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What Gets Shared, and Why? Interpersonal Communication and Word of Mouth

Jonah Berger

Marketing Department, The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA; email: jberger@wharton.upenn.edu

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Abstract

Interpersonal communication is an integral part of everyday life. People are constantly sharing thoughts, opinions, and information with others, both online and offline. Further, such social sharing has important implications for what people think, buy, and do. However, while it is clear that interpersonal communication is both frequent and important, research is only starting to understand what people share and why. This article reviews the literature on interpersonal communication and word of mouth, focusing on the drivers of social transmission and the implications for individuals and society at large. It discusses how factors like audiences, modalities (e.g., speaking or writing), channels (e.g., email or text), and devices (e.g., phone or PC) moderate what gets shared, and it outlines areas that deserve further attention. Such areas include the diffusion of false information, conversations and conversational dynamics, and how automated textual analysis can be used to shed light on a range of interesting questions.

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INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication is an integral part of everyday life. People share thoughts and opinions, forward news articles and rumors, and pass along other content they find interesting or relevant. Consumers talk about products they love, services they hate, and experiences they're looking forward to, and employees share information, relate gossip, and pass along advice. Indeed, research suggests that the average person spends 50–80% of their day engaged in some form of interpersonal communication (Klemmer & Snyder 1972).

Technological shifts have made such sharing even faster and easier. Rather than talking to a neighbor over a back fence, or calling a friend to catch up, thanks to the Internet, social media, and smartphones, people can now quickly and easily share things with hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people. There are billions of online reviews, for example, and over 20 billion texts are sent each day (Giacomini 2021).

Such social sharing has a huge impact. People tend to follow what others say and do (Cialdini & Goldstein 2004, Dichter 1966). Online reviews, for example, drive purchasing decisions (see Babic Rosario et al. 2016 for a review), offline word of mouth boosts sales (Godes & Mayzlin 2009),

and communication between physicians speeds the adoption and diffusion of new pharmaceutical drugs (Iyengar et al. 2010).

However, while it is clear that interpersonal communication is both frequent and important, research has barely begun to identify what people talk about and share, why, and the consequences for attitudes, judgments, decision making, and action.

This article reviews the literature on interpersonal communication, word of mouth, and information transmission, focusing on the drivers of social transmission and the implications for individuals and society at large. First, we review the literature on what people share and why, outlining the social, cognitive, and motivational factors that underlie social transmission.¹ Second, we examine how factors like the communication audience, modality (e.g., speaking or writing), channel (e.g., email or text), and communication device (e.g., phone or PC) moderate what gets shared. Finally, we outline areas that deserve further attention, including the diffusion of false information, conversations and conversational dynamics, and how automated textual analysis can be used to shed light on a range of interesting questions.

While our goal is to be comprehensive, given the amount and breadth of research in this space across disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, marketing, and management), it is impossible to cover every single article. Consequently, we focus on some of the main themes and areas of research, providing a broad sense of research in this space.

WHAT GETS SHARED AND WHY

Some of the key social, cognitive, or motivational factors driving sharing include (a) impression management, (b) accessibility, (c) emotion regulation, (d) information acquisition, (e) social bonding, and (f) persuasion. We discuss these factors below, indicating how each of them, in turn, shapes the types of things that get talked about and shared.

Impression Management

One driver of what people talk about and share is impression management. People care about how others perceive them (Goffman 1959, Leary & Kowalski 1990) and make choices that allow them to communicate desired identities and to avoid communicating undesired ones (Belk 1988; Berger & Heath 2007, 2008; Levy 1959). People might buy a certain car, for example, to seem high status, support certain political issues based on the parties they are associated with (Cohen 2003), or avoid adopting certain products because of the other people who buy them (Berger & Heath 2007, 2008; Berger & Ward 2010).

Beyond what people drive or what they wear, though, what they talk about and share also shapes how they are perceived. The simplest way impression management shapes word of mouth is through self-enhancement. People want to feel good about themselves and maintain positive self-esteem. Further, they want to gain social acceptance (Chen 2017) and be perceived positively by others. Consequently, people tend to talk about and share things that make them look good rather than bad, and the better something makes people look, the more likely they are to share it (Berger 2013, 2014; Chung & Darke 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004).

Beyond generally looking good, though, people also want to communicate specific identities. If someone regularly posts about hot, new restaurants, others may assume they are a foodie. Similarly,

¹In many cases the psychological drivers behind sharing any one piece of content are multiply determined. For example, someone may talk about the dinner they ate last night because it makes them look good, because it is top of mind, or because of the emotions they have associated with it.

if someone always knows the scoop on the newest technology goods, people will assume they know a lot about that. Consequently, individuals may talk about and share things not only to self-enhance but also to signal specific desired characteristics, knowledge, or expertise (Packard & Wooten 2013).

Note that while impression management can certainly be social in nature, this motive may also be driven by the desire to see oneself in a particular light. Someone may share something positive, for example, because they want to see themselves as a positive person or talk about new restaurants because they want to feel like they are a foodie.

How Impression Management Shapes What Gets Shared

The desire to look good and signal particular characteristics has a variety of implications for what people talk about and share. Specifically, it shapes the sharing of things that are engaging, scarce, exclusive, high-status, useful, or self-concept-relevant; the sharing of things that facilitate social interaction; and the valence of discussion.

Engaging things. Impression management leads people to share things that are more engaging (i.e., interesting, funny, surprising, or extreme) or novel. Not only are such things entertaining and interesting for the recipients but also they should make the sharer seem more interesting, funny, knowledgeable, or in-the-know, all of which should foster desired impressions.

