

When Bragging, Be Modest: The Art of Humblebragging

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ABSTRACT

Bragging refers to boasting about one's achievements to others. It can be understood as a behaviour that successfully satisfies an individual's needs for power and affiliation. However, bragging has never been socially acceptable. Our society has always encouraged modesty and humility which have become necessary for social inclusion of people in groups. With an increase in the use of social media platforms today, we also experience an increase in our social needs for affiliation and acceptance. In light of this rise, outright bragging can harm an individual's image and also threaten their social identity. Therefore, individuals today largely engage in the practice of humblebragging – an attempt to brag about one's achievements while projecting oneself to be humble and socially desirable. Humblebrags can either be masked in humility or complaint, and are often self-deprecating in nature. While on surface it projects oneself in a socially acceptable light, the underlying aim of a humblebrag is to boast about one's accomplishments to others. With the rampant prevalence of this phenomenon on social media, there is a pressing urge to fully understand this social construct, its nuances and its varied manifestations. Thus, it is necessary to explore the characteristics of humblebragging, its various forms and its influence on people to understand its impact on our society.

Keywords: *humility, complaint, self-deprecating, social needs, humblebragging*

Humblebragging is a phenomenon that has taken a stride over social media in the last decade. The term first came into existence in 2010 when American comedian Harris Wittels started a Twitter page to reply to all the tweets which classified to be humblebrags according to him. In 2012, Wittels authored the book *Humblebrag: The Art of False Modesty* where he collected various tweets, organized them under different categories, stating the various situations in which people engage in humblebragging. According to Wittels, a humblebrag is defined as –

A specific type of brag that masks the boasting part of a statement in a faux-humble guise. The false humility allows the offender to boast about their “achievements” without any sense of shame or guilt. Humblebrags are usually self-deprecating in nature, but there are a few exceptions.

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According to Wittels, humblebrags are characterised by self-deprecating statements and are masked in false humility. He also indicates that from his observation, most humblebrags are followed by phrases such as ‘awkward’, ‘weird’ etc. (Wittels, 2012). The references that people make in the sentence may not be awkward or weird, but the inclusion of these phrases emphasizes upon the unique nature of the situation and classifies it as a humblebrag. The phenomenon of humblebragging has existed since a long time with famous figures such as Nelson Mandela, Genghis Khan and Madonna engaging in it. It is only recently that this phenomenon has been identified and a term was coined for the same. Since then, humblebragging has been widely discussed in newspaper articles and blog posts across the world.

To understand the impact of humblebragging on its perceivers, Sezer and her colleagues carried out a study in Harvard University (Sezer, Gino & Norton, 2015). The aim of their study was to understand people’s reactions to humblebrags. They classified humblebrags into two types – brags masked in complaint (which made up 70% of humble brags) and others masked in humility (which made up the remaining 30% of humble brags). Such humblebrags are often used to generate sympathy and admiration from others. However, it often results in opposite effects. Sezer and her associates identified that people reacted more unfavourably to humblebrags as compared to brags, and that humblebragging could lead to negative image formation and impression management among people. Therefore, this study indicated that humblebragging generated dire opposite effects to desire and admiration for the individual engaging in it.

Given its popularity, the term humblebragging is now included in the Oxford and Merriam-Webster dictionaries. These definitions further highlight the false humility and self deprecating nature of a humblebrag with reference being made to one’s achievements or accomplishments. Multiple discussions on humblebragging highlight the rising demand drawn by this phenomenon, and thus lay emphasis on its systematic study.

Contextual Triggers of Humblebragging

In his book, Harris Wittels identified a wide range of situations where celebrities were most likely to engage in humblebragging. These humblebrags were largely collected from the Twitter accounts of various celebrities, categorized under various situational contexts of its occurrence and presented to its audience. Contextual triggers of humblebragging identified by Wittels are wide scale, and range from one boasting about being pretty to one boasting about engaging in charity work. These situations also include contexts where the individual engaging in it is either thin or pretty; is rich; is on television or at an exclusive event; or is engaging in socially-encouraged charity work. These situations have an underlying theme of being socially desirable. Being thin, pretty, rich, famous and altruistic are characteristics and actions applauded by people of the society. It allows one to improve their social standing and also become desirable in the eyes of others. Therefore, these humblebrags allow one to widen their social groups, thus improving their social identity and group affiliation. Although humblebragging takes place on social media most times, it is sometimes present in daily face-to-face interactions. These were largely seen in case of historical figures such as Napoleon Bonaparte, Genghis Khan and Adolf Hitler, as indicated by Wittels (Wittels, 2012).

