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Humblebragging: A Distinct—and Ineffective—Self-Presentation Strategy

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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 9 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, compliance with requests, and financial generosity. Despite being more common, complaint-based humblebrags 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 to both 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, sincerity

> 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; Leary, 1995; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1975; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Tedeschi, 1981; 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), 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). 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 nine 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 & Pittman, 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. Per-

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ceived sincerity is a critical factor in determining the success of self-presentation, with perceived insincerity driving negative evaluations (Eastman, 1994; Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1986; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Nguyen, Seers, & Hartman, 2008). In short, we suggest that despite its prevalence, humblebragging may be ineffective in making a favorable impression because of 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) depend on others' impressions (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1975; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Wayne & Ferris, 1990). 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 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 (Baryła, 2014; Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010; Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; Jones, Gergen, Gumpert, & Thibaut, 1965; Pontari & Schlenker, 2006; Rubin, 1973; Wojciszke, Abele, & Baryla, 2009). Indeed, social perception research suggests that social judgments involve two basic, universal, and independent dimensions (Abelson, Kinder, Peters, & Fiske, 1982; Asch, 1946; Wojciszke et al., 2009), such as agency and communion (Bakan, 1966), competence and morality (Wojciszke, 2005), intellectual and social desirability (Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968), or competence and warmth (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). 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) relates to the interpersonal goal of liking, whereas the other (agency, intellectual desirability, and competence) relates to the interpersonal goal of respect.

In everyday life, there are many settings in which 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 (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 likability 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), whereas to be respected, individuals usually employ strategies to convince their targets of their competence (Godfrey et al., 1986; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Wayne & Liden, 1995).

Strategies in the Pursuit of Liking

Most self-presentation strategies that are designed to elicit liking and sympathy are other-focused tactics (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008; Jones, 1964; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Wayne & Liden, 1995; Zivnuska et al., 2004). For instance, people often use other-enhancement statements, such as flattery or praise (Jones & Pittman, 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 likability. 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 that 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; Wosinska, Dabul, Whetstone-Dion, & Cialdini, 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; 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; Van Tongeren, Davis, & Hook, 2014; 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, 2013; 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; Wosinska et al., 1996). Appearing humble can also send a desirable prosocial signal to others (being other-oriented and unselfish; Davis & Hook, 2014), which, in turn, promotes likability (Davis et al., 2013).

Complaining. 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 likable 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, Snyder, & 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 likable leads individuals to engage in variety of "other-focused" tactics (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Jones & Wortman, 1973; 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 (Jones et al., 1965; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; 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 in which 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 (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). People engage in self-promotion to appear competent (Godfrey et al., 1986; Rudman, 1998), to augment their perceived status (Holoien & Fiske, 2013; Swencionis & Fiske, 2016), and to earn others' respect (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Pontari & Schlenker, 2006; Wojciszke 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 & Gregg, 2008). In addition to bragging, they may provide biographical narratives, social anecdotes, and other forms of conversation as evidence of their success (Dayter, 2014; Dunbar, Marriott, & Duncan, 1997; Emler, 1994), or increase their perceived responsibility for a favorable event by claiming credit, a self-presentation strategy known as entitlement (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 this example of combining bragging with humility, "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 this example of combining bragging with complaining, "Graduating from two universities means you get double the calls asking for money/donations. So pushy and annoying!"

This unique form of self-presentation—humblebragging—seemingly allows actors to highlight positive qualities (being nominated for an award, graduating from two universities) while attempting to elicit liking and sympathy by masking these positive qualities in humility (disbelieving the nomination) or in a complaint (feeling annoyed).

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; Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005). At the same time, people who brag run the risk of appearing conceited or self-promoting (Powers & Zuroff, 1988; Tice et al., 1995): Emphasizing positive qualities and successes can lead observers to regard an actor as competent but less likable (Carlston & Shovar, 1983; 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, because of 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; research suggests that sincerity is desirable and is seen as particularly fundamental to people's identity (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). In the context of self-presentation, perceived sincerity exerts significant weight in impression formation (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Liden & Mitchell, 1988). Research in organizational contexts also highlights the importance of integrity—the quality that reflects an individual's reputation for honesty or sincerity (Brambilla et al., 2011; Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012; 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 because of the negative impact on perceptions of an overlooked dimension: sincerity.

Overview of Research

We tested our account in nine studies. We first document the ubiquity of humblebragging across several domains: a nationally representative U.S. 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 with 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 humblebragging (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 4a and 4b examine whether people's dislike of humblebraggers elicits less generosity. Study 5 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 documented 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 646 participants (M_{age} = 45.53, SD = 14.43; 49.5% female) from a U.S. 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"; and "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 e-mail, 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 (Alberts, 1988; Alicke et al., 1992; Kowalski, 2002); humility is a lack of superiority in assessment of one's abilities and strengths (Davis et al., 2010; Kesebir, 2014; Kruse et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Saroglou et al., 2008; Weidman et al., 2016). The coders agreed 91.8% of the time about the type of humblebrag (416 of 453) 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 1 week and 1 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 partici-

pants could recall a humblebrag: 70.1% of participants (453 of 646) reported a humblebrag.

Types of humblebrags. Coders identified that 58.9% of humblebrags (267 of 453) were complaint-based and conveyed dissatisfaction or annoyance, and 41.1% of humblebrags (186 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

Table 1
Topics and Examples of Complaint-Based and Humility-Based Humblebrags in Studies 1a and 1b

Complaint-based humblebrags		Humility-based humblebrags	
Categories	Examples	Categories	Examples
Study 1a			
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."
Study 1b			
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 got 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 80s, nobody had those back then, they used to have champagne in those lounges—my friend is talking about some exclusive club."

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 (35.90%), 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 of 453) that they heard were from men, and 49% (222 of 453) of the humblebrags were from women. The average age of the person who engaged in humblebragging was 38.38 years (SD = 12.38).

Recency of the humblebrag. Regarding recency of the humblebrag, 24.3% of the humblebrags were heard within the last 3 days, 29.1% between 3 and 7 days ago, 18.45% between 1 week and 1 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 1 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 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. Three participants did not fill out the survey on Wednesday and Friday, leaving us with 110 data points for those days; one 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; Hofmann & Patel, 2015). Participants received one daily signal via smartphone at 4:00 p.m., 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"; and "Why do people hit on me even without makeup?"

We asked participants to think back over the last 24 hr 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 e-mail, 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 regardless of 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 [κ] $>$ .80). The coders agreed 94.8% of the time about the type of humblebrag (239 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 with 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 (17.2%), achievements (15.1%), social life (10.7%), personality (9.5%), skills (7.9%), and money and wealth (7.5%).

Bragging. Ratings of bragging did not vary significantly across complaint-based (M = 5.45, SD = .86) and humility-based (M = 5.56, SD = .79) humblebrags, $t(250)$ = 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 in which 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 data set of statements categorized as "humblebrags" on Twitter, predicting that the complaint-based humblebrags would be a combination of bragging and complaining, whereas humility-based humblebrags would be a combination of bragging and an attempt to appear humble.

