I am not talking to you: Partitioning an audience in an attempt to solve the self-promotion dilemma

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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- Audience partitioning
- Self-promotion dilemma
- Self-presentation
- Conversation
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A B S T R A C T

This work investigates self-promotion partitioning, a strategy used in group conversations by self-promoters trying to overcome the self-promotion dilemma—a desire to share self-enhancing information without appearing to be overtly bragging. Self-promotion partitioning occurs when individuals partition their audience by addressing one or more specific recipients, deliberately turning unaddressed recipients into “bystanders.” Across a series of experiments and the analysis of secondary data, we show people disproportionately favor partitioning their audience when they face the self-promotion dilemma, both in face-to-face conversations and on social media platforms. They do so because they expect bystanders to believe they were not intended recipients, and in turn be less likely to see the self-promoter as overtly bragging, resulting in a more favorable impression. We also identify an important boundary condition, audience size; when partitioning creates a single bystander, the self-promoter worries partitioning would make the lone bystander feel excluded and ultimately hurt impressions.

1. Introduction

Group conversations involve the complex coordination of human behavior. A fundamental part of group conversations is turn-taking, or the apportioning of who speaks next and when (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Cooney et al., 2020). Engaged participants take turns assuming the roles of speaker, target (addressee), and/or unaddressed recipient (everyone else) (Goffman, 1981). During the course of turn-taking, participants spend significant effort processing information about the others involved in the conversation and presenting information about themselves. In doing so, they try to regulate what others know about them “in order to manage the impression that others have of them” (O’Sullivan, 2000b, 405). When people intentionally choose to share self-enhancing information, this is a form of strategic self-presentation known as self-promotion (Jones & Pittman, 1982).

Self-promoters frequently face what has been referred to as the self-promotion dilemma (Pfeffer, Fong, Cialdini, & Portnoy, 2006) or braggart’s dilemma (Berman et al. 2014). We use the term self-promotion dilemma and define it here as a desire to share self-enhancing information without appearing as overtly bragging. The dilemma, as such, describes the conflict between the self-promoter’s goal of being recognized for some achievement, skill or even possession, and the simultaneous goal of not hurting their likability, which can be diminished by appearing to be overtly bragging. In general, people who are modest are better liked than those who are boastful (Forsyth, Berger, & Mitchell, 1981; Baumeister & Ilko, 1995; Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). The self-promotion dilemma thus manifests as a choice: share self-enhancing information and risk being seen as overtly bragging and thus less likeable, or keep quiet about one’s qualities and accomplishments?

In this research, we identify and document a distinct self-presentation strategy used in an attempt to overcome the self-promotion dilemma in the context of group conversations, what we call self-promotion partitioning. Self-promotion partitioning occurs when a self-promoter deliberately chooses to address one or more targets when sharing self-enhancing information, trusting that everyone else will “overhear.” To illustrate how this process works, consider a group of colleagues sitting around a table at work having a conversation. A would-be self-promoter could share news, say, of a recent promotion by telling everyone at the table without addressing anyone in particular. Alternatively, they could address the person sitting next to them believing others at the table will overhear. The unaddressed recipients, put into the de facto role of bystanders, are presumed to believe they were not intended recipients and therefore be less prone to see the self-promoter as overtly bragging. In fact, it is not uncommon for an
exchange between two participants to unfold in a group conversation with the rest of the group taking on the role of bystanders (Stasser & Taylor, 1991, Parker, 1988). In this research, we contend that bystanders are at times actually the real targets of strategic self-promotion.

Importantly, self-promotion partitioning can be employed readily on social media platforms commonly used by members of organizations to maintain relationships (Brzozowski, 2009; Mueller, Hutter, Fueller, & Matzler, 2011; Murthy, Rodriguez, and Lewis, 2013). Consider Facebook, a place where billions of users regularly share self-enhancing content in an attempt to present their ideal self to others (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). A user can post a self-enhancing message without addressing anyone (e.g., “I got a promotion today. Can’t wait for my next paycheck”). Alternatively, the user could post the same message addressed to one or more specific recipients by tagging them (using the “@” symbol followed by the addressee’s name). The tag notifies the tagged person they were mentioned in a post while signaling to other Facebook users that the post was “intended” for the addressee (e.g., “@John I got a promotion today. Can’t wait for my next paycheck”). Others who see the post are expected to consider themselves bystanders.

While partitioning one’s audience online and offline can occur for a variety of reasons, it is our contention that self-promotion is one such reason. We show self-promoters are prone to partition their audience as a self-presentation strategy when they see it as a solution to the self-promotion dilemma. They similarly are prone to leverage on an already partitioned audience (e.g., a side discussion in a group conversation) to share self-enhancing information when others are in earshot. In both cases, they expect bystanders to be less likely to see them as overtly bragging, and in turn, form a better impression of them than they would have had they shared the message without partitioning.

2. The self-promotion dilemma

Self-presentation is an inescapable feature of life because so much time is spent in the presence of others who we believe are constantly evaluating us (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Attempts to convey a positive image are so pervasive that they are often habitual and even automatic (Brown, 2007). Self-presentation efforts have been categorized broadly as falling into one of two types: acquisitive or protective (Arkin, 1981). Acquisitive self-presentation refers to actively associating the self with content expected to make a positive impression on others, while protective self-presentation refers to trying to avoid associating oneself with content that might make a negative impression (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992). The focus of this research is on acquisitive self-presentation undertaken by purposefully sharing self-enhancing content.

On some occasions, self-presentation involves transferring content to a single recipient, referred to as narrowcasting, while on other occasions it involves transferring content to more than one recipient simultaneously, referred to as broadcasting (Barasch & Berger, 2014). Self-promotion partitioning, by definition, occurs in the context of broadcasting. Prior literature has found that individuals who broadcast often avoid sharing content that makes them look bad, thereby exhibiting protective self-presentation efforts (Barasch & Berger, 2014). Our work extends these findings by exploring how individuals choose to share self-enhancing information, that is, how they engage in acquisitive self-presentation while broadcasting.

The act of sharing self-enhancing content has been labeled variously as self-promotion (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Rudman, 1998; Scopelliti, Loewenstein, & Vogelrat, 2015), bragging (Berman, Levine, Barasch, & Small, 2015), boasting (Levine & West, 1976), self-praise (Dayter, 2014), positive self-disclosure (Miller, Cooke, Tsang, & Morgan, 1992), and positive self-description (Holgraves & Srull, 1989). As some of these descriptors suggest, sharing self-enhancing content is not always looked upon favorably. A person seen as deliberately self-promoting runs the risk of appearing to be overtly bragging and thus arrogant and boastful, which would hurt their likability (Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; Powers & Zuroff, 1988; Reeder, 2009; Sekhon, Bickart, Trudel, & Fournier, 2015; Tal-Or, 2010; Tice et al., 1995; Berman et al., 2015; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). The extent to which an individual’s self-presentation efforts are able to avoid this pitfall depends on one’s ability to conceal any intention of trying to generate positive impressions (Eastman, 1994; Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1986; Jones & Pittman, 1982).

Individuals are aware of the risks associated with being perceived as actively self-promoting and thus face the self-promotion dilemma (Pfeffer et al., 2006). While they may at times choose to share self-enhancing content and accept this might hurt their likability, they often look for ways to conceal their motives and minimize such risk. Prior research has documented a number of strategies people use in an attempt to overcome the self-promotion dilemma. One strategy involves leaving it to a third party to sing one’s praises (Pfeffer et al., 2006). A different strategy involves praising others who are closely associated with oneself, known as basking in reflected glory (Cialdini et al., 1976). Still another strategy involves altering the message by masking one’s brags as complaints or seemingly humble statements, referred to as humblebragging (Sezer, Gino, & Norton, 2016). Because self-enhancing statements are viewed more favorably when prompted by others (Holgraves & Srull, 1989), yet another strategy involves getting others to ask questions about what one wants to share.

