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The Impact of Image Motivation on Consumption

Chenxi Fu[1,*,#], Daiyun Li[2,#], Iakov Glushkov[3,#]

[1]*Department of Economics and Management, Communication University of China, Beijing, China*
[2]*Department of Business, Dalian University of Technology, Panjin, China*
[3]*Department of Economics and Management, China University of Petroleum (East China), Qingdao, China*
**Corresponding Author. Email: Fuchenxi613@outlook.com*
#These authors contributed equally to this work and should be considered as co-second authors

Abstract. Sharing has become a normal part of buying in the digital era, yet it is still unclear whether sharing always raises purchase intention. This study examines how image motivation, defined as the desire to manage one's social image, influences consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) and purchase intention for virtual and physical products, and how these effects vary with the scope of sharing. The evidence comes from an online survey experiment with 270 participants randomly assigned to no sharing, small-scale sharing (within close groups), or large-scale sharing (public social media). OLS regressions with demographic controls show that image motivation is associated with lower purchase intention and lower WTP. The negative effect is driven mainly by small-scale sharing, while large-scale sharing shows no significant effect. For willingness to pay, the penalty of small-scale sharing is heavier for physical products than for virtual products. Overall, the results question the assumption that social sharing uniformly promotes image-driven consumption. They point to audience scope and product type as key boundary conditions and carry implications for more targeted sharing-based marketing strategies.

Keywords: image motivation, consumption, virtual products, physical products

1. Introduction

Consumption today is difficult to separate from its social afterlife. A purchase made on a shopping app can be posted to Xiaohongshu or Weibo within minutes, shared to a group chat, or mentioned in passing to friends; on many platforms, sharing has become a routine part of the consumption process itself. The assumption behind much of this activity is straightforward: visibility adds symbolic value, and symbolic value sells. Yet the assumption deserves scrutiny, because the desire to be seen in a favorable light—image motivation, in the terms used here—may just as easily discourage buying. The present study takes up this question. It asks how image motivation shapes consumers' willingness to pay for virtual and for physical products, treating the scope of expected sharing as the key moderating condition.

Image motivation denotes the drive to shape or preserve a desired social image—taste, group identity, status—when one's behavior can be observed or shared [1]. The construct sits close to

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impression management theory, which holds that people calibrate their behavior to influence how others judge them. Consumption offers a natural arena for such calibration: once a purchase is likely to be shared, it becomes visible and therefore open to social evaluation. This logic drives the operationalization adopted in the present work. Rather than measuring image motivation directly, the design manipulates whether a purchase is expected to be shared, and if so how widely—from no sharing, through sharing within close-knit groups, to posting on public social media. Audience exposure thus serves as the lever that activates image concerns and sets their intensity.

The comparison between virtual and physical products matters because a purchase can have both private value and social meaning. Digital content and game skins may form part of an online identity, while physical goods can be displayed online and encountered in everyday life. The preliminary survey data collected for this project show a striking pattern: when respondents imagined a purchase being shared, their stated willingness to buy fell for virtual and physical products alike. This observation motivates a closer examination of whether the expected audience changes purchasing decisions.

Why should willingness to buy fall? Symbolic consumption theory [2] and social identity theory [3] help explain the social meaning of goods and group membership. The theory of planned behavior also gives subjective norms a role in shaping intentions [4], although it does not imply that social pressure must always encourage a purchase. These frameworks make visibility relevant to consumption without determining its net effect. Privacy worries, fear of negative evaluation, and the burden of managing impressions may offset the benefits of display. Research on authenticity in consumption [5] and on the tension between authenticity and artifice in social media [6] provides a basis for considering these costs. Whether they differ between sharing within a close group and posting to a wider audience remains an empirical question.

Three gaps in the literature follow from this discussion. The first concerns direction. That sharing scope might weaken, or even reverse, the effect of image motivation has received little attention; the default supposition is that visibility helps, regardless of whether the audience is a private group or the public at large. The second concerns product type. Virtual and physical goods are typically examined in separate studies, leaving open whether image motivation acts with equal force on each. Virtual products, being digital by nature and closely tied to online identity expression, plausibly respond more strongly to changes in sharing scope than physical goods. The third gap is mechanistic. Why purchase intention should decline at all remains underspecified, with social evaluation apprehension, authenticity concerns, and diminished psychological ownership offered as candidate explanations [7, 8] but rarely compared directly.

