
Overcoming the Self-Promotion Dilemma: Interpersonal Attraction and Extra Help as a Consequence of Who Sings One's Praises

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Prior research has shown that positive information presented by a third party shields people from the negative consequences of being perceived as self-promoting. But in many contexts, those third parties are intermediaries with a financial interest in the person being promoted rather than neutral parties. In three experimental studies, the authors demonstrate that even when intermediaries are not neutral, they can be helpful for overcoming the self-promotion dilemma—the need to assert one's competence but not be harmed by the fact that people who self-promote are viewed negatively. The authors find that hiring an agent to sing one's praises results in more favorable perceptions of the client, which contributes, in turn, to a greater willingness to offer that person assistance. It is also shown that even when the intermediary is physically present and seen to be complicit with the client, the positive effects of having someone else speak on one's behalf persist.

Keywords: agents, self-promotion, person perception

The self-promotion dilemma people often face is clear. On one hand, research shows that self-promotion is perceived negatively by others (e.g., Wortman & Linsenmeier, 1977). People who are modest about their qualities and performance are better liked than those who are boastful (Forsyth, Berger, & Mitchell, 1981) because modesty reduces the likelihood of appearing self-aggrandizing (Baumeister & Ilko, 1995). Moreover, boastful presenters are always less effective, whereas intermediate modesty results in the most positive evaluations of people

(Wosinska, Dabul, Whetsone-Dion, & Cialdini, 1996). Because being liked is important to many people in and of itself, and because likeability is a useful method of interpersonal influence (e.g., Cialdini, 2001), there are pressures for people to be modest and not self-aggrandize in their interactions with others.

On the other hand, there are many situations in which people need to make claims of competence on their own behalf or on behalf of their work or output to prospective employers, clients, or purchasers of their goods or services. One's positive characteristics may be uncertain to a prospective client or employer, and the very structure of the interaction compels the individual to make claims of competence or quality. In fact, there is evidence that not to make positive assertions about oneself or one's work can be taken as a negative signal (e.g., Kenrick, Neuberg, & Cialdini, 2002, p. 129).

One possible way out of this dilemma is to have another person present the desirable information on one's behalf (Jones & Wortman, 1973). If it is self-promotion and boastfulness that create interpersonal

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perception problems, then having the claims made by another may have fewer negative consequences. Consistent with this argument, Inman, McDonald, and Ruch (2004) found that people who hear descriptions about a person in the first person (e.g., "I helped him") see that individual as both more boastful and less likeable than when they hear the same description in the third person ("She helped him"). Their studies suggest that intermediaries may help their clients by providing third-person descriptions rather than first-person descriptions of positive attributes. The Inman et al. (2004) findings raise an important issue—whether it is only apparently neutral third parties who can provide the benefits of signaling competence and avoiding the self-promotion dilemma. Although it is the case that sometimes the third parties that are providing the descriptions of others may be casual friends or acquaintances or apparently neutral observers, there are many situations in which the third parties have an economic interest in having the individual they are describing be perceived positively. For instance, literary agents (Coser, Kadushin, & Powell, 1982) receive a percentage of what their clients obtain and therefore have an obvious interest in having their clients and their work be perceived as positively as possible. Similarly, executive recruiters sometimes work on a contingent fee basis so they only make money if they fill a position, which gives them an incentive to hype their candidate. And even in noncontingent searches, the fee is typically a percentage of the salary offered, which again makes executive recruiters third parties with a financial interest in how well their clients do.

Moreover, it is not just the case that people providing favorable descriptions of others can have an incentive to do so. In many instances, the intended targets of these positive statements know about this agency relationship and the intertwined economic interests between the client and the intermediary. So the question arises as to whether third-party claims on behalf of another provide the benefits of avoiding the self-promotion dilemma or signaling competence even when the third party has an economic interest in the transaction.

BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Much of the existing literature on the use of paid intermediaries to conduct transactions proceeds largely from a principal-agent perspective originating in economics (e.g., Kurtzberg, Moore, Valley, & Bazerman, 1999; Mnookin & Cohen, 1999), a point of view that presumes conflicting interests between agents and those who hire them. Not surprisingly, then, existing empirical research generally demonstrates the negative effects

of agents. Levitt and Syverson (2004) argued that because real estate agents receive only a small proportion of the incremental price when a house sells for more money, the agents have an incentive to sell houses for less money but more quickly. The authors found that agents who sold their own houses kept those houses on the market longer and obtained a higher price than when they sold the houses of clients. Bazerman, Neale, Valley, Zajac, and Kim (1992) simulated real estate negotiation and demonstrated that the selling price of a property was higher when an agent was used but that the price increase was insufficient to recoup the cost of the agent and the likelihood of the negotiation reaching an impasse increased. Yavas, Miceli, and Sirmans (2001) and Schotter, Snyder, and Zheng (1995) also reported that using intermediaries increased the likelihood of impasse and increased the time to reach an agreement if one were achieved. Kurtzberg et al. (1999), summarizing the evidence on the effects of the use of intermediaries, maintained that "the use of intermediaries in bargaining relationships has been shown to reduce the likelihood of transaction, increase the sale price, and increase the time to agreement. . . . Overwhelmingly, previous research points to the hazards associated with the use of agents" (p. 286).

The Interpersonal Benefits of Using an Agent

One might wonder if intermediaries have such bad effects on negotiating outcomes why they are used so frequently. One answer might be simply custom, habit, or precedent, but there are discussions in the literature that hint at some possible benefits that agents can provide. Rubin and Sander (1988) noted that agents might have more knowledge of the subject matter and the negotiating process, thereby providing expertise (see also Levitt & Syverson, 2004), and also could have access to networks of influence not available to those less experienced. Jonas, Schulz-Hardt, and Frey (2005) suggested that advisors or intermediaries can provide information to their clients and thereby reduce the clients' lack of knowledge.

