



Can sharing affect liking? Online taste performances, feedback, and subsequent media preferences



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ABSTRACT

Web users share media content with each other in order to express tastes and manage impressions. This study examines this growing intersection between mass media use and computer-mediated communication. The consequences of these online taste performances for an individual's subsequent media preferences and media consumption were unknown. The identity shift framework is applied to explain how the display of tastes can alter later preferences. Specifically, an experiment tested for changes in attitudes toward media content after computer-mediated sharing, to examine how attitudes might change as a result of impression management. Taste performances were expected to result in identity shift due to mechanisms of publicness and feedback. A 2×3 (publicness \times feedback) between-subjects experiment tested these predictions. Participants evaluated and shared artistic photographs. Public sharing led to stronger attitudes among individuals who frequently displayed their tastes online but to weaker attitudes among individuals who rarely shared. Negative feedback consistently weakened attitudes toward shared photos, an effect that persisted for a week. Positive feedback yielded a sleeper effect on the appeal of alternative photos. The results have implications for creators, distributors, and marketers of media content, as well as for social media platforms where media content is shared.

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1. Introduction

People have long shared their media preferences with others. Books and audiovisual recordings are passed around among friends, while television, movies, music, and video games are often consumed in conjunction with others such as family and friends (McDonald, 2009). Media content provides a frequent source of conversation around the proverbial water cooler and elsewhere in everyday life (Atkin, 1972; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Rubin, 2009), and individuals also recommend media titles to each other. The Internet gives media sharing new facility. Users share hyperlinks and content along with their affection for all kinds of media content via email, blogs, social networking sites, and other platforms, often as part of online impression management (Good, 2012; Liu, 2007). Two-fifths (41%) of U.S. adult Internet users repost photos or videos on sites like Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr (compare to 46% who post their own photos or videos; Rainie, Brenner, & Purcell, 2012).

This study examines one consequence of online media sharing: how online expressions of media preferences (i.e., *tastes*) influence later media preferences. Brands of all kinds, especially those who produce or publish media content, seek to capitalize on consumers' online preference expressions to build word-of-mouth and loyalty. Yet it is unclear whether these online taste performances (Liu, 2007) maintain or strengthen attitudes toward media content. Drawing from identity shift theory (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008), we test the effects of public sharing and feedback on attitudes toward media. Demonstrating that taste performances, which may be enacted to adhere to group norms or earn social prestige (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Good, 2012; Liu, 2007), influence later personal preferences will demonstrate a psychological effect of the taste performances that are prevalent in computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments. Media preferences also provide a unique test of identity shift predictions, as media consumption is closely connected to the self-concept (Babrow, 1989) and social categories (Bourdieu, 1979/1984) and reinforces existing social identities (Slater, 2007).

The present research uniquely applies the identity shift framework to address the open question of how sharing of media content in online taste performances may influence subsequent media preferences. It expands research on computer-mediated identity shift by testing a novel aspect of self-presentation (the

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display of cultural capital through taste; Bourdieu, 1979/1984), by testing the differential effects of positive and negative feedback, and by examining identity shift effects over time (one week). It provides new insights into how the intersection of mass media and online social networking allows people to display their media tastes for impression management purposes, and what the consequences are for media preferences and consumption.

1.1. Identity shift

Changes in the self-concept as a result of computer-mediated self-presentation constitute the identity shift process (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008). Identity shift research builds upon theories of cognitive dissonance, impression management, and self-concept (Brehm, 1956; Tice, 1992). Its origins lie in the free-choice paradigm in cognitive dissonance research, which shows that post-decision, a freely chosen option becomes more attractive than alternatives (Brehm, 1956). When an individual makes a choice from among several appealing options, such as selecting a consumer good, there may be discomfort in having freely rejected rewarding alternatives. To avoid this dissonance and achieve cognitive consistency, one's attitude toward the chosen option will become more positive, and attitudes toward alternatives more negative, a "spreading of alternatives." This commitment to choice is especially strong when a decision is public (Cohen, Brehm, & Latané, 1959).

Tice (1992) used this body of work to explain how self-presentation alters the self-concept. She drew a connection between public commitment and self-presentation phenomena to explain how self-concepts change over time, demonstrating that individuals internalize their own strategic self-presentation behavior (Tice, 1992). People come to privately adopt their public personas: "an individual may be taken in by his [sic] own act" (Goffman, 1959, p. 19). Three components of a public situation contribute to self-change: a high degree of choice in behavior; self-presentation explicitly tied to one's identity; and an expectation of future interactions with the audience (Tice, 1992). These conditions are generally quite prevalent in social networking sites (SNSs), blogs, and related platforms; in this context, the process described by Tice has been further specified, and termed *identity shift* (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008).

