

# Observing Flattery: A Social Comparison Perspective

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This research investigates how observers react when they see someone else being given a compliment that is flattering but that appears sincere. Prior work suggests that to the extent the compliment is perceived to be genuine, observers will not judge the source negatively. Merging insights from social comparison research and dual attitudes theory, this article presents a novel conceptualization of observer reactions to flattery. Specifically, while observers' deliberative attitudes toward apparently sincere flattery may be positive, a spontaneous process of comparing oneself with the target will produce an implicit negative reaction rooted in the unpleasant sensation of envy. This conceptualization yields a host of related implications, successfully predicting observers' reactions toward insincere as well as sincere flattery and toward the flattery target as well its source, and also explaining how their envy-based negative reaction may ironically induce observers to behave in a manner consistent with the flatterer's interests. Convergent findings across four experiments provide a multifaceted understanding of observer reactions to flattery, while also informing the literature on social comparison and envy.

Imagine shopping in a clothing store and overhearing a conversation in which a salesperson lavishly compliments another customer on the elegance of her outfit. What opinion would you, as an observer, form of the salesperson? Research on the effects of flattery suggests an answer (Gordon 1996; Vonk 2002). While self-enhancement motives can cause targets of flattery to react positively even when the flattery is blatantly insincere (Chan and Sengupta 2010), observers tend to focus on the sincerity of the compliment. Thus, given a salient ulterior motive (e.g., the salesperson's wish to make a sale), observers are likely to deem the praise insincere and form a negative opinion of the flatterer (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Main, Dahl, and Darke 2007).

An intriguing aspect of flattery, however, is that it is not

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always palpably insincere. Even if the flatterer's praise is guided by an ingratiation motive, it can be difficult for an observer to judge whether this is the case or whether the praise is genuine. In the salesperson scenario, for instance, observers who also believe that the target customer's outfit is truly elegant may judge the salesperson's praise sincere—especially if the compliment is offered after the customer has finished her purchases rather than before (since the sales motive is less salient in the after-purchase case; Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Main et al. 2007).

This research focuses on how observers react to such instances of nonsuspicious flattery. Given lowered suspicion of insincerity, both intuition and existing research suggest that observers' reactions will be relatively positive (Vonk 1998, 2002). In contrast, we argue that observers will react negatively even to nonsuspicious flattery. We arrive at this conclusion by building a new conceptualization of observer reactions, one that merges insights from the flattery literature with two diverse research streams: social comparisons (Festinger 1954; Tesser 1988) and dual attitudes theory (Petty, Brinol, and DeMarree 2007; Wilson, Lindsey, and Schooler 2000). This conceptualization posits that observing someone else being flattered automatically evokes an envy-inducing social comparison, yielding a negative response toward the flatterer. Considerations of the flatterer's sincerity do lead to a more positive judgment; however, the initial negative reaction stays on as an implicit attitude.

The major contribution of this research lies in building on

these ideas to offer a novel and multifaceted theoretical account of how observers respond to flattery. This conceptualization not only enables us to identify an unexpected negative reaction to sincere flattery; it also provides insights into related issues—such as how observers react to the target of flattery, as well as the ironic downstream consequences of observers' negative reactions toward the flatterer (e.g., buying more expensive products from a store after observing a salesperson flatter another consumer). At a secondary level, this investigation also informs the literature on envy and social comparisons that it draws upon. While earlier research on social comparisons has examined reactions toward the comparison target (Collins 1996), we extend that perspective by focusing on reactions toward the person making the comparison salient (i.e., the flatterer). Finally, our findings speak to the literature on envy, both with regard to a comparison of the different forms of envy (cf. Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2009) and the opposing effects on behavior that can be exerted by this emotion.

Apart from its theoretical import, our work contains applied implications as well. Examining observer reactions to flattery is of considerable importance for persuasion agents, including marketers, who use flattery as a persuasion tactic. Flattery that is targeted at one person may often be overheard by another: the in-store salesperson context discussed earlier is one in which this unintended consequence can frequently occur (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Main et al. 2007). The benefits of winning the targeted customer's appreciation will be significantly undercut if observers react adversely to the salesperson in such situations (cf. Aaker, Brumbaugh, and Grier 2000). Our findings offer room for both caution and optimism in this regard: observers do react negatively in terms of their attitudes, but their subsequent behavior might be beneficial for the store.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### “Sincere” Flattery

Although scholars have offered several different definitions of flattery, a common theme is that flattery refers to lavish praise that is offered in an ingratiation setting—that is, the communicator has something to gain from the recipient of the praise (Gordon 1996; Vonk 1998). A PhD student's compliments to a professor on the latter's research may fall in this category, as does the introductory vignette of a salesperson complimenting a customer.

However, while flattery is characterized by a dependence relationship between the giver and the receiver of the compliment, the degree to which an observer suspects that the flattery is prompted by an ulterior motive can vary (cf. Williams, Fitzsimons, and Block 2004). In some cases, there is greater room to believe that the praise is sincere rather than proceeding from an ingratiation motive—for example, when the observer believes that the target is deserving of the praise (e.g., Vonk 2002). Thus, in the student-professor context, an observer who also thinks highly of the professor's research is more likely to perceive the student's compliments as being

sincere. Apart from considerations of “deservingness,” the timing of the compliment can also influence perceptions of sincerity: thus, a salesperson's compliments to another customer are more likely to be judged sincere when offered after the purchase is already complete (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Main et al. 2007).

Viewed from an observer's perspective, the ulterior motive is no longer the only plausible reason for the flattery in these cases. The current research focuses on such types of relatively nonsuspicious flattery, which we term “sincere flattery.” It is worth noting that this label is very similar to (and indeed may interchangeably be used with) the term “genuine flattery” employed by Main et al. (2007) to describe after-purchase compliments from the salesperson. As in Main et al.'s usage, it should be kept in mind that (a) “sincerity” refers to the observer's perceptions, rather than the communicator's actual intent; and (b) perceptions of sincerity (and suspicions of insincerity) range along a continuum rather than referring to an absolute. Thus, although we focus on cases where suspicions regarding insincerity may be relatively low, they cannot be completely ruled out given the dependence relationship between communicator and receiver: the salesperson who offers an after-purchase compliment may still be hoping to encourage future store visits. Indeed, it is because we examine such ingratiation-related settings that we primarily use the term “flattery” (echoing similar uses of the word in past research; Main et al. 2007; Vonk 2002), although for readability, we occasionally interchange that term with “praise” or “compliments.”

### Observers' Reactions to Flattery

As a first step toward elucidating observers' reactions to sincere flattery, we turned to the existing literature on observer reactions to flattery in general. Research in this area has typically focused on the contrast between observers' and targets' evaluations of a flatterer, with the standard finding being that targets react more favorably to the flatterer than do observers (Gordon 1996; Vonk 2002). While several factors have been identified for this difference (such as the cognitive constraints imposed on targets by the act of social interaction; Campbell and Kirmani 2000), the most widely supported rationale has to do with a self-enhancement motive. This account suggests that targets are biased because they want to believe the positive message about themselves; therefore, they respond positively to the flatterer (Gordon 1996; Pandey and Singh 1987; Vonk 2002). Observers do not share this bias; accordingly, they are more likely to attribute the flattery to an ulterior motive and form a poorer opinion of the flatterer (Vonk 2002).

A corollary of this account, of particular relevance to our focus, is that observers do not always react negatively to the flatterer if they have reason to believe in the sincerity of the compliment (e.g., when they perceive that it is well deserved). In support, Vonk (2002; see also Vonk 1998) found that when observers were provided with prior positive information about a flattery target, their attitudes toward the flatterer—who was now deemed sincere—were as positive as those of the targets. However, observers who had not

been provided with this prior information disliked the flatterer, replicating the usual observer effect. While this study thus reports an interesting boundary condition for the observer-target difference, it shares the theme of other work in this area: targets are biased, but observers are objective.

Offering a complementary perspective, the current research, which focuses exclusively on the observer, suggests that observers' attitudes may be colored by a negative bias against the flatterer—even when they have good reason to believe that the flattering message is actually well deserved. We arrive at this prediction by articulating a new mechanism that can underlie observers' reactions to flattery, one based on social comparison.

### Flattery and Social Comparisons

Since Festinger's (1954) seminal work, a rich body of research has shown that people constantly compare themselves with salient others (Collins 1996; Mussweiler 2003). Such social comparisons can be either in an upward direction (when the comparison target is perceived superior) or in a downward direction (when the target is perceived inferior; Tesser 1988). Indeed, the social comparison tendency is so strong that it manifests effortlessly (e.g., even when the protagonist is distracted) and spontaneously (i.e., even without an explicit instruction to engage in comparisons). Thus, a number of studies have found that simply describing another person in glowing or unflattering terms causes people to engage in comparison (Gilbert, Giesler, and Morris 1995; Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2011).

We draw on the social comparison perspective to offer a fresh conceptualization of observing flattery. When the observer is exposed to another person receiving a compliment along a dimension of importance to the observer (Tesser 1988), this is likely to induce a spontaneous upward social comparison. Much evidence suggests that such upward social comparisons create unpleasant feelings of envy, defined as "an emotion that occurs when a person lacks another's superior quality, achievement, or possession that either desires it or wishes that the other lacked it" (Parrott and Smith 1993, 906; see also Cohen-Charash 2009; Smith and Kim 2007). Because envy is characterized by a sense of frustration—wanting something that one does not have—it typically induces negative reactions, as manifested in unfavorable attitudes toward the target of comparison (Cohen-Charash and Mueller 2007; Silver and Sabini 1978; Smith and Kim 2007).

The current article argues that the adverse reaction induced by upward comparisons is not restricted to the person one is envious of (in this case, the target of flattery), but also transfers to the individual who has made the comparison salient and is therefore responsible for the negative feelings being experienced—that is, the flatterer. While such a prediction has not previously been examined in the flattery literature, support for this "transference" argument exists in other streams of work. For instance, research in organizational behavior argues that employees might harm the organization for offering better outcomes to other employees (Cohen-Charash and Mueller 2007)—that is, envy-based

negativity transfers over to the entity (in this case, the organization) that has made the unfavorable comparison salient. Further support for such a transference premise exists in the research on the "kill-the-messenger" effect, which finds that when recipients are presented with a message that clashes with their own views on the subject, they develop a feeling of discomfort (Byrne 1969; Manis, Cornell, and Moore 1974). Of importance, even when participants believe the messenger to be an objective one (i.e., without any personal agenda), the discomfort produced by the negative message itself causes them to resent the person responsible for delivering such a message. Thus, they form negative evaluations of the messenger even though it is the news itself, rather than the messenger, that makes them uncomfortable (Manis et al. 1974).

