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Do we always adopt Facebook friends’ eWOM postings? The role of social identity and threat

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ABSTRACT
In this research, we explore the role of social identity and threats to social identity on consumers’ judgment and behavioural intention about electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on Facebook. Study 1 shows that sharing social identity with a Facebook friend increases perceptions of usefulness and behavioural intention to adopt eWOM. However, when a threat to social identity is posed, these positive effects are eliminated. Study 2 reveals an opposite condition wherein a threat to social identity results in associative responses to eWOM. When the social identity is perceived as impermeable (vs. permeable), threats that are posed toward the social identity increase perceived eWOM usefulness and adoption intention. eWOM source identification is revealed as an underlying mechanism explaining this relationship. Theoretical and managerial implications of these findings are discussed.

KEYWORDS
eWOM usefulness; eWOM adoption; social identity theory; identity threat; identification; social network services (SNSs)

Introduction
Reading through the timeline on Facebook is an ordinary routine for Facebook users. Your Facebook ‘friends’ – who you know from going to school together or by having joined the same interest group on Facebook – are legitimate sources of information. For instance, you might find their posting of a review regarding their experience with a product interesting or helpful. However, can you really count on what your Facebook friends say? Whose posting would you consider to be more useful and, thus, be willing to adopt? The level of shared identity may matter. A friend with simply the same major at college may have less influence on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) adoption than a friend who has both the same major and belongs to the same student club. The nature of social identity may also be important. A friend based on impermeable (e.g. family members) versus temporary (e.g. acquaintance from a past workplace) relationships may also differ. Furthermore, what happens when the social identity based on the relationship between you and your friend faces social identity threat? In this paper, we aim to address these questions to gain a deeper understanding of consumers’ judgments and behavioural intentions about eWOM on Facebook.
Interacting with one another on social networking sites (SNSs) is now a prevalent way of socializing and exchanging information. Remarkable progress in digital technology and wireless environments has allowed us to enjoy higher access to and more convenient sharing of information, accelerating deeper engagement in SNS communication. Social media usage is a global phenomenon, with almost half (47%) of smartphone owners visiting SNSs every day (Nielsen 2014). Facebook is the world’s largest SNS, exceeding one billion active users, which means that one out of every seven people on the planet is on Facebook (Smith, Segall, and Cowley 2012). As of March 2016, 1.65 billion monthly active users were reported (King 2016).

Based on its collaborative and social characteristics, SNSs are a rising platform for consumer-to-consumer conversation, including eWOM, which is defined as ‘any positive or negative statements made by potential, actual, or former customers about products or companies, which are made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet’ (Chu and Kim 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, 39). However, what determines effective eWOM on SNSs has only been investigated in a few survey-based exploratory studies. For example, Teng et al. (2014) examined the role of message quality and source characteristics, and Chu and Kim (2011) incorporated social relationship factors, such as tie strength, homophily, trust, and interpersonal influence.

Extending this earlier research, we argue that the psychology of social identity (i.e. one’s identity as defined by the social groups to which one belongs) (Tajfel and Turner 1986) is an important factor that determines consumers’ eWOM adoption on Facebook. Facebook is currently the most popular SNS with such typical features (Boyd and Ellison 2007; Toma and Hancock 2013). More importantly, unlike conventional platforms (e.g. bulletin boards and online communities) where the source information is presented anonymously (Cheung et al. 2009; Dou et al. 2012), information regarding users’ membership in social groups is explicitly public on Facebook. Social identity is exposed in consumers’ profile, and consumers interact with each other based on common social groups, which often stem from real-life relationships (e.g. school, workplace). Moreover, we focus on a specific situation where social identity threat is posed. On SNSs, individuals’ motives for positive self-expression and presentation are evident (Back et al. 2010; Gonzales and Hancock 2011; Wilcox and Stephen 2013). For instance, consumers edit and control what information is presented to others (Walther 2007) and selectively post desirable information about themselves (Gonzales and Hancock 2011). Thus, social identity threat may influence how individuals respond to eWOM due to their desire to maintain a positive self-image.

