

**Trick or Trait?**

**The Combined Effects of Employee Impression Management Modesty  
and Trait Modesty on Supervisor Evaluations**

Corinna Diekmann, Gerhard Blickle, Katharina Hafner, and Lioba Peters

University of Bonn

Accepted for publication by the Journal of Vocational Behavior

on May 8, 2015

We gratefully acknowledge the thoughtful comments and feedback on a previous draft of this paper by Gerald R. Ferris. Correspondence concerning this article should be directed to:  
Corinna Diekmann, Arbeits-, Organisations- und Wirtschaftspsychologie, Institut fuer Psychologie, Universitaet Bonn, Kaiser-Karl-Ring 9, 53111 Bonn, Germany,  
phone: +49 228 734369, fax: +49 228 734670, e-mail: corinna.diekmann@uni-bonn.de

Abstract

Prior research on the benefits of modest self-presentation in organizational contexts has shown positive effects on several career-related outcomes, including employees' reputation, organizational support, and mentoring. However, little is known about the nature, mechanisms, and boundary conditions of this promising impression management tactic. Our study addresses this research gap by integrating two theoretical conceptions of modesty, i.e., impression management modesty (IM modesty) and trait modesty. We developed and tested an overarching theoretical model that postulates positive interactive effects of employees' IM modesty and trait modesty on supervisor ratings of employees' likeability, competence, and job performance. Data on 233 employee–supervisor dyads were analyzed using hierarchical regression and conditional process analyses. As expected, the effects of IM modesty were systematically moderated by employees' trait modesty: For employees with high trait modesty, IM modesty demonstrated significant positive effects on supervisor ratings of employee likeability and competence, which in turn were associated with higher job performance ratings. For employees with low trait modesty, however, using IM modesty was neither beneficial nor detrimental to supervisor evaluations. Implications for theory, practice, and avenues for future research are discussed.

Keywords: modesty; impression management; likeability; competence; job performance; reputation

## Trick or Trait?

### The Combined Effects of Employee Impression Management Modesty and Trait Modesty on Supervisor Evaluations

If you were a manager at a major company, and you were to decide who of several rising talents was in line for a promotion or a pay raise, how would you make your choice? Would your decision be purely based on the candidates' performance, their professional skills, and their potential? Or, would you also consider their interpersonal style, their attitude towards other people, and their personality? Would it matter if you liked or disliked a candidate?

Prior research on organizational behavior has shown that diverse personal evaluations may influence our decisions about whom to promote, mentor, or generally support in the workplace (e.g., Ferris et al., 2009; Ferris, Munyon, Basik, & Buckley, 2008), and as a consequence, employees do well to actively shape their professional and interpersonal reputation. *Impression management* (IM) research has identified several self-presentation tactics that employees use in order to create favorable impressions and to advance their careers. Whereas the benefits and drawbacks of some of these tactics (e.g., ingratiation, self-promotion) have been widely studied (e.g., Barrick, Shaffer, & DeGrassi, 2009; Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003), one tactic that might prove to be highly efficient has not yet received much research attention: modesty.

*Impression management modesty* (IM modesty) is understood as the intentional moderate underrepresentation of one's own obvious strengths, accomplishments, and expectations in order to appear likeable and maintain a reputation of competence at the same time (Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989). As Cialdini and De Nicholas (1989) pointed out, "favorable self-presentation is a tricky business" (p. 626) because the self-presenter is evaluated on several dimensions at once:

For example, certain IM behaviors may make a person appear nice, but also naïve; or competent, but also arrogant. Whereas some well-known IM tactics, such as ingratiation or self-promotion, focus on just one evaluative dimension (likeability *or* competence), the use of IM modesty can benefit employees in both respects (likeability *and* competence). Perceived likeability and competence mirror two universal dimensions in social cognition (i.e., warmth and competence; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007), and forms of both have been shown to affect supervisor evaluations (e.g., Bates, 2002; Borman, White, & Dorsey, 1995; Lefkowitz, 2000; Schmidt, Hunter, & Outerbridge, 1986). Therefore, using an IM tactic that fosters attributions of both likeability and competence may be of great advantage. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated positive effects of a modest demeanor on actors' reputation as being likeable and competent (Tetlock, 1980), on organizational support (Wosinska, Dabul, Whetstone-Dion, & Cialdini, 1996) and mentoring (Blickle, Schneider, Perrewé, Blass, & Ferris, 2008), and even on objective career success in terms of hierarchical position and income (Blickle, Diekmann, Schneider, Kalthöfer, & Summers, 2012).

Although these findings on the benefits of a modest impression are very promising, past studies have not explicitly distinguished between IM modesty and *trait modesty*, a stable personality disposition that involves people's thoughts and feelings about themselves in comparison to other people (Chen, Bond, Chan, Tang, & Buchtel, 2009). Even though IM modesty and trait modesty may appear similar at first glance, both forms of modesty are conceptually and empirically distinct (Blickle, Diekmann et al., 2012; Chen et al., 2009): Whereas IM modesty involves the intentional, situational, and public self-presentation toward target persons in regard to one's own achievements or strengths, trait modesty describes an enduring personal characteristic that reflects private attitudes, and is consistent across time and

different situations. In spite of their considerable conceptual differences, the two forms of modesty have not been clearly delineated in prior research and have never been examined simultaneously.

This raises the question whether the positive effects of a modest demeanor found in past studies are due to employees' IM modesty, trait modesty, or both. In other words, can employees reap the benefits of a modest reputation by just acting the part, is the virtue of genuine modesty actually more profitable than previously recognized, or does it take both to make a positive impression? In order to close this research gap and to extend our understanding of the potential and limitations of modesty in organizations, the present study aimed at two purposes. The first goal of our study was to clearly distinguish between employee IM modesty and trait modesty, and identify both their separate and their interactive effects on supervisor ratings of employees' perceived likeability, competence, and job performance. The second objective was to analyze how these supervisor ratings interrelate, and specifically, if the effects of modesty on likeability and competence ratings carry over into job performance evaluations. The complete model of hypothesized relations between employee IM modesty, trait modesty, and supervisor evaluations is illustrated in Figure 1.

