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Bragging through an Intermediary

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Abstract

The use of an intermediary to convey positive information about a target person is received more favorably and is more effective than direct self-promotion by the target person. These effects persist irrespective of whether the intermediary is motivated by self-interest. However, intermediation may carry image costs for the intermediary.

Extended Abstract

Self-promotion is a useful strategy to present a favorable image of themselves to others (Jones & Pittman, 1982), adopted in situations where one needs to make her quality known to others, or is competing against others (Rudman, 1998). Self-promotion, however, can backfire and it reduces self-promoters' likeability when it is perceived as bragging (Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; Scopelliti, Loewenstein, & Vosgerau, 2015), suggesting the existence of a trade-off between conveying positive information about oneself and not being perceived as a braggart and as such undermining one's likeability. One possible strategy to address this trade-off would be to have another person disclose positive information on one's behalf. For example, Pfeffer, Fong, Cialdini, & Portnoy (2006) showed that job candidates and authors were perceived as more likeable when promoted by agents than when they were promoting themselves. Similar to the use of intermediaries to reduce perceived responsibility for morally questionable actions (cfr. Hamann, Loewenstein, & Weber, 2010), using an intermediary to convey positive descriptions may protect the individual being promoted from the adverse consequences of self-promotion (Inman, McDonald, & Ruch, 2004).

We argue that i) the use of an intermediary to convey positive information about a target person will elicit more positive and less negative emotions in recipients than direct self-promotion; ii) intermediation effectively enhances perceptions of the target person on the qualities being disclosed; iii) this effect persists irrespective of whether the intermediary is motivated by self-interest; iv) intermediation may damage the intermediary, in particular when the person praised has a higher status. We test these predictions in four experiments.

In Study 1, participants (N = 190) imagined logging into their Facebook account and reading a post about the volunteering activities in a developing country of one of their contacts. In the direct self-promotion condition, the post was in first person and appeared as being written by the protagonist. In the intermediary condition, a different person wrote the post and the protagonist was mentioned (tagged) in the post. Afterwards, participants indicated to what extent reading the post would make them experience *positive* and *negative feelings*, and a series of discrete emotions (*jealous*, *upset*, *happy*, *proud*, *annoyed*, *angry*, *inferior*, and *envious*) towards the protagonist. Direct self-promotion induced less positive and more negative emotions, and made readers feel more upset at, less happy for, less proud of, more annoyed by, and angrier at the protagonist ($ps < .001$) than the same information reported through an intermediary. No

significant differences emerged for the three other emotions, i.e., envy, jealousy, and feelings of inferiority ($ps > .33$).

In Study 2, participants ($N = 133$) were assigned to one of two conditions (as in Study 1), reported their emotional reactions, and rated the target person and themselves (order counterbalanced) on the same 8 positive traits (*kind, brave, special, generous, honest, compassionate, hardworking, and selfless*). Participants evaluated the target person slightly more favorably than they rated themselves in the direct self-promotion condition ($p = .043$), but the effect was amplified in the intermediary condition ($p < .001$), suggesting that the act of self-promoting reduced the positive impact of the information conveyed.

In Study 3 we examined whether the observed effects persist even when the intermediary is motivated by self-interest by adding two conditions to Study 1. In these conditions participants were informed that the intermediary had a romantic interest or a professional interest (i.e., hoping to get a job at the target person's company) towards the target person, respectively. Participants ($N = 199$) read the post, reported their emotions, and rated the target person on a set of positive traits related to the content of the message (*kind, brave, special, generous, compassionate, and selfless*). Direct self-promotion induced less positive and more negative emotions than the same information reported through an intermediary ($ps < .001$), irrespective of the intermediary's self-interest. No differences emerged between the three intermediary conditions. The same pattern of results was observed on five of the six positive traits (all $ps < .05$), and marginally on one trait, *special* ($p = .08$).

In Study 4, participants ($N = 300$) read the post corresponding to one of the three intermediary conditions from Study 3 and reported their impressions of either the intermediary or of the target person (negative/positive; favorable/unfavorable; not highly at all/very highly regarded). Impressions of the intermediary were less favorable than impressions of the target person, marginally in the condition of no self-interest ($p = .07$), but significantly so in the two self-interest conditions ($ps < .003$).

In Study 5, participants ($N = 601$) read a scenario in which an intermediary publicly praised either a peer, or someone in a higher status position, or someone in a lower status position. Participants then reported their impressions of either the intermediary or of the target person as in Study 4. Impressions of the intermediary were less favorable than impressions of the target person ($p < .001$). Moreover, whereas impressions of the intermediary were lowest when the person publicly praised had a higher status position compared to the other two conditions ($p < .001$), impressions of the target person did not change across the three conditions ($p = .81$).

These studies show that disclosing the same positive information through an intermediary (vs. by direct self-promotion) elicits more positive and less negative emotions in recipients (Study 1), and increases the perceived superiority of the person being promoted on the traits being disclosed (Study 2), irrespective of the disclosure of self-interest by the intermediary (Study 3). However, intermediaries do not make as good an impression as the targets of their public praises, but, interestingly, more negative impressions of the intermediary are not reflected in more negative impressions of the targets they praise (Studies 4 and 5). In summary, being publicly praised by an intermediary seems to be beneficial for the target person, but it may carry hidden image costs for the intermediary.

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