suggests that in the contexts that we investigated, indirect speech can backfire.

Future Directions

In addition to these contributions, our studies also point to possible directions for future research. First, further studies could deepen our understanding of the emotional and cognitive consequences of humblebragging. While we focused primarily on the reactions of observers of humblebragging, future research should examine the emotional experiences of humblebraggers themselves. Previous research reveals that self-promoters, despite facing social disapproval and negative consequences in interpersonal relationships (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Leary, Bednarski, Hammon, & Duncan, 1997; Paulhus, 1998; Schlenker & Leary, 1982), can also experience positive emotions and increased self-esteem (O'Mara, Gaertner, Sedikides, Zhou, & Liu, 2012; Scopelliti et al., 2015). These possible intrapsychic benefits may offer another explanation for people's use of humblebragging. Another possibility is that humblebragging may constitute a particularly miscalibrated case: humblebraggers experience positive affect from both bragging *and* from the positive feeling that they are not actually bragging, while recipients react negatively to both the self-promotion and the attempt to mask it. In addition, recent research on humility suggested that humility can take two distinct forms with different intrapsychic effects. Appreciative humility—actions focused on celebrating others—is associated with authentic pride and guilt, while self-abasing humility—hiding from others' evaluations—is associated with shame and low self-esteem (Weidman et al., 2016). Humblebragging may also cause individuals to experience these emotions; future work should explore these possibilities.

Future studies could also deepen our understanding of the effectiveness of humblebragging as an impression-management strategy for different audiences. In our experiments, we typically focused on situations in which actors humblebragged to

strangers. Future research could investigate whether relationship closeness influences individuals' propensity to employ humblebragging as a strategy. People use different self-presentation strategies with different audiences, using more self-enhancing statements with strangers but shifting toward modesty with friends (Tice et al., 1995), suggesting that people may be more likely to use humblebragging as a strategy with friends. Indeed, relationship closeness between the self-presenter and the audience may also moderate the consequences of humblebragging: friends may react less negatively to humblebragging than strangers since people may perceive their friends as higher in overall sincerity. In addition, future work should also investigate the moderating role of gender in humblebragging. Prior research shows that self-promotion is more risky for women (Rudman, 1998), and similar effects may occur with humblebragging.

Future research should also identify characteristics that moderate the negative consequences of humblebragging. Prior research suggests that self-promotion in response to a question is perceived more favorable than direct bragging (Tal-Or, 2010); thus humblebragging may also be perceived more favorable when it is solicited, such as when responding to a compliment or while receiving an award. It is also possible that in these solicited cases, the source of the brag, would not be the self, but other individuals—which makes self-promotion more acceptable and favorable (Scopelliti et al., 2016). In addition, the perceived status of the humblebragger may make humblebragging more or less legitimate in the eyes of others, altering the likelihood of the success or failure. If a high-status person engages in humblebragging, observers may find it more credible, while low-status individuals may face more backlash.

Conclusion

We identify and offer psychological insight into the phenomenon of humblebragging, an increasingly ubiquitous self-promotion strategy. Although a large body of prior research has documented different impression-management strategies, humblebragging is a previously unexplored—and uniquely ineffective—form of self-praise. The proliferation of humblebragging in social media, the workplace, and everyday life suggests that people believe it to be an effective self-promotion strategy. Yet we show that people readily denigrate humblebraggers. Faced with the choice to (honestly) brag or (deceptively) humblebrag, would-be self-promoters should choose the former—and at least reap the rewards of seeming sincere.

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Table 1a

Topics and Examples of Complaint-based and Humility-based Humblebrags, in Study 1a

Complaint-Based Humblebrags		Humility-Based Humblebrags	
Categories	Examples	Categories	Examples
Looks and attractiveness (34.5%)	"I lost so much weight I need to get new clothes, on top of all things I need to do."	Looks and attractiveness (39.8%)	"I don't understand why every customer compliments me on my looks."
Money and wealth (18.4%)	"It is so hard to choose between Lexus and BMW."	Achievements (17.7%)	"I can't understand why I won the employee of the month."
Performance at work (15.4%)	He said "I am so tired of being the only person at the company that my boss could trust to train the new employees."	Performance at work (11.3%)	"Why do I always get asked to work on the most important assignment?"
Intelligence (9.0%)	"He tends to do this quite often, enough that it's starting becoming annoying. Just things like "I hate being right all the time." and things of that nature."	Skills (8.6%)	"Why do people think I am a tech wizard?"
Personality (7.1%)	"I am tired of being the thoughtful and kind person all the time."	Money and wealth (7.5%)	"I do not know why everyone is so jealous of my new car."
Achievements (6.7%)	"I decided this year to do a less interesting project, I can't win first place all the time. I need to let other people win this year, they get angry. You get too much attention if you are a star. "	Intelligence (7.5%)	"Why do people ask me if I'm from Ivy League school?"
Skills (5.2%)	"I'm fed up with people praising my parenting skills. My kids are healthy and happy. That's all that matters."	Personality (5.9%)	"He thinks I'm super hot, and smart, so weird."
Social life (3.7%)	"I never have time for myself because all my friends want me to spend time with them."	Social life (1.6%)	"I can't believe people are making such a big deal out of my birthday party."

Table 1b

Topics and Examples of Complaint-based and Humility-based Humblebrags, in Study 1b

Complaint-Based Humblebrags		Humility-Based Humblebrags	
Categories	Examples	Categories	Examples
Looks and attractiveness (29.5%)	"I hate that I look so young even a 19 year old hit on me."	Looks and attractiveness (35.9%)	"I don't understand why people hit on me when I spend 10 minutes getting ready."
Social life (14.8%)	"It's hard to get anything done because he wants to spend so much time with me."	Performance at work (20.4%)	"My boyfriend recently gotten a raise at work even though he's only been working there for less than a year. He said, "I don't know why I got a raise when people have been working there longer than I have."
Performance at work (14.8%)	"He mentioned that his boss told them it was hard to believe him and him brother were related because he works hard and his brother doesn't. He was complaining about his brother but bragged about himself in the process, he was also saying "I don't like it when my boss says nice things in front of others."	Achievements (16.5%)	"After receiving an award at work my coworker said "I'm just a nurse that loves her patients. I am very surprised. I am just doing my job. "
Achievements (14.1%)	"When I found out that I actually got an offer from here and I got another offer from another job on the same day, it was the worst."	Skills (15.5%)	"I don't know why my friends are always asking me to sing for them. I don't sound that great."
Money and wealth (12.1%)	"My coworker was talking about the new car that he plans to buy and he cannot choose which color because all looks great on a convertible BMW."	Personality (5.8%)	"A co- worker said "I don't know how the rumor got out that I am so hardworking."
Personality (12.1%)	"My co-worker gave himself a pat on the back: "It is so hard for me not to intervene and find a solution, I am such a problem solver. It takes my time but I can't help it."	Social life (4.9%)	" I went to the headquarters and met with the CEO and all those guys, it was unbelievable.
Skills (2.7%)	"It is hard to be a fast learner especially on training days because after the first couple hours I already get things."	Money and wealth (1.0%)	"I can't believe it but I've been a member since the 80's, nobody had those back then, they used to have champagne in those lounges --my friend is talking about some exclusive club."

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for all measures in Study 3a

	Humblebrag & Complaint-based	Brag & Complaint-based	Humblebrag & Humility-based	Brag & Humility-based
Liking	2.63 [2.41, 2.86]	3.39 [3.20, 3.58]	3.74 [3.52, 3.96]	4.18 [3.99, 4.37]
Perceived competence	3.43 [3.16, 3.69]	4.07 [3.88, 4.26]	4.45 [4.21, 4.69]	5.04 [4.85, 5.22]
Perceived sincerity	3.30 [3.06, 3.55]	3.93 [3.73, 4.13]	3.99 [3.77, 4.21]	4.67 [4.49, 4.86]
Bragging	5.34 [5.09, 5.59]	5.37 [5.17, 5.57]	4.85 [4.64, 5.07]	5.08 [4.87, 5.29]
Complaining	4.47 [4.21, 4.72]	2.51 [2.33, 2.69]	1.67 [1.52, 1.82]	1.80 [1.63, 1.98]
Trying to appear humble	2.21 [1.95, 2.47]	2.16 [1.97, 2.36]	3.61 [3.36, 3.86]	2.40 [2.19, 2.61]

Note: The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

Table 3.

Descriptive statistics for all measures in Study 3b

	Main Study		
	Complaint-based Humblebrag	Brag	Complaint
Liking	2.36 [2.11, 2.61]	3.04 [2.76, 3.32]	3.41 [3.17, 3.64]
Perceived competence	2.94 [2.66, 3.21]	3.41 [3.13, 3.69]	3.64 [3.38, 3.90]
Perceived sincerity	2.64 [2.34, 2.94]	3.20 [2.89, 3.51]	4.29 [4.01, 4.58]
	Pretest		
Bragging	5.97 [5.69, 6.25]	6.22 [6.00, 6.43]	2.03 [1.78, 2.28]
Complaining	4.17 [3.74, 4.61]	2.29 [1.97, 2.62]	5.67 [5.47, 5.86]
Humblebragging	5.83 [5.50, 6.15]	4.67 [4.26, 5.07]	2.27 [1.96, 5.59]

Note: The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

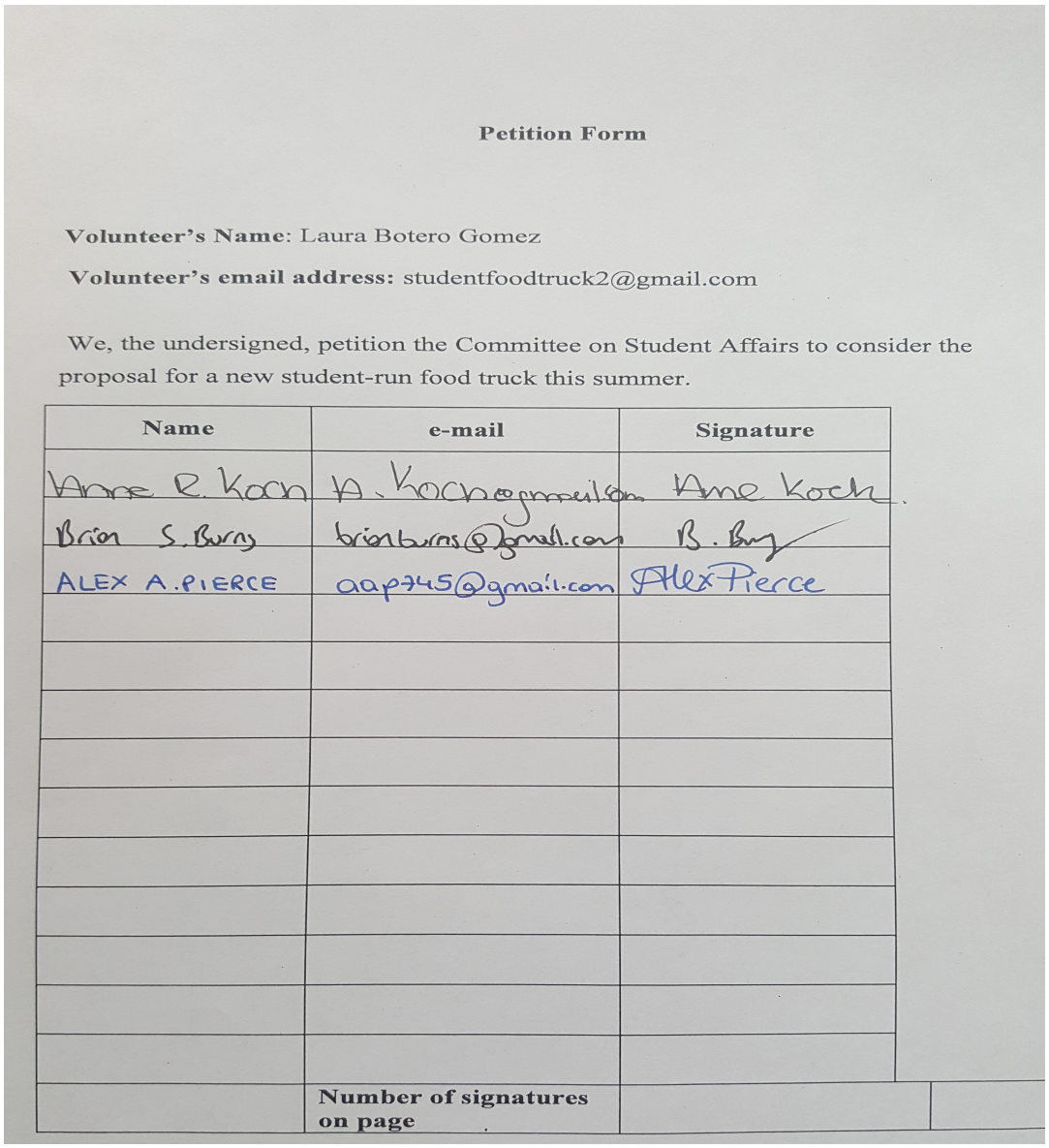
Table 4

Descriptive statistics for all measures in Study 4

	Main Study (Receivers' Evaluations)		
	Complaint-based Humblebrag	Brag	Complaint
Liking	3.32 [3.08, 3.56]	3.99 [3.74, 4.24]	4.24 [4.06, 4.41]
Perceived competence	4.11 [3.83, 4.38]	4.85 [4.60, 5.10]	4.50 [4.28, 4.72]
Perceived sincerity	3.81 [3.53, 4.10]	4.38 [4.12, 4.63]	4.89 [4.69, 5.10]
	Pretest		
Bragging	5.04 [4.68, 5.40]	5.73 [5.49, 5.97]	2.14 [1.87, 2.40]
Complaining	4.30 [3.93, 4.68]	1.66 [1.41, 1.91]	4.79 [4.48, 5.09]
Humblebragging	5.17 [4.79, 5.54]	3.86 [3.46, 4.26]	2.43 [2.10, 2.75]

Note: The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 1 Pre-populated petition form from Study 2.



Petition Form

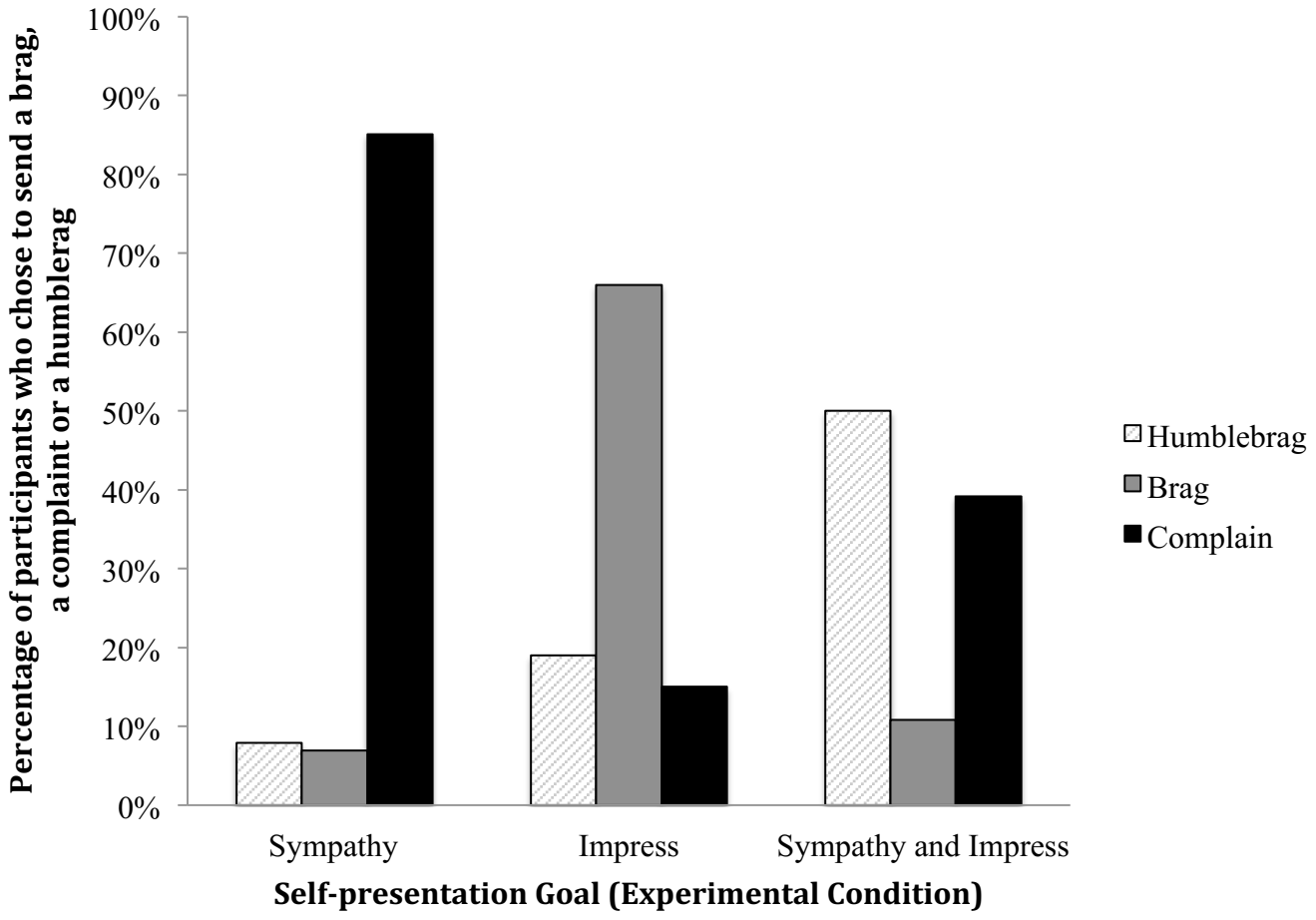
Volunteer's Name: Laura Botero Gomez

Volunteer's email address: studentfoodtruck2@gmail.com

We, the undersigned, petition the Committee on Student Affairs to consider the proposal for a new student-run food truck this summer.

Name	e-mail	Signature
Anne R. Koch	A.koch@gmail.com	Anne Koch
Brian S. Burns	brianburns@gmail.com	B. Burns
ALEX A. PIERCE	aap745@gmail.com	Alex Pierce
	Number of signatures on page	

Figure 2 *Self-presentation strategy selection by condition in Study 4.*



CHAPTER 2.

