

**Backhanded Compliments: How Negative Comparisons Undermine Flattery**

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### Abstract

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

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

### **Backhanded Compliments: How Negative Comparisons Undermine Flattery**

Consider how you would feel at the end of a meeting—after giving a lengthy presentation—if a colleague turned to you and said: “Your ideas were good.” Previous research suggests that you would both feel good and view your colleague favorably (Gordon, 1996; Vonk, 2002). Now, consider your reaction—and your view of your colleague—if your colleague tacked on just a few more words: “Your ideas were good... for an intern.” Such backhanded compliments are common in the workplace (*For a young woman, your speech was great*), in everyday life (*You look thinner than the last time I saw you*), and in academia (*You are actually nice for an economist; This seems pretty rigorous for a social psychologist.*) We explore the psychology of backhanded compliments—seeming praise that draws a comparison with a negative standard—investigating why people deploy them, and whether they have their intended effect on both recipients and third-party observers.

People have a fundamental desire to be liked and viewed positively (Baumeister, 1982; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goffman, 1959; Hill, 1987; Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides, Hoorens, & Dufner, 2015), and often give compliments to garner such favorable impressions; indeed, compliments—communicating positive aspects of another person to that person—are ubiquitous in social and organizational life (Ayduk, Gyurak, Akinola, & Mendes; 2013; Jones, 1964). Several streams of research suggest that delivering compliments in social and professional interactions results in positive outcomes such as increased liking for the flatterer, more favorable evaluations of job performance, and actual career success (Bolino, Varela, Bande, & Turnley, 2006; Wayne & Liden, 1995). Even flattery that is obviously insincere can be effective (Chan & Sengupta, 2010).

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

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

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

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

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

### **Compliments and Liking**

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

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

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

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

### **Compliments and Status**

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

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

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

### **Psychological Mechanisms: The Roles of Image Concerns and Relative Rank**

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Overview of Research**

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

#### **Study 1a: Backhanded Compliments in Everyday Life**

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

#### **Method**

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

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

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

Once they passed both checks, we informed participants that they would answer questions about different types of compliments. In random order, we asked them whether they had received a backhanded compliment from someone, and a compliment from someone. If so, participants were asked to write down an example of a backhanded compliment and a compliment. We provided examples of both backhanded compliments (e.g., “You are good looking for your size”) and compliments (e.g., “You look great”). Next, participants indicated their relationship to the person whose comment they recalled, and rated the extent to which they felt they were being compared to another person or another group on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Finally, participants completed demographic questions.

Two independent coders analyzed the content of participants’ open-ended responses and identified categories of both backhanded compliments and traditional compliments. They agreed 92% of the time about the title of each category and resolved disagreements through discussion. When coders decided on a final set of categories, they reread responses and indicated which category best suited each response. Coders also identified whether the recipients of each type of compliments were being compared to something, and if so, to what were they being compared. In addition, coders indicated whether these responses insulted the comparison group.

## Results

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Discussion**

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

### **Study 1b: Typology of Backhanded Compliments**

Study 1b documents the affective consequences of different types of backhanded compliments. First, we create a taxonomy of compliments using the comparison groups that emerged in backhanded compliments in Study 1a: a comparison with the past self, a comparison with expectations, a comparison with another group, and a stereotypical comparison. Second, given the general impact of social comparison on affective reactions (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Dunn et al., 2012), we examine the affective impact of backhanded compliments and traditional compliments. In particular, we explore whether

recipients feel that backhanded compliments are in fact compliments—or closer to insults.

## **Method**

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

**Design and procedure.** After participants passed the attention checks, they were randomly assigned to one of five conditions. In each condition, they read a scenario that ended with a different type of compliment. Condition 1 ended with a straightforward compliment. Using the comparison groups that emerged in backhanded compliments in Study 1a, Conditions 2-5 ended with compliments that “put down” the comparison group. Specifically, these conditions included backhanded compliments that include a comparison with the past self (Condition 2), a comparison with expectations (Condition 3), a comparison with another group (Condition 4), or a stereotypical comparison (Condition 5).