These considerations translate into three research questions: (1) How does sharing scope—no sharing, small-scale sharing, or large-scale sharing—moderate the effect of image motivation on purchase intention and willingness to pay for virtual and physical products? (2) Do the effects differ between the two product types? (3) What mechanisms, such as perceived social evaluation risk or authenticity concerns, might explain the negative effect of sharing on purchase intention?

The empirical vehicle is an online survey experiment with 270 participants. Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of three conditions: no sharing; sharing within a small community, such as a WeChat group chat or Moments; or sharing on large-scale social media, such as Douyin or Xiaohongshu. Purchase intention was measured on a 5-point Likert scale, and willingness to pay through price-range categories. The preliminary findings run counter to traditional theory. Both sharing conditions lowered purchase intention relative to no sharing, and the decline was steeper under small-scale sharing than under large-scale sharing. The pattern also varied between virtual and physical products, which points to an interaction between product type and sharing scope.

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The study contributes to the literature by identifying boundary conditions of image motivation theory: sharing does not uniformly strengthen image-driven consumption, and its effect depends on sharing scope and product type. Practical implications follow. Marketers, the results suggest, should avoid blanket encouragement of purchase sharing and instead match strategies to product characteristics and target audiences; policymakers may find in these findings material for fostering healthier social consumption norms. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the methodology, Section 3 presents the results, Section 4 discusses the findings together with limitations and implications, and Section 5 concludes.

2. Methodology

2.1. Variables

2.1.1. Definition and measurement

Two outcome variables anchor the analysis. The first is purchase intention, defined as a person's stated willingness to buy a given product; respondents rated it on a 5-point Likert scale, where 0 indicated "definitely not" and 4 indicated "definitely yes." The second is maximum willingness to pay (WTP), the highest price a person would offer for the product. It was elicited with a single question: "If the average price of similar products on the market is 100 yuan, what is the maximum price you are willing to pay for this product?"

The treatment manipulates the presence of image motivation, which concretely means whether the purchase of a product is shared or not shared. A second design element varies the intensity of the treatment through the scope of sharing, producing three scenarios: no sharing, small-scale sharing, and large-scale sharing. The small-scale scenario read, "imagine that your purchase of this product will be shared on your Moments/group chats of the community." The large-scale scenario read, "imagine that your purchase of this product will be shared on social media platforms such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu, Weibo, and Instagram." Assignment is coded with three dummies: T1 equals 1 for respondents in treatment group 1, T2 equals 1 for those in treatment group 2, and C equals 1 for the control group, with zero assigned otherwise.

Control variables cover the individual characteristics that plausibly correlate with purchasing decisions: gender, age, education level, monthly income, monthly expenditure, time spent playing games, and sense of sunk cost. Their role is to absorb individual heterogeneity.

2.2. Model

The effect of the treatment conditions on purchase decisions is estimated through the linear regression model in equation (1):

$$Y_i = \beta_1 T_i + \beta_2 X_i + e_i \tag{1}$$

where Y_i represents the purchasing decision of individual i, covering buying possibility and maximum willingness to pay; T_i contains the treatment variables of interest, namely the presence of image motivation and the scope of sharing; X_i is a vector of control variables (age, gender, education, income, and so on); $\beta_i$collects the coefficients on the treatment variables, which constitute the main parameters of interest; and $e_i$is the error term.

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2.3. Survey and sample

2.3.1. Research methods

Data collection relied on an online questionnaire distributed through two platforms, Wenjuanxing and Google Forms. Three questionnaire versions were fielded in total, one for each condition, and every version contained three parts. An introductory part gathered respondents' background information, such as gender, age, educational level, and average monthly income. An experimental part then placed respondents into treatment group 1, treatment group 2, or the control group: the scenario for treatment group 1 was "making decisions on purchasing virtual and physical products under the condition of a smaller sharing-scale," for treatment group 2 "under the condition of a larger sharing-scale," and for the control group "under the condition of no sharing." A final evaluation part elicited the outcome measures—willingness to purchase and the maximum amount consumers were prepared to pay for the products.