We argue that a similar process is set in motion when one observes another person being flattered and feels envious as a result of social comparison. Because envy is experienced as a highly negative emotion, it causes a sense of discomfort in the person experiencing envy (Cohen-Charash and Mueller 2007; Tangney and Salovey 1999). Similar to the kill-the-messenger effect, therefore, we predict that envy-ridden observers will resent the person responsible for transmitting the message that produces this feeling of discomfort—that is, they will react negatively toward the flatterer.

The idea that observers will evaluate the flatterer unfavorably appears, however, to contradict what past work has shown with regard to observing sincere flattery (which is the focus of this research). Observers have been found to react positively to the flatterer in such cases—indeed, their reaction has been shown to be as positive as that of flattery targets (Vonk 1998, 2002). We draw on dual attitudes theory (Petty et al. 2007; Wilson et al. 2000) to reconcile this ambiguity. Namely, we propose that while considerations of sincerity do lead observers to harbor a relatively positive explicit attitude toward purveyors of sincere flattery, this positive attitude coexists with the automatic negative reaction described above.

### Sincere Flattery: The Case for Dual Observer Attitudes

Much recent research in the attitudes arena contrasts implicit attitudes, which are generally defined as evaluative reactions that are automatically activated upon exposure, with deliberative explicit judgments, whose expression can be consciously controlled (Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2006; Petty et al. 2007). It has been suggested that explicit judgments result from abstract propositional reasoning, which involves deliberate consideration of the truth value of salient cognitions (Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2006; Rydell and McConnell 2006). However, these considerations of validity are absent from implicit attitudes, which are based on automatic associations such as those resulting from visceral motives (e.g., self-enhancement; Koole, Dijksterhuis, and van Knippenberg 2001). Dual attitude formulations build on these ideas to propose that, rather than the deliberative explicit attitude necessarily overriding the au-

automatic implicit attitude, people may simultaneously hold separate implicit and explicit attitudes toward the same object (Petty et al. 2006; Sweldens, van Osselaer, and Janiszewski 2010; Wilson et al. 2000). In such cases, if capacity is constrained at the point of measurement—for instance, by limiting the time available to respond—the automatically activated implicit attitude is likely to be reported. However, if there is no such constraint, then the relatively less accessible explicit attitude is likely to be retrieved and reported (Hofmann et al. 2005; Honea, Morales, and Fitzsimons 2006; Wilson et al. 2000). Indeed, given this distinction, an alternate way of labeling dual attitudes is to simply term them “automatic” versus “deliberative” (Petty et al. 2006). However, this research follows the “implicit”/“explicit” terminology to be consistent with the original dual attitudes model that we draw upon (Wilson et al. 2000).

Our previous work provided a test of this model in a flattery context that examined targets’ reactions to palpably insincere flattery (Chan and Sengupta 2010). Such flattery should produce a relatively favorable implicit attitude because of the self-enhancement motive; however, propositional reasoning regarding the truth value of the flattery should correct for this automatic positivity, yielding a negative explicit attitude. Consistent with these ideas, attitudes toward the flatterer were more favorable when participants were allowed very limited (vs. unlimited) time to respond to the attitude measure.

While this previous research focused on targets’ reactions to insincere flattery, the current work proposes that observers of relatively sincere flattery also develop dual attitudes upon seeing someone else being flattered. Specifically, given the automatic nature of social comparison and the resultant negative feelings of envy, we argue that observers will harbor a negative implicit reaction toward the flatterer for having made this uncomfortable comparison salient. Further, because of its automatic, nonpropositional nature, this implicit reaction should not depend on the perceived sincerity of the flattering comments.

Considerations of sincerity will, however, influence the deliberative explicit attitude formed. In particular, because the dual attitudes formulation holds that explicit judgments result from propositional reasoning (Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2006; Rydell and McConnell 2006), they should incorporate considerations of truth/falsehood. Thus, if the flattery is deemed sincere (i.e., there is lower suspicion as to an ulterior motive for the compliment), observers should engage in an upward correction of their attitudes in recognition that the flatterer was offering a genuine opinion. This will result in a relatively positive explicit attitude, as detected on a time-unconstrained measure (indeed, past flattery research documenting positive observer reactions has used unconstrained measurement; Vonk 2002). Consistent with dual attitude formulations, however, we argue that despite the formation of this positive explicit attitude, the implicit negative reaction will continue to exist and will be detected on a time-constrained attitude measure.

Finally, although this research primarily focuses on ob-

servers’ reactions toward the flatterer, a related question of interest concerns another side of the triad, namely, observer reactions toward the target of flattery. This is a novel question because past work on flattery has examined targets’ and/or observers’ reactions to the flatterer—not the observer’s assessment of the target (e.g., Chan and Sengupta 2010; Vonk 2002). The present theoretical platform, involving social comparison and envy, can inform this question as well. As much prior research has shown, envy produces a direct inimical reaction toward the object of envy (e.g., Cohen-Charash 2009; Salovey and Rodin 1984; Silver and Sabini 1978). In the current context, given the effortless nature of social comparison, observing flattery should therefore produce an automatic negative reaction toward the flattered (and therefore envied) target.

Note that while the observer’s negative implicit reactions toward both the source of flattery (i.e., the flatterer) and its target are caused by the negative sensation of envy, there is a subtle distinction in the underlying mechanisms. As noted above, envy of the target itself translates to an implicit reaction against the target: thus, envy is the direct, proximal cause of this negative reaction. However, the process is slightly different when it comes to reactions toward the flatterer. It is not the case that the observer feels envious of the flatterer; rather, the observer envies the flattered target but resents the flatterer for making salient this uncomfortable feeling of envy. Thus, while envy of the target does ultimately cause the negative implicit reaction toward the flatterer, it functions as the original (distal) cause rather than the immediate (proximal) cause of this negative reaction.

To summarize, our conceptualization of observers’ reactions to sincere flattery draws on insights from social comparison and dual attitudes to argue for a negative bias in observer reactions. Despite a favorable explicit attitude, observers are held to harbor a negative implicit reaction toward the flatterer and also toward the target. A set of four studies examines these ideas, while identifying theoretically-derived boundary conditions that are supportive of our reasoning. We also expand upon our basic conceptualization of observer bias along two key dimensions: (a) a consideration of the different types of envy that might result from observing flattery; and (b) drawing on the envy literature to examine the ironically positive behavioral consequences of observing flattery. For expository ease, the theorizing that underlies each of these further nuances is presented along with the corresponding studies.

## EXPERIMENT 1: DOCUMENTING DUAL ATTITUDES

### Overview and Design

Experiment 1 sought to test the basic premise that observing sincere flattery will induce dual attitudes, with the implicit attitude being less favorable than the explicit one. Further, this study also aimed to support our underlying conceptualization by studying a theoretically-derived boundary condition for the divergence in explicit and implicit attitudes evoked

by observing sincere flattery. Our argument is that the negative implicit reaction is rooted in the unpleasant feeling of envy, which itself is caused by the upward comparison that has been made salient by the flatterer (Tesser and Collins 1988). Prior research has shown that upward comparison is less likely to induce envy when the comparison is with dissimilar versus similar targets (Salovey and Rodin 1984; Smith and Kim 2007). Accordingly, we predict that an observer's implicit reaction toward the flatterer should be less negative (and the divergence with the explicit attitude therefore reduced) if the target of the flattery is thought to be dissimilar to the participant—since felt envy will be lower in the latter case.

Finally, although the other studies in this article use a between-subjects method to assess implicit versus explicit attitudes (so as to prevent one biasing the other; cf. Chan and Sengupta 2010), experiment 1 sought to enhance generalizability by using a within-subjects method to assess dual attitudes. Also in the interests of generalizability, while the remaining studies followed past flattery research (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Chan and Sengupta 2010) and used scenarios in which participants imagined a flattery context, experiment 1 studied a context in which participants were exposed to actual flattery from a store.

## Design and Procedure

A 2 (target of flattery: similar vs. dissimilar; 2 between-subjects)  $\times$  2 (measure of store attitudes: explicit vs. implicit; within-subjects) mixed design was used in this study ( $n = 85$ ). Eighty-five undergraduates at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology were paid to participate in this experiment. All participants were asked to take part in a market research exercise being conducted by the marketing department at their university on behalf of a new footwear store named ROVO, which was opening soon in their city and was targeting university students. Some basic details were provided about this fictitious store (e.g., it specialized in leisure footwear). Participants were told that they would later be asked to provide their opinions of the store, but they were first requested to fill in a simple personality survey, purportedly because the market research exercise included a study of target segment personalities. The questionnaire included numerous personality items, the specifics of which are irrelevant to this research.

Prior to completing these items, participants were told that they would be given personality feedback based on their responses, according to ROVO's customized assessment procedure. Shortly after completing the questionnaire, they were told that unfortunately, owing to the limited time in the current session, no personality feedback could be provided. Instead, in order to provide an idea of what the feedback might have been like, they were asked to read the assessment that had purportedly been given to another student who possessed an "excellent personality" and had completed the same study previously. This target of flattery (i.e., the other student) was described as being either similar or dissimilar to the participants. Participants in

the target-similar (target-dissimilar) condition were told that this individual belonged to the same university as they did (was on exchange from a European university). In all conditions, the sample feedback contained the following complimentary assessment of this other participant, which served as the induction of sincere flattery: "Your responses show us that you possess an excellent personality—in fact, you have scored at the top 5% of the personality profile. You are clearly an extremely well-balanced, multi-talented individual. Your exceptional qualities should make you very successful, both personally and professionally. Congratulations!"

After reading the report, all participants provided their evaluative reactions to the store on both implicit and explicit measures. For the implicit measure, each participant was seated in front of a computer and was told to respond to each question by pressing the appropriate number from 1 to 9 on the keyboard within 5 seconds; failing this, the screen automatically jumped to the next question (Chan and Sengupta 2010; Wilson et al. 2000). Following five practice questions, participants were asked for their store evaluations on two 9-point items: (a) how much they liked ROVO Footwear (like/dislike); (b) how favorable their impression of ROVO Footwear was (unfavorable/favorable;  $r = .71$ ). Following a 5-minute filler task, an explicit measure of attitudes was collected via a pen-and-paper method, in which participants were given unlimited time to provide reactions on two further 9-point evaluation measures: (a) how good they thought ROVO Footwear was (bad/good); (b) their overall impression of ROVO Footwear (poor/excellent;  $r = .73$ ). Note that different anchor items were used to measure implicit and explicit attitudes so as to prevent one from affecting the other (cf. Chan and Sengupta 2010). Further, the order of implicit and explicit attitude measurement was counterbalanced; importantly, measurement order did not influence the results (as described by Chan and Sengupta [2010], the lack of an order effect provides strong evidence for a dual rather than a unitary model of attitudes).

