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Saving the First for Last: The Effect of Order of Sharing Positive Information on Happiness

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SAVING THE FIRST FOR LAST: THE EFFECT OF ORDER OF SHARING POSITIVE INFORMATION
ON HAPPINESS

by

Yuesihan (Georgina) Wang

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the Marketing

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Thesis Mentor

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All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
Marketing have been completed.

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Saving the First for Last:
The Effect of Order of Sharing Positive Information on Happiness

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Yuesihan (Georgina) Wang

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in the

Tippie College of Business

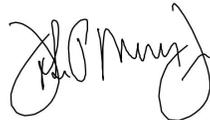


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Thesis received in partial satisfaction of the requirements to graduate with Honors in the Major



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ABSTRACT

Positive information sharing has positive effects on wellbeing, and withholding the consumption of pleasurable items would increase the satiation level. Building upon prior research, the current study expanded the understanding of the withholding effect from sharing positive information on individual happiness levels. Specifically, sharing positive information in the reversed order (i.e., sharing with the first person one wants to share with last) will result in an increased level of happiness. Through experimental evidence, this study further shows that Financial, Academic, and Social are the three major types of positive information undergraduates would share; typically, they would share with their family, friends, and spouse. Overall, the research contributes fundamental insights into consumer sharing behavior and general wellbeing.

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INTRODUCTION

What would be the happiest thing that could happen to you now? Now imagine that it just happened. Who would be the first people you would like to share this news with, and who would be the second the third? Self-evidently, most people would share the news in this order (first, second, and third). Consistent with prior research showing that people often fail to choose and predict what maximizes their happiness (Hsee & Hastie, 2006), we propose that people will derive more happiness from these positive events if they share it in the reversed order, that is, sharing it with the third person first, then the second person, and lastly the third person. Based on the existing literature on information disclosure, emotionality, satiation, desire, and anticipation, we further propose that this happens because the reversed order increases people's desire to share the positive event over time than the default order and the increased desire to share allows people to derive more happiness from it.

To provide initial support for these propositions, we present findings from one exploratory study. The study was conducted with undergraduates. It contains the result of an examination into what event undergraduates would feel the happiest about should it happen, whom they would share this positive event with, how happy they would feel about sharing it with each person they name, and how strong a desire they would feel to share it with the person. By doing so, this study also allows us to conduct some descriptive analyses regarding what the major types of positive events undergraduates experience, with whom they tend to share positive information, and whether there are any gender differences in happiness level of sharing.

To sum up, the current paper investigates positive personal information disclosure through a novel lens, focusing on the order of sharing and the desire for sharing. It obtains preliminary evidence that sharing a positive personal event in an order contrary to the default order results in an overall higher level of happiness. By doing so, the research offers important insights into consumer sharing behavior and general wellbeing.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Positive Information Disclosure

Although some people tend to withhold information for reasons like privacy, trust, and self-preservation, they still show a strong willingness to divulge positive and negative personal information (high grades and job offers, or failures and declinations). Typically, the outcomes of information disclosure are positive. Fundamentally, self-expression, self-clarification, social validation, relationship, and social control are primary purposes for information sharing (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). A majority of previous researchers of this topic focused on the positive effect of developing a closer relationship through self-disclosure. Mainly, positive disclosure also positively affects building more intimate relationships (Gable, Gonzaga, et al., 2006).

Additionally, the process of sharing creates a chance for the subject to re-experience the positive effects of the event itself, and the communication of positive events enhances the salience and accessibility in memory. Thus, sharing positive life events with others generates additional positive results over the event itself and further promotes individual wellbeing (Gabel, Reis, et al., 2004). In our study, specifically focusing on positive events and information sharing contributes to the first research question:

RQ1: What do undergraduate participants consider to be personal positive events?

Capitalization and Emotionality

Concerning why people disclose information, previous research results suggested that one of the most prominent reasons is that they capitalize on the responses (Langston, 1994). Despite the valence of

positive events themselves, sharing or celebrating with others can enhance the positive effects. Specifically, expressive responses make the event more memorable to oneself, and the subject's positive mood will be prolonged through the congratulatory responses and approval of others. Positive effects of capitalization can also enhance relationships and personal and social growth (Gable, Gonzaga, et al., 2006). On the contrary, research also discovered that, unlike capitalizing, individuals who chose mass-sharing or bragging as responses to positive events would hinder the benefits from positive information sharing (Palmer, 2016).

