When Praise Falls on Deaf Ears:

Is the Hedonic Impact of Compliments Muted When it Matters Most?

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ABSTRACT

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When Praise Falls on Deaf Ears: Is the Hedonic Impact of Compliments Muted When it Matters Most? (92 pp.)

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When does praise fall on deaf ears? Though compliments may often provide a hefty emotional boost, at times they can fall short of packing their most powerful hedonic punches. In what may be an unfortunate paradox, compliments may feel *least* good when they come from those people *most* likely to offer them. In six studies, I explored the relationship between the person delivering a compliment and the affective response the compliment produced. Studies 1 and 2 provide evidence that compliments from loved ones are viewed as less emotionally impactful than compliments from strangers. Studies 3a-3c indicate that these effects are more likely to occur when the compliment is in an important domain and demonstrate that people are motivated to receive accurate feedback in important domains. Study 4 failed to find evidence of source effects when participants were given compliments in the lab. Methodological improvements are discussed and the important implications of this work for understanding how people process social feedback are underscored.

Approved: _____

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INTRODUCTION

"I can live for two months on a good compliment." --Mark Twain.

In a damp subway station after a long day at the office, a woman's day brightens a bit when a fellow commuter enviously compliments her new Jimmy Choo shoes. In a swank uptown office, an exhausted executive is on cloud nine when a notoriously hard-to-please client gruffly praises the presentation he stayed up all night preparing. With all the negativity, uncertainty, and thanklessness that can accompany the busy daily drudge, hearing someone admire or compliment even the smallest details of one's appearance or abilities can be emotionally affecting (Fea & Brannon, 2006; Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008). Indeed, a compliment may help to give a person a quick and often unexpected glimpse into how they are regarded in the current social environment. As such, a compliment may provide a speedy boost to mood and self-esteem, many times leaving a happy, if blushing, receiver in its wake.

While compliments are often quite effective at lifting up their targets, at times, compliments can fall short of packing their most powerful hedonic punches. Anecdotal evidence suggests that one such instance is when the compliment comes from a loved one. Praise delivered by a close other many times falls on deaf ears, failing to provide the meaningful emotional impact that a compliment from a stranger or mere acquaintance might. After a nervous poetry reading at "Open Mic Night", the same flattering praise that caused one's heart (and perhaps, head) to swell when bestowed by an eager member of the audience, might have been brushed off when delivered by the loyal friend in the front row. Indeed, in what may be an unfortunate paradox, it seems that compliments

often feel *least* good when they come from those people who are probably *most* likely to offer them. Though the words might be identical, the emotional consequences of compliments may depend on who delivers them. This investigation asks when and why the person delivering the compliment influences the emotional impact of the compliment.

The primary aim of this work is to provide empirical support for the anecdotal impact the compliment-giver—herein referred to as the "source" of the compliment—has in influencing a compliment's emotional impact. In the studies that follow, I provide empirical evidence supporting the assertion that emotional consequences are a function of compliment source. In addition, I examine possible reasons why the source of a compliment may engender different emotional responses. Also, though evidence suggests that compliments may not feel as good coming from loved ones as from strangers, I explore whether this pattern necessarily holds across all compliment scenarios. In so doing, I suggest necessary conditions under which the influence of compliment source on emotional consequence emerges and test possible explanations for why the effect can be seen in some cases but not others. In addition, I ultimately argue for the important implications of these results in informing a clearer understanding of how people process social feedback.

Compliments: Form, Function, and Warm Fuzzy Feelings

The compliment has been established as one of the most fundamental—and more importantly, functional—elements of communication (Wolfson, 1983). Defined as expressions of "appreciation and/or admiration of what others have or do in the course of communication" (Farghal & Haggan, 2006, p. 95), compliments have been most

extensively studied in the sociolinguistic and pragmatic fields. Researchers in these areas have provided extensive catalogs of compliment behaviors in communication, detailing differences in the ways compliments are given and accepted in different cultures (e.g., Chen, 1993; Nelson, Bakary, & Batal, 1993; Herbert & Straight, 1989). In one analysis of compliments from a cross-cultural perspective, Wolfson (1981) describes large cultural differences in the distribution and frequency of complimenting. For instance, in American English, compliments occur extremely frequently and tend to follow more formulaic speech structures compared to other cultures. The most frequent compliments are generally given in reference to targets' appearance or performance. Less frequently, compliments refer to specific personality characteristics (Knapp, Hopper, & Bell 1984).

In addition to providing valuable taxonomies of compliment behaviors, the sociolinguistic literature has also explored the many varied functions compliments may serve. For example, they may serve to communicate an apology, may be given as thanks, and are sometimes used as conversation-starters (Wolfson, 1981). They may aid in a variety of more specific social functions as well, including helping to establish solidarity or common ground between the giver and receiver, helping to make givers feel liked by others, and helping to make receivers feel good about themselves (Wolfson & Manes, 1980; Herbert, 1989; Coates, 1998). Especially for women, who are most likely to give compliments to other women, compliments help strengthen liking, affiliation, and affection between giver and receiver (Coates, 1998). And indeed, giving compliments can be an avenue to a successful social interaction; Knapp et al. (1984) liken compliments' role in social success to the importance of oxygen for breathing. There is even evidence

that compliments can be lucrative avenues to financial success as well; both waitresses and hairstylists receive higher tips from patrons they compliment than from those they do not (Seiter, 2007; Seiter & Dutson, 2007). Compliments have also received attention in other applied ways. For example, compliments have been included in theories of ingratiation techniques that laude them as interpersonal strategies for getting ahead in the workplace and elsewhere (Jones, 1964) and have been examined for the role they can play in a therapeutic setting (e.g. as a method of empowering clients; Wall, Klecker, Amendt, & Bryant, 1989). Indeed, a growing body of evidence demonstrates the beneficial role that compliments play in various types of social interaction.

The positive emotional consequences compliments bestow can be inferred from their behavioral effects during social interactions. Waitresses likely receive higher tips because their compliments have engendered positive affective responses in their customers, and compliments are likely used to empower therapy clients because they have positive effects on confidence and self-esteem. It seems intuitive that positive remarks may engender positive changes in mood. And indeed some research has begun to support this lay intuition; compliments about character and appearance have been shown to affect mood, temporarily alleviating the negative mood of those who receive them (Fea & Brannon, 2006). For instance, women who were complimented on their shirt during the informed consent process indicated less negative mood during the experiment than those who did not receive a compliment (Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008). In studies of ingratiation, compliments have been found to increase targets' mood, while observers to compliments display no change in mood (Vonk, 2002). Compliments have even been

used as part of positive mood induction techniques in at least one experimental paradigm (Greene & Noice, 1988).

It seems that the conclusion that compliments can have measurable effects on how people feel has found empirical support. In doing so, it becomes part of a long lineage of social psychology research that shows that people's self views can be affected by the views they believe others have of them (see Tice & Wallace, 2003 for an overview) Classic theories like the *looking glass self* (Cooley, 1902) and *symbolic interactionism* (Mead, 1934) maintain that people come to see themselves as they believe others see them. Thus, if there is evidence other people see them in a positive light, as might be implied through the delivery of a compliment, people may be more inclined to see themselves that way. More contemporary models (e.g. *sociometer theory;* Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary & Downs, 1995) have also asserted that people's self-esteem can be greatly affected by how other people regard them. Because people do care what others think, a compliment regarding their shoes or poetry dabbling can affect how people feel about themselves. Yet anecdotally there are cases in which, despite being socially-oriented creatures desperate for evidence of social acceptance, the positive feedback people receive fails to affect any emotional change. When are those cases? In this paper, I explore the role of the messenger, suggesting that the emotional impact of a compliment depends, at least in part, on who the compliment comes from.

The Role of Compliment Source

In numerous observable anecdotal cases, it seems the source of the compliment plays an important role in how emotionally impactful the compliment may be. If a mother

showers her son with compliments backstage after his opening night performance in the school play, the boy may shrug off her remarks, focusing instead on his flubbed line or near-stumble into the backdrop. If, however, a stranger approaches the boy backstage to deliver the same enthusiastic praise, he may feel a surge of confidence or a boost in mood that sends his worry about the mistakes to the back of his mind. Indeed, a compliment can feel very different coming from one person than it does from another, even when many details of the comments—the exact words, the location, the timing, the tone, the enthusiasm—are identical.

Theoretically speaking, it may be of little surprise that source matters. Psychologists have long recognized that the effectiveness of a message is in large part due to an evaluation of its source (see Wilson & Sherrel, 1993 for a meta-analytic review). Research in social psychology, communication, and consumer behavior has demonstrably documented that people evaluate the source of a message when determining its impact, considering such characteristics as the credibility, similarity, physical attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness of the person delivering the message. A message is more effective in producing attitude or belief change when it comes from someone who is evaluated as a credible, attractive, or similar to the recipient.

What may be surprising in the case of compliments is that in this evaluative process, loved ones seem to come up short. That is, the "message"—the compliment in this case—is least impactful when it comes from someone well-known. This is particularly intriguing given the intrinsic role of a close other. When asked to list the most important people in their lives, people generally list their parents, friends, and loved

ones above all others (Wilks, 1986). And people value the opinions of those close to them more than they value those of strangers, both on opinions related to themselves and on other issues (Cialdini, 1988). In addition, family, friends, and significant others are the three primary components of a person's social support system (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). The role friends and family members play in one's daily life and the positive effects they have on one's well-being are often invaluable (Myers, 2000). It is in this context that the surprising nature of the source effect emerges. Loved ones' opinions are reportedly most important, loved ones presumably have the most concrete information about a person upon which to offer a valid assessment, and loved ones are the people who will probably most often offer words of encouragement or support over the course of a person's life. Yet, it may be the unfortunate case that these kind words are least effective. Anecdotal experience often suggests that compliments delivered by a close other are often not experienced as emotionally-charged events at all, but are instead shrugged off or ignored. What is it about praise from a loved one that seemingly mutes its emotional impact?

Factors Influencing Source Differences

Why might compliments from close others fall short of producing a powerful emotional response? When a person is complimented, there may be two kinds of factors that play a role in how the compliment will be experienced: causal attributions and external factors.

Causal Attributions

According to *attribution theory* (Kelley, 1972) people are sense-makers. When they witness another's behavior, they are motivated to explain it, and as a result they often are able to generate several possible causes for why the behavior occurred. People seek to explain all kinds of behaviors in many different contexts, and compliments are likely no exception. People may question why someone has complimented them. And in considering the cause of the compliment, they may make different attributions when the compliment is delivered by a loved one than they do when it is delivered by a stranger.

For example, if a person is complimented on her performance by her mom, she may be able to think of multiple explanations for the kind words. Being able to think of multiple causes for the compliment can lead the person to underestimate the likelihood that the reason the compliment was given was because it is an accurate representation of her true performance. In attribution terminology, this effect, whereby the role of one cause is discounted if other possible causes are present, is referred to as the *discounting principle* (Kelly, 1972). Morris and Larrick (1995) conceptualize discounting in probabilistic terms, describing it as a reduced confidence that the behavior was produced by one cause when other alternative causes may be present. Thus, a person may be less confident that the compliment reflects reality because she can think of alternative reasons for the compliment. In effect, being able to think of multiple reasons why a loved one may have given a compliment diminishes the positive emotional benefit that simply accepting the compliment as truth may have produced.

On the other hand, if a person is complimented on her performance by a stranger, she may not be able to think of any reasons *other* than that she really did perform well. In

fact, she might be able to think of multiple reasons why the stranger did *not* have to say that, referred to as inhibitory causes in attribution theory terms (Kelley, 1972). In this case the sole explanation for the compliment that the person generates, that her performance really was great, would be *augmented* and its likelihood of being the true reason overestimated. In the absence of other compelling reasons, the woman may be more confident that the compliment reflects reality, and the praise may deliver a powerful hedonic punch.

Thus, attribution theory provides one theoretical framework within which the effects of the source of a compliment on its emotional consequences can be understood. How a compliment will feel may depend on the causal attributions a person makes; the causal attributions a person makes may depend on the source of the compliment. There are specific attributions that may be expected to mediate the relationship between compliment source and emotional effect. In this work, I will test the roles that two specific causal attributions—sincerity and obligation—play in determining how a compliment will feel. In addition, I will test the role that an inhibitory cause—the effort a compliment-giver has to put into giving a compliment—plays as well.

External Factors.

In addition to causal attributions, other external factors unrelated to perceptions of the compliment-giver may predict how a compliment will feel. For example, in this work I will test the role that habituation plays in the relationship between compliment source and emotional consequence. The intensity of an affective response to a stimulus can decrease with repeated exposure (Dijksterhuis & Smith, 2002). People may be more

habituated to compliments from loved ones after years of positive exchanges, resulting in decreased emotional responses to a compliment from them compared to strangers. Relatedly, I will also test the role of expectedness. Compliments from friends and family members may be expected while compliments from strangers may be more unexpected. Research suggests unexpected events capture attention, are subject to greater processing, increase physiological arousal, and cause more extreme emotional reactions (e.g. Le Poire & Burgoon, 1996; Olson, Roese, & Zanna, 1996; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). Thus, differences in the emotional effects of compliments from loved ones and strangers might be the result of differences in habituation toward each source and differing expectancies about the behaviors of each.