This research adds to this literature by showing when and why self-promoters use self-promotion partitioning, an as yet unexplored self-presentation strategy, to overcome the self-promotion dilemma in group conversations. A critical difference between self-promotion partitioning and the aforementioned strategies is the other strategies focus on who shares what with whom (i.e., someone else does the sharing, or the content is modified to appear less self-promoting), while with self-promotion partitioning, who shares what with whom stays the same. What changes is the role assigned to different audience members.

2.1. The current research—group conversations and self-promotion partitioning

Past research in social cognition and communication discusses various audience participation structures (Bell, 1984; Clark & Carlson, 1982; Goffman, 1981; Levinson, 1988), describing the different roles audience members might assume in a conversation, including addressed and non-addressed recipients. It also discusses participation rules associated with these roles (e.g., who speaks when). According to these rules (Goffman, 1959), an addressed recipient is expected to play an active role (e.g., by responding), while a non-addressed recipient (bystander) is not supposed to play an active role (e.g., not respond), but merely listen. Past research has yet to examine deliberate attempts to change the participation structure by proactively assigning different recipients to different roles. This work is the first we know of to examine how people actively manage the participation structure of their audience. While we recognize audience partitioning is multi-determined, we show one explanation for the phenomenon is a self-promoter’s desire to brag to bystanders without this being transparent (i.e., self-promotion partitioning).

Group conversations can complicate self-presentation efforts, particularly when different constituents have different information and expectations with respect to the self-presenter. This has been referred to as a multiple audience problem (Fleming, Darley, Hilton, & Kojetin, 1990; Fleming & Darley, 1991; Cooney et al., 2020); communicators sometimes feel constrained to play a particular role by the presence of multiple audiences and can be motivated to send hidden messages that are implicitly addressed to, and understood by only some of the recipients. This is often done by rendering part or all of the communication unintelligible to the non-intended audience so that it can be understood only by those for whom it was intended. Self-promotion partitioning is a very different strategic behavior in that

1 Fleming and Darley (1991) give the example of a young woman saying “good night” to her date, aware of her parents listening in another room. Consequently, she may silently point from the hallway to the other room, making her date aware of the presence of her parents, and then may silently kiss him good night.
the communicator sends the same message to everyone (those addressed and unaddressed); there is no hidden message. What changes, is the structure of the audience (i.e., roles assigned to different recipients).

Given this work is the first to introduce self-promotion partitioning as a self-presentation strategy, we approach the phenomenon in several different ways. First, in study 1, we show individuals are prone to partition their audience when attempting to solve the self-promotion dilemma. Study 2 provides evidence consistent with self-promotion partitioning on social media using real world data from Twitter. Delving into process in study 3, we again observe people are more likely to use self-promotion partitioning when facing the self-promotion dilemma, and document how in doing so they expect bystanders to form a more positive impression of them. Study 4 accomplishes two things. First, it shows self-promoters expect to make a better impression on bystanders when partitioning an audience because they believe they are less inclined to come across as overtly bragging. Second, it identifies an important boundary condition, audience size. When partitioning creates a single bystander, self-promoters are particularly concerned this individual would feel excluded, which would hurt impressions to the point of defeating the purpose of partitioning the audience. In study 5, in the context of real, face-to-face conversations, we change the paradigm, showing people are more likely to share self-enhancing content (vs. non-self-enhancing content) when an audience is partitioned because they expect partitioning to help overcome the self-promotion dilemma. Finally, in a follow up to study 5, we present preliminary evidence collected from would-be bystanders suggesting self-promotion partitioning can indeed be an effective strategy. The data and syntax for all our studies can be found at the following Open Science Framework link: https://osf.io/vne4r/.

Before presenting these studies in more detail, we report the results of a survey of a nationally representative sample of Americans that is indicative of how frequently self-promotion partitioning is used as a self-presentation strategy, and how its usage compares to other strategies documented in the literature.

3. Partitioning compared to other strategies for overcoming the self-promotion dilemma

Respondents include a sample of 1,011 US citizens (52% female, avg. age = 45) certified as nationally representative through Qualtrics International Inc. Each one read a short description of the self-promotion dilemma before indicating whether they had ever experienced the dilemma themselves (see supplementary materials for additional details). The majority, 558 (55.19%), reported having experienced the self-promotion dilemma. Next, respondents were presented with five “strategies” (in random order) used to address the self-promotion dilemma (these include the four strategies discussed earlier, as well as self-promotion partitioning).

Respondents indicated which strategies they had used as well as how frequently they recall having used them (1 = very infrequently, 9 = very frequently). Among those who experienced the self-promotion dilemma, 42.7% reported having used self-promotion partitioning (reflecting 24% of the general population). The frequency of use is comparable to other well-documented self-presentation strategies (see Table 1). The key takeaway is that self-promotion partitioning appears to be used by a significant number of Americans, and used as frequently as other well-known strategies.

Table 1 Strategies used to address the self-promotion dilemma.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of those who faced the self-promotion dilemma (N = 558)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humblebragging (Sezer et al., 2018)</td>
<td>Humility-based Complaint-based</td>
<td>82.08% 74.19% 4.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using questions to prompt (Holtgraves &amp; Srull, 1989)</td>
<td>Complaint-based</td>
<td>44.22% 25.63% 5.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-promotion partitioning</td>
<td>Offline</td>
<td>42.47% 27.60% 5.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banking in reflected glory (Galatian et al., 1976)</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>30.47% 24.55% 5.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using an intermediary (Pfeffer et al., 2006)</td>
<td></td>
<td>17.92% 4.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 We received institutional review board (IRB) approval that included informed consent for all of the studies reported in this paper.

3 Two strategies included two entries. We separated humility-based humblebragging and complaint-based humblebragging, as they could entail different behaviors. We also separated offline and online self-promotion partitioning because we were interested in measuring the occurrence of both behaviors explored in this manuscript.

4. Study 1— choosing to partition an audience when facing the self-promotion dilemma

In this study, we test whether the use of self-promotion partitioning varies as a function of one’s self-presentation goal. If individuals whose goal is to impress a colleague without appearing to be overtly bragging are more prone to partition their audience than individuals whose goal is simply being liked, this would be evidence in support of our contention that self-promotion partitioning is considered a viable solution to the self-promotion dilemma.

4.1. Method

A sample of 400 respondents was predicted to be adequate to detect an effect. Respondents include 399 mTurk users who completed the study for compensation (49.4% female, M_age = 39.3). We asked respondents to imagine they had just closed a deal at work and made a 2,000 USD commission, after which they were at lunch in their cafeteria with a group of coworkers, including a new colleague. We manipulated Self-Presentation Goal (Solve Dilemma vs. Likeability) between-subjects in the following way. In the Solve Dilemma condition, respondents were told their goal during the conversation was to impress their new colleague without being seen as overtly bragging. In the Likeability condition, respondents were told their goal was to make sure their new colleague liked them. We chose this as a control condition as the desire to be liked is omnipresent and an extremely common motivation in human interactions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Pfeffer et al., 2006).

Next, respondents indicated whether they would bring up the deal and hefty commission, and if so, how. They were presented with four options: (1) not tell the story; (2) pretending to tell the story only to the person sitting next to them, making sure everyone at the table, including the colleague they wanted to impress, would be able to ‘overhear’ them (i.e., partitioning); (3) simultaneously telling everyone at the table; or (4) only sharing with the new colleague they wanted to impress.