Following the attitude measures, we asked participants to first indicate their generalized mood on a 9-point item (1/9 = sad/happy). After several filler items, participants responded to two items assessing envy: (a) the extent to which they felt envious of the other participant (1/9 = not at all/extremely envious); (b) the extent to which the personality feedback that participant had received made them feel good/bad (1/9 = extremely bad/good, reverse-scored;  $r = .69$ ). Finally, as a manipulation check of target similarity, participants were asked how similar they were to the participant who had been provided with feedback, using a 9-point scale anchored by "not at all /extremely similar."

Note that the positive comments in this study were given by the store to a potential customer (the store description had stated that students constituted the major target market); the dependence relationship between the two thus fits a key criterion for the praise to be classified as flattery. At the same time, we believe that observers should deem this to be a case of relatively sincere flattery, both because the praise was apparently well deserved (the instruction explicitly stated that

the target possessed an “excellent personality” before providing participants with the target’s personality assessment) and because distancing the compliment from the in-store situation should reduce the salience of the ulterior (sales) motive, even if it may not completely get rid of it. A pretest, details of which are available from the authors, confirmed that participants in our pool perceived these positive comments from the store as (a) constituting flattery, but (b) lacking a clear ulterior motive.

**Results**

*Manipulation Checks.* As expected, participants perceived themselves as being more similar to the flattered target in the similar versus the dissimilar condition ( $M_{\text{similar}} = 6.33$ ,  $M_{\text{dissimilar}} = 4.30$ ;  $F(1, 81) = 11.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ); no other effects were significant on this measure.

*Store Evaluations.* We examined the attitudes data in a 2 (target of flattery: similar vs. dissimilar)  $\times$  2 (measures of store attitudes: explicit vs. implicit) mixed-design ANOVA. A significant interaction was obtained between target of flattery and measurement method ( $F(1, 81) = 5.64$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As hypothesized, planned contrasts revealed that the implicit attitude was more favorable in the dissimilar versus similar conditions ( $M_{\text{dissimilar}} = 4.89$ ,  $M_{\text{similar}} = 4.03$ ;  $F(1, 81) = 4.12$ ,  $p < .05$ ); no such difference was obtained for explicit judgments ( $M_{\text{dissimilar}} = 5.06$ ,  $M_{\text{similar}} = 5.42$ ;  $F(1, 81) = 1.16$ ,  $p = .28$ ). Examining the contrasts within each type of target was also informative. As expected, the implicit attitude was lower than the explicit attitude when observing flattery directed at a similar other ( $M_{\text{implicit}} = 4.03$ ,  $M_{\text{explicit}} = 5.42$ ;  $F(1, 81) = 7.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, no such difference was obtained when flattery was directed at a dissimilar other ( $M_{\text{implicit}} = 4.89$ ,  $M_{\text{explicit}} = 5.06$ ;  $F < 1$ ; see table 1 for means).

*Envy.* We argue that the relatively unfavorable implicit attitude in the similar (vs. dissimilar) target condition derives from the unpleasant sensation of envy—such envy is more likely to be induced when one observes a similar other being praised. Supporting this mechanism, an analysis of the envy index revealed only a main effect of target type, with greater envy being induced when the target was similar ( $M = 5.00$ ) versus dissimilar ( $M = 4.36$ ;  $F(1, 81) = 5.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Further, the bootstrapping procedure (Preacher and Hayes 2008) found that feelings of envy fully mediated observers’ implicit attitudes ( $b = .28$ ,  $SE = .06$ ; 95% CI = .11 to .37).

Of importance, target type had no effect on participants’ overall mood ( $M_{\text{similar}} = 5.43$ ,  $M_{\text{dissimilar}} = 5.50$ ;  $F(1, 81) = .35$ ,  $p = .56$ ). Thus, flattery affected observer reactions not by influencing nonspecific, generalized mood but rather through its impact on the specific emotion of envy. We note that in later studies as well, generalized mood did not differ across conditions, and it is thus not discussed further in those studies.

Finally, since the other studies reported in this article

**TABLE 1**

EXPERIMENT 1: THE MODERATING INFLUENCE OF TARGET SIMILARITY ON THE DUAL ATTITUDES EVOKED BY OBSERVING SINCERE FLATTERY

Measures	Condition	
	Similar target	Dissimilar target
Implicit attitude	4.03 (.19)	4.89 (.20)
Explicit attitude	5.42 (.20)	5.06 (.21)
Felt envy	5.00 (.18)	4.36 (.17)

NOTE.—Standard deviations are in parentheses.

feature between-subjects measurement of implicit and explicit attitudes, another study was run to replicate the findings of experiment 1 using a between-subjects approach. This study is not reported in detail here for reasons of space, but a similar procedure was followed as in experiment 1—with a key change being that implicit and explicit attitudes were measured between subjects rather than within subjects. The between-subjects format also allowed us to use the identical scale anchors (“dislike/like” and “unfavorable/favorable”) for both implicit and explicit attitude measurement. Reassuringly, the same set of results was obtained: implicit attitudes toward the store were significantly lower than explicit attitudes given a similar target, but these attitudes did not differ when the flattery was offered to a dissimilar target.

**Discussion**

Results from experiment 1 provided initial support for our conceptualization of observer reactions to flattery. Consistent with the view that observing flattery induces an upward social comparison that evokes a negative implicit attitude toward the “messenger” (cf. Manis et al. 1974), the implicit attitude toward the store was found to be more unfavorable than the explicit attitude when the flattery target was similar to the observer. This result speaks to our thesis that observers are not objective processors of flattery; rather, they are negatively biased, reacting unfavorably toward even sincere flattery. Of note, this negative bias is restricted to implicit attitudes. This may explain why past research that has relied exclusively on explicit attitude measurement has not obtained evidence for negative reactions toward purveyors of seemingly sincere flattery (Vonk 2002).

Experiment 1 also identified a theoretically-derived boundary condition for observers’ automatic negative reactions to flattery. When the flattery was directed at a dissimilar other, observers’ implicit attitude toward the store was no longer negative; in fact, it converged with the explicit attitude. This role of target similarity is consistent with the social comparison mechanism posited for observers’ reactions to flattery. Since such comparisons are less likely to induce envy when the target is dissimilar to the observer, the negativity in implicit attitudes should be reduced—as was found. Finally, results on felt envy

were also supportive of our reasoning: greater envy was induced when observing similar (vs. dissimilar) others being flattered, and it mediated observers' implicit reactions toward the flatterer. Note that while this mediation result is consistent with our position that envy of the flattered target is the original, distal cause of observers' negative reactions toward the flatterer, it does not necessarily imply that such envy is the proximal cause. Rather, as we document in experiment 3, observers' envy of the target creates negative reactions toward the flatterer by inducing resentment of the flatterer (thus, envy serves as the distal cause and resentment the proximal cause of observers' reactions toward the flatterer).

## EXPERIMENT 2: SINCERE VERSUS INSINCERE FLATTERY

Experiment 2 built on experiment 1 in three important ways. First, while this research focuses on observers' reactions to flattery that is deemed sincere, experiment 2 also studied insincere flattery in order to assess whether these two conditions would differ in ways predicted by our conceptualization. We expect that replicating the pattern in experiment 1, observing sincere flattery should produce dual attitudes, with a less favorable implicit than explicit attitude. No such divergence should obtain for insincere flattery, however: even though automatic upward comparison may again result in a negative implicit attitude, the explicit attitude should also be negative since it is based on considerations of sincerity. Experiment 2 also added a nonflattery control condition to provide a clearer comparison with the attitudes expected in the two flattery conditions.

Examining insincere versus sincere flattery allowed us to satisfy a second goal: namely, to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the envy produced by observing flattery. Recent research distinguishes between two types of envy—benign envy versus malicious envy (Van de Ven et al. 2009, 2011). Both types of envy involve similarly high levels of negative feelings and frustration, but the two are associated with different motivations. While benign envy motivates individuals to improve themselves in order to resolve the inequality between oneself and the envied person, malicious envy induces individuals to damage the envied person—to pull them down (Van de Ven et al. 2009). The key determinant of whether envy is malicious or benign is the perceived deservingness of the superior position enjoyed by the target. For instance, Van de Ven et al. (2011) showed that benign (malicious) envy was elicited when the envied person obtained a desirable object by (not) putting in their own effort.

Given this distinction, an intriguing question in the current context has to do with whether observing flattery evokes benign or malicious envy. We predicted that, consistent with the role of deservingness shown in prior research, flattery that is deemed sincere should elicit envy that is of a benign nature. On the other hand, when the flattery is perceived to arise from an ulterior motive—which detracts from the observer's perception that the compliment is deserved—malicious envy should be evoked. Experiment 2 aimed to examine this dis-

inction by directly measuring both benign and malicious envy.

It is important to note, however, that while we expect different types of envy to emerge depending upon perceived sincerity of the flattery, both should evoke negative implicit reactions toward the flatterer. The reason for this expectation is that although benign envy is associated with a self-improvement goal, it is different from pleasant feelings such as admiration. Rather, like malicious envy, it is a negative emotion, driven by the frustration that one lacks another's superior quality or possession (Van de Ven et al. 2009, 2011; see also Cohen-Charash and Mueller 2007). Accordingly, consistent with our view that a messenger who causes an observer to experience a negative emotion will evoke a resentful reaction, we expected implicit attitudes toward the flatterer to be unfavorable regardless of sincerity perceptions (and thus regardless of the type of envy). Explicit attitudes, however, as noted above, should differ for the two cases, with a more positive attitude toward a sincere flatterer.

Finally, although our major focus is on observers' reactions toward the flatterer, experiment 2 also examined observers' reactions toward the target of flattery. As noted earlier, our prediction for the latter draws on a robust finding in the social comparison literature: namely, the negative experience of envy directly produces an unfavorable reaction toward the object of envy (e.g., Cohen-Charash 2009; Salovey and Rodin 1984; Silver and Sabini 1978). In the current context, therefore, since both benign and malicious envy are experienced as negative emotions, observing either sincere or insincere flattery should produce an automatic negative reaction toward the flattered (and envied) target.

