



## Full length article

# “Liking” and being “liked”: How are personality traits and demographics associated with giving and receiving “likes” on Facebook?



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 27 May 2016

Received in revised form

19 November 2016

Accepted 23 November 2016

## Keywords:

Facebook likes

Impression management

Online self-presentation

Gift giving

Personality traits

Demographics

## ABSTRACT

On social media, users can express their favorable attitudes toward messages that others post by clicking the “like” button. In return, they may also receive “likes” from others for their own posts. This study aims to examine the “liking” behavior on social media by using the theoretical framework of gift giving and impression management. Specifically, the study investigates if and how different personality traits (i.e., self-esteem, empathy, interpersonal generosity, and public self-consciousness) and demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, age, and education) are associated with one’s frequencies of giving and receiving “likes” on Facebook. A survey was conducted with 421 Facebook users in the United States. The study results revealed that frequency of giving “likes” was positively associated with both interpersonal generosity and public self-consciousness, but frequency of receiving “likes” was not significantly related to the examined personality traits. Age and gender were significantly associated with frequencies of both giving and receiving “likes.” Educational background was negatively associated with giving “likes.”

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## 1. Introduction

With the booming development of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, an increasing research interest has been formed surrounding various communication activities occurring on those platforms (Tong, Van der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008). One prominent phenomenon is the “liking” behavior: Users can express their favorable attitudes toward messages that others post on SNSs by clicking the “like” button. In return, they may also receive “likes” for their own posts from others.

While the “liking” behavior is a communication phenomenon that permeates everyday life of social media users, little has been explored regarding what drives this social media communication behavior and if different patterns of such behavior emerge based on users’ personality traits and demographic characteristics. This study posits that theories of gift giving and impression management can help interpret this important social media communication phenomenon. Under this theoretical umbrella, the current

study argues that giving and receiving “likes” resembles gift exchange as “liking” can be perceived as a type of online gifting behavior (Skågeby, 2009, 2010) and is similar to a physical gift exchange which happens during one’s interaction with another as a strategy of impression management.

In gift exchange, individuals differ from each other based on specific patterns they have in giving and receiving: Some tend to give out gifts frequently, but others may not. Some are likely to receive gifts often, but others may not. Since “liking” can be perceived as a form of online gift giving, it may have systematic patterns that deserve empirical tests. While previous studies have examined how personality traits and demographics may influence gift giving behavior (e.g., Segev, Shoham, & Ruvio, 2012) and online activities (e.g., Correa, Hinsley, & Gil de Zuniga, 2010; Lee, Moore, Park, & Park, 2012), how they affect online gifting is unknown. The current study aims to investigate the “liking” phenomenon on Facebook under the theoretical framework of gift giving and impression management. Specifically, it sets out to answer why and how people differ in terms of their frequencies of giving and receiving “likes” on Facebook, and what effects personality traits and demographic characteristics have on such behavior. As an initial attempt to regard Facebook “likes” as online gifts, this study’s unique contribution to the literature is to advance the theoretical

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understanding of why people give and receive “likes” on Facebook from a gift exchange perspective. The big “so what” question associated with this “liking” behavior will also be discussed.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Impression management and gift giving: a theoretical framework

Defined as a process that includes an exchange of gifts between givers and recipients with different relationships (Cohn & Schiffman, 1996; Segev et al., 2012), gift giving has been studied from various perspectives, being economic, social, cultural, symbolic, and cognitive (Segev, Shoham, & Ruvio, 2013; Segev et al., 2012). The economic exchange model of gift giving argues that gift giving is a process involving exchanges of gifts based on their economic values, whereas in the social exchange model, gifts are valued for their symbolic worth (Belk & Coon, 1993). Although both models have been used to investigate gift giving phenomenon, they primarily focus on practicing reciprocity rules during the gift exchange process. This study, however, mainly concerns how people actively display their identity via gift giving (Schwartz, 1967), whereby gift giving is considered as a social situation engaging people in impression management or self-presentation (Segev et al., 2012, 2013). Therefore, it is reasonable to use impression management as a theoretical umbrella to investigate gift giving in this current study.

Impression management, also termed self-presentation, refers to a process through which individuals try to control or influence others' perceptions or impressions toward them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Although some scholars have distinguished impression management from self-presentation, arguing that the former is a broader concept that goes beyond self-relevant images, these two terms may be used interchangeably (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). In this study, both terms will be used to describe how individuals consciously control their selected behavior in order to form a desired impression for their target audience (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011).