Recognizing individuals worry about being viewed negatively for being self-aggrandizing (Berman et al., 2015; Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1986; Reeder, 2009), a priori, we expected those in the Likeability condition to be more likely to not share the self-enhancing story. Conversely, we expected those in the Solve Dilemma condition to tell the impressive story in order to impress their new colleague, but to do so in a way that would minimize being seen as overtly bragging. If partitioning is indeed a solution to the self-promotion dilemma, these respondents should disproportionally choose to partition their audience.
4.2. Results

No participants were excluded from our analysis. An omnibus test reveals that the choice of how to share the story does indeed depend on condition ($\chi^2 (3) = 136.01$, $p < .001$, $V = 0.58$). The full set of results is presented in Table 2 and Fig. 1. As anticipated, and consistent with prior literature, far more respondents chose not to tell the story when their only goal was achieving Likeability (62.1%) as opposed to Solve the Dilemma (11.7%), $\chi^2 (1) = 107.98$, $p < .001$, $\varphi = 0.52$). Yet, when their goal included impressing their new potential colleague without being seen as overly bragging, respondents were much more likely to tell the story, and disproportionally so by partitioning their audience. Indeed, conditional on choosing to tell the story ($N = 250$), we observe significantly more respondents chose to partition their audience in the Solve Dilemma condition than in the Likeability condition (48.0% vs. 10.4%; $\chi^2 (1) = 32.52$, $p < .001$, $\varphi = 0.36$).

4.3. Discussion

Study 1 provides evidence that individuals are more prone to partition their audience when attempting to solve the self-promotion dilemma than when facing an alternative self-presentation goal. When the goal was simply to be liked, most respondents chose the safest course of action, to refrain from sharing the self-enhancing story which could hurt their likeability. Those confronting the self-promotion dilemma went ahead and shared the impressive story, but disproportionally chose to do so by partitioning their audience as a way of minimizing the negative consequences in terms of likeability. This is consistent with our contention that individuals believe self-promotion partitioning can be useful in attenuating the potential negative consequences of self-promotion.

4.4. Further evidence

The self-promotion dilemma, as we define it, is a predicament because of the conflict between being recognized for one’s accomplishments and appearing to be overtly bragging, which is presumed to diminish one’s likeability. We therefore extend the results of study 1 by inducing the self-promotion dilemma in different ways. First, instead of avoiding coming across as overtly bragging, we directed respondents to impress their new colleague without being seen as dislikeable (see Appendix A, Study A.2). Second, instead of providing respondents with a specific self-presentation goal, we simply varied the extent to which the content to be shared was self-enhancing in nature, which was expected to lead respondents to experience the self-promotion dilemma when it was in fact self-enhancing (see Appendix A, Study A.3). All of the results are consistent with Study 1 and attest to the robustness of the effect. Taken together, these studies, along with the nationally representative survey provide compelling evidence that self-promotion partitioning is a self-presentation strategy used in an attempt to overcome the self-promotion dilemma. In the next study we look for and find evidence consistent with self-promotion partitioning on social media.

5. Study 2—The use of self-promotion partitioning on social media

In this study, we investigate the use of self-promotion partitioning in the real world. We use archival data reflecting actual behavior on Twitter. If people see partitioning an audience as a solution to the self-promotion dilemma, we should observe an increase in the likelihood of tagging someone when a tweet’s content is self-enhancing in nature and the user is thus more likely to have faced the self-promotion dilemma. To test this, it was necessary to determine whether a given tweet was more or less likely to be self-enhancing. Given the amount of tweets in our data set, to accomplish this we relied on LIWC, linguistic processing software designed for automated text analysis (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015). According to Schwartz’s theory of Basic Human Values (Schwartz, 1992, 1994), self-enhancement encompasses two related core values, power and achievement. We therefore employed two standard LIWC dictionaries, one for power and one for achievement (including terms such as ‘power,’ ‘win,’ ‘success,’ ‘honor,’ ‘better,’ and ‘superior’), to determine which tweets were more likely to include self-enhancing content. LIWC calculates the percentage of power/achievement words included in each tweet.

5.1. Pre-test: self-enhancing tweets

At the onset, we sought support for the decision to use text analysis to categorize tweets. We found reassurance in two ways (see Appendix B for details). First, in the lab, respondents given the goal to impress others in writing a tweet were more likely to use power and achievement words than respondents free to write about anything they wanted, ceteris paribus. Second, independent coders blind to our hypothesis rated a sample of 1000 real tweets. The sample was drawn from our full data set (described below) to insure half contained no power and/or achievement words and the other half included power and/or achievement words. The coders judged tweets containing power and achievement words to be significantly more self-enhancing. Taken together, the results suggest that, on average, self-enhancing tweets are more likely to include power and achievement words than other tweets.

5.2. Real world data

Next, we investigate whether a relationship exists between the content of actual tweets and the use of audience partitioning by way of tags. Tagging is a form of audience partitioning in that social media users write a public post, visible to everyone, but address it to one or more individuals by typing their name following the ‘at’ sign (@). The data used in this study include all 447,793 original tweets posted in the Los Angeles metropolitan area on September 16, 2016.4 By definition, original tweets exclude retweets and replies to others’ tweets. We also excluded tweets by verified users, typically those accounts of public interest associated with companies or celebrities (15,428). The final sample includes 432,365 tweets written by 142,288 users. Of these, 62,425 tweets include tags (14.4%). While it is possible that a message

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4 Data for Sept. 16 were collected through twitter’s public API across a 3-day period ranging from Sept. 20-26, 2016 using the Python library Tweepy.

5 Note that our results are substantially the same if we retain verified users in the dataset (OR = 1.12, z = 5.17, p < .001).

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Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice Condition</th>
<th>Pairwise comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dilemma</td>
<td>Likeability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partition</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrowcast</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Tell</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only those who chose to share (conditional analysis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice Condition</th>
<th>Pairwise comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partition</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrowcast</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The threshold for statistical significance using the Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons is $p = .012$ for the main analysis and $p = .016$ for the conditional analysis (McDonald, 2014). Pairwise comparisons are obtained by contrasting the row of interest with the sum of all other rows. Results hold analyzing chi-square residuals using the adjusted Fisher exact test (Shan & Gerstenberger, 2017).
contains more than one tag, this happens in only 3.7% of cases in our sample, hence we measure our dependent variable (Audience Partitioned) in binary form (no tag vs. at least one tag).\footnote{We replicate the analysis keeping the user mention dependent variable in its original form. A Poisson regression provides consistent results ($b = 0.099$, $z = 3.51$, $p < .001$).}

To compute our focal independent variable, labeled Self-Enhancement, we start by averaging the LIWC scores for power and achievement. Given the very large number of zero values (68%) and the highly concentrated distribution of the remaining values ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 3.56$), we operationalize Self-Enhancement as a dichotomous measure corresponding to two types of tweets. A tweet was categorized as more likely to be self-enhancing if it contained at least one power or achievement word. For each tweet, we collected two covariates intended to control for the size of the user’s social network expected to influence the decision of whether to tag someone, namely the number of followers ($M = 4461$, $SD = 24,424$) and the number of other users followed ($M = 1933$, $SD = 12,038$). Given their highly skewed distributions (Skew $> 20$), we use these covariates in log form.

5.3. Results

Some users wrote more than one tweet during the period under investigation. Therefore, we employed logistic regression with robust standard errors clustered at the user level to adjust for the non-independent nature of the data. As expected, in a model without covariates, Self-Enhancement significantly and positively predicts the presence of at least one tag ($OR = 1.16$, $z = 6.48$, $p < .001$). A tweet drawn from those categorized as self-enhancing has a 16% greater chance of including a tag compared to a tweet drawn from those categorized as not self-enhancing. Importantly, the effect holds even when the covariates—expected to influence the decision of whether to tag someone—are included ($OR = 1.12$, $z = 5.04$, $p < .001$), as shown in Table 3.

As a robustness check, we changed our operationalization of a self-enhancing tweet by separating tweets into those containing Power and those containing Achievement related words. A tweet that contains at least one Achievement word has a 17% greater chance of including a tag versus a tweet that does not contain any of such words ($OR = 1.17$, $z = 5.83$, $p < .001$). Similarly, a tweet that contains at least one Power word has a 10% greater chance of including a tag versus a tweet that does not contain any of such words ($OR = 1.10$, $z = 3.88$, $p < .001$).