While observers' implicit attitudes toward the target should accordingly be negative across flattery type, we predict that explicit attitudes should be relatively positive for sincere flattery. This is in part because of the strong social norms proscribing envy-based negativity (Foster 1972; Silver and Sabini 1978) and also because in our context, the envy that is being produced in the observers is due to a comparison that is made salient by the flatterer—not by the targets of flattery boasting about their superiority. Deliberative, rational consideration should therefore yield relatively positive attitudes, especially when the flattery is perceived to be sincere rather than insincere—in this case, the observer is more likely to think that the target is deserving of praise, and a negative response to the target is therefore particularly unwarranted. Accordingly, as with their attitudes toward the flatterer, observers' explicit attitudes toward the target should be more positive for sincere (vs. insincere) flattery.

Experiment 2 also aimed to increase the generalizability of our findings in two directions. First, this study used a different flattery context, in which participants were asked to visualize observing flattery in a store environment (cf. Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Chan and Sengupta 2010). Second, the praise was offered along a different dimension, namely, that of possessing good fashion sense.

## Design and Procedure

Two hundred and nine undergraduates at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology ( $n = 209$ ) participated in a 3 (flattery: observing after-purchase flattery vs. before-purchase flattery vs. control)  $\times$  2 (measures: implicit vs. explicit) between-subjects study in return for cash. To ensure that the flattering comment (a positive comment about fashion sense) was relevant to the participants, only female participants joined the experiment; pretesting showed that this dimension was considered important by females in our participant pool, satisfying a basic criterion for upward social comparison (Tesser 1988). Experiments 3 and 4 used a similar scenario and also featured only female participants.

Participants in all conditions were asked to imagine that they were shopping in a clothing store, about which brief information was provided (e.g., the store features both European and local labels; prices range from affordable to expensive, etc.). The before-purchase flattery scenario then stated that while browsing, the participant had ended up near a female shopper who was also looking through the same section and was very fashionably dressed. A salesperson came up to talk to this shopper, and participants were asked to imagine that they overheard the salesperson say the following: "Hi, my name is Joey. I just wanted to say—you have fantastic dress sense. The clothes you are wearing are very trendy this season." The after-purchase flattery scenario was identical, except the conversation was said to occur after the fashionably dressed shopper had finished paying for her purchases. The salesperson's name ("Joey") was deliberately chosen as being androgynous.

An ulterior motive is less salient when the salesperson offers an after-purchase compliment rather than before purchase; accordingly, the former is likely to be perceived as being more sincere than the latter (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Main et al. 2007). Note also that because salesperson compliments typically evoke a high degree of suspicion (Main et al. 2007), we needed to enhance baseline levels of perceived sincerity across conditions. We did so by indicating across conditions that the customer was indeed fashionably dressed. In the key after-purchase condition, this perceived sincerity was then further enhanced by stressing that the compliment was only offered after the purchase, thus increasing the likelihood that the compliment was deemed to be deserved (rather than proceeding from an ulterior motive).

This study also included a nonflattery control that provided further insights into the implicit and explicit attitudes predicted in the two flattery conditions. Those in the control group simply overheard a neutral conversation in which the salesperson introduced himself/herself and offered to help pack up the customer's purchases; this conversation did not feature any compliments. However, the salesperson was depicted as acting in a helpful manner toward the customer, so as to create greater equivalence with the flattery conditions.

After reading the scenario, participants responded to a set of dependent variables. The implicit (explicit) measurement of attitudes followed a similar procedure as in experiment 1, except that a between-subjects (rather than within-subjects)

method was used. Thus, following five practice questions, participants responded to the key attitude questions either under time-constrained (they were given only 5 seconds per question; implicit) or unconstrained conditions (they were given as much time as needed; explicit). The first two attitude questions assessed reactions to the salesperson, Joey (1 = dislike very much/extremely unfavorable; 9 = like very much/extremely favorable;  $r = .84$ ). The next two items assessed participants' attitude toward the other shopper (i.e., the target of the flattery; 1 = not at all positive/ extremely unfavorable; 9 = extremely positive/ extremely favorable;  $r = .65$ ). The order of the two sets of attitude measures (attitude toward the salesperson and the other shopper) was counter-balanced; the order did not influence the results.

The computer task ended at this point and so did the operationalization of implicit/explicit attitude measurement. A booklet was then handed out, containing measures of two different types of envy. Because both benign and malicious envy are experienced as negative emotions by the envier, the key distinction between them has to do with the different motivations (aspirational vs. harmful) they are associated with. Accordingly, we used items that assessed each of these motivations (Van de Ven et al. 2009). Participants were first asked to report the extent to which they agreed with two sentences that measured benign envy: (1) they felt inspired by the other shopper to become more fashionable; (2) they would like to compliment the other shopper for her fashion taste (1 = strongly disagree; 9 = strongly agree;  $r = .65$ ). Next, they indicated agreement with two sentences that measured malicious envy: (1) they wanted to hurt the other shopper in some way; (2) they hoped that the other shopper would fail at something ( $r = .71$ ). We expected that since the flattery should be perceived as more sincere (insincere) in the after-purchase (before-purchase) condition, participants would report a higher level of benign envy (malicious envy) in that condition.

As noted above, while benign and malicious envy differ with regard to their associated motivations (aspirational vs. harmful with regard to the target), the commonality is that they both involve negative feelings and frustration (e.g., Van de Ven et al. 2009). Thus, while we expect differences on the fine-grained measures that tap into specific motives, these two types of envy should converge on a generalized measure of envy-related negativity (e.g., the measure used in experiment 1). Accordingly, participants also responded to three general envy items—that is, they indicated their agreement as to whether the compliment received by the other shopper made them feel (a) not at all/ extremely envious, (b) bad/good, or (c) not at all/ extremely frustrated ( $\alpha = .73$ ). The first two items were taken from experiment 1. The third item was added for greater generalizability, because envy in general is characterized by a sense of frustration (Smith and Kim 2007). Note that this "frustration" item, which was suggested in the review process, was included as a measure of general envy only in experiments 2 and 3 (which were actually run after both experiments 1 and 4, despite the order of reporting). We note also that the pattern of results



in experiments 2 and 3 stays unchanged using only a two-item measure of envy, absent the frustration item.

Because this overall measure of envy should capture the negativity common to benign and malicious envy, we expected that participants in both after- and before-purchase flattery conditions would report higher scores than those in the control condition. This is also why we expect similarly negative implicit attitudes in both of the flattery conditions (despite the qualitative difference between the specific forms of envy induced in these two conditions).

Finally, as manipulation checks, we assessed participants' perceptions regarding the sincerity of the flattering comments made by Joey to the other customer using two sets of measures: persuasion intention and deservingness of the flattery. First, participants in all conditions were asked to respond to a two-item measure (1/9 = strongly disagree/agree) as to whether they thought the comments by Joey were deliberately designed to make the shopper feel good about Joey and whether the comments were aimed at persuading the shopper to buy the products ( $r = .68$ ). We expected that participants would be more likely to believe that the comments made by the salesperson were driven by such ulterior motives (and therefore, by definition, less sincere) in the before-purchase flattery condition than the after-purchase flattery and control conditions. Next, in order to measure the perceived deservingness of the flattery, participants in the before- and after-purchase flattery conditions were asked to report the extent to which they agreed that the comments offered by Joey was due to the shopper's actual fashion sense (1/9 = strongly disagree/agree). Again, we expected participants to provide higher ratings of deservingness in the before-purchase flattery condition than the after-purchase flattery condition. Because participants in the control condition did not read any flattering comments, they did not respond to this last item.

## Results

**Manipulation Checks.** The two-item measure of persuasion intention was analyzed in the context of a 3 (flattery: after-purchase vs. before-purchase vs. control)  $\times$  2 (measures: implicit vs. explicit) ANOVA. A main effect of flattery condition was obtained ( $F(2, 203) = 11.28, p < .05$ ). Planned contrasts revealed, as expected, that perception of persuasion intent was higher when observing before-purchase versus after-purchase flattery ( $M_{\text{before}} = 6.73, M_{\text{after}} = 6.04; F(1, 203) = 9.79, p < .05$ ); the latter did not differ from the control condition ( $M_{\text{control}} = 6.11; F < 1, \text{NS}$ ). Convergenly, those observing before-purchase (vs. after-purchase) flattery condition were also less likely to perceive the compliment as being deserved ( $M_{\text{before}} = 4.09, M_{\text{after}} = 4.87; F(1, 138) = 4.74, p < .05$ ). Together, these results suggest that after-purchase flattery was perceived as being more sincere than before-purchase flattery. No other effects were significant on either measure.

**Salesperson Evaluations.** On this key measure, we expected to replicate our earlier findings in the after-purchase (i.e., sincere) flattery condition: dual attitudes were predicted,

with explicit evaluations of the salesperson being more favorable than implicit evaluations. In the before-purchase (insincere) flattery condition, however, such a divergence of attitudes was less likely. Even though the envy resulting from automatic upward comparison should again produce a negative implicit attitude toward the messenger who evokes the comparison, the explicit attitude now should also be negative, since it is based on considerations of sincerity. Finally, dual attitudes were also not expected in the control condition, which did not feature any flattery. Salesperson evaluations should be uniformly positive in this condition since the salesperson was described as being helpful.

In support, a significant two-way interaction of flattery condition and measure type was obtained ( $F(2, 203) = 4.27, p < .05$ ; see table 2 for means). Replicating earlier results, observing after-purchase (i.e., relatively sincere) flattery induced dual attitudes, such that the implicit evaluation of the salesperson was less favorable than the explicit evaluation ( $M_{\text{implicit}} = 4.13, M_{\text{explicit}} = 5.11; F(1, 203) = 8.03, p < .01$ ). In contrast, but as predicted, implicit and explicit evaluations were uniformly low for before-purchase flattery ( $M_{\text{implicit}} = 4.16, M_{\text{explicit}} = 4.01; F < 1$ ) and uniformly high in the control group ( $M_{\text{implicit}} = 5.59, M_{\text{explicit}} = 5.21; F < 1$ ).