Method

Procedure. We constructed our data set of humblebrags using a web page (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 data set 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 $\kappa > .90$); coders agreed 97.1% of the time about the type of humblebrag (719 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*): (a) "To what extent do you think this person is bragging?"; (b) "To what extent do you think the person is complaining?"; and (c) "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%), whereas 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 ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.40$) humblebrags, $t(738) = 1.27$, $p = .21$, $d = .09$, 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 began to explore the efficacy of humblebragging as a self-presentation strategy compared with another common and typically negatively viewed strategy: straightforward bragging. In a field experiment, we investigated the consequences of face-to-face humblebragging (vs. 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 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 113 participants because the same participants began to appear in the coffee shops over the course of the 3 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.

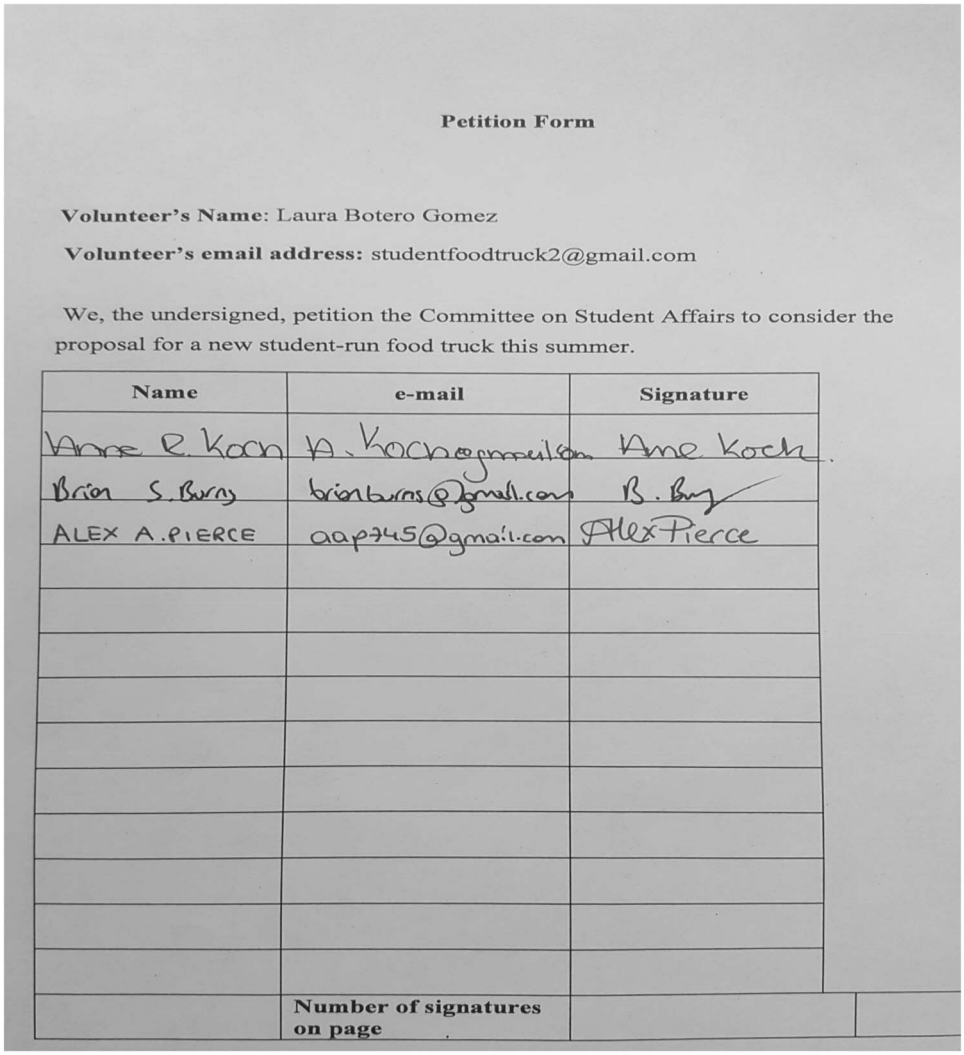
Design and procedure. A female confederate who was blind to our hypothesis approached 113 college students, one at a time, in eight coffee shops near colleges in a Northeastern city and requested their signature for a petition. The study was conducted over the course of 3 days in May 2016. The confederate 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 prepopulated 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, e-mail address, and signature (see Figure 1). After participants signed or not, the confederate informed them that her e-mail address was on the petition form and they could send her an e-mail 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 e-mail about the purpose of the study.

We recorded the date, the time, the coffee shop, the 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

Participants in the humblebragging condition were less likely to sign the petition than did participants in the bragging condition: 85.7% (48 of 57) volunteered to give their signature in support of the petition, compared with 64.9% (37 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, $B = -1.59$, Wald = 8.70, $df = 1$, $p = .003$, but no



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.Kochegmail.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 1. Prepopulated petition form from Study 2.

effect of gender ($p = .56$), time ($p = .29$), day ($p > .43$), or location ($p > .18$).

Discussion

Results from this field study reveal that a face-to-face humblebrag causes self-presenters to be treated less positively compared with 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 demonstrated that deploying a complaint-based humblebrag causes individuals to be treated less positively compared with a straightforward brag. Study 3a had three primary goals. First, we investigated people's perceptions of the two distinct types of humblebrags identified in Studies 1a to 1c—complaint-based and humility-based. Second, whereas Study 2 used only single brag and humblebrag, in Study 3a, we used larger set of stimuli to generalize beyond single cases. Third, whereas Study 2 used a behavioral outcome measure, in Study 3a, we measured 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 allowed us to determine which types of humblebrags are least effective: complaint-based or humility-based.

Method

Participants. We recruited 403 participants ($M_{age} = 36.73$, $SD = 12.18$; 44.9% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid them $1.00 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 $\eta_p^2 = .08$, and $\eta_p^2 = .07$, 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) × 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 data set 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 interrater reliabilities for the five statements were high in each condition (αs for liking = .80; αs for perceived competence = .84; αs 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; interrater reliability for the three ratings across conditions: αs for bragging = .64; αs for complaining = .68; αs 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) and 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 versus 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 (see 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 ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.03$) condition. 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 with the other conditions (see 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 versus 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

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for All Measures in Study 3a

Variable	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.

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 likable. When we included perceived sincerity in the model, predicting liking, the effect of humblebragging was reduced (from $b = -.61$, $p < .001$, to $b = -.08$, $p = .28$), and perceived sincerity was a significant predictor of liking ($b = .80$, $p < .001$). 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 & Kelley, 2011).

Perceived sincerity also mediated the relationship between humblebragging and perceived competence. The effect of humblebragging was significantly reduced (from $b = -.63$, $p < .001$, to $b = -.01$, $p = .88$) when we included perceived sincerity in the model, and perceived sincerity was a significant predictor of perceived competence ratings ($b = .93$, $p < .001$). 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 & Kelley, 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: Although 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 With Complaining

Studies 2 and 3a demonstrated 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 99 participants ($M_{age} = 33.74$, $SD = 9.94$; 43.1% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk in exchange for $0.50. 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 301 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?" ($\alpha = .92$; 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 ($M = 4.17$,

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics for All Measures in Study 3b

Variable	Complaint-based humblebrag	Brag	Complaint
Main study			
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.