5.4. Discussion

There are many reasons why someone might tag another user on Twitter. However, the results from this study suggest the use of tags is sensitive to the nature of the content being shared. The inclusion of words commonly associated with self-enhancing content increases the likelihood of a tag significantly, in line with our theorizing. While correlational in nature, the results are consistent with the findings of Study 1, such that individuals appear more likely to partition their audience when sharing self-enhancing content and are thus more likely to be facing the self-promotion dilemma. In the next study, we examine the mechanism underlying the phenomenon observed in Studies 1 and 2. We expect people who share self-enhancing content to believe they will make a more favorable impression on bystanders when they partition their audience and this belief to drive the choice to partition one’s audience.

6. Study 3—Partitioning impacts the impression people expect to make

Study 3 explicitly tests whether the choice to partition is driven by expectations about how bystanders will receive the message. We examine individuals’ differential expectations regarding the impression bystanders will form of a self-promoter when their audience is partitioned and when it is not, both when sharing self-enhancing and non-self-enhancing content. In this study (as in study A.3), we vary whether the content respondents share is self-enhancing and are thus more likely to be facing the self-promotion dilemma. In the next study, we examine the mechanism underlying the phenomenon observed in Studies 1 and 2. We expect people who share self-enhancing content to believe they will make a more favorable impression on bystanders when they partition their audience and this belief to drive the choice to partition one’s audience.

### Table 3: Effect of content on likelihood to tag in Twitter post.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Logistic regression w/clustered errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Odds Ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Enhancement</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following (log)</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N tweets = 432,365; Twitter users = 142,288. Constant estimates baseline odds
impressions influence the choice of whether or not to engage in self-promotion partitioning.

6.1. Method

Respondents were 189 undergraduate students (60.3% female, M_age = 20.0) who completed the study for partial course credit. Sample size was determined by the number of students who participated in a one-week lab session. Respondents first were asked to recall and summarize a self-relevant fact or story (Content). We varied Content between subjects. In the Control condition, they were instructed to write something interesting about themselves. In the Self-Enhancement condition, respondents were instructed to write something about themselves others would find both interesting and impressive (see full instructions in supplementary materials).

Next, respondents were asked to imagine having a conversation with five other people including a close friend and a recent acquaintance, and wanting to share the content they wrote about (either self-enhancing or interesting). They then chose (Choice) whether to tell the story to the friend sitting next to them, knowing everyone at the table, including their recent acquaintance, would be able to hear (partitioning), or to tell everyone at the table simultaneously.

Irrespective of their choice, respondents next reported how they would expect the acquaintance to perceive them in both scenarios: having addressed the friend knowing others, including the acquaintance, would hear and having told everyone simultaneously (Partitioning: Yes vs. No). They did so by answering the following questions: “What is the overall impression that you believe this person will form about you?” (1 = very unfavorable, 9 = very favorable), and “To what extent do you believe this person will like you?” (1 = not at all, 9 = a great deal). Responses to these two questions were averaged to form a single Expected Impression measure (r = 0.84). To be clear, we collected two different Expected Impression measures from each respondent, one for the case in which they share the story using partitioning (Partitioning: Yes), and one for the case in which they address the whole table (No). As a manipulation check, at the end of the study respondents reported the extent to which they felt the content shared was self-enhancing.

6.2. Results

No participants were excluded from the analysis

Manipulation Check - The content shared was deemed to be more self-enhancing in the Self-Enhancement condition (M_Self-Enhancement = 6.64, SD = 1.71 vs. M_Interesting = 4.56, SD = 2.20, F(1,187) = 52.64, p < .001, ηp² = 0.22).

Choice - Respondents were more likely to partition their audience in the Self-Enhancement condition than in the Control condition (51.6% vs. 31.9%, respectively, χ²(1) = 7.51, p = .006, φ = 0.20), consistent with the results of earlier studies and in line with partitioning being seen as a potential solution to the self-promotion dilemma.

Expected Impression – We ran a mixed two-way ANOVA predicting Expected Impression with Content and Partitioning. Only the interaction term was significant (F(1,187) = 19.24, p < .001, ηp² = 0.09). Simple contrasts reveal respondents expected the acquaintance to form a more favorable impression of them when the audience was partitioned in the Self-Enhancement condition (M_Partitioned = 5.98, SD = 1.37 vs. M_Control = 5.59, SD = 1.57, F(1, 187) = 7.35, p = .007, ηp² = 0.04), but not in the Control condition (M_Partitioned = 5.57, SD = 1.43 vs. M_Control = 6.08, SD = 1.33, F(1, 187) = 12.18, p < .001, ηp² = 0.06).

Mediation – To test whether expected impression drives Choice, we created a measure of Differential Expected Impression by computing the difference between Expected Impression for the two Partitioning (Yes vs. No) conditions. This measure differed significantly based on the type of content being shared (M_Self-Enhancement = 0.39, SD = 1.33 vs. M_Control = -0.51, SD = 1.50, F(1, 187) = 19.24, p < .001, ηp² = 0.09). The change in sign implies expected impressions were more positive when the audience was partitioned in the Self-Enhancement condition, but this was not the case in the Control condition. To examine the role of Expected Impression on the decision to partition, we test the model Content → Differential Expected Impression → Choice using 5,000 bootstrap samples and observe a significant positive indirect effect (b = 0.72, SE = 0.23, 95% CI [0.35, 1.23]). These results are consistent with the idea that the impression one expects to make on bystanders depends on the type of content being shared, which drives the choice of how to deliver it to one’s audience.

6.3. Discussion

Study 3 shows one reason individuals choose to partition their audience when sharing self-enhancing content is that they expect to form a more positive impression on bystanders. Recall in Study 2 we presented evidence consistent with self-promotion partitioning being employed on social media. In a separate study (see Study A.4 in Appendix A), we replicate the findings of Study 3—that self-promoters expect to be perceived more positively when they partition their audience— in a social media context (Facebook). We did so using a between-subjects design in a context in which tagging (i.e., self-promotion partitioning) had potential real world implications given all respondents shared specified self-enhancing content on their actual Facebook page.

Interestingly, in Study 3 we observe partitioning is expected to have a negative effect on the impression bystanders will form when the content shared is not self-enhancing in nature. This finding is consistent with the proposition explored in the next study; when partitioning one’s audience individuals might also be concerned with bystanders feeling excluded from the conversation (Pickett & Gardner, 2005; Tang and Richardson, 2013). If partitioning is not expected to help to overcome the self-promotion dilemma (i.e., the content is not self-enhancing), the downside of making others feel excluded may have led respondents to avoid partitioning.

7. Study 4—Moderation: audience size matters

Study 4 serves two important functions. First, it examines one reason why self-promoters expect to make a better impression when they use self-promotion partitioning. By singling out a recipient as an addressee, respondents believe they are less inclined to come across as overtly bragging to bystanders. Second, this study tests an important boundary condition for the effect; audience size affects the extent to which self-promotion partitioning is seen as a viable solution to the self-promotion dilemma. We believe individuals recognize that when they partition an audience, bystanders might feel excluded (Pickett & Gardner, 2005; Tang and Richardson, 2013). A priori, we predicted that when the audience size is very small, such that partitioning would create a single bystander, self-promoters will worry that partitioning would hurt the impressions they make on the lone bystander. This is because a lone bystander is especially prone to feel excluded from a conversation.

7.1. Method

Respondents were 252 undergraduate students (56.3% female, M_age = 20.5) who completed the study for partial course credit. Sample size was determined by the number of students who participated in a three-week lab session. As in study 1, respondents read a scenario about closing a deal at work and making a 2,000 USD commission. They then imagined going to lunch at their cafeteria at work and sitting with a group of colleagues with whom they shared the news of their deal and commission. We manipulated Audience Size (Two vs. Five) between subjects by telling respondents that they were having lunch with either two or five colleagues. We manipulated Partitioning (Yes vs. No) within-subjects by asking respondents to imagine a scenario in which they had told the story to a good friend sitting next to them where others would overhear, and a scenario in which they told the whole table...
Two ($b_{\text{indirect}} = 0.00$, 95% CI [-0.13, 0.16]). Importantly, a test of moderated mediation supports the two indirect effects are significantly different ($D_{\text{difference}} = -0.67$, 95% CI [-1.00, -0.37]).