Drawing on the literature on eWOM and social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1986), this research provides the first empirical test of the possibility that social identity and threat to it may have an effect on the behavioural intention of eWOM adoption (i.e. liking, sharing, and commenting), as well as the assessment of eWOM message’s informational value. Specifically, we first investigate whether perceptions of eWOM are impacted by the degree to which an individual shares their social identity with the source (study 1), as well as by the extent to which the social identity is perceived as impermeable (study 2). We also propose that social identity threat interacts with these characteristics, rendering distinct consequences.
Literature review and hypotheses

Social identity on Facebook

According to social identity theory, one’s identity is comprised of personal identity (i.e. identity based on unique characteristics of the self) and social identity (i.e. identity related to group membership) (Tajfel and Turner 1986), which are both used to maintain positive self-worth (Steele 1988; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Tesser 2000). Along with the advent of SNSs, individuals are given opportunities to develop their social identity and build a complete sense of self by publicly displaying their social relationship and group membership (e.g. commenting on each other’s walls and showcasing social connection) (Manago et al. 2008). Browsing one’s Facebook profile, which includes information related to social identity, increases self-worth and self-integrity, and social connections to significant others provide self-affirmation (Sherman and Cohen 2006; Toma and Hancock 2013). Communicating on SNSs can even reduce feelings of loneliness and depression by providing an opportunity for self-disclosure and a platform from which to receive social support (Lee, Noh, and Koo 2013; Nimrod 2010). Indeed, it has been reported that Facebook users perceive themselves as having more social support than non-users (Hampton et al. 2011).

Unlike traditional online platforms, Facebook discloses users’ profile information to the public, including acquaintances and strangers. Exposing one’s profile information, including one’s real name and affiliation to social groups, is highly encouraged on Facebook and is not regarded skeptical by users (Gross and Acquiti 2005). Such apparent openness is a distinct feature of Facebook compared to other SNSs that filter or discourage the disclosure of offline identity (e.g. dating websites) (Gross and Acquiti 2005). Moreover, Facebook provides various tools for displaying multiple aspects of the self (Young 2013). Most notably, aspects of social identity are made explicit by providing information on one’s gender, age, and hometown. One’s affiliation to specific social groups (e.g. educational institution, workplace) is also mentioned, and users can join ‘Groups’ within Facebook based on common hobbies, sports activities, and interests (Toma and Hancock 2013; Young 2013; Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin 2008). In addition, the extent and depth of social relationships are portrayed by posting peer photographs and ‘tagging’ one another, which reveal that one is socially engaged and belongs to a certain group (Strano 2008; Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin 2008). Furthermore, social identity information is utilized to identify one another and extend one’s social network. Although many relationships on Facebook are ‘anchored’ in real-life social groups (Zhao 2006), someone who is not known offline or who is known indirectly through mutual friends may also be recommended as a ‘friend’ based on a common social group membership (Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin 2008). For instance, following and ‘liking’ a sports team or alma mater allows users to discover and befriend other users sharing a similar social identity (Schmalz, Colistra, and Evans 2015).

Shared social identity and eWOM

On Facebook, ‘friends’ are the subjects of interactions and are considered sources of information through their activities, such as posting an opinion or uploading a link. However, Facebook friends differ from real-life friends. Whereas offline friends are able to convey varied meanings across relationships that differ in terms of intimacy and closeness, Facebook friends are based on simplified binary relations (‘Friends or not’), which leads to less...
nuanced meanings. Hence, the threshold to be qualified as a friend is low on Facebook, which makes it difficult to specify the weight of the relationship, as they hold a different meaning than real-life friendships (Gross and Acquisti 2005). This leads to a fundamental question regarding the characteristics of Facebook friends that influence the evaluation of the eWOM message.

In the current research, we propose that the sharing of social identity between the receiver and the source (Facebook friend) may influence one’s perception of the informational value of the eWOM message because social identity information is salient and important on Facebook. The shared level of social identity with the source refers to how much one’s social identity overlaps with that of the source, which is based on how much the two individuals belong to the same social group. It is related to awareness of joint membership within a social group (Tajfel 1978) and results from categorizing oneself and the source as having a collective social identity (Dholakia et al. 2009). Such cognitive process may include judgments regarding how similar (dissimilar) one is to another who shares (does not share) a social identity (Mousavi, Roper, and Keeling 2017).