$SD = 2.18$, $p < .001$) conditions. 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, $F(2, 298) = 12.89$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$. 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, $F(2, 298) = 31.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$. 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 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 ($b = .58$, $t = 17.02$, $p < .001$). 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 $b = -.86$, $p < .001$ to $b = -.22$, $p = .06$). 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 $b = -.59$, $p = .001$, to $b = .09$, $p = .48$), and perceived sincerity was a significant predictor of perceived competence ($b = .61$, $p < .001$). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [$-.93$, $-.44$], suggesting a significant indirect effect size of .04 (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelley, 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 played a mediating role: Although braggers and complainers are not well liked, they are at least seen as more sincere than humblebraggers.

Study 4a and 4b: Humblebragging and Generosity

Study 2 examined the effect of humblebragging on compliance with a request; Studies 4a and 4b assessed whether the costs of humblebragging extend to generosity as well. Consistent with our previous studies, we explored whether perceived sincerity would drive lower levels of liking, which, in turn, would lead to less money allocated in a dictator game.

Study 4a

Method.

Participants. The study employed two phases. One hundred fifty-four individuals (M_{age} = 33.27, SD = 9.36; 35.1% female) recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk participated in the first phase in exchange for $0.50. We included two comprehension checks; one participant did not pass the filter questions and was eliminated from the study automatically. For the second phase, we recruited 619 participants (M_{age} = 33.44, SD = 9.72; 41.4% female) across four different studies from Amazon's Mechanical Turk in exchange for $0.50. We included two attention filter questions and eliminated 32 participants across four studies who failed these checks. For the second phase, participants were informed that they would be evaluating messages from real individuals recruited in another phase of the study, and that their allocation decisions would be hypothetical. We aimed for about 140 to 150 participants to be able to match the respondents from the first phase; for liking and perceived sincerity, the post hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of an effect size of d = .36 and d = .36, respectively, with achieved power of .99 and .99.

Design and procedure. Participants in the first phase were assigned to the role of Player A and were informed that they would be playing an allocation game with Player B from another session. They were told that Player B would allocate $5.00 between the two of them. Their task was to select three messages that applied most to them to send to the other player, and they were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in a between-subjects design.

Participants in the humblebragging condition were given the following pairs of messages (each of which was a humblebrag) and selected one message from each pair:

- "Being the know-how person at work is so exhausting. People come to me first."
- "Being too qualified on the job market sucks."
- "I have no idea how I got accepted to all the top schools."
- "I am so exhausted from getting elected to leadership positions all the time."
- "I can't even count the number of people who told me I look like a celebrity. Like really?"
- "People keep telling me how cute I am, awkward."

Participants in the bragging condition were given the following pairs and selected one message from each pair. The messages were designed to convey the same information as the corresponding humblebrags, retaining the brag and removing the complaint component.

- "I am the know-how person at work. People come to me first."
- "I am really qualified for the job market."
- "I got accepted to all the top schools."
- "I get elected to leadership positions all the time."
- "People frequently tell me that I look like a celebrity."
- "People keep telling me how cute I am."

Participants in the second phase of the study were all assigned to the role of Player B and were informed that they would allocate $5.00 between them and Player A from another session. They were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions in a between-subjects design, such that they played the dictator game with an individual who either sent humblebragging messages or bragging messages. After reading the messages, participants rated how much they liked Player A as well as Player A's sincerity (α = .90), using the same measures from previous studies, then allocated $5.00 on a slider from $0 to $5.00. Across the four studies, one participant skipped the allocation question. (In one of the four studies, the order of questions was allocation, liking and sincerity, rather than liking, sincerity and allocation as in the other studies. We included a study indicator as a fixed effect in our model. Note also that Studies 4a and 4b do not include a measure of perceived competence.)

Finally, participants answered demographic questions.

Results. Table 4 provides means for all dependent measures by condition.

To account for the different combinations of messages that senders chose in the first part of the study, we ran a linear mixed effects model, with random intercepts grouped by message combinations and condition and study indicator as fixed effects.

Liking. Participants who were matched with a humblebragger liked their partner significantly less (M = 2.57, SD = 1.43) than did participants matched with a bragger (M = 3.11, SD = 1.56), b = .54; 95% CI [.31, .78]; $t(614)$ = 8.79; $p < .001$, d = .36.

Perceived sincerity. Participants who were matched with a humblebragger found the target to be less sincere (M = 2.84, SD = 1.47) than did participants matched with a bragger (M = 3.36, SD = 1.45), b = .51; 95% CI [.29, .75]; $t(614)$ = 4.39; $p < .001$, d = .36.

Allocation. Hypothetical allocation decisions did not differ: Participants matched with a humblebragger and bragger allocated similar amounts (M = 1.03, SD = 1.30; M = 1.11, SD = 1.24), b = .08; 95% CI [−.49, .59]; $t(613)$ = .18; p = .86, d = .06.

Mediation. A path analysis revealed that perceived sincerity mediated the relationship between condition and liking, again controlling for the four different studies. When we included perceived sincerity in the model the effect of condition on liking was reduced (from b = −.54, $p < .001$, to b = −.15, p = .07), and perceived sincerity was a significant predictor of liking (b = .76, $p < .001$). A 10,000-sample bootstrap analysis revealed that the

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics for All Measures in Studies 4a and 4b

Variable	Humblebrag	Brag
Study 4a		
Liking	2.57 [2.41, 2.73]	3.11 [2.94, 3.29]
Perceived sincerity	2.84 [2.68, 3.01]	3.36 [3.20, 3.52]
Allocation	1.03 [.89, 1.18]	1.11 [.97, 1.25]
Study 4b		
Liking	2.46 [2.21, 2.72]	2.95 [2.66, 3.23]
Perceived sincerity	2.74 [2.50, 2.99]	3.37 [3.09, 3.65]
Allocation	.70 [.47, .93]	1.05 [.81, 1.29]

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

95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [−.58, −.22], suggesting a significant indirect effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelley, 2011).

Discussion. As in our previous studies, humblebraggers were seen as insincere, leading them to be less liked; straightforwardly bragging produces better outcomes than humblebragging. However, our hypothetical allocation measure did not show differences between the two conditions; as a result, Study 4b included real allocation decisions to test whether humblebragging may have actual financial costs.

Study 4b

Method.

Participants. The study had the same design as Study 4a; however, for the second phase, we recruited 154 participants from a university in the northeastern United States (M_{age} = 21.38, SD = 1.50; 70.5% female) to participate in an online study in exchange for a $5.00 Amazon.com gift card. All participants passed the comprehension checks. For both phases of the study, participants were informed that they would be paid additional money based on the allocation game. We aimed for about 140 to 150 participants to be able to match the respondents from the first phase, and for liking and perceived sincerity, the post hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of an effect size of d = .41 and d = .55, respectively, with achieved power of .71 and .92.

Design and procedure. This study employed the same design as Study 4a, except that the allocation decision was not hypothetical but real: Participants in the second phase were all assigned to the role of Player B and were informed that they would allocate $5.00 between them and Player A from another session. They were randomly assigned to evaluate an individual who either sent humblebragging messages or bragging messages. After reading the messages, participants rated how much they liked Player A and Player A's sincerity (α = .70) using the same measures from previous studies, then allocated $5.00 on a slider from $0 to $5.00; one participant skipped the allocation decision.

Finally, participants answered demographic questions.

Results. Table 4 provides means for all dependent measures by condition.