2.3.2. Sample characteristics

A total of 270 questionnaires were collected: 105 for treatment group 1, 85 for treatment group 2, and 80 for the control group. The control variables are demographic and socioeconomic characteristics such as age, gender, education level, and average monthly income. Descriptively, the sample skews young, female, and low-income: 75% of respondents are women, 63% are 18–24 years old, and 39% report no income. Table 1 reports, for each variable, the number of observations (Obs), the mean (Mean), the standard deviation (Std. Dev.), the minimum (Min), and the maximum (Max). Pooled purchase intention under the influence of image motivation averages 1.831, well below the midpoint of the 0–4 scale; whether the sharing manipulations account for this level is what the regressions in Section 3 examine.

Table 1. Summary statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std.dev.	Min	Max
overall buying possibility	270	1.831	1.028	0	4
overall maximum account	270	1.880	0.753	1	4
virtual buying possibility	270	1.670	1.150	0	4
virtual maximum account	270	1.830	0.786	1	4
physical buying possibility	270	1.993	1.094	0	4
physical buying account	270	1.930	0.857	1	4
sharing	270	0.704	0.457	0	1
small scale sharing	270	0.389	0.488	0	1
large scale sharing	270	0.315	0.465	0	1
gender	270	0.752	0.433	0	1
age	270	2.819	1.250	2	6
monthly income	270	5.167	1.849	1	8
monthly expenditure	270	3.437	1.555	1	5

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Table 1. (continued)

educational level	270	7.007	1.859	1	10
sense of sunk cost	270	3.352	1.210	1	5

3. Results

This section presents the data tables and analysis results. The variables in the tables are defined as follows. "Buying possibility" refers to purchase intention as defined in Section 2.1, and "maximum account" refers to maximum willingness to pay. "Sharing" combines the small-scale and large-scale conditions into a single treatment indicator and is estimated on the outcomes pooled over virtual and physical products; its coefficient is the aggregated treatment effect. "Small-scale sharing" is the treatment dummy for the first treatment group, in which the purchased items are shared within a small scope. "Large-scale sharing" is the treatment dummy for the second treatment group, in which the purchased items are shared within a large scope. "Constant" represents the estimated outcome mean of the control group. "N" is the number of observations. "R-sq" reports the coefficient of determination (R^2).

3.1. Overall data features

There are two tables in this section. Table 2 shows the impact of the variable "sharing", which is the sum of "small-scale sharing" and "large-scale sharing" and reflects the impact of image motivation on buying possibility and the maximum account willing to be paid. Table 3 shows the respective impacts of "small-scale sharing" and "large-scale sharing", which reflect the impact of different degrees of image motivation on buying possibility and the maximum account willing to be paid.

Table 2. Pooled effects of anticipated sharing

Dependent variable:	buying possibility	maximum account
	(1)	(2)
Panel A: without controlling personal characteristics		
sharing	-0.328*** (0.136)	-0.260*** (0.099)
constant	2.062*** (0.114)	2.062*** (0.083)
N	270	270
R-sq	0.021	0.025
Panel B: with controlling personal characteristics		
sharing	-0.278*** (0.134)	-0.226*** (0.093)
gender	-0.355*** (0.144)	-0.113 (0.101)
age	-0.117*** (0.052)	-0.071* (0.036)
monthly income	-0.050 (0.037)	-0.046* (0.026)
monthly expenditure	-0.012 (0.042)	-0.047 (0.029)
educational level	0.006 (0.033)	0.102*** (0.023)
playing game time	-0.088 (0.056)	-0.120*** (0.039)

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Table 2. (continued)

sense of sunk cost	0.066 (0.051)	0.001 (0.036)
constant	2.911*** (0.444)	2.345*** (0.310)
N	270	270
R-sq	0.088	0.174

Notes: Estimates are obtained using OLS, with standard errors reported in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05; * p < 0.1.

First, table 2 shows the overall data features.

This table is divided into two modules. Module 1 presents the impact of variable "sharing", which is the sum of "small-scale sharing" and "large-scale sharing" and reflects the impact of image motivation on buying possibility and the maximum account willing to be paid under the condition of not controlling variables.