\*\*\* Insert Figure 1 about here \*\*\*

### **Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development**

Impression management has been firmly established as a field of research for several decades, and scholars' interest in the forms and consequences of people's self-presentation continues. Although there are numerous and divergent conceptions of the construct, impression management essentially comprises actors' behaviors aimed at creating, protecting, maintaining, or modifying certain images held by a target audience (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap,

2008). These behaviors have been categorized into specific tactics, strategies, and styles (e.g., Jones & Pittman, 1982; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984; Wayne & Ferris, 1990), and have been examined with regard to diverse organizational outcomes such as job offers, performance evaluations, and career success (for a review, see Bolino et al., 2008). Despite this extensive research activity, the promising tactic of IM modesty is still largely underexplored.

Chen and her colleagues examined the behavioral aspects of self-presentational modesty and identified three factors: self-effacement, other-enhancement, and avoidance of attention-seeking (Chen et al., 2009). Whereas the benefits of other-enhancement are well-established by ingratiation research, the other two factors may seem unlikely strategies in organizational contexts where employees make great efforts to stand out and gain visibility in order to achieve their career goals. However, it is precisely this organizational background, and its typical focus on performance, that allows successful employees to take a backseat and deliberately downplay their own strengths every now and then.

In occupational life, an actor can assume that target audiences consisting of supervisors or coworkers know the actor's general performance level and also notice specific accomplishments. These audiences will readily classify the actor's understatement of a success or skill as "modesty" and will not mistake it as a realistic account of his or her performance. Contrary to popular belief that especially early-career employees need to advertise their own accomplishments in order to gain supervisors' recognition, a modest demeanor may be even more advisable in the first years of a person's career: Given that young professionals are just learning the ropes and depend substantially on their more experienced coworkers' support, a modest self-presentation may in fact be expected by coworkers and supervisors, and a lack of modesty be seen as presumptuous.

Nonetheless, we expect the effectiveness of IM modesty to partly depend on an employee's personality. Leary and Allen (2011, p. 1208) noted that "many personality characteristics, particularly those that involve the ways in which people relate to other people, inherently involve certain styles of self-presentation," because people try to establish public images that are in line with their self-concepts and interactional goals. One element of an actor's personality that should facilitate the effective use of IM modesty is a high level of trait modesty, a personality disposition included in both the five-factor model (NEO-PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992) and the six-factor model of personality (HEXAO-PI; Lee & Ashton, 2004).

People with a *high* level of trait modesty are unassuming and self-effacing; they see themselves as ordinary people and do not expect to be treated preferentially. People with a *low* level of trait modesty feel superior to other people and feel entitled to high status, privileges, and special treatment (Lee & Ashton, 2004). A high level of trait modesty should help employees to use IM modesty in a more convincing and trustworthy manner, resulting in more favorable outcomes. This is because people with high trait modesty intuitively know the appropriate words, facial expressions, and gestures, so that their seemingly modest understatement of an achievement will appear authentic and genuine, even when this understatement is actually shown on purpose in a particular situation and thus reflects IM modesty. Furthermore, this understatement will be perceived as consistent with the person's generally modest behavior across both time and diverse situations, so that observers will not suspect any ulterior motives.

By contrast, employees with low trait modesty may come across as insincere or awkward when using IM modesty because the execution is less skillful and may clash with a person's usual behavior. Consequently, we expect IM modesty to be more beneficial for employees whose trait modesty is high than for employees whose trait modesty is low. Based upon prior research

on the benefits of a modest impression, we expect positive effects on supervisors' evaluations of employees' likeability and competence, which in turn are associated with job performance ratings.

The first benefit is higher perceived *likeability* of the employee. Generally, modesty is considered a virtue that is socially desired, it protects people from appearing arrogant, and it increases liking (Tetlock, 1980; Wosinska et al., 1996). Moreover, a prototype analysis by Gregg, Hart, Sedikides, and Kumashiro (2008) revealed that modesty was associated with valued attributes such as solicitude, honesty, and likeability. Overall, these findings show that a modest impression results in favorable social evaluations and positive interpersonal affect, including perceived likeability. The second benefit of a modest demeanor is increased perceived *competence* of the employee: Past research has demonstrated that people who act modest are perceived not only as more likeable, but also as more competent (Tetlock, 1980). Even though the mediating processes between modesty and the attribution of competence are still underexplored, the positive effects of a modest self-presentation are possibly due to the fact that actors' public modest evaluation of their own achievements indicates their own high performance standards and expectations. If employees slightly downplay a clearly superior performance and put it into perspective, supervisors may conclude that the employees are neither surprised nor too impressed by their own success: The employees' reaction suggests that they are used to performing well, which in turn points to a high level of competence. In addition, people who present themselves modestly are more readily supported by supervisors (Wosinska et al., 1996) and mentors (Blickle, Schneider et al., 2008) who are often successful senior members of the organization. Close and supportive relationships with managers and mentors may not only promote employees' reputation as capable rising talents, but they may also advance employees'

skill development, which further increases perceived competence. In summary, modest behavior should enhance employees' perceived likeability and competence if they are able to present it in a convincing and natural manner, which is easier for those employees whose trait modesty is high. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 1:* Employee trait modesty will moderate the relation between employee IM modesty and supervisor likeability ratings: For employees with high trait modesty, there will be a positive relationship between employee IM modesty and supervisor likeability ratings.

*Hypothesis 2:* Employee trait modesty will moderate the relation between employee IM modesty and supervisor competence ratings: For employees with high trait modesty, there will be a positive relationship between employee IM modesty and supervisor competence ratings.

In addition to the direct positive effects of a modest demeanor on employees' perceived likeability and competence, we expect indirect positive effects via perceived likeability and competence on supervisor ratings of *job performance*. Even though job performance has attracted wide research interest for decades and researchers have developed detailed conceptualizations (e.g., Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Campbell, 1990), job performance *evaluations* by supervisors are not perfect reflections of employees' factual performance (Murphy, 2008), but rather the concentrated results of a complex evaluation process that is influenced by various cognitive, affective, and social aspects (Feldman, 1981; Ferris et al., 2008).