In sum, several factors may play a role in producing the anecdotal effect of compliment source on its emotional impact. People may consider both causal attributions and external factors when deciding how a compliment makes them feel. Compliments from loved ones can differ from those of strangers on any or all of these dimensions, causing them to feel qualitatively different.

Positive Social Feedback: Unconditional Acceptance vs. Discriminatory Processing

At first glance, it may seem odd that people would engage in a sense-making process that ultimately leads them to discount a compliment's positive effects. As Swann, Pelham, and Krull (1989) aptly put it, "People like good news, especially when it is about them" (p. 782). Rather than try to generate reasons for the praise one is given, it seems more psychologically beneficial to simply soak in any compliments one gets, allowing them to impact mood and self-esteem with their full force. And psychological research

would provide good precedent for this kind of behavior. Within the constraints of reality, people are often biased toward quickly accepting information that confirms their beliefs, while spending more time and effort examining that information that is inconsistent with their beliefs (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Kunda, 1990). Given that people's beliefs about themselves are usually improbably positive (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009) compliments should confirm people's already positive self-views and so might be expected to be absorbed without careful examination. Yet the anecdotal muted emotional effect of compliments delivered by close others seems to suggest that people may engage in a discriminatory processing of the feedback they receive. What implications do source effects have for how people process positive social feedback?

Social psychologists have long debated the extent to which several fundamental motivations inform the self-concept. Often at the core of the debate are two very different motives: self-enhancement and self-assessment. Self-enhancement motivations presume that people are motivated to view themselves in the most favorable light possible. As such, they may seek, process, remember, and interpret feedback in *aggrandizing* ways that provide maximum benefits to self-esteem (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Kunda, 1990; Taylor & Brown, 1988). That people have root self-enhancement motivations is one of the most well-documented, highly-cited tenants of social psychology; to be sure, self-enhancement motives are present and they are prevalent (Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

Self-assessment motivations, on the other hand, presume that people are motivated to view themselves in the most accurate way possible. As such, they may be inclined to seek, prefer, and choose information that allows them to draw the most

accurate conclusions about themselves, regardless of whether those conclusions are positive (Trope, 1980; Trope, 1986). The self-assessment motivation has found sound empirical support as well (see Sedikides & Strube, 1997 for a brief overview). However, as Sedikides and Strube highlight, experimental tests of self-assessment motivations have traditionally been fairly homogenous; support for self-assessment motivations typically is found by showing that people prefer and choose tasks that are highly diagnostic. A complete understanding of the extent to which self-assessment motivations are engaged may be limited by the methodological homogeneity of the studies used to assess it. Thus, the conclusions one can draw about how self-assessment motivations might play out in the arena of compliments might be limited.

The present research regarding differences in the source of the compliment may serve as another way to test the contributions of self-enhancement and self-assessment motives to informing self-concepts. If people were solely motivated by a self-enhancing desire to reach favorable conclusions about themselves, then positive remarks might be expected to be taken at face-value and their hedonic effects welcomed unconditionally. Rather, should this research demonstrate the predictions that compliments from close others and strangers are often not experienced in emotionally identical ways, such results may provide evidence that people do care whether the compliment represents an accurate assessment of their performance or abilities and may therefore engage in more discriminatory processing of compliments.

However, it is still unclear whether people *always* engage in a discriminatory, sense-making process when it comes to compliments, carefully considering the possible

reasons why someone said something nice to them. Do people always consider how unexpected the compliment was, how much effort the source engaged in, or how obligated the person felt? And subsequently, is it then always the case that the source of a compliment plays a role in its affective impact, or are there cases in which a compliment feels good no matter who it comes from? Another goal of this paper is to determine *when* the emotional impact of a compliment is influenced by the person delivering it.

If the impact of source on emotional consequence is the result of a desire for accurate feedback, then the proposed source differences should only occur sometimes—namely, only when a desire for accurate feedback is present. At other times, a general desire for favorable information about the self might lead people to experience an unconditional emotional uplift no matter whom the compliment comes from. When might an accuracy motivation trump an aggrandizing one? Research suggests that one factor that moderates whether people self-assess or self-enhance is whether the trait or skill in question is important or not (Dunning, 1995). Participants who were led to believe that the skill they were being tested on was an important one that had consequences for their future (it would be included on upcoming standardized tests) were more motivated to receive diagnostic feedback than participants who were told that it was unimportant (they would never see the test again in their lives). Thus, the more relevant or consequential the skill in question, the more people want to know how they measure up.

It may be possible to extend Dunning's (1995) work to allow for predictions about when the effects of compliment source are most likely to occur. Given this research, one might expect that when it comes to compliments, accurate feedback may be

desired when the compliment refers to a domain that is important or self-relevant. Thus, the effect of compliment source on its emotional consequences may be evident in domains that are important but not in those that are unimportant. In important domains, people might be motivated to more carefully sift through incoming information about themselves to determine whether it is accurate. During this evaluation process, compliments from loved ones may fail a test of accuracy, and their affective impact may be attenuated. The following set of studies test the components of this argument.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Compliments can effectively boost people's moods and make them feel good about themselves (Fea & Brannon, 2006; Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008). Yet there may be times when a compliment falls on deaf ears and the kind words are not emotionally impactful. The present study sought to provide empirical evidence that the effects of compliments on mood and self-esteem depend on who the compliment comes from. That is, I tested whether people view compliments from loved ones as less emotionally impactful than compliments from strangers. In addition, I tested possible mediators of the relationship between compliment source and emotional consequence and explored conditions under which the source effect emerges. In so doing, I investigated components of an argument that suggests the emergence of source effects provide evidence that accuracy motivations play an important role in determining how people process evaluative information.

Overview of the Present Studies

In six studies, I explored the relationship between the person delivering a compliment and the affective response the compliment produced. In Studies 1 and 2, I provided initial evidence that affective reactions to a compliment depend on who is giving it, explored possible mediators of this relationship, and demonstrated that the effects are apparent in some domains but not others. In Studies 3a-3c, I investigated the hypotheses that source impacts emotional consequences only when the domain is important, that accuracy motivations arise in important domains, and that cognitive resources are a necessary component of source differences in emotional consequences.

Finally, in Study 4, I tested the relationship between compliment source and emotional consequences behaviorally in the lab in order to measure how people actually respond when complimented by different sources.

STUDY 1:
INITIAL SUPPORT AND TESTING MEDIATION

The primary aim of Study 1 was to provide initial empirical evidence that participants believe the emotional effects of a compliment depend on the person giving it. Participants read two scenarios in which they imagined being complimented on their appearance and on their academic performance by a friend, a stranger, or their mom. They indicated what their mood and confidence would be like following the compliments. I expected that compliments from close others, moms, would result in less positive emotional consequences than those from distant others, strangers. Friends likely represent a middle ground between moms and strangers in terms of closeness. Therefore, the imagined positivity of the emotional response after a compliment from a friend was predicted to fall in between the emotional response after a compliment from a mom and a stranger.

A secondary aim of Study 1 was to explore potential factors that may predict why compliments from loved ones may not feel as good as compliments from strangers. I tested factors that represented both causal attributions that could be made about the compliment-giver and external factors that might lead to decreased affective responses. Namely, I tested the role of perceived obligation, habituation, effort, expectedness, and sincerity in producing different emotional responses. I expected endorsement of these factors would vary as a function of the person participants imagined receiving the compliment from. Specifically, I predicted that participants who imagined receiving a compliment from their mom would view the compliment as more obligated, more expected, less effortful, and less sincere than compliments from strangers and that

participants would indicate they were more habituated to compliments from moms than strangers. Again, I predicted that compliments from friends would fall somewhere between those from moms and strangers on each of these factors. In addition, I tested to see whether any of the five factors mediated the relationship between compliment source and emotional consequences.

Method

Participants

In exchange for course credit, 156 Ohio University undergraduates participated in the study.

Materials and Procedure

Participants read scenarios in which they imagined receiving compliments about their appearance and their academic performance from a friend, a stranger, or their mom. They reported their imagined self-confidence, mood, and endorsement of factors that may influence the emotional consequences of receiving the compliment.

Scenarios. Participants read two hypothetical scenarios. One scenario involved a compliment about an academic performance and the other involved a compliment about appearance; scenarios were presented in counterbalanced order to all participants. In each scenario, the compliment was delivered by one of three sources: a friend, mom, or stranger. Compliment source varied between participants such that no participant was asked to imagine the same source delivered both compliments in the two scenarios.

The academic performance scenario read: "*Imagine you have just given a particularly nerve-racking class presentation. After class, a student you don't know [your*

friend/your mom] comes over and says, 'You really did a great job!" Approximately 1/3 of participants read that the compliment came from a stranger (n = 53), another 1/3 read that it came from a friend (n = 55), and the final 1/3 read that the compliment came from their mom (n = 48). The appearance scenario read: *"Imagine you just bought a new shirt and decide to wear it out to dinner with your family [group of friends]. When you arrive, your mom [your friend/a person in the group you don't know] greets you and says, 'I really like that shirt!"* One-third of participants read that the compliment came from a stranger (n = 54), another 1/3 read that the compliment came from a friend (n = 48), and a final 1/3 read that the compliment came from their mom (n = 54).

Self-Confidence. Following each scenario, participants responded to a series of questions about how they imagined they would feel after receiving the compliment. The questions assessed how their self-confidence might be affected by the compliment. Participants responded on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all* and 5 = *extremely*) to six questions. For the academic performance scenario, the questions asked how *good* they would feel, how *unsure* of their performance they would be, how *smart* they would feel, how *worried* they would be about how they did, how *satisfied* with their performance they would be, and how *rattled* about their performance they would feel following the compliment from the given source. For the appearance scenario, the questions asked participants to indicate how *good* they would feel, how *satisfied* with the way they look they would be, how *self-conscious* they would feel, how *certain* they would be that they looked nice, how *attractive* they would feel, and how *self-confident* they would feel following the compliment from the given source.

Mood. Following the self-confidence questions, participants were asked what they believed their mood might be like after receiving the compliment. They rated 7 positive and 5 negative emotion terms. Participants rated each adjective on a 5-point scale; a low score indicated they would not feel the emotion at all and a high score indicated they would feel it a great deal. The positive words were: *excited, surprised, enthusiastic, happy, confident, proud,* and *inspired*. The negative words included were: *distressed, upset, shy, irritable*, and *nervous*.

Mediators. Using a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree,* 7 = *strongly agree),* participants also indicated how much they agreed with several statements about the compliment. To measure perceived effort, participants indicated the degree to which the compliment-giver had to put effort into complimenting them. To measure unexpectedness, participants indicated to what degree they thought the compliment was unexpected. To measure perceived obligation, participants indicated how much they agreed that the compliment-giver likely felt some sort of duty or obligation to deliver the compliment. To measure habituation, participants indicated to what degree they are used to receiving compliments from the given source. Lastly, to measure sincerity, participants indicated the degree to which they thought the compliment from the given source was sincere and genuine.

Results

Emotional Consequence Index Score

Self-confidence scores for each scenario were created by averaging responses to the six questions that assessed how confident the participants would feel following the

compliment (α = .73 in the academic performance scenario and α = .77 in the appearance scenario). Relevant questions were reverse-coded so that higher scores represented greater self-confidence. To calculate a mood score, the positive emotion term ratings were averaged together (α = .85 for the academic performance scenario and α = .82 for the appearance scenario) to create a single score that reflected positive mood. Responses to all negative emotion words were averaged together (α = .73 for the academic performance scenario and α = .75 for the appearance scenario) to form a single score that reflected negative mood. To assess the relative presence of positive mood and ensure that mood scores take negative emotions into account, I calculated a composite measure of mood by subtracting participants' averaged negative mood from their averaged positive mood.

The confidence and mood variables were highly correlated ($r(155) = .66$, $p < .001$ in the academic performance scenario and $r(155) = .78$, $p < 001$ in the appearance scenario). In addition, when the self-confidence and mood variables were analyzed separately, the same patterns with respect to compliment source emerged. Thus, it seems confidence and mood are likely tapping a similar construct, a variable termed *emotional consequence*. An aggregate emotional consequence index score was calculated by standardizing participants' self-confidence scores, standardizing their mood ratings, and averaging the two. I used this method of computing an emotional consequence index score for remainder of the analyses throughout the paper.

Each of the two compliment scenarios was examined separately to determine whether there were effects of compliment source on emotional consequences and to test possible mediators of those effects in each scenario.

