



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).¹ 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.

¹ 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.

Consistent with this reasoning, Pfeffer et al. (2006) found that individuals were perceived as more communal when a third party was the source of positive press about the individual than when the individual sang his own praises. We build on this logic to suggest that even when individuals are the source of their own promoting information, they will be viewed as more communal, and hence be conferred more status, when they are not perceived to be the messenger.

Cognitive busyness and source monitoring

We posit that when audiences possess information about a target from multiple sources (e.g., the target himself or herself, as well as third parties), cognitively busy audiences will be less likely to apply the “communion penalty” to self-promoters than not-busy audiences. Cognitive busyness is a depleted attentional state, often resulting from engagement in multiple, simultaneous cognitive tasks (Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988).

Given that cognitive busyness is “ubiquitous in social life” (Gilbert & Osborne, 1989; p. 941), this variable has been prominent in the study of person perception (e.g., Gilbert & Hixon, 1991; Gilbert et al., 1988; Trope & Alferi, 1997). Often, targets are disadvantaged when their audiences are cognitively busy. For example, when audiences’ mental resources are taxed due to multiple cognitive demands, they are less able to use situational information (e.g., Alex was instructed to give an anti-abortion speech) to discount dispositional inferences about a target (e.g., Alex is against abortion; Gilbert et al., 1988; Trope & Alferi, 1997). In a related vein, cognitively busy audiences are more likely to apply activated stereotypes to a target (e.g., Asians are timid) than not-busy audiences (Gilbert & Hixon, 1991). In a departure from this prior work, we focus on a context in which an audience’s cognitive busyness may actually result in positive consequences for the person perceived. Specifically, we posit that self-promoters will be granted more status from their audience when the audience’s cognitive resources are highly taxed than when cognitive resources are plentiful.

Cognitive busyness may influence audiences’ susceptibility to self-promotion attempts by affecting source monitoring abilities. Source monitoring refers to the “processes involved in making attributions about the origins of memories, knowledge, and beliefs” (Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993, p. 3), and is critical to social functioning. Yet, source monitoring errors, in which an individual remembers a piece of information (I heard it might snow today), but is unable to recollect where he or she initially heard it (Did I hear that on the news, or from my neighbor?), are omnipresent in everyday life. Because source monitoring relies on information retrieved from memory, it is heavily dependent on the quality of information that is encoded about events as they occur. Anything that prevents an audience from fully attending to the context in which information is acquired will disrupt perceivers’ abilities to encode and recall details about the source of the information (Johnson et al., 1993).

Cognitive busyness is an important factor that often disrupts source encoding and retrieval (Jacoby, 1991; Jacoby, Woloshyn, & Kelley, 1989; Kelley & Lindsay, 1993). When individuals are cognitively busy, they often remember what they heard, but not where they heard it. For example, Brown and Murphy (1989) found that most group members in brainstorming groups later believed that they had generated some ideas that were in fact produced by others. Further, group members were more likely to unintentionally plagiarize those who had come before them in the idea-generation order than those who generated ideas after them. Before their turns, participants were cognitively busy, as they were thinking about their own ideas, and thus had fewer cognitive resources to accurately code the source of the ideas given by others during this time. In short, when group members were cognitively busy, they remembered the content of the other ideas they heard, but not the sources of these ideas (self vs. others).

Extending this research to the domain of impression management provides insight into when and why audiences are likely to award status to self-promoters. In situations where individuals form target impressions based on information from multiple sources, source monitoring failures by cognitively busy audiences may increase the likelihood that promoting information about a target is mistakenly attributed to a third-party source, rather than the target (e.g., I heard of John’s award from Mary, not John). Specifically, we suggest that source monitoring failures will result in asymmetrical errors — audiences will be more likely to misattribute information from a target (self-promotion) to a third-party source than to misattribute information from a third-party source to a target.

When source monitoring fails, audiences are likely to use other heuristics to aid in source recollection (Johnson et al., 1993). Because norms of modesty and humility make self-promotion a tactic of questionable merit (e.g., Godfrey et al., 1986; Gordon, 1996; Judge & Bretz, 1994), audiences may subscribe to a general rule-of-thumb that promoting information is more likely to come from a third-party than from the individual himself or herself. Thus, if source monitoring fails, reliance on this heuristic would result in more attributions to third-party sources and fewer attributions to the target. In addition, reliance on simple base rates could also lead to the same heuristic. There are often many possible third parties who could have provided the information, but only a single individual is the subject of the promoting information. Thus, audiences who forget the true source of a message may use base rates to guide their source attributions would have a higher probability of attributing the statement to a third party than to the self-promoter.² In sum, we suggest that source monitoring failures uniquely benefit the self-promoter because they increase the likelihood that promoting information is attributed to third-parties, rather than the target.

Hypothesized model

If source misattribution occurs, the target may avoid the communion penalty imposed for self-promotion, as this penalty should only occur when the individual is coded as the source of his or her own promoting information by the audience. Thus, we expect that a cognitively busy audience should form a more favorable communion judgment of a

² We tested these ideas empirically in two pilot studies. Both Pilot 1 ($N = 65$) and Pilot 2 ($N = 66$) were conducted using the same participant population as Experiments 1 and 2. In Pilot 1, participants answered the following question:

Consider an average person in society, Joe. Think about all of the positive comments that will be said about Joe over the course of his life (e.g., that Joe is nice, he was admitted to a prestigious college, he can run a 5-minute mile, etc.). What percentage of these positive comments do you think will come from Joe himself (i.e., Joe saying nice things about himself) and what percentage of these comments will come from other people (e.g., his mom, his coworker, his friend). Note that your percentages must add up to 100%.

The average response to this question was 33% from Joe, 67% from others. A one-sample t -test indicated that these values differed significantly from 50%, $t(64) = 8.02$, $p < .001$. Participants thought that promoting information about an individual was significantly more likely to come from third-parties than from the individual himself.

In Pilot 2, participants were given four scenarios and asked to indicate whether they thought the promoting information in the scenario was more likely to come from the individual themselves, or a third-party. For example:

You decide you want to join MENSAs, a society for people who score in the top 2% on intelligence tests, and you recall that one of your high school friends, Sarah, is a member. You most likely learned about Sarah’s MENSAs membership from...

- a. Sarah
- b. A mutual friend

For each participant, we computed the percentage of “third-party” choices they made across the four items. On average, participants attributed 61% of the promoting statements to third-parties, and this value significantly differed from 50%, $t(65) = 4.18$, $p < .001$. These results were consistent with those of Pilot 1: Participants thought that promoting information was more likely to come from a third-party than the target themselves. These empirical results support our logic that source attributions are more likely to be attributed to a third-party than a target.

self-promoter, and thus confer more status to the self-promoter, than a not-busy audience.³

Note that this hypothesized path model, which is illustrated graphically in Fig. 1, applies only to situations in which source misattribution is possible. In some situations, individuals may possess information about a target from only one source, such as forming a first impression when meeting a stranger. If an audience is clear that no other information source for the target exists, source misattribution is unlikely to occur, regardless of the level of busyness. However, in many situations, target impressions are multi-source judgments. For example, an individual may form an impression of a co-worker based on direct interaction with the co-worker, but also from many third-hand stories of this co-worker offered from other colleagues. Our interest is in this type of multi-source impression formation, which we see as a frequent and ecologically valid person perception context.

Overview of experiments

We conducted two experiments to test our predictions. In both studies, we explored the moderating effects of cognitive busyness on the effectiveness of a target's self-promotion, using two different operationalizations of cognitive busyness: divided attention (e.g., Chun & Kruglanski, 2006) and time pressure (e.g., Wegner & Erber, 1992). In Experiment 1, we compared the effectiveness of self-promotion to other-promotion (Pfeffer et al., 2006). Holding the information about the target constant across conditions, we varied whether the most promoting information came from the target himself (self-promotion) or a third party (other-promotion), and compared the effectiveness of these two approaches under high and low levels of audience busyness. In Experiment 2, we varied the degree of positive information provided about the target by focusing on different levels of self-promotion (Rudman, 1998). In addition, we measured the proposed mediating mechanisms for status conferral: source misattribution and perceived target agency and communion.