Reasons for Humblebragging

While bragging has been widely prevalent in our society, it is only recently that humblebragging has gained popularity across various communication platforms. Thus, to

understand the reason for the rise in humblebragging, we need to understand the reasons for bragging, also synonymously known as boasting.

According to the Oxford dictionary, boasting refers to ‘talking with excessive pride and self satisfaction about one’s achievements, possessions, or abilities’. In the oldest surviving English story *Beowulf*, boasting was recommended and seen as something desirable by the society. Anglo Saxons warriors had no shame in showing off their achievements with pride. They considered it to be an indication of their capabilities and also their promise to protect the people of their land (Nelson, 2005). Then, boasting was used as a medium to boost one’s self-esteem and also express one’s power. Today, Harvard University scientists reveal that boasting about oneself activates the same areas of the brain that are activated by food and sex (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012). Along with the generation of pleasure, boasting also serves other needs of an individual. According to Morty Lefkoe (2011), boasting helps improve one’s self-esteem by creating one’s positive image in people’s minds. It helps us feel good about ourselves and thus becomes our survival strategy.

Psychological Basis of Bragging

Bragging is a human behaviour which is driven to satisfy needs for affiliation and belongingness; need for self esteem; and need for power. Need fulfilment can be viewed through the motivational and need theories of Murray’s Psychogenic Needs, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and McClelland’s Need Theory.

Murray’s Psychogenic Needs. Among the various psychogenic needs proposed by Murray, the behaviour of bragging allows the individual to satisfy the needs for affiliation and power (Burger, 2008). Murray defines need for affiliation as our desire to form close relations with others and be loved. Boasting about one’s achievements allows oneself to present themselves in positive light to others and also increases social affiliation to various people and groups in the society. Therefore, the person engaging in boasting grows his social circle by making himself more desirable by others. A stronger social standing further increases the power that the individual exerts on people and situations around them. It allows him to become independent and also exert control over others. This is further accomplished by the action of boasting of one’s achievements.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs: The third and the fourth tier of Maslow’s Need Hierarchy correspond to need for love and belongingness and need for self esteem respectively (Feldman, 2011). These needs are satisfied by boasting about one’s achievements. The need for love and belongingness is synonymous with the Murray’s need for affiliation, and this is accomplished by boasting and forming stronger social groups. A strong social standing boosts one’s self esteem by providing him with the power over people and situations. Therefore, boasting increases one’s sense of self worth and helps them feel good about themselves.

McClelland’s Need Theory: Similar to the previous two need theories discussed, McClelland also emphasizes upon one’s needs for power and affiliation (Robbins & Judge, 2013). Each time that boasting fulfils these needs in an individual, it is positively reinforced by its acceptance reflected by the society. Therefore, the behaviour of boasting about one’s achievements is repeated over and over again so that the individual can derive the benefits of increased social desirability and social control.