Academic Performance Scenario

A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of source of the compliment on emotional consequence score, $F(2, 153) = 6.67$, $p = .002$. As can be seen in Figure 1, moms' compliments ($M = -0.3$), resulted in significantly less positive emotional consequence scores than strangers' compliments ($M = 0.3$), $t(153) = -3.49$, $p < .001$. Compliments from friends ($M = -.04$) also resulted in significantly less positive emotional consequence scores than compliments from strangers, $t(153) = -2.04$, $p = .04$. There was no difference in the emotional consequence scores following compliments from moms and compliments from friends, $t(153) = -1.52$, $p = .13$.

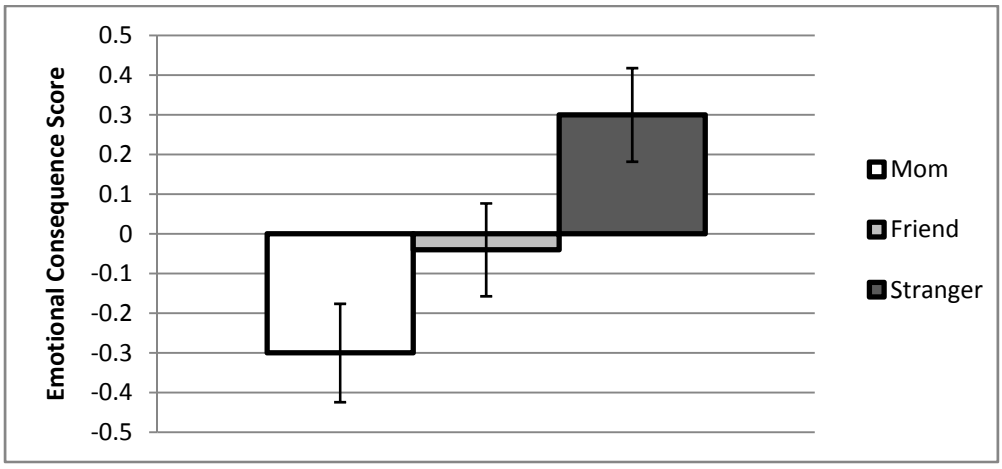

Figure 1. Emotional consequence index score following compliments from each source in the academic performance scenario.

Testing Mediation

The second major goal of Study 1 was to determine possible mediators of the relationship between source and the dependent variables. Compliment source was coded using the following contrast weights: Source was coded as 1 for strangers and as -.5 for both friends and moms. Source was a significant predictor of emotional consequences, β = 0.32, $t(154) = 3.26$ $p = .001$. The five factors were next tested individually to determine whether any mediated the relationship between source and emotional consequence.

Mediators. Perceived obligation was tested as a mediator. The degree to which participants thought the compliment-giver felt obligated to give the compliment depended on who the imagined source was, β = -.86, $t(154) = 4.64$, $p < .001$. Also, perceived obligation predicted the emotional consequence participants reported, β = -.16, $t(154) = 4.26$, $p < .001$. I next ran a regression with compliment source and obligation predicting emotional consequence. Although still a predictor of emotional consequence, the compliment source variable dropped to marginal significance, β = .02, $t(154) = 1.96$, $p = .052$, and obligation remained a significant predictor of emotional consequence, β = -.15, $t(154) = 3.32$, $p = .001$. A Sobel (1982) test suggests that the perceived obligation of the compliment-giver partially mediated the relationship between compliment source and emotional consequence, $Z = 2.71$, $p = .006$.

In addition, the degree to which participants felt they were used to compliments from the source was tested as a mediator. Habituation depended on source of the compliment, β = -.69, $t(155) = 4.24$, $p < .001$. Also, habituation predicted reported emotional consequence, β = -.16, $t(155) = 3.45$, $p = .001$. As a next step, compliment

source and habituation were entered into a regression equation predicting emotional consequence. Though still a predictor of emotional consequence, the compliment source variable dropped in significance, $\beta = .24$, $t(155) = 2.32$, $p = .02$, and habituation remained a significant predictor of emotional consequence, $\beta = -.12$, $t(155) = 2.57$, $p = .01$. A Sobel test suggests that habituation partially mediated the relationship between source of the compliment and emotional consequence, $Z = 2.19$, $p = .03$.

Reasons That Do Not Explain Source Differences. Perceived effort was found to vary as a function of source of the compliment, $\beta = .66$, $t(155) = 3.45$, $p = .001$. However, effort did not predict participants' reported emotional consequences, $\beta = .04$, $t(155) = 0.95$, $p = .35$. Therefore, it was ruled out as a potential explanation for the effect of source on emotional consequences.

The unexpectedness of the compliment also depended on the source, $\beta = 1.61$, $t(155) = 10.22$, $p < .0001$. In addition, the unexpectedness of the compliment predicted participants' reported emotional consequences, $\beta = .10$, $t(155) = 2.56$, $p = .01$. However, in a regression with both unexpectedness and compliment source as predictors of emotional consequence, unexpectedness was no longer a significant predictor of emotional consequence, $\beta = .03$, $t(155) = 0.67$, $p = .50$. Therefore, unexpectedness did not mediate the relationship between compliment source and emotional consequence.

Reasons That Do Not Vary by Source. The final reason, sincerity, was markedly unrelated to the source of the compliment, $\beta = .03$, $t(155) = 0.24$, $p = .81$, therefore it was ruled out as a mediator. That is, participants thought that the compliment was equally sincere from strangers, friends, and moms.

Appearance Scenario

A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant main effect of source of the compliment on emotional consequence score $F(2, 151) = 1.64$, $p = .20$. As can be seen in Figure 2, though moms' compliments ($M = -0.2$), resulted in slightly less positive emotional consequence scores than strangers' compliments ($M = 0.1$) and than friends' compliments ($M = 0.07$), none of the differences between groups were statistically significant (p's > .05).

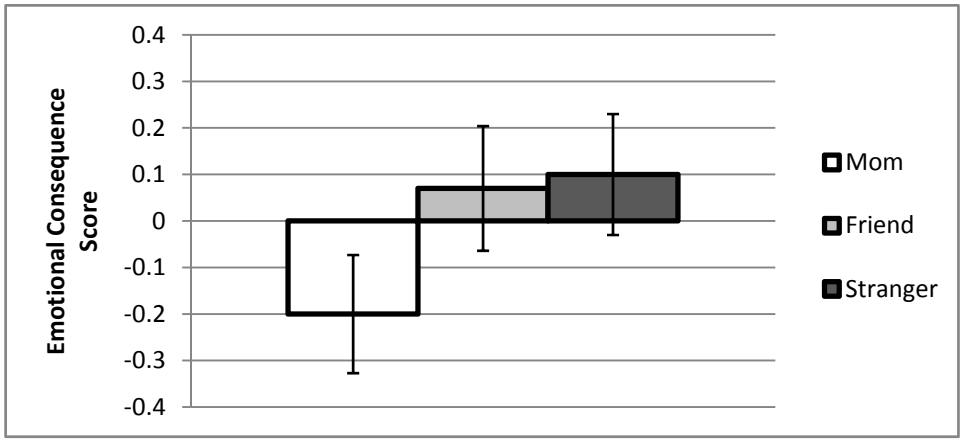

Figure 2. Emotional consequence score following compliments from each source in the appearance scenario.

Testing Mediation

Endorsement of all five factors varied by compliment source in the predicted directions (p's < .05), however since there was no significant relationship between source and emotional consequence in the appearance scenario, the five proposed factors were not tested for mediation.

Discussion

In the academic performance scenario, compliment source predicted how participants thought they would feel following a compliment. Participants reported that academic performance-based compliments from both moms and friends would result in less positive emotional consequences than identical compliments from strangers. Thus, consistent with predictions, when it comes to feedback about academic performance, participants believed that praise from loved ones would not produce the same hedonic impact that praise from strangers would. In addition, two factors emerged as potential mediators of the relationship between compliment source and emotional consequence: obligation and habituation. The difference that emerges in emotional consequences as a result of different sources is at least in part due to the fact that compliments seem more obligated coming from moms and friends and that people are more used to receiving compliments from those sources compared to strangers.

In the appearance scenario, however, compliment source was not a significant predictor of emotional consequence. In effect, appearance-based compliments felt the same no matter who was delivering them. This suggests that there is something different between compliments about academic performance and ones about appearance. Testing possible explanations for the differences in these two domains will be goals of the following studies.

STUDY 2:
VIVID IMAGINATION

Study 2 served two primary purposes. The first was to replicate the effects of Study 1 using other measures of mood and state self-esteem. Study 2 used valid psychological measures: the State Self-Esteem Scale (SES; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) and selected terms from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule—Expanded Form (PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1994). Second, the scenarios used in the second study controlled for how anxiety-provoking participants imagined them to be. One possible explanation for the differences found between the academic performance scenario and the appearance scenario in Study 1 is that the former evoked more feelings of anxiety or uncertainty than the latter. It could be that compliments from loved ones only fail to produce maximum emotional benefits when the person is anxious or uncertain. Thus, the two scenarios used in Study 2 were tested to be equally anxiety-provoking. In addition, in order to be able to most accurately predict how they would feel in a hypothetical scenario, participants need to be able to truly imagine themselves in the situation. Thus, the following study used scenarios that were equivalent in terms of how easy it was for participants to imagine themselves in the situation and how frequently participants had experienced a similar situation. Thus, this study used scenarios that evoked comparable feelings of anxiety, were easily imaginable, and occurred with the same frequency in daily life.

In this study, participants imagined a vivid hypothetical scenario in which they were complimented by their mom, a friend, or a stranger about either their academic performance or their appearance. They then responded to mood and self-esteem

measures. I predicted that, replicating the results of Study 1, participants who imagined academic performance compliments from moms would anticipate less positive emotional consequences than those who imagined compliments from strangers. Again, I predicted that participants who imagined a compliment from a friend would report emotional consequence scores that were somewhere in the middle of those reported by participants who imagined compliments from moms and strangers. Importantly, I predicted that no differences between compliments from moms, friends, and strangers would emerge in the appearance scenario.

Method

Participants

Participants were 102 Ohio University undergraduates (67% female) who participated in exchange for course credit.

Materials and Procedure

At the conclusion of an unrelated study, participants read one of the following scenarios and then completed mood and self-esteem measures indicating how they would feel in the situation.

Half of participants (n = 53) were randomly assigned to read the following scenario in which they imagined receiving a compliment about academic performance:

> *Imagine that it is the end of the quarter and you have to give a presentation in your toughest class. You know the presentation is a big part of your grade and you really want it to go well. During the presentation, you are really nervous. You hear your voice shaking, and you feel everyone's eyes watching you. You feel yourself sweating and your mouth feels really dry. You worry that you're going to forget what you are supposed to say, even though you've practiced it a million times. The teacher is sitting solemnly in the back row and you're having a hard*

> *time reading any emotion on his face. At the end of the presentation, you return to your seat and are finally able to take a deep breath. You feel relieved, but you're still busy thinking about things you could have done better. After class,* ***a student you don't know [your friend/your mom]*** *says, "You did a good job!"*

Approximately 1/3 of these participants (n = 16) imagined the compliment was given by their mom, another 1/3 (n = 19) imagined the compliment was given by a stranger, and a final 1/3 (n = 18) imagined the compliment was given by a friend.

The other half of participants (n = 49) were randomly assigned to read the following scenario about appearance:

> *Imagine that one of your old high school friends is getting married. You know that a lot of people you haven't seen in a long time are going to be there, including your ex from high school. So you really want to look good. You're not used to getting all dressed up and you've spent time shopping to find something to wear that'll look really good. The day of the wedding, you spend extra time showering, getting ready, making sure you smell good, making sure your hair looks good, making sure everything's perfect. You've checked how you look in the mirror at least a hundred times. On the way to the wedding, you remember you still have to stop and get a wedding card. At the store, you see another customer [one of your friends/your mom], who looks at you and says, "All dressed up?" You explain that you're on your way to a wedding.* ***The other customer [your friend/your mom]*** *says, "You look good!"*

Approximately 1/3 of these participants (n = 17) imagined the compliment was given by their mom, another 1/3 (n = 17) imagined the compliment was given by a stranger, and a final 1/3 (n = 15) imagined the compliment was given by a friend.

Mood. Following the scenario, participants were asked to imagine how they would feel if they were in that situation. Using a 5-point scale, they responded to 21 emotion terms selected from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule—Expanded

Form (PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1994). Higher scores on the scale indicated the emotion would be felt a great deal, while lower scores indicated the emotion would be felt very slightly or not at all. The positive emotion terms were: *proud, joyful, inspired, calm, interested, fearless, cheerful, surprised, excited, confident,* and *enthusiastic*. The negative emotion terms were: *distressed, irritable, upset, disgusted, dissatisfied with self, scared, nervous, angry, lonely,* and *sad*.

