

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

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Abstract

Self-presentation is a fundamental aspect of social life, with myriad critical outcomes dependent on others' impressions. We identify and offer the first empirical investigation of a prevalent, yet understudied self-presentation strategy: humblebragging. Across nine 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 humble-brags are less effective than humility-based humblebrags, and are even less effective than simply complaining. We show that people choose to deploy humblebrags particularly when motivated both to elicit sympathy and impress others. Despite the belief that combining bragging with complaining or humility confers the benefits of each strategy, we find that humblebragging confers the benefits of neither, instead backfiring because it is seen as insincere.

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

“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 & Pitman, 1982; Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984), much less is known about strategies that are aimed at eliciting both. We identify humblebragging as a self-presentation strategy that aims to fulfill this dual purpose simultaneously: people believe that humblebragging allows them to highlight their positive qualities and convey competence with a brag, while enabling them to elicit liking by masking their self-aggrandizing statements in a complaint or humility.

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

Fundamental Desires to Be Liked and Respected

Self-presentation is an attempt to establish a favorable image in the eyes of others (Goffman, 1959; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Schlenker, 1980). The motive to be viewed positively by others is a fundamental, powerful, and important driver of human behavior (Baumeister, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Sedikides, 1993; Tetlock, 2002), as countless social and material rewards (social approval, friendships, career advancement) 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 (Baryl, 2014; Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010; Jones, Gergen, Gumbert, & Thibaut, 1965; Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; Pontari & Schlenker, 2006; Rubin, 1973; Wojciske, Abele, & Baryl, 2009). Indeed, social perception research suggests that social judgments involve two basic, universal and independent dimensions (Asch, 1946; Abelson, Kinder, Peters, & Fiske, 1982; Wojciszke et al., 2009), such as agency and communion (Bakan, 1966), competence and morality (Wojciszke, 2005), intellectual and social desirability (Rosenberg et al., 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, while the other (agency, intellectual desirability, and competence) relates to the interpersonal goal of respect.

In everyday life, there are many settings where both strategic goals coexist and both desires are fused (Godfrey et al., 1986), but validation by others on each dimension is of critical importance to people (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Understandably, individuals are generally concerned about how others perceive them on multiple dimensions (Leary, Allen, & Terry, 2011), because observers simultaneously judge targets on more than one dimension (Cialdini & DeNicholas, 1989). But being simultaneously liked and seen as competent is not easy; indeed, projecting likeability and communicating competence entail different strategies (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Joiner, Vohs, Katz, Kwon, & Kline, 2003; Rudman, 1998). To fulfill the desire to be liked, people generally engage in an array of self-presentation tactics that are designed to validate others or elicit sympathy from them (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Wayne & Liden, 1995; Zivnuska et al., 2004), while to be respected, individuals usually employ strategies to convince their targets of their competence (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Godfrey et al., 1986; 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 & Pitman, 1982; Kacmar, Bozeman, Carlson, & Anthony, 1999), to encourage recipients to view them in a favorable light (Chan & Sengupta, 2010; Fogg & Nass, 1997; Gordon, 1996; Vonk, 2002; 2007; Wayne & Kacmar, 1991; Westphal & Stern, 2007). Similarly, people may engage in other target-focused behaviors such as performing favors or agreeing with others' opinions to elicit liking (Bohra & Pandey, 1984; Zivnuska et al., 2004). In their seminal work, Jones and Wortman (1973) categorized these other-focused strategies in pursuit of liking as ingratiation—strategic behaviors that are designed to influence another person regarding the attractiveness of an individual's personal qualities that concern his likeability. According to their taxonomy, ingratiating behaviors include other-enhancement, praise, rendering favors, opinion conformity, and various indirect forms of self-descriptions of attributions for achievement, including displaying humility.

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

Tetlock, 1980), they are better liked (Baumeister & Ilko, 1995; Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982; Forsyth, Berger, & Mitchell, 1981; Schneider, 1969; Wosinka et al., 1996).