Rise of Humblebragging

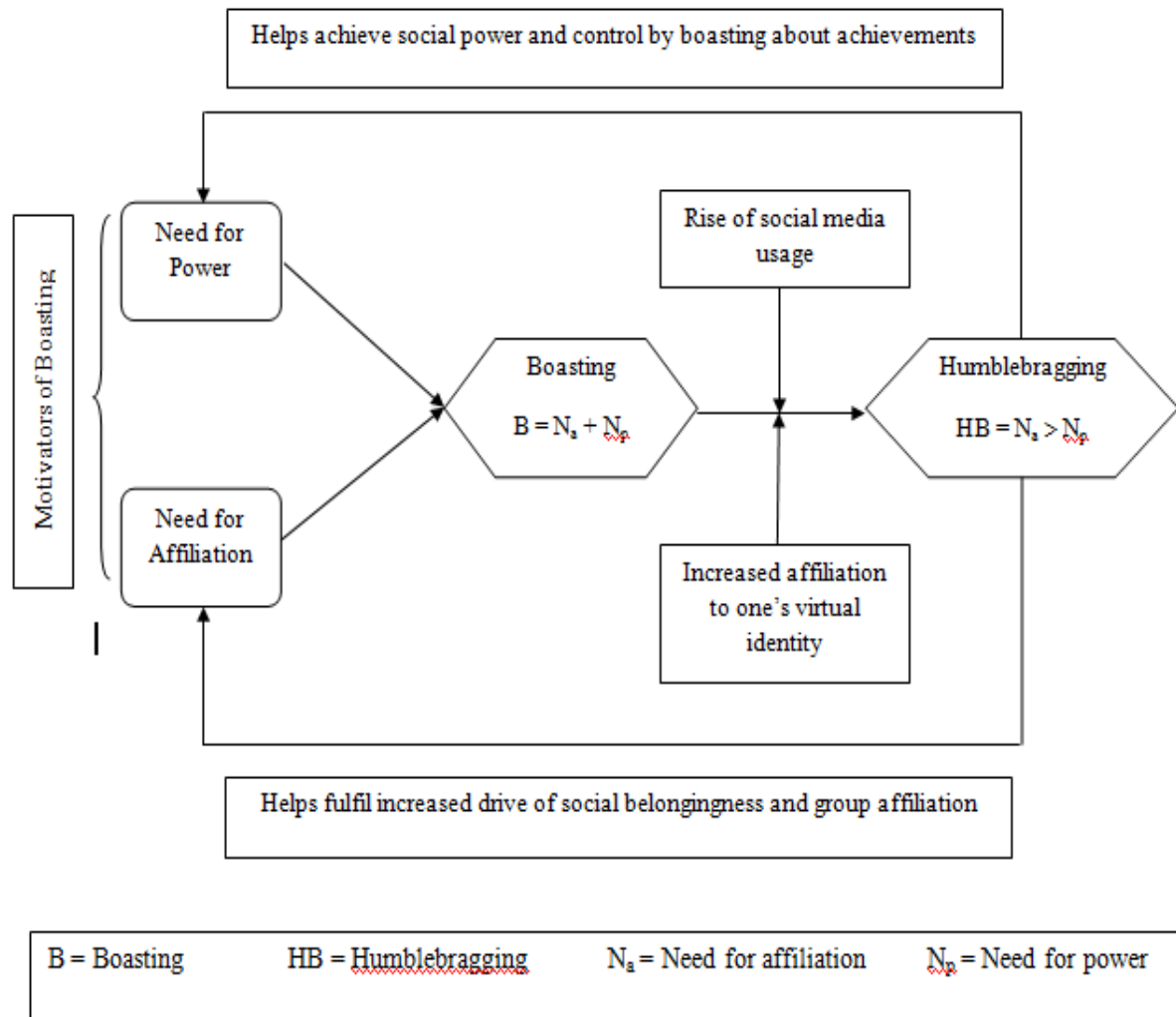
Social media usage by individuals has increased multi-fold in the recent decades. Studies indicate that this rise is mediated by the increased need for popularity among young adults (Utz, Tanis & Vermeulen, 2012). Thus, the higher the need for popularity in an individual, the higher is his social media use. Today, we live in a digital age where ‘showing off’ about one’s achievements and accomplishments has become the norm. Thus, boasting on social media sites is becoming a very common phenomenon where social media posts are a mode to brag about one’s accomplishments.

Rise in social media usage has also led to the development of an online or virtual identity among individuals. This identity is largely shaped by one’s social media posts. Even though the posts are temporary, one’s identity or impression formed is permanent (Ruppell, Hofstetter & John, 2017). A study further conducted in Europe examined the strong role played by social media in driving the identity of Europeans and shaping their day-to-day life (Bebic, Erakovic & Vuckovic, 2016). Thus, the virtual identity is fed by our social media posts, and its influence is not only restricted to virtual platforms but also influences face-to-face encounters with others.

The rise in social media usage has impacted various dimensions of the society. Political, social and economic discussions and decisions are now increasingly being conducted on social media platforms. One’s opinion on various aspects of the society is deliberated upon by others on social media platforms, and this trend is becoming highly common. A study conducted examined how social media becomes a marketing tool for various products and policies as it enables impacting opinions of a large group of people (Rugova & Prenaj, 2016). It is also becoming a platform for various health polls and discussions such as the Polio vaccine discussions on Facebook (Orr, Tsabari & Landsman, 2016) and body image issues among teenagers (Nierengarten, 2017).

The creation of virtual identities and numerous platforms for varied discussions, social media increases the need for group affiliation in individuals. Since social media helps us stay connected to people and various situations, it also makes it necessary for one to belong to a particular group in order to secure his identity. Social exclusion on social media sites can be distressing to an individual as it would threaten his virtual identity and also exclude him from a variety of important discussions, debates and deliberations. This social exclusion is threatening to the belongingness and self-esteem needs in individuals, young adults largely, as they are the highest consumers of social media sites today, especially Instagram and Snapchat (Smith & Anderson, 2018). This places great emphasis on adherence to social norms such as modesty and humility as it increases one’s social desirability and acceptance by others. As a result of the influence of social media, the need to affiliate takes precedence over the need to exert power and control over others. The shift in need preference triggers the phenomenon of humblebragging, where being modest while subtly boasting about one’s achievements becomes the norm. Humblebragging allows one to boast about their achievements and fulfil their needs for power and self esteem while being modest about it, thus fulfilling needs for social affiliation and group belongingness.