Using an intermediary also can make a client appear more competent. There are several mechanisms that can potentially produce such an effect. If intermediaries obtain payment only to the extent that their clients are successful, then the very ability to obtain representation can be a signal that others see the client as worthy and skilled. Second, when agents make claims on behalf of their clients, these claims will be seen as less self-serving than similar statements made by the client. Third parties provide the aura of objectivity, and therefore, intermediary statements of client competence are likely to be more credible. Although intermediaries can affect perceptions

of client competence and these effects can be beneficial, we were primarily interested in the interpersonal affect and liking effects of using an intermediary.

Intermediaries may potentially offer more than just knowledge, contacts, or credible claims of competence. They can affect the interpersonal climate of the transaction and buffer the parties from the negative consequences of tense and difficult interactions. Rubin and Sander (1988) argued that intermediaries might offer the advantage of emotional detachment and could be used tactically, such as playing the role of "good cop" or "bad cop." Others also have theorized that agents may be useful in decreasing the negative affect associated with negotiations, therefore creating a more positive atmosphere between parties (Coser et al., 1982; Kurtzberg & Medvec, 1999).

In this article, we extend the focus on interpersonal benefits of employing an agent by examining the possibility that intermediaries are able to resolve the self-promotion dilemma. Agents can speak of their clients' positive attributes on behalf of the clients, thereby providing the positive information without having the clients self-promote and incur the resulting interpersonal costs. For intermediaries to accomplish this task in situations where others know that they are acting on behalf of their clients, it would have to be the case that even though observers know of the economic relationship between the parties, they are unwilling or unable to correct completely for this situational reality and its implications for intermediary behavior.

In fact, there is a long research tradition in social psychology going back to the classic Jones and Harris (1967) study that shows that even when people are given relatively heavy-handed reminders of the effect of situational factors, they may correct for this information but not enough to completely remove the effect on their judgments. Consequently, we argue that Inman et al.'s (2004) findings about the benefits of third-party promotion may hold even when the third party presenting the favorable information has a relational and economic stake in the information being presented. Therefore, it is likely that people who have favorable information presented on their behalf by intermediaries will appear more likeable than those who present the information for themselves.

The large literature on ingratiation (e.g., Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989; Jones & Wortman, 1973) shows that likeability and positive person perception confer many advantages, including benefits such as being hired and earning a higher salary (Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003). But, in many situations, there are two outcomes to an interaction such as a negotiation. First, there is the actual deal struck, such as the price obtained for a house, the advance for a book, or the salary for an employee.

Although liking may have an effect on these outcomes, such effects may be constrained because conscientious negotiators are expected to suppress the influence of interpersonal attraction during the negotiating process (e.g., Shell, 1999, pp. 66-67). Furthermore, as Higgins and his colleagues (2003) point out, direct measures of success, such as salaries and promotions, are often affected by a number of factors that are outside the realm of interpersonal interaction, so impression management and influence tactics may not have strong effects in these domains.

Our research focuses, therefore, on a second outcome that occurs in most transactions: the sentiments that result from the transaction process. The social dynamics between the two parties can influence the purchaser's or employer's willingness to do more than is required down the road. In general, people can and do perform favors for others above and beyond what is specified by the explicit terms of a transaction. A publisher, for instance, has some discretion on how much to emphasize and promote a book apart from what is formally stipulated in the contract and an employer can make an employee's life more or less difficult on the job. This willingness to go above and beyond the formal requirements is likely to be related to the interpersonal relationship created in the process of reaching an agreement. Therefore, we argue that people represented by intermediaries will obtain more extra benefits and help than those who represent themselves because people who are represented by paid agents are seen as being more likeable.

In the following three studies, we test these hypotheses in a number of ways across two negotiation settings. Study 1 examines the effects of using an agent in getting a job, whereas Studies 2 and 3 replicate our effects in a negotiation setting in which an author is seeking an advance from a publisher. We also explore other potential mechanisms that may explain the benefits of using an agent. In Study 1, we examine the separate effects of an agent on perceptions of competency and explore differential pathways to voluntary help and financial benefits. In Studies 2 and 3, we examine two alternative explanations for the benefits of using an agent: social proof (Study 2) and the physical absence of the client (Study 3).

STUDY 1

To test our hypotheses, we chose a situation where the self-promotion dilemma is quite salient and where the interpersonal or emotional climate of the interaction is crucial: the job interview. Job candidates often are faced with the conflicting goals of conveying their

competence and desirability while also appearing likeable and modest, and benefits such as extra help that result from liking can be crucial in determining future success. Furthermore, research has demonstrated that job candidates often employ self-promoting tactics, with varying degrees of success (Higgins & Judge, 2004), but the effects of promotion by third-party intermediaries has yet to be investigated.

Although likeability is certainly important in a job interview scenario, perceptions of competence can be of equal, if not greater, importance. As we have already noted, there are several reasons why representation by an agent might positively influence perceptions of competence. Because perceptions of competence seem to be more directly relevant to market value and are essentially assessments of quality of the product being purchased, we would expect that perceptions of competence should be more strongly related to financial outcomes than perceptions of likeability. Thus, we propose a separate causal pathway for the relationship between perceptions of competence and financial outcomes such that the relationship between use of an agent and subsequent financial benefits is mediated by competence. Although likeability should mediate the effects of an agent on others' willingness to offer additional help, people who are represented by agents will receive more financial benefits than those who represent themselves as a result of increased perceptions of their competence and value.

Method

Participants. One-hundred and twenty-five students (65 women, 60 men) in an introduction to management course at a major university in the United States received extra credit for participation in this study—50% of the participants were between the ages of 21 and 23; 36% were between 18 and 20; and 13% were older than 23. Almost half of the participants identified as European American (47%), a third identified themselves as Asian American (30%), 2% as Hispanic, 1% as African American, and the remaining 17% were classified as Other.