Column (1) of Panel A shows that under the condition of not controlling variables, there is a significant negative association between sharing and buying possibility. Column (2) of Panel A shows that under the condition of not controlling variables, there is a significant negative association between sharing and the maximum account willing to be paid for the purchased items. Comparing with the control group, the effect of sharing is related to 32.8 percentage point lower in buying possibility outcome, at 1% significant level. What's more, comparing with the control group, the effect of sharing is related to 26.0 percentage point lower in maximum account, at 1% significant level.

Module 2 presents the impact of variable "sharing", which is the sum of "small-scale sharing" and "large-scale sharing" and reflects the impact of image motivation on buying possibility and the maximum account willing to be paid under the condition of controlling variables.

Column (1) of Panel B shows that under the condition of controlling variables, there is a significant negative association between sharing and buying possibility. Column (2) of Panel B shows that under the condition of controlling variables, there is a significant negative association between sharing and the maximum account willing to be paid for the purchased items. Comparing with the control group, the effect of sharing is related to 27.8 percentage point lower in buying possibility outcome, at 1% significant level. What's more, comparing with the control group, the effect of sharing is related to 22.6 percentage point lower in maximum account, at 1% significant level.

Second, table 3 shows the overall data features about sharing scope.

Table 3. Effects by sharing scope

Dependent variable:	buying possibility	maximum account
	(1)	(2)
Panel A: without controlling personal characteristics		
small-scale sharing	-0.467*** (0.150)	-0.453*** (0.107)
large-scale sharing	-0.157 (0.158)	-0.021 (0.113)
constant	2.063*** (0.113)	2.062*** (0.081)
N	270	270

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Table 3. (continued)

R-sq	0.037	0.082
Panel B: with controlling personal characteristics		
small-scale sharing	-0.391*** (0.151)	-0.377*** (0.104)
large-scale sharing	-0.151 (0.156)	-0.055 (0.107)
gender	-0.355*** (0.144)	-0.113 (0.099)
age	-0.111*** (0.052)	-0.063* (0.036)
monthly income	-0.052 (0.037)	-0.049* (0.026)
monthly expenditure	-0.015 (0.042)	-0.050* (0.029)
educational level	-0.001 (0.034)	0.093*** (0.023)
playing game time	-0.069 (0.057)	-0.095*** (0.039)
sense of sunk cost	0.069 (0.051)	0.005 (0.035)
constant	2.904*** (0.443)	2.335*** (0.305)
N	270	270
R-sq	0.097	0.203

Notes: Estimates are obtained using OLS, with standard errors reported in parentheses. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

This table is divided into two modules. Module 1 shows the respective impacts of "small-scale sharing" and "large-scale sharing", which reflect the impact of different degrees of image motivation on buying possibility and the maximum account willing to be paid under the condition of not controlling variables.

Column (1) of Panel A shows that under the condition of not controlling variables, there is a significant negative association between small-scale sharing and buying possibility but there is not a significant association between large-scale sharing and buying possibility. Column (2) of Panel A shows that under the condition of not controlling variables, there is a significant negative association between small-scale sharing and the maximum account willing to be paid for the purchased items but there is not a significant association between large-scale sharing and the maximum account willing to be paid for the purchased items. Comparing with the control group, the effect of small-scale sharing is related to 46.7 percentage point lower in buying possibility outcome, at 1% significant level and is related to 45.3 percentage point lower in maximum account, at 1% significant level. What's more, comparing with the control group, the effect of large-scale sharing is related to 15.7 percentage point lower in buying possibility outcome and is related to 2.10 percentage point lower in maximum account.

Module 2 shows the respective impacts of "small-scale sharing" and "large-scale sharing", which reflect the impact of different degrees of image motivation on buying possibility and the maximum account willing to be paid under the condition of controlling variables.