Social identity sharing may have a profound effect on the manner in which the source and eWOM are evaluated for several reasons. First, belonging to the same social group creates a sense of conformity (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). Group norms are developed and enforced to regulate in-group members’ behaviour (Feldman 1984), and members ought to conform to the group’s point of view due to both normative and informative influences (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). This may lead to higher susceptibility to eWOM from a source who shares greater social identity. Second, social group members tend to share common attributes (e.g. gender, age, race, and education), which signify homophily (Rogers and Bhowmik 1970). Importantly, interpersonal communication is more likely to occur among homophilous members (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; Rogers 1995; Rogers and Bhowmik 1970), and homophilous sources are more likely to be used as information sources (Brown and Reingen 1987). Homophily also leads to a greater level of interpersonal attraction and trust (Ruef, Aldrich, and Carter 2003), and it increases persuasion (Chu and Kim 2011; Walther, Slovacek, and Tidwell 2001; Wang et al. 2008). In particular, similarity between the source and the receiver increases the persuasive influence of WOM and eWOM (e.g. Feick and Higie 1992; Kiecker and Cowles 2002; Reichelt, Sievert, and Jacob 2014) because people want to interact with those who are similar to themselves (Lauermann 1966; Brown and Reingen 1987). Thus,

**H1**: Social identity sharing between the source and the receiver will increase (H1a) perceptions of eWOM usefulness and (H1b) behavioural intention about eWOM adoption.

In addition, certain characteristics of social identity that are shared by the receiver and the source might also influence receivers’ tendency toward eWOM adoption. In this research, we attend to the fact that some social groups are perceived as relatively hard to change, while others may be easily joined and withdrawn from. This refers to the perception of (im)permeability of a group, which is the extent to which individual group members can(not) leave one group and join another (Verkuyten 2005). If a group boundary is impermeable, then withdrawing membership is regarded as almost impossible, as in the case of age and race. Similarly, Jackson and colleagues (1996) have discussed that groups can be perceived as impermeable if group membership is stable across the lifespan or has permanent characteristics. In other words, the concept of social identity’s impermeability...
lies in consumers’ perception. For instance, one’s affiliation to a company or residential area may be regarded as permanent or temporary based on how the member feels bounded by the membership.

Findings from past studies provide some clues that help predict consumers’ attitudes toward eWOM based on the extent of perceived group impermeability. For instance, when group boundaries are perceived as impermeable, people identify more with the group and are more likely to define themselves as a group member rather than at the individual level (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje 2002; Tajfel 1975, 1978). In addition, there is a tendency to be less competitive and exhibit greater personal sacrifice for the group when the group is impermeable (Ellemers, Wilke, and Van Knippenberg 1993) because individuals are reluctant to act in a selfish manner when the group boundary is perceived as impermeable. Therefore, in the context of Facebook, we posit that perceived impermeability of social identity will positively influence the perception of eWOM messages. Accordingly, consumers will evaluate eWOM more favourably when they share an impermeable group membership with the source. Hence,

**H2**: Perceived impermeability of shared social identity between the source and the receiver will increase (H2a) perceptions of eWOM usefulness, and (H2b) behavioural intention about eWOM adoption.

**Social identity threat and eWOM**

When social identity is temporarily devalued or marginalized (e.g. receiving negative information about gender identity), it results in a threatened social identity (Major and O’Brien 2005). In these situations, individuals predominantly attempt to cope with the threat and recover positive social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979). In this paper, we attend to the social mobility strategy which refers to an individual-level approach of leaving or dissociating themselves from the group that shares the same social identities (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Jackson et al. 1996). Individuals deliberately attempt to decrease the perception that they belong to the threatened group (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje 1997) and emphasize heterogeneity within the threatened group (Doosje et al. 1999) whose negative group features may be transmitted to the individual self. Individuals may psychologically depart from the threat by distancing themselves from the group. For instance, they may reluctantly identify with the group, reduce perceived similarity to the group, or decrease interacting with group members. Moreover, individuals may actually relinquish group membership if such an attempt is viable (Jackson et al. 1996). Thus, when a threat is presented, any positive attitudes toward highly homophilous sources who share the same social identity will disappear.

In the marketing field, consumers respond by preferring identity-unrelated products and avoiding threatened identity-related products as a means of defending and upholding their feelings of self-worth (Tepper 1994; White and Argo 2009; White and Dahl 2007). In the context of SNSs, we propose that threats to a shared social identity will lead to an individual’s dissociation from the group that shares the particular threatened social identity. As such, individuals under identity threat are expected to denigrate the credibility of the in-group source, thereby decreasing subsequent perceptions of eWOM’s informative value and behavioural intention about eWOM adoption. Thus,
**H3**: The positive effect of social identity sharing on (H3a) perceptions of eWOM usefulness, and (H3b) behavioural intention about eWOM adoption will disappear when there is a threat posed to social identity.