Mediation Exclusion – We find Exclusion mediates the effect of Audience Partitioning on Expected Impression when the size of the table is Two ($b_{\text{indirect}} = 0.56$, 95% CI (0.32, 0.83)), but not when it is Five ($b_{\text{indirect}} = 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.16]). Again, a test of moderated mediation supports the two indirect effects are significantly different one from the other ($D_{\text{difference}} = -0.50$, 95% CI [-0.80, -0.25]).

Expected Impression Addressee – A mixed ANOVA reveals a marginal effect of Partitioning ($F(1, 250) = 3.65, p = 0.057, \eta^2 = 0.01$), qualified by a significant interaction ($F(1, 250) = 9.87, p < 0.002, \eta^2 = 0.04$) in predicting the impression respondents expected to make on the addressee. Simple contrasts reveal Partitioning is expected to improve perceptions of the addressee when the audience is large ($M_{\text{Partitioned}} = 7.10, SD = 1.29$ vs. $M_{\text{NotPartitioned}} = 6.79, SD = 1.41, F(1, 250) = 12.76, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.05$), but not when it is small ($M_{\text{Partitioned}} = 6.71, SD = 1.41$ vs. $M_{\text{NotPartitioned}} = 6.78, SD = 1.40, F(1, 250) = 0.76, p = .385$).

7.3. Discussion

In this study, we find evidence that individuals expect to make a better impression on non-addressed participants (bystanders) in a conversation when they partition their audience because they believe they are less inclined to come across as overtly bragging. We also observe that, when the audience is partitioned, individuals expect bystanders to feel excluded (Pickett & Gardner, 2005; Tang and Richardson, 2013), and this is particularly true in the case of a lone bystander. Importantly, if partitioning creates a lone bystander, the self-promoter becomes concerned this person will form a more negative impression of them. Consequently, self-promotion partitioning does not appear to be seen as a successful strategy when the audience is so small. Hence, we identify a boundary condition, audience size. Partitioning requires more than two people to be in the audience to be considered an effective strategy.

With respect to the addressee, we find evidence that partitioning might also benefit the impression respondents expect to make on the addressee. As long as the size table is large enough. This effect was not predicted and was smaller in size when compared to the perceived advantage in terms of bystander’s impressions. This, we believe, is because people single out addressees whom they expect will not judge them harshly for being self-promoters in the first place, those with whom they share common ground (Clark & Brennan, 1991). We touch upon this point again in the general discussion with respect to common ground. Next, we investigate how partitioning impacts self-promotion in real life, face-to-face group conversations.

8. Study 5—Partitioning encourages self-promotion in real conversations

In this study, respondents participated in a real-life conversation with a group of three peers. We examine the extent to which partitioning is seen as an effective means in helping achieve the goal of solving the self-promotion dilemma utilizing a different paradigm compared to earlier studies. In this study, partitioning serves as the independent variable, while the content respondents choose to share (self-enhancing or just interesting) serves as the dependent variable. In other words, we test whether individuals are prone to take advantage of an already partitioned audience to self-promote. In this sense, we tested the extent to which partitioning promotes the sharing of self-enhancing content.

8.1. Method

Respondents were 216 graduate and undergraduate students (63.3% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 22.3$) who completed the study for compensation. Sample size was determined by the number of participants who enrolled in a one-week paid lab session. Respondents first completed a survey in...
which they were asked to provide two stories about themselves (Content), an Impressive story (“something related to yourself that you think others would definitely find impressive if they knew about it”) and an Interesting story (“something related to yourself that you think others would find interesting if they knew about it, yet not particularly impressive”). Next, they were informed they would be taking part in a role-playing exercise. They were told they would be participating in a conversation in a “shared workspace” with a friend and two acquaintances (in actuality confederates). We manipulated Partitioning (Yes vs. No) by instructing them either to share the story by bringing it up to their friend, such that the acquaintances would believe they were overhearing the story, or to share the story with the whole group. To help insure they experienced the self-promotion dilemma, all respondents were told their goal was to have the acquaintances see them as impressive, but not think they were overtly bragging.

Before moving to the shared workspace in a different room, respondents indicated which of the two stories they intended to share (Choice). Regardless of the story they chose, they were instructed to imagine sharing their impressive story, and asked to report the extent to which doing so would help successfully achieve their self-presentation goal (Goal Achievement Impressive – 1 = Not at all, 9 = Very much). This allowed us to compare expectations regarding overcoming the self-promotion dilemma between those assigned to partition their audience and those assigned to address the whole group. A priori, we expected respondents to be more prone to share the impressive story in the Partitioning condition because they would view self-promotion partitioning as a viable solution to the self-promotion dilemma. In other words, we predicted Goal Achievement Impressive would be greater when the audience was partitioned than when it was not. Importantly, expectations regarding the extent to which one might achieve one’s self-presentation goal (by telling the impressive story) would drive the decision of which story to tell.

Next, respondents moved to the shared workspace where they sat with “a friend and two acquaintances.” The three confederates were blind to the research hypotheses, and were instructed to pretend they were working and to wait for the participant to strike up a conversation. After respondents participated in a conversation with the confederates, a research assistant escorted them to a separate room where they completed a brief survey. They were asked (Actual Goal Achievement): “To what extent did you achieve your goal of impressing but not coming across as overtly bragging?” (1 = Not at all, 9 = Very much), as well as measures assessing the Impressions they believed they made. These items were retrospective and were measured after respondents chose which story to tell to help them achieve their conversational goal. Thus, they were exploratory; we report the results and their interpretation in the supplementary materials.

8.2. Results

Of the 216 respondents who began the study, 24 were excluded because they either did not complete the first portion of the study (1), did not provide a story (1), did not share a story in the real conversation portion of the study (12), told both the impressive and interesting story while in the room (4), or their unique participant ID could not be matched between the paper and computer survey (6). Ultimately, responses from 192 participants (63.0% female, M_age = 22.2) were included in the analysis.

Choice. Recall the choice in this study reflects the type of information shared – self-enhancing or merely interesting, but self-relevant in both cases. As predicted, significantly more respondents chose to tell the impressive story in the Partitioned condition than in the Not Partitioned condition (61.9% vs. 45.3%, respectively, χ²(1) = 5.31, p = .021, φ = 0.17).

Goal Achievement Impressive. Respondents in the Partitioned condition reported being more confident that telling the impressive story would allow them to achieve the goal of coming across as impressive while not overtly bragging, thus overcoming the self-promotion dilemma (M_Partitioned = 6.16, SD = 1.57 vs. M_NotPartitioned = 5.65, SD = 1.80, F(1, 190) = 4.41, p = .037, η² = 0.02).

Mediation Analysis. Next, we test whether partitioning’s (Partitioning) impact on the choice of whether or not to share self-enhancing content (Choice) is associated with an expectation of being able to solve the self-promotion dilemma while telling the impressive story (Goal Achievement Impressive). A model with 5,000 bootstrap samples reveals the presence of a significant positive indirect effect (b = 0.18, SE = 0.12, 95% CI [0.01, 0.47]). The results suggest partitioning encourages the sharing of self-enhancing content within a conversation because it increases the likelihood of successfully achieving one’s self-presentation goal. This is

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7 We also measured how respondents expected the impressive story to be perceived using the same expected impression items as in prior studies and found consistent results (see supplementary materials).
because, as shown in prior studies, people generally expect the bystanders (in this case, the acquaintances) to be impressed, but not think they were overtly bragging.

8.3. Follow Up—does partitioning work? Bystanders’ point of view

In a separate, subsequent data collection effort, we explore the effectiveness of partitioning from the point of view of the bystander, whom prior studies indicate is expected to form a better impression of the self-promoter when the audience is partitioned. We recruited 645 students from the same student population, who completed the study online for partial course credit (51.2% female, M_age = 20.0). Sample size was determined by the number of students who completed the study across two separate online sessions. The study followed a 2 (Audience Partitioned: Yes vs. No) × 2 (Content: Impressive vs. Interesting) between-subjects design.