Of interest, observers' implicit attitudes were relatively unfavorable in both after- and before-purchase flattery conditions ( $M_{\text{before}} = 4.16, M_{\text{after}} = 4.13, M_{\text{control}} = 5.59; F(2, 203) = 9.81, p < .01$ ). The two flattery conditions did not differ, showing that implicit attitudes toward the messenger who evokes feelings of envy are negative regardless of considerations of sincerity. The pattern should be different for deliberative explicit attitudes, which we argue are affected by the degree to which the observed flattery is deemed sincere. In support, explicit evaluations of the salesperson were lower in the before-purchase condition than in the after-

TABLE 2

EXPERIMENT 2: IMPLICIT VERSUS EXPLICIT ATTITUDES  
BASED ON TYPE OF FLATTERY

Measures	Type of flattery observed		
	After purchase	Before purchase	Control
<b>Salesperson attitudes:</b>			
Implicit attitude	4.13 (.23)	4.16 (.28)	5.59 (.28)
Explicit attitude	5.11 (.26)	4.01 (.24)	5.21 (.24)
<b>Target attitudes:</b>			
Implicit attitude	4.86 (.21)	5.03 (.25)	5.67 (.25)
Explicit attitude	5.82 (.23)	5.31 (.21)	5.33 (.22)
Benign envy	5.36 (.15)	4.84 (.15)	4.97 (.16)
Malicious envy	3.79 (.19)	4.18 (.20)	3.50 (.20)
Felt envy	5.12 (.14)	5.10 (.15)	4.67 (.15)

NOTE.—Standard deviations are in parentheses.

purchase condition ( $M_{\text{before}} = 4.01$ ,  $M_{\text{after}} = 5.11$ ;  $F(1, 203) = 9.87$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

*Target Evaluations.* A significant two-way interaction between flattery condition and measure type was also obtained for observers' attitudes toward the flattered target ( $F(2, 203) = 4.10$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As predicted, observing flattery induced a more negative implicit versus explicit evaluation of the target shopper in the after-purchase condition ( $M_{\text{implicit}} = 4.86$ ,  $M_{\text{explicit}} = 5.82$ ;  $F(1, 203) = 9.42$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but no such duality was observed in either before-purchase flattery ( $M_{\text{implicit}} = 5.03$ ,  $M_{\text{explicit}} = 5.31$ ;  $F < 1$ ) or control conditions ( $M_{\text{implicit}} = 5.67$ ,  $M_{\text{explicit}} = 5.33$ ;  $F < 1$ ). Of importance, observers' implicit attitude toward the target was relatively unfavorable in both after- and before-purchase flattery conditions ( $M_{\text{before}} = 5.03$ ,  $M_{\text{after}} = 4.86$ ,  $M_{\text{control}} = 5.67$ ;  $F(2, 203) = 3.24$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The two flattery conditions did not differ from each other ( $F < 1$ ), providing further support for the premise that implicit reactions are not contingent on perceived sincerity. On the other hand, and also as predicted, observers' explicit attitudes toward the target were more favorable when the flattery was deemed sincere (after-purchase) than insincere (before-purchase;  $M_{\text{after}} = 5.82$ ,  $M_{\text{before}} = 5.31$ ), although this difference was marginally significant ( $F(1, 203) = 2.98$ ,  $p = .09$ ).

*Envy.* We predicted higher levels of benign (malicious) envy in the after-purchase (before-purchase) condition than in the control condition. In support, there was a main effect of flattery on benign envy, such that participants reported greater benign envy in the after-purchase condition ( $M_{\text{after}} = 5.36$ ) than in the before-purchase and control conditions ( $M_{\text{before}} = 4.84$ ,  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.97$ ;  $F(2, 203) = 3.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ; the latter two did not differ). In contrast to the benign envy results, but also as predicted, higher malicious envy was reported in the before-purchase condition ( $M_{\text{before}} = 4.18$ ) than in the after-purchase and control conditions ( $M_{\text{after}} = 3.79$ ,  $M_{\text{control}} = 3.50$ ;  $F(2, 203) = 2.96$ ,  $p = .05$ ; the latter two did not differ).

Despite these distinct patterns of benign and malicious envy, we predicted that they would converge on the more generalized envy index. This index subsumes the negative emotion common to both forms of envy; accordingly, both flattery conditions should report higher scores on this index as compared to the control. In support, a main effect of flattery was obtained on this overall index of felt envy, such that participants reported greater overall envy in both the after- and before-purchase flattery conditions ( $M_{\text{after}} = 5.12$ ,  $M_{\text{before}} = 5.10$ ) than in the control condition ( $M_{\text{control}} = 4.67$ ;  $F(2, 203) = 3.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As in experiment 1, this measure of felt envy mediated the effect of flattery on implicit attitudes toward the salesperson ( $b = .10$ ,  $SE = .04$ ; 95%  $CI = .04$  to  $.31$ ). As expected, envy also mediated flattery's impact on observers' implicit attitudes toward the flattered target ( $b = .08$ ,  $SE = .03$ ; 95%  $CI = .02$  to  $.25$ ).

## Discussion

Results from experiment 2 both replicated and provided important extensions of the findings obtained in experiment 1. From a replication perspective, it was reassuring that despite the difference in context, observers again manifested dual attitudes toward a purveyor of sincere flattery: their implicit attitude, as before, was found to be relatively unfavorable as compared to their explicit attitude. The inclusion of a control condition in this study provided further support for this negative bias in observers' implicit attitudes, which were found to be lower than control attitudes. Explicit attitudes, in contrast, were as favorable as in the control—in which we had deliberately sought to create positive attitudes by depicting a helpful salesperson.

Of more interest, the results of experiment 2 advance our earlier findings along three directions. First, although the focus of this research is on observer reactions to sincere flattery, results obtained in the before-purchase (insincere) flattery condition made for an interesting comparison. Not only did observers' implicit attitudes remain negative but the explicit attitudes now became relatively unfavorable. This result was of value in providing further support for our rationale regarding observers' dual attitudes—automatic (implicit) reactions are unaffected by considerations of sincerity, whereas deliberative (explicit) attitudes are directly influenced by the perceived sincerity of the flatterer. Also of note, our finding of unfavorable explicit attitudes toward insincere flatterers provides a replication of past work that has obtained similar explicit attitude results (Campbell and Kirmani 2000).

Second, in examining insincere along with sincere flattery, experiment 2 was able to provide additional insights into the different types of envy that people might experience when observing someone else being flattered. Consistent with notions of deservingness (Van de Ven et al. 2009), we found that observers experience benign (malicious) envy when exposed to sincere (insincere) flattery. However, because both forms of envy are frustrating and experienced as negative emotions (Van de Ven et al. 2009), our theorizing holds that both will produce a dislike of the person responsible for making the envy salient (i.e., the flatterer). The pattern of implicit attitudes toward the flatterer, which was negative in both flattery conditions, was consistent with such a perspective. This overlap between benign and malicious envy was also captured by the overall envy index, which taps into the negative emotion and frustration common to both. As predicted, scores on this index were equivalently high in both insincere and sincere flattery conditions (vs. the control). Collectively, these results delineate both the distinction and the convergence between benign and malicious envy.

Third, experiment 2 provided support for another aspect of our conceptualization: namely, the envy produced by upward social comparison should not only induce negative reactions toward the "messenger" (i.e., the flatterer); it should also yield an automatic negative reaction toward the object of envy (i.e., the flattered target). As predicted, even though

observers' explicit attitudes toward the target were relatively favorable given sincere (vs. insincere) flattery, their implicit reactions were unfavorable even when flattery was deemed sincere. This study thus provides a complete picture regarding observer reactions toward the other parties in the triad (the flattered target, as well as the flatterer), and it adds to the relatively scant literature on customer-customer interactions (Lin, Dahl, and Argo 2013).

Having extended our findings to comparing the effects of sincere versus insincere flattery, our remaining studies return to the key focus of this research, namely, further exploring observers' reactions toward the purveyor of sincere flattery.

### EXPERIMENT 3: RESENTMENT AND ENVY

Experiment 3 sought to obtain evidence for a further link in our chain of reasoning regarding observers' negative implicit reactions. We have argued that envy of the flattered target drives observers' negative implicit attitudes, and the envy findings reported thus far support this line of reasoning. However, our conceptualization further holds that although envy drives observers' negative reactions toward both the target (i.e., the flattered person) and the source (i.e., the flatterer) of flattery, it does so in different ways. While it directly influences reactions toward the envied target (in keeping with past work documenting inimical reactions toward an object of envy; Cohen-Charrash 2009), its influence on reactions to the flatterer is a more distal one. In particular, consistent with the kill-the-messenger effect (Manis et al. 1974), our argument is that observers resent the flatterer for causing them to experience the negative feeling of envy. Thus, while envy is the root cause of their negative implicit attitudes, the more proximal influence on their negative attitudes toward the flatterer is the resentment that is caused by this feeling of envy. Experiment 3 aimed to provide evidence for these arguments by measuring resentment as well as envy.

Experiment 3 also aimed to rule out an alternate explanation for the negative implicit reactions that observers manifest toward the flatterer (and also the target; experiment 2). It might be argued that this negative reaction is nonspecific to the parties involved in the flattery-observing scenario and is simply caused by a generalized negative mood produced by the upward social comparison. While the null effects obtained on generalized mood items (see experiment 1) are inconsistent with this account, a more direct refutation would involve measuring observers' reactions to flattery-unrelated targets. The mood-based alternate account would suggest that observers' negative reactions should diffuse to such targets as well. However, if our argument about the specific roles of envy and resentment is correct, observers should react negatively only to the source and the target of flattery. To examine this, experiment 3 also included attitudinal measures toward an unrelated target (i.e., the Marketing Department of the university at which the study was conducted).

### Design and Procedure

This study examined observers' dual attitudes to flattery in the context of a 2 (flattery: after-purchase vs. control)  $\times$  2 (measures: explicit vs. implicit) between-subjects design ( $n = 111$ ). One hundred and eleven undergraduates at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology participated in exchange for cash. The procedure was similar to that used in experiment 2, featuring the same shopping scenario. The after-purchase (sincere) flattery and control conditions of this scenario were operationalized in exactly the same way as before. After reading the scenario, participants provided their attitudinal responses to the salesperson (the source of flattery) and the other shopper (the target of flattery). These responses were collected on either time-constrained scales (implicit measure) or time-unconstrained scales (explicit measure), using the same items as in experiment 2. Next, in order to rule out the alternate account regarding generalized mood effects, participants also reported their attitudes toward the Marketing Department of the university (i.e., an unrelated party) on two items (1 = dislike very much/extremely unfavorable; 9 = like very much/extremely favorable;  $r = .85$ ) either implicitly or explicitly.

Following the attitude measures, participants responded to time-unconstrained measures assessing their resentment toward the flatterer. Specifically, participants were asked about the extent to which they felt angry with, resentful toward, and annoyed by the salesperson (Joey) on a 9-point scale (Feather and Sherman 2002; 1 = not at all angry/resentful/annoyed; 9 = extremely angry/resentful/annoyed;  $\alpha = .83$ ). After several filler items, participants responded to the same set of resentment items with regard to the other shopper ( $\alpha = .84$ ). Finally, participants were asked to report how envious they felt of the other shopper, using the three items ( $\alpha = .81$ ) that were used to assess overall envy in experiment 2. Note that since experiment 3 only examined sincere flattery, we did not seek to distinguish between benign and malicious envy. Rather, our focus was on the negative emotion that is associated even with benign envy and that should create resentment toward the flatterer as well as a negative reaction toward the target. Accordingly, we used the index of overall envy, which (as experiment 2 found) captures this negativity associated with benign envy.