*Imagine you are interning for a company and assigned to a team project with four project members. You have a meeting to brainstorm about some ideas. At the end of the meeting, one of the members turns to you and remarks:*

1. *“Your ideas were good.”*
2. *“Your ideas were better than last time.”*

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

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

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

## Results

Table 2 shows means for all dependent measures by condition.

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



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

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

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

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

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

## **Discussion**

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

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

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

after they receive a status threat in the form of a negative evaluation, making status concerns relatively more salient.

### **Study 2a: Why Do People Give Backhanded Compliments?**

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

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

### **Results**

When participants were told to choose a message that would elicit liking, only 5% chose a backhanded compliment; in both conditions in which status was a goal, in contrast, the propensity to choose the backhanded compliment increased dramatically: 81% chose the backhanded compliment when asked to signal status, while 48% chose

backhanded compliments when asked to elicit both liking and status,  $\chi^2(2, N = 301) = 118.39, p < .001$ , Cramér's  $V = .63$  (Figure 3).

## **Discussion**

These results show that when participants aim to signal status and elicit liking, they are more likely to deploy backhanded compliments; when they aim to elicit liking only, they default to traditional compliments. These results offer support for our contention that backhanded compliments are used strategically in the service of achieving multiple self-presentational goals.

### **Study 2b: When Do People Give Backhanded Compliments?**

Study 2a reveals that people attempt to signal status (and gain liking) by deploying backhanded compliments. To offer further support for our notion that people add the “backhanded” aspect to their compliments particularly when status is a goal – shifting from a strategy targeted at liking to one that they also believe garners status – Study 2b explores a context in which people should be even more likely to deploy backhanded compliments: when their status has been threatened.

## **Method**

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

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

*“Imagine that you have been working in a company for the past 4 years. Working there has been your dream job and you really want to rise to higher positions in the coming years ahead.*

*You have one coworker (whose initials are A.N.) who started at the company at the same time as you, and you are up for the same promotion next month. Imagine you have an MBA degree but A.N. doesn't have an MBA degree. You and A.N. are currently Analysts but only one of you will be promoted to Associate Director.*

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

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

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

Participants in the positive evaluation conditions read the following:

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

Participants in the negative evaluation conditions read the following:

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

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

*A.N.'s presentations are really good.*

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

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

Finally, participants completed demographic questions.

## Results

A logistic regression analysis revealed a main effect of status threat (i.e., negative evaluation) on the propensity to respond with a backhanded compliment,  $B = .81$ ,  $Wald = 13.76$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ; presence versus absence of coworker did not have a significant effect,  $B = .08$ ,  $Wald = .17$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .68$ , and there was no interaction,  $B = .15$ ,  $Wald = .12$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .72$ .

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

## Discussion

Study 2b demonstrates that people's propensity to give backhanded compliments increases when their own status has been threatened; interestingly, the presence of the target does not influence the propensity to deploy backhanded compliments, suggesting that people under status threat are willing to blatantly engage in backhanded compliments in their attempt to gain status.

### Studies 3a-c: Are Backhanded Compliments Effective?

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

We also explore the mechanisms underlying backhanded compliments for both flatterers and recipients. In Study 3b we assess the perceived self-image concern of flatterers—the extent to which people see flatterers as actively trying to manage their impression—to examine whether people who give backhanded compliments are seen as more strategic. Study 3c examines mechanism from recipients' perspective, exploring how—in contrast to compliments that place recipients nearer to the top of the distribution—backhanded compliments place recipients at the top of a relatively unfavorable section of that distribution, leading recipients to question their own competence and decrease their motivation.