Lack of superiority in assessment of one's abilities and strengths, ability to acknowledge limitations, and lack of self-enhancement and egotism about one's successes constitute the core characteristics of humility (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Van Tongeren, Davis & Hook, 2014; Davis et al., 2010; Gregg, Hart, Sedikides, & Kumashiro, 2008; Kesebir, 2014; Kruse, Chancellor, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Saroglou, Buxant, & Tilquin, 2008; Weidman et al., 2016). Such displays of humility are often perceived positively by recipients and observers, because the humble self-presenter reduces any threat by avoiding self-aggrandizing statements and displaying his willingness to recognize others' accomplishments (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2004; Davis et al., 2010; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Tangney, 2000). In other words, when actors are humble, they reduce the risk of social comparison or threat that observers may feel – thereby inspiring liking (Brickman & Seligman, 1974; Schlenker & Leary 1982; Tetlock, 1980; Wosinka et al., 1996). Appearing humble can also send a desirable prosocial signal to others (being other-oriented and unselfish; Davis & Nook, 2014), which in turn promotes likeability (Davis et al., 2013).

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 likeable image (Alicke et al., 1992; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Kowalski, 1996; 2002); for example, people may complain about being

tired, feeling sick, or being overwhelmed, which can allow them to gain sympathy and receive help from others (Leary & Miller, 1986; Skelton & Pennebaker, 1982; Smith, 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 likeable leads individuals to engage in variety of “other-focused” tactics (Jones & Wortman, 1973; Jones & Pitman, 1982; Wayne & Liden, 1995). Most relevant to the present research, appearing humble and complaining—the two means by which people attempt to mask their bragging when deploying a humblebrag – can be used strategically to inspire liking from a target.

Strategies in the Pursuit of Respect

In addition to attempting to elicit liking, individuals are also deeply concerned about whether perceivers think highly of them: attempting to gain respect for one’s competence is a fundamental driver of social behavior (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 where an audience does not know about an actor's qualities and successes (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Schlenker, 1975); for example, people consistently present themselves in a self-promoting way when they interact with a target for the first time (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). People engage in self-promotion to appear competent (Godfrey et al., 1986; Rudman, 1988), to augment their perceived status (Holoien & Fiske, 2013; Swencionis & Fiske, 2016) and to earn others' respect (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Pontari & Schlenker, 2006; Wojciske et al., 2009).

Individuals highlight, emphasize, or exaggerate their successes in a self-enhancing manner in a number of ways (Hoorens, Pandelaere, Oldersma, & Sedikides, 2012; Sedikides & 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, Duncan, & Marriott, 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 examples 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 (Carlson & 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, due to humblebraggers' failure to realize that the strategy impacts perceptions on another dimension critical to social evaluation: perceived sincerity.

Indeed, research suggests that people can prize sincerity even above competence and warmth in others; research suggests that sincerity is desirable and is seen as particularly fundamental to people's identity (Brambilla, Ruscioni, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011; Goodwin et al., 2014; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). In the context of self-presentation, perceived sincerity exerts significant weight in impression formation (Jones & Pitman, 1982; Liden & Mitchell, 1988). 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 due to its 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 United States sample (Study 1a), a week-long diary study (Study 1b), and in social media (Study 1c). We provide evidence for the construct, documenting that humblebragging appears in complaint-based and humility-based forms. Study 2 explores the effectiveness of humblebragging against bragging, and demonstrates that humblebragging influences behavior, causing individuals to be treated less positively compared to straightforward bragging. Study 3a shows that both forms of humblebragging—complaint-based or humility-based—are less effective than straightforward bragging, as they reduce liking and perceived competence. Interestingly, complaint-based humble-bragging (despite being the most common type of humblebragging) is even less effective than humility-based humblebragging, simply bragging or even simply complaining (Study 3b). Study 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 documents and differentiates types of humblebrags deployed in everyday life. First, we expected humblebragging to be common. Second, we examined whether—as our definition suggests—humblebrags take two forms: bragging masked by either complaint or humility.

Method

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

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

After offering these examples, we asked participants whether they could think of someone they know (a friend, family member, acquaintance, coworker) who engaged in a humblebrag. We informed them that the humblebrag might have been said in person, on a

phone call, typed in an email, or posted on social media (Facebook/ Twitter/ Instagram/ etc.) If participants reported that they could recall a humblebrag, we asked them to write down the example of the most recent humblebrag that they heard.