Materials and procedure. Participants were told that the university administration was asking for their help in selecting a new director of student life. It was plausible to ask for student input in this decision because the job involved interaction with students. Participants were told that different students would be evaluating transcripts from interviews with different candidates to fill the position. Because we were interested in increasing the involvement of the students and the psychological realism of our materials, we described the job as an on-campus position that involved interaction with students. The

job description for the position included duties such as “advising/counseling students individually through in-person, phone, and e-mail communications.”

Participants were randomly assigned to either the agent condition or the no-agent condition. The interview transcripts were virtually identical; however, in the agent condition, the introductory statement included an additional passage that read as follows:

The candidate has hired a professional from a recruiting firm to represent him in this interview. In this industry, it is quite common to hire such agents to represent candidates, and the agent will receive a fee, which is commensurate with the salary offered to the candidate.

Either having or not having an intermediary could be considered acceptable and normative in the job-finding context. According to a study by Coopers and Lybrand (Kennedy Information Online, 2004), 64% of executive positions are filled through recruiters. Therefore, either being represented or not would be considered appropriate and there should be no effect of being perceived as counternormative. More important, however, this statement makes it clear that the intermediary has a financial interest in the candidate being perceived positively.

Participants in the no-agent condition read the same transcript except that the candidate represented himself and the wording of the candidate's responses was modified from third person for the agent to first person for the candidate. Because the context is a job interview, the dialogue consisted of questions and answers about the candidate's relevant job experience, strengths and weaknesses, and other background details. Given that the participants in the no-agent condition read the candidate's responses in first person, there was, of course, a significant tone of self-aggrandizement that was not present in the agent condition. One example of the candidate's response was, “Anyone who has worked with me would say that I am a natural leader,” whereas in the agent condition, this read as, “Anyone who has worked with him would say that he is a natural leader.”

After reading the transcript, participants completed a packet of questionnaires in which they provided, in order, a salary recommendation, person perception ratings that included competence and likeability ratings, and ratings of their willingness to provide extra help.

Dependent Variables

Extra help. To explore whether having an agent produces more willingness to offer extra help, participants indicated their willingness on a 10-point scale (ranging from 1 = *very unwilling* to 10 = *extremely willing*) to alert this candidate about a problem in student life, help him distribute a survey to other students, and work in

TABLE 1: Nested Models Assessing Discriminant Validity

Model	CFI	ΔCFI	χ^2	$\Delta\chi^2$
1. Three-factor model: "likeability," "competence," and "extra help"	.91		146.14	
2. Single-factor model	.77		245.79	
Difference between models 2 and 1		.14		99.65***
3. Two-factor model combining "likeability" and "extra help"	.85		193.46	
Difference between models 3 and 1		.06		47.32***
4. Two-factor model combining "likeability" and "competence"	.84		199.47	
Difference between models 4 and 1		.07		53.33***

NOTE: CFI = Comparative Fit Index.

*** $p < .001$.

TABLE 2: Means (Standard Deviations) From Study 1

Dependent Variable	No Agent (n = 61)	Agent (n = 63)
Salary (financial outcomes)	5.20 _a (1.39)	5.79 _b (1.27)
Likeability scale	5.73 _a (1.19)	6.98 _b (1.12)
Competence scale	7.55 _a (1.24)	8.52 _b (.95)
Extra help scale	4.99 _a (1.66)	6.29 _b (1.62)

NOTE: Within each row, means with different subscripts are significantly different at $p < .05$.

his office on a project for no pay. These three items were averaged to create a scale of extra help ($\alpha = .74$).

Likeability and competence. Using a 10-point scale (ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 10 = *extremely*), the survey asked participants to rate the candidate and the agent (if applicable) on a number of traits. A likeability scale was composed of ratings of the degree to which the job candidate was perceived as polite, pleasant, likeable, disagreeable (reverse-coded), sincere, honest, devious (reverse-coded) and cunning (reverse-coded; $\alpha = .59$). It should be noted that the reliability for this measure is below the conventional standards of what is considered to be a good scale and this fact could have potential implications for the interpretations of our results. However, because the reliability of this same scale is higher in the next two studies, we were not overly concerned with the low reliability in this one instance. The measure of competence was composed of ratings of the candidate's perceived talent, competence, intelligence, and ability ($\alpha = .82$).

Because we collected several measures from a single respondent at the same time, we wanted to ensure that we were measuring distinct constructs and capturing more than common method variance. In addition, it was particularly important to determine whether our extra help and likeability constructs were theoretically and empirically distinct. Therefore, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses to compare our model, which had the three independent constructs of extra help, competence, and likeability, to a series of other possible models,

including a highly restricted single-factor structure and two different two-factor models. As Table 1 shows, our model provided the best fit to the data. Chi-square difference tests for the nested models were consistently large and significant, showing that improvements in fit were gained as we moved from restricted models to the target model. These results mean that the three scales that we created do in fact tap separate constructs. Furthermore, the chi-square test of model fit was 146.14, $df = 87$, $p < 0.001$, with a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of .91 and a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) of .08. In addition, the ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom is 1.96. Good fit is characterized by CFI values near or greater than 0.95 and a SRMR of less than .06 (Hu & Bentler, 1999) and value of less than 3 for the ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom (Carmines & McIver, 1981). Taken together, these results indicate that the model provides an adequate fit to the data.

Financial outcomes. After participants read the interview transcript, they were asked to indicate the salary that they thought the school should offer the candidate on a 10-point scale that ranged from 1 (less than \$63,000) to 10 (more than \$85,000). The midpoint (5) was anchored with the label \$74,000, which is the average salary for this type of position, and the points on the scale increased or decreased from this number by \$4000, or about 5%.

Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of the relevant dependent variables by condition. Job candidates represented by an intermediary were perceived as more likeable, $t(123) = 6.06$, $p < .001$, $d = .95$, Confidence Interval (CI) (diff) = .84-1.66, than those who represented themselves. Participants also were more willing to offer extra help to candidates who were represented by an agent than candidates who represented themselves, $t(123) = 4.40$, $p < .001$, $d = .74$, CI(diff) = .71-1.87.