Experiment 1

We chose an employment context for this study, since past research has shown that the job search process is one in which individuals are very likely to self-promote (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1986; Stevens & Kristof, 1995) and self-promotion has potentially large status

³ We have focused our theorizing on the communion judgment for self-promoters, since we see communion as the dimension that is most directly affected by audience busyness. However, it is also worth considering how cognitive busyness would impact judgments of a promoter's agency. We suggest that source misattribution will result in either neutral or positive consequences for perceptions of the target's agency. For example, research has shown that a global, unsubstantiated claim that John is "intelligent and a hard worker" will be more likely to lead to the impression that John is agentic when that information is delivered by a third-party than by John himself (Brandt et al., 2009). When John is the source of this promoting information, perceivers may be suspicious of his motives and thus refrain from making a correspondent inference about his attributes. In a situation like this, source misattribution of John's self-promoting statements (from John to a third-party) would increase perceptions of John's agency. In other situations, however, information about an actor's agentic traits may be more likely to be taken at face value, without any discounting for source. Perceivers often demonstrate a correspondence bias, assuming that individuals' behaviors are indicative of their dispositions (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). In the case of self-promotion, the correspondence bias is strengthened when perceivers believe that self-promoting information about a target can be verified (Vonk, 1999). For example, if John announced that he received a prestigious industry award and that he was flying to Florida next Tuesday to accept the award in person, the specific, objective claim of winning an award, which presumably could be verified with investigation, may lead the audience to accept this statement as fact. In this case, John is likely to be judged as highly agentic and misattributing the source of this message to Mary, instead of John, should not further increase perceptions of agency, as the information is seen as equally believable from both sources. Thus, unlike inferences about a self-promoter's communion, which we argue will always be improved when source misattribution occurs, the effect of source misattribution on inferences about the self-promoter's agency will also depend on the content of the self-promoting information. If the information is of dubious veracity, source misattribution should increase agency perceptions. If the information is taken at face value, agency perceptions should be unaffected by source misattribution.

consequences (i.e., the likelihood of being hired). Our procedure mirrored the job application process that is used in many organizations: Applicants are initially screened on the basis of written documentation that they submit, such as applications, resumes, cover letters, and recommendation letters. Participants assumed the role of a manager tasked with making a hiring recommendation about a job applicant. Participants read an applicant's cover letter and three letters of recommendation under either a high or a low level of cognitive busyness. We held the information provided about the job applicant constant across all conditions, and varied whether the most positive information about the applicant's qualifications and achievements came from the applicant (self-promotion condition) or from one of the applicant's recommenders (other-promotion condition).

Method

Participants

One-hundred-thirty students from an east-coast university participated in exchange for partial course credit.

Study design and procedure

The study employed a 2 (applicant promotion source: self vs. other) × 2 (cognitive busyness: low vs. high) between-subjects design. Participants completed the experiment in sessions of 6–8 people, with each participant seated at an individual study carrel.

All instructions, experimental manipulations, and dependent measures were presented via computer using MediaLab software (Jarvis, 2000). The introductory instructions asked the participants to put away all of their personal belongings under their carrel. This instruction was given to ensure that participants would have no writing implements available to them, which was necessary for the high cognitive busyness manipulation. The experimenter was present in the room to make sure that all participants complied with this instruction.

Participants were then asked to take on the role of a consultant in a strategy consulting firm, Simulink. They were told that they had received an email from the HR manager of Simulink with a request to review some application materials – a cover letter and some recommendation letters – and form an evaluation of a male applicant who had applied for an entry-level analyst position.

Cognitive busyness manipulation

Consistent with prior research, we manipulated cognitive busyness by dividing participants' attention between two mental tasks. Specifically, participants in the high cognitive busyness condition were asked to remember and rehearse a nine-digit number in their head while reading the job applicant's cover and recommendation letters (e.g., Chun & Kruglanski, 2006; Gilbert & Hixon, 1991; Trope & Alfieri, 1997).

This manipulation was incorporated into the cover story for the experiment. All participants were informed that each job applicant was given a unique identification number, and that the current applicant's number was 486017935. Participants in the high busyness condition were told that they needed to remember this number, as it was the only way to link their evaluation to the appropriate candidate. They were told to memorize the number before continuing to the next screen, as this was the only time they would see the number, and to continue reciting the number in their head to ensure that they did not forget it. Participants were informed that they would be asked to reproduce this number later, before they completed their evaluation of the applicant. Participants in the low busyness condition were given the applicant's identification number, but were not given the subsequent instructions to remember the number.

Self- and other-promotion manipulations

Participants then read four letters supporting the applicant for a position at Simulink: the applicant's cover letter and three reference letters written by colleagues. Three of the letters were designed to be positive, but relatively uninformative regarding the applicant's qualifications for a position at Simulink. These letters provided only vague impressions of the candidate's skills, and focused on behaviors that were generally non-diagnostic for the job in question (e.g., he once participated in a charity basketball tournament). In contrast, one letter portrayed the applicant as highly intelligent and competent, with excellent leadership abilities.

This positive letter always appeared as the second of the four letters. The author provided several pieces of information supporting the applicant's intelligence, such as the applicant's 4.0 GPA and high IQ. In addition to these quantifiable measures, the letter also provided qualitative indicators of the applicant's abilities, such as comments from the applicant's former co-workers about the applicant's leadership potential. In the self-promotion condition, this letter was authored by the applicant (i.e., the applicant's cover letter). In the other-promotion condition, the content of the letter was identical, except that it was authored by the applicant's former manager at a software development firm.

In the self-promotion condition, the third letter – one of the letters with non-diagnostic information – was authored by the applicant's former manager at a software development firm. In the other-promotion condition, this letter was authored by the applicant himself (i.e., the applicant's cover letter). Thus, all participants saw one cover letter and three recommendation letters, regardless of condition.

Overall, the content of the information provided about the applicant was identical across all conditions. The two promotion conditions differed only in whether the source of the most positive, relevant information about the applicant's competency and qualifications was the applicant himself or one of the applicant's recommenders.

Filler task

Participants then engaged in a 10-minute, unrelated filler task to create a brief time delay between the presentation of information about the applicant and participants' evaluation of the applicant. This delay was intended to give participants an opportunity to experience source monitoring failures (Johnson et al., 1993).

Participants then completed a questionnaire to assess their impressions of the job applicant. At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants in the high busyness condition were asked to reproduce the identification number and were told that they no longer needed to remember it. This was done to ensure that the busyness manipulation did not affect participants' abilities to attend to the questionnaire items, and to provide a check on the manipulation.

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all questions were assessed using scales anchored by “not at all” (1) and “very much” (7).

Status conferral

Three questions measured participants' impressions of the applicant and their beliefs about whether he should be hired into the organization. These items were adapted from past research investigating the effects of self-promotion on applicant hireability (Rudman, 1998). Specifically, participants indicated the extent to which the applicant should be hired at Simulink, the extent to which the applicant was qualified for the position, and the extent to which they had a positive impression of the job applicant (1 = *definitely disagree*, 7 = *definitely agree*). We averaged these three items to form a composite measure of status conferral ($\alpha = .78$).

Perceived applicant agency and communion

We measured agency and communion using a subset of characteristics from Wiggins (1979) interpersonal circumplex model, which is one of the earliest works to document the fundamental nature of the agency and communion dimensions (Abele et al., 2008). Participants indicated the extent to which they found the applicant to be competent, ambitious, persistent, and assertive, and these four items were averaged to form a composite measure of perceived applicant agency ($\alpha = .61$). Participants also indicated the extent to which they found the applicant to be well-mannered, respectful, and ill-mannered (reversed), and these three items were averaged to form a composite measure of perceived applicant communion ($\alpha = .83$).

Manipulation check

Following Chun and Kruglanski (2006), we assessed the effectiveness of our cognitive busyness manipulation with a four-item composite measure ($\alpha = .75$). Participants rated how difficult it was for them to concentrate on the job applicant letters, how distracted they were by other thoughts while reading the letters, the extent to which their mental effort was directed toward remembering the applicant's identification number while reading the letters, and the degree to which they tried hard to remember the identification number.