Consistent with this notion, a great deal of research finds that engaging and novel things are more likely to be shared. Work on the transmission of news articles, for example, finds that more interesting or surprising articles are more likely to make the *New York Times* most emailed list (Berger & Milkman 2012). Similarly, people report greater willingness to share more interesting or surprising urban legends (Heath et al. 2001), and moderate controversy boosts word of mouth because it makes conversation more interesting (Chen & Berger 2013). Further, research on consumer behavior finds that interesting products often get talked about more (Berger & Iyengar 2013, Berger & Schwartz 2011), consumers report being more likely to share word of mouth about more original products (Moldovan et al. 2011), and novelty plays a role in the diffusion of false news (Vosoughi et al. 2018).

Work on content extremity is also consistent with this notion. Compared to regular, more normative stories (e.g., Tim caught a 10-pound fish or went on a 5-mile hike), people are more likely to pass on extreme narratives (e.g., Tim caught a 200-pound fish or went on a 50-mile hike) (Heath & DeVoe 2005), in part because they are more interesting. Impression management concerns also lead people to change the stories they tell to make them more engaging. Over 50% of stories are distorted in one way or another (Marsh & Tversky 2004), and entertainment motives lead people to exaggerate and make stories more extreme (Burrus et al. 2006).

Scarce, exclusive, or high-status things. Beyond engaging content, impression management also leads people to talk about things that signal status. Talking about hidden bars, limited edition products, or hot new technologies shows knowledge and gives sharers social currency or status in the eyes of others (Berger 2013, Goor et al. 2020). Status is only good if other people know that you have it, though, so people are more likely to talk about things that give them status as a way to claim this social currency.

Talking about flying business class, owning a Porsche, or having an au pair, for example, should make sharers seem wealthy and high status. Consistent with this notion, there is some evidence that premium brands are talked about more (Lovett et al. 2013). Similarly, talking about owning a limited-edition pair of sneakers, getting access to an invite-only app, or having other scarce or exclusive things should make people seem wealthy or high status. Information can also connote

status, and people may share knowledge to show they are in-the-know (Ritson & Elliott 1999). Being one of the first people to post about a new music artist or report on a new restaurant opening, or even being the first to comment on a YouTube video, lets people show others that they are ahead of the curve. Along these lines, impression management may also lead people to talk about things that are special or unique. Talking about a special vacation, a customized item, or a distinctive experience should make people seem more unique and differentiated from others.

However, while one might assume that people with higher needs for uniqueness might be more likely to talk about unique things, reality is more complex. While talking about unique things does signal uniqueness, it can also encourage others to adopt those things, which makes them less unique. Consequently, people with high needs for uniqueness are less likely to share things in ways that make them accessible to others. Individuals with high need for uniqueness are less willing to generate positive word of mouth for things they own that are consumed publicly (Cheema & Kaikati 2010), and early adopters with high needs for uniqueness often “share and scare,” sharing favorable word of mouth while simultaneously mentioning how complex something is to use (Moldovan et al. 2015).

Useful things. Impression management also encourages people to share useful information (e.g., discounts, advice, or better-living tips) because it makes sharers seem knowledgeable and helpful. Information about the best sunscreens, for example, tips to save on car insurance, or suggestions about ways to reduce stress help others save money and time and help them live happier and healthier lives.

Along these lines, work on rumors, folk tales, and urban legends has long argued that people share not only to entertain, but “to convey true, worthwhile and relevant information” (Brunvand 1981, p. 11; see also Allport & Postman 1947, Rosnow 1980). When vaccines were tough to come by during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, people shared rumors about where shots were available, which helped others gain access.

Similarly, empirical work demonstrates that usefulness increases sharing. Research on the virality of *New York Times* articles (Berger & Milkman 2012), the diffusion of urban legends (Heath et al. 2001), and the sharing of marketing messages (Chiu et al. 2007) finds that more useful content is more likely to be shared. Restaurant reviews, for example, or travel tips are particularly likely to make the *New York Times* most emailed list. The notion of usefulness may also help explain why higher-quality brands are more likely to be discussed (Lovett et al. 2013).

Self-concept-relevant things. Beyond sharing things that make them look generally good, impression management also encourages sharing things that construct and communicate desired identities. Someone who wants to seem like a foodie, for example, may talk more about new restaurants, while someone who wants to seem like an athlete may talk a lot about sports gear or races they run.

A great deal of research (e.g., Belk 1988; Berger & Heath 2007, 2008; Shavitt 1990) demonstrates that certain domains of life (e.g., cars, clothes, music, and hairstyles) are more symbolic of identity than others (e.g., laundry detergent or Internet service providers). Consequently, choices and attitudes in these symbolic domains are more often used as markers or signals of identity. People tend to infer more about who someone is from their car choice, for example, than from where they get their Internet service. That said, there are also individual differences in identity relevance. While most people do not see their Internet service provider as a signal of who they are, gamers, or people who care a lot about technology, may find it more self-relevant.

Such variations in self-concept relevance, in turn, should impact what people talk about and share. People tend to talk more about symbolic products than about more utilitarian ones (Chung & Darke 2006), for example, and the bigger the difference between someone’s actual and ideal

knowledge in a particular domain, the more likely they are to talk about it (Packard & Wooten 2013). This suggests that people talk not only to signal who they are, or how they see themselves, but also who they would like to be (i.e., ideal selves or aspiration groups).

Things that facilitate social interactions. Given that impression management is inherently social, looking good isn't just about what one shares but also about how that interacts with whom (i.e., the audience) they are sharing with. Talking about an expensive ski vacation could make sharers look good, for example, but if their conversation partner does not care about skiing, or finds the topic boring, it will not have as positive an impact. Consequently, what people share to look good also depends on the audience.

One place this shows up is in talking about things that are common ground or that sharers have in common with others (Clark 1996, Grice 1989) (see the section titled Social Bonding for a more in-depth discussion). A ski vacation, for example, would be common ground if the audience find that topic of interest but not if they don't. Talking about things that are common ground should lead the conversation to go more smoothly, make audiences think sharers are more similar to them, and lead to more positive social inferences about sharers as a result.