### **Study 3a: Recipients' Perceptions of Backhanded Compliments**

#### **Method**

*Participants.* We recruited two hundred and fifty employed individuals ( $M_{age} = 34.68$ ,  $SD = 10.06$ ; 39.8% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk to participate in an online study in exchange for \$.50. Five participants who failed the attention checks were not allowed to take the study. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 250 individuals. For our main variable of interest,

perceived status, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of  $d = 1.21$  with achieved power of 1.

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

As in Study 1a, two independent coders analyzed the content of participants' open-ended responses and identified subcategories for backhanded compliments and traditional compliments. The coders agreed 91% of the time about the title of each category and resolved disagreements through discussion. Once the coders decided on a final set of categories, they reread each response and indicated which category best suited each response.

If participants could recall a coworker who had given them a compliment or a backhanded compliment, they responded on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*) to two items about their coworkers' perceived status in the organization: "How much do you think this person receives respect from others in the organization?" and "How much do you think this person makes valuable contributions in the organization?" ( $\alpha = .89$ ; Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006). Next, participants rated their coworkers' likeability ("This person is likeable" and "I like this person";  $\alpha = .96$ ) on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Then participants answered a two-item



measure of social attraction, also on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*): “To what extent is this person the kind of person you would want as a friend?” and “To what extent is this person the kind of person you would want as a colleague?” ( $\alpha = .95$ ; Rudman, 1998). In addition, participants answered a two-item measure of perceived sincerity, also on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*): “How sincere do you think this person is?” and “How credible do you think this person is?” ( $\alpha = .93$ ; Chan & Sengupta, 2010).

Next, participants rated the perceived condescension of their coworker. We captured this measure by asking participants the following two items: “To what extent do you think this person considers themselves superior to you?” and “To what extent do you think this person is being condescending toward you?” Because the items were closely related ( $\alpha = .86$ ), we used the average of these two items as a combined measure of perceived condescension. Finally, participants answered a 3-item measure of perceived competence: “How competent / capable / skillful do you find this person is?” ( $\alpha = .95$ ) and a 3-item measure of perceived warmth: “How warm / friendly / good-natured do you find this person?” ( $\alpha = .97$ ; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, Xu, 2002) on 5-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*). The order of all dependent measures was counterbalanced; presentation order did not affect our results.

## **Results**

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

Four categories of backhanded compliments and compliments emerged from the coding (see Table 3 for categories and examples). The most common category for backhanded compliments was attractiveness, followed by performance, intelligence, and personality; for traditional compliments, the top category was performance followed closely by attractiveness, then intelligence and personality. These categories are similar to those of Study 1a, though with slightly more emphasis on performance, likely due to the workplace setting in this study.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Discussion

Study 3a suggests that, compared to those who give compliments, coworkers who deploy backhanded compliments are perceived as less likeable, less interpersonally attractive, less competent, and less warm; most critically, these negative effects are not offset by perceptions of increased status, despite the results of Studies 2a and 2b suggesting that people believe the opposite.

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

Study 3a offers initial evidence that recipients of backhanded compliments neither like nor give status to would-be flatterers. Study 3b has two primary goals. First, we investigate whether backhanded compliments might offer a different benefit: given that conversation partners and observers can have differing perceptions (Brooks, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2015; Vonk, 2002), third party observers – such as bosses – may infer that those who give backhanded compliments are superior to their recipients. Second, Study 3b investigates the underlying mechanism that leads people to rate givers of backhanded compliments negatively: perceived image concern. In addition, to exert more control over

the content of the compliments and backhanded compliments than the open-ended format of Study 3a, Study 3b uses more tightly controlled stimuli.

## Method

**Participants.** We recruited three hundred and ninety nine individuals ( $M_{age} = 33.72$ ,  $SD = 10.36$ ; 36.3% female) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk to participate in an online study in exchange for \$.50. Nine participants failed to pass the attention checks and were dismissed from the study. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 400 individuals (100 participants per experimental condition). For our main variable of interest, perceived status, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of ,  $\eta_p^2 = .25$  with achieved power of .95.