Given the subjective and retrospective nature of this evaluation process, the assessment of an employee's professional and personal qualities are closely intertwined: Prior research has shown a strong positive relationship between supervisors' liking for employees and job performance ratings; in fact, a meta-analysis by Sutton, Baldwin, Wood, and Hoffman (2013)

revealed a corrected correlation of  $\rho = .72$  between both constructs. Based on these findings, we expect supervisor job performance ratings to reflect not only the assessment of an employee's competence as a performance-related construct, but also the interpersonal evaluation of an employee's perceived likeability. As a consequence, the hypothesized interactive effects of IM modesty and trait modesty on supervisor likeability and competence ratings should carry over into job performance ratings, resulting in a positive relation between IM modesty and job performance ratings for those employees whose trait modesty is high.

*Hypothesis 3:* Employee trait modesty will moderate the relation between employee IM modesty and supervisor job performance ratings: For employees with high trait modesty, there will be a positive relationship between employee IM modesty and supervisor job performance ratings.

*Hypothesis 4:* The relation outlined in Hypothesis 3 will be mediated by (4a) supervisor likeability ratings and by (4b) supervisor competence ratings.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

The study was conducted in a leading economic region in Germany. Early-career employees from a wide range of industries and their supervisors were contacted via personal contacts, mailing lists, or distributed flyers by 16 psychology students in partial fulfilment of their study requirements. Potential participants were asked if they would like to participate in a scientific study on successful employee-supervisor relationships, and to provide their email or postal address if interested. In order to attain a large sample of employee-supervisor dyads and to prevent selection biases, data collection comprised both online and paper-pencil surveys, and the design allowed for either the employee or the supervisor to be the first contact person. Interested

participants received individual password-coded links to the online survey or password-coded questionnaires for the paper-pencil survey, respectively, in order to match employees' and supervisors' data while preserving anonymity. Of 762 employee-supervisor dyads who received individual links or questionnaires, we obtained complete survey sets from 233 dyads (30.6% response rate). Of these 233 dyads, 117 dyads had completed the online survey and 116 dyads had completed the paper-pencil survey. Comparisons of both sub-samples with regard to demographic variables and the scales as well as additional analyses indicated that the form of data collection did not affect results. Hence, both sub-samples could be combined and analyzed jointly.

The mean age of the employees was 29.70 ( $SD = 4.70$ ); 127 (55%) were female. The employees had been working in their current position for an average of 1.92 years ( $SD = 1.72$ ) and collaborating with their supervisor for an average of 1.79 years ( $SD = 1.60$ ). The supervisors reported a mean age of 46.93 ( $SD = 9.33$ ), 77 (33%) were female, and they had been working in their current position for a mean of 9.58 years ( $SD = 7.73$ ). The participants worked in a variety of different industries, e.g., civil service and administration (13%), non-profit sector (11%), health care (10%), consulting (9%), research (6%), or media (5%).

## Measures

The employees provided self-assessments of IM modesty, trait modesty, and control variables. Supervisors provided ratings of their employee's perceived likeability, perceived competence, and job performance.

**IM modesty.** IM modesty was measured using a 4-item scale (IM-modesty 4; Blickle, Diekmann et al., 2012). The employees were asked to indicate how they presented themselves with regard to their achievements and strengths toward their supervisor. The scale comprised the

statements “I act very modest,” “I do not make a fuss about myself,” “I do not make a big deal about my accomplishments,” and “I refrain from self-praise,” and used a response format ranging from 1 = *never* to 9 = *always*. The internal consistency reliability estimate for the scale was  $\alpha = .78$ .

**Trait modesty.** Trait modesty was assessed using eight modesty items from the HEXACO personality inventory (German translation by Marcus, Lee, & Ashton, 2007). The employees were asked to indicate to which extent each of the eight statements described them as a person; for example, “I am an ordinary person who is no better than others,” “I am special and superior in many ways” (reverse coded), and “I think that I am entitled to more respect than the average person is” (reverse coded). The response format ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The scale’s internal consistency reliability estimate was  $\alpha = .75$ .

The discriminant validity of the two modesty measures (IM modesty vs. trait modesty) that we used in the present study was empirically supported by Blickle, and Diekmann et al. (2012) who conducted a validation study with a sample of 132 early-career employees. The authors analyzed the relations between the IM-modesty 4 scale, a different, validated IM modesty scale (IM-modesty 19; Blickle, Diekmann et al., 2012), and the HEXACO trait modesty scale (German translation by Marcus et al., 2007). The IM-modesty 19 scale that the authors had validated in advance consisted of 19 items assessing impression management modesty; for example, “In certain situations I intentionally play down my strengths in order to make a good impression,” “I behave modestly when it is obvious to others that I have done something well so as to appear personable,” and “I talk about my strengths and positive accomplishments even if I occasionally make myself a little unpopular by doing so” (reverse coded). Findings revealed a strong positive correlation of the IM-modesty 4 scale with the IM-modesty 19 scale ( $r = .62$ ,

$p < .01$ ), and this correlation was significantly stronger ( $z = 3.14, p < .01$ ) than the correlation between the IM-modesty 4 scale and the HEXACO trait modesty scale ( $r = .32, p < .01$ ). Further, there was no significant correlation between the IM-modesty 19 scale and the HEXACO trait modesty scale ( $r = .09, p > .10$ ). The results support the discriminant validity of the IM-modesty 4 scale and the HEXACO trait modesty scale and demonstrate that the two constructs IM modesty and trait modesty are not only conceptually, but also empirically distinct.

**Likeability.** Likeability was measured using a German translation of a 4-item scale by Turnley and Bolino (2001). The supervisors rated how accurately each of four attributes (“likeable,” “cooperative,” “nice,” “pleasant”) described their employee. The response format ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *absolutely*. The internal consistency reliability estimate of the scale was  $\alpha = .78$ .

**Competence.** Competence was also assessed using a German translation of four items by Turnley and Bolino (2001). Again, the supervisors indicated how accurately each of four attributes (“competent,” “intelligent,” “talented,” “accomplished”) described their employee, with the response format ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *absolutely*. The scale’s internal consistency reliability estimate was  $\alpha = .79$ .

**Job performance.** Job performance was assessed using the 6-item scale developed by Blickle, Meurs et al. (2008). The supervisors were asked to rate their employee’s performance regarding six performance criteria. Sample items include “How is the quality of this person’s performance altogether?” and “How well does this person adjust to changes and innovations?”, with the response format ranging from 1 = *clearly inferior to peers* to 5 = *clearly superior to peers*. The scale had an internal consistency reliability estimate of  $\alpha = .80$ .