For all analyses, as in Study 4a, we ran a linear mixed effects model, with random intercepts grouped by message combinations and condition as fixed effects to account for the different combinations of messages that senders chose in the first phase of the study.

Liking. Participants matched with a humblebragger liked their partner significantly less (M = 2.46, SD = 1.14) than did participants matched with a bragger (M = 2.95, SD = 1.25), b = .49; 95% CI [.11, .87]; $t(152)$ = 2.52; p = .013, d = .41.

Perceived sincerity. Participants matched with a humblebragger found the target to be less sincere (M = 2.74, SD = 1.08) than did participants matched with a bragger (M = 3.37, SD = 1.22), b = .62; 95% CI [.26, .99]; $t(152)$ = 3.37; $p < .001$, d = .55.

Allocation. Participants matched with a humblebragger allocated less money to their partners (M = .70, SD = 1.02) than did participants matched with a bragger (M = 1.05, SD = 1.04), b = .36; 95% CI [.46, .92]; $t(151)$ = 2.15, p = .034, d = .34.

Mediation. A path analysis revealed that perceived sincerity and liking mediated the relationship between condition and allocation. Higher perceived sincerity led participants to like their partner more, which led to higher allocation amounts in the dictator game. When we included perceived sincerity in the model, predicting liking, the effect of condition was reduced (from b = −.49, p = .013, to b = −.17, p = .33), and perceived sincerity was a significant predictor of liking (b = .51, $p < .001$). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [−.56, −.14], suggesting a significant indirect effect. When we included perceived sincerity and liking in the model, predicting allocation, the effect of condition was reduced (from b = −.36, p = .034, to b = −.15, p = .35), and both perceived sincerity (β = .17, p = .029) and liking (b = .19, p = .014) predicted allocation. The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [−.15, −.01], suggesting a significant indirect effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelley, 2011).

Discussion. Results from Study 4b—taken together with the results for compliance with requests from Study 2—suggest that the costs of humblebragging extend beyond interpersonal evaluations, impacting behavior. Humblebraggers are seen as insincere, leading them to be less liked and treated less generously. At the same time, results from Study 4a were inconclusive: Hypothetical allocation decisions were not influenced by humblebragging. As a result, future research is needed to further test the robustness of the effects of humblebragging on financial outcomes.

Study 5: The Antecedents and Consequences of Humblebragging

Studies 2, 3a, 3b, 4a, and 4b showed that people who humblebrag are generally disliked and perceived as insincere, yet Studies 1a to 1c showed that humblebragging is ubiquitous. Study 5 investigated 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 5, 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 5 simultaneously examined 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 305 participants (M_{age} = 35.69, SD = 11.31; 41.6% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk in exchange for $0.50 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 608 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 $0.50. One participant failed to pass the attention checks and was 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 $\eta^2 = .10$ and $\eta^2 = .05$, 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) × 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?" (α = .85; Chan & Sengupta, 2010).

Finally, all participants answered demographic questions.

Results

Table 5 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 com-

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for All Measures in Study 5

Variable	Complaint-based humblebrag	Brag	Complaint
Main study (receivers' evaluations)			
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.

plaint, whereas 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, whereas 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 (12.9%) conditions, $\chi^2(2, N = 303) = 50.56$, $p < .001$, 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 $b = -.79$, $p < .001$, to $b = -.29$, $p = .007$), and perceived sincerity was a significant predictor of liking ($b = .61$, $p < .001$). 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 & Kelley, 2011).

Perceived sincerity also mediated the relationship between humblebragging and perceived competence. Including sincerity in the model significantly reduced the effect of humblebragging (from $b = -.57$, $p < .001$, to $b = -.06$, $p = .63$), and perceived sincerity was a significant predictor of liking ($b = .61$, $p < .001$). 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 & Kelley, 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.

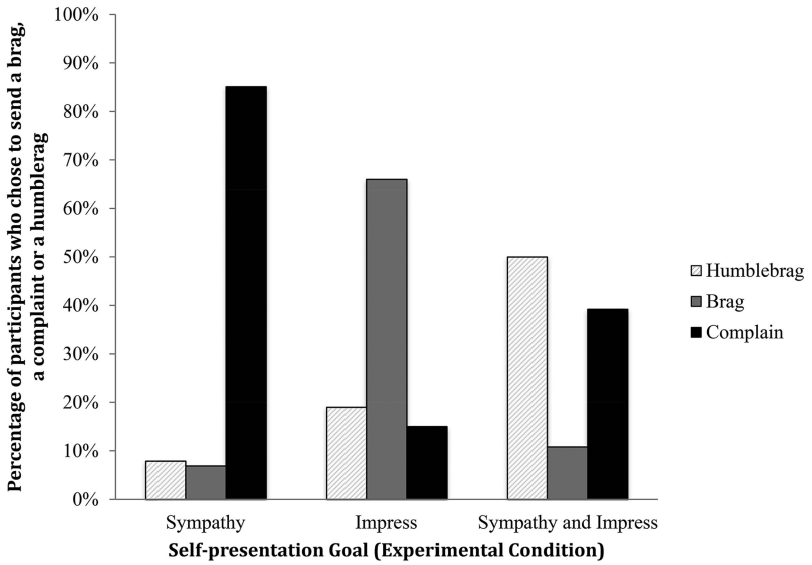


Figure 2. Self-presentation strategy selection by condition in Study 5.

Additional Mediation Analyses

To offer further support for our conceptual account, we tested additional alternative meditational models in which we reversed the mediator and primary dependent variable(s). For example, in Study 3a, when we included liking in the model as the mediator predicting perceived sincerity, the effect of humblebragging was reduced (from $b = -.66$, $p < .001$, to $b = -.18$, $p = .013$), and liking was a significant predictor of perceived sincerity ($b = .80$, $p < .001$). A 10,000-sample bootstrap analysis revealed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [−.67, −.31], suggesting a significant indirect effect size of .06. We also examined the proportion of variance mediated by both our proposed mediator and the reverse meditational models by assessing the ratio of indirect to total effect (Preacher & Kelley, 2011). With sincerity as the mediator between condition and liking (as in our conceptual account) this ratio was .87 with 95% CI [.68, 1.13], whereas with liking as the mediator between condition and sincerity, it was .73 with 95% CI [.56, .91], suggesting that that the point estimate of the proportion for our proposed model is higher. Table 6 shows the same analyses for each mediational model for each study. Critically, in seven of the eight mediational models, our proposed model has a higher ratio of indirect to total effect, suggesting that, on balance, our proposed model better accounts for the overall pattern of data.