Another motive behind people's willingness to share information is the emotionality that drives the action. The existing literature confirmed the immediacy of people to share information. It centered around emotional disruptiveness and rumination from social sharing and how information sharing is mostly with intimates like close friends, spouses, and family (Derlega et al., 2011). Specifically, the more substantial the emotional disruption caused by an event is, the quicker the emotions are shared. Besides the emotional effect of the event itself, previous research that focused on the social sharing of emotion also suggested that people share emotional experiences soon after they occurred (Carbone & Loewenstein, 2020). From studies done by Rimé et al. (1991), most participants often share events with different persons on the same day.

Desire

As human beings, we experience intrinsic wishes to obtain certain goods, achieve goals, and share information. As mentioned before, positive information sharing as a form of self-disclosure also serves as a form of desire to enhance wellbeing. On the one hand, Dai and Fishbach (2014) proposed that a longer non-consumption period will result in a stronger desire for unconsumed food when there is no salient substitute. Because an unfulfilled need has been suspended for a longer period of non-consumption, it would result in an inferred, stronger desire for that food or experience. On the other hand,

research on the Zeigarnik effect showed that people are more likely to remember important uncompleted actions (Zeigarnik, 1935). When people cannot finish sharing the positive news with the first person, the uncompleted action would make the positive information that people want to share stand out in memory, receive precedence in attention, and subsequently increase the desire to share. Changing the order of sharing would cause an uncompleted action and force people to slow down. We infer that the desire people experience while withholding the joyful information promotes their happiness level. Additionally, Loewenstein's research (1996) on impulsivity indicated that people would experience higher desire in the future than the present if delayed conditions. In line with the findings mentioned above, our second research question is the following:

RQ2: How does the desire to share affect the average happiness one gets from sharing positive events?

Delayed Gratification

When consuming enjoyable goods (e.g., well-liked food) or having positive experiences (e.g., watching interesting TV shows), people are inclined to accelerate the consumption speed or number of times. Most people believe that immediate consumption would bring the most hedonic experience. However, the repeated consumption of stimulus, whether in the form of eating, playing games, or socializing, would lead to tiredness. With prolonged exposure to the same stimulus, people experience less pleasure from consumption (Redden, 2015).

Contrasting to common perceptions that people would have on the consumption rate, it is the slower path and slower rate of consumption that results in greater pleasure. Based on the theory of delayed gratification, the famous Stanford 'Marshmallow experiment' found out that children who chose delayed rewards demonstrated higher scores in future achievement, physical and mental health and even life span (Mischel, Ebbesen, & Raskoff, 1972). In this case, instead of immediate rewards, the delayed

reward would result in enhancement in happiness. Previous research demonstrated that with a simple delay or disruption, the satiation level would increase, even when the breaks inserted into the consumptions are not intuitively pleasant, it still improves the overall experience (McSweeney & Swindell, 1999, Nelson & Meyvis, 2008; Galak et al., 2013). Unfortunately, most people are not aware of the pernicious effects of rapid consumption and the impacts of intervals on satiation. Thus, when people are forced to slow their path, it results in an overall greater hedonic experience than fast-path conditions. Although it takes effort to slowly consume something one enjoys, research shows that the ability to employ self-control played a minor role as those participants with more self-control share a similar path (Galak et al., 2013). Thus, our research is different from Mischel, Ebbesen, & Raskoff's (1972) research that focused on the self-regulation aspect of delayed gratification and how it led to future success. Knowing the benefit of prolonged consumption and positive information sharing, we would like to investigate the effect of a simple intervention for information sharing and whether it enables participants to increase their overall satiation and happiness level. As such, the order of sharing could serve as one of the possible conditions to intervene.