BACKHANDED COMPLIMENTS: HOW NEGATIVE COMPARISONS UNDERMINE FLATTERY

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Abstract

Seven studies (N = 2352) examine the psychology of backhanded compliments: compliments that draw a comparison with a negative standard ("Your ideas are good…for a doctoral student"). Backhanded compliments are a distinct self-presentation strategy characterized by two goals: conveying status and eliciting liking. Although backhanded compliments take several distinct forms and are common, they are viewed negatively by recipients (Studies 1a-b). Would-be flatterers deploy backhanded compliments in the mistaken belief that they will signal status and elicit liking (Studies 2a-b), but recipients and third-party evaluators grant them neither (Studies 3a-b). However, backhanded compliments harm recipients' self-views and motivation, enhancing the flatterer by comparison (Study 3c). We identify the mechanisms underlying the negative effects of backhanded compliments: giving backhanded compliments is seen as reflective of a concern with one's self-image (driving negative perceptions), while receiving backhanded compliments causes recipients to feel that they have low standing in an ability distribution (driving their reduced motivation).

Keywords: backhanded compliments, self-presentation, impression management, liking, status, social interaction, interpersonal relationships, social perception, social cognition

BACKHANDED COMPLIMENTS: HOW NEGATIVE COMPARISONS UNDERMINE FLATTERY

Consider how you would feel at the end of a meeting—after giving a lengthy presentation—if a colleague turned to you and said: "Your ideas were good." Previous research suggests that you would feel good and view your colleague favorably (Gordon, 1996; Vonk, 2002). Now, consider your reaction—and your view of your colleague—if your colleague tacked on just a few more words: "Your ideas were good… *for an intern*." Such backhanded compliments are commonplace in the workplace (*You speak well for a woman*), in everyday life (*You look thinner than the last time I saw you*), and in academia (*You are nice for an economist*; *This seems pretty rigorous for a social psychologist*.) We explore the psychology of backhanded compliments—compliments that draw a comparison with a negative standard—investigating why flatterers deploy them and how they are viewed by recipients.

People have a fundamental desire to be liked and viewed positively (Baumeister, 1982; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goffman, 1959; Hill, 1987; Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides, Hoorens, & Duffner, 2015; Scopelliti, Loewenstein, & Vosgerau, 2015), and often give compliments to garner such favorable impressions (Gordon, 1996; Jones, 1964; Westphal & Stern, 2007). Indeed, compliments—communicating positive aspects of another person to that person—are ubiquitous in social and organizational life (Gordon, 1996, Zivnuska, Kacmar, Witt, Carlson, & Bratton, 2004). Several streams of research suggest that deploying compliments in social and professional interactions results in positive outcomes such as increased liking for the flatterer, more favorable evaluations of job

performance, and actual career success (Bolino, Varela, Bande, & Turnley, 2006; Gordon, 1996; Wayne & Liden, 1995). Even flattery that is obviously insincere can be effective (Chan & Sengupta, 2010).

At the same time, flattery is not without risks to the flatterer. Being liked is a fundamental social goal, but people also desire respect and status (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015; Anderson, Sristava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006; Holoien & Fiske, 2013; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Swencionis & Fiske, 2016). Compliments can thus be costly: stating that someone is excellent at Task X may imply that the recipient is *better* than the flatterer at Task X, such that compliments may cause both recipients and observers to see flatterers as relatively inferior to recipients by comparison (Chan & Sengupta, 2013; Collins, 1996; Festinger, 1954; Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris 1995; Mussweiler, 2003; Tesser, 1988).

Most studies of self-promotion have focused on strategies designed to elicit either liking—such as ingratiation and flattery—or respect—such as bragging or intimidation (Bolino & Turnley, 2003; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; Gordon, 1996; Jones, 1964; Jones & Pitman, 1982). We explore a previously-undocumented yet common strategy by which flatterers seek to gain liking and status simultaneously: backhanded compliments, a compliment (to elicit liking) that contains a subtle "put down" in the form of a comparison with a negative standard (to elicit respect). We suggest that backhanded compliments are in fact ineffective because recipients focus less on the compliment and more on the comparison to a negative standard—leading to backlash against the would-be flatterer. We propose that backhanded compliments backfire due to a novel mechanism in the self-presentation literature: the location in

which recipients feel that different forms of flattery place them in a distribution. Whereas compliments place recipients at the top of an omnibus distribution (*Your ideas were good*...), backhanded compliments place recipients at the top of a relatively unfavorable section of that distribution (...*for an intern*; Figure 1).

Across seven studies we explore the psychology of backhanded compliments. Studies 1a-b document their pervasiveness in everyday life. Studies 2a-b examine which self-presentation goals (signaling status, gaining liking, or both) are most likely to prompt backhanded compliments. Studies 3a-c assess their effectiveness in three ways: perceptions of the would-be flatterer by both recipients and third-parties, and their affective consequences to recipients. Studies 3b and 3c investigate the mechanisms underlying backhanded compliments.

Study 1a: Backhanded Compliments in Everyday Life

Study 1a documents and differentiates compliments and backhanded compliments deployed in everyday life. First, we expected backhanded compliments to be common. Second, we examined whether—as our definition suggests—backhanded compliments include a comparison to a negative standard.

Method

Participants. We recruited one hundred and fifty six participants (M_{age} = 33.91, *SD* = 8.39; 32.5% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid them $1 for completing the survey. We included two attention filter questions to ensure that participants paid attention, all of which participants passed. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted recruitment of approximately 150 individuals. For the within-

subjects comparison of feelings of social comparison, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of d = .78 with achieved power of 1.

Design and procedure. Participants read initial instructions welcoming them to the study and answered two stringent reading and comprehension checks. If participants failed either of the comprehension checks, they were not allowed to complete the study.

Once they passed both checks, we informed participants that they would answer a few questions about different types of compliments. In random order, we asked them whether they had received a backhanded compliment from someone, and a compliment from someone. If so, participants were asked to write down an example of a backhanded compliment and a compliment that they had heard in the past. We provided examples of both backhanded compliments (e.g., "You are good looking for your size") and compliments (e.g., "You look great"). We asked two independent coders to analyze the content of the participants' open-ended responses and identify categories of both backhanded compliments and traditional compliments. They agreed 92% of the time about the title of each category and resolved disagreements through discussion. When coders decided on a final set of categories, they reread responses and indicated which category best suited each response.

We also asked coders to identify whether the recipients of the each type of compliments were being compared to something, and if so, to what were they being compared. In addition, coders indicated whether these responses insulted the comparison group.

Next, participants indicated their relationship to the person whose comment they recalled, and rated the extent to which they felt they were being compared to another

person or another group on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Finally, participants completed demographic questions.

Results

Frequency of backhanded compliments and compliments in everyday life. Both forms of flattery were ubiquitous in everyday conversation. The majority of participants could recall both types of compliments: 84.6% of participants could recall a backhanded compliment, and 98.1% of participants could recall a compliment they had received in the past.

Topics of compliments. Table 1a shows the categorization of backhanded compliments and compliments, with examples. For both backhanded compliments and compliments, five distinct topic categories emerged: 1) attractiveness, 2) intelligence, 3) personality, 4) performance and 5) skills. For backhanded compliments, the most common category was attractiveness, followed by intelligence, skills, performance, and personality. For compliments, the most common category was again attractiveness, followed by performance, intelligence, personality, and skills.

Comparisons. Coding revealed that the vast majority (97.0%) of backhanded compliments included a specific comparison, $\chi^2(1, N = 132) = 116.49$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = .94. The most common types of comparisons were: comparisons with another group, comparisons with the past self, comparisons with expectations, and comparisons with a stereotype (see Table 1b for examples). Moreover, fully 96.2% of these comparisons were coded as derogatory to the comparison group, $\chi^2(1, N = 132) = 112.76$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = .92.

In contrast, only 1.31% of the traditional compliments were coded as containing a comparison, $\chi^2(1, N = 153) = 145.11$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = .97. Moreover, none of the few comparisons were coded as derogatory.

Feelings of social comparison. As expected, among participants who recalled both backhanded compliments and compliments, backhanded compliments invoked greater feelings of social comparison ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.92$) than did traditional compliments ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 2.01$), $t(131) = 8.92$, $p < .001$, $d = .78$.

Relationship with the flatterer. Participants received both types of compliments from other people in their lives across many different contexts. The majority of backhanded compliments were from friends (35.6%), followed by coworkers (25%), family members (21.2%), strangers (15.2%), and a boss (3%). The majority of traditional compliments were from friends (43.8%), followed by coworkers (17.6%), family members (16.3%), strangers (11.8%) and a boss (10.5%).

Discussion

These findings offer initial evidence that backhanded compliments are common in everyday life, and offer support for our conceptual definition: compared to compliments, backhanded compliments draw a comparison to negative standard, invoking greater feelings of social comparison for recipients.

Study 1b: Typology of Backhanded Compliments

Study 1b documents the affective consequences of different types of backhanded compliments—using the many backhanded compliments from Study 1a to create a taxonomy of compliments. Given the general impact of social comparison on affective reactions (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Dunn, Ruedy, & Schweitzer, 2012), we examine the

affective impact of backhanded compliments and traditional compliments. In particular, we explore whether recipients feel that backhanded compliments are in fact compliments—or closer to insults.

Method

Participants. We recruited five hundred and nine participants (M_{age} = 36.75, *SD* = 11.81; 47.3% female) through Amazon's Mechanical Turk to participate in an online study in exchange for $.50. Three participants who failed the attention checks were not allowed to take the study. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 500 individuals (100 per experimental condition). For our main variable of interest, perceptions of offensiveness, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of $\eta^2 = .40$ with achieved power of 1.

Design and procedure. After participants passed the attention checks, they were randomly assigned to one of five conditions. In each condition, they read a scenario that ended with a different type of compliment:

> *Imagine you are interning for a company and assigned to a team project with four project members. You have a meeting to brainstorm about some ideas. At the end of the meeting, one of the members turns to you and remarks:*
>
> 1. *"Your ideas were good."* [Compliment]
> 2. *"Your ideas were better than last time."* [Backhanded compliment]
> 3. *"Your ideas were better than I expected."* [Backhanded compliment]
> 4. *"Your ideas were good for an intern."* [Backhanded compliment]
> 5. *"Your ideas were good for [your gender]."* [Backhanded compliment]

Condition 1 ended with a straightforward compliment. Using the comparison groups that emerged in backhanded compliments in Study 1a, Conditions 2-5 ended with compliments that "put down" the comparison group. Specifically, these conditions included backhanded compliments that include a comparison with the past self

(Condition 2), a comparison with expectations (Condition 3), a comparison with another group (Condition 4), or a stereotypical comparison (Condition 5).

After reading one of the scenarios, participants rated how proud and happy they felt on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all,* 7 = *very much*), which we averaged to create a composite measure of positive emotion (α = .97). Then they completed a two-item measure of offensiveness, also on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*): "To what extent did you feel offended?" and "To what extent did this person make you feel upset?" (α = .94; Cavanaugh, Gino, & Fitzsimons, 2015). These measures were counterbalanced; order did not affect our results

Finally, participants rated the extent to which they thought the person intended to compliment them and the extent to which they found it to be a compliment. Similarly, participants rated the extent to which they thought the person intended to insult them and the extent to which they found it to be an insult. Finally, participants answered demographic questions (age, gender).

Results

Table 2 shows means for all dependent measures by condition.

Perceived offensiveness. A one-way ANOVA revealed that participants' perceptions of offensiveness varied across conditions, $F(4, 708) = 85.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .40$. Post-hoc comparisons (with Bonferroni adjustments) showed that all backhanded compliments ($M_2 = 3.32$, $SD_2 = 1.65$; $M_3 = 3.65$, $SD_3 = 1.83$; $M_4 = 3.25$, $SD_4 = 1.86$; $M_5 = 5.31$, $SD_5 = 1.55$) were viewed as more offensive than the compliment ($M_1 = 1.24$, $SD_1 = .76$, $p < .001$; $ps < .001$). The stereotypical backhanded compliment was rated as more offensive than all others ($ps < .001$; Figure 2).

Positive emotions. A one-way ANOVA revealed that participants' positive emotions varied across conditions, $F(4, 508) = 68.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .35$. Post-hoc comparisons (with Bonferroni adjustments) indicated that participants who received backhanded compliments experienced less positive emotion ($M_2 = 4.21$, $SD_2 = 1.69$; $M_3 = 4.27$, $SD_3 = 1.82$; $M_4 = 4.16$, $SD_4 = 1.77$; $M_5 = 2.17$, $SD_5 = 1.49$) than those who received the compliment ($M_1 = 5.82$, $SD_1 = .98$; $ps < .001$). Participants in the stereotypical backhanded compliment condition ($M_5 = 2.17$, $SD_5 = 1.49$) reported lower positive emotions than all other conditions ($ps < .001$).

Compliment? A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect on ratings of the extent to which participants received the messages as compliments, $F(4, 508) = 82.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .39$. Post-hoc tests (with Bonferroni adjustments) indicated that ratings for the compliment condition ($M_1 = 6.31$, $SD_1 = .95$) were significantly higher than ratings for backhanded compliments ($M_2 = 3.94$, $SD_2 = 1.76$, $M_3 = 3.90$, $SD_3 = 2.06$, $M_4 = 4.28$, $SD_4 = 1.83$; $M_5 = 2.12$, $SD_5 = 2.12$, $ps < .001$). For the traditional compliment (*Your ideas are good*), there was no difference between the extent to which it was intended to be a compliment and taken as a compliment, $t(100) = .46$, $p = .64$, $d = .07$; all four backhanded compliments, however, were rated as more likely to be intended as a compliment than taken as a compliment (all $ps < .001$)

Or insult? The one-way ANOVA on ratings of the extent to which participants received these messages as insults was also significant, $F(4, 508) = 81.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .39$. Post-hoc tests (with Bonferroni corrections) indicated that the compliment condition was seen as significantly less insulting ($M_1 = 1.32$, $SD_1 = .81$) than all backhanded

compliments (M_2 = 3.71, SD_2 = 1.88, M_3 = 3.86, SD_3 = 1.87, M_4 = 3.34, SD_4 = 2.02; M_5 = 5.49, SD_5 = 1.70; *ps* < .001).

For the traditional compliment, there was no difference between the extent to which it was intended to be an insult and was likely to be viewed as an insult (all *p*s > .41). In contrast, all four backhanded compliments were rated as more likely to be taken as an insult than intended as an insult (all *ps* < .001, Table 2).

Discussion

Study 1b suggests that backhanded compliments reduce positive emotions and are perceived as more offensive than compliments. While all backhanded compliments were offensive, those that reference stereotypes (in this case, gender) were viewed as particularly harsh. Moreover, these results suggest that even though recipients understood that would-be flatterers intend their backhanded compliments to be complimentary and not insulting, they were insulted nonetheless.

Studies 2a and 2b: Why and When Do People Give Backhanded Compliments?

Studies 1a-b suggest a dilemma: backhanded compliments are both commonly used yet generally offensive to their recipients. If straightforward compliments lead to being liked (Gordon, 1996), why would people qualify their compliments by making them backhanded? We suggest that backhanded compliments are deployed in an effort to signal or repair status while simultaneously eliciting liking. In Study 2a, people choose which of two self-presentation strategies—giving a compliment or backhanded compliment—will best elicit liking, convey status, or achieve both goals. In Study 2b, we explore whether people are more likely to give backhanded compliments to a coworker after they receive a status threat in the form of a negative evaluation.

Study 2a: Why Do People Give Backhanded Compliments?

Participants. We recruited three hundred and one participants (M_{age} = 34.94, *SD* = 10.93; 43.5% female) through Amazon's Mechanical Turk to participate in an online study in exchange for $.50. Four participants who failed the attention checks were not allowed to take the study. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 300 individuals (100 participants per experimental condition). For our main variable of interest, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of Cramér's V = .63 with achieved power of .99.

Design and procedure. We randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions in which they were given a goal: elicit liking, convey status, or both. We asked participants to choose one of two self-presentation strategies—giving a compliment or giving a backhanded compliment—to achieve their goal(s). We provided examples of compliments ("You are so smart" and "Your ideas are great") and backhanded compliments ("You are so smart for your educational background" and "Your ideas are better than I expected.") We counterbalanced the order of the choice options, which did not affect our results.

Results

When participants were told to choose a message that would elicit liking, only 5% chose a backhanded compliment; in both conditions in which status was a goal, in contrast, the propensity to choose the backhanded compliment increased dramatically: 81% chose the backhanded compliment when asked to signal status, while 48% chose backhanded compliments when asked to elicit both liking and status, $\chi^2(2, N = 301) =$ 118. 39, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = .63 (Figure 3).

Discussion

These results show that when participants aim to signal status and elicit liking, they are more likely to deploy backhanded compliments; when they aim to elicit liking only, they default to traditional compliments.

Study 2b: When Do People Give Backhanded Compliments?

Study 2a reveals that people attempt to signal status by deploying backhanded compliments. Study 2b explores a context in which people may be even more likely to deploy backhanded compliments: when their status has been threatened.

Method

Participants. We recruited four hundred and five individuals (M_{age} = 34.84, *SD* = 10.84; 46.9% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk to participate in an online study in exchange for $.50. All participants passed two attention checks. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 400 individuals (100 participants per experimental session). For our main variable of interest, a post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of Cramér's V = .11.

Design and procedure. We randomly assigned participants to one of four between-subject conditions using a 2 (absent coworker vs. present coworker) X 2 (negative evaluation vs. positive evaluation) experimental design. In all conditions, participants read the following scenario:

> *"Imagine that you have been working in a company for the past 4 years. Working there has been your dream job and you really want to rise to higher positions in the coming years ahead.*
>
> *You have one coworker (whose initials are A.N.) who started at the company at the same time as you, and you are up for the same promotion next month. Imagine you have an MBA degree but A.N. doesn't have an MBA degree. You and A.N. are currently Analysts but only one of you will be promoted to Associate Director.*

Your supervisor was not able to come with you and A.N. to a client meeting last week and wants to know how the client presentations went."

Participants in the absent coworker [present coworker] conditions read:

"Your supervisor calls for a meeting, but A.N. is unable [and A.N. is able] to make the meeting."

Participants in the positive evaluation conditions read the following:

"Your supervisor tells you he heard from several different sources that your presentation was well-organized and went extremely well, and that he is strongly considering you for the promotion."