Candidates in the agent condition also were perceived as more competent than those in the no agent condition, $t(123) = 4.92$, $p < .001$, $d = .81$, CI(diff) = .58-1.36,

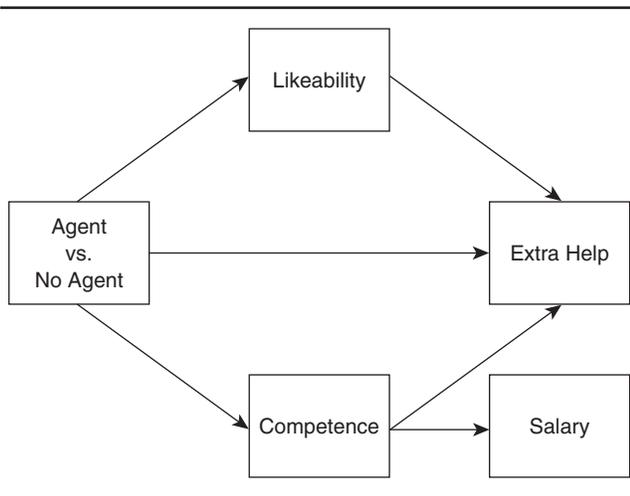


Figure 1 Summary of mediational analyses for Study 1.

and candidates who were represented by an agent received higher salary recommendations, $t(122) = 2.50$, $p < .01$, $d = .46$, $CI(\text{diff}) = .124-1.07$, than candidates who represented themselves.

Mediational analysis. To test the mediating effects of increased likeability and competence, we conducted a series of mediational analyses as directed by Baron and Kenny (1986). Baron and Kenny designate full mediation as occurring when the effect of the independent variable is no longer significant when entered with the mediating variable, whereas the effect of the mediating variable remains a significant predictor. Full mediation indicates that the mediating variable has explained all of the variance initially associated with the independent variable. Partial mediation occurs when the predictive power of the mediating variable remains high while the predictive power of the independent variable is diminished but remains statistically significant. In the case of partial mediation, other factors also may be influencing the relationship between the independent and dependent variable. Because we believed that other factors (such as market forces, individual differences, or other situational factors) may influence the effect of agents on obtaining extra help or salary, we expected that perceptions of likeability and competence would be partial mediators of the relationship between being represented by an intermediary and our dependent variables.

In all of our mediational analyses, the independent variable was the agent condition (coded as 0 if the candidate represented himself or 1 if the candidate was represented by an agent). The dependent variable was either the extra help scale or the salary item, and we tested both competence and interpersonal likeability as potential mediators. As expected, condition (agent or no-agent) was a significant predictor of both of the

dependent variables of interest: extra help ($\beta = .37$, $p < .001$) and salary ($\beta = .22$, $p < .05$). Condition also significantly predicted both likeability ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$) and competence ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$), and likeability ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$) and competence ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$) significantly predicted extra help. However, only competence was a significant predictor of salary ($\beta = .33$, $p < .001$).

Perceptions of likeability partially mediated the effects of having an agent on offering extra help because the effect of condition on extra help was reduced ($\beta = .18$, $p < .05$) when simultaneously entered with the likeability score ($\beta = .40$, $p < .001$). A Sobel (1982) test indicated that the association between the independent variable and the dependent variable was significantly reduced when the mediating variable was included ($Z = 4.31$, $p < .001$). In addition, competence partially mediated the effects of having an agent on being willing to offer extra help; the effect of condition on extra help was reduced ($\beta = .24$, $p < .05$) when entered simultaneously with competence ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$) and the Sobel test indicated that this mediation was statistically significant ($Z = 3.56$, $p < .001$).

Perceptions of competence fully mediated the effects of having an agent on salary because the effects of condition on salary became nonsignificant ($\beta = .11$, ns) when entered simultaneously with competence ($\beta = .28$, $p < .01$), and the Sobel test indicated that these mediated effects were significant ($Z = 3.02$, $p < .01$). These findings imply that, contrary to our initial expectation of partial mediation, perceptions of competence fully explained the variance associated with agent representation in affecting salary. In addition, perceptions of likeability did not mediate the effects of having an agent on salary. Figure 1 depicts all of the significant mediational pathways described.

These results show that using an agent leads to increased likeability, even though the intermediary is not a neutral or disinterested third party. Furthermore, this increased likeability contributes to more willingness to help the job candidate in the future. In addition, an agent can make a client appear more competent even when saying the identical things that the candidate might say, and this increased perceived competence leads to a higher recommended salary for the job candidate.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, our primary goal was to see if the interpersonal effects of having an agent would generalize across a different experimental context. We chose the domain of book publishing because (a) agents are sometimes, but not invariably, used in placing books so

both having an agent and representing oneself would both be plausible and normative; (b) the scenario situation in book publishing did not require a lot of specialized technical knowledge that participants would be unlikely to possess; and (c) both the economic terms of the deal and also the quality of the relationship between the parties are important outcomes.

For this study, we also wanted to examine the possibility that intermediaries may be useful not just because they provide third-person advocacy but also because they provide social proof of their client's likeability and competence. To begin to explore this possibility, we varied the number of agents to see if having two rather than one affected the results. Previous research has demonstrated that as the number of individuals who share the same opinion grows, so does the perception of social proof (Milgram, Bickman, & Berkowitz, 1969).

Finally, although the effects of having an intermediary on perceptions of competence and through competence on salary revealed in Study 1 were theoretically interesting, our primary focus is on the interpersonal and social effects of having a third party sing one's praises. Therefore, we chose an experimental context and constructed a scenario where we could establish the competence of our author and standardize perceptions of success of the individual across conditions to, in effect, hold competence constant. We also were interested in exploring the possibility that the effect of being represented by an intermediary comes from the status or prestige associated with retaining an agent, an idea that is separate from but related to perceptions of competence. Consequently, we included two new, additional measures of perceptions of status and prestige in this study as manipulation checks.