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

*“Imagine that you have been working in a company for the past 14 years and have risen to the role of Director. You were not able to go to a client meeting last week and you want to know how the client presentations went. You call for a meeting.*

*Both employees K.L. and A.N. started at the same time in the company and both are up for the same promotion next month. Both K.L. and A.N are currently Analysts but only one of them will be promoted to Associate Director.*

*K.L. has an MBA degree, A.N doesn't have an MBA degree.*

*During the meeting, you tell K.L. that you heard K.L.'s presentation went poorly. You ask K.L. how well A.N.'s presentation went."*

Participants in the absent coworker conditions read:

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

Participants in the present coworker conditions read:

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

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

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

After reading one of the scenarios, participants completed the same measure of liking ( $\alpha = .93$ ) and perceived status ( $\alpha = .78$ ; Anderson et al., 2006) as in Study 3a.

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

## **Results**

Table 5 provides means for all dependent measures by condition.

**Perceived status.** Consistent with Study 3a, there was a main effect of compliment type on perceptions of the flatterer's status,  $F(1, 395) = 135.91, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .25$ . Participants rated flatterers who deployed backhanded compliments as having lower status ( $M = 4.05, SD = 1.33$ ) than those who gave traditional compliments ( $M = 5.46, SD = 1.06$ ); the main effect of absence versus presence of the coworker was not significant  $F(1, 395) = .39, p = .53, \eta_p^2 = .001$ , and there was no interaction of compliment type by absence of coworker,  $F(1, 395) = .14, p = .71, \eta_p^2 = .001$ . There was also, however, a main effect of backhanded compliments on judgments of the recipient's status,  $F(1, 395) = 19.76, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .05$ , such that recipients of backhanded compliments were judged to be lower status ( $M = 5.02, SD = 1.03$ ) than targets of traditional compliments ( $M = 5.50, SD = 1.13$ ); there was no main effect of absence/presence,  $F(1, 395) = .77, p = .38, \eta_p^2 = .002$ , and no interaction,  $F(1, 395) = 2.04, p = .15, \eta_p^2 = .005$ . Critically, despite this lowering of status of recipients of backhanded compliments, flatterers who gave backhanded compliments were still rated as having lower status ( $M = 4.04, SD = 1.45$ ) than the recipients of those backhanded compliments ( $M = 5.02, SD = 1.04$ ),  $F(1, 395) = 98.39, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .19$ .

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

5.10,  $SD = 1.16$ ),  $F(1, 395) = 1.85, p = .18, \eta_p^2 = .005$ . There was no main effect of coworker absence/presence,  $F(1, 395) = .40, p = .53, \eta_p^2 = .001$ , and no interaction,  $F(1, 395) = 2.78, p = .10, \eta_p^2 = .007$ .

As with status perceptions, using backhanded compliments backfired: participants liked targets who deployed backhanded compliments less ( $M = 3.43, SD = 1.59$ ) than the recipients of those backhanded compliments ( $M = 4.95, SD = 1.10$ ),  $F(1, 395) = 124.30, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .24$ .

**Perceived image concern.** Consistent with our account, there was a main effect of compliment type on judgments of flatterers' perceived image concern,  $F(1, 395) = 158.93, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .29$ : those who gave a backhanded compliment were perceived as far more strategic about impression management ( $M = 5.35, SD = 1.41$ ) than those who gave a traditional compliment ( $M = 3.51, SD = 1.50$ ); there was no main effect of coworker absence/presence,  $F(1, 395) = .58, p = .45, \eta_p^2 = .001$ , and no interaction,  $F(1, 395) = .31, p = .58, \eta_p^2 = .001$ . Neither compliment type,  $F(1, 395) = 1.31, p = .25, \eta_p^2 = .003$ , nor absence/presence of the compliment recipient,  $F(1, 395) = .009, p = .93, \eta_p^2 = .001$ , influenced evaluations of the perceived image concern of the recipient, and there was no interaction,  $F(1, 395) = .87, p = .35, \eta_p^2 = .002$ . Finally, participants perceived flatterers who gave backhanded compliments to be more strategic ( $M = 5.35, SD = 1.42$ ) than recipients ( $M = 4.05, SD = 1.30$ ),  $F(1, 395) = 87.83, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .18$ .

