



## Busy brains, boasters' gains: Self-promotion effectiveness depends on audiences cognitive resources



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Mentally busy audiences award more status to self-promoters than not-busy audiences
- Mental busyness increases source misattribution – forgetting who said what
- Self-promoters are usually seen as less warm, friendly, and likeable
- Source misattribution reduces this “communion penalty”

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### ABSTRACT

Impression management research suggests variability in the effectiveness of self-promotion: audiences grant self-promoters more status in some situations than others. We propose that self-promotion effectiveness depends on the audience's cognitive resources. When audiences are cognitively busy, they are more likely to misattribute the source of promoting information, and thus fail to penalize self-promoters for violating norms of politeness and modesty. Thus, self-promoters are perceived as more communal, and granted more status, when audiences are cognitively busy. These predictions were supported across two experiments, which varied the source of the promoting information about a target (self vs. other, Experiment 1), and the level of self-promotion (Experiment 2), and used different manipulations of cognitive busyness – divided mental attention (Experiment 1) and time pressure (Experiment 2). These studies provide insight into the conditions under which self-promotion is effective vs. ineffective, and contribute to our theoretical understanding of status judgments.

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*You have to do a little bragging on yourself even to your relatives – man [sic] doesn't get anywhere without advertising.*

John Nance Garner  
32nd Vice-President of the United States

### Introduction

Impression management is a cornerstone of social interaction. Individuals are often concerned with how they are perceived by others, and consequently will strategically exhibit behaviors designed to create a positive public image (Goffman, 1959; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Schlenker, 1980; Schneider, 1981). One of the most frequently used impression management tactics is self-promotion, which includes pointing out one's

accomplishments and taking credit for one's achievements (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Often, self-promotion is used to portray oneself as competent and capable to others (Bornstein, Riggs, Hill, & Calabrese, 1996; Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986). Thus, individuals are particularly likely to self-promote when they are competing with others for status, but are relatively unknown by their audience, such that their accomplishments and qualifications may not be self-evident (e.g., job interviews, first dates; Higgins & Judge, 2004; Stevens & Kristof, 1995).

Although self-promotion often augments audiences' perceptions of the promoter's competence and abilities (Godfrey et al., 1986; Rudman, 1998), it comes at a cost: self-promoters are generally perceived as less likeable, polite and well-mannered than individuals who are more modest in their self descriptions (Godfrey et al., 1986; Gurevitch, 1984; Pfeffer, Fong, Cialdini, & Portnoy, 2006; Vonk, 1999). Self-promotion violates norms of politeness and humility, and thus is often considered socially inappropriate (Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989; Gibbins & Walker, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As a result, even though self-promotion is frequently exhibited (e.g., Stevens & Kristof, 1995), it is not always effective. In some cases,

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studies have linked self-promotion to status advancement, showing that self-promoters are more likely to receive more favorable evaluations in job interviews and get jobs (e.g., Kacmar, Delery, & Ferris, 1992; Rudman, 1998; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). In other cases, self-promoters have been found to be no more successful in getting hired, promoted, or paid than their more humble and self-effacing counterparts (Higgins & Judge, 2004; Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003; Orpen, 1996) – or even less successful (Gordon, 1996; Judge & Bretz, 1994).

These conflicting findings underscore the importance of identifying situational factors that moderate the effectiveness of self-promotion attempts. Yet, compared to the number of studies documenting the frequency or consequences of self-promotion, relatively little prior research has focused on determining when and why self-promotion is likely to be effective or ineffective. Prior studies that have investigated moderators of self-promotion effectiveness have often focused on characteristics of the messenger. For example, high self-monitors are more effective self-promoters than low self-monitors, presumably because high self-monitors are better at tailoring their self-promoting messages to their audience (Higgins & Judge, 2004). Similarly, female self-promoters have been shown to be less likely to be hired than male self-promoters, whereas self-effacing women and men are judged as equally (un)likely to be hired (Rudman, 1998).

Importantly, Rudman (1998) found that the audience's goals moderated reactions to self-promotion: when audiences were focused on forming an accurate perception, they were often more likely to judge self-promoters negatively. This suggests that self-promotion effectiveness is determined not only by attributes of the messenger, but also by characteristics of the audience. Here, we extend Rudman's (1998) insight beyond audience goals to suggest that even when audiences are motivated to form accurate judgments of a self-promoter, their ability to do so depends on their cognitive resources. In two experiments, we test the hypothesis that cognitively busy audiences confer more status to self-promoters than audiences who are not mentally taxed.