**Control variables.** Employees' gender, age, and duration of collaboration with their supervisor were used as control variables as these variables may affect supervisor ratings (Duarte, Goodson, & Klich, 1994; Ng & Feldman, 2008; Roth, Purvis, & Bobko, 2012).

## Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations of the study variables.

\*\*\* Insert Table 1 about here \*\*\*

Because participation in the study was voluntary, there could have been a selection bias in favor of employees who believed to be highly regarded by their supervisors, resulting in a strongly skewed distribution of our dependent variables. Perfectly normal distributions are indicated by zero values of skewness and kurtosis, whereas skewness values  $\geq |2|$  and kurtosis values  $\geq |7|$  suggest problematic levels of nonnormality (Curran, West, & Finch, 1996). Our analyses of skewness and kurtosis of supervisor likeability, competence, and job performance ratings revealed normal distributions (likeability: skewness = -1.113, kurtosis = 2.107; competence: skewness = -1.176, kurtosis = 3.068; job performance: skewness = -0.251, kurtosis = 0.003). In sum, these findings do not suggest a selection bias.

In order to test the independence and distinctiveness of our five scales from the two rating sources, we first conducted confirmatory factor analyses using Mplus 7.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012). Because recent research demonstrated that higher numbers of manifest variables impair goodness-of-fit statistics in structural equation modeling (Moshagen, 2012), we computed two indicator variables for each scale based on the odd- and even-numbered scale items to reduce the number of manifest variables in our models. We then built three different models: In Model 1, the respective indicator variables loaded on one factor for each construct (i.e., IM

modesty, trait modesty, perceived likeability, perceived competence, perceived job performance), and each of these five factors loaded on one of two higher order factors representing the rating source (i.e., employee self-report or supervisor rating). This model showed good fit indices:  $\chi^2 = 43.398$ ,  $df = 29$ ,  $p = .042$ ;  $RMSEA = .046$ ;  $CFI = .985$ ;  $SRMR = .041$ .

In order to ensure the discriminant validity of the IM modesty and trait modesty measures used in this study, we compared Model 1 with Model 2 where the indicator variables for IM modesty and trait modesty loaded on one modesty factor instead of two separate factors (trait vs. impression management). The other factors were identical to Model 1. The fit of Model 2 ( $\chi^2 = 92.360$ ,  $df = 31$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $RMSEA = .092$ ;  $CFI = .934$ ;  $SRMR = .056$ ) was clearly inferior to the fit of Model 1;  $\Delta\chi^2 = 48.962$ ,  $\Delta df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ . Finally, we compared Model 1 with Model 3 where the respective indicator variables loaded directly on one of two factors representing the rating source (i.e., employee self-report or supervisor rating), as would be implied by a potential mono-source bias. The fit indices of this model were poor ( $\chi^2 = 195.865$ ,  $df = 34$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $RMSEA = .143$ ;  $CFI = .827$ ;  $SRMR = .071$ ), and the direct comparison of both models demonstrated that Model 1 fitted the data significantly better than Model 3;  $\Delta\chi^2 = 152.467$ ,  $\Delta df = 5$ ,  $p < .001$ . These results strongly support the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the scales used to measure the five different constructs, and there was no indication of mono-source bias.

Next, we analyzed the hypothesized relations between employee IM modesty, employee trait modesty, and supervisor ratings of likeability, competence, and job performance using hierarchical moderated multiple regression analyses (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 stated that employee trait modesty would moderate the relation between employee IM modesty and supervisor *likeability* ratings (Hypothesis 1), between employee IM

modesty and supervisor *competence* ratings (Hypothesis 2), and between IM modesty and supervisor *job performance* ratings (Hypothesis 3). Table 2 shows the results of the three corresponding regression analyses. After including the control variables and main effects in the first two regression steps, the IM modesty x trait modesty interaction term was a significant predictor that explained incremental variance in supervisors' likeability ratings ( $\beta = .14, p < .05, \Delta R^2 = .02$ ), in supervisors' competence ratings ( $\beta = .17, p < .05, \Delta R^2 = .03$ ), and in supervisors' job performance ratings ( $\beta = .15, p < .05, \Delta R^2 = .02$ ), respectively. The amount of variance explained by the interaction term in each criterion (i.e., 2%, 3%, and 2%) is consistent with common findings on interaction effects in field studies (i.e., 1-3%; Champoux & Peters, 1987; Chaplin, 1991).

\*\*\* Insert Table 2 about here \*\*\*

Subsequent simple slope analyses for high, medium, and low levels of the moderator trait modesty revealed that the form of the three IM modesty x trait modesty interactions were in accordance with the hypotheses: For individuals with high trait modesty, there was a significant positive relation between IM modesty and likeability ratings ( $b = .11, p < .05$ ), competence ratings ( $b = .13, p < .05$ ), and job performance ratings ( $b = .08, p < .05$ ). By contrast, for individuals with medium or low trait modesty, IM modesty was not associated with the supervisor ratings (medium trait modesty:  $b = .05, b = .05, \text{ and } b = .03$ ; low trait modesty:  $b = -.02, b = -.04, \text{ and } b = -.02$ ; all  $p > .10$ ). Thus, the results of the regression analyses and the simple slope analyses support Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. The results of these graphed interaction effects are presented in Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c.

\*\*\* Insert Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c about here \*\*\*

Finally, in order to test the hypothesized mediation effects, we conducted a conditional process analysis based on 10,000 bootstrap samples using the data analysis tool PROCESS by Hayes (2013) in one single statistical model. Hypotheses 4a and 4b stated that the interaction effect on supervisor job performance ratings would be mediated by supervisor likeability ratings (4a) and supervisor competence ratings (4b). Accordingly, the analysis included IM modesty as the predictor variable, trait modesty as the moderator variable, perceived likeability and perceived competence as simultaneous potential mediator variables, job performance ratings as the criterion variable, and the control variables as covariates. In line with our theoretical assumptions, we specified that the moderator variable would moderate the relation between the predictor and the mediator variables (as opposed to between the mediator variables and the criterion variable) as well as the direct relation between the predictor and the criterion, and that the two potential mediators would operate in parallel (i.e., Model 8; Hayes, 2013).