We asked five independent coders—blind to our hypotheses—to analyze the content of the participants’ open-ended responses and identify whether humblebrags were complaint-based or humility-based. We provided coders with the definition of complaint and humility, based on the prior literature: A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction or annoyance (Alicke et al., 1992; Alberts, 1988; Kowalski, 2002); humility is a lack of superiority in assessment of one’s abilities and strengths (Davis, Wortington, & Nook, 2010; Kesebir, 2014; Kruse et al., 2014; Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Saroglou, Buxant, & Tilquin, 2008; Weidman, Cheng, & Tracy, 2016). The coders agreed 91.8% of the time about the type of humblebrag (416 out 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 one week and one month ago). Then, participants reported their relationship to the person whose humblebrag they recalled, and identified this person’s age and gender.

Results

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

Types of humblebrags. Coders identified that 58.9% of humblebrags (267 out of 453) were complaint-based and conveyed dissatisfaction or annoyance, while 41.1% of humblebrags (186 out of 453) were humility-based in which speakers expressed lack of superiority in their assessments of their abilities and strengths.

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

Relationship with the humblebragger. Participants received both types of humblebrags from other people in their lives across many different contexts. The majority of humblebrags were from friends (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 out of 453) that they heard were from men, while 49% (222 out of 453) of the humblebrags were from women. The average age of the person who engaged in humblebragging was 38.38 ($SD = 12.38$).

Recency of the humblebrag: 24.3% of the humblebrags were heard within the last 3 days, 29.1% between 3 and 7 days ago, 18.45% between one week and one month ago, and 28.1 % from more than a month ago.

Discussion

These findings offer initial evidence that humblebragging is common in everyday life across several domains, and offer support for our conceptual definition:

humblebragging is bragging masked by either complaint or humility.

Study 1b: Humblebragging in a Diary Study

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

Method

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

Design and procedure. In the experience-sampling phase, participants received a text message on their mobile phones via a web-application (SurveySignal.com; Hofmann & Patel, 2013). Participants received one daily signal via smartphone at 4:00 PM, local

time. Once they clicked the link on the text message on their phones, participants were informed that they would answer a few questions about humblebrags. Similar to Study 1a, without giving any definition, we provided them with some examples of humblebrags: “I am tired of people mistaking me for a model.” “I can’t believe they wanted me to be a spokesman for the group.” “I work so fast that I am bored the rest of the day.” “Why do people hit on me even without make up?”

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

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

To analyze the extent to which the speakers were trying to brag, complain or appear humble, we recruited four additional coders. They independently rated responses

to the following questions on 7-point scales: “To what extent do you think this person is bragging?” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*); “To what extent do you think this person is complaining?” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*) and “To what extent do you think this person is trying to appear humble?” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). We averaged ratings to create composite measures for bragging, complaining and trying to appear humble (α = .60, .77, and .70).

Results

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

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

Topics of humblebrags. Table 1b shows the categorization of complaint-based and humility-based humblebrags, with examples. Across both types of humblebrags, seven distinct topic categories emerged: looks and attractiveness (32.1%), performance at work (17.1%), achievements (15.1%), social life (10.7%), personality (9.5%), and skills (7.9%), money and wealth (7.5%).

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

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

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

Discussion

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

Study 1c: Humblebragging on Social Media

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

Method

Procedure. We constructed our dataset of humblebrags using a webpage (<http://twitter.com/Humblebrag>) that lists tweets categorized as humblebrags between June 2011 and September 2012 for the book *Humblebrag: The Art of False Modesty*

(Wittels, 2012). This resulted in a dataset of 740 tweets; 68.4% were made by males (seven tweets lacked gender information). Examples include: “I hate when I go into a store to get something to eat and the staff are too busy hitting on me to get my order right :(so annoying!” and “Just been asked to give a talk at Oxford. I’m more surprised than you are.”

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

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

Results

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

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

Complaining. Ratings of complaining varied significantly across different types of humblebrags, $t(738) = 18.38$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.44$. Complaining ratings for complaint-based humblebrags ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.65$) were higher than ratings for humility-based humblebrags ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 1.15$).

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

Discussion

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

Study 2: The Behavioral Costs of Humblebragging

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

Method

Participants. One hundred and thirteen college students (55.8% female) in coffee shops near colleges in a Northeastern city participated in the experiment. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted recruitment of approximately 150 individuals, based on what we thought was feasible given the setting; indeed, we ended with one hundred and thirteen participants because the same participants began to appear in the coffee shops over the course of the three days. One participant was excluded from the data analysis, as she signed the petition form without being assigned to any experimental condition; this participant was in a rush to catch an Uber. For our main variable of interest, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of Cramér's $V = .24$ with achieved power of .73.