Beyond what people talk about, or the content of their communication, people also infer things about others based on the way they talk about those things, or their conversational style. How quickly someone talks, for example, or how long they take to respond, can both communicate things about the communicator (Loewenstein et al. 2005, Tannen 2005). If someone takes too long to respond to what someone else says, for example, others may infer that they are not a very good conversationalist or do not have very much to say (Sacks et al. 1974). Indeed, recent research on response time finds that faster response time in conversations can signal social connection (Templeton et al. 2022).

Consequently, conversation partners often have a motive to fill conversational space—to talk about anything, even if it is not the most exciting, rather than sitting in silence.

Positive or negative things. Impression management should also influence the valence of what gets discussed, or whether people talk about positive things (e.g., getting a good grade on a test) or negative ones (e.g., failing a test).

Some work suggests that talking about positive things should be more likely to generate favorable impressions. Talking about positive experiences can suggest sharers have expertise or make good choices (e.g., the movie I picked was good; Wojnicki & Godes 2011). Similarly, most people would prefer positive to negative news and prefer interacting with positive others (Bell 1978, Kamins et al. 1997), so people may talk about positive things to avoid seeming like a negative person or a “Debbie Downer.” Consistent with this notion, people are reluctant to share negative news (see Tesser & Rosen 1975 for a review), and more positive articles are more likely to make the *New York Times*' most emailed list (Berger & Milkman 2012). One reason may be that sharing is a reflection of self, so people assume that sharing positive things will make them look better than negative ones. Impression management may also help explain why positive reviews greatly outnumber negative ones (Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006).

Other work, however, suggests that talking about negative things can sometimes facilitate desired impressions. People were seen as more competent and intelligent, for example, when they wrote negative (rather than positive) reviews (Amabile 1983). Along these lines, one could argue that being critical showcases someone has enough expertise in a domain to parse small differences.

One way to integrate these seemingly opposing findings might be to consider whether the thing being discussed signals something about the communicator. When someone talks about a movie they picked, for example, whether it is good or bad reflects back on them. If it was great, it makes them look knowledgeable, but if it was terrible, it reflects badly on their expertise. Consequently,

when talking about something they selected, people may tend to talk more about positive things rather than negative ones to show that they make good choices.

When talking about things they are less personally invested in, however, or had nothing to do with choosing, whether that thing is good or bad signals less about the sharer. Consequently, people may be more willing to talk negatively to show they have discriminating taste. Consistent with this, research finds that whether people are talking about themselves versus others moderates the valence of word of mouth (De Angelis et al. 2012). People generate positive word of mouth when talking about their own experiences, for example (because it makes them look good), but share negative word of mouth when talking about others' experiences (because it makes them look better by comparison).² This may also explain why people are especially likely to share moral outrage on social media (Brady et al. 2017).

Accessibility

Another factor that shapes what people talk about and share is accessibility. Accessibility refers to how easily things can be retrieved from memory (Higgins & King 1981, Wyer & Srull 1981). Recent experiences or stimuli tend to be more accessible, or more easily retrieved; things become less top of mind as more time passes. If someone just ate dinner, for example, what they ate, or whom they ate with, is probably relatively accessible. What they ate last week, though, is probably less top of mind (Higgins et al. 1977).

How Accessibility Shapes What Gets Shared

Accessibility impacts sharing in several ways. Specifically, it should encourage the sharing of things that are recent, frequent, triggered by the environment, or publicly visible.

Recent. People may tend to talk about things that happened recently, for example, because those things are top of mind. Indeed, whether looking at what people share on social media or at what they talk about offline, over 40% of what is discussed are things happening right now (Weingarten & Berger 2024). Another 25–35% are things that either just happened or are about to happen (i.e., less than a day away).³

Frequent. In addition to recency, frequency also plays a role. Stimuli that are encountered more frequently should tend to be more chronically accessible and thus more likely to be discussed (Berger & Schwartz 2011). Indeed, beyond impression management, one reason people may be more likely to talk about self-relevant things is that they think about them more often.

Primed. Beyond recency and frequency, stimuli in the environment can act as cues or triggers, activating conceptually related memories and making them more accessible (Berger & Heath 2005, Collins & Loftus 1975). Orange-related products are more top of mind around Halloween

²Note that impression management may also lead incidental arousal to encourage sharing. Incidental arousal (e.g., running in place) can boost the sharing of even unrelated content (Berger 2011). Similarly, work on rumor transmission suggests that rumors flourish in times of crisis, conflict, and catastrophe (e.g., natural disasters), due to the generalized arousal those situations evoke (Koenig 1985). One potential reason may be self-enhancement. If people misattribute a general feeling of arousal to content they are considering sharing, they may come to infer that this content is more interesting, entertaining, or engaging, which may increase transmission.

³Accessibility may also explain why people tend to talk about more temporally distant things when talking about the future (Weingarten & Berger 2024). While temporally near things tend to be more accessible, goals and plans are more likely to remain active when they are in the future, which shapes what gets discussed.

(Berger & Fitzsimons 2008), for example, and if someone says “peanut butter and . . .” it might make others think of “jelly” (at least in cultures where peanut butter and jelly is a common type of sandwich).

Consequently, products, services, and ideas that are cued or triggered more frequently by the surrounding environment are more likely to be discussed (Berger & Schwartz 2011). Discussions about coffee, for example, are often driven by related cues (e.g., talking about food or seeing an advertisement). Similarly, referrals often occur when related topics are being discussed (Brown & Reingen 1987). Accessibility also helps explain why things that are advertised more tend to receive more discussion (Onishi & Manchanda 2012). More frequent advertising, or any types of reminders, should make things more top of mind and thus more likely to be talked about.

Publicly visible. Accessibility may also explain why things that are publicly visible (i.e., easy to see) are talked about more (Berger & Schwartz 2011, Lovett et al. 2013). It is relatively easy to see what shirt someone is wearing, but it is harder to observe their socks. Similarly, someone’s phone is relatively public, but their political views are harder to observe. Increased visibility should make products and ideas more accessible, which in turn should make them more likely to be discussed.