Anticipation and Uncertainty Resolution

People derive positive benefits from the anticipation of desirable things (Loewenstein & Elster, 1992). When people withhold positive information without sharing it, they will experience anticipation as well as happiness from the information itself. People generally would have more intense emotions about positive events than retrospection as the future implies a sense of uncertainty that would amplify emotions (Boven & Ashworth, 2007). Previous research confirmed that when the hedonic consequences of events are not certain, the sense of uncertainty creates pleasure in many ways (Lee & Qiu 2009; Wilson, Centerbar, et al., 2005). Because the simulation of pleasurable future events activates certain parts of our brains that produce dopamine, we feel better when we imagine doing things that will generate positive

effects (e.g., traveling) (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007). Thus, people would be happier after resolving the uncertainty created by anticipation.

Moreover, when the outcome of a positive event is uncertain, people tend to think about it but do not readily adapt to it (Whitchurch, et al., 2011). If the valence of the potential outcomes is positive, then the affective consequences would also be positive. Furthermore, based on the planning effect in Loewenstein's research on anticipation (1987), the delay of desired outcome would increase utility from consumption. Therefore, in our study, intentionally creating a sense of uncertainty and anticipation by delaying the information sharing is expected to enhance the overall happiness level.

HYPOTHESIS

In consideration of the above research, our inquiry turns to whether delayed positive information sharing also yields the same effect as slower consumption. We propose that by reversing the sharing order to create time-delay, anticipation, and uncertainty that would increase the desire for information sharing, which would invariably maximize the total pleasure of the subject over time. Therefore, we predict that the order of positive information sharing will affect the happiness level of the subject who discloses the information. The default order in which one shares positive information involves sharing it with the first person one wants to share it with first, and the reversed order involves sharing it with the first person one wishes to share it with last.

Hypothesis: On average, people will feel happier about sharing the positive events when they share it in the reversed order than the default order.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Method

Participants and Design. We conducted a study that had two between-subjects conditions: a default-order condition and a reversed-order condition. A total of 383 undergraduates (227 females, $M_{age} = 20.42$) in the United States participated in the study in exchange for course credit.

Procedure. Participants were directed to a survey—hosted by Qualtrics—that contains both open-ended and multiple-choice questions. Participants were asked to imagine and write down the happiest thing that would happen to them realistically. They will then provide, in preferential order, the initials of three individuals that they would share the news with if what they wrote down happens, as well as their relationships with these selected individuals. Next, each participant was randomly assigned to one of two conditions that made up the dependent variable: default order (share with the first person one wants to share at first) and reversed order (share with the first person one wants to share in the end). Participants were told that the events they considered the happiest thing that could happen actually occurred, and they were to report their desire to share the news and their happiness level after sharing with each person. For each recipient of the news sharing, the participants indicated the extent to which they wanted to share the news using a 1–7 scale (1 = very weak, 7 = very strong). Participants also rated how they would feel after sharing the news with the particular person using a 1–5 scale (1 = extremely unhappy, 5 = extremely happy). Lastly, participants were to provide demographic information about their age and gender.

Result and Discussion

RQ1: What do undergraduate participants consider to be personal positive events?

The first research question examined different types of positive information that undergraduate participants identified. Using the description of the happiest thing described by them, we created seven categories for the coding scheme.

As shown in Table 1, positive Financial and Academic information took most of the positive events perceived as the happiest thing concerning frequency. Leisure, Social, and Professional events are the following three large categories. Each makes up more than 11% of the participants. Within the Health category (3.9%), it is worth noticing that approximately 1% of the total number of participants thought that the end of the pandemic would be the happiest thing that happens to them. Finally, a small percentage of trivial positive information (e.g., having food or this survey ends) is included in the Others section. These findings, reflecting what university students and working adults worry about, seem consistent with those of prior studies (Davey, et al., 2006): “17% of respondents reported they worried most often about their competence at work, followed by the academic performance (11%), health issues (10%), financial circumstances (10%), and intimate relationships (9%).” However, there are differences in percentage as Davey, et al., which includes working adults, the major categories of events are similar. Thus, we conclude that the events giving rise to college students’ worries (and anxiety) also bring them the most joy as they care the most about them.