Finally, participants answered a free response question regarding their beliefs about the purpose of the experiment. They were then debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results

Following the procedure used by Gilbert and Hixon (1991), we excluded the data from four participants in the high cognitive busyness

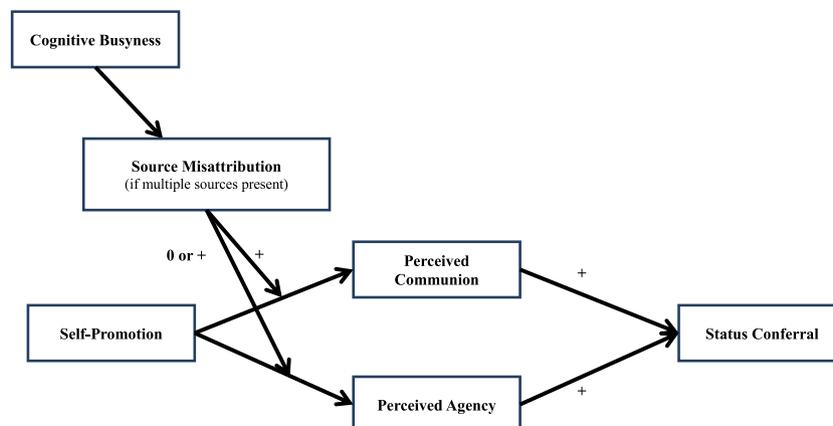


Fig. 1. Hypothesized path model.

condition who could not accurately reproduce at least four digits of the nine-digit identification number. We also excluded one participant who correctly guessed the study hypotheses. All reported analyses are based on the remaining 125 participants.

Cognitive busyness manipulation check

A 2 (applicant promotion source: self vs. other) \times 2 (cognitive busyness: low vs. high) ANOVA on the four-item cognitive busyness measure revealed only a significant main effect of cognitive busyness. Participants in the high busyness condition reported a greater subjective feeling of mental busyness and effort ($M = 3.97$) than participants in the low busyness condition ($M = 2.62$), $F(1, 121) = 42.92$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.18$.

Status conferral

A 2 (applicant promotion source: self vs. other) \times 2 (cognitive busyness: low vs. high) ANOVA on the three-item status conferral measure revealed main effects of both promotion source and cognitive busyness. Participants conferred higher status to the applicant when he was promoted by his manager ($M = 6.00$) than when he self-promoted ($M = 5.51$), $F(1, 121) = 24.14$, $p < .001$, $d = .86$. Also, busy participants conferred more status to the applicant ($M = 5.78$) than not-busy participants ($M = 5.46$), $F(1, 121) = 3.98$, $p < .05$, $d = .31$. Importantly, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, $F(1, 121) = 3.98$, $p < .05$. As may be seen in Fig. 2, and consistent with our predictions, busy participants conferred more status to the self-promoting applicant ($M = 5.51$) than not-busy participants ($M = 4.84$), $t(121) = 2.73$, $p < .01$, $d = .50$. In contrast, when the applicant was promoted by his manager, he was equally effective in gaining status regardless of participants' levels of cognitive busyness ($M_{high} = 6.00$ vs. $M_{low} = 6.00$, $t(121) < 1$, *n.s.*).

Perceptions of applicant's agency and communion

To examine the factor structure of the perceived agency and communion items, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis using EQS software version 6.1 with maximum likelihood estimation procedures (Kline, 1998). We specified a two-factor solution, with factors for agency and communion. The model achieved acceptable fit with the data, $\chi^2(13) = 28.44$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .94, standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) = .09, and the fit was significantly better than a one-factor solution.

We predicted that self-promoting applicants would be judged as less communal than applicants benefitting from other-promotion, given that self-promotion is seen as impolite and ungracious (a main effect of promotion source). However, we expected this communion penalty for self-promoters to be reduced when audiences were cognitively busy, since busy audiences should have fewer cognitive resources to

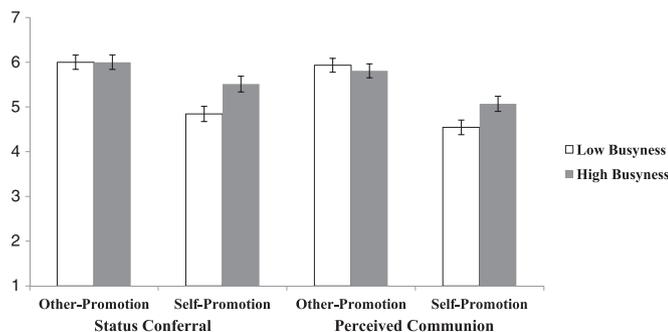


Fig. 2. Experiment 1: status conferral and perceived communion as a function of promotion source and cognitive busyness.

accurately encode and retrieve the source of the promoting information (an interaction between cognitive busyness and promotion source). As predicted, a 2 (applicant promotion source: self vs. other) \times 2 (cognitive busyness: low vs. high) ANOVA on the three-item communion composite revealed that the applicant was judged as less communal when he self-promoted ($M = 4.80$) than when he was promoted by another party ($M = 5.87$), $F(1, 121) = 43.57$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.16$. The predicted interaction between promotion source and cognitive busyness also emerged, $F(1, 121) = 4.09$, $p < .05$. When the applicant self-promoted, busy participants judged the self-promoting applicant to be significantly more communal ($M = 5.07$) than not-busy participants ($M = 4.54$), $t(121) = 2.24$, $p < .05$, $d = .41$ (see Fig. 2). In contrast, when the applicant was promoted by his manager there was no effect of audiences' cognitive busyness on judgments of the applicant's communion ($M_{high} = 5.81$ vs. $M_{low} = 5.93$, $t(121) < 1$, *n.s.*).

A similar 2 (applicant promotion source: self vs. other) \times 2 (cognitive busyness: low vs. high) ANOVA on the four-item composite measuring perceived agency revealed no significant main or interaction effects: The applicant was judged to be similarly agentic in all conditions ($M_s = 5.52$ to 5.80). We have suggested that the impact of self-promotion on perceived agency would depend on whether the content of the promoting information is believed when it is offered by the target of the promotion (the applicant), or whether it is discounted (see Footnote 3). In this case, we suspect that the specific, objective, and easily verifiable nature of the promoting information – such as the applicant's 4.0 GPA and 176 IQ – led this information to be equally believable in both the self- and other-promotion conditions. Thus, the self-promoter was already judged highly agentic, and any possible source misattribution to a third-party would not increase these agency attributions further. Had we used more general, subjective forms of self-promotion in the letters (e.g., "I'm a hard worker."), we may have seen agency attributions increase with audience busyness, as these generic statements may have become more believable when they were misattributed to third parties (Brandt, Vonk, & Van Knippenberg, 2009).

Mediation analysis

We examined the extent to which assessments of the applicant's communion mediated the relationship between promotion source and cognitive busyness on the applicant's ability to gain status. We followed the procedures recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986) and Edwards and Lambert (2007) for combining mediation and moderation. Above, we demonstrated interactions between promotion source and cognitive busyness on both status conferral and perceptions of applicant communion. We then regressed our measure of status conferral on promotion source, cognitive busyness, perceived communion, the interaction of promotion source and cognitive busyness, and the interaction of communion and promotion source. In this model, only perceived communion significantly predicted status conferral ($b = .53$, $t(119) = 5.95$, $p < .001$). The interaction between promotion source and cognitive busyness was no longer significant when perceived communion was entered into the model ($b = .07$, $t(119) < 1$, *n.s.*).