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 documented that humblebragging is a ubiquitous phenomenon in everyday life and takes two distinct forms: bragging masked by either complaint or humility. Study 2 showed that compared with straightforward bragging, humblebraggers garner more negative behavioral responses in a face-to-face field setting. Study 3a documented that both complaint-based humblebrags and humility-based humblebrags are less effective than bragging in being perceived as likable or competent, and Study 3b that complaint-based humblebragging is less effective even than straightforward complaining. Study 4 demonstrated 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

Table 6
Statistics for Alternate Mediations across All Studies

Study	Mediation	*b*	95% CI	Ratio of indirect to total effect for original meditational analyses	Ratio of indirect to total effect for alternate meditational analyses
3a	Liking as a mediator between condition and perceived sincerity	from $b = -.66$, $p < .001$ to $b = -.18$, $p = .013$	[−.67, −.31]	.87 [.68, 1.13]	.73 [.56, .91]
	Perceived competence as a mediator between condition and perceived sincerity	from $b = -.66$, $p < .001$ to $b = -.17$, $p = .006$	[−.70, −.31]	.98 [.81, 1.23]	.75 [.58, .92]
3b	Liking as a mediator between condition and perceived sincerity	from $b = -1.10$, $p < .001$ to $b = -.37$, $p = .011$	[−1.00, −.48]	.74 [.53, 1.00]	.67 [.49, .90]
	Perceived competence as a mediator between condition and perceived sincerity	from $b = -1.11$, $p < .001$ to $b = -.64$, $p < .001$	[−.73, −.20]	1.15 [.81, 2.16]	.42 [.23, .60]
4a	Liking as a mediator between condition and perceived sincerity	from $b = -.52$, $p < .001$ to $b = -.13$, $p = .12$	[−.57, −.22]	.77 [.54, 1.10]	.73 [.50, 1.02]
4b	Liking and perceived sincerity as mediators between condition and allocation	from $b = -.36$, $p = .033$ to $b = -.15$, $p = .35$	[−.13, −.004.]	.17 [.02, .99]	.11 [−.0001, .86]
5	Liking as a mediator between condition and perceived sincerity	from $b = -.82$, $p < .001$ to $b = -.22$, $p = .065$	[−.83, −.39]	.63 [.43, .90]	.73 [.53, 1.03]
	Perceived competence as a mediator between condition and perceived sincerity	from $b = -.82$, $p < .001$ to $b = -.50$, $p < .001$	[−.56, −.17]	.89 [.55, 1.66]	.43 [.23, .67]

Note. We report meditational analyses using 10,000 sample bootstrap analysis with 95% bias corrected confidence intervals (CIs).

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 with 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 likable 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 (Lee & Pinker, 2010; Pinker, Nowak, & Lee, 2008). 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. Although 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, whereas 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, whereas 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 because 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, Vosgerau, & Loewenstein, 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, whereas low-status individuals may face more backlash.

Finally, although our studies provided a taxonomy of different classes of humblebrags, we primarily compared the effectiveness of humblebragging with straightforward bragging and straightforward complaining. Future research should also investigate the effectiveness of humblebragging against actually being humble. There is, however, a lack of consensus among researchers about what constitutes humility (Weidman et al., 2016), in part because claiming humility usually indicates a lack thereof: Stating that one is humble is in itself form of bragging. Thus, an important avenue for future work is to investigate whether and how people can effectively convey humility, and how effective expressions of humility compare with humblebragging as self-presentational strategies.

Conclusion

We identified and offered 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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Backhanded Compliments: How Negative Comparisons Undermine Flattery

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Abstract

Seven studies (N = 2352) examine backhanded compliments—seeming praise that draws a comparison with a negative standard—a distinct self-presentation strategy with two simultaneous goals: eliciting liking ("Your speech was good…") and conveying status ("…for a woman"). Backhanded compliments are common, from delivering feedback in work settings to communicating in casual conversation, and take several distinct forms (Studies 1a-b). Backhanded compliments have mixed effectiveness, as people who deliver backhanded compliments erroneously believe that they will both convey high status and elicit liking (Studies 2a-2b) but recipients and third-party evaluators grant them neither (Study 3a-3b); however, backhanded compliments are successful in reducing recipients' motivation (Study 3c). We identify two constructs useful in determining the general effectiveness of ingratiation: excessive concern with image drives negative perceptions of backhanded compliment givers, while perceptions of low relative rank in a distribution drives the reduced motivation of backhanded compliment recipients.

Keywords: backhanded compliments, self-presentation, impression management, interpersonal perception, liking, status, image concern

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 both 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 common in the workplace (*For a young woman, your speech was great*), in everyday life (*You look thinner than the last time I saw you*), and in academia (*You are actually nice for an economist*; *This seems pretty rigorous for a social psychologist*.) We explore the psychology of backhanded compliments—seeming praise that draws a comparison with a negative standard—investigating why people deploy them, and whether they have their intended effect on both recipients and third-party observers.

People have a fundamental desire to be liked and viewed positively (Baumeister, 1982; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goffman, 1959; Hill, 1987; Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides, Hoorens, & Dufner, 2015), and often give compliments to garner such favorable impressions; indeed, compliments—communicating positive aspects of another person to that person—are ubiquitous in social and organizational life (Ayduk, Gyurak, Akinola, & Mendes; 2013; Jones, 1964). Several streams of research suggest that delivering 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; 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; Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006; 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 (Collins, 1996; Festinger, 1954; Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris 1995; Tesser, 1988).

Most studies of self-promotion have focused on strategies people use to elicit either liking (such as ingratiation and flattery) or respect (such as bragging or intimidation; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; Jones & Pitman, 1982; Scopelliti, Loewenstein, & Vosgerau, 2015), but not both. We explore a previously-undocumented yet common strategy by which flatterers seek to gain both liking and status simultaneously: backhanded compliments, a compliment (aimed to elicit liking) that contains a subtle "put down" in the form of a comparison with a negative standard (aimed to elicit respect).

We predict that although backhanded compliments are intended to generate liking and convey status, they fail to elicit either, because people who deliver backhanded compliments are perceived as strategic and overly-concerned with impression management. Indeed, research suggests that image concerns—concerns about how one appears to others—foster suspicion of ulterior self-presentational motives (Crant, 1996; Nguyen, Seers, & Hartman, 2008; Turnley & Bolino, 2001). Consequently, observers view these individuals as impression managers who adjust their interpersonal conduct

based on social contingencies rather than acting on their authentic beliefs, consider them to be deceitful and pretentious, and view them negatively (Bolino et al., 2006; Buss, 1983; Butler, 1991; Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Nguyen et al., 2008; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007; Leary, 1995; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). Taken together, we expect that people's strategic efforts to gain both status and liking by deploying backhanded compliments will signal impression management concerns, undermining the positive feelings and interpersonal liking typically triggered by traditional compliments.

At the same time, however, we suggest that backhanded compliments may succeed by harming the self-perceptions of the recipient. Backhanded compliments are ineffective as compliments because recipients focus less on the compliment and more on the comparison to a negative standard, but this focus reduces both their perceptions of their ability and their motivation. We explore how backhanded compliments convey and influence recipients' perceptions of relative standing in an omnibus ability distribution. Whereas traditional 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*; see Figure 1).

Compliments and Liking

Giving compliments in social and professional interactions often garners positive outcomes; in the workplace, job candidates who give compliments elicit greater interest, are more likely to receive an offer, and are seen as a better fit in the organization (Chen, Lee, & Yeh, 2008; Kacmar & Carlson, 1999; Zhao & Liden, 2011). Beyond hiring choices, giving compliments increases evaluations of job performance (Ferris, Judge,

Rowland, & Fitzgibbons, 1994; Westphal & Shani, 2015), increases the likelihood of appointment to an executive board (Westphal & Stern, 2007), and relates to overall career success (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008; Judge & Bretz, 1994).