TABLE 1. CODED PERSONAL POSITIVE EVENT TOPICS

Topic	Description	Example	<i>n</i>	%
Finance	Personal wealth related positive events	“Win the lottery,” “\$100,000 in my bank account”; “Receive a billion dollar”	108	28.2%
Academic	Excelling in college and positive events related to schoolwork	“My exam is cancelled,” “Getting all A’s”; “Grad school offer”	102	26.6%
Social	Meeting with friends, family, or significant others	“My long-distance boyfriend come home from college!” “I get to see my brother”; “Getting to see my family”	53	13.8%
Leisure	Traveling, relaxation, and enjoyable activities	“Travel,” “Going to the NFL”; “Get a dog”	48	12.5%
Career	Obtaining job or internship and other positive professional achievements	“Having an internship offer,” “Job offer”; “Getting a promotion”	42	11.0%
Health	Personal wellbeing and positive expectations related to the COVID-19 pandemic	“COVID ends soon,” “Get enough sleep”; “My stress went away”	15	3.9%
Others	Food-related, general wishes, or trivial positive things	“Someone brings me food now,” “I hope this survey ends”; “World peace”	15	3.9%

Hypothesis: On average, people will feel happier about sharing the positive events when they share it in the reversed order than the default order.

The results of study were consistent with our hypothesis: overall happiness level of participants is significantly higher when the order of information sharing is reversed ($M = 4.71$, $SD = .48$) than default ($M = 4.60$, $SD = .57$), ($F = 4.20$, $p < 0.05$, see Table 2). Noticeably, the happiness level experienced by sharing with each person also increases. For example, the happiness level received from sharing with the first person is $M = 4.73$ in the default order and $M = 4.85$ in the reversed order—an increase of .12 in the mean happiness level.

TABLE 2. MEAN (SD) OF SHARING ORDER AND HAPPINESS

	1st Person	2nd Person	3rd Person	Average
Default Order	4.73 (.56)	4.58 (.68)	4.49 (.73)	4.49 (.57)
Reversed Order	4.85 (.37)	4.64 (.67)	4.63 (.69)	4.62 (.48)

RQ2: How does the desire to share affect the average happiness one gets from sharing positive events?

Through the second research question, we explored the effect of desire on average happiness level. As shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, the reversed order of sharing has a higher level of desire and happiness. Thus, delayed sharing also demonstrates a higher desire ($M = 6.60$, $SD = .76$) than the default ($M = 6.24$, $SD = 1.05$), ($F = 15.09$, $p < 0.01$), which suggest an overall increase in desire for sharing: not only the desire to share with the third person increased, but also the desire to share with the first person. Although there is a potential ceiling effect (Salkind, 2010), participants may already reach the top level of happiness with not much room for enhancement. Our effect can survive that and make people who are already extremely happy slightly happier.

By examining the correlation, we addressed Research Question 2 with the fact that the average happiness experienced from sharing positive events increases as the desire to share increases. The overall correlations between desire sharing and happiness level after sharing are all greater than .4 ($t(277) = 16.37$, $p < .001$). These results suggested that the desire for information sharing might be the cause of the higher happiness level.