Self-Esteem. Participants then imagined how they would feel about themselves after receiving a compliment from the given source. They completed the State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991). The scale contains 20-items consisting of three correlated self-esteem subscales: performance, social, and appearance self-esteem. Items are rated on a 5-point scale, with endpoints of 1 (*not at all*) and 5 (*extremely true of me*). Sample items from the scale include, "*I am worried about whether I am regarded as a success or failure*" and "*I feel confident about my abilities*."

Scenario Pretest. To ensure that the two scenarios were matched in terms of the anxiety they produced and the ease with which they could be imagined, a separate group of participants (n = 62) rated the scenarios on several dimensions. Half of these participants (n = 31) read the academic performance scenario and the other half read the appearance scenario. All participants responded to three questions. On a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all,* 5 = *extremely),* participants indicated how uncertain or anxious they would be in the situation and how easy it was for them to imagine themselves in the situation. On a 5-point scale (1 = *I've never experienced a situation like this,* 5 = *I often experience*

situations like this) participants indicated how often they have experienced the situation or one similar.

Results

Scenario Pretest

Participants who rated the scenarios for the anxiety they produced, ease with which they could be imagined, and the frequency with which they had experienced similar situations indicated the scenarios were equivalent on all three dimensions. Participants reported that the appearance scenario would make them feel equally as anxious as the academic performance scenario (M = 3.6, M = 3.7 respectively), $t(60)$ = -0.27, p = .79. In addition, they reported that the appearance scenario was equally as easy to imagine as the academic performance scenario (M = 3.5, M = 3.5 respectively), $t(60)$ = 0.23, p = .82. Lastly, they reported that they had experienced a situation similar to the appearance scenario equally as frequently as they had experienced one similar to the academic performance scenario (M = 2.9, M = 3.0 respectively), (60) = 0.26, p = .80. Thus, the two scenarios were effectively matched on each of these constructs.

Emotional Consequence Index Score.

Self-confidence scores were created by averaging participants' responses to the 20 items of the State Self-Esteem Scale (α = .92). To calculate a mood score, the positive emotion term ratings were averaged together (α = .90) to create a single score that reflected positive mood. Responses to all negative emotion words were averaged together (α = .84) to form a single score that reflected negative mood. A composite measure of mood was calculated by subtracting participants' averaged negative mood from their

averaged positive mood. The confidence and mood variables were highly correlated, $r(102) = .65$, $p < .001$. An aggregate emotional consequence index score was calculated by standardizing participants' self-confidence scores, standardizing their mood scores, and averaging the two.

Primary Analysis.

To assess the relationship between compliment source and emotional consequence in each scenario, a 2 (Scenario: Academic Performance, Appearance) x 3 (Compliment Source: Mom, Stranger, Friend) between-participants ANOVA was conducted. There was a main effect of compliment scenario on emotional consequence, $F(1, 96) = 32.09$, $p < .001$. Compliments about appearance ($M = 0.5$) resulted in significantly more positive emotional consequence scores than compliments about academic performance ($M = -0.4$). There was no main effect of compliment source on emotional consequence, $F(2, 96) = 1.04$, $p = .35$.

Importantly, the predicted interaction between scenario type and compliment source was found, $F(2, 96) = 5.18$, $p = .007$. As can be seen in Figure 3, in the academic performance scenario, compliments from moms ($M = -0.7$) resulted in significantly less positive emotional consequence scores than compliments from strangers ($M = .07$), $t(96) = -2.98$, $p = .003$. Compliments from friends ($M = -0.5$) also resulted in significantly less positive emotional consequence scores than compliments from strangers, $t(96) = -2.28$, $p = .02$. There was no difference in the emotional consequence scores following compliments from moms and compliments from friends, $t(96) = 0.77$, $p = .44$. In the appearance domain, the pattern was quite different. Compliments from moms ($M = 0.5$)

resulted in equally positive emotional consequence scores as those from strangers (M = .25), $t(96) = 0.99$, $p = .32$. Compliments from friends (M = 0.62) also resulted in equally positive emotional consequence scores as those from strangers, $t(96) = 1.41$, $p = .16$. Lastly, there was no difference in the emotional consequence scores following compliments from moms and those from friends in the appearance domain, $t(96) = 0.44$, $p = .66$.

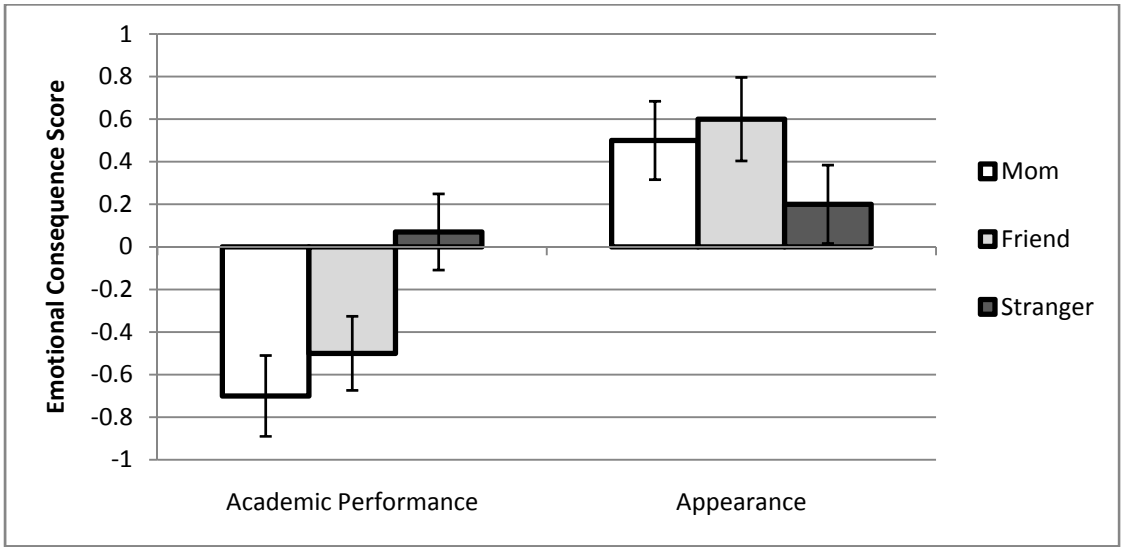

Figure 3. Emotional consequence score following compliments from each source in academic and appearance scenarios.

Discussion

Study 2 effectively replicated the results of Study 1 using valid measures of mood and self-esteem. In the academic performance scenario, participants reported that compliments from moms and friends would feel significantly less positive than

compliments from strangers. In the appearance scenario, however, participants reported that the compliment would feel equally good no matter who was giving it. Thus, the results again provided empirical support for the primary hypothesis that the emotional impact of praise from close others can be diminished relative to strangers' compliments. But again, this was found only in some cases. In addition, Study 2 controlled for several possible differences between the two scenarios that could contribute to the different patterns of results. Participants rated the scenarios in this study as equally vivid, reported they have experienced the situations with equal frequency, and believed the scenarios would generate equivalent levels of anxiety. Therefore, several possible explanations for the different patterns of results in the two scenarios were ruled out.

STUDY 3A:
CASUAL AND LEAGUE BOWLERS

Results of the previous studies revealed that compliments from close others produced less positive emotional consequences than compliments from strangers when the compliment referred to academic performance. However, when the compliment was about one's appearance, compliments from loved ones resulted in equally positive emotional effects as those from strangers. What key difference between these two very different domains might contribute to these very different patterns of results?

One possibility is that academic performance and appearance differ in how important they are to participants. Perhaps participants—college students in these samples—feel that success in academics is more important than appearance. Research suggests the importance a person places on a domain correlates with the extent to which the person bases aspects of his or her self-esteem on success in that domain (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouverette, 2003; Marsh, 1993). In other words, the more important a domain is to a person, the more a success or failure in that domain has the power to alter self-perceptions. If participants care more about academics, they may be more interested in diagnostic feedback they receive in that domain and subsequently more motivated to evaluate the legitimacy of a compliment they receive. Thus, the dampened positive emotional consequences from close others in one domain but not another may be a function of how important the domains are to participants.

To test this hypothesis, I surveyed two groups of participants for whom the same domain varied in importance. Specifically, I asked both members of a bowling league and casual bowlers to imagine being complimented on their bowling performance. Among the

league bowlers, who are more likely to view bowling success as important to them, I expected that compliments from moms would result in less positive emotional consequences than compliments from strangers. However, among casual bowlers, who are less likely to view bowling success as important to them, I expected that bowling compliments from moms would result in equally positive emotional consequences as those from strangers. I again predicted that compliments from friends would result in emotional consequence scores that fell somewhere between those from moms and strangers.

Method

Participants

Participants were 170 bowlers who completed a survey in exchange for candy. Approximately half of participants (n = 79, 76% male, M_{age} = 44.9) were active members of a bowling league. League bowlers were primarily recruited at the local bowling alley; a very small number of the league bowlers were recruited around campus (n = 4). The other participants (n = 91, 40% male, M_{age} = 28.6) were casual bowlers who were not members of a bowling league, and were primarily recruited from undergraduate bowling classes at the local bowling alley. A small number of the casual bowlers were recruited around campus (n = 19).[1]

[1] I recruited on campus during Parent's Weekend to try to better match the average age of casual and league bowlers. Because the casual bowlers were typically young undergraduates and the league bowlers were typically older community members, I was concerned that Bowler Type might be confounded by age and that any effects found might be attributable to age rather than domain importance. Thus, I recruited older casual bowlers to try to minimize the age difference between casual bowlers and league bowlers. I also statistically controlled for the effects of age in analyses.

Materials and Procedure

In exchange for candy, participants imagined receiving a compliment about their bowling performance from a friend, a stranger, or their mom. Specifically, they read: *"Imagine you are out for a night of bowling with a group of people. At the end of the final frame, you walk over to your seat and your friend [a stranger/your mom] says, 'You did really well tonight!'"*

Next, participants reported their imagined self-confidence following this compliment from one of three sources. Participants indicated how *good* they would feel, how *unsure* of their performance they would be, how *satisfied* with their performance they would be, how *confident* they would be that they played well, and how *worried* they would be about their performance. Participants used a 7-point scale, (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Then, participants reported their imagined mood following this compliment. Participants indicated how much they would feel each of several positive and negative emotions. The positive emotions were *proud, happy, fearless, cheerful, excited, confident, inspired,* and *enthusiastic.* The negative emotion terms were *distressed, irritable, upset, scared, nervous, angry, disgusted* and *sad.* Participants used a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*).

As a manipulation check, participants also answered several questions about their bowling involvement. They indicated whether they were members of a bowling league, how long they had been involved in the league, how often they bowled (1 = *less than once a month*, 2 = *about once a month*, 3 = *a few times a month*, 4 = *about once a week*, 5

= *several times a week*), and how important it was to them to be a good bowler (1 = *not at all important*, 7 = *very important*).

Results

Manipulation check.

Twelve participants failed to complete the back page of the survey where the manipulation check and demographic questions were located, so analyses for the manipulation check were conducted using this smaller sample size (n = 158). League bowlers indicated they bowled more often (M = 4.6) than casual bowlers (M = 1.5), $t(156) = 28.64$, $p < .001$. In addition, it was more important to league bowlers to be a good bowler (M = 5.2) than it was to casual bowlers (M = 3.4), $t(156) = 6.92$, $p < .001$.

Emotional Consequences.

Incomplete data from three participants resulted in a sample size of 167 participants for the remaining analyses. A self-confidence score was computed by averaging participants' responses to the five questions assessing self-confidence (α = .66). A mood score was computed by averaging participants' responses to the 8 positive emotion terms (α = .91), averaging participants' responses to the 6 negative emotion terms (α = .91), and then subtracting participants' average negative mood from their average positive mood. Mood and self-confidence ratings were highly correlated, $r(167) = .63$, $p < .001$. Thus, an aggregate emotional consequence score was calculated by standardizing participants' self-confidence scores, standardizing their mood scores, and averaging the two.

The emotional consequence index score was used as the dependent variable in a 2 (Bowler: league, casual) x 3 (Compliment Source: friend, stranger, mom) between-participants ANOVA. There was a main effect of Bowler, $F(1, 161) = 11.75$, $p < .001$. As a group, casual bowlers indicated they would feel more positive emotional consequences ($M = 0.2$) following a bowling compliment than league bowlers ($M = -0.3$).

There was also a main effect of Compliment Source, $F(2, 161) = 5.57$, $p = .005$. Participants who imagined that the compliment was delivered by their mom indicated they would feel less positive emotional consequences ($M = -0.3$) than those who imagined the compliment came from a stranger ($M = 0.2$) $t(161) = 3.04$, $p = .004$. Participants who imagined the compliment came from a friend indicated they would feel marginally less positive emotional consequences ($M = -0.08$) than those who imagined the compliment came from a stranger, $t(161) = 1.89$, $p = .06$. Participants who imagined the compliment came from a friend indicated they would feel equally positive emotional consequences as those who imagined the compliment came from their mom, $t(161) = 1.03$, $p = .30$.