**Promotion decisions.** A logistic regression analysis revealed a main effect of compliment type on promotion decisions,  $B = 1.47, \text{Wald } \chi^2 = 17.85, p < .001$ ; presence versus absence of coworker did not have a significant effect,  $B = .05, \text{Wald} = .03, df = 1, p = .86$ , and there was no interaction,  $B = .38, \text{Wald} = .67, df = 1, p = .23$ . When

participants evaluated an employee who gave a traditional compliment, they showed roughly the same propensity to promote the flatterer (44.5%) and the recipient (55.5%). When participants evaluated an employee who gave a backhanded compliment, however, they became far more likely to choose the recipient of this statement for promotion (81.4%) than the flatterer who gave the backhanded compliment (18.6%).

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

## Discussion

Study 3b demonstrates that using backhanded compliments conveys information to perceivers about flatterers' image concerns, which makes those who deploy



backhanded compliments less likeable and less likely to be promoted, compared to both flatters who convey traditional compliments, and the recipients of those (backhanded) compliments.

### **Study 3c: Do Backhanded Compliments Undermine Recipients?**

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

#### **Method**

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

For the main study, we recruited two hundred and two participants ( $M_{age} = 34.33$ ,  $SD = 11.69$ ; 43.1% female) through Amazon's Mechanical Turk to participate in an online study in exchange for \$1. Four participants who failed the attention checks were not allowed to take the study. Prior to beginning data collection, we targeted a recruitment of approximately 200 individuals. For our main variable of interest,

perceived creativity, the post-hoc power analysis revealed that our sample size led to an effect size of  $d = .30$  with achieved power of .99.

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

Participants rated their positive emotions ( $\alpha = .96$ ) and perceived offensiveness ( $\alpha = .94$ ) using the same measures as in Study 1b. Participants rated their partner’s likeability (“I like the other participant” and “The other participant is likeable”;  $\alpha = .98$ ), their own creativity on a slider from 0 (“Least Creative”) to 10 (“Most Creative”), and how their partner would rate the creativity of people from their state in general on a slider from 0 (“Least Creative”) to 10 (“Most Creative”). Finally, as a measure of motivation,

we asked participants whether they would like to complete the task again (write another creative story and receive feedback), or whether they would prefer to complete a different (and boring) letter-counting task in which they counted vowels in paragraphs of prose.

## Results

Table 6 provides descriptive statistics for all measures by condition.

**Pretest results.** Consistent with our hypothesis, participants in our pretest study rated the backhanded compliment to be more offensive ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ) than the traditional compliment ( $M = 1.39$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ),  $t(218) = 10.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.46$ . Similarly, participants who received backhanded compliments experienced decreased positive emotion ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ) than those who received traditional compliments ( $M = 5.19$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ),  $t(218) = 6.94$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .93$ . Participants also liked their partner less in the backhanded compliment condition ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ) than in the traditional compliment condition ( $M = 5.24$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ),  $t(218) = 7.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.02$ . Finally, participants who received a backhanded compliment rated their own creativity to be lower ( $M = 5.43$ ,  $SD = 2.41$ ) than did participants who received a traditional compliment ( $M = 6.01$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ),  $t(218) = 2.04$ ,  $p = .043$ ,  $d = .27$ .

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

**Perceived offensiveness.** In the main study, participants who received a backhanded compliment found their partner to be more offensive ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.92$ )

than those who received a traditional compliment ( $M = 1.66$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ),  $t(200) = 6.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .99$ .

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

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

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

**Perceived creativity of the comparison group (state).** Participants who received a backhanded compliment thought that their partner would rate the creativity of people from their state to be substantially lower ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 2.98$ ) than did participants who received a traditional compliment ( $M = 6.31$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ),  $t(200) = 5.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .82$ , offering support for our contention that backhanded compliments place recipients in an unfavorable place (an uncreative state) in an overall distribution (all states).