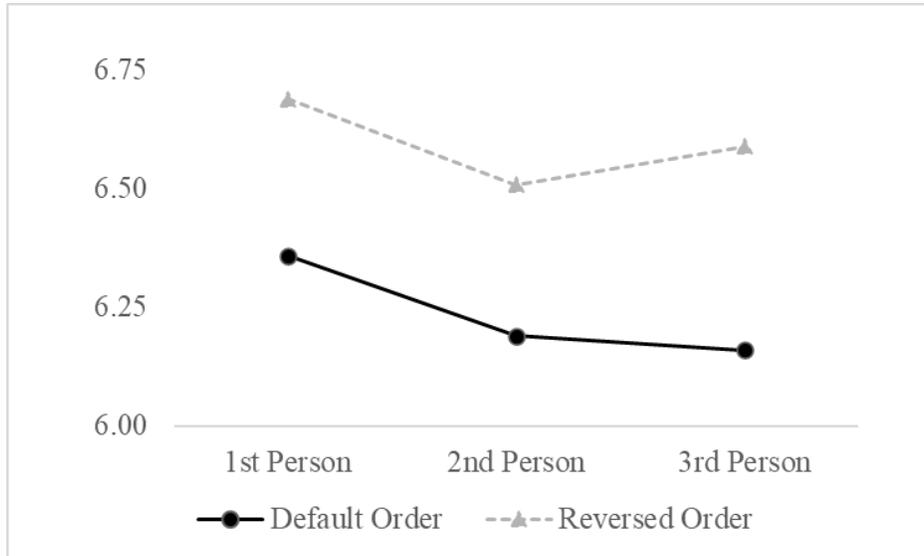


FIGURE 1. DESIRE OF SHARING RESULTS

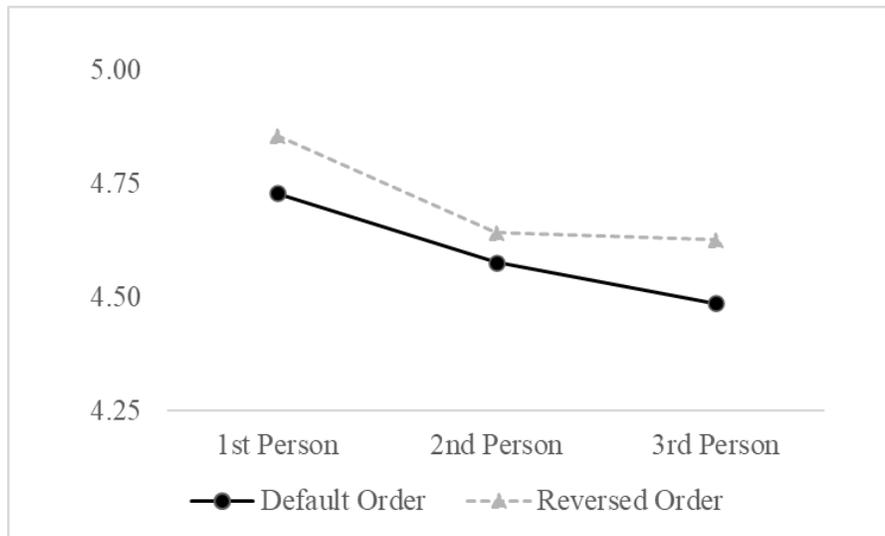


FIGURE 2. HAPPINESS AFTER SHARING RESULTS

Other findings regarding the relationship between participants and their sharing targets, consistent with previous research. First, participants would share information with family, friends, and spouses (see Table 3). Specifically, the first person to whom the participants disclosed positive news first was significantly more frequently to a mother (28.7%) compared to a father (11.0%). This finding is consistent

with Derlega’s (2011) finding because participants were significantly more likely to mention their mother as a disclosure target than others. Markedly, 6.8% of all disclosure targets that the participants mentioned were roommates. As common sense suggests, people would share personal events and news with the physically closer person.

TABLE 3. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS AND SHARING TARGET

	Family	Friend	Spouse	Roommate	Others
1st Person	193 (50.4)	88 (23.0)	77 (20.1)	19 (5.0)	6 (1.6)
2nd Person	235 (61.4)	110 (28.7)	17 (4.4)	20 (5.2)	1 (.3)
3rd Person	151 (39.4)	137 (25.8)	27 (7.0)	39 (10.2)	29 (7.9)

**Note: number (percentage)*

Additionally, as for individual differences, male and female participants have equal happiness levels and desires to share positive information. Our study confirms the results of previous research (Rimé et al., 1991): the difference of happiness levels ($M_{male} = 4.63$ vs $M_{female} = 4.69$, $SD = .53$ vs $SD = .86$), ($t(381) = -1.17$, $p = .12$) and desire to share positive information are not significant ($M_{male} = 6.41$ vs $M_{female} = 6.46$, $SD = .53$ vs $SD = 1.01$), ($t(381) = -.54$, $p = .29$).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In this fast-paced era, many consumers failed to acknowledge that rapid consumption causes reduced enjoyment of the stimulus. When people evaluate enjoyable experiences, they typically consider multiple dimensions rather than the pleasure of the stimulus itself (Galak, et al., 2013). However, the intervention between constant consumption was not one of the attributes. Across participants, we found that the order in which positive information is shared affects the average happiness level of college students. Specifically, the reversed order is a distraction of the sharing process that decreased the rapid

path. Participants would anticipate sharing with the person they want to share with at first during the prolonged time they withhold information. A sense of uncertainty also exists as they do not know the consequence and response of that particular person. In this case, the average happiness level would increase because the desire to share increases.