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

The confederate explained that she was collecting signatures in support of a new student-run food truck during the summer on campus. Once she explained the reason for the petition, she asked "What are you up to this summer by the way?" The confederate then waited for the participant's response, and alternated the script that she used across the individuals that she approached. The confederate either delivered a brag about her summer plans, "That's cool! I got my dream internship and got funding to travel to Paris," or a humblebrag: "That's cool! I got my dream internship and got funding to

travel to Paris. Ugh it's so hard to decide which one to choose." We pre-populated the petition form with the same three signatures to ensure that all participants were exposed to the same version of the form that asked them to write their name, email address and signature (Figure 1). After participants signed or not, the confederate informed them that her email address was on the petition form and they could send her an email if they had any questions or wanted to follow up; no participants did so. Participants who signed the form were debriefed the following day via email about the purpose of the study.

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

Results

Petition signing as a behavioral measure. Participants in the humblebragging condition were less likely to sign the petition than did participants in the bragging condition: 85.7% (48 out of 57) volunteered to give their signature in support of the petition, compared to 64.9% (37 out of 57) of the participants in the humblebragging condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 113) = 6.56, p = .01$, Cramér's $V = .24$. In addition, we conducted a logistic regression with petition signing as our dependent measure, and self-presentation condition (humblebragging vs. bragging), gender, day, time, and location as independent variables. We observed a significant effect of condition on the propensity to sign the petition, $B = -1.59$, Wald = 8.70, $df = 1, p = .003$, but no 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 to a straightforward brag: people were less likely to volunteer a signature for a petition when the request came from a confederate who humblebragged than bragged. These findings offer initial evidence that, despite its generally negative connotation, straightforward bragging can produce better outcomes than humblebragging.

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

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

Method

Participants. We recruited four hundred and three participants ($M_{age} = 36.73$, $SD = 12.18$; 44.9% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid them \$1 for

completing the survey. We included two attention filter questions to ensure that participants paid attention and eliminated eight participants who failed these checks. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted recruitment of approximately 400 individuals (100 per condition). For our main variables of interest, liking and perceived competence, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of $\eta_p^2 = .08$, 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) X 2 (self-presentation style: brag vs. humblebrag) experimental design. In each condition, participants evaluated either complaint-based humblebrags (e.g., “*So I have to go to both Emmy awards!!... Two dresses!!!!!!*”), straightforward brags based on these complaint-based humblebrags (e.g., “*I am going to both Emmy awards*”), humility-based humblebrags (e.g., “*I just received an award for my teaching!?!? #whaaaaaaat?*”) or straightforward brags based on these humility-based humblebrags (e.g., “*I just received an award for my teaching*”). We used humblebrags from the Twitter dataset in Study 1c; we selected the five statements that were the most typical of being complaint-based (the ones that were highest on complaint but lowest on humility), and the five most typical of being humility-based (the ones that were highest on humility but lowest on complaint). Participants rated each of five statements in each condition, in random order.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For each of these statements, participants rated how much they liked the target on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Next, they answered a two-item measure of perceived sincerity, also on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*): “How sincere do you think this person is?” and “How credible do you think this person is?” ($\alpha = .92$; Chan & Sengupta, 2010). Then, they rated how competent they found the target on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Because the inter-rater reliabilities for the five statements were high in each condition (α ’s for liking = .80; α ’s for perceived competence = .84; α ’s for perceived sincerity = .83), we averaged the within-subjects ratings for each item.

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

Finally, participants answered demographic questions.

Results

Table 2 provides means for all dependent measures by condition.

Manipulation checks. An ANOVA with self-presentation style (brag vs. humblebrag) X content (complaint-based vs. humility-based) as the independent variables

showed that there was no main effect of self-presentation style on ratings of bragging, $F(1, 399) = 1.40, p = .24, \eta^2 = .004$: targets in the humblebrag condition ($M = 5.10, SD = 1.20$) received equal ratings of bragging as targets in the brag condition ($M = 5.22, SD = 1.03$). Consistent with our definition of humblebrags, both brags and humblebrags were perceived as bragging. Interestingly, ratings in the complaint-based condition were significantly higher ($M = 5.36, SD = 1.13$) than those in the humility-based condition ($M = 4.97, SD = 1.08, p < .001$), $F(1, 399) = 12.49, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$. There was no interaction, $F(1, 399) = .76, p = .38, \eta_p^2 = .002$.