Using these regression coefficients, we computed path coefficients between cognitive busyness, perceived communion, and status conferral, at each level of promotion source (self-promotion and other-promotion). We tested the significance of these path coefficients by using a bootstrap procedure, drawing 1000 random samples with replacement from the full sample (Efron & Tibshirani, 1993; Stine, 1989), and using these samples to construct bias-corrected confidence intervals to ascertain whether each path differed significantly from zero (see MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007). As may be seen in Fig. 3, only the first path – between cognitive busyness and perceived communion – differed across promotion conditions. As hypothesized, self-promoters were perceived as significantly more communal when the audience was cognitively busy than when the audience was not busy. When the applicant was promoted by a third party, audience

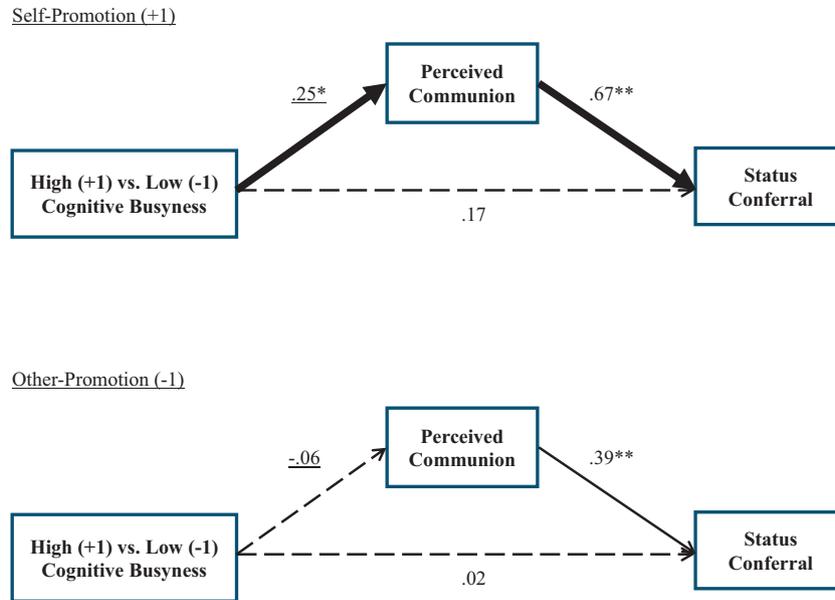


Fig. 3. Experiment 1: moderated path analysis results for cognitive busyness for self-promotion (top panel) and other-promotion (bottom panel). Note. Figure entries are unstandardized path coefficients. Significance levels tested using the percentile bias-corrected bootstrap method (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). Solid lines indicate significant paths, $p < .05$. Boldface lines indicate significant indirect effects, $p < .05$. Underlined coefficients differ significantly between the top panel and bottom panel, $p < .05$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

busyness had no significant effect on communion perceptions for the applicant. As a result of differences in this first path, the indirect effects across levels of promotion source differed as well. The indirect effect of cognitive busyness on status conferral, through perceived communion, was statistically significant for self-promotion (top path; $0 < 95\% \text{ CI} < .40$), whereas the indirect for other-promotion (bottom path) was not significant ($-.11 < 95\% \text{ CI} < .03$).⁴ Further, we used the bootstrap method to test the difference between these two indirect effects, and they differed significantly ($-.45 < 95\% \text{ CI} < 0$). Thus, perceived communion mediated the effect of cognitive busyness on status conferral for self-promotion, but not for other-promotion.

Discussion

The results of this experiment supported our predictions. The self-promoting applicant was perceived as more qualified for the job and more worthy of hiring when participants were cognitively busy than when they were not. These effects were mediated by perceptions of the applicant's communion: Self-promoting applicants were perceived as more communal by cognitively busy audiences than not-busy audiences, and this higher level of perceived communion led to greater status conferred to the self-promoter when audiences were cognitively busy. In contrast, the participant's level of cognitive busyness did not affect status conferral or perceptions of applicant communion when a third party promoted the applicant.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 was designed to extend the findings of Experiment 1 in several ways. First, rather than holding the information about the applicant constant across conditions and varying the source (self vs. other), we varied the level of self-promotion that the applicant displayed (low vs. high self-promotion). Second, we have argued that the effects of cognitive busyness on self-promotion effectiveness are driven by differences in source misattribution: Cognitively busy

audiences should be less likely to accurately encode and recall sources of information than not-busy audiences (e.g., Gilbert & Hixon, 1991). However, a major shortcoming of Experiment 1 is that we did not measure source misattribution. To demonstrate the effect of cognitive busyness on source misattribution, in Experiment 2 we assessed audiences' ability to accurately recall the sources of various pieces of information presented about the job applicant. Third, in Experiment 1 our measure of agency was limited in its primary focus on ambition, and our measure of communion emphasized manners. To constructively replicate our findings with different measures of agency and communion, in Experiment 2 we directly measured audiences' perceptions of the competence dimension of agency and the warmth dimension of communion (Judd et al., 2005).

Method

Participants

One-hundred-sixteen students from an east-coast university participated in exchange for partial course credit.

Study design and procedure

The study employed a 2 (self-promotion: low vs. high) \times 2 (cognitive busyness: low vs. high) between-subjects design.

The materials and procedure were similar to Experiment 1, with the following modifications.

Cognitive busyness manipulation

We operationalized cognitive busyness by varying the level of time pressure that participants experienced. Time pressure has been used as a manipulation of cognitive busyness (Wegner & Erber, 1992), as it disrupts effortful cognitive processes such as source monitoring (Johnson et al., 1993).

In the high cognitive busyness condition, participants were informed that reviewing the job applicant's materials was just one of many tasks that they needed to perform as part of their organizational duties that day. Thus, participants would have only 25 s to read each of the applicant's letters before moving on to the next one. We chose this time limit based on the results of a pre-test indicating that this was

⁴ We report 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs) for all bootstrap results. If the 95% CI is not significant (contains zero), we also examined the 90% CI. If the 90% CI is significant, we report it in the text. If neither CI is significant, we report only the 95% CI and state that it is non-significant.

the average amount of time necessary to fully read each letter at a very quick pace. Participants in the low cognitive busyness condition were not given any time limits for reading the letters.

Self-promotion manipulation

In this experiment, all participants read the same three reference letters, all written to be positive but relatively uninformative. Only the applicant's cover letter varied across conditions. In the low self-promotion condition, the applicant stated some basic information about his background and experiences. In the high self-promotion condition, the applicant's cover letter added several pieces of information about the applicant's achievements and abilities, similar to the self-promoting cover letter used in Experiment 1.

Filler task

After reading the four letters, all participants completed a 10-minute filler task unrelated to the present experiment.

Measures

All questions were assessed using 7-point scales, anchored by "not at all" (1) and "very much" (7) unless otherwise indicated.

Status conferral

As three separate items, participants indicated how much status, respect, and influence the applicant deserved. Participants also indicated whether they would, if it were up to them, hire the applicant for a job requiring the analysis of strategic business problems, whether they would hire the applicant for a job requiring collaboration with others, and whether the applicant should be hired (adapted from Rudman, 1998). These six questions were averaged to form a composite measure of status conferral ($\alpha = .85$).

Perceived agency and communion

To ensure that our Experiment 1 findings were not artifacts of our agency and communion measures, we used different measures of these dimensions in Study 2. Following the traditions of prior self-promotion research, we adopted a modified version of Rudman's (1998) measures of task ability and social attraction, which correspond to judgments of agency and communion, respectively. Agency was assessed with a four-item scale ($\alpha = .88$). Participants indicated how competent and intelligent the applicant was, and how good he would be at solving strategic business problems and complex analytic problems. Communion was assessed with a five-item scale ($\alpha = .82$). Participants indicated how likeable, friendly, and popular they thought the applicant was, the extent to which they would like to be close the applicant, and the extent to which they would do a favor for the applicant if asked.

Manipulation checks

Participants indicated their agreement with three statements ($\alpha = .82$) about the applicant (adapted from Goldberg, 1999): he boasts about his own virtues, he seldom "toots his own horn" (reversed), and he does not brag about his accomplishments (reversed; all three items anchored by 1 = *completely disagree* and 7 = *completely agree*). To assess the effectiveness of our cognitive busyness manipulation, participants indicated how difficult it was for them to concentrate on the letters (Chun & Kruglanski, 2006).