Emotion Regulation

Another key driver of what gets talked about and shared is emotion regulation (Gross 1998, 2008). External factors (e.g., a team losing or fighting with a spouse) can impact the emotions people experience, and emotion regulation describes the processes through which people manage that emotional experience. If one’s favorite team loses, for example, they may try to reduce their frustration by thinking about how things will be better next season.

While some approaches consider the self in isolation (e.g., Park & Folkman 1997), other approaches note that others aid coping (Monnier et al. 1998). These perspectives highlight that the social sharing of emotion (see Rimé 2009 for a review) provides an important channel for regulation. If a team just lost, for example, calling a friend to complain and commiserate may help one feel better.

Talking and sharing with others should help people manage their emotions in various ways, including by (a) generating social support, (b) venting, (c) facilitating sense making, (d) reducing dissonance, (e) taking vengeance, and (f) encouraging rehearsal. I review each component individually and then discuss how they affect what people share.

First, sharing should help generate social support. Talking to others can provide comfort and consolation (Rimé 2007, 2009), which may help buffer unpleasant feelings arising from negative emotional experiences. Schachter (1959), for example, found that people who were anxious about receiving an electric shock preferred to wait with others, potentially because they provided emotional support. Similarly, more recent work finds that sharing with others after a negative emotional experience can boost well-being because it increases feelings of social support (Buechel & Berger 2012).

Second, sharing facilitates emotion regulation by allowing people to vent (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Sundaram et al. 1998; but see Rimé 2009). Teams lose, efforts fail, and work can be frustrating: Talking with others can help people deal with such negative experiences, providing catharsis that can decrease their emotional impact (Pennebaker 1999, Pennebaker et al. 2001). Angry (Wetzer et al. 2007) or dissatisfied (Anderson 1998) customers share word of mouth to vent, for example; most people believe that sharing emotional experiences will provide relief (Zech 1999); and one reason people share negative personal experiences is the desire for catharsis (Alicke et al. 1992).

Third, sharing should facilitate sense making, or help people make sense of their emotional experiences (Rimé 2009). Emotional reactions are not always straightforward. Even if someone who gets fired clearly feels bad, they may not be sure whether that negative feeling is anger, sadness, anxiety, or a mix. Alternatively, someone may feel an emotion like anxiety without being sure why. Interpersonal communication can help resolve such uncertainty (Rimé et al. 1991, Rosnow 1980). Explaining how one feels requires clear and thoughtful articulation, which can generate cognitive reappraisal and sense making (i.e., cognitive emotion regulation; Gross & John 2003). This, in turn, can encourage recovery and long-term well-being (Pennebaker et al. 2001).

Fourth, interpersonal communication can reduce dissonance. Sharing may help people cope with experiences that challenge their worldview (Festinger et al. 1956) or may just confirm their own judgment (Dichter 1966). Decision-makers are often uncertain about whether they made the right choice, so talking to others can reduce feelings of doubt (Engel et al. 1993).

Fifth, interpersonal communication can allow people to take vengeance and punish others for their negative experiences (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Richins 1983, Sundaram et al. 1998). Someone who has a terrible hotel experience, for example, may post a scathing review in the hopes that it will dissuade others from staying there. Indeed, frustrated, angry, or otherwise dissatisfied customers are more likely to share negative word of mouth to take revenge (Anderson 1998).

While most of the aspects discussed above focus on negative emotional experiences, note that sharing may also allow people to relive and rehearse positive experiences (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Rimé 2009). Word of mouth, for example, can be seen as “verbal consumption,” allowing sharers to “relive the pleasure the speaker has obtained” (Dichter 1966, p. 149). Talking about an amazing Parisian vacation, or a relaxing massage, should allow people to ruminate on and savor some of the pleasurable feelings they had during those experiences. Indeed, communicating about positive events to others enhanced positive affect, even above and beyond the affect associated with the experiences itself (Gable et al. 2004).

How Emotion Regulation Shapes What Gets Shared

Taken together, these underlying drivers have important implications for the type of things that get shared. Specifically, they should encourage the sharing of more emotional things, highly positive or negative things, things that evoke arousal, and things that evoke specific emotions.

Emotionality. More emotional things are more likely to be talked about and shared. The large literature on the social sharing of emotion (see Rimé 2009 for a review), for example, argues that people share up to 90% of their emotional experiences with others (Rimé et al. 1992). Experimental evidence is also consistent with this perspective. News is more likely to be shared, for example, and movies are more likely to be talked about, if they are higher in emotional intensity (Berger & Milkman 2012, Luminet et al. 2000). Similarly, people are more willing to share more emotional anecdotes (Peters et al. 2009); forward emails with higher hedonic value (Chiu et al. 2007); and retell urban legends that evoke greater disgust, interest, surprise, joy, or contempt (Heath et al. 2001). Customers who feel more strongly (i.e., are either highly satisfied or highly dissatisfied) are also more likely to share via word of mouth (Anderson 1998, Richins 1983).⁴

⁴It is worth noting that culture plays an important role in emotional expression. While European Americans value being excited, for example, East Asians tend to value being calm (see Tsai 2007 for a review). These differences also impact what people talk about and share. When talking about relationships, for instance, European American couples express high-arousal positive emotions more than Chinese Americans (Tsai et al. 2006). Thus, which emotions people feel comfortable talking about may vary cross-culturally.

Valence. Similar to impression management, emotion regulation also impacts the positivity or negativity of what gets shared. People often share negative things to help themselves feel better. Indeed, most of the ways emotional regulation shapes sharing focus on negative experiences (i.e., venting, social support, vengeance, dissonance reduction, and sense making; Berger 2014). Consequently, one could argue that emotion regulation encourages sharing of negative experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Voters might share an angry political rant, for example, or talk negatively about an opposing politician, to vent or reduce dissonance about that party being in power.