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

Finally, ratings of trying to appear humble ratings also varied significantly depending on the self-presentation style, $F(1, 399) = 29.32, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$: ratings were significantly higher in the humblebrag ($M = 2.91, SD = 1.46$) than in the brag condition ($M = 2.28, SD = 1.03$). We also observed a main effect of content (complaint-based vs. humility-based) on ratings of trying to appear humble: ratings were significantly higher in the humility-based conditions ($M = 3.00, SD = 1.31$) than the

complaint-based conditions ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.16$), $F(1, 399) = 49.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. There was a significant interaction, $F(1, 399) = 24.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$, reflective of the fact that ratings of trying to appear humble were highest in the humility-based humblebrag condition—the one condition that contained an effort to appear humble—compared to the other conditions (Table 2).

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

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

Perceived sincerity. We also observed a main effect of self-presentation style on our mediating construct, perceived sincerity, $F(1, 399) = 36.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$:

Consistent with our hypothesis, ratings of perceived sincerity were lower in the humblebrag conditions ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.23$) than in the brag conditions ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.04$). Perceptions of sincerity varied across complaint-based and humility-based conditions, $F(1, 399) = 43.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$: participants rated complaint-based statements to be less sincere ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.17$) than humility-based statements ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.09$). There was no interaction, $F(1, 399) = .08$, $p = .77$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$.

Mediation. A path analysis revealed that perceived sincerity mediated the relationship between self-presentation style and liking. Humblebragging led to lower perceived sincerity, which led participants to find targets as less likeable. When we included perceived sincerity in the model, predicting liking, the effect of humblebragging was reduced (from $b = -.61$, $p < .001$, 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 & Kelly, 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 & Kelly, 2011).

Discussion

Individuals who humblebrag—couching a brag in a complaint or humility—are liked less and perceived to be less competent than those who straightforwardly brag. Complaint-based humblebrags are viewed more negatively than humility-based humblebrags. Moreover, insincerity plays a critical mediating role: while people do not rate braggers highly, they at least see them as more sincere than humblebraggers, such that perceptions of insincerity drive negative evaluations of humblebraggers.

Study 3b: Comparing Humblebragging to Complaining

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

Method

Participants. In order to ensure that we selected statements that distinctively reflected complaining, bragging, and complaint-based humblebragging, we pretested our paradigm by recruiting two hundred and ninety nine participants ($M_{age} = 33.74$, $SD = 9.94$; 43.1% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk in exchange for \$.50. We included several comprehension checks to ensure that participants paid attention and eliminated

four participants who failed these checks. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 200 individuals (100 participants per experimental condition).

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

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

In the main study, after viewing one of these statements, participants rated how much they liked the target and how competent they found the target on 7-point scales (1 =

not at all, 7 = *very much*). Then they answered a two-item measure of perceived sincerity, also on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*): “How sincere do you think this person is?” and “How credible do you think this person is?” ($\alpha = .92$; 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 conditions ($M = 4.17, SD = 2.18, p < .001$). Consistent with our definition of humblebrags, ratings of complaining were higher in the humblebrag condition than in the brag condition ($p < .001$).

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

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

Liking. As predicted, an ANOVA revealed a significant effect on liking, $F(2, 298) = 17.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$. Participants in the humblebrag condition liked the target less ($M = 2.36, SD = 1.26$) than did participants in the brag condition ($M = 3.04, SD = 1.41; p = .001$) and the complain condition ($M = 3.41, SD = 1.18; p < .001$). Liking ratings in the complain condition did not differ significantly from ratings in the brag condition ($p = .13$).