Respondents were asked to imagine sitting at a table in a shared workspace with a group of three other people, including an acquaintance. They were provided one story (Content: Impressive vs. Interesting) randomly selected from those provided by respondents from the in-lab session and were instructed to imagine they heard their acquaintance tell that story at the table. How the story was communicated varied; they either were told their acquaintance told the story to the whole table, or they overheard their acquaintance tell a friend sitting next to them. Critically, the way the story was communicated matched how respondents in the lab shared it (Partitioning: Yes vs. No). Therefore, the story and mode of delivery matched what respondents in the lab sessions actually did. Next, respondents were asked to rate their overall impression of the person (1 = very unfavorable, 9 = very favorable) and the extent to which they felt they liked the person (1 = not at all, 9 = a great deal). Responses to these two questions were averaged to form a single Impression measure (r = .90).

No participants were excluded from the analysis. An ANOVA predicting Impression with Content (Impressive vs. Interesting) and Partitioning (Yes vs. No) only revealed a significant interaction (F(1, 641) = 5.14, p = .024, n_p² = .01). Partitioning seemed to improve Impression when the content was Impressive (M_Partitioned = 5.60, SD = 1.30 vs. M_NotPartitioned = 5.26, SD = 1.38, F(1, 641) = 5.22, p = .023, n_p² = 0.01), but not when it was merely Interesting (M_Partitioned = 5.28, SD = 1.36 vs. M_NotPartitioned = 5.42, SD = 1.27, F(1, 641) = 0.83, p = .363).

8.4. Discussion

In this study, all respondents were assigned the explicit goal of solving the self-promotion dilemma. We manipulated audience partitioning, in light of which respondents were free to choose which content they would share. As expected, we find individuals are more likely to share self-enhancing content when the audience is partitioned. Further, we find this choice is driven by an expectation that doing so will help solve the self-promotion dilemma. These results, obtained in the context of real conversations, further support the contention that self-promotion partitioning is considered a viable strategy for solving the self-promotion dilemma.

Interestingly, even in the not-partitioned condition almost half of respondents chose to share the self-enhancing fact about themselves. This is not so surprising, as we know from prior literature that individuals can adopt a variety of other strategies in an attempt to solve the self-promotion dilemma (humblebragging, asking questions, etc.). Hence, they had multiple other avenues to pursue to solve the dilemma. From this we can conclude that 16.6% of respondents in the partitioned condition (the difference between 61.9% and 45.3%) believed partitioning allowed them to tell the impressive story without being seen as overtly bragging.

We further investigated whether this strategy works on bystanders in a follow up exploratory study. We recognize this test may suffer from a selection bias (respondents in the lab chose which story to tell fully aware they either had to partition their audience or not). Nonetheless, it is interesting that partitioning appears to improve bystanders’ impressions when the content shared is self-enhancing, but does not affect impressions when the content is merely interesting and not particularly self-enhancing. The follow-up to study 5 provides preliminary evidence that self-promotion partitioning can help mitigate the negative consequences of self-promotion. Ultimately, its success may reinforce self-promoters’ expectations with respect to the effectiveness of partitioning their audience to minimize the negative consequences of self-promotion.

9. General discussion

Strategic self-promotion is a common phenomenon in conversations that occur in organizational settings where many outcomes depend on the impression colleagues, subordinates, and superiors form of one another (Zivnuska, Kacmar, Witt, Carlson, & Bratton, 2004, Bolino, Varela, Bande, & Turnley, 2006). Individuals are often aware that a balance must be struck when deliberately trying to impress others. They realize that by sharing self-enhancing content they may impress others, but at the same time run the risk of coming across as overtly bragging, and thus less likeable. In this work, we identify self-promotion partitioning as a strategy employed in group conversations to deliver self-enhancing content while minimizing this risk. Unlike other self-presentation strategies documented in the literature, self-promotion partitioning is unique in that it does not involve varying the content of the message. Instead, it focuses on altering the participation structure of one’s audience.

To the best of our knowledge, this work is the first to investigate when and why individuals partition their audience for impression management purposes. In doing so, we contribute to the literature exploring the dynamics of group conversations, adding to a growing list of disclosure strategies that people can deploy to improve their conversational performance (Cooney et al., 2020). We also contribute to the literature on social cognition and communication, which has offered conceptual work detailing a wide variety of audience taxonomies, but has not investigated people actively managing the participation structure of their audience empirically. Further, we contribute to the impression management literature by identifying a novel self-presentation strategy and documenting how it is considered an effective means of delivering self-enhancing content. Moreover, by showing how partitioning an audience can influence whether individuals share content about themselves, this work also contributes to the literature on word-of-mouth communication.

When individuals face the self-promotion dilemma, a deliberate or intuitive mental calculus may reflect an explicit cost-benefit analysis of sorts, in which the expected benefit from impressing others is weighed against the expected cost to the self-promoter’s likeability from being seen as overtly bragging. We argue this cost is expected to be reduced by self-promotion partitioning. An interesting question is whether individuals are always strategic in their decision to partition an audience, or merely take advantage of the option when it presents itself. Our contention is that individuals typically have different self-presentation goals. If the goal is to impress their conversation partners, they are likely to face the self-promotion dilemma. In response they can either actively assign different roles to participants, or simply take advantage of a fortuitous conversational dynamic (the ability to partition) to try to achieve their self-presentation goal.

While this research introduces self-promotion partitioning as a novel self-presentation strategy, it largely focuses on the decision from the sender’s side, focusing on the perspective and expectations of self-promoters. A natural question that emerges concerns the extent to which self-promotion partitioning is a successful self-presentation strategy. The initial evidence we collected in a follow up to study 5 suggests that, at least under certain conditions, this might indeed be the case. This is particularly interesting given some other strategies used in an attempt of solving the self-promotion dilemma are known to be
generally ineffective (e.g., humblebragging, Sezer et al., 2018). Future research might examine whether and why self-promotion partitioning is successful in different contexts and under different conditions. We suspect one factor resulting in its success is the ambiguity among bystanders regarding the common ground (Clark & Brennan, 1991) between the self-promoter and the addressee. This provides “cover” for people to share what is clearly self-enhancing by seemingly directing the content to someone else whom bystanders infer they have some reason for being so forward with what would otherwise be seen as an overt brag.

The addressee is also an important party in the communication and many important questions come to mind. What is the effect that self-promotion partitioning has on the addressee? Relatedly, who is likely to be singled out as an addressed recipient? We know from previous literature that impression management concerns are dampened when interacting with highly familiar others (Gosnell, Britt, & McKibben, 2011; Leary et al., 1994). Consequently, we believe individuals using self-promotion partitioning would disproportionately choose a close other as the addressee for two main reasons: (1) close others could be more interested in the self-enhancing content shared and thus be less likely to attribute it to the self-promoter’s desire to brag, and (2) even if they perceive the content as purposefully self-enhancing, they are likely to be more forgiving and less prone to alter their (well-established) impression of the self-promoter based on a single act. Findings from study 4 suggest degrading impressions of the addressee is generally not a concern for self-promoters when using self-promotional partitioning. We suspect self-promoters employ self-promotion partitioning only when they do not expect to damage the impression addressees will form in response.

It is important to state that we do not believe self-promotion partitioning is the only reason people choose to address specific members of their audience, even in the context of self-promotion. Indeed, there might be situations in which individuals choose to address someone they really care about impressing (unlike in our studies, in which the bystander was explicitly specified as the target of respondents’ self-presentation efforts). One might imagine an employee choosing to address their new boss when talking about a recent work accomplishment at lunch as a way of signaling they value that person’s opinion. While we argue this is no longer a form of self-promotion partitioning, as the boss is clearly the target of the self-enhancing message, this is a different form of strategic audience partitioning that may also be used for self-presentation reasons.