Method

Participants. Forty-four students from a major university in the United States were recruited from an electronic mailing list that advertises behavioral studies to people who have indicated that they are interested in participating in them (M age = 21.66, SD = 2.93; 16 women, 19 men; demographic information for 8 participants was not collected). In this case, participants responded to an advertised study on decision making and were paid \$10 for their participation.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to read and respond to one of three vignettes. In all cases, participants were instructed to imagine themselves in the role of a senior editor at a successful book-publishing house considering a deal with an experienced author named Michael Green. In all conditions, participants were told that the author with whom they are negotiating had already been successful in the academic

book market and was now thinking about moving into the popular book market. Therefore, the competence of the author was constant and presumed to be equal across all three conditions. Participants in the control condition then read excerpts from a conversation with the author asking for a sizeable advance owing to the quality of his reputation, talent, and vision for the new book. Participants in the agent conditions read the identical speech as being delivered entirely by one agent or split between two agents.

Dependent Variables

Extra help. Because the situation is different in Study 2, we modified the extra assistance measure to reflect help that could be plausibly given by a publisher to an author. Participants indicated on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (*extremely unwilling*) to 10 (*extremely willing*) their desire to invite the author to dinner at their home and to favor him over other authors in granting requests for special help. These two items were averaged to create a scale of extra help that accrues to the client (α = .61).

Likeability. The identical likeability scale used in Study 1 was used to assess participants' impressions of the author and his agent or agents; in this instance, the scale achieved a high degree of reliability (α = .83).

Financial outcomes. After reading the scenario, participants indicated how much they would offer the author for the advance on his proposed book. The scale for the financial offer ranged from 1 (less than \$25,000) and increased in amounts of \$5,000 until 10 (more than \$60,000).

Manipulation checks. To ensure that perceptions of competence were, in fact, equivalent across all three conditions, we used the same four-item competence scale from Study 1 (α = .88). We also included two additional items to explore whether agent representation or number of agents influenced perceptions of status or prestige. Participants were asked to answer the questions, "How much status do you think Michael Green has as an author?" and "How prestigious do you think Michael Green is as an author?" on 10-point scales ranging from 1 (*very low status/very unprestigious*) to 10 (*extremely high status/extremely prestigious*).

Results and Discussion

Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations for the economic and likeability outcomes by condition.

Effects of social proof. Pairwise comparisons revealed that there were no differences between having one or two agents on any of the dependent variables of interest (t s ranged from .02 to 1.00, n s, d s ranged from 0 to .22). Null results are, of course, difficult to interpret

TABLE 3: Means (Standard Deviations) From Study 2

Dependent Variable	No Agent (n = 15)	1 agent (n = 14)	2 agents (n = 15)
Book advance offer	5.60 _a (1.55)	6.43 _a (1.65)	6.53 _a (1.36)
Likeability scale	4.45 _a (0.96)	6.40 _b (0.70)	6.62 _b (0.90)
Competence scale	7.70 _a (1.42)	7.96 _a (0.57)	8.21 _a (1.16)
Status	7.00 _a (1.81)	6.85 _a (1.46)	6.87 _a (2.00)
Prestige	6.67 _a (2.06)	6.93 _a (1.64)	7.27 _a (1.53)
Extra help scale	3.67 _a (1.57)	6.36 _b (0.72)	6.67 _b (1.87)

NOTE: Within each row, means with different subscripts are significantly different at $p < .05$.

and may be specific to this research design, measurement, or particular stimulus materials. Nonetheless, the absence of any significant differences between having one or two agents suggests that the observed effects of using an intermediary are unlikely to be solely because of social proof processes and that other factors, such as perceptions of likeability, are more potent in this particular research setting. Moreover, considering the differences in the means between the one- and two-agent conditions, it would take a very large number of agents to have much greater effect than one agent alone. Because there was no difference between the one- and two-agent conditions, for all subsequent analyses, we collapsed across this variable.

Perceptions of competence, status and prestige. As intended in our design, condition did not influence ratings of the client’s competence, $t(42) = 1.11$, *ns*, $d = .36$, $CI(\text{diff}) = -1.78-3.34$. We presume that this intended null result is because of the statement regarding the author’s previous success, a statement that was equivalent across conditions, but the absence of any differences in perceived competence also could be from the difference in the setting (publishing vs. job interviewing) or other factors. The data also show that the presence or absence of an agent did not influence perceptions of the author’s status, $t(42) = .25$, *ns*, $d = .08$, $CI(\text{diff}) = -3.81-4.35$, or prestige, $t(42) = .79$, *ns*, $d = .25$, $CI(\text{diff}) = -4.89-3.18$.

Financial outcomes. There was a marginally significant difference in participants’ recommended advance when the author was represented by an agent (or two) than when he was alone, $t(42) = 1.85$, $p = .07$, $CI(\text{diff}) = -5.25-1.73$, although the Cohen’s d for this effect size was .60, which is traditionally considered a medium effect. In combination with the results from Study 1, these results could be interpreted as evidence that perceptions of competence influence how much money people decide to offer, making approximately the same offers when competence is judged to be about equal (as in Study 2) and offering more when they perceive greater competence (as we observed in Study 1).