When facing a shared social identity threat, the first approach (i.e. social mobility strategy) involves using a dissociative strategy to psychologically depart from the threatened social identity, as has been described in the previous section. However, several studies have introduced another coping strategy as an alternative to avoiding or dissociating oneself from the in-group that shares the same social identities. Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (1997) proposed that responses to group identity threat can differ depending on the individual’s prior level of in-group identification. Low identifiers are likely to implement dissociative strategies by departing from the in-group, whereas high identifiers are likely to respond with stronger group cohesion. White and Argo (2009) also posit that the level of collective self-esteem (CSE) affects individual coping strategies in the face of social identity threat. Those who are low in CSE do not identify with or value the social group, and they may take a self-protective response by dissociating from the group. On the other hand, those who are high in CSE identify with and value the social identity, and they may maintain their group associations in the face of threat. Furthermore, White, Argo, and Sen-gupta (2012) discovered that when those with more independent self-construals experience a social identity threat, they avoid threatened identity-linked products to restore their individual self-worth. In contrast, those with highly interdependent self-construals use associative strategies (i.e. a greater preference for identity-linked products) to satisfy their need to belong. Therefore, depending upon the level of in-group identification, CSE, and self-construal, individuals may adopt associative responses when social identities are threatened.

Consistent with social identity threat and perspectives regarding associated coping strategies, we propose (im)permeability as a new factor that may influence whether or not individuals adopt an alternative coping strategy. In particular, when social identity is threatened, one of the distinguishing socio-structural factors that determines whether an individual uses social mobility strategies is the perceived impermeability of group boundaries (Verkuyten and Reijerse 2008). For example, Ellemers, Wilke, and Van Knippenberg (1993) have shown that individuals are reluctant to use social mobility strategies (i.e. dissociating from the group) when the social identity is perceived as impermeable. This is consistent with prior studies that people show stronger in-group identification when the social group boundary is perceived as impermeable, even when the in-group is viewed negatively (Ellemers et al. 1988; Ellemers, Knippenberg, and Wilke 1990).

Strongly identifying with a certain social identity is a sign of solidarity and commitment toward that social identity since renouncing it would signify that one has lost an important part of the self (Schmalz, Colistra, and Evans 2015). When this commitment is high, the homogeneity of the in-group is stressed even under a threat (Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears 1995). That is, members’ intention to exit and join another group does not increase, even when they are presented with negative information regarding the impermeable group (Lalonde and Silverman 1994). Rather, identification with the in-group increases in such cases. However, if the commitment toward the group is low, exposure to negative group information will lead one to adopt social mobility strategies (Doosje et al. 1999). Thus, we expect that social identity threat may increase individuals’ association with the social identity when it is perceived as impermeable. In the context of SNSs, this associative
response would be represented by supportive actions toward the eWOM source who shares the threatened social identity and by increased eWOM usefulness and adoption. Hence,

**H4**: The positive effect of perceived impermeability of the social identity on (H4a) perceptions of eWOM usefulness and (H4b) behavioural intention about eWOM adoption will be more pronounced under conditions of social identity threat (see Figure 1 for the research overview).

**Study 1**

The objective of study 1 was to test the hypothesis that the shared level of social identity between the source and the receiver would positively influence the judgment of eWOM on Facebook. A total of 387 participants (198 females, 189 males) who had a Facebook account were recruited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, and randomly assigned to one of four conditions based on a 2 (shared social identity: high vs. low) × 2 (social identity threat: threat vs. no threat) between-participants design.

**Pre-test**

Prior to the main study, a pre-test was conducted to confirm in advance the manipulation scenario of shared social identity. A total of 132 participants (75 females, 57 males) were randomly presented with one of two conditions of shared social identity: high vs. low. First, social identity in terms of high school membership was made salient. To do so, participants were asked to think about their membership of high school alumni (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992). They wrote down the name and location of the high school they went to or graduated. Then, participants were instructed to imagine themselves browsing Facebook and spotting a friend named ‘Pat’. In the high sharing condition, Pat was described as a high school alumnus while Pat was not a high school alumnus in the low sharing condition. Next, participants answered how much Pat shares social identity based on two measurements. First, a set of seven-step Venn diagrams were presented. Each diagram represented different degrees of overlap of two circles that indicate the participant and

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*Figure 1. Overview of the research.*
Pat. If the circles’ overlapped area is larger, this reflected greater shared social identity between the participant and Pat (adapted from Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992). As expected, participants in the high sharing condition felt that Pat shared greater level of social identity ($M_{high} = 2.484, M_{low} = 1.956; F(1, 130) = 5.520, p < .05$). Second, participants directly answered the degree of shared social identity they perceived of Pat upon a percentage scale (0% = none shared; 100% = very much shared). Again, participants in the high sharing condition indicated a greater level of shared social identity with ‘Pat’ ($M_{high} = 32.734, M_{low} = 25.956; F(1, 130) = 2.993, p = .086$) albeit marginally significant.