Source misattribution

We asked the participants to indicate the correct source for each of six statements: four statements that appeared in one of the four letters, and two statements that did not appear in any of the letters. To compare source monitoring accuracy across conditions, we needed all participants to evaluate the same statements. Thus, we chose four statements that appeared in both the high and low self-promotion conditions: the

applicant was on a debate team, was a French major, played in a charity basketball tournament, and raised money for multiple sclerosis. The two additional statements that did not appear in any letter were: the applicant raised money for the American Cancer Society, and was born and raised in Los Angeles. For each statement, participants were given five source choices: the four letter writers' roles (e.g., job applicant, Cheese-cake Factory manager), as well as a "did not appear in any letter" option. The number of incorrect source attributions (from zero to six) was summed to create a measure of source misattribution.⁵

In addition, we asked the participants to subjectively assess their ability to accurately encode and recall sources using four items ($\alpha = .72$): the extent to which they paid attention to the source of each letter, how difficult it was for them to concentrate on remembering the sources of specific pieces of information about the applicant (reversed), how difficult it was for them to remember who said what about the applicant (reversed), and their confidence that they had accurately matched statements to sources in the source recall task.

Finally, participants answered an open-ended question regarding their beliefs about the purpose of the experiment. Participants were then debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results

Manipulation checks

Cognitive busyness

A 2 (self-promotion: low vs. high) \times 2 (cognitive busyness: low vs. high) ANOVA on the item measuring concentration difficulty revealed only a significant main effect of cognitive busyness. Busy participants reported greater difficulty focusing on the application letters ($M = 5.32$) than not-busy participants ($M = 3.52$), $F(1, 112) = 38.16$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.14$.

Self-promotion

A 2 (self-promotion: low vs. high) \times 2 (cognitive busyness: low vs. high) ANOVA on the three-item self-promotion composite revealed significant main effects for both self-promotion and cognitive busyness. The applicant was viewed as more self-promoting in the high self-promotion condition ($M = 5.39$) than the low self-promotion condition ($M = 3.95$), $F(1, 112) = 48.99$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.17$. In addition, busy participants viewed the applicant as expressing less self-promoting information ($M = 4.41$) than not-busy participants ($M = 4.82$), $F(1, 112) = 6.59$, $p = .01$, $d = .29$. These main effects were qualified by an interaction, $F(1, 112) = 25.35$, $p < .001$. Not-busy participants judged the high self-promoting applicant as expressing more self-promoting information ($M = 6.16$) than the low self-promoting applicant ($M = 3.72$), $t(112) = 8.64$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.63$. However, busy participants viewed both applicants as equally self-promoting regardless of their actual level of self-promotion ($M_{low} = 4.22$ vs. $M_{high} = 4.62$), $t(112) = 1.37$, *n.s.* Thus, cognitively busy audiences were less likely to recognize that self-promoters were actually exhibiting self-promotion.

⁵ We measured two other statements, both of which appeared in the high self-promotion condition (i.e., applicant's cover letter) but not the low self-promotion condition. However, the fact that these statements did not appear in all conditions meant that the difficulty of matching these statements to sources likely differed across conditions. In the low self-promotion condition, participants only needed to recognize that these statements did not appear in any of the letters in order to correctly match statement to source. In the high self-promotion condition, participants needed to recognize that they appeared, and also which of the four letters contained this information (the applicant's cover letter in both cases). We were concerned that these were fundamentally different, and perhaps not equivalently easy (or difficult) source monitoring tasks. Thus, we restricted our analysis only to those six items that appeared in all four conditions.

Source misattribution

A 2 (self-promotion: low vs. high) \times 2 (cognitive busyness: low vs. high) ANOVA on the four-item composite measuring self-reported (subjective) source-monitoring accuracy revealed only a significant main effect of cognitive busyness. Busy participants reported less ability to accurately encode and recall sources of information about the job applicant ($M = 2.77$) than not-busy participants ($M = 3.87$), $F(1, 112) = 33.39, p < .001, d = 1.09$.

To determine whether these subjective assessments were accurate, we turned to the objective measure of source misattribution with the six-item statement-source matching task. Again, a 2 (self-promotion: low vs. high) \times 2 (cognitive busyness: low vs. high) ANOVA revealed only a main effect of cognitive busyness on source misattribution, $F(1, 112) = 16.77, p < .001, d = .77$. Cognitively busy participants made more source misattributions ($M = 4.70$) than not-busy participants ($M = 3.80$).

Status conferral

A 2 (self-promotion: low vs. high) \times 2 (cognitive busyness: low vs. high) ANOVA on the composite measure of the amount of status conferred to the job applicant revealed the predicted interaction between self-promotion and cognitive busyness on status conferral, $F(1, 112) = 6.23, p = .01$. As may be seen in Fig. 4, busy participants awarded more status to the self-promoter ($M = 4.79$) than not-busy participants ($M = 4.25$), $t(112) = 1.97, p = .05, d = .37$. In contrast, the applicant in the low self-promotion condition was judged as equally deserving of status regardless of participants' levels of cognitive busyness ($M_{high} = 4.50$ vs. $M_{low} = 4.90, t(112) = -1.55, n.s.$).

Mediating role of source misattribution

We have suggested that this interaction between cognitive busyness and self-promotion on status conferral should be mediated by source misattribution. Cognitive busyness should increase source monitoring errors, and this source misattribution should uniquely advantage the self-promoter, leading the self-promoter to achieve greater status with a busy audience than a not-busy audience.

To test this proposed model, we again followed the procedures recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986) and Edwards and Lambert (2007) for combining mediation and moderation. Above, we demonstrated a main effect of busyness on objective source misattribution (matching statements to sources), and an interaction between self-promotion (low vs. high) and cognitive busyness on status conferral. We then regressed our measure of status conferral on self-promotion, cognitive busyness, the interaction of self-promotion and cognitive busyness, source misattribution, and the interaction of self-promotion and source misattribution. In this model, only the interaction between self-promotion and source misattribution was statistically significant ($b = .223, t(115) = 2.23, p = .03$). The interaction between self-

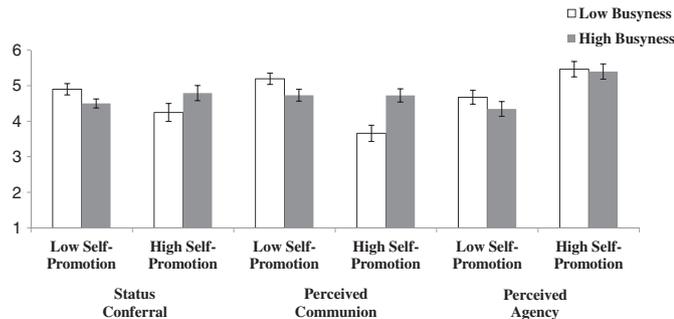


Fig. 4. Experiment 2: status conferral, perceived communion, and perceived agency as a function of self-promotion and cognitive busyness.

promotion and cognitive busyness was no longer significant when source misattribution was entered into the model ($b = .157, t(115) = 1.58, n.s.$).

Using these regression coefficients, we computed path coefficients between cognitive busyness, source misattribution, and status conferral, at each level of self-promotion (low vs. high). We tested the significance of these path coefficients by using a bootstrap procedure, drawing 1000 random samples with replacement from the full sample (Efron & Tibshirani, 1993; Stine, 1989), and using these samples to construct bias-corrected confidence intervals to ascertain whether each path differed significantly from zero (see MacKinnon et al., 2007). As may be seen in Fig. 5, the first path – between cognitive busyness and source misattribution – was significant across both levels of self-promotion, and these paths did not differ from each other. As predicted, cognitive busyness increased source misattribution across the board. However, only high self-promoters benefitted from this source misattribution. The second path in Fig. 5 – between source misattribution and status conferral – was marginally significant ($p < .10$) in the high self-promotion condition, but not in the low self-promotion condition. Further, the magnitude of this path differed significantly across self-promotion conditions ($-.80 < 95\% \text{ CI} < 0$). As a result of differences in this second path, the indirect effects across levels of self-promotion differed as well. The indirect effect of cognitive busyness on status conferral, through source misattribution, was statistically significant for high self-promotion (top path; $0 < 95\% \text{ CI} < .35$), whereas the indirect for low self-promotion (bottom path) was not significant ($-.16 < 95\% \text{ CI} < .01$). Further, we used the bootstrap method to test the difference between these two indirect effects, and they differed significantly ($-.38 < 95\% \text{ CI} < 0$). Thus, source misattribution mediated the relationship between cognitive busyness and status conferral for high self-promotion, but not for low self-promotion.