That said, emotion regulation may also encourage the sharing of positive things (e.g., Gable & Reis 2010). When something good happens, the first thing most people want to do is tell others. Getting promoted or winning an award is exciting, and sharing the news with others allows people to reconsume the positive affect.

Consequently, whether emotional regulation encourages positive or negative things to be talked about may depend on the reasons for sharing. Both highly positive and negative things may be more likely to be shared, and middling affective experiences (e.g., just slightly good or bad) may be the only ones that do not get a boost.

Other factors may also inhibit the sharing of negativity. As discussed in the section on impression management, people may avoid sharing negative things to avoid seeming like a negative person. Posting negative content can lead people to be liked less (Forest & Wood 2012), and sharing negative things can also be uncomfortable, which can decrease sharing (Chen & Berger 2013). Similarly, financially constrained consumers are less likely to talk about things they have bought because they believe it will remind them of their negative feelings about their limited financial situation (Paley et al. 2018).

Arousal. Emotionally arousing things are also more likely to be shared. Different specific emotions are associated with different levels of physiological arousal or activation (i.e., increased heart rate; Heilman 1997). Sadness and anxiety are both negative emotional states, for example, but while sadness is relatively low arousal, anxiety is associated with greater arousal or activation (Christie & Friedman 2004).

Arousal increases sharing (Berger 2011). News that evokes more high-arousal emotions (e.g., awe, anger, or anxiety) is more likely to be shared and go viral, while news that evokes more low-arousal emotions (e.g., sadness) is less likely to be shared (Berger & Milkman 2012). Indeed, one reason false news may be shared more than true news is that it tends to evoke more high-arousal emotions like surprise and disgust (Vosoughi et al. 2018), and one reason outgroup animosity may drive engagement on social media is because it evokes more anger (Rathje et al. 2021). Advertisements that elicit more emotional engagement (i.e., biometric responses like skin conductance), or high-arousal emotions like disgust, receive more buzz (McDuff & Berger 2021, Siefert et al. 2009), and future experiences tend to be more affectively arousing than equivalent past ones, which can encourage discussion (Weingarten & Berger 2017). Even incidental arousal (i.e., running in place) can be enough to boost the sharing of content (Berger 2011).

On the negative side, high-arousal emotions (e.g., anxiety or anger) should increase the need to vent, resolve the situations, or decrease arousal. On the positive side, high-arousal emotions (e.g., excitement or amusement) should increase desires for rehearsal, or maintaining the positive feelings. Indeed, Teeny et al. (2019) suggest that sharing is an arousal management strategy. They find that people engage in positive word of mouth to maintain or increase energetic arousal, while engaging in negative word of mouth to reduce or eliminate tense arousal.

Specific emotions. Beyond the degree to which they are associated with physiological arousal, other features of specific emotions may also impact sharing. People may be less likely to talk about things that evoke shame and guilt, for example, because it makes them look bad (Finkenauer &

Rime 1998). While increased emotion may often boost sharing, extremely strong emotions (e.g., high levels of fear) may decrease it if they shock people too much to act. Some work also suggests that contentious political content is more likely to be retweeted if they use moral emotional language (Brady et al. 2017).

Information Acquisition

Sharing is also driven by information acquisition. When trying to figure out what to buy, how to resolve a problem at the office, or how to solve a tough interpersonal dilemma, people often turn to others to gather information and insight.

Sometimes this occurs in the context of advice seeking (Dichter 1966, Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Rimé 2009): Where should I go on vacation? Should I take that new job? People often talk to peers to get assistance—for recommendations, suggestions about what to do, or even just an outside perspective (Fitzsimons & Lehmann 2004).

Consistent with this notion, some work argues that one of gossip's key functions is to help people learn (Baumeister et al. 2004). While one could collect information through trial and error (e.g., trying several vacation destinations) or observing what others do (e.g., social proof), gossip is another way to acquire relevant information quickly and easily (Dunbar 1996).

Talking to others also helps people resolve problems (Sundaram et al. 1998). Products break, services fall short, and interpersonal issues arise. By discussing these and other similar problems with others, people can get useful information that helps them find a solution. Talking about broken sunglasses, for example, can help people learn about a more durable brand. Indeed, people often talk to others to help them solve health problems, and online reviews often serve a similar function (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004).

How Information Acquisition Shapes What Gets Shared

Taken together, these underlying drivers have important implications for the type of things that get shared. Specifically, this motive encourages people to talk about decisions or situations where information is lacking.

In terms of decisions, people should be particularly likely to talk to others to acquire information when decisions are risky, important, complex, or uncertainty ridden. If someone is considering a completely new medication, for example, they may reach out to others who have used it to allay their concerns. Indeed, brands that involve more risk are talked about more (Lovett et al. 2013). Interpersonal communication can reduce risk perceptions, simplify complex ideas, and increase people's confidence that they are making the right decision (Engel et al. 1993, Hennig-Thurau & Walsh 2004).

The information environment itself should also shape when people talk to acquire information. If it is tough to find any information about a particular medication, for example, people will be more likely to reach out to others to find out more. Alternatively, if it is not clear whether available information is trustworthy (e.g., it came from the company or a biased source), people may also talk to peers.

Social Bonding

People also talk and share to generate and deepen social bonds (Berger 2014, Rimé 2009). Some work argues that language evolved to facilitate social grooming (Dunbar 1996). While apes might have bonded through picking nits out of each other's hair, language provides an easier way to stay connected and keep tabs on others. Whether or not this is why language originally evolved, talking and sharing helps bond people together. Humans have a fundamental desire for social relationships

(Baumeister & Leary 1995), and communication helps fill that need (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). It reinforces that we care about others and what is happening in their lives (Wetzer et al. 2007). Consequently, interpersonal communication can act like a “social glue” bringing people together and strengthening social ties. Indeed, one reason people engage in brand communities (e.g., the Swifties or the BeyHive) is to connect with like-minded others.