In CMC settings, public performance of a trait (e.g., acting as if one was highly extroverted; Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Walther et al., 2011) or advocacy of a position (Walther, Van Der Heide, Tong, Carr, & Atkin, 2010b) can lead to internalization of the trait or to intrapersonal persuasion regarding the position. Beyond the occurrence of freely chosen, identity-relevant behavior seen by persistent audiences, CMC may augment the process of self-concept change in a number of ways (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008). Public performance online can involve large, generalized audiences drawn from different contexts (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), often persists in its online presence (Herring, 1999), and allows strategic self-presentation (Walther, 1996, 2007) which may involve new or "previously unexpressed" elements of the self (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008, p. 168).

Gonzales and Hancock (2008) demonstrated identity shift in CMC by asking participants to answer questions about themselves in an either extroverted or introverted manner, in either a public situation (writing on a blog) or a private situation (writing in a word processor). Afterward, among those assigned to the public conditions, participants instructed to self-present as extroverted rated themselves as significantly more extroverted than those instructed to self-present as introverted. In contrast, participants who answered questions in the private condition showed no differences in self-ratings, regardless of their self-presentation. Within CMC, a relatively public setting fosters internalization of impression management behavior.

In another study, a comparison of CMC and face-to-face (FtF) communication situations found that public commitment to a persuasive argument led to an effect of self-influence only in the CMC setting (Van Der Heide, Dickinson, Schumaker, & DeAndrea, 2013). This was attributed to the inclusion of affective and strategic content that CMC interactions often employ to compensate for the absence of FtF nonverbals. Furthermore, Van Der Heide et al. (2013) demonstrated the social nature of the CMC public commitment effect by identifying dissonance, rather than self-perception (Bem, 1967), as the mechanism for self-influence. This is consistent with the requirement of public commitment for identity shift.

In summary, public (as opposed to private) commitment to decisions and behavior influences subsequent attitudes and self-conceptions, and this phenomenon is especially likely in CMC, where selective self-presentation to mediated audiences activates hyperpersonal processes that strengthen interpersonal relations (Walther, 1996). However, tests of identity shift have relied on asking participants to manage the extroversion-introversion dimension personality (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Walther et al., 2011). Similarly, Tice (1992) used extroversion and emotional stability to test the impact of public situations on self-concept. A public display of communication may be seen as an inherently extroverted act, presenting a possible confound. However, participants instructed to publicly act more introverted did experience identity shift toward introversion (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Tice, 1992; Walther et al., 2011). Nonetheless, it is vital to expand the facets of self-concept used to test identity shift. Taste, preferences for media and other cultural goods, provides an ideal aspect of identity distinct from personality. Moreover, the consequences of taste performances (displaying cultural consumption as a form of self-presentation; Liu, 2007) for an individual's subsequent tastes are unknown, although taste performances are a vital part of self-presentation both online (Good, 2012; Liu, 2007) and off (Bourdieu, 1979/1984) and as such have the potential to produce self-concept change.

H1. Sharing media content in a public online setting will increase liking of that content more than sharing media content in a private online setting.

1.2. Feedback

Along with selective self-presentation, feedback is critical to hyperpersonal interactions and effects (Walther, 1996). The hyperpersonal model describes the process by which computer-mediated communication can produce very intense relationships or interpersonal influence despite occurring through channels with limited bandwidth (e.g., online text). A recent study replicated findings by Gonzales and Hancock and extended the identity shift model by including feedback regarding self-presentation (Walther et al., 2011). Feedback was provided in the public condition through a manipulated blog comment, or in the private condition through a manipulated linguistic analysis. The presence of positive feedback increased the effect of public commitment, compared to no feedback. Self-concept changed in response to one's own digital self-presentation, and also due to reinforcing feedback.

Building on that design, Kim, Fesenmaier, and Johnson (2013) examined the interaction of feedback with the use of either a public channel (social media) or a private channel (instant messaging) on positive and negative affect. Participants imagined a hypothetical experience involving tourism at a ski resort. They then viewed an instance of sharing regarding the tourism (a photo and description) via either social media or instant message, coupled with feedback. The experimental design was extended by including negative feedback, versus positive or no feedback. The predicted interaction

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