Participants in the negative evaluation conditions read the following:

"Your supervisor tells you he heard from several different sources that your presentation was disorganized and went extremely poorly, and that he is considering passing you over for the promotion."

Participants then imagined that their supervisor asked how well the other coworker's presentation went. We provided participants with a compliment and a backhanded compliment and asked them to indicate which they would be most likely to respond with:

A.N.'s presentations are really good.
A.N.'s presentations are really good for someone without an MBA degree.

The order of the choice options was counterbalanced and did not affect our results.

Finally, participants completed demographic questions.

Results

A logistic regression analysis revealed a main effect of status threat (i.e., negative evaluation) on the propensity to respond with a backhanded compliment, B = .81, Wald = 13.76, df = 1, $p < .001$; presence versus absence of coworker did not have a significant

effect, B = .08, Wald = .17, df = 1, p = .68, and there was no interaction, B = .15, Wald = .12, df = 1, p = .72.

In the absence of their coworker, 23.5% of participants chose to respond with a backhanded compliment when they received a positive evaluation, while 42.7% chose a backhanded compliment when they received a negative evaluation, $\chi^2(1, N = 205) = 8.51$, p = .004, Cramér's V = .20. Similarly, when the coworker was present, 23.5% chose to respond with a backhanded compliment after a positive evaluation, while 39% chose to send a backhanded compliment after a negative evaluation, $\chi^2(1, N = 202) = 5.63$, p = .018, Cramér's V = .16.

Discussion

Study 2b demonstrates that people's propensity to give backhanded compliments increases when their own status has been threatened.

Studies 3a-c: Are Backhanded Compliments Effective?

Studies 3a-c investigate whether backhanded compliments are an effective form of self-promotion. We investigate three possible routes by which backhanded compliments might benefit flatterers: either recipients (Study 3a) or third-party observers (Study 3b) viewing such flatterers more positively, or—in a particularly pernicious outcome of backhanded compliments—recipients feeling undermined in their sense of competence and motivation (Study 3c).

We also explore the mechanisms underlying backhanded compliments for both flatterers and recipients. In Study 3b we assess the perceived self-image concern of flatterers—the extent to which people see flatterers as actively trying to manage their impression—to examine whether people who give backhanded compliments as seen as

more strategic. Study 3c examines mechanism from the recipients' perceptive, exploring how—in contrast to compliments that place recipients nearer to the top of the distribution—backhanded compliments place recipients at the top of a relatively unfavorable section of that distribution, leading recipients to question their own competence and harming their motivation.

Study 3a: Do Recipients See Backhanded Compliments as Effective?

Method

Participants. We recruited two hundred and fifty employed individuals (M_{age} = 34.68, *SD* = 10.06; 39.8% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk to participate in an online study in exchange for $.50. Five participants who failed the attention checks were not allowed to take the study. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 250 individuals. For our main variable of interest, perceived status, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of *d* = 1.21 with achieved power of 1.

Design and procedure. We randomly assigned participants to recall either a backhanded compliment or a traditional compliment they had received from a coworker. In the backhanded compliment condition, we asked them whether they could think of a coworker who had given them a backhanded compliment, and in the compliment condition, we asked them whether they could think of a coworker who had given them a compliment. If so, we asked participants to write down the initials of the coworker and an example of the backhanded compliment or compliment that they had heard in the past from that coworker.

We asked two independent coders to analyze the content of the participants' open-ended responses and identify subcategories for backhanded compliments and traditional compliments. The coders agreed 91% of the time about the title of each category and resolved disagreements through discussion. Once the coders decided on a final set of categories, they reread each response and indicated which category best suited each response.

If participants could recall a coworker who had given them a compliment or a backhanded compliment, they responded on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*) to two items about their coworkers' perceived status in the organization: "How much do you think this person receives respect from others in the organization?" and "How much do you think this person makes valuable contributions in the organization?" ($\alpha = .89$; Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro & Chatman, 2006). Next, participants rated their coworkers' likeability ("This person is likeable" and "I like this person"; $\alpha = .96$) on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Then participants answered a two-item measure of social attraction, also on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*): "To what extent is this person the kind of person you would want as a friend?" and "To what extent is this person the kind of person you would want as a colleague?" ($\alpha = .95$; Rudman, 1998). In addition, participants answered a two-item measure of perceived sincerity, also on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*): "How sincere do you think this person is?" and "How credible do you think this person is?" ($\alpha = .93$; Chan & Sengupta, 2010).

Next, participants rated the perceived condescension of their coworker. We captured this measure by asking participants the following two items: "To what extent do

you think this person considers themselves superior to you?" and "To what extent do you think this person is being condescending toward you?" Because the items were closely related (α = .86), we used the average of these two items as a combined measure of perceived condescension.

Finally, participants answered a 3-item measure of perceived competence: "How competent / capable / skillful do you find this person is?" (α = .95) and a 3-item measure of perceived warmth: "How warm / friendly / good-natured do you find this person?" (α = .97; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, Xu, 2002) on 5-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*). The order of all dependent measures was counterbalanced; presentation order did not affect our results.

Results

Frequency and type of compliments in the workplace. The majority of participants could think of a coworker who had given them a backhanded compliment or a compliment: 84.1% of participants were able to list a coworker who gave them a backhanded compliment, and 97.1% of participants could list a coworker who gave them a compliment.

Four categories of backhanded compliments and compliments emerged from the coding. (Table 3 shows the categorization of both types of compliments, with examples.)

The most common category for backhanded compliments was attractiveness, followed by performance, intelligence, and personality; for traditional compliments, the top category was performance followed closely by attractiveness, then intelligence and personality.

Perceived status. Despite participants' belief in Study 2a that backhanded compliments were more useful than compliments for conveying status, participants who thought of a coworker who gave them a backhanded compliment rated that coworker as having lower status ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.44$) than those who thought of a coworker who gave them a traditional compliment ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 1.19$), $t(226) = 9.10$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.21$. (Table 4 provides means for all dependent measures by condition.)

Liking. Participants liked coworkers who gave them a backhanded compliment significantly less ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.69$) than they did coworkers who gave them a compliment ($M = 6.20$, $SD = .96$, $t(226) = 14.85$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.98$.

Social attraction. Similarly, ratings of social attraction were lower in the backhanded compliment condition ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.72$) than in the compliment condition ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 1.10$, $p < .001$), $t(226) = 14.92$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.98$.

Perceived sincerity. Participants found coworkers who offered backhanded compliments to be less sincere ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.55$) than they did coworkers who offered compliments ($M = 6.18$, $SD = .94$), $t(226) = 14.66$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.95$.

Perceived condescension. Participants found coworkers who gave backhanded compliments to be more condescending ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.45$) than they did coworkers who gave compliments ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.64$), $t(226) = -11.76$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.56$.

Perceived competence and warmth. Participants perceived coworkers who gave backhanded compliments to be less competent ($M = 3.17$, $SD = .95$) and less warm ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.02$), than they did coworkers who gave compliments ($M = 4.17$, $SD = .78$; $M = 4.43$, $SD = .63$), $t(226) = 8.74$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.16$, and $t(226) = 17.39$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.31$.

Discussion

Study 3a suggests that, compared to those who give compliments, coworkers who deploy backhanded compliments are perceived as lower status, less likeable, less interpersonally attractive, less competent, and less warm.

Study 3b: Do Observers See Backhanded Compliments as Effective?

Study 3a offers initial evidence that recipients of backhanded compliments neither like nor give status to would-be flatterers. Study 3b has two primary goals. First, we investigate whether backhanded compliments might offer a different benefit: leading third parties to infer that those who give backhanded compliments are superior to their recipients; previous research demonstrates differing perceptions between conversation partners and observers (Brooks, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2015; Vonk, 2002). Second, Study 3b investigates the underlying mechanism that leads people to rate givers of backhanded compliments negatively: their perceived image concern. In addition, to exert more control over the content of the compliments and backhanded compliments, Study 3b uses more tightly controlled stimuli.

Method

Participants. We recruited three hundred and ninety nine individuals (M_{age} = 33.72, *SD* = 10.36; 36.3% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk to participate in an online study in exchange for $.50. Nine participants failed to pass the attention checks and were dismissed from the study. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 400 individuals (100 participants per experimental condition). For our main variable of interest, perceived status, the post-hoc power

analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of , $\eta_p^2 = .25$ with achieved power of .95.

Design and procedure. We randomly assigned participants to one of four between-subjects conditions using a 2 (absent coworker vs. present coworker) X 2 (backhanded compliment vs. traditional compliment) experimental design. We asked participants to read a scenario in which a subordinate issues a backhanded compliment or traditional compliment about a coworker who is either present or absent. We asked participants to take the perspective of the supervisor and evaluate both the flatterer and the recipients. In all conditions participants read the following:

> *"Imagine that you have been working in a company for the past 14 years and have risen to the role of Director. You were not able to go to a client meeting last week and you want to know how the client presentations went. You call for a meeting.*
>
> *Both employees K.L. and A.N. started at the same time in the company and both are up for the same promotion next month. Both K.L. and A.N are currently Analysts but only one of them will be promoted to Associate Director.*
>
> *K.L. has an MBA degree, A.N doesn't have an MBA degree.*
> *During the meeting, you tell K.L. that you heard K.L.'s presentation went poorly. You ask K.L. how well A.N. 's presentation went."*

Participants in the absent coworker conditions read:

> *"Your employee K.L. is able to make the meeting. And A.N. is not able to make the meeting due to another task."*

Participants in the present coworker conditions read:

> *"Your employees K.L and A.N are able to make the meeting."*

In the backhanded compliment [compliment] condition, participants read:

> *"K.L. answers: "A.N.'s presentations are really good for someone without an MBA degree." [A.N.'s presentations are really good.]*

After reading one of the scenarios, participants completed the same measure of liking (α = .93) and perceived status (α = .78; Anderson et al., 2006) as in Study 3a. Participants rated both the employee who gave a compliment or backhanded compliment and the employee who was the target of the compliment or backhanded compliment. In addition, participants completed a five-item measure of perceived image concern on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*): "To what extent do you think this person is concerned about the impressions that others form of them?" "To what extent do you think this person is trying to look superior to others?" "To what extent do you think this person is trying to show themselves in the best possible light?" "To what extent do you think this person is insecure about how they look to others?" and "To what extent do you think this person is attempting to control the impressions they are making?" (α = .83). Next, participants indicated which employee they would choose to be promoted to Associate Director. Finally, participants completed demographic questions.

Results

Table 5 provides means for all dependent measures by condition.

Perceived status. Consistent with Study 3a, there was a main effect of compliment type on perceptions of the flatterer's status, $F(1, 395) = 135.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$. Participants rated those who deployed backhanded compliments as having lower status ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.33$) than those who gave traditional compliments ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.06$). The main effect of absence versus presence of the coworker was not significant $F(1, 395) = .39$, $p = .53$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, and there was no interaction of compliment type by absence of coworker, $F(1, 395) = .14$, $p = .71$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$. However, there was also a main effect of backhanded compliments on judgments of the recipient's

status, $F(1, 395) = 19.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, such that targets of backhanded compliments were judged to be lower status ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.03$) than targets of traditional compliments ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.13$). Critically, however, despite the lowering of status of the backhanded compliment recipient, flatterers who gave backhanded compliments were rated as having lower status ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.45$) than the recipients of those backhanded compliments ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.04$), $F(1, 395) = 98.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$.

The main effect of coworker absence or presence was not significant $F(1, 395) = .77$, $p = .38$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$, and there was no interaction, $F(1, 395) = 2.04$, $p = .15$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$.

Liking. Flatterers who gave backhanded compliments were liked less ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.59$) than employees who gave traditional compliments ($M = 5.63$, $SD = 1.11$), $F(1, 395) = 256.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .39$. The main effect of coworker absence or presence was not significant $F(1, 395) = .06$, $p = .81$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, and there was no interaction, $F(1, 395) = 1.39$, $p = .24$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$. Participants who were evaluating an employee who received a backhanded compliment liked the target equally ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.10$) compared to participants who evaluated an employee who received a traditional compliment ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.16$), $F(1, 395) = 1.85$, $p = .18$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$. The main effect of coworker absence or presence was not significant $F(1, 395) = .40$, $p = .53$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, and there was no interaction, $F(1, 395) = 2.78$, $p = .10$, $\eta_p^2 = .007$.

As with status perceptions, using backhanded compliments backfired: participants liked targets who deployed backhanded compliments less ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.59$) than the

recipients of those backhanded compliments ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.10$), $F(1, 395) = 124.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .24$.

Perceived image concern. Consistent with our predictions, we found a main effect of compliment type on judgments of flatterers' perceived image concern, $F(1, 395) = 158.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .29$: those who gave a backhanded compliment were perceived as more strategic about impression management ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.41$) than those who gave a traditional compliment ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.50$). The main effect of coworker absence or presence was not significant, $F(1, 395) = .58$, $p = .45$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, and there was no interaction, $F(1, 395) = .31$, $p = .58$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$. Neither compliment type, $F(1, 395) = 1.31$, $p = .25$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$, nor the absence or presence of the compliment recipient, $F(1, 395) = .009$, $p = .93$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, influenced evaluations of the perceived image concern of the recipient, and there was no interaction, $F(1, 395) = .87$, $p = .35$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$. And finally, participants perceived flatterers who gave backhanded compliments to be more strategic ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.42$) than recipients ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.30$), $F(1, 395) = 87.83$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$.

Promotion decisions. A logistic regression analysis revealed a main effect of compliment type on promotion decisions, B = 1.47, Wald $\chi^2 = 17.85$, $p < .001$; presence versus absence of coworker did not have a significant effect, B = .05, Wald = .03, df = 1, $p = .86$, and there was no interaction, B = .38, Wald = .67, df = 1, $p = .23$. When participants evaluated an employee who gave a traditional compliment, they showed roughly the same propensity to promote the flatterer (44.5%) and the recipient (55.5%). When participants evaluated an employee who gave a backhanded compliment, however,

they became far more likely to choose the recipient of this statement for promotion (81.4%) than the flatterer who gave the backhanded compliment (18.6%).

Mediation. A path analysis revealed that perceived image concern and liking mediated the relationship between backhanded compliments and promotion decisions. Backhanded compliments led to higher perceived image concern, which led participants to find their employees less likeable, which led to unfavorable promotion decisions. When we included perceived image concern in the model, predicting liking, the effect of backhanded compliment was reduced (from $\beta = -.63$, $p < .001$, to $\beta = -.45$, $p < .001$), and perceived image concern was a significant predictor of liking ($\beta = -.33$, $p < .001$). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [–.84, –.42], suggesting a significant indirect effect. When we included perceived image concern and liking in the model, predicting promotion decisions, the effect of backhanded compliments was reduced (from $\beta = -.28$, $p < .001$, to $\beta = .04$, $p = .52$), and both perceived image concern ($\beta = .20$, $p = .001$) and liking ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .001$) predicted promotion outcomes. The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [.08, .38], suggesting a significant indirect effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelly, 2011).

Discussion

Study 3b demonstrates that using backhanded compliments conveys information to perceivers about flatterers' image concerns, which makes those who deploy backhanded compliments less likeable and less likely to be promoted, compared to both their recipients and those who deploy traditional compliments.

Study 3c: Do Backhanded Compliments Undermine Recipients?

Thus far, we have shown that people believe backhanded compliments will convey status while eliciting liking, but that the strategy backfires with recipients and third-party observers. Study 3c examines one final possible benefit: backhanded compliments may undermine recipients' feelings of competence and desire to persist in tasks—possibly making the flatterer better off in comparison. We also explore the mechanism that might underlie that reduced motivation: the feeling of being in an unfavored part of a distribution.

Method

Participants. We pretested our paradigm by recruiting two hundred and twenty undergraduate students (M_{age} = 20.19, SD = 1.33; 54.5% female) from a northeastern university in the United States to participate in an online study in exchange for a $10 Amazon Gift Card. All participants passed attention checks. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 200 individuals (100 participants per experimental condition).

For the main study, we recruited two hundred and two participants (M_{age} = 34.33, SD = 11.69; 43.1% female) through Amazon's Mechanical Turk to participate in an online study in exchange for $1. Four participants who failed the attention checks were not allowed to take the study. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 200 individuals. For our main variable of interest, perceived creativity, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of d = .30 with achieved power of .99.

Design and procedure. In both the pretest and the main study, we first asked participants to indicate their gender, age, and state of residence (e.g., Massachusetts).

Then we told participants that they would work on a creativity task: writing a creative short story of at least 200 words. We informed participants that once they finished their story, they would be matched with an anonymous participant who would then read their story and send feedback. In reality, this anonymous participant was a computer-simulated confederate. After five minutes of writing, participants automatically moved to the next screen with a loading image that asked them to wait until the other participant sent feedback. After one minute, they moved to the next page where they read the feedback. At this stage, we randomly assigned participants to one of two between-subject conditions: compliment or backhanded compliment. In the compliment condition, participants read: "You are creative." In the backhanded compliment condition, participants read: "You are creative for someone from [participant's geographical state]." That is, in the backhanded compliment condition, participants received a personalized version of the backhanded compliment based on their answers to the state question at the beginning of the study.

Participants rated their positive emotions ($\alpha = .96$) and perceived offensiveness ($\alpha = .94$) using the same measures as in Study 1b. Participants rated their partner's likeability ("I like the other participant" and "The other participant is likeable"; $\alpha = .98$), their own creativity on a slider from 0 ("Least Creative") to 10 ("Most Creative"), and how their partner would rate the creativity of people from their state in general on a slider from 0 ("Least Creative") to 10 ("Most Creative"). Finally, as a measure of motivation, we asked participants whether they would like to complete this task again (i.e., write another creative story and receive feedback), or whether they would prefer to complete a different letter-counting task in which they count vowels in some paragraphs of prose.

Results

Table 6 provides descriptive statistics for all measures by condition.

Pretest results. Consistent with our hypothesis, the undergraduate participants in our pretest study rated the backhanded compliment to be more offensive (M = 3.60, SD = 1.88) than the traditional compliment (M = 1.39, SD = 1.03), $t(218) = 10.78$, $p < .001$., d = 1.46. Similarly, participants who received backhanded compliments experienced less positive emotions (M = 3.54, SD = 1.97) than those who received traditional compliments (M = 5.19, SD = 1.54), $t(218) = 6.94$, $p < .001$, d = .93. Participants also liked their partner less in the backhanded compliment condition (M = 3.50, SD = 1.97) than they did in the traditional compliment condition (M = 5.24, SD = 1.40), $t(218) = 7.55$, $p < .001$, d = 1.02.