Meanwhile, participants are still experiencing the positive effect of the news itself while withholding telling the first person they want to share. From the correlation analysis, we conclude that desire is the main factor contributing to why the average hedonic level increases, but there might be other explanations for this phenomenon. As previous research suggested, capitalization and emotionality are drivers for positive information disclosure. Nevertheless, Frederick and Loewenstein (1999) showed that the intensity of affective reaction would eventually deteriorate over time as people begin to adapt to it. In which people would have a decreased emotional response to attention-grabbing events. Likewise, repeated exposure to the stimulus can start weakening a person's affective responses due to affective adaptation (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). Moreover, when an event is not self-relevant or fully explained, people would allocate less attention and affective reactions (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). Considering this affective adaptation effect, we do not suggest prolonging the news for longer than five to seven days to maintain the happiness experienced by positive events themselves.

In general, the current study enriches our understanding of the effect of withholding positive information sharing on happiness level. It provides additional evidence for how the order as an intervention to delay the sharing of enjoyable events could increase happiness. Specifically, we found that sharing the positive information in the reversed order and sharing with the first person one wants to share last will result in a higher level of happiness. Likewise, to increase the public's awareness to focus more on the attribute that generally appears counterintuitive and neglectable, this study offers important insights on general consumer wellbeing and information disclosure.

Limitations

Several limitations of the current study should be noted. Firstly, due to the nature of the hypothetical lab setting and the imaginative assessments, participants may experience different desire and happiness levels in a real-life scenario.

Secondly, different positive events have different levels of hedonic components. For example, winning a \$10,000 lottery would cause more pleasure than having an ice cream. In such cases, the degree of happiness level of the positive news may cause the difference in average happiness level. Nonetheless, we argue that depending on each participant's current need and want status, even winning a lottery may cause less pleasure than having a healthy life when that individual is undergoing cancer treatment.

Moreover, under the Social category, 12.4% of the participants reported their positive personal events associated with interacting with others. The presence of other people may reduce the degree of accuracy and cause variations in the happiness level and desire one experiences when sharing with others. For instance, if the positive event is not "shopping with my best friend," then that best friend could be the first person to share the positive information with. Lastly, the study focuses entirely on undergraduate students, which confined our study subjects to a specific demographic group. Topics of positive information may be different because college students' common concerns may differ in other groups.

Future Directions

Based on our study findings, additional research may entail exploring whether the first person's response with whom one shares positive news affects the happiness level. As Stepper and Strack (1993) mentioned, positive feedback given to subjects had a more significant positive impact on mood and feelings of pride. One's perceptions of an event will influence his/her future hedonic experience; thus, the responses of the first person that one wants to share may also have an impact on the happiness level

he/she experiences (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007). Because the current research did not include and analyze the response received, future research may examine the happiness level of the participants, using the reversed order and the responses—both positive and negative—participants received from news sharing. Furthermore, research could also be done on how different media participants chose to share may influence the real happiness level. Whether the information sharing is done face-to-face may have a potential influence on both the response from the disclosure target and the participants' happiness level. Additionally, as we only explored the individual difference in gender, further research can focus on other differences like personality characteristics to better eliminate the restriction on generality. Lastly, a more realistic setting than laboratory and tools with higher accuracy than self-reporting for detecting the happiness level of positive information sharing in the reversed order may be pursued to reduce external factors such as self-reported bias and other limitations.

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APPENDIX

Exhibit 1. Demographics of Participants

	<i>n</i>	%
Male	156	40.73%
Female	227	59.27%