For the hypothesized mediator *likeability*, the conditional process analysis revealed a positive indirect effect of the highest-order interaction (i.e., of the interaction between the predictor IM modesty and the moderator trait modesty) with the 95% confidence interval excluding zero (.019,  $SE = .010$ ; 95% CI .004 to .044), which indicates that the moderation of IM modesty by trait modesty on supervisor job performance ratings was indeed mediated by likeability ratings. The conditional indirect effects of IM modesty on job performance ratings at high, medium, and low levels of trait modesty specify this effect: In line with our expectations, IM modesty had a positive indirect effect on job performance ratings via perceived likeability for individuals with high trait modesty (.019,  $SE = .011$ ; 95% CI .004 to .046), but not for individuals with medium (.008,  $SE = .008$ ; 95% CI -.003 to .027) or low trait modesty (-.003,

$SE = .008$ ; 95% CI  $-.018$  to  $.014$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 4a was supported by the data and statistical analyses.

For the hypothesized mediator *competence*, the conditional process analysis revealed a similar pattern: A positive indirect effect of the highest-order interaction with the 95% confidence interval excluding zero ( $.052$ ,  $SE = .019$ , 95% CI  $.016$  to  $.091$ ) suggests that the moderation of IM modesty by trait modesty on supervisor job performance ratings was indeed also mediated by competence ratings. As expected, IM modesty had a positive indirect effect on job performance ratings via perceived competence for individuals with high trait modesty ( $.045$ ,  $SE = .020$ ; 95% CI  $.008$  to  $.084$ ), but not for individuals with medium ( $.016$ ,  $SE = .014$ ; 95% CI  $-.012$  to  $.044$ ) or low trait modesty ( $-.014$ ,  $SE = .016$ ; 95% CI  $-.049$  to  $.016$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 4b was also supported by the data and statistical analyses. In contrast to the conditional indirect effects via likeability and competence ratings, the conditional *direct* effects were not significant for high, medium, or low trait modesty, which further supports our proposition that the positive effects of modesty on job performance ratings can largely be ascribed to higher perceived likeability and competence of employees.

### Discussion

The present study contributes to IM research in several ways. First, a theoretical model describing the complex relations between IM modesty, trait modesty, and employees' reputation at work was tested and empirically supported, thereby integrating and extending previous research on the benefits of modesty in the workplace. Second, the unique effects of IM modesty and trait modesty were identified and empirically quantified, thus further establishing IM modesty as a self-presentation tactic that is distinct from the personality trait of modesty. Finally, displaying modesty in an apparently genuine and convincing way was shown to have positive

effects on both one's interpersonal and professional reputation, underlining this strategy's considerable value for employees.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Our findings contribute to a clearer understanding of the nature and consequences of modesty in the workplace. Previous studies on the benefits of modest behavior had not clearly distinguished between IM modesty and trait modesty so that the relative importance of each was unclear. Our results reveal that the positive effects on target evaluations are not driven by IM modesty or trait modesty alone, but rather by their positive interaction. The best supervisor evaluations were attained by those employees who reported high levels of IM modesty as well as high levels of trait modesty. By contrast, there were no substantial benefits for employees who scored high only in IM modesty or trait modesty. These findings suggest that IM modesty and trait modesty complement each other in enhancing an actor's reputation, and may have different functions: IM modesty comprises observable behaviors like specific statements or gestures that the audience can easily recognize as "modesty." Because IM modesty is contingent on situations that involve obvious positive features or accomplishments of the actor, the quality of modesty in an actor's behavior becomes even more apparent. Thus, IM modesty is the outward display of modesty.

On the other hand, trait modesty refers to the thoughts and attitudes that actors have about themselves in comparison to other people. Even though a personality disposition may occasionally shine through in an actor's behavior, the essence of trait modesty is therefore internal and hardly observable by the audience. However, high levels of trait modesty can provide the actor with the required authenticity to skillfully carry out the modest behavior that represents IM modesty. Based on this interpretation, there may be other individual characteristics

or skills that can help actors to make the most of IM modesty, for example, social effectiveness constructs such as political skill (Ferris et al., 2005) or self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974).

Our findings also suggest that IM research may benefit from including the IM modesty tactic in future studies. Previous research on the effects of specific IM tactics on career-relevant outcomes such as job performance ratings or interview success has typically focused on the consequences of well-established tactics like ingratiation or self-promotion. Even though these tactics work to the actor's advantage when used in the right place at the right time, they also have been shown to backfire when used under the wrong conditions or in the wrong way. By contrast, we did not observe any significant detrimental effects of IM modesty, even for those employees whose low trait modesty apparently impeded their successful utilization of IM modesty. Besides, ingratiation and self-promotion target only one of the two universal dimensions of social judgment, i.e., warmth (ingratiation) and competence (self-promotion). Modesty, on the other hand, appears to avoid the trade-off between the two dimensions and offer benefits in both respects.

### **Practical Implications**

The results of our study show that employees can benefit in several respects from a modest self-presentation, especially if this modest demeanor comes naturally to them. In contrast to common suggestions that advise early-career employees to advertise their skills and accomplishments, our findings suggest that acting modest can have positive effects on employees' reputation at work that exceed mere liking and even include attributions of competence and high performance. Unlike other impression management tactics that focus on either likeability or competence, IM modesty seems to combine the "best of both worlds" while avoiding the drawbacks and risks of other tactics.

From an organizational point of view, our findings point to the importance of educating supervisors about the forms and consequences of employees' impression management in order to ensure realistic and objective performance evaluations. Although appearing likeable and competent can be a valuable asset at times (e.g., in sales talks or customer service), supervisors need to be aware that employees' skillful self-presentation can distort personal impressions and even performance appraisals. However, the results did not indicate any risk of supervisors falling for "false modesty." On the contrary, IM modesty worked best for those employees who considered modesty to be a genuine part of their personality.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Building on previous research on the benefits of modest behavior in the workplace, this study is the first to separately measure both employee trait modesty and IM modesty, thus allowing us to determine their unique and interactive effects. The predictor and criterion variables came from two different sources, thereby avoiding common-source bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), and confirmatory factor analyses supported the conceptual independence and distinctiveness of the scales. The study participants consisted of actual employees and their supervisors, thus strengthening the external validity of the results. Relevant control variables were included in the analyses to eliminate rival explanations of the findings.