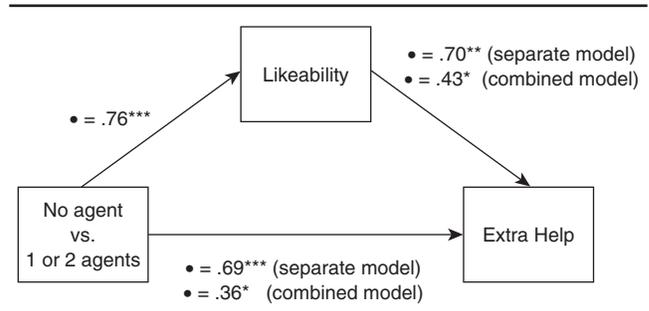


Figure 2 Mediation analyses for Study 2: Likeability mediates the relationship between having an agent and obtaining extra help.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Perceptions of likeability and extra assistance. Consistent with the results of Study 1, the author was perceived more favorably, as measured by the likeability scale, when he was represented by an agent (or two) than when he represented himself, $t(42) = 7.58$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.48$, $CI(\text{diff}) = -2.61$ to -1.51 . As we expected, authors were more likely to receive extra assistance when they were represented by an agent than when they represented themselves, $t(42) = 6.10$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.99$, $CI(\text{diff}) = -3.80$ to -1.89 .

Mediation analysis. For the mediation analyses, the independent variable was coded 0 if the author represented himself and 1 if he was represented by one or two agents. Once again, as the pattern of coefficients depicted in Figure 2 demonstrates, likeability partially mediates the effect of having an agent on obtaining extra help from the publisher, and a Sobel test indicated that the mediated effects were significant ($Z = 2.48$, $p < .05$). Just as in Study 1, likeability ratings did not mediate the effects of having an agent on financial outcomes.

The results of Study 2 indicate once again that agents can provide important person perception benefits even when people know the agents’ economic interest in making their clients look good. In this case, authors who used agents to tout their positive qualities were more likeable than those who presented the favorable information themselves, and this increased likeability contributed to willingness to offer extra assistance. Furthermore, these results occurred in a negotiation context where the client’s competence was not in question, and because there was no evidence that agents created more status or prestige for the author, and there was no difference between having one or two agents, we can, at least in this instance, rule out some plausible alternative interpretations for the observed results. Taken together, these results are consistent with our arguments about the self-presentation dilemma and the

effect of intermediaries in overcoming it. Having an agent changed perceptions of likeability even when, as in the first study, the agent obviously had a financial interest in the client's success.

STUDY 3

In Study 3, our objective was first to replicate the results of Study 2 using an even more realistic video vignette methodology that would enhance the motivational involvement and engagement of the study participants. Second, this method also allowed us to explore the effects of the client being physically present with the agent, which puts the effect of situational constraints on interpersonal perceptions to a very stringent test. One possible benefit of using an intermediary is that the client can be physically absent when positive information is presented on that person's behalf. This fact of not being visible when claims of competence are being made might decrease negative attributions or associations that come from self-promotion. Even though people know that the agent is acting on the client's behalf, the fact that the client is not present may make this association less salient and reduce the perceived connection between the two parties. However, it also may be the case that as long as the words don't come out of the client's mouth, the person being represented may escape the social opprobrium that results from appearing self-aggrandizing even if the client is seen to be complicit in the agent's behavior.

One limitation of our first two studies was that we could not disentangle whether it was the agent making the statements or the client's physical absence that shielded the client from negative interpersonal perceptions. In Study 3, we manipulated both agent representation and physical presence separately to examine the effects of these two factors.

Method

Participants. Eighty-five participants (53 women, 32 men; M age = 22.36, SD = 5.05) were recruited from the same electronic mailing list as described in Study 2. In this sample, 51.8% identified themselves as White or Caucasian, 36.5% identified themselves as Asian/Asian American, 3.5% were Black/African American, and 8.2% were Hispanic/Latin American. Half of our participants stated that their major was in science and/or engineering, whereas the others identified themselves as humanities majors (13.6%), social sciences majors (25.8%), other (1.5%), or undecided (9.1%); 27.4% of our participants were in the master's of business administration (MBA) program, which means that they had at least some work experience.

Procedure. Participants were told that the researchers were interested in their reactions to differing types of negotiation tactics. They were told to imagine themselves as a senior editor in the videotaped scene that they were about to watch and that the scene was of a fictional negotiation with actors playing the parts of an author or an agent. To help them prepare, participants read a background information sheet prior to watching the videotape. The sheet contained a description of the scenario used in Study 2. They were then shown one of four randomly assigned videotaped scenes of the negotiation and then completed a series of questionnaires.

Stimulus materials. Four different videotaped scenarios were created. A professional actor was hired to deliver the short speech used in Study 2. The same actor delivered identical lines in all conditions. In all conditions, the actor (either alone or accompanied by a confederate in a nonspeaking role) entered an office set, sat down at the desk, and delivered his lines. In the agent alone condition, the actor was alone on the camera and played the part of the agent. In the author alone condition, the actor also was alone but this time played the role of the author representing himself. In a third condition (author speaks/agent silent), the actor played the author and was accompanied by a confederate, whom he introduced as his agent. The confederate did not say anything and only his arm and shoulder were in view while the author made his speech. Finally, in the agent speaks/author silent condition, the actor played the agent and the confederate was introduced as his client. Again, only the confederate's arm and shoulder were visible during the delivery of the lines that followed.

Dependent Variables

Complicity measures. The measures collected were identical to those from Study 2, with an important addition of complicity measures. In addition to the variables from Study 2, we also included measures that assessed the extent to which the participants felt that the author was complicit in the agent's statements and behavior. These questions were answered using a 10-point scale that ranged from 1 (*no knowledge at all/not at all approving/no control at all*) to 10 (*complete knowledge/extremely approving/complete control*). Because these questions referred to the agent's statements and actions, they were only collected in the agent alone and agent speaks/author silent conditions.

Results and Discussion

Table 4 contains the means and standard deviations for all variables of interest in Study 3. For all of the dependent variables in this study, we conducted 2 (speaker alone vs. accompanied) \times 2 (agent speaks vs.