Our studies focus on self-promotion, but our research also speaks to the broader theoretical question of who is most able to advance in a status hierarchy and why. Functionalist perspectives on status conferral suggest that the individuals who gain the most status in groups and organizations should be those individuals who are best able to help the collective achieve its goals (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008). These functionalist perspectives have led to predictions about the types of characteristics that should be desired in a high status group member. Specifically, high status group members should be agentic (i.e., competent, persistent and decisive), so that they can execute tasks successfully, but also communal (i.e., warm, interpersonally sensitive, and humble), so that they can put the good of the group ahead of their personal ambitions (Fragale, 2006; Van Vugt et al., 2008). Although groups may hope that their high status members would possess all of these characteristics, this is often not the case: History is replete with examples of high status individuals who lack some, or all, of these attributes. Although the absence of these characteristics may eventually lead to high status individuals' derailment or demise (Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995), it begs the question of how such individuals are so often able to gain status in the first place.

Our research begins to shed some light on this question of significant theoretical and practical importance. Our logic suggests that in some situations audiences may lack the abilities to evaluate whether an individual possesses all of the characteristics necessary to be an effective high status group member. Specifically, it may be in circumstances like the one we investigate, when audiences' cognitive resources are depleted, that audiences will be least equipped to accurately evaluate individuals' underlying characteristics – namely, communal attributes – and award status to those individuals who may not necessarily serve all of the group's goals. Thus, by exploring when and

why self-promotion is likely to be effective or ineffective for gaining status, our research also provides insight into the general psychological processes underlying audiences' status conferral decisions.

### Self-promotion and status conferral

Self-promotion is considered effective for a promoter to the extent that the individual gains status as a result self-promoting information. Status refers to the extent to which an individual is respected, valued and admired by others (Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Thus, status conferral – the extent to which an individual is awarded respect, esteem and admiration by others – is socially determined; one can only possess as much status as others are willing to grant. Status conferral is often signified by granting an individual formal, visible status markers, such as a job, a title, or financial rewards (e.g., Fragale, 2006; Tiedens, 2001).

Status is generally conferred to a target on the basis of audiences' judgments about the target's agency and communion, two fundamental dimensions of interpersonal judgment (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). The agency dimension captures both an individual's ability (e.g., intelligence, competence) and desire (e.g., ambition, persistence) to accomplish tasks and achieve goals (Abele, Cuddy, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2008). The communion dimension captures both an individual's affiliation with (e.g., friendly, good-natured) and consideration of (e.g., well-mannered, respectful) others (DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007).<sup>1</sup> Empirical research has documented that both agency and communion are positively predictive of an individual's status. The more agentic individuals are perceived to be, the more status they are awarded. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that individuals are more likely to be promoted to leadership roles and evaluated favorably in those roles when they are perceived as competent (e.g., Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986). Likewise, perceptions of communion aid status attainment. For example, Fragale (2006) found a positive relationship between how communal audiences perceived a target to be and the audiences' likelihood of recommending the target to be hired or awarded a leadership position in a team. Similarly, perceived altruism and generosity to others – indicated by the frequency of help-giving behaviors (Flynn, 2003; Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006) and contributions to shared group resources (Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005; Willer, 2009) – has been shown to positively predict individuals' status and influence in groups.

Thus, audiences should be most likely to confer status to self-promoters when (a) judgments of the promoter's agency are maximized, and (b) any negative attributions of communion that may result from violating social norms of modesty and humility are minimized. To shed light on when, and how, (b) the "communion penalty" will be incurred or avoided by self-promoters, we turn to source attributions. The reason that self-promoters are often viewed as ill-mannered, arrogant, and unlikeable is not because of what they say, but because being the source of one's own positive press violates social norms of politeness and humility (Godfrey et al., 1986). These communion costs would not be incurred if the same accomplishments were pointed out by a third party, as norms of humility and modesty are no longer relevant to the information being presented (Pfeffer et al., 2006). For example, if an audience learns that John won a prestigious award, they may like John less if they received this information directly from John, but not if they received this same information about John's award from Mary.

<sup>1</sup> Although the names of the two dimensions of interpersonal judgment vary across literatures, there is general consensus about their underlying content. The vertical and horizontal dimensions have been referred to, respectively, as competence and warmth (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), agency and communion (Bakan, 1966), self- and other-profitability (Peeters, 2002), and self- and other-concern (Fragale, Rosen, Xu, & Merideth, 2009), among others. In this paper, we adopt the agency and communion labels to denote these two dimensions, but the underlying meaning of the dimensions does not substantively differ from researchers who have used other terminology.

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