Prior research has identified at least two reasons that flattery leads to favorable outcomes. First, flattery has a positive influence on the target's judgments of the flatterer (Fogg & Nass, 1997; Gordon, 1996; Vonk, 2002). Second, flattery makes recipients feel good, even when it is obviously insincere. For example, customers who received a printed advertisement from a department store complimenting their taste in fashion were more likely to evaluate the store positively and buy from the store than those who did not receive a compliment (Chan & Sengupta, 2013). So strong is this preference for feeling flattered that people even enjoy receiving compliments generated by a non-human algorithm (Fogg & Nass, 1997).

One crucial factor underlying the positive effects of compliments is a deeply-rooted human motive for self-enhancement (Gordon, 1996; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Cai, 2015). People like those who compliment them and are motivated to believe the compliments they receive because compliments are egocentrically validating (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Vonk, 2002). The desire to think highly of oneself leads people to accept compliments without question (Bless, Mackie, & Schwarz, 1992; Chan & Sengupta, 2010; 2007). Indeed, people are much less likely to scrutinize flatterers' ulterior motives when they are the recipients (versus third-party observers) of compliments (Vonk, 2002).

Compliments and Status

As noted earlier, although compliments increase interpersonal liking, they may decrease perceptions of status, creating a self-presentational dilemma: in addition to wanting to be liked, people are highly motivated to attain status – respect, esteem, and influence (Anderson et al., 2015; Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Barkow, 1975; Kilduff & Galinsky, 2013; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Maslow, 1943). As with liking, status influences many outcomes in social interactions; for example, compared to those with low status, high-status individuals have greater access to a range of material and social rewards (Ellis, 1994; Halevy, Chou, Cohen, & Livingston, 2012; Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010). Previous research has identified several strategies deployed to increase perceptions of status, such as projecting confidence (or overconfidence) or successfully landing appropriate jokes (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009b; Bitterly, Brooks, Schweitzer, 2016; Chen, Peterson, Phillips, Podolny, & Ridgeway, 2012).

We suggest that delivering traditional compliments may succeed in garnering liking but fail to garner status, because delivering a compliment can imply that the flatterer is of lower status than the recipient. Indeed, observers of flattery are likely to engage in social comparison and consider the compliment recipient to be superior to themselves (Chan & Sengupta, 2013). Moreover, status-related judgments follow a zero-sum principle: people who see others as high status are perceived to be lower status themselves (Dufner, Leising, & Gebauer, 2016). In sum, giving compliments may make the flatterer seem inferior in status compared to the recipient. Most problematically, because increasing one's status can require highlighting superiority relative to others (Jones & Pitman, 1982; Leary & Allen, 2011), such efforts often conflicts with the goal

to be liked; insults such as "sucking up to the boss" reveal the potential decreases in liking that come with efforts to increase status (Vonk, 1998).

Psychological Mechanisms: The Roles of Image Concerns and Relative Rank

How then do would-be flatterers achieve their dual goals to be liked and to gain status? Although previous research suggests that eliciting liking and conveying status require different strategies (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Joiner, Vohs, Katz, Kwon, & Kline, 2003; Rudman, 1998), we identify backhanded compliments as an understudied self-presentation strategy that attempts to fulfill the both goals: eliciting liking and conveying status. We propose that people believe that delivering the "compliment" part of a backhanded compliment will garner the benefits of flattery for liking, while using the "backhanded" part to avoid being seen as lower status: with backhanded compliments, flatterers specifically place recipients lower in an ability distribution because flatterers both control the comparison set and in fact exclude themselves from that set. For example, when a man gives a woman a compliment – "Your speech was great" – both the recipient and observers might interpret the compliment as "Your speech was [better than the compliment-giver could have given]"; this interpretation might increase liking but harm perceptions of the flatterer's status. If the man instead gives a backhanded compliment – "Your speech was great…for a woman" – the flatterer has technically still given a compliment, but now has placed the woman in a comparison set that he clearly views as inferior.

As a result, we predict that, despite people's beliefs that backhanded compliments are effective in projecting likeability and status simultaneously, backhanded compliments actually fail to achieve either. At the same time, we suggest that backhanded

compliments may have some "pay off" for the flatterer: by implying that the recipient is of low ability, may harm the recipients' perceptions of their own competence, decreasing their motivation – likely making the flatterer look better by comparison. We explore the mechanisms underlying backhanded compliments from the perspective of the compliment giver, recipient, and observers. First, we expect that backhanded compliments do not lead to favorable impressions because those who give backhanded compliments appear to both recipients and observers to be overly concerned with impression management. Second, we expect that those who receive backhanded compliments to have less motivation to succeed, driven by recipients' feeling that they have low rank or standing in an ability distribution.

Image concerns. The success of impression management strategies depends critically on targets' perceptions of flatterers' authenticity (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). Actors who appear to be independent and indifferent to others' approval are evaluated positively (Dworkin, 1988; Kim & Markus, 1999; Lewis & Neighbors, 2005); similarly, those who are admired and respected are seen as immune to social pressures and social evaluation concerns (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Haslam 2004; Hollander, 1958). And those who are perceived as behaving tactically or strategically are viewed as less likeable and more selfish, cold, manipulative, and untrustworthy (Gurevitch, 1984; Jones & Davis, 1965; Roulin, Bangerter, & Levashina, 2015; Stern & Westphal, 2010). Importantly, perceptions of sincerity can vary based on specific roles in social encounters. With compliments, for example, recipients view flatterers positively regardless of sincerity, but third-party observers are more skilled at discerning flatterers' ulterior motives (Vonk, 2002). We

suggest that when individuals assert their superiority by making their compliments backhanded, their image concerns will become salient to both recipients and observers, leading to an unfavorable impression.

Relative rank. Humans exhibit a strong and pervasive tendency to make social comparisons, engaging in such comparisons effortlessly (Festinger, 1954; Gilbert et al., 1995) and with profound affective and cognitive consequences (Buunk & Gibbons 2007; Dunn, Ruedy, & Schweitzer, 2012; Tesser, 1988). In particular, while downward comparisons enhance one's self-image (Achee, Tesser, & Pilkington, 1994; Garcia & Tor, 2007; Garcia, Tor, & Gonzalez, 2006), upward comparisons are aversive, and evoke feelings of threat, envy, and anger (Gilbert et al., 1995; Goethals, 1986; Tangney, 1995); indeed, research suggests that feelings of relative low rank can harm performance in relevant domains (e.g., Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

Drawing on this research, we expect that backhanded compliments, compared to traditional compliments, will reduce recipients' motivation to succeed precisely because backhanded compliments implicitly place recipients lower in an omnibus ability distribution. In contrast to traditional compliments ("Your ideas were good."), where the lack of an explicit social comparison allows the recipient to attend only to the positivity of the statement, backhanded compliments include a salient—and negative—standard of comparison: "Your ideas were good… for an intern." While compliments place recipients at the top of an omnibus distribution backhanded compliments place recipients at the top of an undesirable subsection of the omnibus distribution (in this case, ideas offered by interns).

In sum, these psychological mechanisms suggest that backhanded compliments are costly both for flatterers, in the form of negative impressions driven by perceptions of excessive image concern, and for recipients, in the form of decreased motivation due to their perceptions of low relative ranking.