### Results and Discussion

*Salesperson and Target Evaluations.* As expected, a significant interaction was again obtained between flattery condition and attitude measure type ( $F(1, 107) = 5.05, p < .05$ ). Replicating our past results, observing sincere (after-purchase) flattery produced dual attitudes toward the salesperson ( $M_{\text{explicit}} = 5.38, M_{\text{implicit}} = 4.29; F(1, 107) = 4.48, p < .05$ ), while no such difference was obtained in the control condition ( $M_{\text{explicit}} = 5.25, M_{\text{implicit}} = 5.61; F < 1$ ). Comparisons with the control supported our prediction regarding a negative bias in observers' reactions toward the flatterer, as reflected in a lower implicit attitude in the after-purchase flattery versus control conditions ( $F(1, 107) = 8.46, p <$

.05), while this difference disappears if only looking at explicit attitudes ( $F < 1$ ; see table 3 for means).

Evaluations of the target (the flattered shopper) followed the same pattern, as predicted, although the two-way interaction did not reach significance ( $F(1, 107) = 2.49, p = .12$ ). In the after-purchase flattery case, implicit evaluations of the target were relatively unfavorable compared to explicit evaluations ( $M_{\text{implicit}} = 4.72, M_{\text{explicit}} = 5.52; F(1, 107) = 3.60, p = .06$ ), but no such difference was observed in the control condition ( $M_{\text{implicit}} = 5.36, M_{\text{explicit}} = 5.22; F < 1$ ). Finally, and reassuringly, observing flattery produced no difference in implicit versus explicit attitudes toward an unrelated party (i.e., the Marketing Department of the university;  $M_{\text{implicit}} = 5.85, M_{\text{explicit}} = 5.72; F < 1$ ). This pattern refutes the alternate account to do with a generalized effect of negative mood, which would predict a poorer implicit attitude even toward this flattery-unrelated target.

*Resentment and Envy.* Our theorizing suggests that observers feel envious of the flattered target and, accordingly, resentful of the messenger (the flatterer) responsible for the flattering comments. It is this resentment of the flatterer that is held to drive the negative implicit reaction toward the flatterer. Therefore, we predicted higher levels of resentment toward the flatterer in the flattery versus control conditions. No such difference in resentment is predicted with regard to reactions toward the target; rather, we expect only higher envy of the target in the flattery versus control conditions, since it is this envy alone that is directly responsible for negative evaluations of the target.

As predicted, participants reported greater resentment toward the salesperson when they had to observe flattery than when they did not ( $M_{\text{flattery}} = 4.26, M_{\text{control}} = 3.46; F(1, 107) = 4.50, p < .05$ ). They did not differ in their reported level of resentment toward the other shopper ( $M_{\text{flattery}} = 2.89, M_{\text{control}} = 3.28; F(1, 107) = 1.55, p = .22$ ), but, as expected, they did feel more envious of the shopper when observing that person being flattered ( $M_{\text{flattery}} = 5.05, M_{\text{control}} = 4.38; F(1, 107) = 5.82, p < .05$ ).

Finally, we ran two separate mediation models to test the different mechanisms by which envy of the flattered target is held to drive observers' negative implicit attitudes toward (a) the target and (b) the source (the flatterer). In the former case, as predicted, envy itself fully mediated the effect of flattery on implicit attitudes toward the target ( $b = -.14, SE = .08; 95\% CI = -.02 \text{ to } -.35$ ); as noted above, flattery did not create resentment of the target. With regard to reactions toward the flatterer, however, we posit that envy of the target induces resentment of the salesperson, which then produces the hostile implicit reaction. We tested this account via a double mediation model that used flattery condition as the independent variable, felt envy as the first mediator, resentment toward the salesperson as the second mediator, and implicit salesperson evaluations as the dependent variable. Following the bootstrapping method (Preacher and Hayes 2008), the effect of flattery on salesperson evaluations after sequentially accounting for envy and resentment was significant ( $b = -.20, SE = .11; 95\% CI = -.05 \text{ to } -.51$ ).

TABLE 3

EXPERIMENT 3: RESENTMENT, ENVY, AND ATTITUDES EVOKED BY OBSERVING SINCERE FLATTERY

Measures	Type of flattery observed	
	After purchase	Control
Salesperson attitudes:		
Implicit attitude	4.29 (.32)	5.61 (.33)
Explicit attitude	5.38 (.31)	5.25 (.32)
Target attitudes:		
Implicit attitude	4.72 (.30)	5.36 (.30)
Explicit attitude	5.52 (.29)	5.22 (.31)
Resentment toward the salesperson	4.26 (.26)	3.46 (.27)
Resentment toward the target	2.89 (.22)	3.28 (.23)
Felt envy	5.05 (.19)	4.38 (.20)

NOTE.—Standard deviations are in parentheses.

This is consistent with our premise that target envy is the distal mediator of the influence of observing flattery on implicit reactions toward the flatterer, while resentment of the flatterer is the more proximal mediator (see fig. 1).

*Discussion.* Apart from replicating our earlier findings regarding the dual attitudes produced in observers of sincere flattery, this study provided more detailed insights into the process underlying their negative implicit reactions. Envy of the flattered target led directly to observers' negative reactions toward the target. Target envy also had a critical role to play in influencing observers' reactions toward the flatterer; however, it did so in a more distal fashion. Specifically, the uncomfortable feeling of envy causes observers to resent the person responsible for delivering the flattering message, thus yielding a negative implicit attitude toward the flatterer as well.

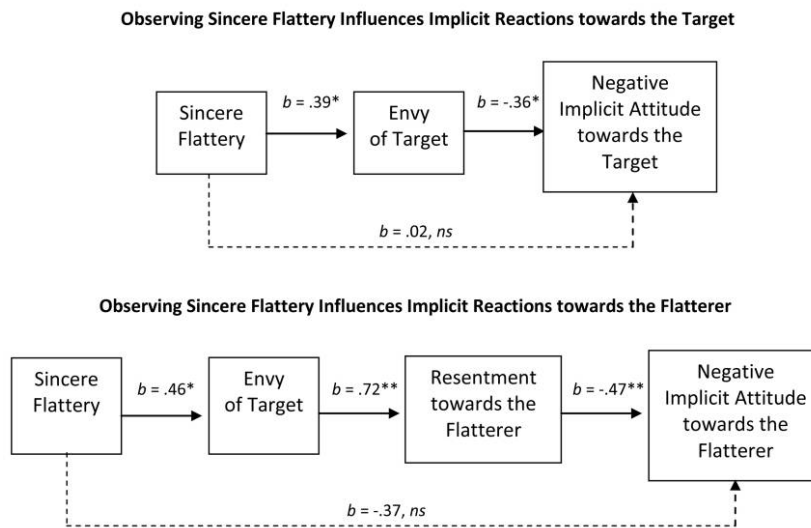
It is interesting to note that even though target envy produced resentment toward the flatterer, it did not lead observers to resent the target. Thus, in some ways, observers seem to think that it is not really the target's "fault" for being superior on the relevant attribute; rather, the flatterer is to be blamed for highlighting this superiority and making it salient. It should be kept in mind also that these results apply to the context of sincere flattery, which evokes benign rather than malicious envy (experiment 2). If the flattery in question were of the insincere variety, the resultant malicious envy might well have induced resentment of the target as well (Feather and Sherman 2002).

### EXPERIMENT 4: OBSERVING FLATTERY IS PERSUASIVE

Our final goal was to investigate whether and when observing sincere flattery can have a persuasive impact. That

FIGURE 1

## EXPERIMENT 3



NOTE.—\* significant at the .05 level; \*\* significant at the .01 level.

is, can it make the observer behave in a manner aligned with the flatterer's interests? The results obtained thus far suggest otherwise. Even flattery that is deemed sincere produces an automatic negative reaction toward the flatterer because of the accompanying unpleasant sensation of envy and resentment that it creates. Thus, upon observing a salesperson flatter another customer (as in experiments 2 and 3), the observer should be less likely to engage in purchase behaviors that in any way benefit that salesperson.

An intriguing possibility to the contrary does exist, however, stemming from the nature of envy itself. As shown in experiment 2, observing sincere flattery elicited benign envy. Besides being a negative emotion, such benign envy also creates an aspirational motive that drives people to reduce the unpleasant sensation by closing the gap between themselves and the target on the dimension in question (Cohen-Charash 2009; Van de Ven et al. 2011). In one example of this tendency to engage in aspirational, gap-closing behavior, Van de Ven et al. (2011) demonstrated that envy caused by another's possession of a superior product increased the protagonists' willingness to pay for that product.

We build upon this perspective to argue that the envy caused by observing sincere flattery exerts two separate influences on the observer's likely purchase behavior. One force involves the negative affect associated with envy; our previous studies show that this negative affect does transfer to the source of the flattering comment (i.e., the salesperson). The second force has to do with the goad to action that is caused by the desire to reduce envy. In the context of sincere

flattery, which produces benign rather than malicious envy, this second force will oppose the first.

Imagine, for example, that the observer, after overhearing the salesperson's flattering comments about another customer's stylish dress, is trying to choose between two pairs of jeans, one that is not very stylish but inexpensive and the other that is both more stylish and expensive. Given that customers likely possess a lay belief that choosing the more expensive option is more beneficial to the salesperson (an assumption we check), envy-related hostility toward the flatterer will lower their preference for this option. However, the aspirational wish to reduce envy—to "close the gap" with the flattered target—should increase preference for the stylish option.

This analysis suggests that a possible persuasive impact of observing flattery may result if the negative affective reaction tagged to the flattery source can be dissociated from the customer's choice process. While there may be several ways in which such dissociation can occur, we examine the influence of a time delay between observing flattery and making one's own choice. Classic research on the sleeper effect proposes that individuals tend to dissociate the source from the message given sufficient delay. Thus, the persuasive impact of a message that contains compelling arguments but is delivered by a negatively-valenced source is likely to increase over time as the source gets dissociated from one's reactions to the message (Hovland and Weiss 1951; Kumkale and Albarracin 2004).