TABLE 4: Means (Standard Deviations) From Study 3

Dependent Variable	Agent Alone (n = 22)	Author Alone (n = 19)	Author Speaks/Agent Silent (n = 21)	Agent Speaks/Author Silent (n = 23)
Book advance offer (financial outcomes)	5.77 (1.63) _a	5.00 (1.94) _{a,c}	5.06 (1.51) _{a,c}	4.74 (1.60) _{b,c}
Likeability scale ($\rho = .76$)	6.14 (.99) _a	5.16 (.98) _b	4.54 (.99) _b	6.22 (1.06) _a
Competence scale ($\rho = .94$)	7.85 (1.48) _a	7.37 (1.01) _{a,b}	6.46 (1.57) _b	7.17 (2.07) _b
Status	6.18 (2.13) _a	6.21 (1.51) _a	5.71 (1.71) _a	5.61 (2.21) _a
Prestige	6.22 (2.07) _a	6.26 (1.52) _a	5.86 (1.80) _a	5.30 (2.27) _a
Extra help scale ($\rho = .63$)	5.98 (2.08) _a	3.95 (1.96) _b	3.33 (1.69) _b	5.70 (1.47) _a
Knowledge	5.59 (2.17) _a	—	—	7.79 (2.12) _b
Approve	5.77 (2.00) _a	—	—	7.16 (1.80) _b
Control	4.72 (2.31) _a	—	—	6.11 (2.31) _a

NOTE: Within each row, means with different subscripts are significantly different at $p < .05$.

author speaks) ANOVAs to disentangle the differential effects of speaking, physical presence, and the interaction of the two.

Manipulation checks. Our analyses revealed a marginally significant main effect for being alone or accompanied, such that when the agent or author was alone in the meeting, the author was perceived as more competent ($M = 7.64$) than when the agent or author was accompanied ($M = 7.00$), $F(1, 59) = 2.92$, $p < .10$, $\eta^2 = .05$. As expected, there was no significant main effect of speaker, $F(1, 59) = .94$, ns , $\eta^2 = .02$, or a significant interaction effect, $F(1, 59) = .32$, ns , $\eta^2 = .01$, on ratings of the author's competence.

In addition, there were no main effects for speaker, being alone or accompanied, or the interaction between the two on ratings of the author's status or prestige (all F s < 2.11 , ns , all $\eta^2 < .04$).

Financial outcomes. There were no significant main or interaction effects on the size of the author's advance (all F s < 1.81 , ns , all $\eta^2 < .03$). Taken as a whole, these results correspond with the findings in Study 2 that show that when competence is not in question and is equal across conditions, using an agent does not necessarily lead to better financial outcomes.

Complicity measures. As expected, an independent samples t test demonstrated that participants in the agent speaks/author silent condition (where the author was physically present) rated the client as having more knowledge about his agent's behaviors, $t(40) = 3.26$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.50$, $CI(\text{diff}) = -3.56$ to -0.84 , and believed that the author approved of his agent's behavior to a greater extent, $t(40) = 2.32$, $p < .05$, $d = 1.07$, $CI(\text{diff}) = -2.60$ to -1.67 , than those in the agent alone condition. In addition, participants in the agent speaks/author silent condition rated the author as having marginally more control over his agent's behavior, $t(40) = 1.90$, $p < .06$, $d = .87$, $CI(\text{diff}) = -2.84$ to $.09$, than those in the agent alone condition. Thus, physical presence did, as

we had intended, serve as a reminder that the agent was complicit and in a relationship with the client. However, there were no correlations between the complicity measures and the extra assistance scale or the likeability scale (r s ranged from $.00$ -. 31 , ns).

Extra assistance and likeability. A 2×2 ANOVA demonstrated that there was no significant main effect for whether the author or agent was alone or accompanied, $F(1, 59) = .51$, ns , $\eta^2 = .01$, and there was no significant interaction effect, $F(1, 59) = .00$, ns , $\eta^2 = .00$. Of importance, however, there was a significant effect for speaker, $F(1, 59) = 13.03$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .19$, such that the author received significantly greater extra assistance when the agent spoke ($M = 5.90$) than when he spoke himself ($M = 3.96$).

Results for ratings of the author's likeability followed the identical pattern we have seen in the previous studies. There was no significant main effect for whether the author or agent was alone or accompanied, $F(1, 59) = .09$, ns , $\eta^2 = .00$, and there was no significant interaction effect, $F(1, 59) = .36$, ns , $\eta^2 = .00$, but there was a significant effect for speaker, $F(1, 59) = 12.31$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .18$. The author was better liked when his agent sang his praises ($M = 6.18$) rather than when he praised himself ($M = 5.13$).

These results show that the differences in person perceptions and extra assistance that come from having an intermediary are not simply because the client is physically absent. Instead, the fact that someone other than the client makes claims of competence permits the client to avoid being seen as self-promoting, thereby providing the benefits of being offered extra assistance. Although participants were aware that the author was more complicit in the statements that the agent made when the author was present, this awareness did not influence how favorably the author was perceived or his likelihood of receiving extra help. These results indicate that just as Jones and Harris (1967) and others (e.g., Ginzler, 1994) have found, people are not able to fully

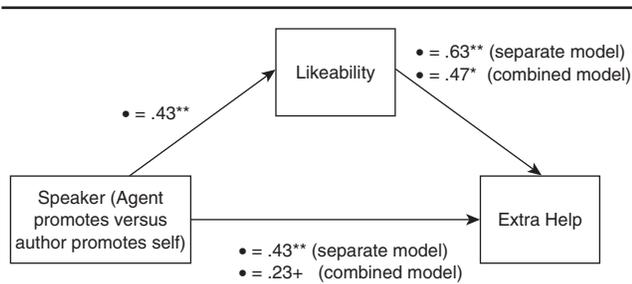


Figure 3 Mediation analyses for Study 3: Likeability mediates the relationship between self-promotion or agent promotion and obtaining extra help.