Overview of Research

We tested our predictions across seven studies. In Study 1a-b, we document the pervasiveness of backhanded compliments in everyday life. In Study 2a-b, we examine which self-presentation goals (signaling status, gaining liking, or both) and situations (seeking status and being under status threat) are most likely to prompt backhanded compliments. Studies 3a-c assess the effectiveness of backhanded compliments in three ways: 1) perceptions of the would-be flatterer by recipients, 2) perceptions of the would-be flatterer by third parties, and 3) self-perceptions and motivation of recipients.

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 all 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 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 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. We provided examples of both backhanded compliments (e.g., "You are good looking for your size") and compliments (e.g., "You look great"). 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.

Two independent coders analyzed the content of participants' open-ended responses and identified 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. Coders also identified whether the recipients of 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.

Results

Frequency of backhanded compliments and compliments in everyday life. Both forms of flattery were ubiquitous, with the vast majority of participants able to recall receiving both types of compliments: 84.6% of participants could recall a backhanded compliment, and 98.1% of participants could recall a compliment.

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 bosses (3%). The majority of traditional compliments were from friends (43.8%), followed by coworkers (17.6%), family members (16.3%), strangers (11.8%) and bosses (10.5%).

Discussion

These results provide 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. First, we create a taxonomy of compliments using the comparison groups that emerged in backhanded compliments in Study 1a: a comparison with the past self, a comparison with expectations, a comparison with another group, and a stereotypical comparison. Second, given the general impact of social comparison on affective reactions (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Dunn et al., 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. 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).

> *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."*
> 2. *"Your ideas were better than last time."*

3. *"Your ideas were better than I expected."*
4. *"Your ideas were good for an intern."*
5. *"Your ideas were good for [your gender]."*

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). They next 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, participants chose 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, making status concerns relatively more salient.

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. These results offer support for our contention that backhanded compliments are used strategically in the service of achieving multiple self-presentational goals.

Study 2b: When Do People Give Backhanded Compliments?

Study 2a reveals that people attempt to signal status (and gain liking) by deploying backhanded compliments. To offer further support for our notion that people add the "backhanded" aspect to their compliments particularly when status is a goal – shifting from a strategy targeted at liking to one that they also believe garners status – Study 2b explores a context in which people should 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 their coworker's presentation went. We provided participants with a compliment and a backhanded compliment and asked them to indicate with which they would be most likely to respond:

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; interestingly, the presence of the target does not influence the propensity to deploy backhanded compliments, suggesting that people under status threat are willing to blatantly engage in backhanded compliments in their attempt to gain status.

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 are seen as more strategic. Study 3c examines mechanism from 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 decrease their motivation.

Study 3a: Recipients' Perceptions of Backhanded Compliments

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 yes, we asked participants to write down the initials of the coworker and an example of that backhanded compliment or compliment.

As in Study 1a, two independent coders analyzed the content of participants' open-ended responses and identified 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?" (α = .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?" (α = .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 a backhanded compliment or a compliment: 84.1% of participants listed a coworker who gave them a backhanded compliment, and 97.1% of participants listed a coworker who gave them a compliment.

Four categories of backhanded compliments and compliments emerged from the coding (see Table 3 for categories and 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. These categories are similar to those of Study 1a, though with slightly more emphasis on performance, likely due to the workplace setting in this study.

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 less likeable, less interpersonally attractive, less competent, and less warm; most critically, these negative effects are not offset by perceptions of increased status, despite the results of Studies 2a and 2b suggesting that people believe the opposite.

Study 3b: Third Party Observers' Perceptions of Backhanded Compliments

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: given that conversation partners and observers can have differing perceptions (Brooks, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2015; Vonk, 2002), third party observers – such as bosses – may infer that those who give backhanded compliments are superior to their recipients. Second, Study 3b investigates the underlying mechanism that leads people to rate givers of backhanded compliments negatively: perceived image concern. In addition, to exert more control over

the content of the compliments and backhanded compliments than the open-ended format of Study 3a, 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 ($\alpha = .93$) and perceived status ($\alpha = .78$; 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?" ($\alpha = .83$). 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 flatterers 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, $F(1, 395) = .14$, $p = .71$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$. There was also, however, 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 recipients of backhanded compliments were judged to be lower status ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.03$) than targets of traditional compliments ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.13$); there was no main effect of absence/presence, $F(1, 395) = .77$, $p = .38$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$, and no interaction, $F(1, 395) = 2.04$, $p = .15$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$. Critically, despite this lowering of status of recipients of backhanded compliments, flatterers who gave backhanded compliments were still rated as having lower status ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.45$) than the recipients of those backhanded compliments ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.04$), $F(1, 395) = 98.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$.

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/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 ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.10$) as participants who evaluated an employee who received a traditional compliment ($M =$

5.10, *SD* = 1.16), $F(1, 395) = 1.85$, $p = .18$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$. There was no main effect of coworker absence/presence, $F(1, 395) = .40$, $p = .53$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, and 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 account, there was 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 far more strategic about impression management (*M* = 5.35, *SD* = 1.41) than those who gave a traditional compliment (*M* = 3.51, *SD* = 1.50); there was no main effect of coworker absence/presence, $F(1, 395) = .58$, $p = .45$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, and 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 absence/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, $F(1, 395) = .87$, $p = .35$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$. 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 flatters who convey traditional compliments, and the recipients of those (backhanded) 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 (to the flatterer): backhanded compliments may undermine recipients' feelings of competence and desire to persist in tasks—making the flatterer look better off in comparison. We also explore the mechanism that might underlie recipients' reduced motivation: their feeling of being in an unfavorable 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. 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 the task again (write another creative story and receive feedback), or whether they would prefer to complete a different (and boring) letter-counting task in which they counted vowels in paragraphs of prose.

Results

Table 6 provides descriptive statistics for all measures by condition.

Pretest results. Consistent with our hypothesis, 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 decreased positive emotion ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.97$) 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 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 ($M = 6.01$, $SD = 1.77$), $t(218) = 2.04$, $p = .043$, $d = .27$.

These pretest results suggest that merely qualifying a compliment with a backhanded "for someone from your state" is sufficient to decrease people's perceptions of their own creativity. In the main study, we explore the implications of this decrease on participants' subsequent motivation.

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), $t(200) = 5.85$, $p < .001$, $d = .82$, offering support for our contention that backhanded compliments place recipients in an unfavorable place (an uncreative state) in an overall distribution (all states).

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.

Relative rank as mediator. The perceived creativity of the comparison group (participants' 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 [-1.09, -.44], suggesting a significant indirect effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelly, 2011).

Self-assessed creativity as a mediator. Self-assessed creativity mediated the relationship between backhanded compliments and task selection. Including self-assessed creativity in the model significantly reduced the effect of backhanded compliments (from $\beta = -.14$, $p = .042$, to $\beta = -.11$, $p = .11$), and self-assessed creativity was a significant predictor of task selection ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$). A 10,000-sample bootstrap analysis revealed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [-.43, -.03], suggesting a significant indirect effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelly, 2011).

Discussion

The negative standard that backhanded compliments evoke leads recipients to place themselves in a relatively unfavorable rank in the omnibus distribution of ability, driving recipients' decreased assessments of their ability and motivation.