Finally, participants who received a backhanded compliment rated their own creativity to be lower (M = 5.43, SD = 2.41) than did participants who received a traditional compliment (M = 6.01, SD = 1.77), $t(218) = 2.04$, $p = .043$, d = .27.

Perceived offensiveness. In the main study, participants who received a backhanded compliment found their partner to be more offensive (M = 3.25, SD = 1.92) than those who received a traditional compliment (M = 1.66, SD = 1.52), $t(200) = 6.50$, $p < .001$, d = .99.

Positive emotions. As we predicted, backhanded compliments reduced the experience of positive emotions (M = 4.11, SD = 1.88) compared to traditional compliments (M = 5.37, SD = 1.69), $t(200) = 5.00$, $p < .001$, d = .70.

Liking. Participants liked their partner less in the backhanded compliment condition ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.83$) than they did in the traditional compliment condition ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.58$), $t(200) = 6.53$, $p < .001$, $d = .92$.

Self-assessed creativity. Participants who received a backhanded compliment rated their own creativity to be lower ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 2.19$) than did participants who received a traditional compliment ($M = 6.51$, $SD = 1.79$), $t(200) = 2.16$, $p = .032$, $d = .30$.

Perceived creativity of the comparison group (state). Participants who received a backhanded compliment thought that their partner would rate the creativity of people from their state to be substantially lower ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 2.98$) than did participants who received a traditional compliment ($M = 6.31$, $SD = 2.12$), $t(200) = 5.85$, $p < .001$, $d = .82$.

Subsequent task selection. The percentage of participants who chose to complete the same creativity task varied across conditions, $\chi^2(1, N = 202) = 4.15$, $p = .042$, Cramér's V = .14. Only 18.6% of participants who received a backhanded compliment chose to complete the same creativity task again, while 31% of participants who received a traditional compliment chose to complete the same task again.

Comparison group as mediator. The perceived creativity of the comparison group (the participant's home state) mediated the relationship between backhanded compliments and self-assessments of creativity. Including perceived creativity of the comparison group in the model significantly reduced the effect of backhanded compliments (from $\beta = .15$, $p = .032$, to $\beta = .03$, $p = .72$), and perceived creativity of the comparison group was a significant predictor of self-assessed creativity ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$). A 10,000-sample bootstrap analysis revealed that the 95% bias-corrected

confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [-109, -.44], suggesting a significant indirect effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelly, 2011).

Discussion

The negative standard that backhanded compliments evoke lead recipients to place themselves in an unfavorable location in the omnibus distribution of ability, and this drove recipients' decreased assessments of their performance and persistence in subsequent tasks.

General Discussion

Although previous research demonstrates that flattery can secure positive outcomes across a variety of situations (Vonk, 2002), our results demonstrate that not all compliments are alike: different types of compliments are used for different self-presentational goals, and some classes of compliments are more effective than others. Seven studies reveal the psychology of backhanded compliments: compliments that draw a comparison with a negative standard. We identify a typology of this novel and common self-presentation strategy (Studies 1a-1b). Most self-promotion strategies target either liking or respect; backhanded compliments are a distinct strategy most commonly deployed when people attempt to fulfill their goals to be liked and respected simultaneously (Studies 2a-2b). We highlight a critical self-presentational mismatch: although would-be flatterers believe that backhanded compliments will garner them both liking and status, both recipients and third-party observers grant them neither (Studies 3a-3b). However, backhanded compliments do serve one goal for flatterers: by causing recipients to question their competence and decreasing their motivation, backhanded compliments may make the flatterer look better in comparison (Study 3c).

In linking the literatures on self-presentation and social comparison, our results make contributions to each. Although all self-presentation strategies are efforts to manage self-image in the eyes of others, we introduce a construct—perceived concern with self-image—that varies by the type of strategy deployed (from the flatterer's perspective) and predicts the effectiveness of those strategies (from the recipient and observer perspectives). Although people likely should see straightforward complimenters as deliberately managing their image, they often do not (Chan & Sengupta, 2010; Vonk, 2002); Study 3 suggests that people who deploy backhanded compliments are in fact seen as concerned with their image, driving the dislike and disrespect they garner. We introduce a novel interpersonal strategy which individuals can use to induce others to engage in harmful social comparison, and a construct that helps to explain the impact that flattery has on recipients: in Study 3c, we identify perceived placement in a distribution as a mechanism underlying the impact of backhanded compliments on the affective experiences of recipients.

Our findings suggest several promising directions for future research. First, because we show that backhanded compliments operate in part through perceived placement in a distribution, understanding how actual placement in that distribution—such as status differentials between flatterers and recipients—influence the effect of backhanded compliments warrants further exploration. Second, while backhanded compliments make a negative standard of comparison very salient, we suspect that people who give traditional compliments have an implicit standard of comparison in mind, suggesting that examining the types of comparison groups called to mind by different forms of self-presentation offer a fruitful path for further research. Finally, while our

research primarily examines unsolicited backhanded compliments, future research should examine whether the negative impact of backhanded compliments might be mitigated when the recipient asks for (and expects to receive) accurate feedback.

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Table 1a.
Topics and Examples of Backhanded Compliments and Compliments, in Study 1a

Backhanded Compliments		Compliments	
Categories	Examples	Categories	Examples
Attractiveness (42.4%)	"You are pretty athletic and good looking for your size. For a fat person you don't sweat much."	Attractiveness (52.9%)	"You're so handsome."
Intelligence (22.0%)	"You're actually smart for someone without a college education."	Performance (19.0%)	"You did a great job on that project."
Skills (18.9%)	"You are really good at racing games for being a girl."	Intelligence (14.3%)	"So many times my friends told you are too smart and brilliant."
Performance (10.6%)	"You're doing a lot better than I thought."	Personality (7.8%)	"You are a very kind and thoughtful person."
Personality (6.1%)	"You must really be brave and not care for what others think for these clothes."	Skills (5.9%)	"You have a great voice."

Table 1b.
Types of Backhanded Compliments

Type	Example
Comparison with another group (50.8%)	"For a finance employee, you look like a really nice person."
Comparison with the past self (20.5%)	"Your new haircut really slims down your face."
Comparison with expectations (16.7%)	"You did way better on this project than we assumed you would do."
Comparison with a stereotype (12.1%)	"You are pretty assertive for an Asian."

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for all measures in Study 1b

	Condition 1: "Your ideas were good."	Condition 2: "Your ideas were better than last time."	Condition 3: "Your ideas were better than I expected."	Condition 4: "Your ideas were good for an intern."	Condition 5: "Your ideas were good for [your gender]."
Perceived Offensiveness	1.24 [1.09, 1.39]	3.32 [2.99, 3.65]	3.65 [3.29, 4.01]	3.25 [2.88, 3.62]	5.31 [5.01, 5.62]
Positive emotions	5.82 [5.62, 6.01]	4.21 [3.88, 4.54]	4.27 [3.91, 4.62]	4.16 [3.81, 4.50]	2.17 [1.87, 2.46]
Receiving it as a compliment	6.31 [6.12, 6.49]	3.94 [3.60, 4.29]	3.90 [3.50, 4.31]	4.28 [3.92, 4.64]	2.12 [1.83, 2.40]
Intended to be a compliment	6.34 [6.17, 6.51]	4.55 [4.22, 4.88]	4.47 [4.11, 4.83]	4.78 [4.42, 5.13]	3.79 [3.42, 4.17]
Receiving it as an insult	1.23 [1.08, 1.38]	3.71 [3.34, 4.07]	3.86 [3.50, 4.23]	3.34 [2.95, 3.74]	5.49 [5.16, 5.83]
Intended to be an insult	1.25 [1.10, 1.39]	3.04 [2.72, 3.36]	3.37 [3.02, 3.73]	2.87 [2.51, 3.23]	4.06 [3.69, 4.43]

Note: The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

Table 3
Topic Categorizations and Examples of Backhanded Compliments and Compliments in Study 3a

Backhanded Compliments		Compliments	
Categories	Examples	Categories	Examples
Attractiveness (41.05%)	"You're cute for a big girl."	Attractiveness (36.84%)	"You really look great today, so professional."
Performance (34.74%)	"You're doing better than I thought you would when you were in training."	Performance (24.06%)	"You are really good at creating spreadsheets and forms!"
Intelligence (14.74%)	"You are smart for being so blonde."	Intelligence (14.29%)	"You come up with a lot of creative ideas that make our process more efficient."
Personality (9.47%)	"You are pretty cool for an IT guy."	Personality (11.28%)	"You are very patient with the customers."

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics (Study 3a)

	Compliment	Backhanded Compliment
1. Perceived Status	5.72 [5.52, 5.93]	4.13 [3.84, 4.43]
2. Liking	6.20 [6.03, 6.36]	3.57 [3.22, 3.91]
3. Social Attraction	5.96 [5.77, 6.15]	3.17 [2.82, 3.52]
4. Perceived Sincerity	6.18 [6.02, 6.34]	3.76 [3.45, 4.08]
5. Perceived Condescension	2.62 [2.34, 2.90]	5.09 [4.79, 5.38]
6. Perceived Competence	4.17 [4.04, 4.31]	3.17 [2.97, 3.36]
7. Perceived Warmth	4.43[4.33, 4.54]	2.53 [2.32, 2.73]

Note: The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for all measures in Study 3b

	Flatterer			
	Backhanded Compliment & Coworker Absent	Backhanded Compliment & Coworker Present	Traditional Compliment & Coworker Absent	Traditional Compliment & Coworker Present
Perceived status	4.06 [3.80, 4.32]	4.03 [3.76, 4.30]	5.52 [5.30, 5.74]	5.40 [5.19, 5.60]
Liking	3.48 [3.18, 3.78]	3.38 [3.05, 3.71]	5.53 [5.29, 5.77]	5.72 [5.53, 5.92]
Perceived image concern	5.26 [4.99, 5.53]	5.44 [5.15, 5.73]	3.50 [3.18, 3.81]	3.53 [3.24, 3.81]
Promotion decision	21.6% (22/102)	15.5 % (15/97)	45.1 % (46/102)	43.9% (43/98)
	Recipient			
	Backhanded Compliment & Coworker Absent	Backhanded Compliment & Coworker Present	Traditional Compliment & Coworker Absent	Traditional Compliment & Coworker Present
Perceived status	5.14 [4.93, 5.36]	4.88 [4.69, 5.08]	5.47 [5.24, 5.70]	5.53 [5.31, 5.75]
Liking	5.01 [4.77, 5.24]	4.89 [4.69, 5.09]	4.97 [4.74, 5.20]	5.23 [5.01, 5.45]
Perceived image concern	4.10 [3.85, 4.34]	3.99 [3.72, 4.27]	3.86 [3.62, 4.10]	3.96 [3.76, 4.15]
Promotion decision	78.4% (80/102)	84.5 % (82/97)	54.9 % (56/102)	56.1% (55/98)

Note: The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals; the values in parentheses indicate proportions.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for all measures in Study 3c

Pretest		
	Backhanded Compliment	Compliment
Perceived Offensiveness	3.60 [3.25, 3.96]	1.39 [1.20, 1.59]
Positive Emotions	3.54 [3.16, 3.91]	5.19 [4.90, 5.48]
Liking	3.50 [3.13, 3.87]	5.24 [4.98, 5.51]
Perceived self-creativity	5.43 [4.97, 5.88]	6.01 [5.67, 6.34]
Study 3c		
	Backhanded Compliment	Compliment
Perceived Offensiveness	3.25 [2.87, 3.62]	1.66 [1.36, 1.96]
Positive Emotions	4.11 [3.74, 4.48]	5.37 [5.03 5.71]
Liking	3.82 [3.46, 4.18]	5.40 [5.08, 5.71]
Perceived self-creativity	5.90 [5.47, 6.33]	6.51 [6.15, 6.87]
Perceived creativity of the comparison group	4.18 [3.59, 4.76]	6.31 [5.89, 6.73]
Participation in the same task	18.6 % (19/102)	31.0 % (31/100)

Note: The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals; the values in parentheses indicate proportions.

Figure 1. Recipients' perceptions of their relative standing in an omnibus distribution.

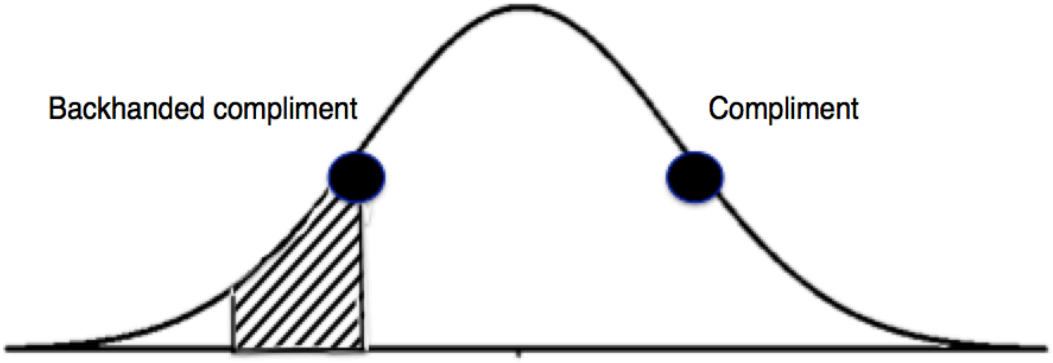


*Figure 2***.** Ratings of perceived offensiveness by condition in Study 1b.

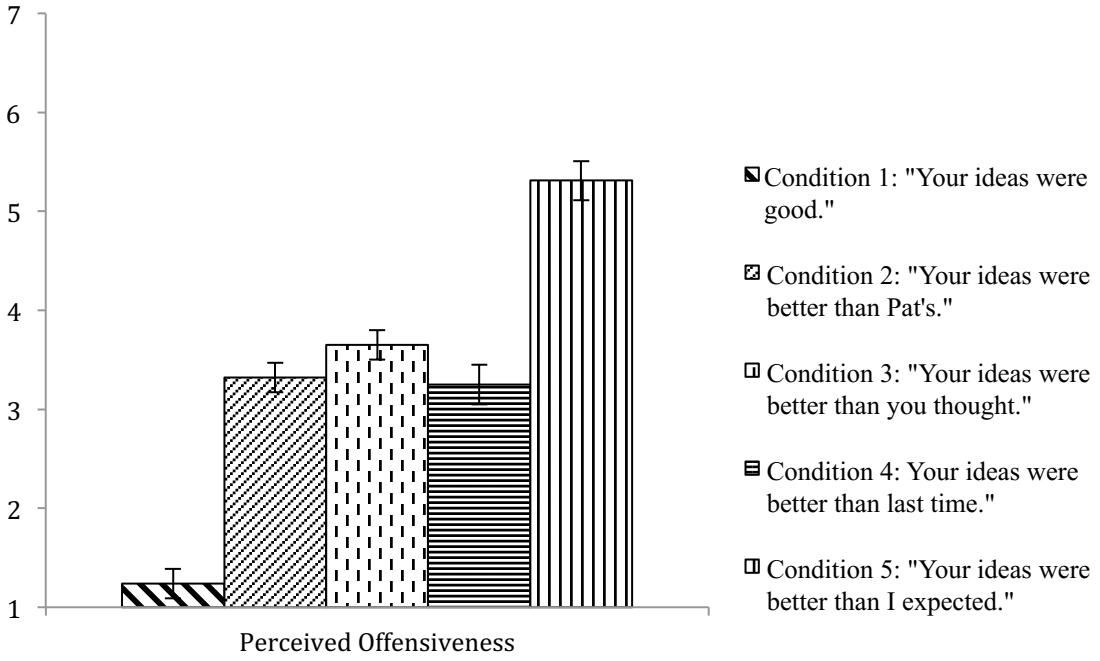
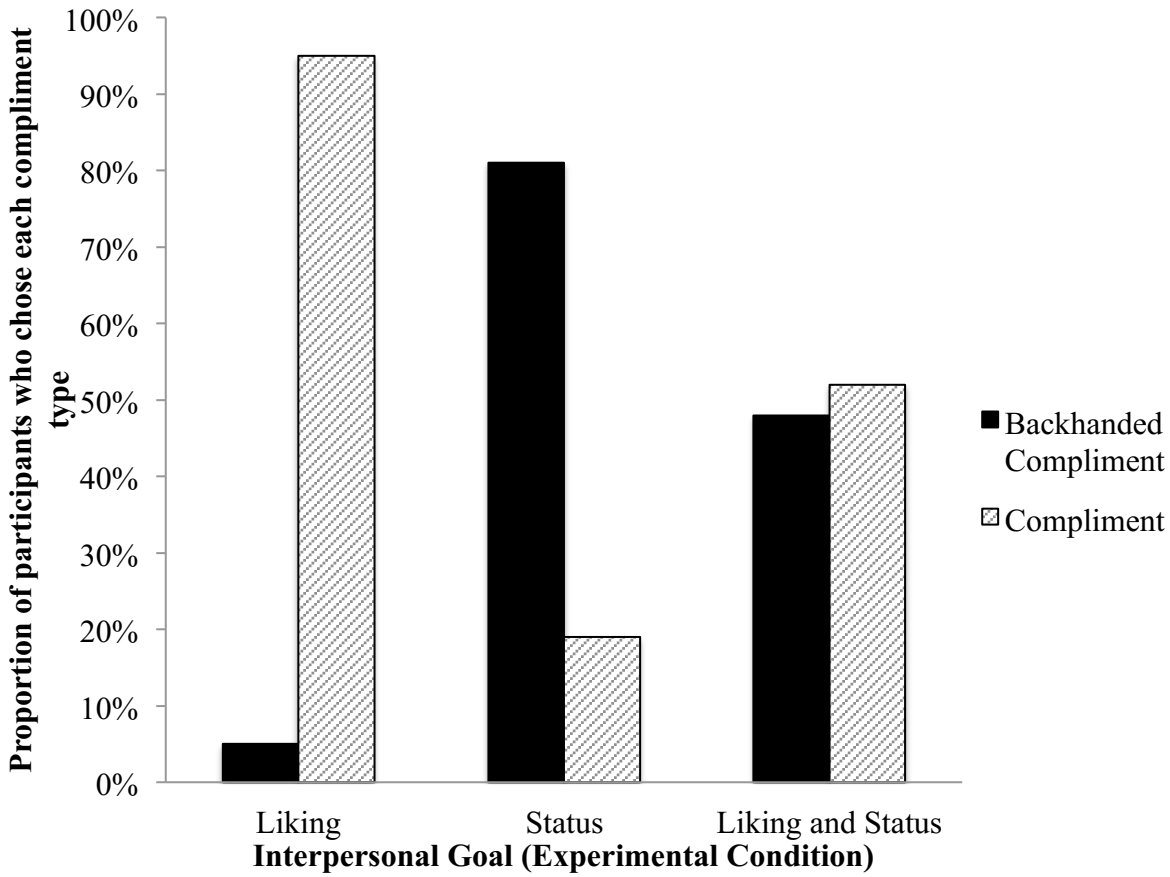


Figure 3. Self-presentation strategy selection by condition in Study 2a.