Although this research showed meaningful relations between employee impression management and supervisor evaluations, the cross-sectional design could not establish causality. Also, this study used a German sample of early-career, white-collar workers, and the results may differ by cultural context (Schmid Mast, Frauendorfer, & Popovic, 2011), employees' career stage, or industry.

### **Directions for Future Research**

There are several areas in which future research can contribute to a more profound understanding of the consequences and underlying processes of IM modesty. In particular, in addition to our findings that point to positive indirect effects of a modest self-presentation on supervisor performance *evaluations* via employees' perceived likability and competence, there may be complementary mechanisms linking modesty and actual job performance. For example, because modest employees tend to receive more organizational support (Wosinska et al., 1996) and mentoring (Blickle, Schneider et al., 2008), they are more likely to have access to ample resources to cope with both daily tasks at work and specific problems that may arise. Due to the cognitive association of modesty with sincerity and integrity (Gregg et al., 2008), these employees might also be granted more liberties and a wider scope of discretion, which could help them to work more efficiently and successfully than employees whose constraints are stronger.

On the other hand, the effects of a modest self-presentation in turn probably depend on an employee's initial objective performance level: IM modesty is thought to be more beneficial when an actor's performance is high and apparent, but how good is good enough? Examining ranges of performance (similar to the experimental work by Schlenker & Leary, 1982) in a field study will provide a more precise definition of this success factor in using IM modesty. Furthermore, future studies should investigate the effects of IM modesty in additional organizational contexts such as employment interviews. Our findings indicate that employees can benefit from using IM modesty in everyday working life. However, further research is needed to analyze the implications of IM modesty in different kinds of work interactions; for example, short-term interactions or different hierarchical relations between actor and audience.

Finally, the effects of IM modesty may vary among different industries, depending on typical situational contexts and specific behavioral norms.

### **Conclusion**

The present study examined the unique and interactive effects of employees' IM modesty and trait modesty on career-relevant supervisor evaluations. IM modesty was shown to be an efficient IM tactic that demonstrated considerable benefits for those employees who considered modesty to be a genuine part of their personality. Continued research on the prerequisites and boundary conditions of IM modesty will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the tactic's processes, strengths, and limitations. We hope that the present findings will encourage impression management researchers to further explore this promising tactic.

### **References**

- Barrick, M. R., Shaffer, J. A., & DeGrassi, S. W. (2009). What you see may not be what you get: Relationships among self-presentation tactics and ratings of interview and job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 94*, 1394–1411.
- Bates, R. (2002). Liking and similarity as predictors of multi-source ratings. *Personnel Review, 31*, 540–552.
- Blickle, G., Diekmann, C., Schneider, P. B., Kalthöfer, Y., & Summers, J. K. (2012). When modesty wins: Impression management through modesty, political skill, and career success—a two-study investigation. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 21*, 899–922.
- Blickle, G., Meurs, J. A., Zettler, I., Solga, J., Noethen, D., Kramer, J., & Ferris, G. R. (2008). Personality, political skill, and job performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 72*, 377–387.

- Blickle, G., Schneider, P. B., Perrewé, P. L., Blass, F. R., & Ferris, G. R. (2008). The roles of self-disclosure, modesty, and self-monitoring in the mentoring relationship: A longitudinal multi-source investigation. *Career Development International, 13*, 224–240.
- Bolino, M. C., Kacmar, K. M., Turnley, W. H., & Gilstrap, J. B. (2008). A multi-level review of impression management motives and behaviors. *Journal of Management, 34*, 1080–1109.
- Borman, W. C., & Motowidlo, S. J. (1993). Expanding the criterion domain to include elements of contextual performance. In N. Schmitt & W. C. Borman (Eds.), *Personnel selection in organizations* (pp. 71–98). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Borman, W. C., White, L. A., & Dorsey, D. W. (1995). Effects of ratee task performance and interpersonal factors on supervisor and peer performance ratings. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 80*, 168–177.
- Campbell, J. P. (1990). Modeling the performance prediction problem in industrial and organizational psychology. In M. D. Dunnette & L. M. Hough (Eds.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (2nd ed., Vol. 1, pp. 687–732). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Champoux, J. E., & Peters, W. S. (1987). Form, effect size, and power in moderated regression analysis. *Journal of Occupational Psychology, 60*, 243–255.
- Chaplin, W. F. (1991). The next generation of moderator research in personality psychology. *Journal of Personality, 59*, 143–178.
- Chen, S. X., Bond, M. H., Chan, B., Tang, D., & Buchtel, E. E. (2009). Behavioral manifestations of modesty. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 40*, 603–626.

- Cialdini, R. B., & De Nicholas, M. E. (1989). Self-presentation by association. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *57*, 626–631.
- Cohen, J., Cohen, P., West, S., & Aiken, L. (2003). *Applied multiple regression/correlation analysis for the behavioral sciences*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Costa, P. T., & McCrae, R. R. (1992). *Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R) and NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) professional manual*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Curran, P. J., West, S. G., & Finch, J. F. (1996). The robustness of test statistics to nonnormality and specification error in confirmatory factor analysis. *Psychological Methods*, *1*, 16–29.
- Duarte, N. T., Goodson, J. R., & Klich, N. R. (1994). Effects of dyadic quality and duration on performance appraisal. *Academy of Management Journal*, *37*, 499–521.
- Feldman, J. M. (1981). Beyond attribution theory: Cognitive processes in performance appraisal. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *66*, 127–148.
- Ferris, G. R., Liden, R. C., Munyon, T. P., Summers, J. K., Basik, K. J., & Buckley, M. R. (2009). Relationships at work: Toward a multidimensional conceptualization of dyadic work relationships. *Journal of Management*, *35*, 1379–1403.
- Ferris, G. R., Treadway, D. C., Kolodinsky, R. W., Hochwarter, W. A., Kacmar, C. J., Douglas, C., & Frink, D. D. (2005). Development and validation of the Political Skill Inventory. *Journal of Management*, *31*, 126–152.
- Ferris, G. R., Munyon, T. P., Basik, K., & Buckley, M. R. (2008). The performance evaluation context: Social, emotional, cognitive, political, and relationship components. *Human Resource Management Review*, *18*, 146–163.

- Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J., & Glick, P. (2007). Universal dimensions of social cognition: Warmth and competence. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 11*, 77–83.
- Gregg, A. P., Hart, C. M., Sedikides, C., & Kumashiro, M. (2008). Everyday conceptions of modesty: A prototype analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 34*, 978–992.
- Hayes, A. F. (2013). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Higgins, C. A., Judge, T. A., & Ferris, G. R. (2003). Influence tactics and work outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 24*, 89–106.
- Jones, E. E., & Pittman, T. S. (1982). Toward a general theory of strategic self-presentation. In J. Suls (Ed.), *Psychological perspectives on the self* (pp. 231–262). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Leary, M. R., & Allen, A. B. (2011). Personality and persona: Personality processes in self-presentation. *Journal of Personality, 79*, 1191–1218.
- Lee, K., & Ashton, M. C. (2004). Psychometric properties of the HEXACO personality inventory. *Multivariate Behavioral Research, 39*, 329–358.
- Lefkowitz, J. (2000). The role of interpersonal affective regard in supervisory performance ratings: A literature review and proposed causal model. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 73*, 67–85.
- Marcus, B., Lee, K., & Ashton, M. C. (2007). Personality dimensions explaining relationships between integrity tests and counterproductive behavior: Big Five, or one in addition? *Personnel Psychology, 60*, 1–34.

- Moshagen, M. (2012). The model size effect in SEM: Inflated goodness-of-fit statistics are due to the size of the covariance matrix. *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, *19*, 86–98.
- Murphy, K. R. (2008). Explaining the weak relationship between job performance and ratings of job performance. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, *1*, 148–160.
- Muthén, L. K., & Muthén, B. O. (1998-2012). *Mplus user's guide* (7th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Muthén & Muthén.
- Ng, T. W. H., & Feldman, D. C. (2008). The relationship of age to ten dimensions of job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *93*, 392–423.
- Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., Lee, J.-Y., & Podsakoff, N. P. (2003). Common method biases in behavioral research: A critical review of the literature and recommended remedies. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *88*, 879–903.
- Roth, P. L., Purvis, K. L., & Bobko, P. (2012). A meta-analysis of gender group differences for measures of job performance in field studies. *Journal of Management*, *38*, 719–739.
- Schlenker, B. R., & Leary, M. R. (1982). Audiences' reactions to self-enhancing, self-denigrating, and accurate self-presentations. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *18*, 89–104.
- Schmid Mast, M., Frauendorfer, D., & Popovic, L. (2011). Self-promoting and modest job applicants in different cultures. *Journal of Personnel Psychology*, *10*, 70–77.
- Schmidt, F. L., Hunter, J. E., & Outerbridge, A. N. (1986). Impact of job experience and ability on job knowledge, work sample performance, and supervisory ratings of job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *71*, 432–439.

- Snyder, M. (1974). Self-monitoring of expressive behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 30*, 526–537.
- Sutton, A. W., Baldwin, S. P., Wood, L., & Hoffman, B. J. (2013). A meta-analysis of the relationship between rater liking and performance ratings. *Human Performance, 26*, 409–429.
- Tedeschi, J., & Melburg, V. (1984). Impression management and influence in the organization. In S. B. Bacharach & E. J. Lawler (Eds.), *Research in the sociology of organizations* (pp. 31–58). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Tetlock, P. E. (1980). Explaining teacher explanations of pupil performance: A self-presentation interpretation. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 43*, 283–290.
- Turnley, W. H., & Bolino, M. C. (2001). Achieving desired images while avoiding undesired images: Exploring the role of self-monitoring in impression management. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 86*, 351–360.
- Wayne, S. J., & Ferris, G. R. (1990). Influence tactics, affect, and exchange quality in supervisor-subordinate interactions: A laboratory experiment and field study. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 75*, 487–499.
- Wosinska, W., Dabul, A. J., Whetstone-Dion, R., & Cialdini, R. B. (1996). Self-presentational responses to success in the organization: The costs and benefits of modesty. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 18*, 229–242.

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, Coefficient Alpha Reliabilities, and Correlations of the Study**Variables*

<i>Variables</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. E Gender	1.45	0.50	–							
2. E Age	29.70	4.70	.09	–						
3. E Collaboration <sup>a</sup>	1.79	1.60	.04	.19**	–					
4. E IM Modesty	5.75	1.38	-.14*	-.06	-.09	(.78)				
5. E Trait Modesty	3.61	0.57	-.30**	.03	-.12 <sup>†</sup>	.46**	(.75)			
6. S Likeability	6.07	0.76	-.09	-.08	-.01	.13*	.16*	(.78)		
7. S Competence	5.85	0.82	.03	.01	.19**	.04	-.01	.50**	(.79)	
8. S Job Performance	3.80	0.56	-.07	-.10	.07	.09	.09	.50**	.62**	(.80)

*Note.*  $N = 233$  dyads of employees and supervisors; Gender: 1 = female, 2 = male; E = employee self-report; S = supervisor rating of the employee.

<sup>a</sup>Duration of employee's collaboration with supervisor in years.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 2

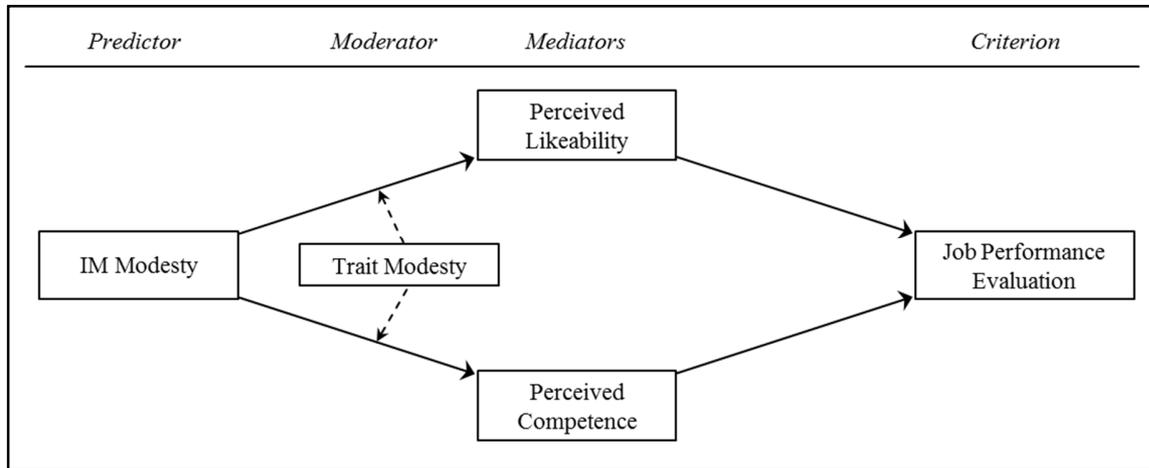
*Hierarchical Moderated Regression Analysis of Supervisor Ratings on Employee IM Modesty, Employee Trait Modesty, and Control Variables*