Column (1) of Panel B shows that under the condition of controlling variables, there is a significant negative association between small-scale sharing and buying possibility but there is not a significant association between large-scale sharing and buying possibility. Column (2) of Panel B shows that under the condition of controlling variables, there is a significant negative association

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between small-scale sharing and the maximum account willing to be paid for the purchased items but there is not a significant association between large-scale sharing and the maximum account willing to be paid for the purchased items. Comparing with the control group, the effect of small-scale sharing is related to 39.1 percentage point lower in buying possibility outcome, at 1% significant level and is related to 37.7 percentage point lower in maximum account, at 1% significant level. What's more, comparing with the control group, the effect of large-scale sharing is related to 15.1 percentage point lower in buying possibility outcome and is related to 5.5 percentage point lower in maximum account.

3.2. Impact on virtual products

There is one table in this section. Table 4 shows the respective impacts of "small-scale sharing" and "large-scale sharing", which reflect the impact of different degrees of image motivation on the buying possibility towards virtual products and the maximum account willing to be paid for virtual products.

Table 4. Effects on virtual products

Dependent variable:	virtual buying possibility	virtual maximum account
	(1)	(2)
small scale sharing	-0.427*** (0.169)	-0.330*** (0.112)
large scale sharing	-0.112 (0.174)	0.007 (0.115)
gender	-0.257 (0.161)	-0.162 (0.107)
age	-0.110* (0.058)	-0.035 (0.039)
monthly income	-0.066 (0.041)	-0.027 (0.027)
monthly expenditure	-0.043 (0.047)	-0.049 (0.031)
educational level	0.002 (0.037)	0.074*** (0.025)
playing game time	-0.127*** (0.064)	-0.102*** (0.043)
sense of sunk cost	0.077 (0.057)	-0.008 (0.038)
constant	2.954*** (0.494)	2.280*** (0.328)
N	270	270
R-sq	0.101	0.152

Notes: Estimates are obtained using OLS, with standard errors reported in parentheses. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Column (1) shows that under the condition of controlling variables, there is a significant negative association between small-scale sharing and buying possibility towards virtual products but there is not a significant association between large-scale sharing and buying possibility towards virtual products. Column (2) shows that under the condition of controlling variables, there is a significant negative association between small-scale sharing and the maximum account willing to be paid for virtual products but there is not a significant association between large-scale sharing and the maximum account willing to be paid for virtual products. Comparing with the control group, the effect of small-scale sharing is related to 42.7 percentage point lower in virtual buying possibility

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outcome, at 1% significant level and is related to 33.0 percentage point lower in virtual maximum account outcome, at 1% significant level. What's more, comparing with the control group, the effect of large-scale sharing is related to 11.2 percentage point lower in virtual buying possibility outcome and is related to 0.7 percentage point higher in virtual maximum account outcome.

3.3. Impact on physical products

There is one table in this section. Table 5 shows the respective impacts of "small-scale sharing" and "large-scale sharing", which reflect the impact of different degrees of image motivation on the buying possibility towards physical products and the maximum account willing to be paid for physical products.

Table 5. Effects on physical products

Dependent variable:	physical buying possibility	physical maximum account
	(1)	(2)
small scale sharing	-0.355*** (0.163)	-0.423*** (0.119)
large scale sharing	-0.189 (0.168)	-0.117 (0.122)
gender	-0.453*** (0.155)	-0.065 (0.113)
age	-0.112*** (0.056)	-0.091*** (0.041)
monthly	-0.038 (0.040)	-0.071*** (0.029)
monthly expenditure	0.013 (0.045)	-0.052 (0.033)
educational level	-0.004 (0.036)	0.112*** (0.026)
playing game time	-0.011 (0.062)	-0.088* (0.045)
sense of sunk cost	0.061 (0.055)	0.017 (0.040)
_cons	2.855*** (0.477)	2.391*** (0.348)
N	270	270
R-sq	0.077	0.199

Notes: Estimates are obtained using OLS, with standard errors reported in parentheses. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Column (1) shows that under the condition of controlling variables, there is a significant negative association between small-scale sharing and buying possibility towards physical products but there is not a significant association between large-scale sharing and buying possibility towards physical products. Column (2) shows that under the condition of controlling variables, there is a significant negative association between small-scale sharing and the maximum account willing to be paid for physical products but there is not a significant association between large-scale sharing and the maximum account willing to be paid for physical products. Comparing with the control group, the effect of small-scale sharing is related to 35.5 percentage point lower in physical buying possibility outcome, at 1% significant level and is related to 42.3 percentage point lower in physical maximum account outcome, at 1% significant level. What's more, comparing with the control group, the effect of large-scale sharing is related to 18.9 percentage point lower in physical buying possibility outcome and is related to 11.7 percentage point lower in physical maximum account outcome.