In closing, it is worth noting that impression management is only one of many goals that individuals try to achieve when communicating with others. While we believe impression management is an important and significant motivator for strategic audience partitioning, conversations and interpersonal communication serve a variety of functions, especially within organizations (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Huang, Gino, & Galinsky, 2015; Loewenstein, Morris, Chakravarti, Thompson, & Kopelman, 2005). Future research could address questions related to the use of audience partitioning as a strategic communication tool in different contexts and for reasons other than self-presentation, such as negotiations, joint decision making, and feedback seeking and provision.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Francesca Valsesia: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Resources, Investigation, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Visualization, Project administration. Joseph C. Nunes: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Resources, Investigation, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Visualization. Andrea Ordanini: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Resources, Investigation, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Visualization.

Appendix A

Additional studies referenced in the manuscript

Study A.1

This study was designed to replicate the findings of Study 1 with a different induction of the self-promotion dilemma.

Method

Respondents were 401 mTurk users who completed the study for compensation (52.1% female, $M_{age} = 40.5$). The design of this study mirrored that of Study 1, with the following exception. In the Solve Dilemma condition, respondents were told their goal during the conversation was to impress their new colleague without being seen as dislikeable (“Your goal in this conversation is to make sure Scotty would be impressed by your achievement without seeing you as dislikeable”).

Results

No participants were excluded from our analysis. An omnibus test reveals that the choice of how to share the story does indeed depend on condition ($\chi^2(3) = 76.44, p < .001, V = 0.44$). Full results are presented in table A.1 and Fig. A.1. As anticipated, and in line with prior literature, the number of respondents who chose not to share was greater in the Likeability condition (59.9%) compared to the Solve Dilemma condition (20.6%), $\chi^2(1) = 64.29, p < .001, \phi = 0.40$.

More importantly, a conditional analysis (N = 239) further reveals that among those who chose to share the story, 39.9% chose to partition their audience in the Solve Dilemma condition versus 17.3% in the Likeability condition ($\chi^2(1) = 12.51, p < .001, \phi = 0.23$).

Study A.2

This study was designed to replicate the findings of Study 1 with yet another induction of the self-promotion dilemma.

Method

Respondents were 400 mTurk users who completed the study for compensation (54.8% female, $M_{age} = 38.3$). The design of this study mirrored that of Study 1, with the following exception. In the Solve Dilemma condition, respondents were told their goal during the conversation was to impress their new colleague while also being seen as likeable and warm (“Your goal in this conversation is to make sure Scotty would be impressed by your achievement but also think you are likeable and warm”).

Table A1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Pairwise comparison</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PARTITION</td>
<td>Dilemma</td>
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<td>BROADCAST</td>
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<td>p = .027</td>
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<tr>
<td>NARROWCAST</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>p = .073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOT TELL</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only those who chose to share (conditional analysis)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTITION</td>
<td>Dilemma</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BROADCAST</td>
<td>50.6%</td>
<td>p = .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NARROWCAST</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>p = .829</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The threshold for statistical significance using the Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons is $p = .012$ for the main analysis and $p = .016$ for the conditional analysis (McDonald, 2014). Pairwise comparisons are obtained by contrasting the row of interest with the sum of all other rows. Results hold also analyzing chi-square residuals using the adjusted Fisher exact test (Shan & Gerstenberger, 2017).

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Results

No participants were excluded from our analysis. An omnibus test reveals that the choice of how to share the story does indeed depend on condition ($\chi^2 (3) = 93.65, p < .001, V = 0.48$). Full results are presented in Table A.2 and Fig. A.2. As anticipated, and in line with prior literature, the number of respondents who chose not to share was greater in the Likeability condition (59.7%) compared to the Solve Dilemma condition ($15.1%, \chi^2 (1) = 84.97, p < .001, \phi = 0.46$).

More importantly, a conditional analysis (N = 250) further reveals that among those who chose to share the story, 36.7% chose to partition their audience in the Solve Dilemma condition versus 17.3% in the Likeability condition ($\chi^2 (1) = 9.74, p = .002, \phi = 0.20$).

Discussion of A.1 and A.2

These results are consistent with the notion that individuals seen as overtly bragging are less likable, and, in turn, those who self-promote do not want to come across as bragging as this might affect their likeability. It appears that describing the self-promotion dilemma in terms of the more proximal goal of not coming across as bragging, or in terms of the more distal goal of affecting one’s likeability, lead to similar responses. Interestingly, this is true irrespective of how the likeability goal is framed (being liked vs. not hurting one’s likeability).

Table A2

Choice shares based on self-presentation goal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Pairwise comparison</th>
<th>Likeability</th>
<th>Dilemma</th>
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<td>NARROWCAST</td>
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<td>4.0%</td>
<td>$p = .126$</td>
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<tr>
<td>NOT TELL</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
<td>$p &lt; .001$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only those who chose to share (conditional analysis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Pairwise comparison</th>
<th>Likeability</th>
<th>Dilemma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PARTITION</td>
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<td>17.3%</td>
<td>$p = .002$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BROADCAST</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
<td>72.8%</td>
<td>$p = .005$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NARROWCAST</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>$p = .798$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The threshold for statistical significance using the Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons is $p = .012$ for the main analysis and $p = .016$ for the conditional analysis (McDonald, 2014).

Pairwise comparisons are obtained by contrasting the row of interest with the sum of all other rows. Results hold also analyzing chi-square residuals using the adjusted Fisher exact test (Shan & Gerstenberger, 2017).

Fig. A1. Self-presentation goal affects sharing.

STUDY A.3

In study A.3, respondents are not given a specific self-presentational goal. Instead, we vary the extent to which the content they share is self-enhancing in nature. We expect people to be more prone to use self-promotion partitioning when the content shared is self-enhancing (and thus individuals should be more likely to experience the self-promotion dilemma). In this study respondents are also given the option of sharing the information privately with the person they would address in case they chose to partition. This allows us to test whether partitioning is used simply to ensure the addressee pays attention to the information being shared; if this were the case, narrowcasting by separately sharing with the addressee would fulfill that objective.

Method

Respondents were 400 mTurk participants who completed the study for compensation (56.3% female, $M_{age} = 37.1$). Respondents read a short scenario about taking an IQ test administered by their Human Resources department. We manipulated the self-enhancing nature of the content by varying whether respondents performed exceptionally well or not on the test (Content: Self-Enhancing vs. Not Self-Enhancing). Next, respondents imagined sitting at a table in their workplace cafeteria with a group of colleagues with whom they were considering sharing the results of their test. Based on the Content condition, respondents were presented with a statement pre-tested to be more or less self-enhancing (“I just aced (tanked) an IQ test this morning! (But) I knew (thought) I was a genius!”). They then chose how they would prefer to share. They had the option of: (1) pretending to tell the story only to the person sitting next to them, making sure everyone at the table would be able to ‘overhear’ them; (2) telling everyone at the table simultaneously; (3) just telling to the person sitting next to them, making sure others would not hear, or (4) not telling the story.

At the end of the study, respondents were asked to report the extent to which they felt the content they considered sharing was self-enhancing in nature.

Results

No participants were excluded from our analysis.

Manipulation check - The content shared was deemed to be more self-enhancing in the Self-Enhancement condition ($M_{SelfEnhancing} = 6.98$, $SD = 1.99$ vs. $M_{NotSelfEnhancing} = 2.55$, $SD = 2.07$, $F(1,398) = 477.46, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.54$).
**Choice** - An omnibus test reveals that the Choice of how to share the story does indeed depend on Condition ($\chi^2 (3) = 9.61, p = .022, V = 0.16$). Full results are presented in Table A3 and Fig. A.3.