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

***Relative rank as mediator.*** The perceived creativity of the comparison group (participants' home state) mediated the relationship between backhanded compliments and self-assessments of creativity. Including perceived creativity of the comparison group in the model significantly reduced the effect of backhanded compliments (from  $\beta = -.15$ ,  $p = .032$ , to  $\beta = .03$ ,  $p = .72$ ), and perceived creativity of the comparison group was a significant predictor of self-assessed creativity ( $\beta = .46$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A 10,000-sample bootstrap analysis revealed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero [-1.09, -.44], suggesting a significant indirect effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelly, 2011).

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

## **Discussion**

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

## **General Discussion**

Although flattery can trigger positive outcomes across a variety of situations (Goffman, 1959; Vonk, 2002), our results demonstrate that not all compliments are alike: different types of compliments are used for different self-presentational goals, and some classes of compliments are more effective than others. Across seven studies, we explored backhanded compliments—compliments that draw a comparison with a negative standard. Our findings reveal the psychology of backhanded compliments—their pervasiveness, typology, antecedents, and consequences. We highlight a critical self-presentational mismatch: although would-be flatterers believe that backhanded compliments will garner them both liking and status, both recipients and third-party observers grant them neither. We further highlight the risks and rewards of backhanded compliments: while they may lead to lower perceptions of liking and status for their users, they are effective in undermining their recipients. Though on their surface, backhanded compliments may appear supportive, they can be destructive—both for the giver and the receiver.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

Our findings make several theoretical contributions. First, we link the existing literatures on self-presentation and social comparison. Although all self-presentation strategies are efforts to manage one's image in the eyes of others, we introduce a construct—perceived concern with self-image—that varies by the type of strategy deployed (from the flatterer's perspective) and predicts the effectiveness of those strategies (from the recipient and observer perspectives). Although people should often view straightforward compliment-givers as deliberately managing their image, they often do not (Chan & Sengupta, 2010; Vonk, 2002); Study 3b suggests that people who deploy

backhanded compliments are seen as concerned with their image, driving the dislike and disrespect they garner.

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

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

In addition to these contributions, our findings suggest several promising directions for future research. First, because we show that the impact of backhanded compliments on recipients operates in part through their effect on recipients' perceived placement in a distribution, understanding how actual placement in that distribution—such as status differentials between flatterers and recipients—influence the effect of backhanded compliments warrants further exploration. Second, while backhanded compliments make a negative standard of comparison very salient, we suspect that people who give traditional compliments have an implicit standard of comparison in mind, suggesting that examining the types of comparison groups called to mind by different forms of self-presentation offer a fruitful path for further research. As just one example, the phrase, “That outfit actually looks good on you” can seem innocuous, until the purpose of the additional and technically unnecessary word “actually” – conveying a kind of surprise or expectancy violation – is unpacked. Finally, while our research primarily examines unsolicited backhanded compliments, future research should examine whether the negative impact of backhanded compliments might be mitigated when the recipient asks for (and expects to receive) accurate and potentially negative feedback.