Individuals manage impressions through both face-to-face and online interactions, with the latter attracting an increasing academic attention nowadays (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). Several scholars have developed theoretical models to interpret the uniqueness of online impression management. For example, Walther (1996) addressed the dynamic of interpersonal communication online by using the hyperpersonal model of computer-mediated communication. According to this model, people have more control over their presented “self” in online environments and therefore tend to selectively present themselves which is uncontrolled in a face-to-face setting (Walther, 1996). Another important model to describe how people manage their impressions online is the impression management model of communication channels (O'Sullivan, 2000). Based on this model, people select communication channels to maximize self-presentational benefits and minimize self-presentational costs (O'Sullivan, 1996; 2000). Computer-mediated channels are considered more ambiguous than face-to-face communication because people communicating online are better equipped to regulate and manage what is made known or unknown about themselves to others (O'Sullivan, 2000).

When it comes to online gift giving and impression management, there are two typical environments for online users: One is an anonymous environment such as chat rooms and virtual communities where users tend to hide their identities; the other is a context where people are mostly tied to each other through relationships established offline such as SNSs (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007;

Mehdizadeh, 2010). The current study focuses on SNSs because such sites provide a highly controlled environment for self-presentational behavior (Mehdizadeh, 2010), and those who interact with each other on SNSs are more likely to have gift exchange interactions as they may have established relationships offline.

As discussed earlier, a gift can be regarded as the giver's extended self and impressions created by the gift can impact the receiver's perceptions toward the giver (Segev et al., 2013). Traditionally, a gift refers to “a product or a service (including the giver's time, activities, and ideas) voluntarily provided to another person or group through some sort of ritual presentation” (Belk & Coon, 1993, p. 394). Nowadays, with the rapid development of Internet, gift giving has reached the realm of online networks and communities (Skågeby, 2009, 2010). In a discussion of online gift giving, Skågeby (2010) asserted that gift giving in digital networks is more than just a sum of many dyadic gift exchanges; instead, there are three concepts central to gifting online: Realizing social bond value, acting out other-orientation by the end-user, and manifesting reciprocal rules and patterns. Specifically, *social metadata*, which refers to data information that exists in every intersection between people and media objects online (Skågeby, 2009), is similar to an actual gift in the aspect of helping strengthen social bonds (Skågeby, 2010). Examples that Skågeby (2009, 2010) gave for social metadata included photo comments and wall comments posted on a friend's social media page. Moreover, “liking” and the accompanying “Like” button on SNSs such as Facebook can be regarded as social metadata because it is essentially a shortcut to commenting, replacing short affective comments such as “Awesome” and “Congrats” (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). Therefore, it is logical to argue that giving and receiving “likes” on Facebook is conceptually a form of online gift exchange behavior.

### 2.2. Impression management, gift giving, personality traits, and demographics

Gift giving, whether online or offline, is a way through which people manage their impressions in the eyes of others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Segev et al., 2013). Previous studies have found that individual differences, especially personality characteristics, can impact how people engage in impression management (Leary, 1996; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011) and gift giving behavior (Jonason, Tost, & Koenig, 2012; Segev et al., 2013). Specifically, several personality traits that are associated with offline gift giving and impression management have been identified, including self-esteem (Segev et al., 2012), empathy (Schlenker & Britt, 1999), interpersonal generosity (Smith & Hill, 2009), and public self-consciousness (Segev et al., 2013).

Although some studies argued that the Internet facilitates “true self” expressions (that people show a different self-identity compared to their offline image), such expressions tend to occur mostly in anonymous online settings (McKenna, 2007). When it comes to online interactions with people one already knows in the real world, there is no significant difference between one's offline and online personalities (Marriott & Buchanan, 2014; McKenna, Buffardi, & Seidman, 2005). Since this study focuses on the “liking” behavior between Facebook users and their friends (a non-anonymous context), personality traits that impact people's offline gifting behavior and impression management are expected to be associated with their online gifting behavior in the forms of giving and receiving “likes” as well. In addition to personality traits, some studies also tapped into the association between demographics and impression management online (e.g., Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, & Kruck, 2012; Rose et al., 2012). It was found that certain demographics such as gender, age, and education were

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