Perceptions of applicant's agency and communion

To examine the factor structure of the perceived agency and communion items, we again conducted a confirmatory factor analysis using EQS software version 6.1 with maximum likelihood estimation procedures (Kline, 1998). We specified a two-factor solution, with factors for agency and communion. The model achieved acceptable fit with the data, $\chi^2(26) = 65.66$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .93, and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) = .07, which was significantly superior to a one-factor solution.

A 2 (self-promotion: low vs. high) \times 2 (cognitive busyness: low vs. high) ANOVA on the four-item composite measuring perceived applicant agency revealed only a main effect of self-promotion, $F(1, 112) = 19.64, p < .001, d = .81$: Highly self-promoting applicants were judged as more agentic ($M = 5.43$) than low self-promoting applicants ($M = 4.52$; see Fig. 4). Thus, as the amount of positive information about the applicant increased across self-promotion conditions, perceptions of the applicant's agency increased as well.

Conversely, a 2 (self-promotion: low vs. high) \times 2 (cognitive busyness: low vs. high) ANOVA on the five-item composite measuring perceived applicant communion indicated that applicants were judged as less communal when they self-promoted ($M = 4.19$) than when they did not ($M = 4.98$), $F(1, 112) = 17.29, p < .001, d = .73$. This main effect was qualified by the predicted interaction, $F(1, 112) = 17.06, p < .001$. In the low self-promotion condition, there was no significant effect of audiences' cognitive busyness on judgments of the applicant's communion ($M_{high} = 4.73$ vs. $M_{low} = 5.19$), $t(112) = -1.83, n.s.$ (see Fig. 4). However, when the applicant was highly self-promoting he was judged to be significantly more communal by busy audiences ($M = 4.73$) than not-busy audiences ($M = 3.66$), $t(112) = 3.94, p < .001, d = .74$. Further, when participants were cognitively busy, the high self-promoting applicant was not judged to be significantly less communal than the low self-promoting applicant (under either high or low audience

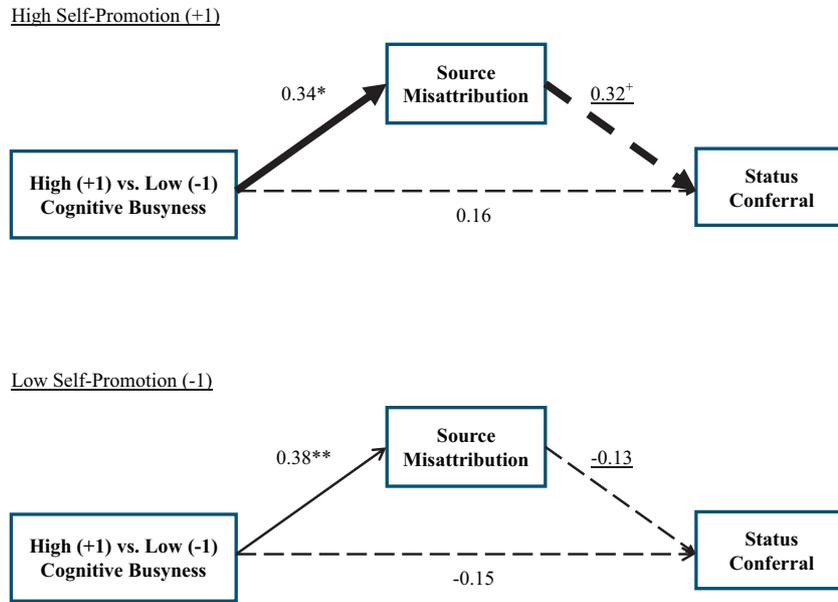


Fig. 5. Experiment 2: moderated path analysis results for cognitive busyness for high self-promotion (top panel) and low self-promotion (bottom panel). Note. Figure entries are unstandardized path coefficients. Significance levels tested using the percentile bias-corrected bootstrap method (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). Solid lines indicate significant paths, $p < .05$. Boldface lines indicate significant indirect effects, $p < .05$. Underlined coefficients differ significantly between the top panel and bottom panel, $p < .05$. + $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

busyness, $t_s(112) < 1.82$, *n.s.*). Thus, the communion penalty for high self-promoters was eliminated when audiences were cognitively busy.

Test of full model

We again used moderated path analysis to test our complete hypothesized model (Fig. 1), testing path significance and indirect effect sizes using the bias-corrected bootstrap procedure. This path analysis is depicted in Fig. 6.

The top panel illustrates the high self-promotion condition, and the results support our model. First, the path from source misattribution to perceived communion ($b = .21$) was positive and marginally significant ($p < .10$): The greater the audiences' source misattribution, the more communal the high self-promoter was perceived to be. Further, the indirect effect from busyness to perceived communion through source misattribution was significant ($0 < 95\% \text{ CI} < .23$). In contrast, source misattribution did not significantly affect perceptions of the promoter's agency ($b = -.22$), and as a result the indirect effect from busyness to perceived agency through source misattribution was also nonsignificant ($-.25 < 95\% \text{ CI} < .01$).

We then added status conferral to the model and found that, as predicted, both perceived communion and perceived agency significantly, and positively, predicted status conferral in the high self-promotion condition. Finally, we tested the indirect effects from IV (busyness) to DV (status conferral) through the two-stages of mediators (stage 1: source misattribution; stage 2: agency and communion). We found that the indirect effect through perceived communion was significant ($0 < 95\% \text{ CI} < .22$; see boldfaced path in top panel of Fig. 6). The indirect effect through perceived agency was marginally significant ($-.12 < 90\% \text{ CI} < 0$). In sum, these results indicate that cognitive busyness increased source misattribution, source misattribution improved perceptions of applicant communion for high self-promoters, and these improved communion perceptions, in turn, increased status conferral. Source misattribution did not affect perceptions of applicant agency, although the indirect effect through agency was still marginally significant due to the significant positive relationship between perceived agency and status conferral ($b = .40$). Overall, these results provide support for our hypothesized model illustrated in Fig. 1.

The bottom panel of Fig. 6 illustrates the results for the low self-promotion. In contrast to the high self-promotion condition, the path from source misattribution to perceived communion ($b = -.19$) was

not significant: Source misattribution did not increase communion perceptions when the applicant was not self-promoting, although the indirect effect from busyness to perceived communion, through source misattribution was marginally significant ($-.18 < 90\% \text{ CI} < 0$). In contrast, source misattribution had a negative and marginally significant ($p < .10$) effect on perceptions of the promoter's agency ($b = -.22$), and the indirect effect from busyness to perceived agency through source misattribution was also marginally significant ($-.18 < 90\% \text{ CI} < 0$).

We then tested the indirect effects from IV (busyness) to DV (status conferral) through the two-stages of mediators (stage 1: source misattribution; stage 2: agency and communion), and found that the indirect effect through agency was significant ($-.13 < 95\% \text{ CI} < 0$; see boldfaced path in bottom panel of Fig. 6), but the indirect effect through perceived communion was not ($-.09 < 95\% \text{ CI} < .01$). These findings indicate that source misattribution uniquely benefits self-promoters. When the applicant was not self-promoting, source misattribution did not affect communion perceptions. In contrast, we found that audience busyness actually reduced status conferral to the low self-promoting applicants. This effect was driven by differences in perceived agency. Source misattribution reduced agency perceptions for low self-promoters, and since agency perceptions were a strong positive predictor of status conferral, cognitive busyness reduced the amount of status awarded to low self-promoters.

Discussion

These results replicate and extend the findings of Experiment 1. Busy audiences were more likely to confer status and respect to self-promoters, and were more likely to recommend hiring them, than not-busy audiences. Perceptions of the applicant's agency increased as self-promotion increased. Perceptions of the applicant's communion decreased as self-promotion increased, but only for audiences who were not cognitively busy. When the audience was cognitively taxed, the communion penalty for self-promoters was eliminated – they were judged to be as communal as their more self-effacing counterparts.

