Mass media have long served as a source of cultural, entertainment, and informational messages that people readily share with each other (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). This interpersonal sharing of media content produces valuable social utility and cultural capital for individuals and social groups (Atkin, 1972; Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Rubin, 2009). Displaying one’s tastes in entertainment can earn social rewards by connecting to others with shared affinities (J. Lee & Choi, 2017) and by cultivating a self-image (Chan, Berger, & Van Boven, 2012). More recently, the redistribution and curation of media content through computer-mediated channels such as the social network site (SNS) has become a prevalent and influential practice within those services (Ellison & Boyd, 2013; Thorson & Wells, 2016) and a key part of media brands’ strategies for reaching target audiences with their content (Baticin & Appel, 2013; Bobkowski, 2015; Kudeshia, Sikdar, & Mittal, 2016; Oeldorff-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015; Oh, Bellur, & Sundar, in press). This intersection of mass media and interpersonal media (Walther, 2017; Walther et al., 2010) is the focus of the present study.

Sharing mass media content via interpersonal media channels is one instance of masspersonal communication, in which individuals “can use traditionally defined mass communication channels for interpersonal communication […] and traditional interpersonal channels for mass communication” (O’Sullivan & Carr, in press, p. 4). In particular, media sharing involves using mass media content such as film, television, music, news, or web pages to engage in interpersonal interactions, retransmitting (by embedding or discussing) this content among audiences of personal networks, smaller interpersonal groups, or specific individuals in order to facilitate shared experiences and engage in individual self-presentation. This media sharing may also entail the simultaneous use of mass and interpersonal media (O’Sullivan & Carr, in press).

Specifically, in the present study we consider how different motivations might lead to selective patterns of sharing media content in an online social network site (e.g., Facebook). Three psychological motives for the presenting the self-concept—portraying the actual self, the own-ideal self, or the other-ideal self—were tested as antecedent factors in sharing music and film characterized as guilty pleasures, prestigious titles, and popular titles. Additionally, we examined theoretically relevant moderating traits such as a need for uniqueness. In the following, we review the presentation of different selves on social media, the utility of media sharing in impression management, and the role of personality. Then, we present the results of an experiment that
tested our predictions by soliciting music and film to be shared in assigned situations, along with perceptions of those entertainment media.

1. Social media and the presentation of possible selves

One of the most studied aspects of computer-mediated communication, and social media in particular, is its ability to provide affordances for self-presentation, including the ability to selectively edit and cultivate one’s online persona and identity (Kramer & Winter 2008; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Walther, 2007). According to Whitty (2008), this process of online identity curation might also be seen as the result of an effort to present different possible selves: an actual self, inclusive of what is typically expressed to others; an ideal self, representing how the user—or others—would like for them to be seen; as well as an “ought-to” or simply ought self, embodying the qualities they believe one should possess (Whitty, 2008). An earlier articulation of this self-discrepancy theory, as introduced by Higgins (1987), distinguished between “own” selves and “other” selves, suggesting that for ideal and ought self-concepts both the individual’s beliefs as well as their peers’ beliefs about the ideal possible self play an important role. The question as to whether online media might be more suitable for the presentation of actual, rather than ideal selves, has been at the center of communication research for a few years (Michikyan, Subrahmanyan, & Dennis, 2014; Seidman, 2013), yet relatively little attention has been paid to the difference between own-ideal and other-ideal.

Earlier research has identified online media as a particularly suitable platform for the expression of actual selves (Ragh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; boyd, 2008; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002), highlighting how individual characteristics of users, such as personality traits (Michikyan et al., 2014) or specific social media usage motives (Tosun, 2012), can predict actual-self presentation. Dating sites and, more recently, dating apps have further enriched the body of research on self-presentation online, exploring more in depth the role of ideal selves (Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012) and taking more explicitly into account the role of others’ expectations on the type of information individual users share about themselves. While the possibility of a future encounter, in fact, represents an important drive towards presentation of the actual self (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006), the pressure to find a significant other might also push users towards depicting an ideal self which responds to their own idea of how they wish to be seen (own-ideal, cf. Ellison et al., 2012), or an ideal self that shows characteristics that respond to expectations from an audience they wish to attract (other-ideal, cf. Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014). In the words of Ellison and colleagues, “presenting one’s ideal self is one strategy for resolving pressures to be both honest and attractive” (Ellison et al., 2012, p. 48).