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4. Discussion

4.1. Theoretical integration and mechanism analysis

Across all specifications the estimates tell a single story: expecting a purchase to be shared lowers both purchase intention and willingness to pay, the damage concentrates in small-scale sharing, and the two product types do not respond in quite the same way. The pooled sharing effect is negative and significant; once the scopes are separated, small-scale sharing keeps coefficients between −0.33 and −0.47 while large-scale sharing never reaches significance. Any account of image-driven consumption that treats visibility as uniformly beneficial sits awkwardly with these numbers.

Why should expected sharing suppress buying? Impression management theory [1] supplies the starting point. People regulate their behavior when others are watching, and a purchase destined to be shared is, by definition, watched. A consumer weighing such a purchase thinks about two things at once: what the product does for them, and what it says about them. The results reported in Section 3 indicate that the second consideration can outweigh the first.

The mechanism proposed here is impression management pressure, the cognitive and emotional cost of anticipating other people's judgment of one's consumption. Once a purchase is expected to circulate, the mental question changes from whether one likes the item to how one's choice will be read. Three costly processes follow. Fear of negative judgment—evaluation apprehension—discourages acting on genuine preference and pushes consumers toward safe options, not buying at all included. Cognitive dissonance appears when the image a product projects clashes with how the buyer sees themselves; declining the purchase resolves the clash. And contemplating sharing can crowd out intrinsic motivation [8]: once social approval enters the calculation, consumers begin to wonder whether they want the product or merely want to be seen with it.

The scope asymmetry has to do with who is in the audience. A small-scale share lands among people who know the consumer—WeChat Moments, group chats of friends—where authenticity carries real weight [9]. Being caught performing for one's own circle feels costly; a purchase that looks inauthentic or showy threatens standing in relationships that matter. The stakes of impression management are therefore highest precisely where the audience is intimate. A large-scale share, by contrast, reaches a largely anonymous and heterogeneous public. On open platforms performativity is the norm rather than a violation of it; products circulate there as social currency and status signals [10], and reconciling self-expression with status signaling is comparatively easy. The crowding-out logic weakens accordingly, which fits the null coefficients on large-scale sharing.

Two other pathways may also be at work, although neither of them replaces the one described above. One is weakened psychological ownership [7]. When consumers are told in advance that a purchase will be shared, the feeling that the product belongs to them alone starts to fade before they have even acquired it. In their minds the item is already handed over to an audience, and what used to be private property turns into a public display. The emotional attachment that usually drives purchase desire becomes weaker as well, above all for products whose value lies in personal identity. The other pathway has to do with social norms and signaling [11]. Physical goods can be touched and seen in offline life, so they send stronger signals about identity, status, and group membership than virtual goods do. Once a physical purchase is going to be shared, the signaling stakes therefore rise. The willingness-to-pay estimates fit this reading: under small-scale sharing the penalty for physical products (0.42 units) is clearly heavier than the penalty for virtual ones (0.33 units). Purchase intention points in the other direction, because the virtual penalty (0.43 points) is slightly larger than the physical one (0.36 points). It is better to acknowledge this divergence than to explain it away, since the two outcomes may capture different stages of the decision process.

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These mechanisms should not be read as rivals. They most likely work together. Expected sharing sets off evaluation apprehension, the signaling stakes of physical goods make that apprehension sharper, and the weakening of psychological ownership removes some of the emotional support that would otherwise keep purchase desire alive. Impression management pressure stands at the center of this network, but it is the network as a whole that produces the pattern found in the data.

One caveat about the manipulation itself also needs to be recorded. Sharing scope was meant to capture different intensities of image motivation, but scope moves together with audience intimacy: small-scale audiences are close audiences, and large-scale audiences are distant ones. For this reason the estimates pick up image motivation together with its social context, not image motivation on its own. Future designs could hold intimacy fixed while changing scope, for example by comparing an intimate group with a non-intimate group of the same size, or could measure perceived intimacy and evaluation apprehension directly and include them as covariates.