Analogously, we propose that over time, the negative re-

action to a flattering salesperson will get dissociated from the observer's decisions regarding store purchases. In contrast, the observer's motivation to improve her standing on the envied dimension, which should exist independent of the actual presence of the flatterer, will still affect delayed behavior. Therefore, store purchase decisions after a delay (vs. immediate decisions) are more likely to be influenced by this envy-reducing motive. Experiment 4 tests this prediction, support for which would further illuminate the distinct reactions that can be induced by observing sincere flattery.

## Design and Procedure

A 2 (flattery: after-purchase flattery vs. control)  $\times$  2 (measures: explicit vs. implicit)  $\times$  2 (timing of behavior: immediate vs. delayed) between-subjects design was used in the study. The procedure was similar to that used in experiments 2 and 3. All participants ( $n = 220$ ) were undergraduates at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and they were paid to participate in this study. The participants read the same shopping scenario as in experiments 2 and 3, featuring either the control statement asking if the customer needed help packing her purchases or the after-purchase flattering comment made by the salesperson (Joey) to a fashionably dressed customer. All participants then provided their attitudes toward the salesperson either implicitly (time-constrained) or explicitly (time-unconstrained) on the same two evaluation items used previously ( $r = .72$ ).

These items were followed by a set of other measures, which were assessed right away (immediate condition) or following a 30-minute delay during which participants completed filler tasks (delayed condition). The first of these measures featured the critical purchase decision. Participants were told to imagine that, after having overheard the conversation between the salesperson and the other customer described earlier, they were trying to decide between two pairs of jeans at that store: a standard and comfortable pair of jeans (300 HKD) versus a stylish and more expensive pair (375 HKD). Participants were asked to choose between them; we expected that participants should have the lay belief that the salesperson would benefit more if they chose the relatively expensive pair of jeans.

A separate group of participants ( $n = 45$ ) from the same pool tested this lay belief. These participants read a jeans-shopping scenario similar to that in the main study but without any salesperson conversation. They then responded to two items, asking their opinion as to which of the two jeans (standard vs. expensive) they thought the salesperson would (a) prefer the customer to buy (1 = standard jeans; 9 = expensive jeans); (b) benefit more from the customer's purchasing it (i.e., choice between standard and expensive jeans; 0 = standard jeans; 1 = stylish jeans). Confirming our assumption regarding lay beliefs, scores on each item were significantly different from the midpoint (5 or 50%) of the scale ( $M_{\text{salesperson\_prefer}} = 7.93$ ;  $M_{\text{salesperson\_benefit}} = 93\%$ ;  $p < .05$  in each case). Since participants do seem to believe that choos-

ing the more expensive jeans will be of greater benefit to the salesperson, hostility toward the salesperson in itself should lower preference for this option.

Returning to the main experiment, the choice measure was followed by an additional item that helped provide convergent insights into their purchase decisions. Participants were told to imagine that as they walked around the mall after leaving the clothing store, they noticed a fashion show being organized by the mall (i.e., unrelated to the store itself). They were asked their interest in attending the fashion show, using two items (1/9 = not at all likely/likely; 1/9 = not at all motivated/motivated;  $r = .75$ ). The rationale for this measure is presented along with the results. Finally, participants were asked to think back to the salesperson scenario and report how envious they felt of the other customer, using the same envy items as in experiment 1 ( $r = .72$ ).

## Results

*Salesperson Evaluations.* The data were analyzed in a 2 (flattery: sincere flattery vs. control)  $\times$  2 (attitude measure: explicit vs. implicit)  $\times$  2 (timing of choice: immediate vs. delayed) ANOVA. Since salesperson evaluations were reported before the manipulation of choice timing, delay should not influence these evaluations. In accordance, results only showed a significant two-way interaction between flattery and type of attitude measure ( $F(1, 212) = 4.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ; see table 4 for means). Planned contrasts revealed that, replicating our earlier results, observers in the flattery condition provided less favorable evaluations when responding implicitly than explicitly ( $M_{\text{explicit}} = 5.61$ ,  $M_{\text{implicit}} = 4.62$ ;  $F(1, 212) = 4.91$ ,  $p < .05$ ), while no such difference was observed in the control condition ( $M_{\text{explicit}} = 5.73$ ,  $M_{\text{implicit}} = 5.63$ ;  $F < 1$ ).

*Immediate versus Delayed Choice between Standard versus Stylish Jeans.* We expected that even though the envy-driven motivation to be stylish (thereby reducing the gap with the flattered target) would induce a preference for the more stylish jeans after observing the flattering comment, the negative reaction toward the salesperson would weigh against this tendency in the immediate condition. In this condition, therefore, jeans choice was not expected to differ substantially for flattery versus control. The reaction toward the salesperson should, however, get increasingly dissociated from the purchase decision over time. Those who had observed flattery should therefore display an increased preference for the stylish (vs. standard) jeans with delayed measurement. Accordingly, after a delay, the choice of stylish jeans should be higher for flattery versus control conditions.

In accordance, a significant two-way interaction between flattery and timing of behavior was obtained on the purchase decision measure ( $\chi^2 = 4.37$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Planned contrasts revealed that when choice behavior was measured immediately, participants in both flattery and control conditions reported a similar level of preference for the stylish jeans ( $M_{\text{flattery}} = 44\%$ ,  $M_{\text{control}} = 39\%$ ). Of importance, however, when choice was measured after a delay, participants who

**TABLE 4**  
EXPERIMENT 4: REACTIONS TO OBSERVING SINCERE  
FLATTERY AS A FUNCTION OF DELAY

Measure	After-purchase flattery		Control	
	Immediate	Delayed	Immediate	Delayed
Implicit attitude	4.53 (.24)	4.71 (.24)	5.71 (.25)	5.54 (.26)
Explicit attitude	5.70 (.24)	5.51 (.25)	5.91 (.25)	5.56 (.25)
% choosing the stylish jeans	44	65	39	41
Intention to attend fashion show	3.92 (.24)	4.31 (.24)	3.36 (.25)	3.69 (.24)
Felt envy	4.88 (.23)	5.25 (.24)	4.13 (.24)	4.39 (.25)

NOTE.—Standard deviations are in parentheses.

had imagined observing the flattering comment were more likely to choose the stylish jeans than those in the control condition ( $M_{\text{flattery}} = 65\%$ ,  $M_{\text{control}} = 41\%$ ;  $\chi^2 = 6.17$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As predicted, this pattern obtained because those overhearing flattery increased their tendency to choose the stylish jeans over the delay ( $\chi^2 = 5.46$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

*Behavioral Intention toward the Fashion Show.* This measure provided us with another way of testing the thesis that observing someone else being complimented on style should increase behaviors satisfying the motivation to appear fashionable and stylish oneself—as long as such behaviors are dissociated from the negatively viewed messenger (i.e., the salesperson). Just as such dissociation obtains over time, it should also obtain with regard to participants' intentions of attending a fashion show organized by a source unrelated to the negatively viewed salesperson (e.g., the shopping mall). Observers' negative reactions toward the salesperson should not influence these intentions, whether immediately or after a delay. Therefore, we predict that the intention to attend the mall's fashion show should be higher for flattery versus control (regardless of timing of measurement). In accordance, only a main effect of flattery ( $F(1, 212) = 4.64$ ,  $p < .05$ ) was obtained on this intention measure, with participants in the flattery condition ( $M = 4.12$ ) reporting a higher likelihood of attending the show than those in the control condition ( $M = 3.53$ ).

*Envy.* Finally, we expected higher levels of envy in the flattery condition than in the control condition. This should be the case both immediately and after the 30-minute delay (if envy were to dissipate over the delay, the preference for buying stylish jeans, which is driven by the envy, should also have dissipated). In support, only a main effect of flattery on envy was obtained, with participants reporting greater envy when they observed the target being flattered than in the control ( $M_{\text{flattery}} = 5.07$ ,  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.26$ ;  $F(1, 212) = 9.66$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Also, as in our earlier studies, the effect of flattery on implicit attitudes toward the salesperson was fully mediated by felt envy ( $b = .31$ ,  $SE = .09$ ; 95% CI = .09 to .47).

## Discussion

Building on our earlier studies, experiment 4 examined the downstream consequences of observing sincere flattery. Findings were consistent with the notion that observing such flattery induces two forces that can exert opposing influences on the observer's behavioral reactions. The hostility toward the flatterer that we have earlier documented (and which itself arises in the first place from the flatterer having caused the uncomfortable feeling of envy) is combated by the motivation to improve oneself on the envied dimension. When the former influence gets dissociated from the behavior decision, the decision will be more in alignment with the latter motivation. Thus, a flattering comment regarding another customer's sense of style increased observers' tendency to purchase a fashionable pair of jeans from the store after a delay—because the negatively viewed salesperson is likely to get dissociated from the store purchase decision over this delay. A similar dissociation should result when the decision is with regard to a target that is unrelated to the salesperson but related to the envied dimension: thus, intentions to attend a fashion show organized by the mall increased even immediately after observing the flattering comment. These findings thus present a more nuanced picture of the differing reactions that may be manifested by observers of sincere flattery: the resultant envy can produce both negative and positive outcomes.

While our findings on the two outcome measures (the key measure of jeans preference as well as the ancillary measure of fashion show attendance) both support a dissociation-based explanation, another account needs to be considered. It can be argued that even if the salesperson remains strongly associated with the store (and, thereby, with participants' decision to purchase from the store) over a delay, the jeans preference pattern might be driven simply by the increased salience of the goal to appear stylish. This account derives from robust findings regarding the increased temporal salience of unsatiated goals (e.g., Fitzsimons, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons 2008). In the current context, the goal to appear stylish that was evoked by the flattering comment at time 1 might grow in importance at time 2 and thus increase

preference for the stylish jeans. This alternate account thus does not incorporate a dissociation mechanism; it derives simply from heightened goal importance over a delay. While it is unclear how this alternate mechanism would explain the heightened intention regarding fashion show attendance (which was not influenced at all by delay), it is important enough to warrant a closer examination.

We did so in the context of a follow-up study. This study only looked at after-purchase (i.e., sincere) flattery, using a one-factor (timing of measures: immediate vs. delayed) between-subject design. The procedure followed was similar to that used in experiment 4. All participants ( $n = 47$ ) read the scenario featuring the after-purchase flattering comment made by the salesperson (Joey) to a stylishly dressed customer in a shop (ROVO). Either immediately or following a 30-minute delay, participants were asked to report how important several different issues were to them at that moment, in order to assess current goal importance. Among these issues was embedded the critical goal: the importance of looking fashionable and stylish (1 = totally unimportant; 9 = totally important;  $r = .85$ ). Six goal items unrelated to this critical one (e.g., “doing well in school”) were used as fillers.