		Criteria = Supervisor Ratings								
		S Likeability			S Competence			S Job Performance		
Block	Predictors	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$R^2$
1	E Gender	-.08			.02			-.06		
	E Age	-.08			-.02			-.11 <sup>†</sup>		
	E Collaboration <sup>a</sup>	.01			.20**			.10		
			.01	.01		.04*	.04*		.02	.02
2	E IM Modesty	.07			.05			.05		
	E Trait Modesty	.13 <sup>†</sup>			.01			.07		
			.03*	.04		.00	.04 <sup>†</sup>		.01	.03
3	IM Modesty									
	x Trait Modesty	.14*			.17*			.15*		
			.02*	.06*		.03*	.07*		.02*	.05 <sup>†</sup>

*Note.*  $N = 233$  dyads of employees and supervisors; Gender: 1 = female, 2 = male; E = employee self-report; S = supervisor rating of the employee.

<sup>a</sup>Duration of employee's collaboration with supervisor.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ .



*Figure 1.* Theoretical Model Linking Employee Impression Management (IM) Modesty, Trait Modesty, and Supervisor Evaluations.

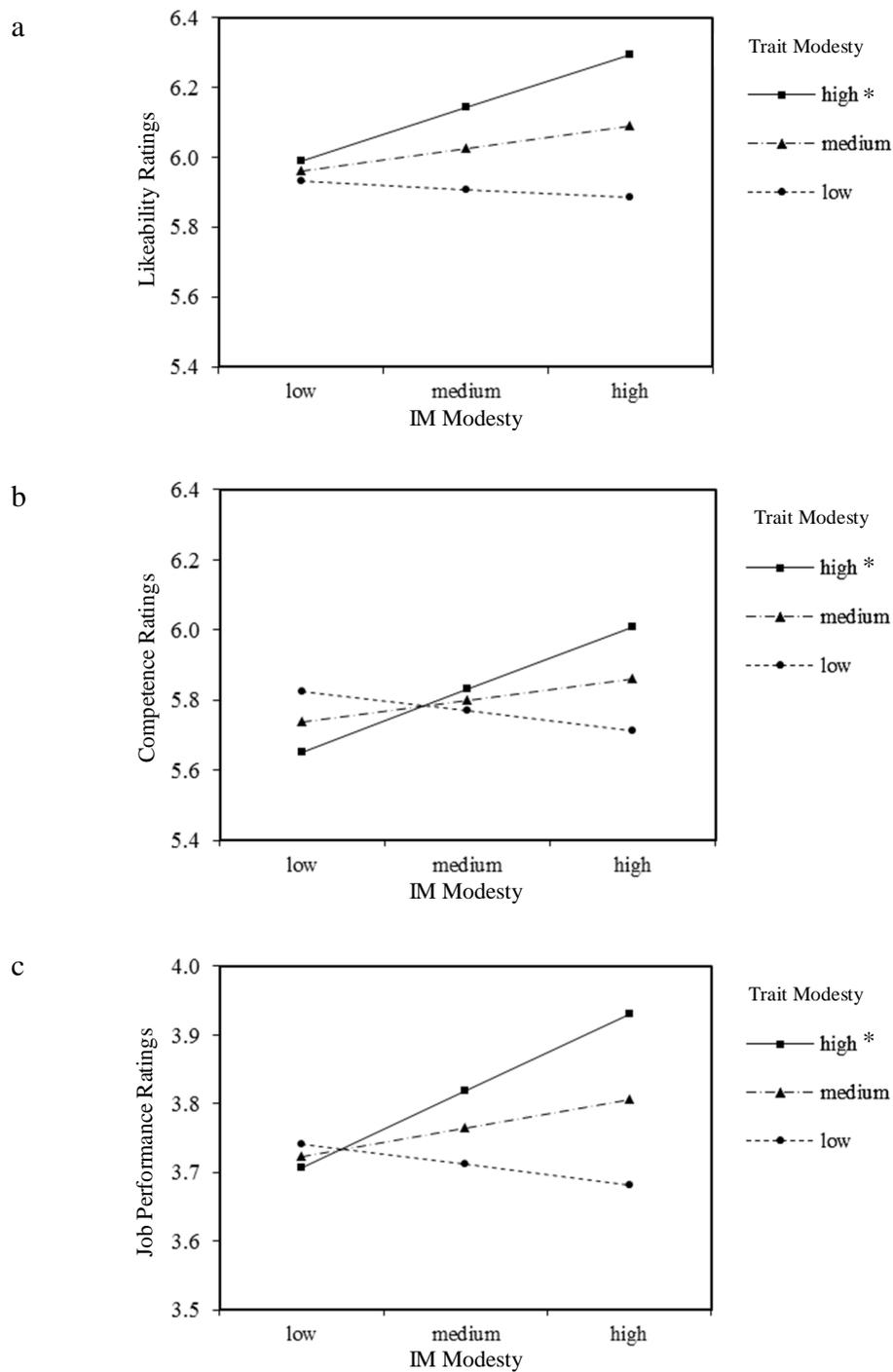


Figure 2. Interactions of Employee Impression Management (IM) Modesty and Trait Modesty on Supervisor (a) Likeability Ratings, (b) Competence Ratings, and (c) Job Performance Ratings.

Note.  $N = 233$  dyads of employees and supervisors;  $*p < .05$ .