General Discussion

Although flattery can trigger positive outcomes across a variety of situations (Goffman, 1959; 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. Across seven studies, we explored backhanded compliments—compliments that draw a comparison with a negative standard. Our findings reveal the psychology of backhanded compliments—their pervasiveness, typology, antecedents, and consequences. 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. We further highlight the risks and rewards of backhanded compliments: while they may lead to lower perceptions of liking and status for their users, they are effective in undermining their recipients. Though on their surface, backhanded compliments may appear supportive, they can be destructive—both for the giver and the receiver.

Theoretical Contributions

Our findings make several theoretical contributions. First, we link the existing literatures on self-presentation and social comparison. Although all self-presentation strategies are efforts to manage one's 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 should often view straightforward compliment-givers as deliberately managing their image, they often

do not (Chan & Sengupta, 2010; Vonk, 2002); Study 3b suggests that people who deploy backhanded compliments are seen as concerned with their image, driving the dislike and disrespect they garner.

Second, our research underscores the relevance of flattery for the growing literature on feedback. Research in psychology and in organizational behavior has focused on the effects of feedback on employee engagement, retention, and job performance in organizational settings (Becker, 1978; Donovan & Williams, 2003; Fedor 1991; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Ivancevich & McMahon, 1982; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Latham & Locke, 1991; Locke Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981; Pritchard, Jones, Roth, Stuebing, & Ekeberg, 1988). Our findings in Study 3c highlight that there are clear implications for people using backhanded compliments in feedback settings—appending a negative standard comparison to positive feedback undermines the effectiveness of the feedback. In addition to causing negative affective responses, backhanded compliments also reduce their recipients' motivation to persevere.

Finally, we contribute to the impression management literature by identifying a distinct, common, though ineffective form of flattery. Prior research has identified a wide array of self-presentation strategies, ranging from ingratiation to self-promotion to exemplification (see Bolino, Long, & Turnley, 2016 for a review); however, most of these strategies are used in the service of achieving one self-presentational goal. Here, we examine a previously unidentified form of flattery, backhanded compliments, a strategy utilized to accomplish two simultaneous goals – eliciting liking and conveying status – though with mixed success.

In addition to these contributions, our findings suggest several promising directions for future research. First, because we show that the impact of backhanded compliments on recipients operates in part through their effect on recipients' 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. As just one example, the phrase, "That outfit actually looks good on you" can seem innocuous, until the purpose of the additional and technically unnecessary word "actually" – conveying a kind of surprise or expectancy violation – is unpacked. 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 and potentially negative feedback.

Conclusion

Making a positive impression is crucially important in social and organizational life. We identify a previously unexplored self-presentation strategy: backhanded compliments, or compliments that draw a comparison with a negative standard. Moreover, we explore the psychology underlying backhanded compliments from both flatterer and recipient perspectives. Although flatterers deploy backhanded compliments to garner liking while also conveying social status, recipients view backhanded

compliments as strategic put-downs and penalize would-be flatterers – even as the backhanded compliment undermines their motivation and perseverance.

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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.

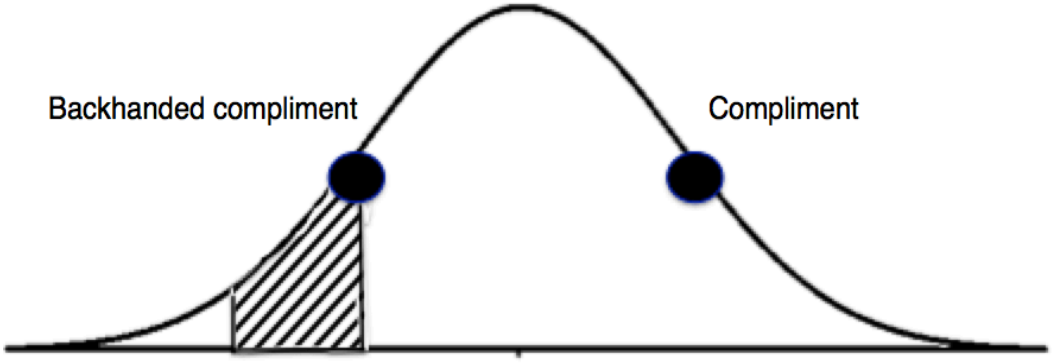

*Figure 2***.** Ratings of perceived offensiveness by condition in Study 1b.

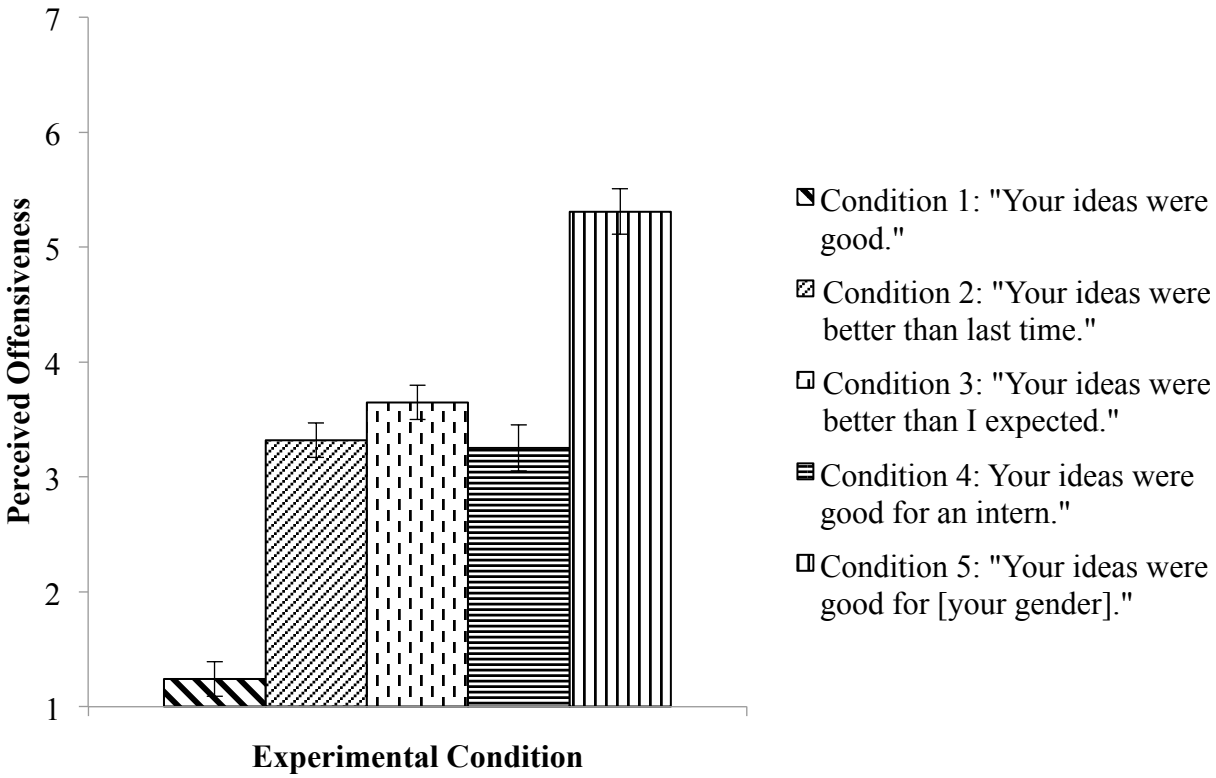

Figure 3. Self-presentation strategy selection by condition in Study 2a.