Along these lines, the notion of phatic communication is used to describe conversations whose function is to “create social rapport rather than to convey information” (Rettie 2009, p. 1135). Empirical work suggests that almost 6 out of 10 text messages are phatic in nature, noting that the sender is thinking of the recipient (Rettie 2009).

One way sharing facilitates social bonds is through reinforcing shared views. Just as consumption can delineate group membership and allow people to connect with similar others, so does interpersonal communication. Talking to a colleague about a team you both like, or a social issue you are aligned on, should reinforce that you have things in common. Talking about popular ads, for example, gives teens a type of social currency that allows them to fit in with their peers and show they are in-the-know (Ritson & Elliott 1999).

Another way sharing deepens social bonds is through reducing feelings of loneliness or social exclusion. Loneliness (i.e., the undesirable feeling of social isolation) and social exclusion (i.e., feeling ostracized or rejected) should increase the desire for social connection (Lakin et al. 2008), which should, in turn, encourage people to reach out and communicate with others. Boredom may have similar effects. While it is not the same as loneliness, and is not a social deficit per se, it may lead people to reach out to others for entertainment or to fill time.

How Social Bonding Shapes What Gets Shared

The drive to bond with others should lead people to talk about things that are common ground or more emotional.

Common ground. People often talk about the weather, their kids (if they are parents), or how teaching is going (if they are academics), not because these are the most interesting topics to talk about, but because they are common ground (Grice 1989), or things that others can weigh in on. Consistent with this notion, even controlling for actual performance, more familiar athletes are talked about more (Fast et al. 2009), and talking about such common ground makes people feel more socially connected (Clark & Kashima 2007).

Emotionality. The desire to connect should also lead emotional things to be shared. Given emotional contagion, sharing emotional content increases the chance others will feel similarly. Telling a funny story, for example, makes both the sharer and the audience laugh. This emotional similarity increases group cohesiveness (Barsade & Gibson 2007) and synchronizes attention, cognition, and behavior to coordinate action.

Social bonding may also encourage and result from the sharing of emotion. Sharing emotion bonds people together (Peters & Kashima 2007), but feeling high-arousal emotions may also increase social bonding needs (Chan & Berger 2013). Consequently, high-arousal emotions may increase the desire to connect, which, in turn, may encourage communication to satisfy that need.

Persuasion

A final driver of why people talk and share is to persuade. Parents talk about a particular sport to encourage their kids to play, and colleagues talk about certain strategies to get others on board. Indeed, people report using interpersonal communication to shape everything, from others’ health behaviors to their purchase decisions (Tucker & Mueller 2000).

How Persuasion Shapes What Gets Shared

Persuasion motives should encourage people to share more extreme content. Compared to more moderate information, extremely positive or negative information should be more likely to encourage people to take a desired action (Abelson 1995, Craig & Blankenship 2011).

Similarly, persuasion motives should also encourage the sharing of physiologically arousing (e.g., anger- or anxiety-inducing) content. Arousal is an excitatory state (Heilman 1997) that increases a broad range of actions, from helping (Gaertner & Dovidio 1977) to responding faster in negotiations. Given that “the primary role of autonomic changes that accompany emotion is to provide support for action” (Davidson 1993, p. 468), people may share arousing content to encourage others to take desired actions.

MODERATING ROLE OF THE COMMUNICATION AUDIENCE

Not surprisingly, whom people are talking to shapes what they talk about. People can communicate with friends, colleagues, neighbors, family members, acquaintances, and a variety of other audiences. Two key dimensions of communication audiences are (*a*) tie strength and (*b*) audience size.

Tie Strength

Research distinguishes between strong ties (i.e., people we know well, trust, and/or speak to often) and weak ties (i.e., acquaintances with whom we do not have as strong a connection) (Brown & Reingen 1987, Granovetter 1973). Close friends, family members, or colleagues would be considered strong ties, whereas someone we just met, or are nominally connected to online, would be considered a weak tie.

Tie strength impacts both the motivations to share and the type of content people pass on. Some research, for example, suggests that impression management concerns should be stronger with weaker ties. One’s weak ties usually do not know them very well, so it may be more important to present oneself positively because that interaction will have a stronger impact on social judgment. Consistent with this notion, compared to friends, people prefer sharing self-enhancing topics with strangers (Chen 2017), they are less willing to talk about controversial topics with acquaintances (Chen & Berger 2013), and word of mouth tends to be more positive with weaker ties (Dubois et al. 2016). People should be less likely to share embarrassing or potentially damaging things (e.g., cheating on a test) with weak ties for similar reasons.

That said, while the impact of any one interaction is larger for weak ties, impression management may also occur with stronger ties because communicators care more about how that audience perceive them. People also impression-manage with strong ties (Tesser & Paulhus 1983), and some work suggests that people are more likely to present themselves positively to neighbors (who should be closer ties) than to strangers (Argo et al. 2006). Expected future interaction may also play a role. While people may impression-manage with weak ties they expect to interact with in the future, this should be less important with weak ties one does not expect to see again.

Tie strength should also moderate emotional regulation’s role in sharing. Rather than just trying to self-enhance, for example, people share more emotionally connecting topics with friends to maintain existing ties (Chen 2017). One’s strong ties also know that person better, and thus they may be more useful for generating social support (when bad things happen) or celebrating (when good things occur). Sense making and dissonance reduction may also be better served by stronger ties. Consistent with this notion, some research suggests that people share emotional experiences with close others or people they know well (Brown & Reingen 1987, Heath et al. 2001, Rimé 2009).

While people may share negative rants online to vent or take vengeance, note that this may be less about tie strength and more about audience size. While online followings tend to be weaker ties, the larger number of people that can be reached allows communicators to encourage quick responses and feel like they are having more impact.

