

# Bragging and modesty

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Young people today react to bragging in the same way as previous generations, according to new research by psychologists at the University of Dayton.

"You might say 'I'm the best' at something or 'I'm better than most [people](#),' but without evidence to back up your claim, that kind of self-promotion can have negative social repercussions," said Erin O'Mara, associate professor of psychology.

People react more favorably to boasting when it is supported by evidence. But the researchers found being modest—saying you're average at something when the evidence shows you're actually great at it—makes someone the most likeable.

The findings replicate and extend a study done in 1982 by Barry Schlenker and Mark Leary. O'Mara said it was worth re-examining how people respond to self-promotion today because researchers have found that younger generations have higher self-esteem and narcissism, and [social media](#) has given people more ways to brag.

"You might expect a shift in how people perceive self-promotional claims because it's become the norm now to promote yourself on social media," said Benjamin Kunz, associate professor of psychology. "People are always posting on Facebook and Instagram all the success and fun they're having, so we thought people may have become desensitized to self-promotion. Perhaps you don't need to be modest anymore to be liked. But that wasn't the case."

Their research grew out of a disagreement they had about Roger Federer, who is widely considered to be the best tennis player of all time, and whether his [self-promotion](#) makes him unlikeable.

"He's very sure of himself when he's interviewed," Kunz said of Federer, who holds more Grand Slam singles titles than any other male player in history. "But he can say he's the best in the world and you can verify that, so his boasting is warranted. I thought that made him more likeable."

But O'Mara maintained: "If he were more modest, that would make him more likeable."

O'Mara said they decided to test it empirically, which led them to the 1982 study. And when they replicated the findings, they confirmed: She was right.

The study is published in *Self and Identity*, a peer-reviewed journal.

**More information:** Erin M. O'Mara et al. Is self-promotion evaluated more positively if it is accurate? Reexamining the role of accuracy and modesty on the perception of self-promotion, *Self and Identity* (2018). [DOI: 10.1080/15298868.2018.1465846](https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2018.1465846)

Provided by University of Dayton

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