Importantly, there was also a significant interaction between Bowler and Compliment Source, $F(2, 161) = 4.03$, $p = .02$. As Figure 4 shows, the effect of compliment source on emotional consequence ratings depended on the bowler type (i.e., the importance of the bowling domain). Among league bowlers, the effects of compliment source on emotional consequence were more pronounced. As expected, participants who imagined the compliment came from their mom indicated they would feel less positive emotional consequences ($M = -0.8$) than those who imagined the

compliment came from a stranger (M = 0.05), t(161) = 3.60, p < .001 and less positive emotional consequences than those who imagined the compliment came from a friend, (M = -0.10), t(161) = 2.74, p = .007. Participants who imagined the compliment came from a friend indicated they would feel equally positive emotional consequences as those who imagined the compliment came from a stranger, t(161) = 0.62, p = .54. Among casual bowlers, participants who imagined the compliment came from their mom indicated they would feel equally positive emotional consequences (M = 0.2) as those who imagined the compliment came from a stranger (M = 0.4), t(161) = 1.01, p = .31, and as those who imagined the compliment came from a friend (M = -0.06,), t(161) = 1.13, p = .26. Participants who imagined the compliment came from a friend indicated they would feel less positive emotional consequences than those who imagined the compliment came from a stranger, t(161) = 2.09, p = .04. [2]

[2] I also ran the 2 (Bowler) x 3 (Compliment Source) ANOVAs with age as a covariate to statistically control for the effects of age. The interaction between Bowler and Compliment Source remained significant controlling for age of the participants, F(2, 148) = 3.41, p = .04.

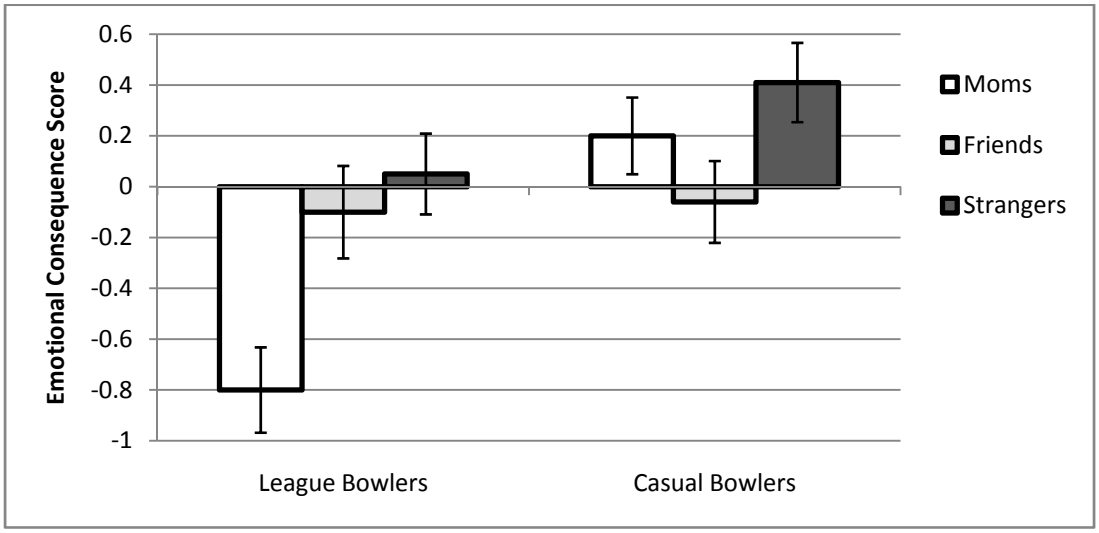

Figure 4. Emotional consequence scores for league and casual bowlers following compliments from each source.

Discussion

The results of Study 3a provide additional evidence that the imagined emotional consequences of a compliment depend on the person who is delivering it, particularly when the domain is important. As predicted, league bowlers who imagined being complimented on their bowling performance by their mom indicated they would experience significantly less positive emotional consequences than those who imagined compliments from strangers. This is consistent with the hypothesis that when a domain is important, the hedonic impact of a compliment from a close other is muted.

In contrast, as predicted, the difference between groups of casual bowlers was much more muted than those between groups of league bowlers. Casual bowlers who imagined being complimented on their bowling performance by their mom indicated they would experience equally positive emotional consequences as those who imagined

compliments from strangers. This null finding provides support for the hypothesis that reductions in the positive effects of compliments from moms are not experienced when the domain is unimportant to people. The results did indicate that casual bowlers who imagined compliments from friends reported less positive emotional consequences than those who imagined compliments from strangers. It is possible that this small effect of compliment source arose because the casual bowlers, who were members of bowling classes, may believe bowling is moderately important (and data indicate this was the case). Thus, casual bowlers may be somewhat motivated to know how well they are performing in bowling, leading them to engage in some evaluation of the source of the compliment. Casual bowlers may have imagined friends that are themselves inexperienced bowlers, leading them to doubt the credibility of the source and conclude that feedback from the person is not very meaningful. So while the results were not predicted, they may not be all that surprising.

STUDY 3B:
IMPORTANCE AND ACCURACY

The effects of compliment source on emotional consequence seem to arise in important domains but not unimportant domains. Why do the effects emerge in one case but not the other? It may be because accuracy motivations arise in one but not the other. Previous research has shown that when a trait or skill is important, people prefer to receive diagnostic feedback (Dunning, 1995). In other words, perhaps people want to know the truth about themselves more when the domain is important to them than they do when it is unimportant. Desiring accurate feedback could lead people to evaluate the source more carefully, resulting in source differences.

The goal of Study 3b was to provide evidence that people are more likely to want accurate feedback when a domain is important to them than when it is unimportant. Participants imagined one of two scenarios, an academic-related scenario or an appearance-related scenario. They were then asked questions about how important the domain was to them and how much they wanted to receive accurate feedback about their success in the domain. I expected that participants would indicate the academic domain was more important to them than the appearance domain. In addition, I expected that participants would report wanting to receive accurate feedback more in the important academic domain than in the less important appearance domain. Most importantly, I expected that the perceived importance of the domain would mediate the relationship between type of domain and desire to receive accurate feedback.

Method

Participants

Participants were 112 Ohio University undergraduates participating in exchange for course credit.

Materials and Procedure

At the conclusion of an unrelated study, participants imagined one of two scenarios. Half of participants (N = 55) imagined giving a class presentation. Specifically, they read:

> *Imagine that it is the end of the quarter and you have to give a presentation in your toughest class. You know the presentation is a big part of your grade and you really want it to go well. During the presentation, you are really nervous. You hear your voice shaking, and you feel everyone's eyes watching you. You feel yourself sweating and your mouth feels really dry. You worry that you're going to forget what you are supposed to say, even though you've practiced it a million times. At the end of the presentation, you return to your seat and are finally able to take a deep breath.*

Using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all important*, 7 = *extremely important*), participants first indicated how important it is to them to perform well in academic situations like the one described. Next, using a 7-point scale (1 = *I would not want to know at all*, 7 = *I would definitely want to know*), participants indicated to what extent they would want to know how well they *truly* did on the presentation.

The other half of participants (N = 56) imagined they were getting dressed to go out to dinner. Specifically, they read:

> *Imagine you are getting ready to go out to dinner with a group of people. You're hungry so you're looking forward to getting there, having a good meal, and hanging out with cool people. You look at the*

> *clock and realize you're running a little late. You quickly search your closet and drawers to find a shirt to wear. You decide to wear a new shirt you just bought and haven't worn before. You spend a few minutes getting ready, run around looking for your keys, and then head out the door.*

Using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all important*, 7 = *extremely important*), participants first indicated how important it is to them to dress well and to look nice. Next, using a 7-point scale (1 = *I would not want to know at all*, 7 = *I would definitely want to know*), participants indicated to what extent they would want to know how good they *truly* looked.

Results

Did participants view success in an academic domain as more important than success in an appearance domain? Yes, participants reported that it was more important to them to do well in academic situations ($M = 6.0$) than it was to dress well ($M = 4.9$), $t(109) = 4.88$, $p < .001$.

Did participants want to receive accurate feedback when the domain was more important? Yes, participants reported that they would want to know how well they truly did (looked) to a greater extent in the academic domain ($M = 5.9$) than in the appearance domain ($M = 4.7$), $t(109) = 4.40$, $p < .001$.

Lastly, using the procedures outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986), I tested to see whether perceived importance of the domain mediated the relationship between the domain type and the extent to which participants wanted to receive accurate feedback. The domain type—coded as 1 for the academic domain and 2 for the appearance domain—significantly predicted the extent to which participants desired accurate

feedback, β = -1.18, $t(110) = 4.40$, $p < .001$ and the perceived importance of the domain, β = -1.07, $t(110) = 4.88$, $p < .001$. In addition, the perceived importance of the domain significantly predicted the extent to which participants wanted to receive accurate feedback, β = 0.74, $t(110) = 8.11$, $p < .001$. Finally, when both domain type and perceived importance were included in a regression equation predicting desire for accurate feedback, the former dropped to marginal significance, β = -0.47, $t(110) = 1.90$, $p = .06$, while the latter remained a significant predictor, β = 0.66, $t(110) = 6.63$, $p < .000$. A Sobel (1982) test confirmed the significance of this partial mediation, $Z = 3.93$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

The results of Study 3b provide evidence that success in an academic domain is more important to participants than success in a domain related to appearance or attire. In addition, the results confirmed the hypothesis that when domains are important, participants are more likely to want accurate feedback about how they perform/how they look. The effect of type of domain on the desire for accurate feedback was partially mediated by the importance participants placed on being successful in that domain. Thus, Study 3b provides an important link in the emerging picture of how people respond to positive social feedback. The results of Study 3a showed that in important domains, the positive emotional impact of a compliment was muted when participants imagined the compliment was delivered by a loved one. Study 3b suggests that one reason may be because people are more motivated to receive accurate feedback in important domains. This seems to replicate and reinforce previous research that shows that people prefer

accurate feedback about themselves when the domain is important but not when it is unimportant (Dunning, 1995). In that work, Dunning experimentally manipulated the importance of a novel trait, --"integrative orientation ability"—in the lab and showed that people wanted diagnostic feedback about their ability on this skill when they were led to believe the skill was important and consequential. The present work extends those findings by evidencing that accuracy motivations engage when the general domain is personally relevant to participants, as well as when it is experimentally manipulated. In addition, these are familiar domains so this work shows it is not just the case that people want to receive diagnostic feedback on traits that are novel or unfamiliar, but rather the effects can be seen for domains that participants likely have much experience with and already have a good idea of their own abilities. In effect, the present research broadens the definition of the importance moderator to include domains that are familiar and personally relevant.

STUDY 3C:
COMPLIMENTS UNDER COGNITIVE LOAD

People want accurate feedback when a domain is important to them. Thus, in these domains they may not readily accept the positive feedback they receive, but rather may scrutinize it for evidence of its authenticity. In Study 3c, I explored the supposition that the observed effects of compliment source on emotional outcome in important domains are the result of more effortful evaluations of compliments in these domains. A more careful evaluation may be why, when a domain is important, the hedonic impact of a positive remark is contingent upon the person delivering it. Thus, inhibiting people's ability to engage in effortful evaluation of a compliment should eliminate the effects of the source of a compliment on its positive emotional consequences and result in equivalent positive effects no matter who the compliment comes from.

The purpose of Study 3c was to test the hypothesis that the influence of compliment source on emotional consequences in important domains requires that people engage in effortful evaluations of the compliment. Thus, in this study, I used a cognitive load manipulation in order to interfere with the resources needed to evaluate a compliment. That is, I gave some participants an additional task to do while they imagined compliment scenarios and considered the emotional consequences of the compliment. If the observed effect of compliment source on emotional impact in important domains is the result of more careful evaluation of the compliment, I expected that a cognitive load manipulation would interfere with participants' ability to evaluate the compliment and the observed source effect would disappear. Thus, I predicted that in important domains, there would be a source effect in the same pattern as the previous

studies when there was no cognitive load but the effect would disappear under conditions of cognitive load. Since it is hypothesized that people are not engaging in effortful evaluations of feedback in unimportant domains, source effects are not expected to emerge whether participants are under cognitive load or not.

Pretest

In this study, participants imagined being complimented about their performance on an academic presentation and about their performance on a video game. An early pretest with a separate group of participants (n = 35) revealed that these two domains differed how important they were to participants, paired $t(34) = 7.47$, $p < .001$. On a 5-point scale, performing well in academics was rated as more important to participants than performing well on video games ($M = 4.0$, $M = 2.0$ respectively). Thus, these two domains were chosen for this study because they were likely to be relatively important and unimportant to participants, respectively.

Method

Participants

Participants were 120 Ohio University undergraduates participating in exchange for course credit.