**Method**

All participants were asked to recall their membership of high school alumni and write down the name and location of their high school as in the pre-test. Then, participants took part in two unrelated studies. The first part involved manipulating social identity threat, in which participants read about intellectual achievements of their high school alumni over the last 10 years, ostensibly retrieved from National Center of Education Statistics (adapted from Dietz-Uhler and Murrell 1999). In the threat condition, the level of analytical reasoning skill, motivation in the workplace, and sense of social intelligence were described as being evaluated poorer than the national average. In the no-threat condition, the achievements were similar to the national average. In the second part, participants were instructed to imagine themselves browsing Facebook and reading a review post from a Facebook friend named Pat. The descriptions of Pat varied using the manipulation in pre-test for the level of shared social identity (high vs. low). The posting consisted of Pat’s comments upon visit to a restaurant along with four photos (see Appendix).

Subsequently, participants completed a questionnaire that includes measures pertaining to the evaluations of Pat’s posting, expertise on restaurants, and demographics. Adapted from Sussman and Siegal (2003), eWOM usefulness was measured using 7-point semantic differential items, anchored with ‘worthless/valuable, uninformative/informative, and harmful/helpful’ ($\alpha = .837$). eWOM adoption intention was measured by assessing the willingness to engage in three typical behaviours in Facebook: pressing ‘Like’ on a posting, leaving a ‘Comment’ on a posting, and ‘Sharing’ a posting. The three items were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = very low; 7 = very high, $\alpha = .837$). As a control variable, expertise on restaurant was measured with three items (e.g. ‘I am familiar with restaurants in general,’ ‘I have much experience with restaurants in general’) on a 7-point scale (Ryu and Han 2009) (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree, $\alpha = .927$).

**Results and discussion**

As a check on social identity threat, participants indicated their agreement with each of the following statements on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree, $\alpha = .816$): ‘I feel uncomfortable when I receive this information about my high school,’ ‘I feel threatened when I read this information about my high school,’ ‘My feelings are negative when I read the information about my high school’ (Jetten, Postmes, and McAuliffe 2002). Participants in the threat condition felt more threatened than those in the no-threat condition ($M_{threat} = 3.903, M_{no-threat} = 2.713; F(1, 382) = 59.187, p < .000$).
Each of the two dependent measures, eWOM usefulness and eWOM adoption intention, was entered to a 2 (shared social identity) $\times$ 2 (social identity threat) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with restaurant expertise included as a covariate (see Figure 2). First, we analysed the effects of shared social identity and its threat on eWOM usefulness. A significant main effect of shared social identity on eWOM usefulness was found ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.216$, $M_{\text{low}} = 4.859$; $F(1, 382) = 10.411$, $p = .001$). The main effect of social identity threat was also significant ($M_{\text{threat}} = 4.923$, $M_{\text{no-threat}} = 5.150$; $F(1, 382) = 3.912$, $p = .049$). Most importantly, the two-way interaction on eWOM usefulness revealed significant as predicted ($F(1, 382) = 3.980$, $p = .047$). Contrast analyses provided support for H1a that participants in the high sharing condition perceived eWOM from Pat as more useful than those in the low sharing condition ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.416$, $M_{\text{low}} = 4.883$; $F(1, 382) = 13.765$, $p < .000$) when there is no threat. However, when threat was posed to the social identity, the positive effect of shared social identity was eliminated ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.011$, $M_{\text{low}} = 4.835$; $F(1, 382) = .778$, $p = .378$) supporting H3a.