None of the mechanisms, finally, was measured directly; they were inferred from the pattern of results. The interpretation offered above should accordingly be read as generative rather than confirmatory. Process measures—scales for evaluation apprehension, authenticity concerns, and psychological ownership—combined with mediation tests through structural equation modeling or bootstrapping would put the account on firmer ground, and designs that manipulate the proposed mediators, for example by priming authenticity concerns, would provide causal evidence. What the present study contributes is a set of hypotheses specific enough to be tested.

4.2. Limitations future directions and practical implications

Certain limits of the design should be kept in view when interpreting the findings. The sample numbers 270 respondents and skews young, female, and highly educated; whether the observed patterns hold in other demographic and cultural settings is a question only replication can answer. A second limitation, noted above, is the conflation of audience size with audience intimacy in the sharing manipulation, which prevents a clean isolation of image motivation from relational closeness.

A third concern is measurement. Both outcomes were elicited coarsely. Willingness to pay came in categorical price ranges, which makes the OLS estimates approximations; ordered probit or logit specifications would be a natural robustness check. The scenarios were also hypothetical—no respondent actually paid anything—and hypothetical bias cannot be ruled out. Incentive-compatible designs, experimental auctions chief among them, would strengthen external validity.

The psychological constructs at the center of the interpretation—impression management concerns, authenticity, evaluation apprehension, psychological ownership—went unmeasured, as already acknowledged. Future work that adds validated scales could test the proposed pathways formally. Longitudinal designs would add a further dimension: whether the effects decay over time, and whether actual sharing experience changes subsequent purchase decisions.

The findings nonetheless translate into practical guidance. Consumers, for one, benefit from knowing that sharing expectations can distort their own preferences. The question worth asking before a purchase—whether the item is chosen for oneself or for how it will look to others—can mitigate the crowding-out of intrinsic motivation and guard against regret. Platform tools that restrict audience visibility, such as Instagram's "Close Friends" stories, let users keep sharing while limiting the pressure it creates.

For marketers, the central lesson is that encouraging sharing is not a uniform good. Products destined for close circles call for messaging that stresses authenticity, personal meaning, and shared values rather than display; reassurance that a purchase reflects the buyer's real identity can ease

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authenticity anxiety. Physical products, the more exposed to impression management pressure in the WTP estimates, are better promoted through intrinsic benefits—quality, comfort, functionality—presented alongside social signals rather than in place of them. Virtual products occupy a different position: they invite performative identity expression, so status signaling can be pushed further, through limited-edition digital collectibles or exclusive in-game badges, provided the consumer's genuine engagement with the product is respected.

Platform designers face a related task. Granular audience control—friend lists, purchase-visibility selectors—reduces the anxiety of unintended exposure. Strengthening psychological ownership over digital goods, through customization options, exclusive access, or tradability, may offset the dilution that anticipated sharing causes. For policymakers and educators, the results argue for digital literacy programs that teach younger consumers how sharing norms shape desire, and for vigilance toward marketing that exploits image anxiety to drive compulsive or conspicuous consumption; transparency requirements around the social features of platforms belong in the same conversation.

Taken together, the evidence shows that image motivation is no reliable engine of consumption: whether it propels or suppresses buying depends on who will see the purchase and on what kind of product is involved.

5. Conclusion

This study began with a question that is easy to state but harder to answer: does the desire to manage one's social image push people toward buying or hold them back? The empirical material came from an online survey experiment with 270 participants, each of whom was randomly assigned to no sharing, small-scale sharing, or large-scale sharing. Purchase intention and maximum willingness to pay (WTP) for virtual and physical products served as the outcomes. What the analysis produced complicates the view that visibility reliably fuels consumption.

The pooled estimates come first. Expecting a purchase to be shared lowers both outcomes. Without controls, the sharing coefficient is −0.328 for purchase intention and −0.260 for WTP; after demographic characteristics are added, the two coefficients move only slightly, to −0.278 and −0.226. This result goes against the conventional account, in which sharing amplifies the symbolic value of products and symbolic value sells. What the data show instead is that the mere anticipation of circulation dampens the desire to buy. The social visibility of consumption, in other words, brings psychological costs that can outweigh the signaling benefits it carries, so the relationship between image motivation and consumption is more complicated than existing theory usually assumes.