Materials and Procedures

The task for all participants was to imagine receiving two compliments and to indicate how good each compliment would make them feel. Approximately half of participants ($n = 56$) imagined the compliments and indicated how good they would feel,

with no additional cognitive tasks. The other half of participants (n = 64) were given an additional task to do while they completed this primary task.

Experimental Procedure. In cubicles in front of their own computer, participants read instructions that explained that their task would be to imagine themselves in a scenario and indicate how good they would feel in that situation. Instructions explained the scale participants should use to respond. Participants were instructed to respond using the row of letters from "A" to "L" on their keyboard. They placed their left index finger on the "A" key and their right index finger on the "L" key to represent the two endpoints of the scale. The "A" key represented no change in mood from a neutral starting mood. The "L" key represented the maximum positive mood change they could experience. Participants were told they could use any key along the whole scale to indicate how they would feel. Thus, participants were to imagine the compliment and then indicate how much they expected their positive mood would increase as a result of hearing the compliment. Participants were given several practice trials to familiarize them with the task and practice using the scale.

Participants were randomly assigned to either a *No Load* or a *Cognitive Load* condition. In the *No Load* condition, participants both saw on their screen and heard read to them a short scenario in which they were complimented. Participants then indicated, using the keyboard scale, how good the compliment would make them feel. Participants imagined two compliments. The academic compliment read "*Imagine that you have just given a particularly nerve-racking class presentation. After class, your mom [your friend/a student you don't know] tells you, 'You did a really great job!'"* The video game

compliment read, *"Imagine you are hanging out one night playing video games with a group of people. When your turn is over, your mom [your friend/a person you don't know] says, 'You are really good at that game!"* The compliments were presented in counterbalanced order. The manipulation of compliment source was between-subjects; that is, participants were randomly assigned to read that both compliments came from their mom, a friend, or a stranger.

Participants in the *Cognitive Load* condition completed a few practice trials wherein they were shown a 5-digit number on the screen, were instructed to hold the number in their heads, and then were presented with eight 5-digit numbers on the screen and asked to indicate whether the number they had seen appeared among the numbers listed. After practicing this task, participants were informed that they would do the two tasks they had learned simultaneously, indicating how they would feel in an imagined scenario while remembering a 5-digit number. Thus, during the experimental task, participants in the *Cognitive Load* condition underwent the following sequence of events: First, a blinking fixation star appeared in the center of the screen and then was replaced by a 5-digit number. After 1-sec, the number disappeared and participants saw and heard the compliment scenario. On this same screen, they indicated, using the A through L keyboard scale, how good the compliment would make them feel. After choosing their response, a screen containing eight 5-digit numbers appeared, and participants indicated whether the number they had been asked to remember appeared on the screen. Thus, participants had to keep a 5-digit number in their head while thinking about how good each compliment would feel.

As a manipulation check, following the compliment scenarios, all participants rated the importance of the two domains. Participants were asked "How important is it to you to perform well in academic domains, that is to do well in school?" and "How important is it to you to perform well on video games?" Participants again used the keyboard scale to respond, choosing any letter between the "A" and "L" keys to respond (A = *the domain isn't important to me at all*, L = *the domain is extremely important to me*). The scale was coded as 0 – 9 for all analyses.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check

Participants indicated that the two domains differed in how important they were, paired $t(119) = 16.64$, $p < .001$. Performance in academics was more important to participants than performance in video games ($M = 6.6$, $M = 1.7$ respectively). Importantly, there was no effect of load condition on importance rating, $F(1, 118) = 1.89$, $p = .17$.

Primary Analysis

To test whether the emotional impact of a compliment depends on its source only when participants are able to engage in effortful evaluation of the compliment in important domains, I conducted a 2 (Load Manipulation: load, no load) x 3 (Compliment Source: mom, friend, stranger) x 2 (Compliment Domain: academics, video games) repeated measures ANOVA with Compliment Domain as a within-participants variable. There was no main effect of Load Manipulation, $F(1, 114) = 1.41$, $p = .24$. There was a main effect of Compliment Domain, $F(1, 114) = 35.24$, $p < .001$. Participants reported

that academic performance compliments would feel significantly better than compliments about video game performance (M = 4.3, M = 3.1 respectively).

There was also a main effect of Compliment Source, $F(2, 114) = 10.05$, $p < .001$. Participants indicated compliments from moms would feel significantly less good (M = 2.8) than compliments from strangers (M = 4.9), $t(114) = -3.19$, $p = .002$. Participants also reported that compliments from friends would feel marginally less good (M = 3.6) than compliments from strangers, $t(114) = 1.92$, $p = .06$ and equally as good as compliments from moms, $t(114) = 1.23$, $p = .22$. There were no significant 2-way interactions between the variables in the full model (p's > .05).

The 3-way interaction testing the primary hypothesis of this study was not significant, $F(2, 114) = 1.17$, $p = .31$. Figure 5 contains graphs of results for both the academic and video game scenarios.

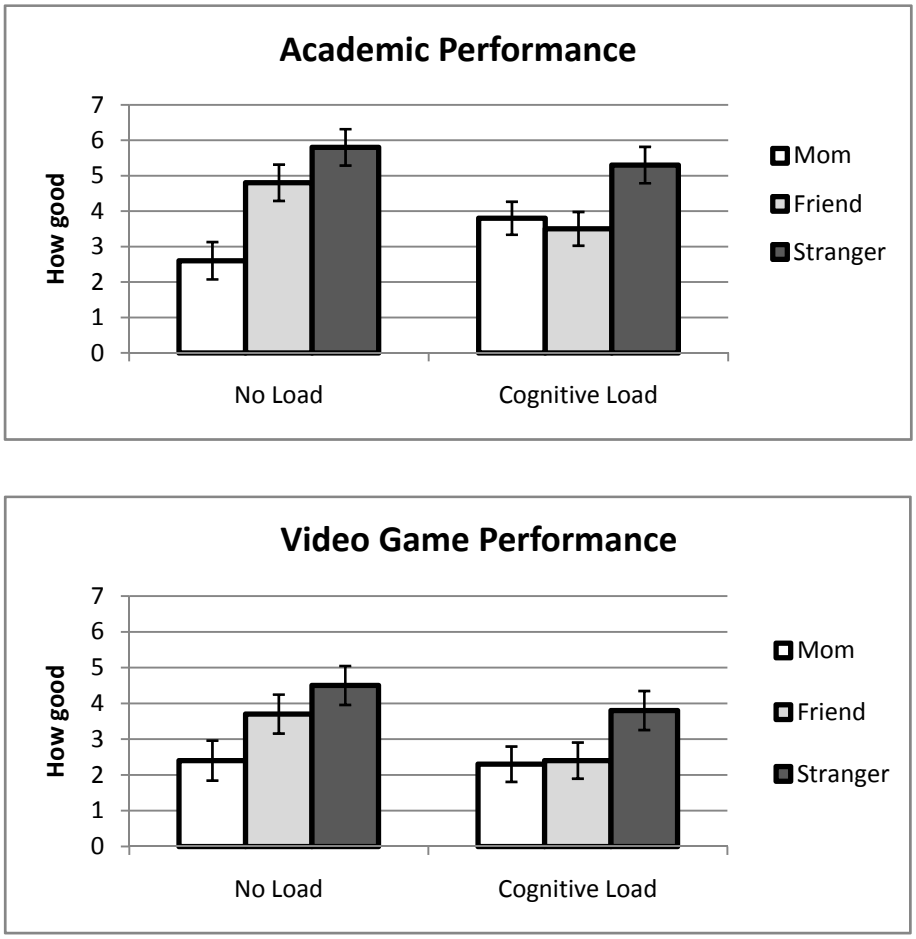

Figure 5. Emotional effect of compliments in academic and video game domains

Though the expected 3-way interaction was not found, to look at the data another way, I conducted a 2 (Load Manipulation: load, no load) x 3 (Compliment Source: mom, friend, stranger) between-participants ANOVA looking at just the important appearance domain where the effect of cognitive load was predicted to occur. There was again a main effect of compliment source, $F(2, 114) = 1.17$, $p = .31$. Participants indicated compliments from moms would feel significantly less good ($M = 3.2$) than compliments from strangers ($M = 5.6$), $t(114) = 4.76$, $p < .001$ and significantly less good

than compliments from friends (M = 4.2), $t(114) = 1.99$, $p = .05$. Participants also reported that compliments from friends would feel significantly less good than compliments from strangers, $t(114) = 2.83$, $p = .006$.

More importantly, there was a significant interaction between compliment source and load manipulation in the appearance domain, $F(2, 114) = 3.42$, $p = .04$. In the *No Load* condition participants indicated compliments from moms would feel significantly less good (M = 2.6) than compliments from strangers (M = 5.8), $t(114) = 6.71$, $p < .001$ and significantly less good than compliments from friends (M = 4.8), $t(114) = 4.62$, $p < .001$. Participants also reported that compliments from friends would feel significantly less good than compliments from strangers, $t(114) = 2.12$, $p < .001$. Thus, in the no load condition, the academic scenario supported the hypothesis and replicated the source effects found in previous studies.

In the *Load* condition, there was still a significant effect of compliment source on emotional impact, but the difference was more muted. Participants reported that compliments from moms would feel significantly less good (M = 3.8) than compliments from strangers (M = 5.3), $t(114) = 3.34$, $p = .001$. Participants indicated that compliments from friends would also feel significantly less good (M = 3.6) than compliments from strangers, $t(114) = 3.72$, $p < .001$. Finally, participants reported that compliments from moms and friends would not feel significantly different, $t(114) = 0.46$, $p = .65$.

Though I predicted that the effect of compliment source on emotional impact would disappear when participants were deprived of the cognitive resources necessary to evaluate the compliment and its source, there did remain a significant difference between

compliments from different sources in the cognitive load condition. However, the difference between sources in the cognitive load condition was muted compared to the differences in the no load condition. So it seems the most pronounced source difference observed in these studies does require available cognitive resources, suggesting there is some level of active discriminatory processing that is engaged when people think about how a compliment feels.

The results of Study 3c also reveal another unexpected finding. Contrary to the results of the previous studies, in this study there was an effect of compliment source on emotional consequence in the unimportant video game domain. In the *No Load* condition, which should be expected to evidence the same pattern of results as the previous studies, there were differences between the sources. Participants reported that compliments from moms would feel significantly less good (M = 2.4) than compliments from strangers (M = 4.5), $t(114) = 4.50$, $p < .001$ and significantly less good than compliments from friends (M = 3.7*)*, $t(114) = 2.71$, $p = .008$. Participants indicated compliments from friends would feel marginally less good than compliments from strangers, $t(114) = 1.70$, $p = .09$. Likewise, there was a significant effect of compliment source on emotional effect in the cognitive load condition. Participants reported that compliments from moms would feel significantly less good (M = 2.4) than compliments from strangers (M = 3.8), $t(114) = 3.11$, $p = .002$ and that compliments from friends would feel significantly less good (M = 2.4*)* than compliments from strangers $t(114) = 3.11$, $p = .002$. Participants imagined compliments from moms would feel equally as good as compliments from friends, $t(114) = 0.22$, $p = .90$.

The mixed findings of Study 3c are somewhat difficult to reconcile with the previous studies. Unexpectedly, source differences emerged in the important domain in the cognitive load condition when participants' ability to scrutinize the compliment was limited. This provides evidence that source differences may not be entirely contingent upon having the resources necessary to engage in an effortful evaluation of the source. This result contradicted predictions, but it may give valuable insight into how people do process social feedback. Though I have used terms like "scrutinize" and "carefully consider" to describe the process people engage in after receiving feedback in domains that matter to them, it may be that the evaluation process has become more automatized than that language would imply. Indeed, after years of repeated feedback from many different sources, evaluating a person's potential reasons for delivering a compliment each and every time he or she does so is unnecessarily costly. Rather, sources may be automatically associated with values on certain evaluative dimensions so that when a domain is important, simply thinking about the source of the compliment implies where the feedback stands in terms of its accuracy. Thus, it is still that case that compliments from loved ones may not feel as good as compliments from strangers because they are more biased, more obligated, and more expected. But they do not necessarily need to be repeatedly evaluated as such in order for their effects to be muted. It is interesting to note, however, that under conditions of cognitive load, the differences between sources were less exaggerated. There may be some evidence that the effects of compliments feel least good when people do have the capability to carefully consider them.

A second surprising result is that participants indicated compliments from moms would feel less good than compliments from strangers and friends in unimportant domains even though they presumably have very little motivation to evaluate whether the feedback is accurate. This is contrary to findings in the first three studies. It may be that when being complimented about video game performance, moms' perceived lack of credibility in this area is glaringly apparent. Moms likely have very little expertise in the area of video game playing. And just as a person may raise a dubious eyebrow at relationship advice from a perpetually single friend, or financial advice from a bankrupt uncle, sometimes a source's obvious lack of credibility is too blatant to ignore. It may be that whether accuracy motivations exist or not, the unreliability of feedback from sources that are viewed as having very little credibility may affect perceptions of the compliment's legitimacy even when the domain matters very little to people.

