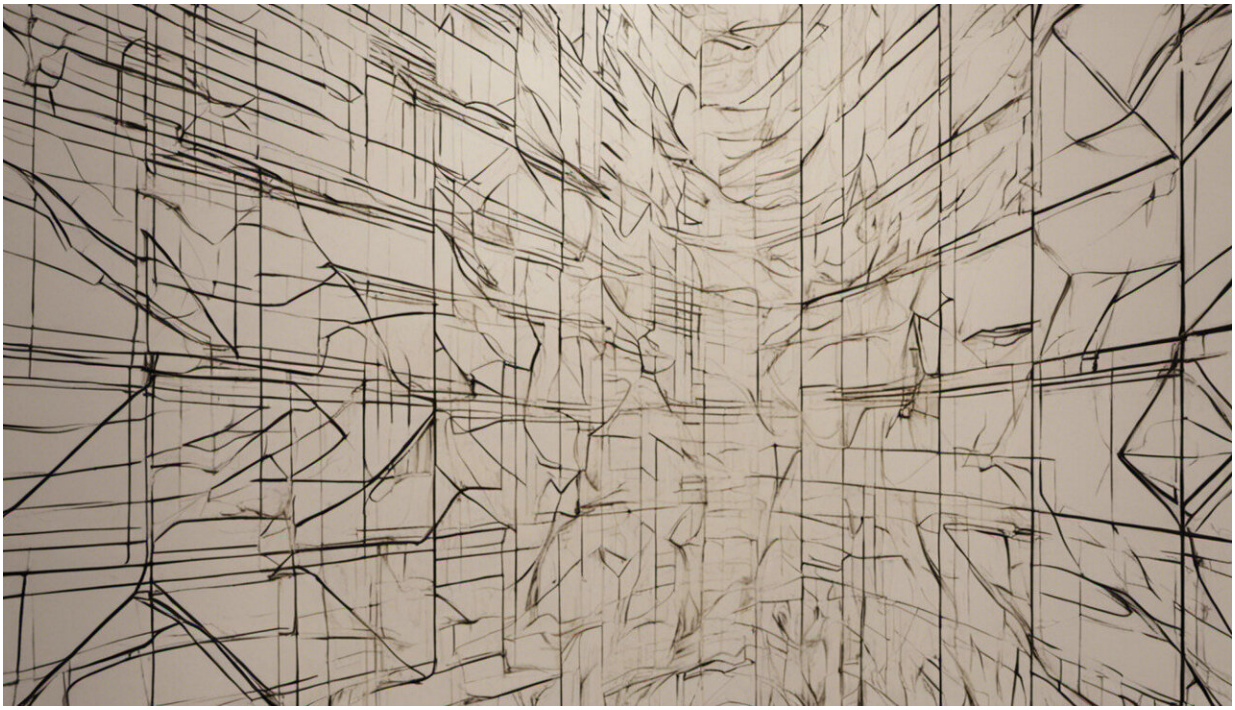
How sharing your success is perceived as bragging—more often than you think

May 29 2015, by Irene Scopelliti



Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

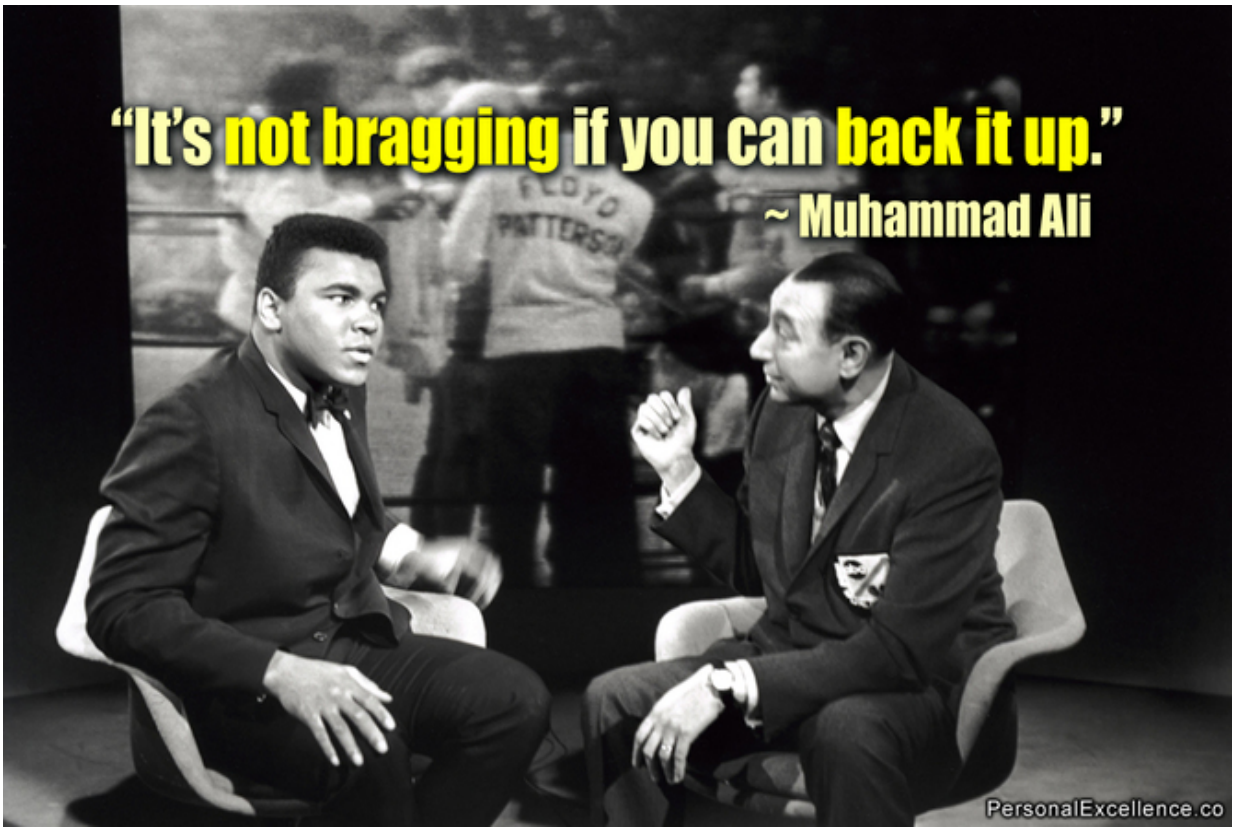
Imagine you just received a great bit of news at work – a promotion, pay rise, new car, an acceptance letter from the top journal in your field. If you are like me, you would probably like to open your door or pick up your phone and share your happiness with co-workers and friends. But research that colleagues and I have recently carried out suggested you