Figure 1. Contextual framework of Humblebragging



Sustenance of Humblebragging

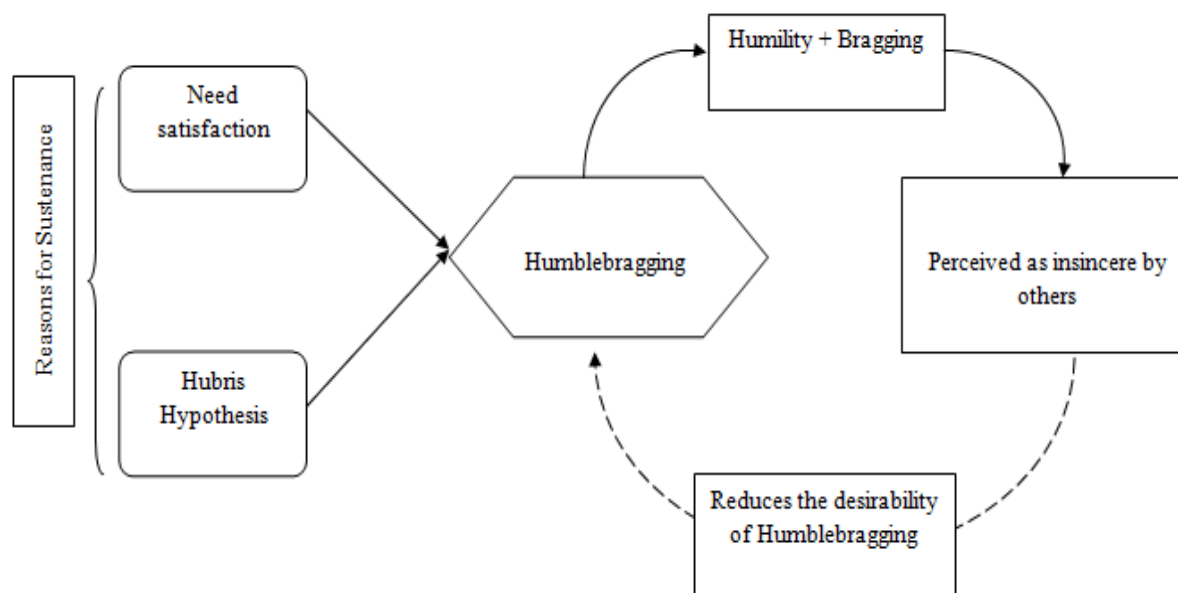
Humblebragging helps satisfy the dual needs for affiliation and power without risking one's exclusion from social groups. The successful fulfilment of these needs acts as positive reinforcements to humblebragging. Additionally, humblebragging is further supported by the Hubris hypothesis. This hypothesis states that observers dislike explicit self-superiority claims as compared to implicit self-superiority claims. Various studies have also been conducted to confirm the hubris hypothesis, their results indicating the unfavourable nature of explicit self superiority claims (Hoorens, Pandelaere, Oldersma & Sedikides, 2012; Damme, Hoorens & Sedikides; 2015). While humblebragging allows an individual to make self-superiority claims by boasting about one's achievements, it is rather implicit in nature as it is often masked by modesty. Thus, the behaviour of humblebragging is further strengthened as implicit self superiority claims are more socially acceptable.

While on one hand humblebragging is appreciated, on the other hand it is also disliked by others. This is because the attempt to merge humility and bragging is perceived as insincere in nature where the individual is trying to deceive the others by subtly bragging but fooling them with the mask of humility (Sezer, Gino & Norton, 2015). There are numerous periodicals which further indicate the annoyance humblebragging causes in its perceivers by appealing to everyone to simply boast about their achievements instead of being uncanny and

insincere about it (Tugend, 2013; Dewey, 2014; Lewiston, 2015). These articles thus indicate that engaging in humblebragging can be risky for the individual as it may also lead its perceivers to dislike him.

Therefore, humblebragging has various advantages and disadvantages for the individual engaging in it. It is however suitable to decide upon its usage based on the needs of the situation and the audience of humblebragging.

Figure 2. Sustenance of Humblebragging



CONCLUSION

Humblebragging is a phenomenon that has taken stride over social media. It is a form of bragging where the statement is either masked in complaint or humility; or is self-deprecating in nature. Humblebragging can be understood as a behaviour satisfying one's need for power and control along with balancing need for affiliation and belongingness in today's digital age. It is thus a medium to protect one's virtual identity against social exclusion while also communicating self-superiority claims. While this behaviour is positively reinforced over time, humblebragging also has its pitfalls. People often find it more annoying to be exposed to humblebrags as they are perceived to be insincere in nature. This requires individuals to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of humblebragging along with sensing the needs of the situation before engaging in it.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors colorfully declare this paper to bear not conflict of interests

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