CHAPTER 3.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF NAMEDROPPING

Ovul Sezer

Abstract

Self-presentation is an inherent aspect of social life. Drawing from social networking and self-presentation research, this research posits that namedropping—casual mentioning of close social ties with a high-status name—has unintended consequences for impression management. Five studies (N = 2120) including two laboratory studies and a field experiment provide evidence that from everyday life to academic conferences, namedropping is a common, but ineffective self-presentation strategy in organizational life. Unlike mentioning of professional ties and instrumental connections, mentioning of personal ties and close social relationships with high-status individuals reduces liking and perceived status. Individuals may namedrop in several distinct forms, believing that it will signal status, but namedropping backfires. Moreover, namedropping results in behavioral consequences, influencing observers' generosity toward namedroppers. The current research also identifies perceived image concern as the underlying mechanism behind the ineffectiveness of namedropping as a self-presentation strategy. Together, these findings offer both theoretical and practical insights into how individuals can inform others about their social capital.

Keywords: namedropping, impression management, self-presentation, social cognition, status, liking

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF NAMEDROPPING

In both social and professional interactions, people commonly focus on managing the impressions that they make on others. Successful self-presentation is a critical part of landing a job, sealing a deal, getting promoted, and achieving career success (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Leary, 1995; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Wayne & Ferris, 1990; Wayne & Kacmar, 1991; Wayne & Liden, 1995). Managing perceptions of others is an inherent part of any social interaction (Goffman, 1959), and individuals engage in an array of tactics to present themselves in a way that maximizes positive outcomes for them (Gibson & Sachau, 2000; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Lee, Quigley, Nesler, Corbett, & Tedeschi, 1999; Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984; Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995).

Self-presentation is especially critical in building one's social capital. Individuals build and nurture personal and professional relationships to create a system of information and support, and the ability to effectively utilize these connections influence long-term career and personal success (Lankau & Scandura, 2002; Whiting & de Janasz, 2004). Research has documented that networking behaviors are essential to professional advancement (Wolff & Moser, 2009). For example, referred candidates are more likely to be invited to a job interview, more likely to get hired, and more likely to start with higher initial salary (Brown, Setren & Topa, 2013; Castilla 2005; Fernandes & Weinberg, 1997; Granovetter, 1973; Whiting & De Janasz, 2004; Wolff & Moser, 2009). Social capital—"whom do we know" —matters to a great extent in career outcomes; nonetheless, how

individuals inform others about their connections is not understood.

One strategy that people often use in their attempts to emphasize their social capital is *namedropping*—casual mentioning of a close social ties with a high-status name—as in the following example: "I was at dinner with Danny, you know Kahneman." In the current research, I examine the psychology and effectiveness of namedropping as a self-presentation strategy. I identify namedropping as a common, and ineffective self-presentation strategy through which self-presenters aim to emphasize their connections in an indirect way, by casually mentioning the high-status name in social interactions.

Why would namedroppers mention high-status names in a casual way? This conceptualization posits that people believe namedropping allows them to attenuate the effects of blatant self-promotion. Indeed, prior research shows that successful self-presentation is a delicate act that requires a balance. For instance, when people highlight their accomplishments directly, emphasize their status, make internal attributions for success and achievements (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Rudman, 1998), others may view them as conceited or self-interested (Ben-Ze'ev, 1993; Godfrey, Jones & Lord, 1986; Powers & Zuroff, 1988; Schlenker, 1980; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Stires & Jones, 1969; Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995; Wosinska, Dabul, Whetstone-Dion, & Cialdini, 1996). In other words, when individuals focus on themselves and overemphasize their credentials, they risk appearing less likeable (Berman, Levine, Barasch & Small, 2014; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Holoien & Fiske, 2013; Scopelliti, Loewenstein, & Vosgerau, 2015; Swencionis & Fiske, 2016). In addition, in situations where self-presentation concerns are salient, observers become highly suspicious of actor's ulterior motives (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Fein, 1996;

Fein, Hilton & Miller, 1990; Heyman, Barner, Heumann, & Schenck, 2014). Ultimately, self-presenters are often faced with a dilemma: by emphasizing their own positive qualities, they run the risk of being perceived as self-interested and braggart and by remaining silent, they run the risk of not letting anyone know about their qualities and thereby receiving no credit at all.

Given this trade-off in self-presentation (Holoien & Fiske, 2013; Swencionis & Fiske, 2016), people often engage in indirect self-presentation strategies (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Pfeffer, Fong, Cialdini & Portnoy, 2006; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992; Scopelliti, Loewenstein, & Vosgerau, 2016; Inman, McDonald, & Ruch, 2004). By engaging in indirect strategies, self-presenters do not explicitly state information about themselves but communicate their positive qualities via associations (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). Namedropping—casual mentioning of close social ties with a high-status name in social interaction is an indirect self-presentation strategy through which self-presenters aim to overcome this trade-off. Namedropping allows actors to highlight their own status by associating themselves with a "high-status actor" (Nobel prize winner Daniel Kahneman), while enabling them to convey their likeability through "close social ties" (calling Kahneman "Danny" and having dinner with him) and masking their self-presentation attempts by casual mentioning ("you know Kahneman). Although previous self-presentation literature has identified several impression management tactics where individuals convey their status or likeability directly (Jones & Pitman, 1982; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984), much less is known about indirect strategies that are aimed to address the aforementioned trade-off. In addition, prior research has documented that building of relationships to create a social network is crucial for individuals' career and personal

success (Brown, Setren & Topa, 2013; Granovetter, 1973; Lankau & Scandura, 2002; Whiting & de Janasz, 2004; Wolff & Moser, 2009), but much less is known about how individuals are perceived when they let others know about their connections. In the current research, I document the commonality of namedropping as a social phenomenon and investigate antecedents and consequences of namedropping during interpersonal interactions in both laboratory and field settings.

Building on self-presentation, social networking, and social cognition literatures, this conceptualization posits that people engage in namedropping in a strategic effort to convey status indirectly, but it actually backfires, because it conveys information about self-presenter's image concerns. The more the self-presenter seems focused on managing impressions, the less favorable the impression that he makes on others. Prior research suggests that success of any self-presentation strategy depends on whether it fosters suspicion of ulterior self-presentation motive (Crant, 1996; Nguyen et al., 2008; Turnley & Bolino, 2001). When the goal of making a positive impression is too obvious, observers consider the self-presenter to be fake and deceitful (Leary, 1995; Bolino et al., 2008)—and this lack of genuineness drives negative evaluations (Brambilla, Ruscioni, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011; Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012; Goodwin Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). In this paper, I explore whether namedropping, despite its ubiquity, may be an ineffective self-presentation strategy, because it makes intentions to manage impressions transparent to the observers.

Conveying Status By Mentioning High-Status Names

The desire for status is a fundamental human motive (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Hogan, 1983; Holoien & Fiske, 2013; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Individuals with high status receive myriad social and material rewards, including social approval, respect, admiration, influence over decisions, and access to scarce resources (Bales, Strodtbeck, Mills, & Roseborough, 1951; Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Blau, 1964; Henrich & GilWhite, 2001; Ridgeway, 1984). Therefore, people are motivated to pursue status in all social environments.

Individuals can convey their status and competence either directly by engaging in wide array of self-presentation strategies (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Berger & Ward, 2010) or indirectly by using positive associations with people or possessions (Bourdieu, 1984; Cialdini, Finch & DeNicholas, 1990; Holt, 1998; Lamont, 1992; Weber 1978). Indeed, emphasizing positive associations is a common self-presentation strategy, because depending on the basis of the association, observers may make personality and behavioral attributions that are independent of an individual's true characteristics (Cialdini, Finch & De Nicholas). When exposed to connections, observers view positively connected individuals as alike, as they strive for cognitive balance (Heider, 1958). Hence, if a self-presenter succeeds in establishing a legitimate connection with a high-status individual, observers may view the self-presenter favorably.

Indeed, prior research has shown that people strategically engage in positive associations and avoid negative associations. For example, Cialdini and DeNicholas (1989) has shown that college students used the pronoun "we" much more often in a description of a football match when their university's football team won the match as opposed to lost it. Depending on success or failure of another group, individuals'

tendency to announce their associations with that group change dramatically (Cialdini & DeNicholas, 1989). This self-presentation strategy is known as basking in reflected glory (Cialdini, 1976). The tendency to bask in reflected glory has been documented for football fans (End, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, & Jacquemotte, 2002), for supporters of political parties (Boen et al., 2002), and for association with teams (Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986). Similarly, when describing other individuals, people become associated with traits that they describe in others (Skowronski, Carlston, Mae & Crawford, 1998). Thus, individuals often actively seek positive associations by creating contexts to announce them (Carter & Sanna, 2006) and avoid negative associations by sometimes socially excluding others (Pryor, Reeder & Monroe, 2012). In addition, impressions are formed when individuals automatically categorize others into social categories (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986); thus self-presenters may benefit from associating themselves with highly regarded groups, especially if the other party does not know the self-presenter well.

Taken together, associating oneself with a positively viewed group or individual may provide self-presentational benefits. Thus, namedropping seemingly allows actors to convey their status through associations with high-status individuals.

Conveying Likeability By Casual Mentioning of Close Social Ties

People also have a fundamental desire to be liked (Baumeister 1982; Jones & Wortman 1973; Leary & Kowalski 1990; Tetlock 2002) and engage in a variety of self-presentation tactics. These strategies are designed to emphasize individuals' characteristics regarding their likeability (Jones & Wortman, 1973) and are mainly other-focused (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008; Jones, 1964; Jones & Pitman, 1982;

Schlenker, 1980; Wayne & Liden, 1995; Zivnuska et al., 2004). For example, people may perform favors or agree with others' opinions to signal their friendly characteristics (Bohra & Pandey, 1984; Zivnuska et al., 2004). Similarly individuals often use other-enhancement statements, such as flattery or praise (Jones & Pitman, 1982; Kacmar, Bozeman, Carlson, & Anthony, 1999) to please their targets and inspire liking from them.

One common aspect of all of these strategies is that they all emphasize qualities that are related to the self-presenter's social desirability, which gives information about an individual's warmth, benevolence, friendliness, trustworthiness or closeness with others (Asch, 1946; Abelson, Kinder, Peters, & Fiske, 1982; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, Xu, 2002; Lydon, Jamieson, & Zanna, 1988; Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekenanthan, 1968; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005; Wojciszke et al., 2009). Similar to these strategies, namedropping may be used as an indirect means to convey social desirability, because actors who engage in namedropping not only mention a high-status name, but also assert a form of social closeness between themselves and the individual whose name is mentioned. In other words, namedropping emphasizes connections to high-status individuals not only in a work-related context, but also occur in personal-contexts.

How does namedropping convey the level of social closeness between the self-presenter and the individual whose name is mentioned? I suggest that namedroppers can convey social closeness by either emphasizing the nature of their relationship, focusing in particular on the content of their social ties, or by mentioning it in a casual way. The network literature distinguishes between professional (instrumental) network ties and personal (expressive) network ties. Professional ties (instrumental ties) arise mostly in

work role performance and involve an exchange of job-related resources, such as information, expertise, professional advice, material resources or political access (Fombrun, 1982; Ibarra, 1993; Lincoln & Miller, 1979; Tichy et al., 1974). In contrast, personal ties (expressive ties) involve the exchange of friendship, social activities and provide emotional support (Krackhardt, 1992; Lincoln & Miller, 1979; Ibarra, 1993). Personal (expressive) network relationships are characterized by higher levels of closeness, trust and social support than exclusively instrumental relationships. Professional and personal ties may overlap to a great extent, as both types of relationships often coexist (Casciaro & Lobo, 2008), but these two forms of content are conceptually distinct and each type of relationship may lead to different perceptions by others. By focusing on their "friendship, social activities and closeness" with a high-status individual, namedroppers aim to signal their social desirability. When self-presenters engage in namedropping, they not only mention that they are associated with a high-status individual in a distant way or only in a work-related context, but also emphasize that they are indeed close—"like friends".

Namedropping may also allow actors to signal their likeability through "casualness". By mentioning or "dropping" the name in an informal way, individuals may express a level of relational intimacy through casual conversation (Dayter, 2014; Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997; Eggins & Slade, 2005), which in turn signals a level of social closeness between the self-presenter and the individual whose name is mentioned. As an indirect strategy, this informal approach in namedropping also allow actors to reduce the risks of possible negative consequences of direct self-promotion (Eagly & Acksen, 1971; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Schlenker, 1980). In sum, informal and

casual expressions in namedropping may help the self-presenter appear socially desirable because: 1) It emphasizes close social ties with a high-status actor, 2) It shows that the self-presenter mentions the connection "casually" rather than announcing it blatantly.

As noted above, conveying status and eliciting liking are two fundamental goals of actors; associating with a high-status individual may elicit the former, and casual mentioning of close social ties may elicit the latter. Namedropping is an ubiquitous everyday phenomena, suggesting that people believe it will be effective.

The Role of Perceived Image Concerns

However, successful self-presentation involves concealing the ulterior motive to make a favorable impression (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). When targets feel that actors' efforts to elicit desired impressions are indeed too obvious, self-presentation efforts can fail (Crant, 1996; Nguyen et al., 2008; Turnley & Bolino, 2001). Here, I suggest that although people engage in namedropping when motivated to make a favorable impression, it backfires, because it makes self-presenters' intentions to make a good impression transparent to the target.

Consequently, namedropping may decrease both likeability and perceived status. Prior research has shown that when any social behavior is interpreted as a "tactic", observers find their targets less likeable (Gurevitch, 1984), because perceived genuineness and sincerity of the attempt exerts a significant weight in impression formation (Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). When intentions and motives to influence impressions are too blatant, observers question the character of the self-presenter, which in turn leads to lower levels

of liking (Butler, 1991; Crant, 1996; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, Nguyen et al., 2008; Turnley & Bolino, 2001).

Due to transparency of the ulterior motive and perceived image concerns, namedropping may also fail to convey status. Indeed, due to the accumulation of positive impressions and "idiosyncratic credits" in the minds of others, high-status individuals are expected to be free from social pressures and social evaluation concerns (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Haslam 2004; Hollander, 1958) compared to low-status individuals. Therefore, high-status individuals are not "expected" to try to signal their status. For instance, high status individuals may downgrade their lifestyle (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Brooks, 1981; Brooks & Wilson, 2015), engage in low-status activities and choices (Holt, 1998; Peterson & Kern, 1996; Simonson & Nowlis, 2000) or bear the costs of nonconformity better than low-status individuals (Belleza, Gino, & Keinan, 2013; Solomon, 1999). They can deviate from the norms (Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001), because they are expected to act independently and not seek others' approval (Baumeister, 1982; Dworkin, 1988; Kim & Markus, 1999; Lewis & Neighbors, 2005; Markus & Schwartz, 2010; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). In contrast, namedropping signal actors' image concerns about *seeming* high-status. While behaving according to one's own rules leads to perceptions of integrity and high self-esteem (Koestner, Bernieri, & Zuckerman, 1992; Van Kleef, Homan, Finkenauer, Gundemir, & Stamkou, 2011), seeking external approval fuels negative inferences in the eyes of others (Leary, 2003; Lewis & Neighbors, 2005). Observers consider autonomous actions to be genuine (Lewis & Neighbors, 2005), but strategic impression management acts to be insincere (Eastman, 1994; Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1986), manipulative and self-serving

(Rosenfeld, 1997; Rosenfeld & Giacolone, 1991). Because high status individuals are expected to act according to their own rules rather than external approval (Lewis & Neighbors, 2005; Ryan & Lynch, 1989), I suggest that those who engage in namedropping would be perceived as having lower status compared to individuals who do not mention any name.

Overview of Research

In a series of five studies, I investigate the antecedents and consequences of namedropping. Study 1a and 1b document the ubiquity of namedropping in everyday life and in the workplace. Study 2 explores whether people engage in namedropping strategically to make a good impression, while simultaneously examining others' perceptions of namedropping. Study 3 investigates the effect of different forms of namedropping on perceptions. Finally, Study 4 examines whether people's dislike of namedropping extends to less generous behavior toward those who engage in namedropping. Across the studies, I assess the mechanisms underlying the negative perceptions of namedropping, testing whether perceived image concerns, drive the dislike and lower status that namedroppers garner.

Study 1a: Namedropping in Everyday Life

Study 1a documents the ubiquity of namedropping in everyday life. First, I expected namedropping to be a common phenomenon in social interactions. Second, I examined the distinct forms of namedropping that people witness.

Method

Participants. I recruited two hundred and fifty two participants (M_{age} = 32.91, *SD* = 9.38; 33.1% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid them $.50 for

completing the survey. I included two attention filter questions to ensure that participants paid attention. Five participants failed to pass the attention checks and were not allowed to participate in the study. Prior to beginning data collection, I targeted a recruitment of approximately two hundred and fifty individuals.

Design and procedure. Participants read initial instructions welcoming them to the study and answered two stringent reading and comprehension checks. If participants failed either of the comprehension checks, they were not allowed to complete the study.

Participants were then informed that they would answer a few questions about namedropping, and were provided with the following definition: "Namedropping is the practice of mentioning people or institutions."

Next, I asked participants whether they witnessed someone engage in namedropping. If so, I asked them to write down the example of the namedropping that they witnessed. Specifically, I asked them to describe *how* the person namedropped and what did they say. I asked participants to provide as many details as possible such that a person reading the response would understand the situation and how the other party namedropped.