Audience Size

Audience size also shapes sharing. Sometimes people communicate with a small audience (e.g., just one friend), while other times they communicate with a larger one (e.g., a group of friends). The former can be described as narrowcasting, while the latter can be described as broadcasting. Similar to tie strength, audience size should impact why people share and what they end up sharing.

Impression management concerns have a larger impact on sharing when people communicate with larger groups (Barasch & Berger 2014). When sharing with just one other person, people tend to be more focused on their audience, which encourages sharing things that audience might find interesting or useful. When sharing with a large group, however, people's natural egocentrism encourages them to be focused on themselves, which makes them more likely to share things that make them look good (e.g., less negative content).

Audience size should moderate whether and how people share to regulate emotion. Having a larger audience, for example, may encourage people to share to take vengeance. Similarly, the undirected nature of broadcasting on social media (i.e., simultaneously reaching out to many people at once) may be particularly useful when people are looking for social support (Buechel & Berger 2012). Rather than feeling like they are bothering someone, people can use status updates or other broadcast-type social channels to share their message with many people at once. This decreases the weight put on any one connection and increases the number of responses received, increasing perceived social support.

MODERATING ROLE OF COMMUNICATION MEDIUMS

Beyond whom people communicate with, the mediums they communicate through also shape sharing. People communicate in various ways. They talk face-to-face or over the phone, write emails or send text messages, and communicate using smartphones, PCs, and a variety of other devices. More specifically, people always communicate via a modality (e.g., speaking or writing), through a channel (e.g., face-to-face, text, or email), and sometimes with the aid of a device (e.g., smartphone, computer, or smartwatch). Each of these mediums, in turn, can impact what people talk about and share (Oba & Berger 2023).

Communication Modality

Communication often involves speaking or writing. Speaking involves producing words through one's voice, while writing involves producing text. Someone can tell their friend about a great vacation using their voice (e.g., face-to-face or over the phone), for example, or they can write that information down (e.g., in an email or text).

Beyond being a means to communicate, however, communication modality also shapes what people share. Speaking tends to lead communicators to produce more personal, social, self-disclosing, and informal communication (Akinaso 1982, Shen & Sengupta 2018), for example, while writing leads to communication that is more formal, detached, and complex (Akinaso 1982, Horowitz & Newman 1964). Recent empirical work, for example, finds that writing reduces emotional expression because it involves more deliberation (Berger et al. 2022). Writing also leads people to talk about more interesting products and brands (Berger & Iyengar 2013).

These and other differences between speaking and writing are driven by differences in the processes by which these two types of content are produced, and by learned associations with

different modalities (Oba & Berger 2023). It takes longer to write something than to speak it (Akinnaso 1982), for example, and while it is easy to edit writing, it is tough to edit speech (unless one re-records a voicemail). These two factors give writers more time to construct and refine what to say, which can shape the content they produce. Similarly, while people often write to themselves, speech tends to be more social (Akinnaso 1982, Melumad 2023), and as a result, speaking puts communicators in a more interactive mindset, which encourages them to focus more on their audience.

Communication Device

The specific device communicators communicate through also shapes what they share (Oba & Berger 2023). Devices include things like smartphones, computers, tablets, and smartwatches, and they are the additional equipment through which communication is created or transmitted. Written communication always requires some sort of device, while speaking can involve a device (e.g., a phone) or not (i.e., face-to-face communication).

Early research in this space focused on how computers shape communication (e.g., Walther 1996), and more recent work has examined the effect of smartphones. Smartphones tend to encourage communication that is shorter, for example, less focused on specific details, more emotional, and more self-disclosing (Melumad et al. 2019), while personal computers tend to encourage communication that is more abstract, extreme, and reflective (Ransbotham et al. 2019).

These and other effects are driven by learned associations with the different devices and by how devices shape the process of content production (Oba & Berger 2023). While personal computers are often used for work (e.g., word processing), for example, smartphones are often used to connect with others and maintain social identities, so they have more social associations (Melumad & Pham 2020). These associations, in turn, shape communication. Similarly, smartphones' smaller screens and buttons make writing more effortful (Antoun et al. 2017), and smartphones' portable nature makes them more likely to be used in distracting contexts. Both aspects generally reduce the capacity for deliberation and, in turn, shape the nature of what communicators communicate.

Communication Channel

The specific channel communicators communicate through also shapes what they share. Communication channels (e.g., email, phone calls, and text) are the mediums through which content is sent to an audience. Some channels are linked to certain modalities (e.g., phone calls require speaking), while others occur across modalities and devices (e.g., one can voice-to-text or write emails, from either a smartphone or a PC).

Similar to modalities and devices, different communication channels have different effects (i.e., through their learned associations and the process of producing content through them). While texting is generally used in personal situations to communicate with stronger ties, for example, email is often used in work situations to communicate with weaker ones. As a result, communicators may deliberate more on what they send in an email, which shapes what gets shared.

Channels also vary in synchronicity, ephemerality, and social presence. When speaking face-to-face, for example, or over the phone, gaps between conversational turns tend to be relatively short. When using channels like email, however, gaps between turns tend to be much longer. This difference in synchronicity, in turn, gives communicators more time to construct and refine what to say (Berger & Iyengar 2013).

Channels can also make content more or less ephemeral (Barnea et al. 2023). When talking face-to-face or over Snapchat, for example, the communicated messages disappear as soon as they are delivered. In channels like emails or voice notes, in contrast, content is less ephemeral and can be repeatedly viewed. This, in turn, can shape the ability to deliberate on what was shared.

Finally, channel features also impact social presence (i.e., Short et al. 1976). When interacting face-to-face, communicators can see their audience, hear their voices, and read their body language, all of which should make the audience feel more present. This can be contrasted with phone calls (where the audience is restricted to a voice) or email (where cues to social presence are decreased even further). Decreased social presence should, in turn, make the audience less salient and thus decrease their impact on what is communicated.