This experiment also provided evidence for the effect of cognitive busyness on source monitoring accuracy. As predicted, cognitively busy audiences perceived their source recollection to be less accurate, and the measure of objective source monitoring confirmed these

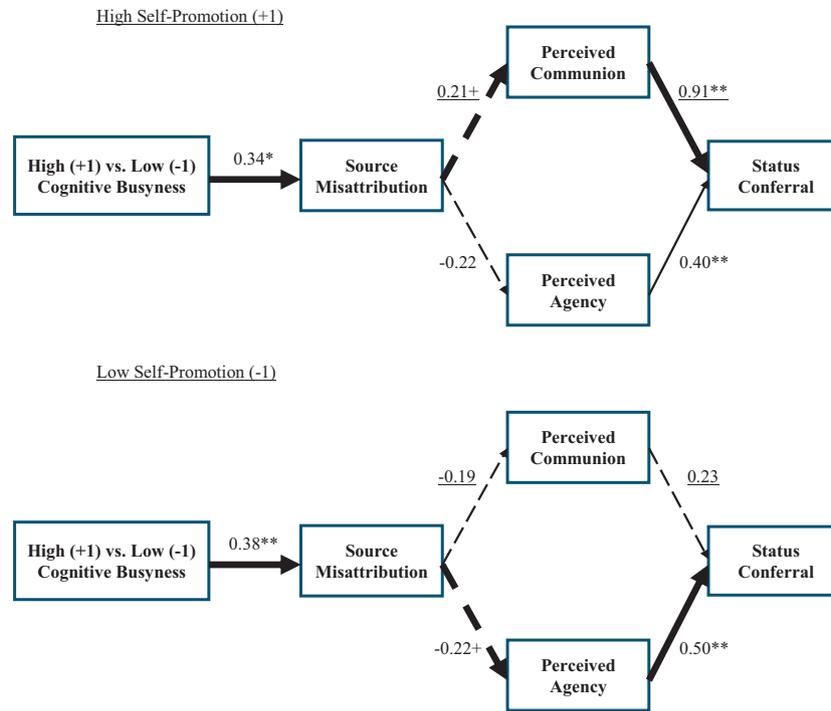


Fig. 6. Experiment 2: moderated path analysis results for cognitive busyness for high self-promotion (top panel) and low self-promotion (bottom panel). Note. Figure entries are unstandardized path coefficients. Significance levels tested using the percentile bias-corrected bootstrap method (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). Solid lines indicate significant paths, $p < .05$. Boldface lines indicate significant indirect effects $p < .05$. Underlined coefficients differ significantly between the top panel and bottom panel, $p < .05$. + $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

subjective assessments: Cognitively busy audiences were less able to remember the exact sources of the information they had read about the job applicant. Mediation analyses revealed that source misattribution explained differences in the status conferred to self-promoters across levels of busyness. Further, these source monitoring failures uniquely benefitted self-promoters, by increasing audience perceptions of their communion, and these communion perceptions, in turn, led to greater status conferral.

Overall, the results of Experiment 2 provide consistent support for our hypothesized model. Two aspects of our results, however, are worthy of mention. First, even under high load, audiences did not confer *more* status to the high self-promoter than the low self-promoter (see Fig. 4). Rather, the status penalty that self-promoters experienced under low load was simply eliminated when audiences were busy. This finding does support our hypothesis, as our central thesis is that self-promoters gain more status when their audience is cognitively busy than when they are not busy. However, it may seem surprising that audience busyness didn't enable the high self-promoter to earn more status than the low self-promoter.

We suggest that this absence of this advantage for the high self-promoter is driven by the relative importance of agency and communion in the status conferral process. Although both agency and communion are positively predictive of status conferral, the extent to which these two dimensions are weighted in status conferral decisions will differ dramatically across contexts, based on the extent to which these two dimensions are seen as predictive of one's performance (Fragale, 2006). In our study, perceived communion perceptions were a stronger predictor of status conferral than agency perceptions for high self-promoters (see top panel of Fig. 6). This could explain why high self-promoters didn't gain more status than their less promoting counterparts. Under audience busyness, high self-promoters were seen as equally communal, but not more communal, than low self-promoters, and communion was a particularly strong determinant of status judgments for high self-promoters, leading high self-promoters to be conferred similar levels of status as low self-promoters.

If perceived agency had been equally or more predictive of status conferral than perceived communion, this may have resulted in the high self-promoter gaining even more status than the low self-promoter. In fact, this pattern is what is observed in the low self-promotion condition. For low self-promoters, perceived agency was a stronger determinant of status conferral judgments than perceived communion (see Fig. 6). An intriguing possibility, beyond the scope of this paper, is that audiences use a weakest link approach when conferring status to a target, and place a heavier weight on whichever dimension is assumed to be the weaker of the two – in this case, audiences that question a high self-promoter's communal characteristics may weight those heavily in forming status judgments, whereas concerns about a low self-promoter's lack of agency may lead agency to be a strong predictor of status conferral.

We see these types of questions about how agency and communion are weighted in status judgments as potentially interesting avenues for future research. Here, however, this was not our goal. Rather, our intent was to demonstrate that audience busyness eliminates the communion penalty for self-promoters, and that the reduction in this communion penalty leads self-promoters to gain more status when audiences are busy than when they are not. Further, the letters contained quite a bit of additional information about the job applicant, which was held constant across conditions. Participants were not judging status, agency, and communion based solely on the level of self-promotion, but also in the context of these other comments provided in the references. These comments may have established a baseline level of status for the applicant, limiting the extent to which status judgments would vary as a function of self-promotion.

A second noteworthy finding is that source misattribution reduced perceptions of agency for low self-promoters only – the less accurate participants' source recollections, the less agentic they found low self-promoters to be. Although our theorizing was focused on audiences' reactions to high self-promoters and how source misattribution advantaged them, it is interesting to speculate why source misattribution disadvantaged low self-promoters with respect to agency judgments. One possibility is that some level of self-promotion is

expected in a job search context. If source misattribution leads an audience to think that an applicant said almost nothing promoting about himself, this may lead the audience to judge the applicant as less agentic. If this logic is correct, this suggests that a different context, one where self-promotion is less normative, would not produce the same effects of source misattribution on agency.

In sum, Experiment 2 supported our central premise that self-promoters are benefitted by audience busyness. At the same time, many other aspects of our results, like the relative importance of agency and communion in status judgments and the effects of source misattribution on perceived agency, may be affected by the context in which the self-promotion occurred, and we see these contextual variables as potentially interesting avenues for future inquiry.

General discussion

Our research demonstrates that audiences' status conferral judgments are affected by their level of cognitive resources. We found convergent evidence that cognitively busy audiences granted self-promoters more status than not-busy audiences. We replicated these effects across two operationalizations of cognitive busyness, divided attention and time pressure. In addition, we compared high self-promotion to both high other-promotion (Experiment 1), holding constant the amount of promoting information provided about the applicant, and low self-promotion (Experiment 2), varying the amount of promoting information about the applicant across conditions.

Theoretical implications

Our work provides greater understanding about when and why self-promotion is likely to benefit or harm a self-promoter's standing. At the same time, these findings also contribute to our general understanding of status conferral processes. Agency and communion judgments are central to status conferral decisions — individuals and groups reward both high agency and high communion with status (Fragale, 2006; Van Vugt et al., 2008). However, little research, if any, has investigated observers' ability to form these judgments. Existing studies generally presume that signals of agency and communion exhibited by the target will be accurately perceived by the audience, and the audience will award status to the target accordingly (e.g., Fragale, 2006; Tiedens, 2001). Our work, however, shows that this is not necessarily the case. Cognitive busyness can disrupt agency and communion judgments, and these altered perceptions may create a disconnection between who audiences *want* to promote and who they actually promote.