To gain a better understanding of the type and variety of namedropping instances that people recalled, I asked two independent coders—blind to my hypotheses—to analyze the content of the participants' open-ended responses and identify the distinct forms of namedropping. First, I provided coders with the definition of the content of the social ties (professional or personal ties) based on the prior literature: Professional ties (instrumental ties) are work-related connections that involve an exchange of job-related resources, information, expertise, professional advice (Fombrun, 1982; Ibarra, 1993;

Kanter, 1983; Kotter, 1982; Lincoln & Miller, 1979; Tichy et al., 1974). Professional ties involve work-related activities and provide help in task execution and career success. On the other hand, personal ties (expressive ties) involve the exchange of friendship, social activities and provide emotional support (Krackhardt, 1992; Lincoln & Miller, 1979; Ibarra, 1992). I also asked coders to identify the specific forms of namedropping based on the descriptions of *how* people namedrop. The coders agreed 97% of the time about the category of the form of namedropping (215 out of 222) and resolved disagreements through discussion. Most responses included examples of namedropping in which the speaker engaged in different types of namedrops simultaneously (e.g the namedropper mentions the nickname of a high-status individual in an unrelated context). Thus, the entries could belong to multiple categories. When coders decided on a final set of categories, they reread responses and indicated which category best suited each response.

Next, participants reported their relationship to the person whose namedrop they recalled, and identified this person's age and gender. Finally participants answered demographic questions (age and gender).

Results

Frequency of namedropping in everyday life. Namedropping was ubiquitous in everyday life. The majority of participants could recall a situation where another person namedropped: 88.1% of participants (222 out of 252) reported that they witnessed someone engage in namedropping. While most of these namedrops were about names from the participants' circles (94.6%, 210 out of 222), 5.4% participants (12 out of 222) recalled an example in which the namedropper mentioned a celebrity.

Content of social ties. Coders identified that namedroppering mostly includes mentioning of personal ties: 75.6% of the namedropping examples (168 out of 222) were about personal ties and conveyed an exchange of friendship, while 15.8% of the namedrops (35 out of 222) were about professional ties in which speakers mentioned work-related activities and connections. The remaining 8.6% of the namedropping examples (19 out of 222) included mentioning of institutions (schools and organizations).

Types of namedropping. Table 1a shows the categorization of types of namedropping, with examples. Across all types of namedropping (including mentioning of institutions) five distinct types of namedropping emerged: mentioning the full name (38.8%), mentioning the name in an unrelated context (38.8%), mentioning the first name (23.1%), mentioning a nick name (11.9%) and mentioning information about the individual's personal life (8.1%).

Relationship with the namedropper. Participants witnessed namedropping from other people in their lives across many different contexts. The majority of namedropping examples were from friends (32.5%), followed by coworkers (19.9%), family members (19.2%), acquaintances (17.2%), and others (11.2%).

Demographic characteristics of the namedropper. Participants reported that 68.5% of the namedropping examples (152 out of 222) that they heard were from men, while 31.5% (70 out of 222) of the namedropping were from women. The average age of the person who engaged in namedropping was 33.31 (*SD* = 11.32).

Discussion

These findings offer initial evidence that namedropping is common in everyday life across several domains, and demonstrates that namedropping attempts mostly

emphasize personal social ties compared to professional ties, and appear in five distinct forms: mentioning of a full name, first name, nickname, personal information, or mentioning the name in an unrelated context.

Study 1b: Namedropping in the Workplace

In Study 1b, I focus on people's use of namedropping in the workplace, another domain where self-promotion is common (Kacmar et al., 1992). In this study, I asked employed individuals if they could identify coworkers who namedrop in their workplace to document the frequency of namedropping in the organizational context.

Method

Participants. I recruited three hundred and three employed individuals (M_{age} = 39.29, *SD* = 12.81; 41% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid them $.50 for completing the survey. I included two attention filter questions to ensure that participants paid attention. Four participants failed to pass the attention checks and were not allowed to participate in the study. Prior to beginning data collection, I targeted a recruitment of approximately 300 individuals.

Design and procedure. Participants were told that they would be asked a few questions about their coworkers. Specifically, I asked them whether they could think of a coworker who engages in namedropping in the workplace. If so, participants were asked to write down the initials of the coworker and an example of the namedropping that they had heard in the past from him/her. Next, participants reported the status of the person (relative to them) whose namedrop they recalled—whether the person is higher status, equal status, or lower status than them in the workplace, and identified this person's age and gender. Finally participants answered demographic questions (age and gender).

I then asked two independent coders to analyze the content of the responses and identify the content of the social ties (professional ties vs. social ties) and the form of namedropping (how the name is "dropped"). They agreed 96% of the time about the title of each subcategory and resolved disagreements through discussion.

Results

Frequency of namedropping in the workplace. Namedropping is common in the workplace. The vast majority—94.06% (285 out of 303) of participants could think of a coworker who engaged in namedropping. The majority of the namedrops were from equal status coworkers (57.9%, 165 out of 285), followed by higher status coworkers (29.5%, 84 out of 185), and lower status coworkers (12.6%, 36 out of 185).

Content of social ties. As in Study 1a, the majority of the namedrops include mentioning of personal ties: 74.4% of the namedropping examples (212 out of 285) were about personal ties, compared to 23.5% of the namedrops (67 out of 285) about professional ties. The remaining 2.1% of the namedropping examples (6 out of 285) included mentioning of institutions (schools and organizations).

Types of namedropping. Table 1b shows the categorization of types of namedropping, with examples. Across all types of namedropping (including mentioning of institutions) five distinct types of namedropping emerged: mentioning the first name (30.9%), mentioning the full name (25.6%), mentioning the name in an unrelated context (24.6%), mentioning information about the individual's personal life (15.1%) and mentioning a nickname (13.7%).

Demographic characteristics of the namedropper. Participants reported that 49.5% of the namedropping examples (141 out of 285) that they heard were from men,

while 50.5% (144 out of 285) of the namedropping were from women. The average age of the person who engaged in namedropping was 38.03 (*SD* = 10.49).

Discussion

These results support the previous findings that namedropping is common in organizational life, and that it takes five distinct forms. The majority of namedropping examples mention close personal ties with another actor as opposed to professional ties.

Study 2: Field Study

Study 1a and 1b demonstrate that namedropping is a common strategy that people use in both everyday life and in the workplace. Having documented the ubiquity of namedropping, in Study 2, I investigate the effectiveness of namedropping as a self-presentation strategy in a field setting: Behavioral Exchange Conference in 2016. An academic conference is a particularly appropriate setting for exploring namedropping for several reasons. First, behaviors aimed at developing new social ties or strengthen existing ties are common in these professional events (Welch, 1980; Forret & Daughtery, 2004). Second, Behavioral Exchange Conference included attendees from universities and organizations, and connecting with individuals that may be helpful for career advancement, or creating collaboration opportunities with experts in the field was important for the attendees. Finally, the conference included attendees from different ranks in organizations, governments and universities, allowing me to explore how individuals use namedropping to position themselves in a social hierarchy.

Study 2 had three primary goals. First, although Study 1a and 1b suggests that namedropping is common, both studies rely on whether participants could recall a time when they witnessed namedropping in the past. In Study 2, I measure the frequency of

namedropping at a particular event, asking participants whether they witness or engaged in namedropping during this conference. With this approach, Study 2 aims to provide a more fine-grained measurement of the commonality of namedropping. Second, Study 2 investigates whether people admit to "namedropping" at the event, and whether their likelihood of recognizing their own namedrops matches the frequency of observations of namedropping. Third, whereas Study 1a and 1b focused only on the perspective of the target, in this study, I simultaneously examine the underlying motives for namedropping and target's perceptions of namedropping, both from the perspective of the target and the namedropper. I predicted that mentioning of a name would be identified as namedropping only when the name is high-status. I also predicted that namedroppers would think they were signaling superior status by associating themselves with high-status individuals, while those who witnessed namedropping would perceive namedroppers as having lower status.

Method

Participants and setting. Behavioral Exchange Conference took place at Harvard University on June 6 and June 7, 2016, featured 82 speakers and had 370 attendees from 175 organizations and 26 countries in total. Prior to beginning data collection, I targeted a recruitment of approximately 200 individuals (100 per condition) from the conference. Two hundred and fifty three attendees (M_{age} = 35.82, SD = 9.66; 45.1% female) participated in the study. For my main variable of interest, perceived status, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that my sample size led to an effect size of d = .37, with achieved power of .83.

Design and procedure. I recruited eight research assistants—blind to my hypotheses—to approach conference attendees one at a time, during both the evening reception on the first day, and lunch break on the second day. Research assistants approached conference attendees who were standing alone. Research assistants approached with their survey forms and explained that they were collecting responses for a study about how people interact with each other. They asked for participants' oral consent by informing participants that participation was entirely voluntary and their responses would be kept completely anonymous. All attendees that research assistants approached during the reception and the lunch break agreed to participate in the study.

Participants were then informed that they would answer a few questions about their social interactions in this conference. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions—target or namedropper condition—in a between-subjects design. While participants answered survey questions, research assistants recorded their responses on a paper-form. In the "target" condition, I asked: "Have you witnessed someone engage in namedropping in this conference so far?" If participants said no, the research assistant recorded their age and gender and the survey ended. If participants said yes, then they were asked: "Who did they namedrop?" Next, participants rated the status of the person whose name was being dropped on a scale from 1 (*lowest status*) to 7 (*highest status*). Then, participants rated the status that the namedropper was trying to signal, and the status that the namedropper *actually* signaled on a 7-point scale (1 = *lowest status,* 7 = *highest status*). Finally, participants rated the status of the average attendee at the conference on a 7-point scale and answered demographic questions.

In the "namedropper" condition, I asked participants "Have you namedropped in this conference so far?" If participants said no, the research assistant recorded their age and gender and the survey ended. If they said yes, then they were asked: "Who did you namedrop?" Next, participants rated the status of the person they namedropped about on a 7-point scale (1 = *lowest status,* 7 = *highest status*). They also rated the status that they were trying to signal, and the status they think they *actually* signaled on a scale from 1 (*lowest status*) to 7 (*highest status*). Finally, they rated the status of the average attendee at the conference on a 7-point scale and answered demographic questions.

Results

Table 2 provides means for all dependent measures by condition.

Frequency of the namedropping. The majority of participants in the target condition—79.7% (110 out of 138)— reported that they witnessed someone engage in namedropping in the conference. In contrast, in the namedropper condition, the proportion of participants who reported that they namedropped in the conference was significantly lower—57.4% of participants indicated that they namedropped (66 out of 115).

Names that were dropped: Across both conditions, 90.3% of the participants (159 out of 176 namedropping entries for both conditions) either recalled or mentioned another individual's name while 9.7% (17 out of 176) of the namedrops included institutions (schools and organizations) (See Figure 1). 15.9 % (28 out of 176) of the individual names belonged to female scholars.

Status of the person whose name was dropped. Participants who witnessed namedropping in the target condition, rated the status of the person whose name was

being dropped (M = 6.16, SD = 1.42) as equally high as participants in the namedropping condition (M = 6.19, SD = 1.17), $t(174) = .681$, $p = .92$, $d = .12$, suggesting that namedropping is not mentioning of any name, but mentioning the name of a high-status individual, both from the targets' and the namedroppers' perspectives.

Status that namedropper was trying to signal. The status that the namedropper was trying to signal did not differ between target condition (M = 5.45, SD = 1.34) and the namedropping condition (M = 5.19, SD = 1.76), $t(174) = 1.45$, $p = .49$, $d = .16$, suggesting that both the targets and the namedroppers recognized namedropping as an attempt to signal high-status.

Status that namedropper actually signaled. Most importantly, participants in the target condition perceived the namedroppers as having lower status (M = 3.84, SD = 1.41), than what namedroppers thought they actually signaled (M = 5.13, SD = 1.59), $t(174) = 3.98$, $p = .001$, $d = .41$. (See Figure 2)

Status of the average attendee in the conference. Interestingly, participants in the namedropping condition rated the average attendee in the conference to have higher status (M = 4.73, SD = 1.04), than participants in the target condition (M = 4.23, SD = .92), $t(174) = 2.09$, $p = .04$, $d = .35$.

From the perspective of the target: Participants in the target condition rated the person whose name was being dropped as having higher status (M = 6.16, SD = 1.42) than what the namedropper was trying to signal (M = 5.45, SD = 1.34), $t(109) = 4.03$, $p < .001$, $d = .41$, suggesting that the individual whose name was being dropped was still perceived to be higher status than namedropper's intended signal. However, participants rated namedroppers' actual status (M = 3.84, SD = 1.41), to be lower than what they

tried to signal (M = 5.45, SD = 1.34), $t(109) = 5.82$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.17$, and similar to average attendee's status (M = 4.23, SD = .92), $t(109) = 1.63$, $p = .11$, $d = .32$.

From the perspective of the namedropper: Similarly, participants in the namedropping condition rated the person whose name was being dropped as having higher status (M = 6.19, SD = 1.17) than the status they were trying to signal as namedroppers (M = 5.19, SD = 1.76), $t(65) = 4.42$, $p < .001$, $d = .47$, suggesting that the namedroppers also perceived individual whose name was being dropped to be higher status. In contrast to target condition, participants in namedropping condition rated their actual signaled status (M = 5.13, SD = 1.59), to be similar to what they tried to signal (M = 5.19, SD = 1.76), $t(65) = 1.01$, $p = .62$, $d = .19$, and higher than average attendee's status (M = 4.73, SD = 1.04), $t(65) = 3.53$, $p = .032$, $d = .49$.

Discussion

These results support the previous findings that namedropping is common in professional life and demonstrate that people are less likely to report their namedropping attempts than targets who witness someone engage in namedropping. Results from this field study also reveal that a face-to-face namedropping causes self-presenters to be perceived as lower status. Although namedroppers thought they were signaling superior status by associating themselves with high-status individuals, those who witnessed namedropping perceived these individuals as having lower status, even though both the targets and namedroppers recognized that the name that was dropped was indeed a high-status actor. In sum, even though namedroppers believe that mentioning of a high-status name is effective, it backfires.

Study 3: Different Types of Namedropping

Study 2 shows that engaging in namedropping causes individuals to be perceived as lower status, while namedroppers think they signal their superiority in the social hierarchy by associating themselves with high-status individuals. To exert more control over the content of the namedropping attempts, Study 3 uses more tightly controlled stimuli. In this study, I examine people's perceptions of the distinct types of namedropping identified in Studies 1a-1b, and measure perceptions of namedroppers on my key constructs: perceived status and liking. Study 3 aims to investigate which types of namedropping attempts are least effective. Moreover, this study examines the psychological mechanism underlying this effect: perceived image concern. I predicted that namedropping a high-status individual would cause the actors to be evaluated more negatively than mentioning of another name (whose status is not known) or not engaging in namedropping, because observers would perceive namedroppers to be strategic and concerned about their impression management,

Method

Participants. I recruited seven hundred and nine participants (M_{age} = 34.66, *SD* = 10.82; 41.7% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid them $.50 for completing the survey. I included two attention filter questions to ensure that participants paid attention and eliminated eight participants who failed these checks. Prior to beginning data collection, I targeted recruitment of approximately 700 individuals (100 per condition). For my main variables of interest, perceived status and liking, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that my sample size led to an effect size of η_p^2 = .35, and η_p^2 = .31, respectively, with achieved power of .99.

Design and procedure. Participants read initial instructions welcoming them to the study and answered two reading and comprehension checks. If participants failed either of the comprehension checks, they were not allowed to complete the study. Once they passed both checks, I randomly assigned participants to one of seven between–subjects conditions. In each condition they read a scenario in which the target namedropped in a different way:

"Imagine that you are at a networking event and you run into someone that you know from college. You start talking and find out that this person is working at Facebook. You both then start talking about your work. During your conversation, this person says:

6. *"My colleagues and I were at a barbecue party last weekend."* [No name]
7. *"John Smith and I were at a barbecue party last weekend."* [Another name]
8. *"Mark Zuckerberg and I were at a barbecue party last weekend."* [Full name]
9. *"Mark and I, you know Zuckerberg, were at a barbecue party last weekend."* [First name]
10. *"Zuck and I were at a barbecue party last weekend."* [Nickname]
11. *"My colleagues and I were at a barbecue party last weekend. Mark Zuckerberg and I were chatting about how he proposed to Priscilla."* [Personal information]
12. *"My colleagues and I were at a barbecue party last weekend. By the way, Mark Zuckerberg loves mac and cheese."* [Unrelated context]

Condition 1 was the control condition in which the actor did not specify any name but still talked about their social life with coworkers at work. Condition 2 was another control condition to investigate whether the perceptions may change by mentioning of any name, rather than the name of a high status individual. Using the distinct types of namedrops that emerged in namedropping examples in Study 1a and 1b, Conditions 3-7 included namedrops that mentioned high-status connection—Mark Zuckerberg, the chief executive officer and founder of the company Facebook—in different ways. Specifically, these conditions included namedrops that include Mark Zuckerberg's full name

(Condition 3), first name (Condition 4), nick name (Condition 5), or information about Mark Zuckerberg's personal life (Condition 6), and mentioning of Mark Zuckerberg's name in an unrelated context (Condition 7).

After reading one of the scenarios, participants rated how much they liked the target on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Next, participants responded on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*) to two items about the actor's perceived status in the organization: "How much do you think this person receives respect from others in the organization?" and "How much do you think this person makes valuable contributions in the organization?" (α = .89; Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro & Chatman, 2006). In addition, participants completed a five-item measure of perceived image concern on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*): "To what extent do you think this person is concerned about the impressions that others form of them?" "To what extent do you think this person is trying to look superior to others?" "To what extent do you think this person is trying to show themselves in the best possible light?" "To what extent do you think this person is insecure about how they look to others?" and "To what extent do you think this person is attempting to control the impressions they are making?" (α = .90). Next, as a manipulation check, I asked participants to identify Mark Zuckerberg and John Smith, and all participants knew that Mark Zuckerberg is the CEO and founder of the company Facebook and none of the participants knew who John Smith was. Finally, participants completed demographic questions.

Results

Table 3 provides means for all dependent measures by condition.