Significantly more respondents chose to partition their audience in the Self-Enhancing condition than in the Not Self-Enhancing condition ($17.2\%$ vs. $7.9\%, \chi^2 (1) = 7.82, p = .005, \phi = 0.14$). Interestingly, in this study the number of those who chose not to tell the story did not vary across conditions ($38.9\%$ vs. $41.2\%, \chi^2 (1) = 0.42, p = .516$). Moreover, the number of those who chose to tell the story to their friend alone ($31.8\%$ vs. $31.7\%, \chi^2 (1) = 0.00, p = .997$) also did not vary. A conditional analysis excluding those who chose not to tell the story ($N = 273$) further reveals that $25.2\%$ chose to partition their audience in the Self-Enhancing condition versus $11.6\%$ in the Not Self-Enhancing condition ($\chi^2 (1) = 8.43, p = .004, \phi = 0.18$).

**Discussion**

Study A.3 provides additional evidence that individuals are more likely to partition their audience when they intend to share self-enhancing content (i.e., are more likely to face the self-promotion dilemma). This is true even when they are given the option to narrowcast by only sharing the story with the addressee. While the number of respondents who chose to share their story with the whole audience did not vary across conditions, what did vary was how they chose to deliver the message. A greater percentage of respondents preferred to pretend to only tell the addressee when the content shared was self-enhancing in nature. This suggests audience partitioning is not only about informing the addressee; self-promoters use self-promotion partitioning because they really want their message to be ‘overheard’ by those who are not addressed.

**Study A.4**

It is important to provide evidence that individuals expect bystanders to form a more favorable impression even when the self-enhancing content shared is exactly the same, and all that changes is who is addressed. Study A.4 was designed to provide additional evidence that someone sharing self-enhancing content expects to make a better impression on bystanders when using audience partitioning. However, it does so in a different context, that of social media, while controlling for what content participants share. Importantly, the task in this study has real-world implications as respondents posted a real self-enhancing message on their own Facebook wall. Partitioning is manipulated by varying whether respondents were instructed to tag someone or not. The dependent variable is how they expect non-addressed audience members to respond. We expect individuals who post self-enhancing content to expect to make a better impression on non-addressed audience members when they tag someone (i.e., use self-promotion partitioning).

**Method**

The target sample size was 100 participants per condition, which we predicted would be an adequate size to detect an effect. We recruited 201 respondents (45.3% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 34.1$) on the online platform Prolific Academic. Respondents were prescreened to be native English speakers. Only actual Facebook users were allowed to complete the study.

Respondents first answered three relatively easy logic questions purported to be part of an IQ test (the correct response rate averaged 94.8%). Each respondent was informed that he or she had performed better than 80% of those who had completed the survey and, although not diagnostic, this result implied an IQ level of up to 160. Next, respondents were asked to log on to their Facebook account and post the following message about these results: “Aced an IQ test today! I knew I

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### Table A3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Pairwise comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Enhancing</td>
<td>Not Self-Enhancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTITION</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BROADCAST</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NARROWCAST</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOT TELL</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only those who chose to share (conditional analysis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTITION</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BROADCAST</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NARROWCAST</td>
<td>57.0%</td>
<td>61.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The threshold for statistical significance using the Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons is $p = .012$ for the main analysis and $p = .016$ for the conditional analysis (McDonald, 2014). Pairwise comparisons are obtained by contrasting the row of interest with the sum of all other rows. Results hold also analyzing chi-square residuals using the adjusted Fisher exact test (Shan & Gerstenberger, 2017).
was a genius 😊!” We manipulated whether or not they were instructed to tag a Facebook friend (Audience Partitioned: Yes vs. No). To ensure compliance, we instructed respondents to upload a screenshot of the post.

Next, respondents were asked to name a person they recently friended on Facebook (those in the Audience Partitioned condition were explicitly instructed to think of someone other than the person they tagged). While thinking about this person, they were asked the following questions: “What is the overall impression that you believe this person will form about you?” (1 = very unfavorable, 9 = very favorable), and “To what extent do you believe this person will like you?” (1 = not at all, 9 = a great deal). Responses to these two questions were averaged to form a single Expected Impression measure (r = 0.79).

Results

No participants were excluded from our analysis. A between-subject ANOVA predicting Expected Impression with Audience Partitioned (Yes vs. No) reveals that, as predicted, respondents expect non-addressed recipients to form a better impression of them when someone was explicitly instructed to think of someone other than the person they were a genius 😊! We manipulated whether or not they were instructed to tag a Facebook friend (Audience Partitioned: Yes vs. No). To ensure compliance, we instructed respondents to upload a screenshot of the post.

Next, respondents were asked to name a person they recently friended on Facebook (those in the Audience Partitioned condition were explicitly instructed to think of someone other than the person they tagged). While thinking about this person, they were asked the following questions: “What is the overall impression that you believe this person will form about you?” (1 = very unfavorable, 9 = very favorable), and “To what extent do you believe this person will like you?” (1 = not at all, 9 = a great deal). Responses to these two questions were averaged to form a single Expected Impression measure (r = 0.79).

Results

No participants were excluded from our analysis. A between-subject ANOVA predicting Expected Impression with Audience Partitioned (Yes vs. No) reveals that, as predicted, respondents expect non-addressed recipients to form a better impression of them when someone was addressed (i.e., tagged) in the post (MPartitioned = 5.98, SD = 1.74 vs. MNoPartitioned = 4.69, SD = 1.91, F(1, 199) = 7.39, p = .007, ηp² = 0.04).

Discussion

Study A.4 shows how self-enhancing content is expected to make a better impression on non-addressed audience members when someone is addressed in the message, doing so in a social media context. These results are consistent with audience partitioning being a self-presentation strategy employed to help solve the self-promotion dilemma. Further, the findings are consistent with those of study 2, which also looked at the use of tags on social media.

Appendix B. Pre-test study 2

Pre-test 1: self-enhancing tweets contain power/achievement words

We asked 1000 Twitter users recruited on mTurk to each write two separate tweets. They were instructed first to “write a tweet about anything that comes to your mind (e.g., you could write about what you are doing right now).” Next, they were instructed to write a self-enhancing tweet described as “a tweet written with the specific goal of impressing those who read it.” In short, each respondent wrote two tweets that varied in terms of Content (Control vs. Self-Enhancement).

For each tweet, LIWC reports the percentage of words related to power and achievement. Our self-enhancement metric is the total percentage of power and achievement-related words in each tweet. Across conditions the range was 0–67% while the distribution had some notable features. First, there was a disproportionate number of tweets with no power/achievement words at all (60% for Self-Enhancement; 60% for Control). Second, the distribution of positive values was skewed and concentrated (M ≈ 12, SD ≈ 8). Given these features of the distribution, we chose to employ a dummy variable transformation (Hosmer, Lemeshow, & Sturdivant, 2013), dichotomizing the DV. Each tweet was judged as self-enhancing or not based on whether it contained any power or achievement-related words. A test on equality of proportions reveals the share of tweets coded as self-enhancing is significantly greater (+35%) in the Self-Enhancement condition (0.54 vs. 0.40, z = −6.36, p < .001, Cohen’s h = 0.14). Note that those in the Control condition who wrote about anything on their mind could have included self-enhancing content, making this a conservative test. The results of the pre-test provided reassurance that we could reliably use LIWC to distinguish self-enhancing tweets in the real-world data.

Pre-test 2: tweets containing power/achievement words are more self-enhancing

This pre-test utilized two distinct sets of 500 tweets originating from the full dataset. The first 500 were drawn randomly from all tweets that did not include any power or achievement words. The second set was selected from all tweets that included a minimum of 16.5% power and/ or achievement words. Two coders (r = 0.62), blind to our research hypotheses, rated whether the 1000 tweets were Self-Enhancing (described as tweets ‘intended to make the author look good in the eyes of others’). Tweets containing a significant percentage of power and achievement words were deemed to be significantly more self-enhancing (M = 3.28, SD = 1.58) compared to tweets that did not contain power and achievement words (M = 2.61, SD = 1.22, F(1,998) = 55.32, p < .001, ηp² = 0.05). These results provide reasonable reassurance that LIWC can help distinguish self-enhancing tweets in the real-world data.

Appendix C. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2021.04.006.