In this vein, another interesting implication of our work is that those individuals most responsible for conferring status to others — individuals in positions of power and responsibility — may be those least likely to devote full attention to this task. Those individuals at the top of a group's hierarchy are likely to be the most cognitively busy, as their resources and responsibilities come with complex information-processing demands and considerable time pressure, yielding attentional overload (Fiske, 1993). The chronic busyness of high-ranking individuals suggests that status conferral decisions may often be made by those who are not devoting full attention to these interpersonal judgments. In the context of the present studies, this also implies that the most frequent audiences of self-promotion may also be those who are most likely to be swayed by it. If individuals use self-promotion as a tactic for status advancement, they are likely to display this tactic most frequently to those individuals who are in the best position to confer this advancement; namely, those individuals in positions of power (e.g., managers, recruiters; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). This may explain why self-promotion is often effective in everyday life: self-promoters direct their efforts at powerful people whose cognitive busyness causes source monitoring failures, minimizing any negative attributions of communion to the self-promoter.

In practice, status conferral decisions may be increasingly likely to be made by cognitively-taxed audiences, as modern technology has made multicomputing possible (Reinsch, Turner, & Tinsley, 2008). Simultaneously carrying on an email dialog, a phone conversation, a text message exchange, and a chat with colleagues increases cognitive load (e.g., Hyman, Boss, Wise, McKenzie, & Caggiano, 2010). In this way, as technology enhances our tendencies to multitask, we may see rising levels of automaticity (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999), mindlessness (Langer, 1989), and inattentive blindness (Hyman et al., 2010; Most, Scholl, Clifford, & Simons, 2005), which may reduce the attention that individuals bring to any one task, including status conferral decisions, potentially increasing “errors” into these decisions. This raises the possibility that risky tactics for enhancing one's status, such as self-promotion, may become more effective going forward in a multitasking world.

Finally, although beyond the scope of our current data, our research raises some questions for individuals and groups charged with making status conferral decisions, particularly in organizations. Some organizational practices — such as “super days,” in which organizations interview all of their job candidates in one day, in rapid-fire fashion — may exacerbate cognitive busyness, increase source monitoring confusion about which candidate said what, and introduce error into consequential status conferral decisions, such as who gets hired and how much they get paid. It is interesting to consider whether individuals and groups charged with conferring status, and then marking this status with tangible symbols such as promotions, perks, and pay, should try to design status conferral processes that allow audiences to fully focus on this task.

Limitations and future directions

Our research is subject to a number of limitations, several of which highlight worthwhile directions for future inquiry. There were no gender differences in either experiment: male and female audiences reacted similarly to self-promotion under different levels of cognitive busyness. However, we cannot speak to target gender effects: across both studies, we used a male self-promoter, which raises questions about whether female self-promoters also get away with self-promotion when audiences are cognitively busy. Although women tend to be penalized more severely for self-promotion than their male counterparts (Rudman, 1998), insofar as cognitive busyness prevents audiences from correctly monitoring the source of the promoting information, we expect that the effects would be quite consistent when the self-promoter is female. However, if audiences attend more carefully to self-promotion by women, a stronger level of cognitive busyness may be necessary in order for audiences to experience this source monitoring failure in the first place.

In this paper, we focused on the cognitive resources of the audience as a moderator of self-promotion effectiveness. However, features of the message, the messenger, and the context are likely to also play a role, and some of these other variables may be particularly fruitful avenues for future research. For example, future research could also address the style of the self-promotion. Fragale (2006) found that individuals who used powerless speech, containing hedges, disclaimers, and tag questions, were perceived as more communal than individuals whose speech did not contain these linguistic markers. Perhaps “powerless self-promotion” (e.g., “I think I'm a pretty fast learner” vs. “I'm a fast learner”) is a way for self-promoters to enhance perceived agency while minimizing any negative attributions of communion. Further, our first experiment replicated the finding that promotion by a third party is more effective than self-promotion (Pfeffer et al., 2006). In this comparison, it is not clear whether self-promotion is a liability or other-promotion is a benefit. If other-promotion is a benefit, then self-promotion may be more effective for gaining status as long as it is accompanied by some type of third-party promotion.

The medium of self-promotion is also worthy of investigation: do cognitively busy audiences have an easier time attributing the correct source to verbal rather than written self-promotion, as there are more source cues to encode? If so, is this effect limited to extraverted audience members, given that introverts are more likely to be cognitively overloaded by face-to-face interaction (De Pascalis, 2005)? In addition, it is unclear how the effects of cognitive busyness on self-promotion unfold over time. In light of classic research on the sleeper effect, whereby information from a source lacking credibility is discounted in the short run but believed in the long run as source memory fades (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Kumkale & Albarracín, 2004), our short-term cognitive busyness effects may be representative of how most audiences react to self-promotion over time. Even if they are not cognitively busy at the time of encoding self-promotion, audiences may be vulnerable to forgetting the source over time. These may be some of the productive areas of future inquiry exploring other determinants of self-promotion effectiveness.

It is also worthwhile to consider how our findings were affected by the context in which the self-promotion occurred. Our paradigms involved a job search context, where self-promotion is frequent and expected (Higgins & Judge, 2004; Kacmar et al., 1992; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). In this circumstance, we found that saying positive things about oneself resulted in a communion penalty from not-busy audiences. It may be the case that situations where self-promotion is expected lead audiences to see self-promotion as a deliberate strategy for status advancement, and to react against such a strategy by penalizing self-promotion through lower attributions of communion. This would suggest that these negative communion attributions may be less likely to occur in situations in which audiences are not expecting self-promotion, and thus are less suspicious of the self-promoter's motives. Conversely, the fact that self-promotion is normative (and perhaps even appropriate) in job search contexts may lead audiences to be less critical of self-promotion in these circumstances than in other situations where self-promotion would be less expected. This would imply that our findings were likely to be magnified in other contexts, with self-promoters suffering greater communion penalties in situations where self-promotion was seen as unusual. In sum, testing these ideas in other situations would inform how self-promotion is interpreted differently based on the context in which it occurs.

In a similar vein, both of our experiments relied on a paradigm using three reference letters and one cover letter for a job applicant, meaning that 75% of the sources were third-parties. If audiences forgot the correct source for a piece of information, reliance on simple base rates (as we suggest on pp. 10–11 and Footnote 2) would lead participants to be more likely to misattribute information to third parties rather than the applicant. Might our findings change if we presented, for example, three letters from the applicant and only one letter from a third party? Following our base rate argument, we suspect that the findings would change, with lower levels of source misattribution observed in this hypothetical scenario. Conversely, we would expect even more source misattribution to occur if a perceiver had information about a target from 20 third-party sources, rather than only three. This is yet another aspect of context that may have influenced our results and is worthy of future inquiry.

Finally, since we measured agency, communion, and status concurrently in both experiments, an alternative causal sequence is possible: cognitive load makes it more difficult to detect self-presentation motives, leading to a greater correspondence between self-promotion and subsequent positive trait inferences (Vonk, 1999). Although this interpretation cannot be discounted by mediation analysis alone, the absence of significant effects on agency judgments in Experiment 1 calls into question this reverse causal sequence. Promotion source and cognitive busyness interacted to affect perceived communion, but not perceived agency; there were no effects on how competent, ambitious, persistent, and assertive participants appeared across conditions. If status conferral judgments

came first in the psychological process, and these judgments led to a halo effect around the target, we would expect to see more positive perceptions of perceived communion and perceived agency. Nevertheless, it will be important for future studies to examine the causal sequence of person perception judgments more systematically by using enhancement or blocking designs (MacKinnon et al., 2007), directly manipulating agency and communion under different combinations of cognitive load and self-promotion.

Conclusion

The quest for status and advancement has been described a fundamental human motive (Frank, 1985; Winter, 1973). Thus, it is important to understand the impression management tactics that individuals use to gain status and the circumstances under which these tactics will be effective or ineffective. Our studies focus on one frequently-exhibited impression management tactic, self-promotion, but they also highlight the fact that status advancement cannot be understood through tactics alone. Rather, one must understand the interplay between the person managing the impression and the person forming it. By focusing on the cognitive resources of the audience, our research provides insight into when and why self-promotion is effective and contributes to the broader theoretical question of who “gets ahead” and why.

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