Perceived status. A one-way ANOVA revealed that target's perceived status varied across conditions, $F(6, 708) = 62.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .35$. As predicted, post-hoc comparisons (with Bonferroni adjustments) showed participants rated those who namedrop a high-status individual ($M_3 = 4.15$, $SD_3 = 1.58$; $M_4 = 3.98$, $SD_4 = 2.12$; $M_5 = 3.86$, $SD_5 = 2.03$; $M_6 = 4.02$, $SD_6 = 1.93$, $M_7 = 3.71$, $SD_7 = 1.89$) as having lower status than those who mentioned the name of another individual ($M_2 = 5.48$, $SD_2 = 2.09$, $p < .001$) or did not mention any name ($M_1 = 5.98$, $SD_1 = 1.91$, $p < .001$).

Liking. As predicted, a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect on liking ratings, $F(6, 708) = 51.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .31$. Post-hoc comparisons (with Bonferroni adjustments) indicated that namedropping targets were liked significantly less ($M_3 = 3.79$, $SD_3 = 1.33$; $M_4 = 3.53$, $SD_4 = 1.22$; $M_5 = 3.66$, $SD_5 = 1.36$; $M_6 = 3.83$, $SD_6 = 1.38$, $M_7 = 3.41$, $SD_7 = 1.49$) than the target who mentioned another name ($M_2 = 4.43$, $SD_2 = .83$, $p < .001$) or the target who did not mention any name ($M_1 = 4.70$, $SD_1 = 1.04$, $p < .001$).

Perceived image concern. A one-way ANOVA also revealed a significant effect on target's perceived image concern, $F(5, 708) = 65.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .36$. Post-hoc comparisons (with Bonferroni adjustments) showed that those who engaged in namedropping by mentioning a high-status name were perceived as more strategic and concerned about their impression management ($M_3 = 5.87$, $SD_3 = 1.26$; $M_4 = 6.33$, $SD_4 = 1.29$; $M_5 = 5.80$, $SD_5 = 1.58$; $M_6 = 5.94$, $SD_6 = 1.34$, $M_7 = 6.24$, $SD_7 = 1.55$) than those who mentioned another name ($M_2 = 4.67$, $SD_2 = 1.35$, $p < .001$) or those who did not mention any name ($M_1 = 4.45$, $SD_1 = .96$, $p < .001$).

Mediation. To examine whether perceived image concern mediated the effect of namedropping on liking, I followed the steps recommended by Baron and Kenny

(1986). The first and second criteria specify that the independent variable should significantly affect the dependent variable and the mediators. The prior analyses showed that these two criteria were met, as namedropping had a significant effect on liking and perceived image concern. To assess the third and fourth criteria, I conducted a hierarchical ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression analysis (including a dummy variable for the control conditions), predicting liking from the independent variable of the namedropping (Step 1) and perceived image concern (Step 2). The third criterion specifies that the mediator should significantly predict the dependent variable while controlling for the independent variable. The results met this criterion: controlling for the namedropping and control conditions, I found that perceived image concern significantly predicted lower levels of liking ($\beta = -.67$, $t = 12.91$, $p < .001$). To complete the test of mediation for perceived image concern, the fourth criterion holds that the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable should decrease after controlling for the mediator. After controlling for perceived image concern, the effect of namedropping on liking decreased significantly (from $\beta = -.35$, $p < .001$ to $\beta = .05$, $p = .44$). To test whether the size of the indirect effect of namedropping on liking through sincerity differed significantly from zero, I used a bootstrap procedure to construct bias-corrected confidence intervals based on 10,000 random samples with replacement from the full sample (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval excluded zero (–1.41, –.79), indicating a significant indirect effect.

A path analysis also revealed that perceived image concern mediated the relationship between namedropping and perceived status. When I included perceived image concern in the model, predicting perceived status, the effect of namedropping was

reduced β = -.20, p = .005, to β = .01, p = .76), and perceived image concern was a significant predictor of perceived status (β = .80, p < .001). A 10,000-sample bootstrap analysis revealed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [–.97, –.31], suggesting a significant indirect effect size of .09 (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelly, 2011). Namedropping increased perceptions of image concern, which led participants to rate their targets as having lower status.

Discussion

Individuals who engage in namedropping—by casually mentioning close social ties with a high-status name—are liked less and perceived to have lower status than individuals who do not namedrop or who mention another name in their social interactions. In addition, all forms of namedropping in which the self-presenter mentions either the first name , full name or nick name of the high-status individual, shares personal information about the high-status individual, or mentions the name in an unrelated context, are viewed as having lower status than not mentioning any name. Moreover, perceived image concern plays a critical mediating role: Engaging in namedropping signals information about targets' image concern and conveys that the namedroppers are being strategic about their impression management, which in turn makes namedroppers less likeable and drives lower perceptions of status.

Study 4: The Behavioral Costs of Namedropping

Study 4 aims to understand whether the costs of namedropping extend beyond interpersonal evaluations to influence behavior, causing individuals not only to dislike or grant lower status to namedroppers, but also treat them less positively. I predicted that

people would provide less help to namedroppers than those who do not mention any name. Consistent with the previous study, I again predicted that perceived image concern would lead to less generous behavior towards namedroppers. In addition, this study manipulates both the forms of namedropping (full name vs. first name) and the content of the social ties (professional vs. personal).

Method

Participants. Six hundred and three participants (M_{age} = 36.23, *SD* = 11.34; 45.1% female) recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk participated in the study in exchange for $.75. I included two attention filter questions to ensure that participants paid attention and eliminated eight participants who failed these checks. Prior to beginning data collection, I targeted recruitment of approximately 600 individuals (100 per condition). For my main variables of interest, perceived status and liking, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that my sample size led to an effect size of η_p^2 = .10, and η_p^2 = .17, respectively, with achieved power of .99.

Design and procedure. Participants read initial instructions welcoming them to the study and answered two reading and comprehension checks. If participants failed either of the comprehension checks, they were not allowed to complete the study. Once they passed both checks, participants were informed that they would be asked to help edit a applicant's cover letter. Specifically, participants were informed that they would be asked whether they prefer to provide feedback on a job application cover letter (Grant et al., 2007) drawn from a pool of cover letters from Career Centers from different universities. Unbeknownst to the participants, all of them were matched with the same applicant-profile. At this point in the experiment, participants were randomly assigned to

one of six between–subjects conditions in a 2 (content of the social ties: professional ties vs. personal ties) X 3 (type of namedropping: no name vs. full name vs. first name) experimental design. In all conditions, participants read excerpts from the applicant in which the applicant described their previous working experience. Participants were informed that this applicant has previously worked at Microsoft. In each condition, the design manipulated both the content of the social ties (professional vs. social ties) and the type of namedropping that participants read.

In "professional ties [personal ties] with no name" condition, participants read the following from the applicant

"It was a very valuable experience. I learned what it means to launch a business from the ground up. My coworkers and I used to have project meetings [dinner] every Tuesday."

Participants in the "professional ties [personal ties] with full-name namedrop" condition read the following from the student:

"It was a very valuable experience. I learned what it means to launch a business from the ground up. Bill Gates and I used to have project meetings [dinner] every Tuesday."

Participants in the "professional ties [personal ties] with full-name namedrop" condition read the following from the student:

"It was a very valuable experience. I learned what it means to launch a business from the ground up. Bill and I, you know Gates, used to have project meetings [dinner] every Tuesday."

After reading one of the scenarios, participants completed the same measure of liking, perceived status ($\alpha = .89$; Anderson et al., 2006) and perceived image ($\alpha = .83$) concern as in Study 3. Next participants were asked a dichotomous measure of whether they would voluntarily provide help on this applicant's cover letter. If participants said

yes, they worked on the cover letter (see Figure 4). Finally, participants completed the demographic questions and were debriefed about the study.

Results

Table 4 provides descriptive statistics for all measures by condition.

Perceived status. An ANOVA revealed that perceived status varied across conditions, $F(2, 597) = 18.75$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$. Participants in the namedropping conditions—both first name ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.63$) and full name conditions ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.62$)—perceived the target as having lower status than did participants in the no-name condition ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.35$; $p = .001$). There was also a significant interaction, $F(2, 597) = 6.89$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .015$. Perceptions of status in the first name namedropping condition ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.65$) did not differ significantly from the full-name namedropping ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.67$, $p = .47$) when the targets talked about their personal ties, but first-name namedrops were judged to be lower status ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.62$) than full-name namedrops ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.53$, $p = .001$) when the targets talked about their professional ties.

Liking. As predicted, an ANOVA revealed that the main effect of type of namedropping was significant $F(2, 597) = 45.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$: participants who viewed first-name namedrops liked their targets less ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.59$), than those who viewed full-name namedrops ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.66$). In addition, participants who viewed namedropping targets (both full-name and first-name conditions) liked their targets less than participants in the no-name conditions ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.23$). There was also a significant main effect of content of social ties on liking, $F(1, 597) = 6.63$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .015$: participants liked targets in the personal ties condition less ($M = 3.67$, $SD =$

1.59) than those who viewed targets who mention professional ties (M = 4.02, SD = 1.69). There was a significant interaction $F(2, 597) = 2.99$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .013$, reflective of the fact that liking ratings were lower in conditions in which the target namedropped with personal-ties (Table 4).

Perceived image concern. The results also revealed a main effect of namedropping style on the mediating construct, perceived image concern $F(2, 597) = 31.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$: Consistent with my hypothesis, ratings of perceived image concern were higher in the namedropping conditions (full name M = 5.74, SD = 1.04; first name M = 6.27, SD = 1.03) than in the no-name conditions (M = 4.48, SD = 1.09). Participants perceived targets who namedrop with personal ties to be more strategic (M = 6.22, SD = 1.17) than targets who namedrop with professional ties (M = 5.67, SD = 1.15), $F(1, 597) = 4.43$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = .011$. There was also a significant interaction, $F(2, 597) = 4.08$, $p = .043$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, indicating that content of the social ties influenced perceptions of image concerns when the namedropping style was full-name (See Table 4).

Helping behavior. A logistic regression analysis revealed a main effect of type of namedropping on helping behavior, B = 1.84, Wald $\chi^2 = 14.57$, $p < .001$; content of the social ties did not have a significant effect, B = .03, Wald = .099, df = 1, $p = .78$, and there was no interaction, B = .79, Wald = .89, df = 1, $p = .56$. In support of my hypothesis, percentage of participants who voluntarily provided help by editing the cover letter was higher in the no-name conditions (29.8%) than in the name-dropping conditions (11.5%), $\chi^2(1, N = 603) = 7.15$, $p = .024$. While 29.8% of participants helped the target in no-name dropping conditions, only 11.5% of participants who viewed a namedropping target chose to provide help by editing the letter.

Mediation. A path analysis revealed that perceived image concern and liking mediate the relationship between condition and helping behavior (see Figure 5). Namedropping led to higher perceived image concern, which led participants to like their targets less, which decreased helping behavior. When perceived image concern was included in the model, predicting liking, the effect of condition was reduced (from $\beta = -.20$, $p = .013$, to $\beta = -.07$, $p = .33$), and perceived image concern was a significant predictor of liking ($\beta = -.49$, $p < .001$). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [–.56, –.14], suggesting a significant indirect effect. When perceived image concern and liking were included in the model, predicting helping behavior, the effect of condition was reduced (from $\beta = -.17$, $p = .034$, to $\beta = -.07$, $p = .35$), and both perceived image concern ($\beta = -.20$, $p = .029$) and liking ($\beta = .22$, $p = .014$) predicted helping behavior. The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [–.14, –.01], suggesting a significant indirect effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelly, 2011).

Discussion

These results demonstrate that the costs of namedropping extend beyond interpersonal evaluations, impacting behavior. Individuals who namedrop are seen as more concerned with their image, which makes them less likeable, leading them to receive less help compared to individuals who do not namedrop.

General Discussion

Successful self-presentation is a delicate business. From material rewards and social approval to career advancement, successful self-presentation helps individuals secure positive outcomes in a number of domains (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Jones &

Wortman, 1973; Leary, 1995; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1975; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Tedeschi, 1981; Wayne & Ferris, 1990; Wayne & Kacmar, 1991; Wayne & Liden, 1995). The motivation to make a favorable impression stems from two fundamental desires: to appear likeable and to convey status (Baumeister, 1982; Zivnuska et al., 2004). The majority of research in the self-presentation literature has focused on an array of tactics people use in an attempt to fulfill one of these purposes. The current investigation examines a novel self-presentation strategy, the phenomenon of namedropping—an indirect self-presentation tactic that aims to fulfill both of these fundamental desires.

These findings show that namedropping fails to make a favorable impression, despite being a prevalent strategy. Study 1a and Study 1b show that namedropping is a ubiquitous strategy in everyday life. Study 2 documents the frequency of namedropping in an academic conference, and shows that individuals who engage in namedropping think that they signal their superiority in the social hierarchy, while observers perceive them as having lower status. Study 3 and Study 4 also show that namedropping is less effective than simply not mentioning any high-status name. These studies suggest that namedropping not only is costly in terms of liking and perceived status, but also influence behavior. Study 4 shows that these perceptions affect treatment of namedroppers and garner more negative behavioral responses. Both Study 3 and Study 4 explored the mechanism underlying the link between namedropping and negative outcomes, demonstrating that perceived image concerns causes namedropping to backfire. In sum, the ulterior motive signaled by casual mentioning of a high-status name leads to unfavorable impressions.

Theoretical Contributions

This research makes several theoretical contributions. First, these findings contribute to the impression management literature by identifying and examining a previously undocumented self-presentation strategy. I provide evidence from both the field and laboratory to document the ubiquity of namedropping, and provide an empirical examination of why people engage in it and how others perceive it.

Furthermore, these findings describe an important link between self-presentation and the influence of perceived concern with self-image. Observers pay attention to the information that a person conveys, but they also care about the reason why that information is conveyed (Wyer, Budesheim, Lambert & Swan, 1994; Vonk, 2002; 2007), which in turn causes observers to judge the self-presenters as either genuine or manipulative (Vonk, 2002). This construct of perceived image concern helps explain the likelihood of success or failure of different self-presentation strategies.

Third this research establishes an important link between content of social ties and impression management. Social network literature has focused on antecedents and consequences of building and nurturing of relationships to create a system of information and support (e.g. Sewel, 1992; Whiting & de Janasz, 2004). By contrast, little attention has been devoted to understanding how individuals may inform others about their networks, and how these connections, or strategies that bring these connections to others' attention, influence impression management. This work sheds light on the importance of network structures in impression management.

Future Directions

In addition to these contributions, this research also points to possible directions for future research. First, future studies could explore the intrapsychic antecedents and consequences namedropping. Prior research has shown that active pursuit of professional ties contaminates individuals' moral purity and makes them feel dirty (Casciaro, Gino, & Couchaki, 2015). One possibility is that, due to these emotional reactions, individuals may be more likely to emphasize their close social ties, rather than professional ties. Future research could deepen our understanding of these possible emotional reactions of namedroppers themselves. Similarly, targets may also experience negative emotional reactions as a response to namedropping, since targets of self-promotion attempts do experience negative emotions (Scopelliti et al., 2015). Previous research demonstrates differing perceptions between actors and observers in several domains (Brooks, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2015; Vonk, 2002), and intrapsychic explanations may account for these gaps. Future research can explore these possibilities.

Future research can also investigate the relationship between namedropping and conversational norms. It is possible that casual mentioning of a high-status name in a conversation may not comply with conversational maxims (Grice, 1975), from the perspective of the target, which may contribute to ineffectiveness of namedropping. Prior research has shown that people sometimes violate conversational norms and observers may fail to detect these attempts (Rogers & Norton, 2011; Rogers, Zeckhauser, Gino, Norton, & Schweitzer, 2016). Future research can examine what makes namedropping attempts more or less salient. One possibility is that namedropping may be perceived as inappropriate, which then is likely to evoke negative affective reactions and negative attributions (Ferris, Judge, Rowland, & Fitzgibons, 1994).

Future research can also identify characteristics that moderate the negative consequences of namedropping. For example, the characteristics of the namedropper (gender, status) as well as the characteristics of the individual whose name is mentioned may influence how namedropping is perceived. Similarly, the relationships between the individual whose name is mentioned, the namedropper, and the target are likely to influence perceptions.

Finally, in this work, studies focused on namedropping attempts in which the self-presenter mentioned another individual's name. However, mentioning of a highly regarded institution is also a common strategy that people use (as Studies 1a, 1b and 2 have shown). Future work could investigate consequences of this type of namedropping. In particular, mentioning of a prestigious institution, can signal culture capital—cultural knowledge that people have in particular domain (Bourdieu, 1986; Thronton, 1996). Namedropping this way may help self-presenters to signal their insider knowledge differentiate themselves and experience increased self-esteem, while targets may feel "excluded" in particular. Future work should explore these possibilities.

Conclusion

This paper identifies and offers psychological insight into the namedropping, a previously unexplored and ineffective form of indirect self-presentation. People believe it to be an effective self-promotion strategy and resort to namedropping frequently in both everyday life and professional life. Yet, these results show that namedropping backfires.

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Table 1a
Categorizations and Examples of Namedropping, in Study 1a

Namedropping with Professional Ties		Namedropping with Personal Ties	
Type	Examples	Type	Examples
Full name (31.3%)	A co-worker name-dropped our companies Vice President. Nobody at our company really knows because he only visits our plant for special occasions or to "synergize" us. Anyways, she dropped his name like they are good friends just because she was with him during some meetings saying things like "Andrew Stevens and I worked on this together for days."	Full name (37.9%)	"There's a guy that my husband works with who was always name-dropping the CEO at the time (Jeff Gardner), saying stuff at the office like "Yeah, I always enjoy a lunch out with Jeff Gardner". He's smug as hell (Smith is) and always tossing stuff like that around."
Unrelated context (31.5%)	"She just can't enter into any conversation without mentioning that she gets lots of advice from Mike Williams, the HR manager. She would say things like "That reminds me of what Mike Williams was telling me the other day." whatever the topic is.	Unrelated context (32.7%)	"My friend from work spends the entire time name dropping in all company events. Whether we talk about it or not he would interject with "Oh I love fishing! Do you know Jack, we went fishing with him last weekend" (Jack is our boss)."
First name (30.9%)	"Yeah, I talked to David about some such plan and he really liked my ideas. A.S says things like this all the time at the office and David is our supervisor.	First name (33.4%)	"We work at a small consulting company and Ashley has hung out with the founder Shawn Cooper a handful of times. The last time I hung out with Ashley, she kept bringing up Cooper in conversation; she would refer to him as just 'Shawn, you know Cooper' in a way that had a forced casualness to it. She did it so much that it was disgusting."
Nickname (12.8%)	"I witnessed A.K referring to our store manager as Jessie. "Jessie taught me how to sort them" or something like that."	Nickname (16.6%)	"Our supervisor loves to namedrop, she says she regularly hangs out with "Val" when she talks about Valerie Clark, the director."
Information about the individual's personal life (2.5%)	"Jimmy, you know Jimmy Martin (this guy is known in our circle, kind of a big name in the company) told me that his great mentor was David when he first arrived. "	Information about the individual's personal life (13.9%)	"My coworker mentioned that our department manager John likes to play chess with Nancy. Nancy is his wife and he says something like: "Do you know John loves playing chess with Nancy."