Next, participants performed a lexical decision task to assess whether the salesperson got dissociated from the decision to purchase from the store. Participants were told that the task required them to identify as quickly and accurately as possible whether a presented string of letters was a meaningful word or not (cf. Shah and Kruglanski 2003). Each string of letters was preceded by a prime word, which appeared on screen for 50 milliseconds and was backward masked by a letter string (xxxxxxx) for 100 milliseconds. Following a brief delay (another 100 milliseconds), the target string of letters appeared. Participants were asked to press one of two keys to indicate whether this target was a word or a nonword, as quickly and accurately as possible. The task began with 16 practice trials, each of which featured a neutral word (e.g., “town”) as the prime word, and other neutral words (e.g., “listen”) and nonwords (e.g., “giwna”) as targets. Twenty-four experimental trials followed, with “ROVO” (i.e., the store participants were considering buying the jeans from) as the prime word. The target words now consisted of six words related to the scenario (i.e., “Joey,” “fashion,” “jeans,” “shop,” “stylish,” “clothes”), six neutral words (e.g., “radio”) and 12 nonwords (e.g., “lheruo”). Finally, after this lexical decision task, participants reported their decision of whether to buy the standard or the stylish jeans from ROVO.

Results from this follow-up study were informative. First, replicating experiment 4 findings, participants were more likely to choose the stylish jeans after a delay ( $M_{\text{immediate}} = 30\%$ ,  $M_{\text{delay}} = 64\%$ ;  $\chi^2 = 4.96$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Second, the importance of appearing fashionable and stylish did not go up over time ( $M_{\text{immediate}} = 6.04$ ,  $M_{\text{delay}} = 6.23$ ;  $F < 1$ ), providing evidence against the possibility that the jeans preference pattern obtains because of the heightened importance of the target goal (of looking fashionable and stylish) over the delay. Rather, our argument is that the increased preference

for the jeans over the delay arises from the “fashion” goal remaining equally strong in importance, but the disliked flatterer (Joey) getting dissociated from the store over time. The lexical decision results, which examined response latencies of various target words (including “Joey”) in the context of the store name prime, were used to check this premise: a stronger (weaker) association will manifest in a lower (higher) response latency (Mukhopadhyay, Sengupta, and Ramanathan 2008).

Data from the lexical task were prepared for analyses by removing the one trial that had response latencies greater than 2,500 milliseconds (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2008). Results on the log-transformed response times showed that following the prime word of “ROVO,” participants responded to “Joey” faster in the immediate condition ( $M = 2.77$ ) than in the delayed condition ( $M = 2.83$ ;  $F(1, 44) = 4.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This confirms our expectation regarding the dissociation pattern over time. No such effect of delay was found on the other five target words (e.g., “fashion,” “stylish,” “jeans,” etc.;  $F < 1$  in each case). The null effect on “fashion” and “stylish” as target words was of particular interest since it provided further evidence that the importance of this goal did not go up over time (quicker responses would have been expected over delay had this been the case).

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The major contribution of this research is to provide a new conceptualization of how observers react to flattery that they think might be sincere—that is, they have some reason to believe that even though the praise is being offered in an ingratiation setting, it is genuinely meant rather than proceeding from an ulterior motive. Prior work in the area suggests that perceptions of sincerity are critical in determining observer reactions to flattery (Campbell and Kirmani 2000) and that relatively sincere flattery therefore produces a favorable reaction (Vonk 2002). The current research, however, merges insights from two major bodies of work—one on social comparisons and the other on dual attitudes—to propose that observing sincere flattery yields two distinct reactions. While considerations of sincerity indeed yield a favorable overt (explicit) attitude, the upward comparison inherent in observing someone else being flattered produces an automatic negative reaction; further, this implicit attitude coexists with, rather than being replaced by, the explicit attitude. Results from four experiments provide supportive evidence for such dual attitudes; reassuringly, these studies obtain convergent results using two different flattery paradigms. We note that our demonstration of dual attitudes complements rather than contradicts earlier work on observing flattery: we agree that observing sincere flattery should yield favorable explicit attitudes; however, our research adds to this view by demonstrating the parallel existence of a negative implicit reaction toward the flatterer, arising from social comparison.

In addition to documenting this hitherto unidentified negative implicit reaction, examining flattery from a social comparison perspective also provides theoretical insights into four different, though interrelated aspects of how flattery is



processed by observers. First, we suggest and find that their implicit attitude improves if the target of flattery is dissimilar to the observer (experiment 1). Note that previous conceptualizations, based on considerations of the sincerity of flattery, would not predict this boundary condition, which is uniquely tied to the social comparison account. Second, the social comparison perspective also enables us to examine how observers react to the target of flattery (experiments 2 and 3); we are not aware of past research that has examined observers' reactions to both the source of flattery and its target. Third, although our primary focus is on sincere flattery, the underlying social comparison account also serves to illuminate observer reactions to insincere flattery (experiment 2). Consistent with the idea that implicit reactions do not incorporate considerations of sincerity, we find that such reactions are negative for both types of flattery. However, sincere and insincere flattery do differ both in terms of the particular type of envy they induce (benign vs. malicious) and the explicit attitudes they produce (more positive for sincere flattery). Finally, we contribute to the flattery literature by showing how the envy caused by observing sincere flattery can actually serve as a goad to action, in spite of the negative reaction toward the flatterer (experiment 4). Collectively, these findings provide a novel and multifaceted understanding of how observers process flattery.

### Contributions to Social Comparison Literature

Besides illuminating extant research on flattery, our work contributes to the social comparison literature and to the related research on envy. First, prior work in that area has focused on reactions toward the comparison target—for example, the inimical reaction that is produced as a result of envy (Cohen-Charrash and Mueller 2007). By situating our research in the context of observers' reactions toward the flatterer, we are able to add on a new dimension to the effects of social comparison, namely, resultant attitudes toward the person making the comparison salient (as opposed to the target of comparison). At the same time, we are able to replicate past work identifying negative reactions to the target of comparison (here, the flattery target). Of interest, the process underlying these two negative reactions is subtly different: while envy of the flattered target of comparison directly produces hostility toward that target, the hostile reaction to the flatterer is proximally mediated by the resentment felt toward that person for making an uncomfortable emotion (envy) salient.

Second, this investigation informs research on envy by demonstrating the ironic behavioral consequences of observing sincere flattery. While the existing literature provides support for the motivational consequences of envy (e.g., Van de Ven et al. 2011), we provide a more nuanced perspective by positing that the negative affective reaction produced by envy can detract from its motivational impact. Thus, the motivational influence on behavior is more likely to be observed when the affective reaction can be dissociated from the behavior (Kumkale and Albarracin 2004). We believe this research is the first to theorize about, and obtain

results consistent with, the effects of these two opposing forces deriving from envy. Finally, by showing that sincere (insincere) flattery evokes benign (malicious) envy, this investigation adds to the small body of work that has identified these two qualitatively distinct forms of envy (Smith and Kim 2007; Van de Ven et al. 2011). Along with supporting this distinction, we also find evidence for an important overlap in the consequences of these two types of envy: both benign and malicious envy are experienced as negative emotions (Van de Ven et al. 2009), thus evoking negative implicit reactions toward the source and target of flattery.

### Practical Implications

The findings presented in this research offer both a caveat and pointers for those interested in using flattery as a persuasion device, such as sales agents. Current knowledge and intuition already suggests that the most effective use of flattery is when it is perceived to be sincere—not only is this likely to please targets, but also observers. It is in relation to observers' reactions that we offer a caveat: because of the possibility of upward social comparison, flattery that is deemed sincere can still lead to negative reactions—even if these are not detectable on standard attitude measures. A salesperson should know, therefore, that in praising one person, s/he may be displeasing another. All is not bleak, however. Results from experiment 4 suggest that even if envy produces an automatic negative reaction in observers, it can have a positive influence over time because envy also acts as a goad to action. Thus, as long as the dimension on which the flattery is being offered is of importance to the observer, she or he may end up taking actions that ultimately benefit the salesperson.

### Future Research

Because a process of upward social comparison is particularly likely to occur for important dimensions (Tesser 1988), the flattery attributes studied in this research were explicitly chosen for their importance to participants. Thus, since the attribute examined in experiments 2–4 (a person's sense of style and fashion) was found to be particularly important to our female participants, only female students took part in these three studies. Future work in this area should examine observer reactions to flattery along other dimensions as well. For greater generalizability, these dimensions should be of importance to both men and women—reassuringly, this was the case in experiment 1 (which examined reactions to compliments on “an excellent personality”; both male and female participants took part in that study). Relatedly, it would be interesting to consider the outcomes of observing flattery on a dimension that is relatively unimportant, for example, a person who is indifferent to considerations of style overhearing a salesperson praising another customer on that dimension. An envious reaction should not obtain in such cases. Implicit attitudes in these cases may therefore be positive rather than negative. This speculation is in line with the notion of self-esteem maintenance (Tesser 1988), which argues that

if a similar other possesses a praiseworthy attribute that is not of importance to another, the latter may actually react positively rather than negatively to the former.

While our research looks at observers' attitudinal reactions to both the flatterer and the target, we only examine behavioral consequences for the former, not the latter. Future work should investigate how observers act toward flattered customers. The envy literature suggests that such behavior will be negative only when malicious (vs. benign) envy is elicited, that is, a motivation to "punish" the superior other operates when the advantaged position enjoyed by the other is undeserved (Van de Ven et al. 2009). Ongoing work in our lab is examining this question. In one study that used a context similar to the current experiment 2, participants imagined observing in-store flattery (insincere vs. sincere) and were then exposed to a situation in which the flattered customer required help. Participants were found to be less likely to offer such help when they had imagined observing the customer receive insincere versus sincere flattery. Thus, consistent with the role of deservingness and malicious envy, it is only when the flattery is deemed insincere—and therefore, perceived to be undeserved—that it evokes a desire to harm the recipient of the flattery (cf. Van de Ven et al. 2009). It is worth noting also that observers' implicit attitudes toward the target were equally negative in the two flattery conditions of the study; however, explicit attitudes were more favorable when observing sincere flattery. The greater willingness to help the target in this condition thus suggests that the relatively positive explicit attitude induced by sincere flattery does not simply reflect a self-presentation concern (i.e., the observer wishing not to appear petty or envious) but rather is truly indicative of a more positive deliberative reaction toward the target, as compared to that in the insincere flattery case.

Interesting opportunities clearly exist for consumer researchers to delve more deeply into how different types of flattery influence observer reactions along multiple dimensions. In general, the field has perhaps paid insufficient attention to the broad question of how we, as observers, react to interactions between store agents and other customers. The current research takes a step in this direction, but much remains to be done.

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