## **Conclusion**

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



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

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

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

**Table 1b.**  
Types of Backhanded Compliments

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

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

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

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



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

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

**Table 4.** Descriptive Statistics (Study 3a)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

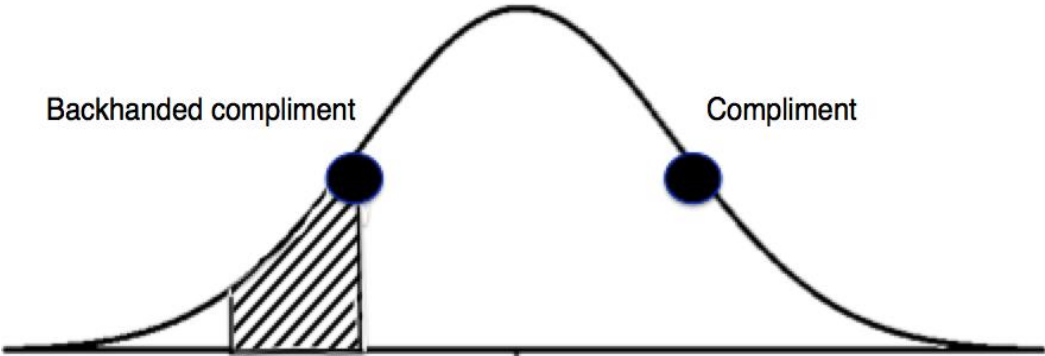


Figure 2. Ratings of perceived offensiveness by condition in Study 1b.

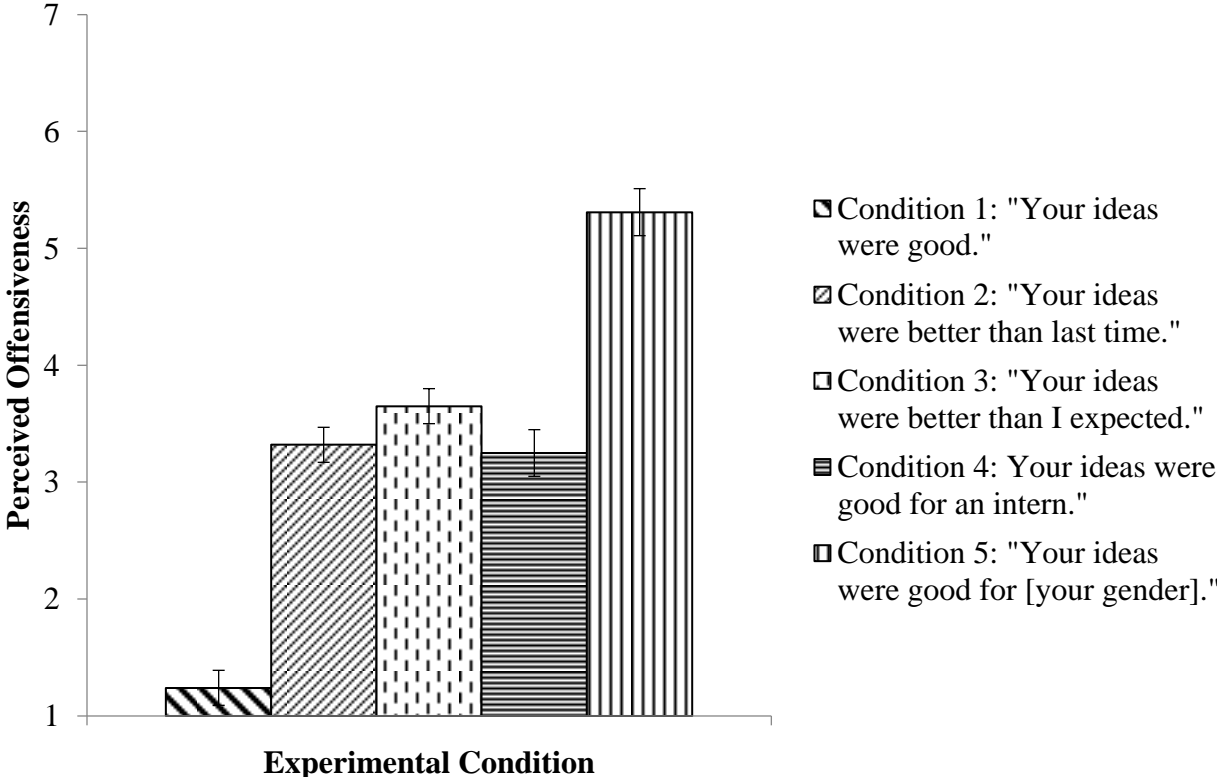


Figure 3. Self-presentation strategy selection by condition in Study 2a.