These are only a few of the dimensions on which channels vary. Further, variation can even occur within the same broader channel. Sending a direct message on Facebook, for example, that only reaches a small number of people is different than posting a status update, which reaches a much larger audience. The latter can be described as undirected communication, and it is particularly valuable when people feel socially apprehensive (Buechel & Berger 2018). It allows them to simultaneously express themselves in front of a large audience without addressing anyone in particular, increasing the likelihood of potential response while also reducing concerns about bothering others.

AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While there has been increased interest in what people share and why, many interesting topics deserve further attention. These include (a) the sharing of false information, (b) conversational dynamics, and (c) the role of automated textual analysis.

Sharing False Information

The rise of digital sharing, social media, and fake news has drawn attention to why false information gets shared. Further, this question has clear implications for political discourse, the science of beliefs, and the role of science and truth in discourse more generally. Indeed, research on misinformation has explored a variety of factors associated with the sharing of false information such as the social media context, deliberation, and accuracy prompts (Bago et al. 2020, Ecker et al. 2022, Epstein et al. 2023, Lazer et al. 2018, Pennycook & Rand 2022).

That said, while aspects of these issues are certainly new, the sharing of false information is far from it. Decades of research on rumors, urban legends, and related phenomena (e.g., Allport & Postman 1947, Rosnow 1980, Rosnow & Fine 1976) have explored why people share false things. While not focused on digital sharing, this work has provided important insights that may be relevant for today's challenges.

One key question, then, is the degree to which sharing false things is unique. Are the drivers of why people share false things qualitatively different from the reason they share true things, for example, or do similar factors drive both? More emotional content, particularly content that evokes arousal, is more likely to be shared (Berger 2011, Berger & Milkman 2012). Given this, it is not completely surprising that highly shared false information often evokes high-arousal emotions (Vosoughi et al. 2018). Similarly, people often share things that make them look good or allow them to communicate desired identities. Consequently, it is not completely surprising that people often share false information that supports their political beliefs or allows them to signal things they care about.

Overall, future research might more directly examine whether previously identified drivers of sharing extend to false information or whether the drivers of sharing false information are unique.

Conversational Dynamics

Another area that deserves more attention is conversational dynamics. Most research on sharing has focused on sharing individual things: whether people share a certain piece of misinformation,

talk about a particular brand, or share a certain story. Though this work has provided important insights into why people share, sharing is often situated in larger conversations. Consequently, to truly understand why people share, it is important to understand the broader conversational dynamics in which sharing is situated.

Conversations are social interactions in which multiple individuals act in coordinated ways to reach a shared understanding (Clark & Schaefer 1989). These interactions involve sequential back-and-forth of utterances and responses (Reis & Patrick 1996), organized into individual speaker turns (Schegloff & Sacks 1973). People converse to seek and share information, manage impressions, and strengthen social bonds, among other reasons (e.g., Baumeister et al. 2004, Dunbar 1996).

Recent work has explored the consequences of conversation and misperceptions about them (e.g., Hirschi et al. 2023, Templeton et al. 2022), but there has been less attention to the nature of conversation itself. How do conversations start, and what types of things tend to be talked about first? How do conversations evolve, and how does what is being discussed at one point in time shape what is discussed next? What features lead discussion to last longer, and why? These are only a few examples of questions that deserve further attention.

One possibility is that people tend to start with more concrete topics and then move to more abstract ones. While it is hard to start a conversation with big, thorny, abstract ideas, discussing more specific examples of things that are happening may open up larger discussions about broader topics. Similarly, accessibility and relevance likely shape the evolution of conversation. Talking about one thing should make related topics and ideas more accessible, as well as more relevant to the conversation, and increase their probability of being talked about next.

The Role of Automated Textual Analysis

Beyond any specific research topic, automated textual analysis and natural language processing tools have made it easier to study a range of questions related to what gets shared and why. Shifts in technology have made it easier to capture the content of social sharing. Early work used tape recorders to naturally capture what people were saying (e.g., Mehl et al. 2001), but today, many interactions leave digital traces that can be used for further study. Social media posts and online conversations can be easily analyzed, and video calls can be recorded and automatically transcribed.

Further, the advent of new natural language processing tools has made it faster and easier to analyze large corpora of text (see Berger & Packard 2022, Berger et al. 2020a, Boyd & Pennebaker 2017, Boyd & Schwartz 2021 for recent reviews). Rather than relying on manual coding, which can be effortful, subjective, and difficult to scale, automated tools allow research to objectively (and quickly) extract a variety of features from language data. The Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count software (Boyd et al. 2022) is already quite well known among psychologists, but several other dictionaries exist that can help quantify various features (e.g., <https://www.lexicalsuite.com/>; see Berger et al. 2020b, Paetzold & Specia 2016), as can large language models such as ChatGPT.

Beyond such top-down approaches, more bottom up-approaches can also be helpful. Topic modeling (e.g., Blei et al. 2003), for example, extracts the main themes discussed, and embeddings (e.g., Mikolov et al. 2013) represent words, sentences, and even entire documents as points in a multidimensional space, providing a sense of semantic similarity, among other things.

These tools can make it easier to study social transmission. Automated textual analysis is particularly useful for analyzing field data. By measuring the potential drivers of sharing (e.g., the amount of emotion contained, or the arousal evoked in a social media post) and linking them to sharing, researchers can gain insight into what gets shared and why. These tools can also be used to analyze more traditional experiments. One can parse open-ended responses to measure

hypothesized mediators (e.g., Barasch & Berger 2014), dependent variables, or alternative explanations. Similarly, researchers studying conversations can extract features of what participants said and how they relate to conversation length (Boghrati & Berger 2023) and to what is said next.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, social sharing has been, and will continue to be, an integral part of being human. Changes in the devices used to share (e.g., smartphones) and the channels used to share through (e.g., social media) have made it faster and easier to quickly share things with larger, geographically dispersed audiences, but the fundamental motivations for sharing have remained similar. By better understanding what people share and why, we can shed light on interpersonal interactions, social transmission, and why things catch on more generally.

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