Table 1b
Categorizations and Examples of Namedropping, in Study 1b

Namedropping with Professional Ties		Namedropping with Personal Ties	
Type	Examples	Type	Examples
Full name (31.3%)	"It was during a meeting. One of the people in the room was talking about how they met one on one with our CEO, John Brown. It is hard to find time with him so he mentioned it couple times, that he did meet with the CEO multiple times."	Full name (37.9%)	"I have a co-worker who regularly does this. "Did I tell you about the I went swimming with Arnold Anderson in Crystal River?" Arnold Anderson is in the upper management, but he namedrops others too. It's a regular thing with him."
Unrelated context (31.5%)	"I worked with a guy that would namedrop his meetings with big names every chance he got. For example, whenever the group faced a problem he would say "I think if he were here, Ben would say." or "By the way, Ben and I just had a discussion about this."	Unrelated context (32.7%)	"I witnessed my boss in an act of namedropping when she casually mentioned that she had had dinner with some of the Officers of the corporation. She mentioned this is an almost off-handed type of remark as if this was something that she does everyday, between friends. She brings that up even though it was not necessary, like "By the way, during lunch the other day with Emily and Isaac, we had ravioli." Why do we care?"
First name (30.9%)	"I heard a consultant say that they knew someone in HR at a certain company: "I know the head of HR at _____, Jay, I'm planning to set a meeting with them to learn more about their needs and see if we can do anything for them."	First name (33.4%)	"A coworker of mine was name dropping our executive directors name and talking about how they went out to lunch together. They said it matter of factly, like it was an everyday occurrence. "Jason and I were having lunch the other day, etc.." Like they were casual friends."
Nickname (12.8%)	"I just got back from a meeting with the Becky, the VP, he suggested we do it this way." The person does it exactly as that and does not say Rebecca but Becky, the VP. They namedropped like this and it is ridiculously annoying. RIDICULOUSLY!"	Nickname (16.6%)	"The person said that they just had coffee with CEO Tim Fields and Meg. (Meghan Taylor is the VP). Throughout the entire day, the person kept mentioning that and made sure they spoke loud enough so that everyone could hear."
Information about the individual's personal life (2.5%)	"During our project meeting, Aaron showed me pictures of Lucy, his cat. He looks tough from outside but such a nice guy. My coworker was talking about our boss Aaron. It was so annoying."	Information about the individual's personal life (13.9%)	"An employee was name-dropping with the boss' son. He said, "I am good friends Matthew. We were together in the weekend, Matthew, his dad, you know our CEO, but at home he was like a friend. It was not weird at all."

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for all measures in Study 2

	Namedropper Condition	Target Condition
Status of the person whose name was being dropped	6.19 [5.79, 6.58]	6.16 [5.65, 6.67]
Status that the namedropper was trying to signal	5.19 [4.60, 5.77]	5.45 [4.96, 5.94]
Status of the namedropper actually signaled	4.87 [4.58, 5.16]	3.84 [3.60, 4.07]
Status of the average attendee	4.73 [4.38, 5.08]	4.23 [3.88, 4.56]

Note: The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics for all measures in Study 3

	Condition 1: No name	Condition 2: Another name	Condition 3: Full name	Condition 4: First name	Condition 5: Nickname	Condition 6: Personal information	Condition 7: Unrelated context
Perceived status	5.98 [5.55, 6.42]	5.48 [5.00, 5.96]	4.15 [3.74, 4.51]	3.98 [3.48, 4.47]	3.86 [3.40, 4.33]	4.02 [3.57, 4.46]	3.71 [3.23, 4.15]
Liking	4.70 [4.46, 4.94]	4.43 [4.21, 4.64]	3.79 [3.47, 4.10]	3.53 [3.25, 3.81]	3.66 [3.35, 3.97]	3.83 [3.50, 4.04]	3.41 [3.07, 3.78]
Perceived image concern	4.45 [4.24, 4.67]	4.67 [4.36, 4.98]	5.87 [5.58, 6.16]	6.33 [6.03, 6.63]	5.80 [5.44, 6.16]	5.94 [5.64, 6.26]	6.24 [5.89, 6.60]

Note: The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

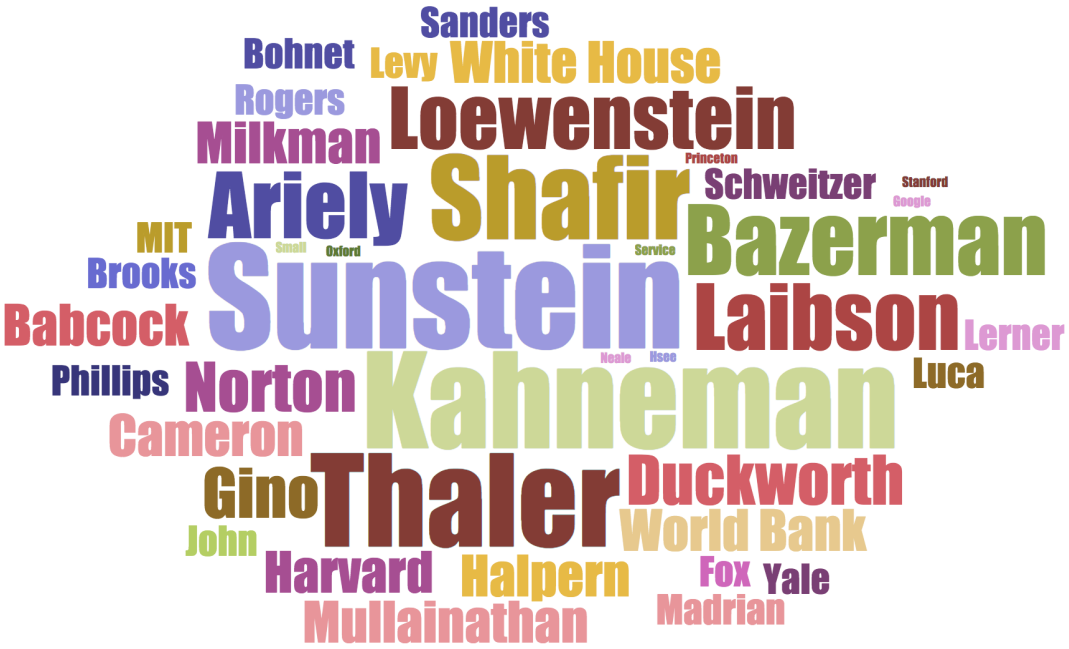
Table 4

Descriptive statistics for all measures in Study 4

	Professional ties & No name	Professional ties & Full name	Professional ties & First name	Personal ties & No name	Personal ties & Full name	Personal ties & First name
Perceived status	4.60 [4.18, 5.03]	4.41 [3.94, 4.85]	3.41 [2.99, 3.82]	4.78 [4.45, 5.11]	3.70 [3.26, 4.15]	3.49 [3.09, 3.88]
Liking	4.66 [4.37, 4.96]	4.01 [3.62, 4.40]	3.05 [2.67, 3.43]	4.57 [4.29, 4.84]	3.35 [2.98, 3.70]	2.91 [2.56, 3.25]
Perceived image concern	4.36 [4.11, 4.62]	5.37 [5.13, 5.62]	6.21 [5.85, 6.57]	4.60 [4.34, 4.86]	6.11 [5.72, 6.51]	6.32 [6.03, 6.59]

Note: The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 1. Word cloud generated with names that were dropped in Study 2 across both conditions.



Note: The size of each word indicates its frequency.

Figure 2. Perceived status ratings by condition in Study 2.

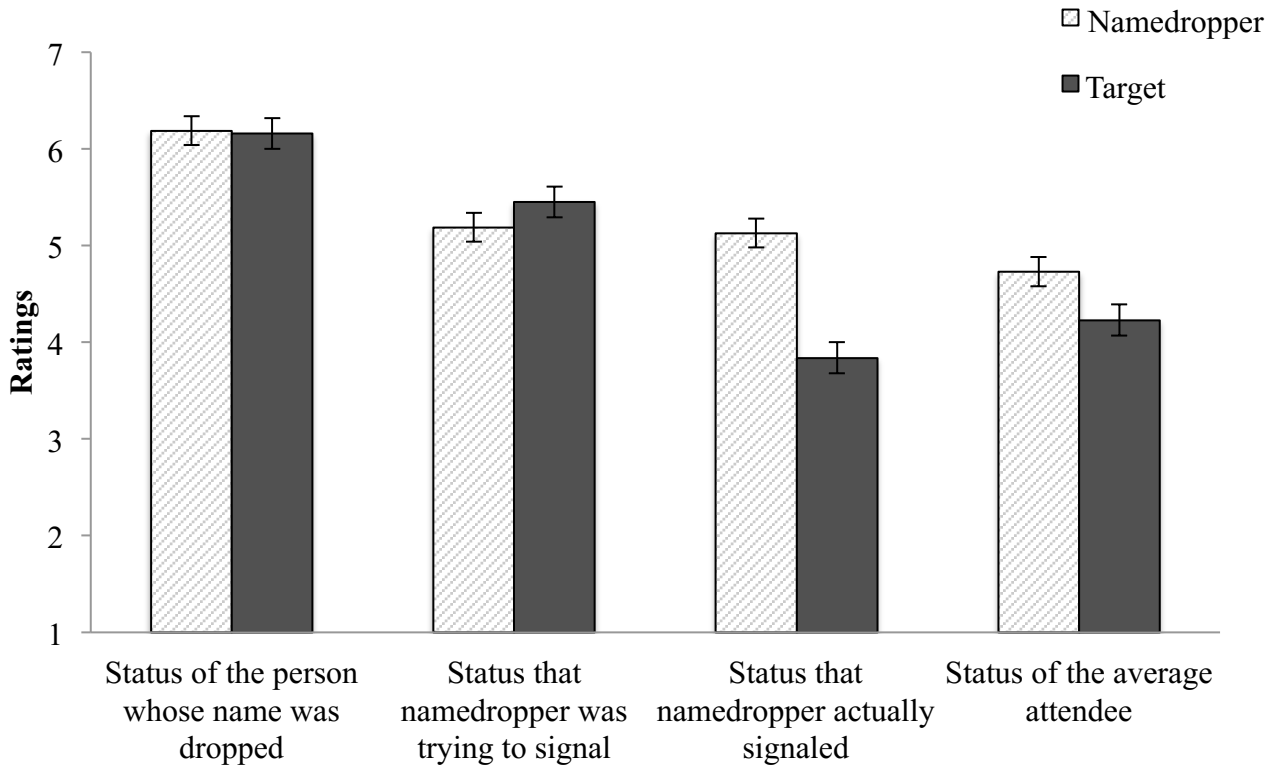


Figure 3. Liking and perceived status ratings by condition in Study 3.

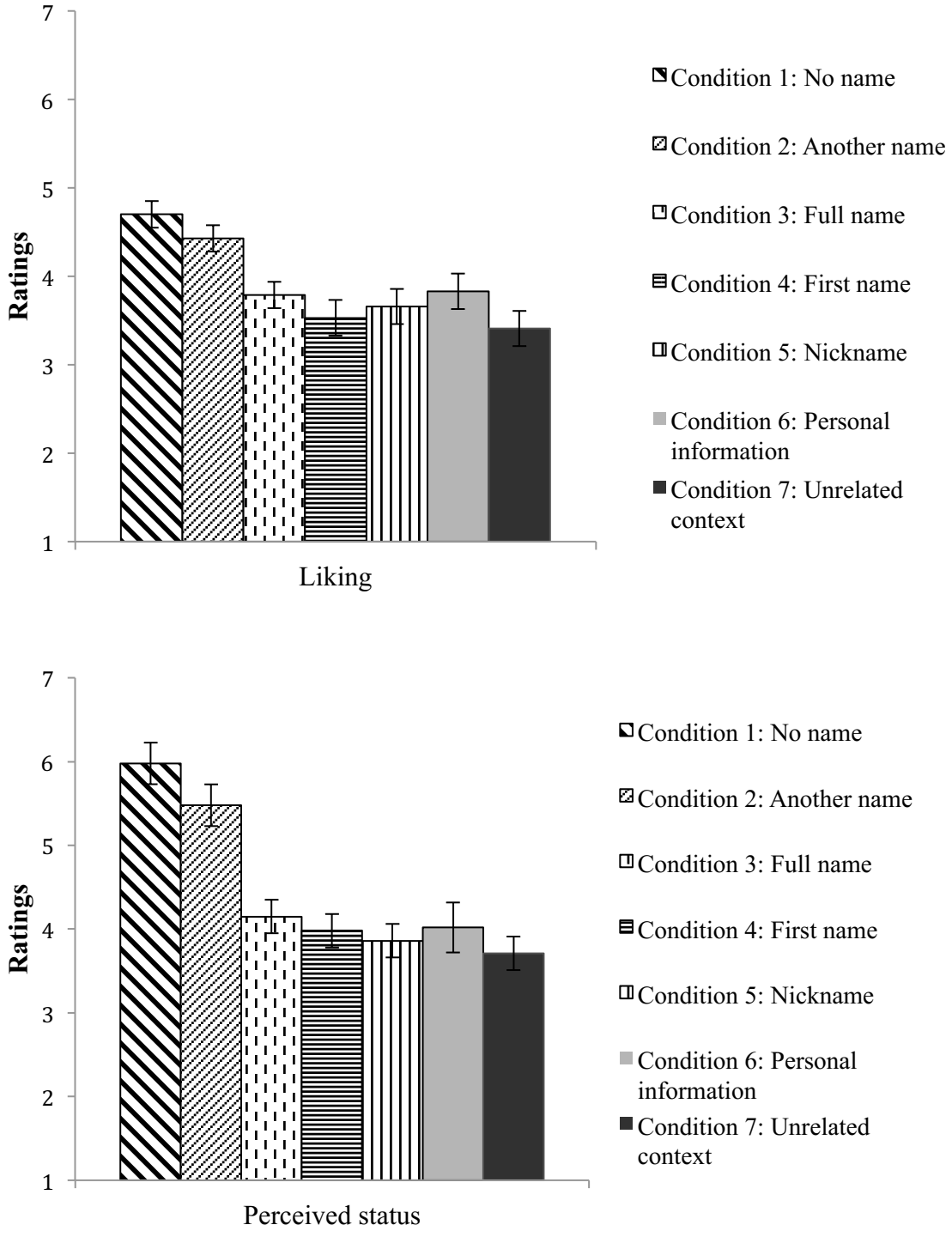


Figure 4. Cover letter in Study 4.

COVER LETTER

I am writing to apply for the Associate Product Manager position at your company. I am very interested in the field of digital marketing and would welcome the opportunity to contribute to your company's business with my skills.

I am excited about your company's commitment to the digital business. Your emphasis on "learning by doing and leading by serving" is also consistent with the training I received in my school.

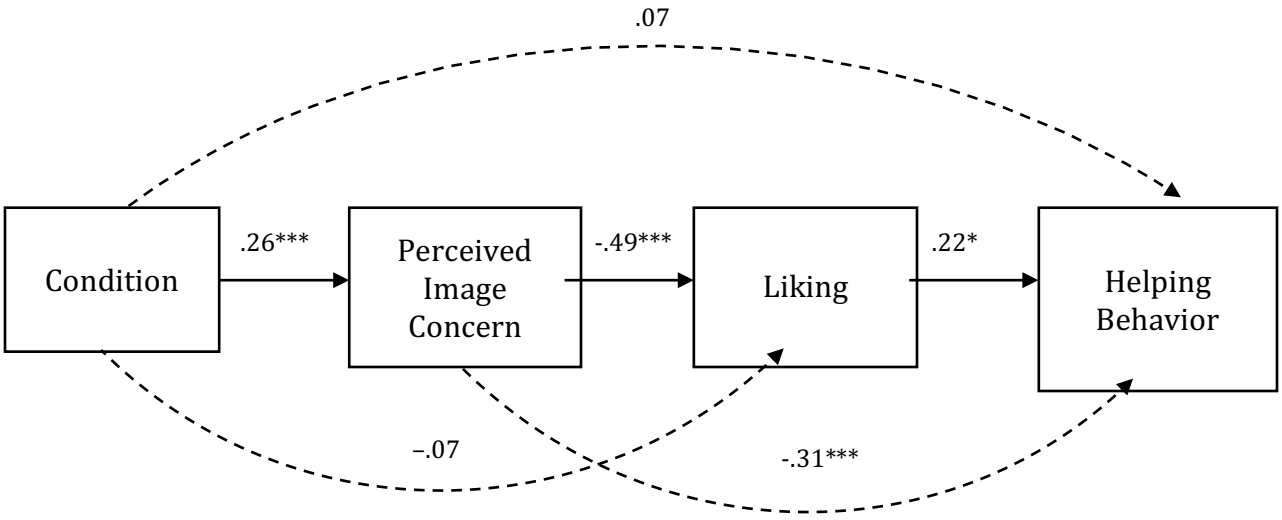
In addition, my time at my previous jobs taught me the importance of customer service, and I gained a great deal of organizational skills. By working on products that are used by everyone, I learned to take on several projects at once, never to compromise my ability at any task.

I am confident that I will always be able to handle the workload and never feel the position to be a burden, but rather a desire.

With my technical knowledge and work experience, I believe I can become a great fit for your excellent organization. I am dedicated, reliable and punctual. My character and motivation to work would make me a good addition to your company. I want to thank you in advanced for your consideration and I am looking forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Sincerely,

Figure 5: Path analysis in Study 4.



Note. Standardized beta coefficients displayed. *** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$