Lastly, a general reason why the results of this study may not perfectly align with those of the previous studies is that the dependent measures were different. The previous studies measured the effects of compliments using an aggregate score that took aspects of both mood and self-esteem into account. The dependent measure in the present study was a single-item question asking how "good" the compliment would feel. Thus, this study may tap into an immediate or more automatic response to how the compliment would feel rather than the more deliberate or evaluative response that more detailed measures of mood and self-esteem produce. How immediate affective responses differ from more deliberate ones when it comes to compliments might be an area for future research to explore.

STUDY 4:
COMPLIMENTS IN THE LAB

The primary purpose of Study 4 was to examine the effects of compliments behaviorally. In this study, I moved away from demonstrations using hypothetical scenarios to measure how actually giving participants a compliment impacted their mood and self-esteem. An abundant literature demonstrates that people are often wrong when making predictions about how events will make them feel, overestimating both the extent to which positive events will make them feel good and negative events will make them feel bad (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). A behavioral study was necessary to investigate whether the emotional consequence people anticipate they would experience after compliments correspond to the kinds of effects they actually do experience.

In addition, in Study 4 I again measured explicit judgments of mood and self-esteem, but added an implicit measure as well. Changes in mood and self-esteem are often difficult to capture with explicit survey measures. Implicit measures can be particularly valuable because, unlike explicit measures, they do not rely on self-report. They reflect more automatic nonconscious aspects of mood and self-esteem, rather than the deliberative judgments required of explicit self-report measures (see Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker for a discussion, 2000). Thus, including an implicit measure of self-esteem allows for the measurement of more nonconscious aspects of the experience of receiving a compliment.

In this study, participants were complimented by either a friend or a stranger following their performance on a lab task. In order to most closely mirror the academic

scenario that has evidenced source differences in the previous survey studies, participants gave a short presentation in front of other participants and were complimented on their performance. Both implicit and explicit emotional consequences were measured immediately following the compliment to determine the effect of the source of the compliment on emotional consequences. Though the most pronounced source differences would likely be found between compliments from moms and strangers, it was not logistically possible to use moms in this study. Previous studies suggest that participants believe compliments from friends and strangers would result in significantly different emotional consequences; therefore, friends and strangers delivered compliments in the present study. The primary hypothesis of Study 4 was that compliments from friends would result in less positive emotional consequences than compliments from strangers. Participants who were complimented by either source were expected to exhibit more positive emotional responses than participants who experienced no compliment at all.

Method

Participants

Participants were 63 Ohio University undergraduates (67% female) who participated in exchange for course credit or five dollars.

Materials and Procedure

Experimental Procedure. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to measure how learning is affected when there is a close relationship between teacher and learner. Thus all participants were asked to bring a close, same-sex friend whom they were not dating, to the lab with them to participate. Each experimental session consisted

of three people: the two members of the friend dyad and one confederate who was ostensibly another participant whose friend was not able to make it to the session at the last minute.

In the lab, the participants were informed that one of the three of them would be chosen as the "teacher," whose responsibility it would be to present information to the rest of the group. The two people not chosen would be "learners," whose responsibility it would be to listen to the information presented and take a short quiz. The experimenter then selected one of the friends' names at random and announced which one had been selected as the teacher. In each session, the confederate was always a learner, one friend was chosen as the teacher, and the other friend was a learner.

The teacher was given approximately ten minutes alone in a cubicle to study information about winemaking in preparation for a short, five-minute presentation to the group. This topic was chosen because it was a presumably novel topic that lent itself to a cover story about teaching and learning new information. To maintain the cover story, and increase the perceived importance of the presentation, participants were told that the learners would have to take a quiz on the information they heard, and they were encouraged to prepare and present the information well. While the teacher friend prepared for the presentation, the learner friend completed surveys in a separate cubicle.

It is at this point that the experiment differed by condition, each of which had an essentially identical procedure with one important manipulation. The learner friend was given a short paragraph to read. In the *Friend Compliment Condition* (n = 20) the paragraph asked the participant to comply with delivering a compliment to his or her

friend at the conclusion of the presentation. Specifically, the friend was asked to say, "You did a great job!," and nothing else, when the teacher finished the presentation. The learner read the written instructions, indicated whether he or she understood the instructions, and also verbally confirmed to the experimenter that he or she understood what would be required at the conclusion of the presentation. In the *Stranger Compliment Condition* (n = 20), the confederate learner, a stranger to the participant, delivered the same compliment. The learner friend was asked not to make any positive comments to the teacher friend following the presentation. In the *Control Condition* (n = 23), the teacher did not receive any positive remarks following the presentation. The learner friend, again, was asked to refrain from providing the teacher friend with any form of feedback following the presentation. Though only one of the experimental conditions involved the friend's active participation in the compliment, a friend was present in all experimental conditions to control for the potential effects of the friend's mere presence on participants' mood and self-esteem.

Just prior to giving the presentation, the teacher completed a quick *pre-presentation survey*, described below, and then all participants returned to the main lab area for the presentation. At the conclusion of the presentation, the experimenter asked participants to return to their separate cubicles so that the learners could ostensibly take their quizzes. It was at this point, immediately prior to returning to the cubicles, that the compliment was delivered, by the friend in the *Friend Compliment Condition* or by the confederate in the *Stranger Compliment Condition*. In the *Control Condition*, the participants returned to their cubicles without any feedback being provided to the teacher.

Pre-Presentation Mindset Assessment. Immediately prior to delivering the presentation, the teacher completed a quick survey. To report their pre-presentation mood, participants indicated how much they currently felt each of several positive and negative emotions. The positive emotions were *proud, calm, joyful, inspired, interested, fearless, cheerful, excited, confident, and enthusiastic.* The negative emotion terms were *distressed, irritable, sad, upset, scared, nervous, angry*, and *lonely.* They indicated how much they were experiencing each emotion using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *a great deal*). Participants also indicated how prepared to give the presentation they felt using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all prepared*, 7 = *extremely prepared*). In addition, participants indicated how important it was to them to do well on the presentation using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all important*, 7 = *extremely important*).

Post-Presentation Mindset Assessment. At the conclusion of their presentation, immediately following the compliment, participants completed a survey packet with the dependent mood and self-esteem measures.

Mood. The mood dependent variable was assessed with the same mood scale participants completed prior to the presentation. That is, participants indicated how much they felt each of several positive and negative emotion terms using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*).

Self-Esteem. The self-esteem dependent variable was assessed with both explicit and implicit measures. As an explicit measure, participants completed the State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). The scale contains 20 items and consists of three correlated self-esteem subscales: performance, social, and appearance self-esteem.

Items are rated on a 5-point scale, (1 = *not at all*, 5 =*extremely true of me*). Sample items from the scale include, "*I am worried about whether I am regarded as a success or failure*" and "*I feel confident about my abilities*." As an implicit measure of self-esteem, participants were asked to sign their name, ostensibly to consent for their data to be used as part of a thesis project. This signature was used to assess participants' change in signature size from their signature on the informed consent in the beginning of the study to their signature after receiving a compliment. Larger signatures have been found to indicate greater self-esteem (Zweigenhaft, 1977). Examining differences in signature size from pre-survey to post-survey assesses the effect of the compliment on participants' implicit self-esteem.

Manipulation Checks. Two manipulation checks were included in the surveys. To ensure that participants did regard the friends they brought to the lab as friends and the confederate participants they met in the lab as strangers, participants completed The Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) to indicate their perceived relationship with the other members in their experimental session. Using the pictorial scale, participants indicated which of a series of overlapping Venn diagrams represented the relationship between themselves and the target other. Participants chose a Venn diagram to represent the relationship between themselves and the friend they brought to the lab. They then saw another scale and chose one Venn diagram to represent the relationship between themselves and the confederate participant. Secondly, to ensure participants heard the compliment and were aware of who delivered it, participants

indicated whether they had received any feedback about their performance and, if so, what was said and who said it.

At the conclusion of the study, participants were probed for suspicion, carefully debriefed, and thanked for their participation.

Results

Manipulation Checks

To ensure that they viewed the friend they brought to the lab as a friend and the confederate as a stranger, I analyzed participants' responses to the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale. Higher numbers indicated a greater perceived closeness between the participant and the target other. As expected, participants perceived a closer relationship with the friend they brought to the lab ($M = 5.0$) than with the confederate ($M = 1.3$), $t(62) = 14.94$, $p < .001$.

I also checked to make sure participants were aware that they had been given a compliment and could correctly identify who delivered it. Of the 40 participants who did receive a compliment only one participant incorrectly reported that she did not receive any feedback about her performance. The remainder of complimented participants indicated they had received a compliment, correctly identified the source of the compliment, and correctly recalled what was said to them. All participants in the control condition correctly reported having received no feedback about their performance. Thus, the one participant's data was removed from all further analyses, resulting in a final sample of 62 participants.

Mood

A pre-compliment mood score was computed by averaging participants' responses to the positive emotion terms (α = .90), averaging participants' responses to the negative emotion terms (α = .74), and then subtracting participants' average negative mood from their average positive mood. A post-compliment mood score was computed by averaging participants' responses to the positive emotion terms (α = .92), averaging participants' responses to the negative emotion terms (α = .80), and then subtracting participants' average negative mood from their average positive mood.

In a between-participants ANOVA, I investigated the effects of compliment source (Friend, Stranger, or Control) on post-compliment mood controlling for participants' pre-compliment mood. Participants' mood differed as a function of compliment source, $F(2, 58) = 7.55$, $p = .001$. As seen in Figure 6, participants who received a compliment from their friend reported more a more positive mood ($M = 1.9$) than participants who received no compliment at all ($M = 0.9$), $t(58) = 4.23$, $p < .001$. Participants who received a compliment from a stranger also reported a more positive mood ($M = 1.5$) than participants who received no compliment at all, $t(58) = 2.50$, $p = .02$. Finally, contrary to the hypothesis, when participants did receive a compliment, the mood of participants who received compliments from their friends was no more positive than the mood of participants who received compliments from a stranger, $t(58) = 1.61$, $p = .11$.

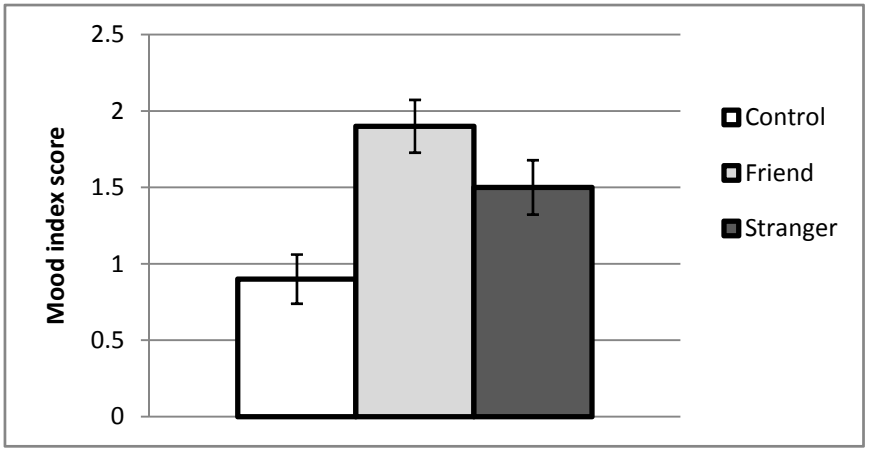

Figure 6. Mood following compliments from each source

Explicit Self-Esteem

Self-esteem scores were created by averaging participants' responses to the 20 items of the State Self-Esteem Scale (α = .87).

In a between-participants ANOVA, I investigated the effects of compliment condition (Friend, Stranger, or Control) on explicit self-esteem. Participants' explicit state self-esteem did not differ as a function of compliment condition, $F(2, 59) = 0.11$, $p = .89$. In addition, there were no differences on any of the three self-esteem subscales (F's < 1).

Implicit Self-Esteem

As a measure of implicit self-esteem, the change from participants' signature size pre-compliment to their signature size post-compliment was calculated. Signature size was measured in terms of the total area covered by the signature. Thus, the height of the signature from the highest point to the lowest point was measured, the length of the

signature from the leftmost point to the rightmost point was measured, and the two numbers were multiplied to obtain a measure of the total area of the smallest rectangle that could contain the signature. The change from the area of the signature pre-compliment to the area of the signature post-compliment was computed by dividing participants' pre-compliment signature by their post-compliment signature.