The scope of anticipated sharing matters considerably. When purchases are expected to surface within close-knit circles such as WeChat Moments or community group chats, the negative effect is pronounced: relative to the control group, small-scale sharing is associated with 0.36–0.47 points lower purchase intention and 0.33–0.45 units lower WTP across specifications. When the audience is the open public of social media platforms, no statistically detectable effect remains. Audience composition is not a detail here but the crux. Intimate audiences appear to activate precisely the concerns—about authenticity, about judgment by people whose opinions matter—that anonymous ones leave dormant.

Product type adds a second boundary, though not a symmetric one. For virtual and physical products alike, small-scale sharing depresses purchase intention and WTP while large-scale sharing leaves both statistically unchanged. The magnitudes, however, divide by outcome. The WTP penalty under small-scale sharing is heavier for physical products (0.42 units) than for virtual ones (0.33 units), which is consistent with the argument that tangible goods, being closely tied to offline identity construction, carry higher signaling stakes: once their purchase becomes visible, concerns

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about authenticity and social evaluation intensify. Purchase intention moves the other way, with the virtual penalty (0.43 points) marginally exceeding the physical one (0.36 points). Rather than force the two outcomes into a single narrative, it seems wiser to read them as registering different things—willingness to pay may respond to the identity stakes of the product, while stated intention may respond to how naturally the product lends itself to online self-presentation.

Several theoretical contributions follow from these findings. The study identifies boundary conditions for image motivation theory: image motivation does not uniformly enhance consumption, and whether it does at all depends on who will see the purchase and on what kind of product is involved. Impression management theory [1] supplies the framework within which these contingencies become intelligible. The findings also connect to recent scholarship on authenticity in digital contexts [5, 6], insofar as the performative demands of social sharing appear to set consumers' authentic selves against the images they feel obliged to project. By analyzing virtual and physical products within a single design, the study further extends a literature that has tended to examine the two categories in isolation.

Practical implications follow for three audiences. Marketers should not treat the encouragement of sharing as a uniformly profitable strategy; campaigns are better matched to the product type and to the sharing context the product is likely to meet, and products headed for close circles call for messaging about authenticity and personal meaning rather than conspicuous display. Platform designers have reason to give users fine-grained control over sharing audiences, since the anxiety attached to unintended exposure is one of the costs this study documents; features such as friend lists and audience selectors bear directly on it. Consumers, finally, stand to benefit from knowing that sharing expectations can bend their own preferences—awareness of this mechanism may support more deliberate purchasing and fewer regretted buys.

The usual cautions apply, and then some. The sample of 270 is small and skews young, female, and highly educated; generalization to other demographic groups and cultural settings awaits replication with larger and more varied samples. The manipulation of sharing scope, moreover, welds audience size to audience intimacy, because small-scale audiences are typically close ones. Isolating image motivation from relational closeness would require designs that vary scope while holding intimacy constant, or that measure perceived intimacy and evaluation apprehension directly and control for them statistically.

Measurement imposes its own limits. Willingness to pay was elicited in categorical price ranges, which makes the OLS estimates approximations; ordered probit or logit specifications would offer a robustness check, and incentive-compatible methods such as experimental auctions would speak to purchasing behavior outside hypothetical scenarios. The psychological mechanisms invoked throughout—evaluation apprehension, authenticity concerns, motivation crowding-out, and attenuated psychological ownership—were inferred from the pattern of results rather than measured. Incorporating validated scales for these constructs and formally testing mediation would move the argument from exploratory interpretation toward empirical validation.

What the evidence supports, in the end, is a modest but firm conclusion: image motivation, operationalized through anticipated sharing, can suppress rather than stimulate purchase intention, and whether it does depends critically on the scope of sharing and on the product at hand. The assumption that sharing uniformly enhances consumption does not survive contact with these data. If the findings carry a broader message, it is that social visibility is a double-edged instrument in the digital economy, and that the interplay among identity, authenticity, and consumption merits the further investigation this study is intended to encourage.

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Declaration of interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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