should think twice.

Despite your genuine intentions, your friends or colleagues may not be as excited as you think to hear your good news. Most people probably realise that they experience emotions other than pure joy when they are on the receiving end of someone else's self-promotion. Yet, when we engage in self-promotion ourselves – by tagging ourselves at a first-class airline lounge on social media or sharing news of the triathlon we just completed – we tend to overestimate the extent that others will share in our joy and underestimate the negative reactions this can provoke.

Empathy gap

Colleagues and I conducted a series of experiments to investigate this phenomenon, which we recently published in the journal *Psychological Science*. We asked participants to recall situations in which they engaged in self-promotion, or were the recipients of someone else's. Participants recalled boasting or hearing boasts about a variety of topics – from achievements and special abilities to money, status and material possessions, from knowing the right people to having great partners, children and lovers.



How not to win friends and influence people. Credit: Celestine Chua, CC BY

We found that self-promoters overestimated the extent to which recipients of their self-promotion felt proud and happy for them and underestimated the extent to which recipients felt annoyed. We were fascinated by these results, and attributed this miscalibration to a phenomenon called the empathy gap. Both parties – self-promoters and recipients – have trouble imagining how they would feel if their roles were reversed.

We then conducted another experiment to examine the consequences of this miscalibration. We wanted to know whether people who try to make a good impression actually self-promote more. In the first part of the

experiment, 99 participants were instructed to create a profile to present themselves to others – similar to what people do on social media or dating websites. We told them they could talk about their work or education, sports activities or other hobbies, looks or personality, family or social life.

Half of the participants were given an additional instruction. They had to try to make readers of their profile most interested in them. In the second part of the experiment, a large sample of participants read their profiles and indicated how much they liked the authors, their interest in actually meeting them, how successful they thought the authors were and the extent to which the author appeared to be bragging.

We observed that participants who created their profile with the intention of maximising others' interest, bragged more and were perceived as such. Although the goal they were given was to increase the likelihood that other people would be interested in meeting them, their efforts backfired. More self-promotion did not change perceptions of their success or interest in meeting them. Instead it decreased those reading their profiles' liking of them and increased the perception that they were braggarts.

Little nudges

These results are particularly important in an age where a great deal of our interactions with others take place online and opportunities for self-promotion have proliferated via social networking sites. The emotional miscalibration that we observed in our study may be increased by the additional distance there is between people sharing information and their recipients. This can both reduce the empathy of the self-promoter and decrease the sharing of pleasure by the recipient.

So what can be done to reduce the negative social consequences of self-

promotion? Some little nudges may be very helpful. For example, when we feel the urge to share some good news we should try to put ourselves in the shoes of those on the receiving end. Will they interpret our news as a brag or share in our enjoyment?

Thinking about how others will hear or read our news may help us realise that others may actually be less happy than we think to hear about our latest achievement. At the same time, when we are on the other end of someone else's self-promotion, and find ourselves very annoyed at our self-praising friend, we might likewise try to bolster our tolerance in the knowledge that braggarts genuinely underestimate others' negative reactions to their bragging.

Source: The Conversation