In a between-participants ANOVA, I investigated the effects of compliment condition (Friend, Stranger, or Control) on implicit self-esteem using the change in participants' signature size as a dependent variable. Participants' implicit self-esteem did not differ as a function of compliment condition, $F(2, 53) = 1.75$, $p = .19$. However, there was a marginally significant difference between the change in signature size after compliments from strangers ($M_{change} = 1.6$) and after compliments from friends ($M_{change} = 1.3$), $t(53) = 1.69$, $p = .09$. That is, when participants were complimented by strangers, their post-compliment signature was 1.6 times bigger than their pre-compliment signature. When participants were complimented by a friend, their signature was 1.3 times bigger.

Discussion

The purpose of Study 4 was to investigate compliments behaviorally to see whether the emotional consequences people imagine they would experience as a result of being complimented by different sources are similar to those they actually do experience when complimented. I hypothesized that participants would experience more positive mood and greater self-esteem following compliments from strangers compared to compliments from friends. Though there was a marginal difference in the expected

direction for the change in signature size, contrary to my hypotheses, the remainder of the results indicated that participants' mood and self-esteem following compliments did not depend on the source of the compliment. That is, compliments from friends and strangers resulted in equivalently positive emotional consequences.

Though the results were not as predicted, the fact that there were no effects of compliment source on emotional consequences actually may not be so surprising given two findings that emerged in the previous studies. In Study 1, I found that a partial mediator of the relationship between emotional consequences and source differences was the perceived obligation of the compliment-giver. Compliments from friends are seen as more obligated than compliments from strangers. If friends are perceived as having an obligation to compliment, it is possible that a friend *not* complimenting may seem particularly strange and may subsequently have an adverse effect on participants' mood. In the *Stranger Compliment Condition* participants' friends were present but did not deliver a compliment. Participants might view the lack of a compliment from their friend as indicative that they really did not perform well. Thus, it is possible that the absence of a compliment from their friend actually decreased the hedonic impact of a compliment from a stranger.

The results of this study might also be explained in another way. In this paper, I have argued that the effect of compliment source on emotional consequence is often contingent upon the domain being of importance to the participant. In domains that are unimportant, positive feedback may be accepted without regard for who delivered it. Though I tried to amplify the importance of the task by having participants believe there

would be a quiz on the information they presented, the lab presentation simply may not have been very important to participants. If it was not important, participants might not be motivated to evaluate whether the compliment was indicative of how well they performed and so any feedback might be taken at face value. An analysis of responses to the question about how important it was to do well on the presentation revealed that the average response was 4.27 on the 7-point scale, just above the midpoint. Thus, it might be the case that performance on the presentation was not important enough to participants to yield an interest in receiving accurate feedback and so compliments from both friends and strangers felt equally good.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Robert Orben, a U.S. comedy writer, once said, “A compliment is verbal sunshine.” A powerful testament to the power of compliments to brighten a gloomy day can be found on the Purdue University campus. Outside the chemistry building, on one of the busiest walkways on campus, every Wednesday from 12:30 to 2:30 two students—the “Compliment Guys”—offer passersby free compliments. Rain, shine, and in the freezing Indiana winter months, two sophomore students stand on the sidewalk with one simple goal: to brighten people’s day. Each week, the two students attempt to uniquely compliment every single person who passes by, doling out accolades such as “Looking good, sir! I like that brown hat,” “You guys are a very cute couple,” or, to a fellow student noticeably attempting to grow a scraggly goatee, “That’s coming in nicely!” The guys claim they are there for no other reason than to make people feel good. And it is working. Amidst worry about exams, relationship problems, job prospects, and gloomy economic times, the compliments the guys offer bring many people much-needed boosts. When asked how they like receiving compliments from the guys, many students gush about how it feels to have someone appreciate small details about their clothes or their appearance. Some students claim they go all the way across campus on Wednesday afternoons just to walk by and see what kind words the guys have to offer.

To be sure, it feels good to hear praise (Vonk, 2002; Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008). The compliments the Purdue students offer can brighten a person’s day and make him feel good about his brown hat or experimental new facial hair. But compliments do not always deliver a warm, fuzzy feeling ; sometimes they are accompanied by very little

feeling at all. In this work, I found evidence that people believe compliments from close others to be less emotionally impactful than compliments from strangers. In Studies 1 and 2, participants who imagined being complimented by their mom or a friend reported less positive emotional consequences than participants who imagined an identical compliment from a stranger. Study 1 indicated that two factors partially mediated the relationship between compliment source and emotional consequence: the perceived obligation of the source and the habituation participants felt toward compliments from the source.

In the first two studies, compliment source impacted emotional consequences in one domain, but not another. In Studies 3a-3c, I explored a potential explanation for why source influences the emotional impact of a compliment in some cases but not others. In Study 3a, I found that the source effect emerged when the domain was important to people, but not when it was unimportant. League bowlers anticipated experiencing less positive emotional consequences when the compliment came from their mom than when it came from friends or strangers. For casual bowlers, however, compliments felt equally good coming from moms as they did from strangers. Study 3b found that in important domains, people desire accurate feedback. Study 3c tested the assumption that in important domains, when accurate feedback is desired, the source differences that emerge are the result of an effortful evaluation of the compliment. Contrary to predictions, however, this study failed to confirm the necessity of cognitive resources for the effects of compliment source on emotional consequence to emerge. However, the extreme differences between sources were muted some, providing evidence that some level of processing may be taking place. Lastly, in Study 4, participants were given compliments

by friends or strangers and their mood and self-esteem was assessed. In this study, I failed to find evidence that compliments from friends felt qualitatively different than compliments from strangers.

Taken together, the present studies provided mixed support for the primary hypotheses. The results of the first three studies provide strong converging evidence that when imagining themselves being complimented in a domain that matters to them, people anticipate that compliments from close others would fail to produce as positive an emotional reaction as compliments from strangers. In addition, Study 3b offers a piece to the puzzle by evidencing that accuracy motivations arise in important domains but not unimportant ones. However, Studies 3c and 4 failed to provide the evidence necessary to make definitive conclusions about the effects of the source of a compliment on its emotional impact.

Specifically, three findings emerged that were contrary to predictions. First and most importantly, though people anticipated that compliments from close others would be less emotionally impactful than compliments from strangers, when participants were actually complimented, this difference did not emerge. It may be that participants are poor predictors of their emotional responses to compliments and the effects found in the scenario studies represent affective forecasting errors. That is, it may be that compliments from friends and family really are just as emotionally impactful as those from strangers and people are wrong when they imagine how they will feel. Indeed, an abundant literature shows that people are often ill-equipped to make predictions about their own emotions, even after they have experience with an event (Wilson, Meyers, & Gilbert,

2001). However, given abundant anecdotal evidence that suggests a source effect, and no obvious reason why participants would consistently make wrong predictions yet always in the same exact pattern, I am reluctant to draw that conclusion. It may instead be the case that there were methodological issues in the experimental paradigm of Study 4 that precluded an effective test of this phenomenon.

Future studies could endeavor to address the shortcomings of the lab study in order to aptly capture the phenomena that anecdote suggests. For example, future research could make the feedback more valued by increasing the importance of the domain or trait on which people are being complimented. Domains that are personally important to a person have more impact on self-esteem and perceptions of self-worth (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouverette, 2003). Perhaps external incentives could be offered to increase participants' investment in the task and make performance more consequential to them. In addition, future research could control for perceptions of friends' obligation to give feedback or restructure the lab setting so that there was not so obvious a lack of feedback from a friend. In addition, more stringent criteria could be placed for the closeness of the friend participants bring to the lab to ensure that participants are coming with a close friend they know well rather than the student who sits next to them in class. Lastly, compliments are real world phenomena that may be slippery to capture in the lab. A field study in which participants actually are complimented, maybe after sports games or class presentations, might produce more measurable effects. If the story about when compliments fail to produce their effects is

ever to be told in full, actual evidence of the differential impacts compliments from close others and strangers can have is necessary.

Secondly, there were two findings in Study 3c that are important for future research to reconcile. First, though I predicted that compliment source would play a role in emotional consequences only when participants could engage in an effortful evaluation of the compliment, that did not appear to be the case. Though the effects were more subtle under conditions of cognitive load, participants did believe compliments from moms would feel less good than compliments from strangers. This provides evidence that the process by which people come to conclude that moms' compliments do not feel as good as strangers' is not one that necessitates careful processing. It could be that a compliment source has been associated with certain characteristics (e.g., moms are biased, friends may feel obligated, strangers had to put effort into the compliment, etc.) so often in the past that an evaluative process does not need to be engaged for every compliment. It is clear from these studies that people do not simply unconditionally accept the positive things that are said about them. But what exactly do they do instead? Future research is certainly needed to iron out the process involved in how people decide to accept or reject the positive accolades someone offers them.

Lastly, contrary to predictions, in Study 3c the same pattern of results was found in both important and unimportant domains. This not only ran contrary to predictions, but also contradicted results from the first three studies that showed that the effects of compliment source on emotional consequences emerged in important domains but not unimportant domains. Given the strength of evidence for domain differences in the first 3

studies, this finding does not necessarily provide a detrimental blow to the argument. Indeed, the difference between studies could be the result of the difference in the dependent measure used; Studies 1-3a used measures that were more deliberate and multidimensional while Study 3c used a single-item response that may have represented a more automatic affective response.

Or it could be that certain characteristics of a source are too obvious to be ignored when considering the effects of a compliment. The communication and persuasion research cites credibility of the source as the most important determinant of the effectiveness of a message (Wilson & Sherrel, 1993). In his classic ingratiation work, Jones (1964) too describes the establishment of credibility as a vital component to ensuring flattering comments hit their marks. A glaring lack of credibility could be like a bright neon warning sign against accepting the praise at face value, even when the domain is not important to a person. And people could lose credibility for all sorts of reasons; for example, people could have an obvious lack of expertise in an area or could be caught giving an insincere compliment. Future research is certainly necessary to explore the boundary conditions under which people will view a source as credible, regardless of the relationship they have with the person. Finally, it is important to note that though compliment source was the primary focus of the present research, this is in no way an insinuation that it is the only factor that influences how a compliment feels. Rather, on the contrary, I believe that compliment source may only be the vessel in which the truly interesting components that determine how we process social feedback travel.

To be sure, the unexpected findings of the present study open the door to many future explorations of the topic.

Additional Directions for Future Research

The present studies lend themselves to additional fruitful avenues for future research. Additional studies could explore some missing pieces of the present argument. For example, a study that shows that given a choice, people would opt to receive feedback from strangers over loved ones in important domains, might help provide additional evidence of a desire to hear feedback that is perceived as most accurate. In addition, teasing apart the role of causal attributions and external factors could better inform an understanding of when compliments pack their most powerful hedonic punch. In addition, I selected domain importance as a moderator to test in this study because it lent itself to straightforward predictions about why a person might be affected by the compliment source in one domain but not another. When a domain is important to a person, the cost of accepting a compliment as truth is great; people could accept feedback that is not accurate which could hinder their chances for self-improvement. However, there are no doubt many other moderators that represent boundary conditions under which these source differences may emerge.

Finally, to take a step back, compliments as a whole appear to be grossly under-researched in social psychology. A quick Google search of the word “compliment” results in an impressive 28.5 million webpage hits. That makes a lot of people who are talking about compliments. And people are talking about them in a lot of different ways: there are lists of the best compliments people have gotten and lists of the worst,

workshops devoted to teaching people how to be better compliment-givers and workshops devoted to teaching them how to be more gracious compliment receivers, and there are thousands and thousands of forums and blog postings analyzing (and overanalyzing) compliments and their meanings. Future research could look to these sources and anecdotal experiences with compliments to inform research questions. How do compliments affect people perceptions of themselves? What is the social psychology behind fishing for compliments? And in addition to investigating when compliments fall on deaf ears, research could explore the conditions under which compliments feel maximally good, such as when a person is told about a compliment that was said about him to someone else. Indeed, compliments seem to represent untapped psychological phenomena that researchers have yet to explore.

CONCLUSION

The set of studies in the present research confirm the conclusion the limited body of work that evidences the sociopsychological impact of compliments has come to: compliments make people feel good. Furthermore, these studies provide initial empirical support for a long-witnessed anecdotal phenomenon: they often feel least good coming from people who matter most. Looking at the studies through a wider lens, the results help bring a picture of how people process and respond to positive social feedback into clearer focus. It seems people do not unconditionally soak in all of the flattering remarks that come their way. Rather, the fact that the source of a compliment may impact its hedonic benefit seems to provide evidence that it matters whether the remarks are believed to be true. Praise that has the least likelihood of reflecting the true state of affairs likely stands the least chance of being emotionally impactful. Indeed, explorations of differential source effects may be another road to providing empirical support for the role of accuracy motivations in self-evaluation. This work also confirms previous research that suggests accuracy motivations are particularly evident in important domains (Dunning, 1995). Thus, this research weighs in on motivations people have when their positive views of themselves are most at stake. Ultimately, this work suggests that, in what may be an unfortunate paradox, in important domains when people most care about how well they are doing, the people who are probably most likely to say things to make them feel good are the least likely to actually be effective at doing so.

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