Perceived competence. An ANOVA revealed that perceived competence varied across conditions, $F(2, 298) = 12.89, p = .001, \eta^2 = .04$. 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 (OLS) regression analysis (including a dummy variable for the bragging condition), predicting liking from the independent variable of the humblebragging condition (Step 1) and sincerity (Step 2). The third criterion specifies that the mediator should significantly predict the dependent variable while controlling for the independent variable. The results met this criterion: controlling for the humblebragging and bragging conditions, we found that sincerity significantly predicted greater liking ($b = .58, t = 17.02, p < .001$). 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 & Kelly, 2011). Humblebragging lowered perceptions of sincerity, which led participants to find their targets less competent.

Discussion

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

Study 4a and 4b: Humblebragging and Generosity

Study 2 examined the effect of humblebragging on compliance with a request; Studies 4a and 4b assess 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 and 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 \$.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 \$.50. We included two attention filter questions and eliminated thirty-two 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 140–150 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 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 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 ($\alpha = .90$), using the same measures from previous studies, then allocated \$5 on a slider from \$0 to \$5. 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 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 & Kelly, 2011).

Discussion

As in our previous studies, humblebraggers are 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 includes 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 140–150 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 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 ($\alpha = .70$) using the same measures from previous studies, then allocated \$5 on a slider from \$0 to \$5; 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 ($\beta = .17, p = .029$) 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 & Kelly, 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 show that people who humblebrag are generally disliked and perceived as insincere, yet Studies 1a-1c show that humblebragging is ubiquitous. Study 5 investigates the antecedents of humblebragging: what beliefs lead people to deploy an ineffective strategy? As discussed in the Introduction, both eliciting warmth—being liked—and conveying competence—being respected—are fundamental social goals (Baumeister, 1982; Buss, 1983; Hill, 1987; Zivnuska et al., 2004). In Study 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 examines recipients' perceptions of these strategies—allowing for an analysis of their efficacy. We predicted that although self-presenters would select humblebragging to gain sympathy and respect, it would accomplish neither goal, because recipients view it as insincere.

Method

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

For the main study, we recruited six hundred and eight individuals ($M_{age} = 36.29$, $SD = 11.64$; 45.6% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk to participate in an online study in exchange for \$.50. One participant failed to pass the attention checks and were dismissed from the study. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 600 individuals (100 participants per experimental condition). For our main variable of interest, liking and perceived competence, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of an effect size of $\eta^2 = .10$ 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) X 3 (self-presentation goal: sympathy vs. impress vs. sympathy and impress) experimental design. We asked participants in the sender role to choose a message to another person. All senders were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in which they were given a different purpose: eliciting sympathy from the other person, impressing the other person, or eliciting sympathy and impressing. Participants in the sympathy condition were told: “Your goal is to choose the message that will make the recipient feel the most sympathetic toward you.” Participants in the impress condition were told: “Your goal is to choose the message that will make the recipient feel the most impressed by you.” Participants in the sympathy and impress condition were told: “Your goal is to choose the message that will make the recipient feel the most sympathetic toward you and the most impressed by you.” We provided participants with a multiple-choice question in which they chose to send either a complaint (“I am so exhausted”), a brag (“I get elected to leadership positions”), or a humblebrag (“I am so exhausted from getting elected to leadership positions”). We did not provide participants with the name of the category. The order of the multiple-choice options was counterbalanced; order did not affect our results.

Receivers were told that they would be evaluating another person. All participants were randomly assigned to one of three statements— humblebrag, brag, or complain that

senders had to choose from— in a between-subjects design. Participants in the humblebrag condition viewed the following statement from the target: “I am so exhausted from getting elected to leadership positions.” Participants in the brag condition viewed the brag portion of the humblebrag: “I get elected to leadership positions.” And participants in the complain condition viewed the complaint portion: “I am so exhausted.”

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

Finally, all participants answered demographic questions.

Results

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

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

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

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

Mediation. A path analysis revealed that perceived sincerity partially mediated the relationship between humblebragging and liking. When we included perceived sincerity in the model, predicting liking, the effect of humblebragging was reduced (from $b = -.79, p < .001$, 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 & Kelly, 2011).

Perceived sincerity also mediated the relationship between humblebragging and perceived competence. Including sincerity in the model significantly reduced the effect of humblebragging (from $b = -.57, p < .001$, 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 & Kelly, 2011).