† $p < .10$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

correct their interpersonal judgments and perceptions for knowledge of situational constraints and influence. The results also show that the Inman et al. (2004) findings on the benefits of having a third party sing one's praises persist even when that third party is seen to be associated with and closely tied to—even under the control of—the person being praised.

Mediation analyses. Once again, we conducted mediation analyses, which are shown in Figure 3. For these analyses, the independent variable was whether the author spoke (i.e., in the author alone and author speaks/agent silent conditions) or the agent spoke (i.e., agent alone and agent speaks/author silent conditions). These analyses revealed that in this study, likeability fully mediated the effects of who spoke (agent or author) on whether the author received extra assistance (see Figure 3 for relevant coefficients). In addition, the results of the Sobel (1982) test indicated that this mediation was statistically significant ($Z = 2.23$, $p < .01$).

The results of Study 3 provide important insights into the mechanisms that create the benefits of agent representation by investigating the effects of perceived complicity and physical salience as well as speaking on behalf of another. Study 3 revealed that the positive results associated with using an agent to sing one's praises occur even when participants are aware that the agent is complicit with and somewhat under the control of the client because the client is actually physically present while the agent speaks. These findings suggest that it is who actually makes the positive statements, not physical salience or even perceived control, that accounts for the effects of using an agent on increased likeability and obtaining extra help.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results of the three studies paint a consistent picture: Using an intermediary to make positive comments

shields the individual being promoted from the adverse consequences of being seen as self-aggrandizing. People whose praises are sung by others are perceived as more likeable, and this likeability leads, in turn, to a greater willingness to do favors or expend extra effort on behalf of that individual. What is particularly remarkable is that these effects occurred not just in situations such as those described by Inman et al. (2004), in which neutral or disinterested third parties are doing the talking, but even when the intermediary had a financial stake in the client's outcomes, even when others knew about this financial stake (because they were explicitly told about it), and even when the client was physically present and seen to be complicit in the intermediary's statements on his behalf. As such, the results not only show that agent representation provides a resolution to the self-promotion dilemma but they also provide another vivid illustration of the fact that individuals are unable to fully discount situational factors in forming social judgments and making decisions. So, even though participants were told (and in Study 3 actually saw) the connection between the intermediary and his client, they nonetheless perceived the client to be more likeable and were willing to accord him more assistance just because another sang his praises.

Furthermore, the results of Study 1 showed that in circumstances when competency may be in question, having an agent make favorable statements can have the added benefit of increasing perceptions of competency or ability above the individual claiming competency for himself, and these perceptions of competency can then positively influence financial outcomes.

We have argued that having another sing one's praises leads to greater likeability and, as a consequence, a greater willingness on the part of others to do favors for the individual. This causal model was tested through our mediation analyses and we found either partial or full mediation of the effect of using an agent on obtaining extra help occurring through the effect of an agent on likeability in each instance. However, there are other plausible causal pathways not tested or relevant in the present study. For example, it is possible that offering extra help could, through the mechanism of cognitive consistency, cause those who offered the extra help to see the individual to whom the help was offered as more likeable or more competent. Future research should examine additional causal pathways, such as cognitive consistency, to develop a more complete understanding of the benefits of agent representation.

Our results are theoretically important because they highlight the utility of employing an agent in affecting the interpersonal climate of negotiations and transactions. Intermediaries can help clients build and maintain positive relationships with others, a social psychological

effect that may help to explain why intermediaries are so pervasive in their use. Our results serve to substantially broaden the exploration of the effects of agents on transactions from the narrow focus on the possible divergence of interests between agents and their clients to a broader consideration of other dimensions of the interaction—for instance, interpersonal affect—and also to consider the effects of having an intermediary on the other party to the transaction. Our results also show that the positive benefits of having a third party sing one's praises hold even when that third party stands to benefit from the positive portrayals being offered.

Directions for Future Research

A number of questions remain for subsequent research to more fully understand the mechanisms and circumstances under which using an agent helps overcome the self-promotion dilemma. An important dimension of the experimental situations we have used is the absence of any prior history or relationship between the people involved in the transactions. One possible moderator to the relationships we observed could be whether there was a prior history of interactions between any of the negotiating parties. Prior history could conceivably make self-promotion more tolerable and less unacceptable because an existing favorable relationship could produce idiosyncrasy credits—permission to deviate from socially expected and accepted behavior (Hollander, 1958)—that mitigate the negative effects of self-promotion.

The particular mechanism we have explored is also something that will be more or less important in different contexts. When interpersonal relations are an important part of an ongoing transaction, the effects we have discussed should be more important in predicting outcomes. In other, more one-off transactions with less interpersonal content, such as real estate transactions, the sorts of effects we have demonstrated here should have much less importance, whereas financial outcomes and perceptions of competence may become more important. Consequently, one extension of the present research is to systematically study the effects of intermediaries in transactions that presumably vary along both dimensions of prior history and the importance of interpersonal versus financial outcomes. When financial outcomes are important, a more in-depth understanding of the mediational relationship between agent representation, competence, and financial outcomes would likely be beneficial, and more work is necessary to determine potential moderators of this effect.

It would be useful to understand more fully the conditions under which interpersonal perceptions (of likeability) fully mediate the effects of using an intermediary

and when the mediation is partial. Full mediation was observed only in the case of Study 3, which is also the instance of the greatest emotional and motivational engagement because of the use of the video vignette methodology. It is possible that full mediation through likeability occurs only when the intermediary is present or absent in more psychologically involving or dynamic situations.

Although there are a number of possible extensions of the present research and a need to extend the argument to other negotiating situations, it does seem clear that the general situation we have explored—having another represent an individual in some transaction—is quite important as the use of intermediaries is widespread. Therefore, it is both theoretically and substantively useful to explore the effects of various representation arrangements as well as the social psychology that underlies those effects. Going beyond the principal-agent literature with its assumptions of conflicting interests to investigate other social psychological mechanisms that affect interpersonal interaction seems to be a useful avenue to pursue.

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