Social network sites like Facebook are not so much about finding new (romantic) relationships as they are about maintaining recent and older ones (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014). In this sense, SNS users hold incentives to balance—or cycle between—presenting actual, own-ideal, and other-ideal selves. More authentic (i.e., actual) self-presentation on Facebook is linked to more social connections and less stress (Grieve & Watkinson, 2016). Yet because the networks of users typically depict the different contexts they might encounter in their everyday lives, the strategies employed to manage their impressions will also be mindful of different audiences, whether real or perceived as such (Hogan, 2010). Multiple audiences and contexts can collapse into a univocal network of references, where self-presentations converge into a single online identity encompassing elements of each self (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Selective presentation of cues allows for motivated, situational impression management online (Walther, 2007) across social contexts (Beam, Child, Hutchens, & Hmielowski, in press; Marder, Joinson, & Shankar, 2012).

In addition to a motivation to be authentic and present a true self (e.g., Ellison et al., 2006; Tosun, 2012), other psychological motives can be relevant for self-presentation (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992), such as the presence of discrepancies between the actual self and desired selves, which produce motivations to regulate behavior. Higgins (1987) emphasized how individuals are “motivated to reach a condition where [their] self-concept matches [their] personally relevant style-guides” (p. 321). As such, any discrepancy between actual self and represented self might give rise to discomfort, and to a sense of inauthenticity. According to Higgins, a discrepancy between actual and own-ideal selves might manifest itself into an “absence of positive outcomes” (p. 322), i.e., the perception that the performed ideal characteristics might not be realistically met. A discrepancy between actual and other-ideal selves can instead give rise to feelings of shame, anxiety, or embarrassment, stemming from the distance between individuals’ actual identity and what they feel others would like them to be (Higgins, 1987; Moretti, Rein, & Wiebe, 1998). Overall, individuals perceive self-discrepancies as shortcomings, which can act as motivating forces for behavior. These psychological and mental salience, of these discrepancies depends on situational relevance and the frequency and recency of previous activation (Higgins, 1987). Thus, changes in personal performance or social situations can yield different motivational states, shaping self-presentation and conspicuous consumption (Litt, 2012; Peloza, White, & Shang, 2013). And, these self-concepts—the actual self, own-ideal self, and other-ideal self—can produce positive attitudes towards targets that are congruent with these conceptualizations (e.g., organizations; Nolan & Harold, 2010).

Recent evidence shows these self-discrepancy motives at work in SNS self-presentation. If engagement with a brand was visible to others (i.e., on Facebook) and the brand’s image was congruent with the other-ideal self, university students were more likely to engage than if the brand was ideal-incongruent or online engagement was not visible to others (Jeong & Lee, 2013). Facebook users report making decisions about liking brands and celebrities based on similar discrepancies of actual and other-ideal selves (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). Interview data illustrated that it was more common to share content that was consistent with an ideal self rather than the actual self, and that Facebook users distinguished between their own ideal ("who I could be") and a social ideal ("how I want to be perceived") when making decisions about online engagement with brands (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012, p. 400). T. Kim and Kim (2016) found that both actual-self congruence and own-ideal self congruence positively predicted brand interaction on Facebook, but found minimal support for influence from other-ideal self motives. So, given their demonstrated relevance for online self-presentation, we focus on these three motivations: presenting an actual self, presenting an own-ideal self, or presenting an other-ideal self.

Furthermore, the fact that users must summarize their identity into “reduced cues” infuses each of their messages with a self-disclosing power (Ellison et al., 2012). In this sense, any type of content shared online, from personal information to news, from political affiliations to user-generated media, can be employed to steer someone’s impression towards a specific self-presentation (Doster, 2013; Marder, Slade, Houghton, & Archer-Brown, 2016). Especially after the emergence of platforms like Twitter, the display, discussion, and sharing of mass media content (Good, 2013; Hogan, 2010) such as music and movies has increasingly become one of the tools users employ to present their different selves online.
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