Discussion

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

Additional Mediation Analyses

To offer further support for our conceptual account, we tested additional alternative mediational 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 mediational 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 7 out of the 8 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 document that humblebragging is a ubiquitous phenomenon in everyday life and takes two distinct forms: bragging masked by either complaint or humility. Study 2 shows that compared to straightforward bragging, humblebraggers garner more negative behavioral responses in a face-to-face field setting. Study 3a documents that both complaint-based humblebrags and humility-based humblebrags are less effective than bragging in being perceived as likable or competent, while Study 3b that complaint-based humblebragging is less effective even than straightforward complaining. Study 4 demonstrates that individuals employ humblebragging in a strategic but erroneous effort to elicit sympathy and admiration simultaneously. Studies 2, 3a, 3b and 4 explored the mechanism underlying the link between humblebragging and negative outcomes, demonstrating that perceived sincerity—a key predictor of favorable impressions—is a psychological driver of the ineffectiveness of humblebragging. In sum, the insincerity signaled by humblebragging manifests in dislike.

Theoretical Contributions

Our research makes several theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to the impression management literature by identifying and examining a distinct self-presentation strategy. Prior research has identified several self-presentation tactics that individuals use in an attempt to achieve liking or appear competent, such as flattery, ingratiation, and complaining (Arkin, 1981). Here, we examine a previously undocumented—and common—strategy that aims for both goals, augmenting the literature on impression management. We provide evidence from both the field and

laboratory to document the ubiquity of humblebragging, and provide the first empirical examination of why people frequently employ this strategy despite its mixed consequences.

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

Third, our research advances our understanding of the relevance of indirect speech to impression management. Previous research has identified other indirect means of self-promotion, such as praising close associates (Cialdini et al., 1990; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). We document a novel type of indirect speech that does not divert attention to other people but rather attempts to divert attention from the bragging nature of the claim via a complaint or an attempt to appear humble. Humblebragging is an indirect speech attempt because the intent of the self-presenter (to self-promote) is

couched in other language, rather than directly stated (Pinker, Novak, & Lee, 2008; Lee & Pinker, 2010). Our research suggests that in the contexts that we investigated, indirect speech can backfire.

Future Directions

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

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

Future research should also identify characteristics that moderate the negative consequences of humblebragging. Prior research suggests that self-promotion in response to a question is perceived more favorable than direct bragging (Tal-Or, 2010); thus humblebragging may also be perceived more favorable when it is solicited, such as when responding to a compliment or while receiving an award. It is also possible that in these solicited cases, the source of the brag, would not be the self, but other individuals—which makes self-promotion more acceptable and favorable (Scopelliti, 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, while low-status individuals may face more backlash.

Finally, while our studies provided a taxonomy of different classes of humblebrags, we primarily compared the effectiveness of humblebragging to 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 to humblebragging as self-presentational strategies.

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for all measures in Study 3a.

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

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

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

| | Main Study | | |
|----------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Complaint-based Humblebrag | Brag | Complaint |
| Liking | 2.36 [2.11, 2.61] | 3.04 [2.76, 3.32] | 3.41 [3.17, 3.64] |
| Perceived competence | 2.94 [2.66, 3.21] | 3.41 [3.13, 3.69] | 3.64 [3.38, 3.90] |
| Perceived sincerity | 2.64 [2.34, 2.94] | 3.20 [2.89, 3.51] | 4.29 [4.01, 4.58] |
| | Pretest | | |
| Bragging | 5.97 [5.69, 6.25] | 6.22 [6.00, 6.43] | 2.03 [1.78, 2.28] |
| Complaining | 4.17 [3.74, 4.61] | 2.29 [1.97, 2.62] | 5.67 [5.47, 5.86] |
| Humblebragging | 5.83 [5.50, 6.15] | 4.67 [4.26, 5.07] | 2.27 [1.96, 2.59] |

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

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for all measures in Study 4a and 4b.

| | Study 4a | |
|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Humblebrag | Brag |
| 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.

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

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

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

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.

Figure 1. Pre-populated petition form from Study 2.

Petition Form

Volunteer's Name: Laura Botero Gomez

Volunteer's email address: studentfoodtruck2@gmail.com

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

| Name | e-mail | Signature |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| Anne R. Koch | A.Koch@gmail.com | Anne Koch |
| Brian S. Burns | brianburns@gmail.com | B. Burns |
| ALEX A. PIERCE | aap245@gmail.com | Alex Pierce |
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| | Number of signatures on page | |

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