Second, influences on eWOM adoption intention were examined. The main effect of shared social identity on eWOM adoption intention was insignificant ($M_{\text{high}} = 2.775$,
$M_{low} = 2.556; F(1, 382) = 2.492, p = .115$ and the main effect of social identity threat was significant ($M_{threat} = 2.495, M_{no-threat} = 2.833; F(1, 382) = 5.592, p = .019$). The two-way interaction on eWOM adoption intention was insignificant ($F(1, 382) = .746, p = .388$). However, contrast analyses indicated a similar pattern to what was found for eWOM usefulness. Participants in the high sharing condition showed higher adoption intention for eWOM ($M = 2.495, M_{no-threat} = 2.833; F(1, 382) = 5.592, p = .019$) when the threat was not posed (H1b), albeit marginally significant. Yet, when participants were exposed to threat (H3b), the influence of shared social identity diminished ($M_{high} = 2.532, M_{low} = 2.458; F(1, 382) = .261, p = .610$).

The results from this study demonstrate that consumers appreciate more of the posting in Facebook and are more willing to ‘like’, ‘comment’, and ‘share’ it when the source (i.e. Facebook friend) shares social identity with them. Nevertheless, such positive impacts disappeared when their social identity was threatened. This is similar to prior studies that revealed dissociative responses upon identity threat (e.g. White and Argo 2009).

**Study 2**

The objective of study 2 was to examine whether the perceived impermeability of a social identity may induce distinguished consequences of reinforcing the positive attitude toward eWOM even upon threat. We also aimed to demonstrate that the source identification exists as an underlying mechanism. A total of 196 responses (105 females, 91 males) from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk were analysed using a 2 (perceived impermeability of social identity: high vs. low) × 2 (social identity threat: threat vs. no threat) between-participants design. This study postulates that the source shares social identity with the participant and only differs in terms of how impermeable the shared social identity is. Also, we utilized a different social identity of being a member of a company’s membership program to generalize our findings.

**Method**

Participants were presented with two parts as in study 1. In the first part, participants read a scenario in which they were a member of ‘ETNA,’ a fictitious American membership-only supermarket chain. In the high impermeable condition, participants were imagined to have lifetime membership with no expiration date. The registration fee of $100 was described as non-refundable. In the low impermeable condition, participants were imagined to have two-year membership which would expire this month. The registration fee of $100 was described as refundable according to remaining period. Next, participants read a news article with study results on green consumption of US citizens to manipulate social identity threat. The fictitious investigation covered consumers from the 50 national membership-only supermarket chains and stated how the members of ETNA were evaluated. In the threat condition, ETNA members were evaluated as poorer than the national average on dimensions such as the amount in-store garbage, excessive usage of plastic bags, environmentally friendly product purchase, and recycling participation. Participants were also told that their regional community responded sensitively to the results and criticized ETNA members. In no-threat condition, ETNA performance for these criteria was similar to the national average, and their regional community was interested with the results. In the
second part, participants imagined themselves browsing Facebook and reading a posting of a Facebook friend Pat who was also a member of ETNA and shared Facebook friends who were ETNA members as well. The posting was identical with the stimulus used in study 1.

Participants completed a questionnaire that included measures of manipulation checks, source identification, perceived eWOM usefulness, behavioural intention about eWOM adoption, and demographics. Adapted from Mummendey and Wenzel (1999) and Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004), perceived source identification was measured on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree, $\alpha = .943$) by asking how much they agreed with the four statements: ‘I see myself and Pat as a member of a same social group,’ ‘Pat and I can be categorized as members of same social group,’ ‘Pat and I belong to a same social group,’ ‘Pat and I have same social identity’. Perceived eWOM usefulness ($\alpha = .809$) and behavioural intention about eWOM adoption ($\alpha = .865$) were measured using the same items as in study 2.

Results and discussion

To verify the manipulation of perceived impermeability, participants responded to the following statement about ‘ETNA’ membership: ‘In your opinion, how difficult is it for you to withdraw ETNA membership? (1 = not very difficult; 7 = very difficult), adapted from Jackson et al. (1996).’ As expected, participants in the high condition felt that the ETNA membership is more impermeable than those in the low condition ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.480, M_{\text{low}} = 3.020; F(1, 192) = 28.376, p < .000$). Manipulation for social identity threat was checked with the same items used in study 1 ($\alpha = .875$). As intended, a higher level of threat was produced for participants in the threat condition ($M_{\text{threat}} = 4.709, M_{\text{no-threat}} = 2.941; F(1, 192) = 74.785, p < .000$).

We analysed eWOM usefulness and eWOM adoption intention using a 2 (perceived impermeability) $\times$ 2 (social identity threat) ANOVA (see Figure 3). The main effect of perceived impermeability of social identity ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.211, M_{\text{low}} = 5.000; F(1, 192) = 2.399, p = .123$) and the main effect of social identity threat ($M_{\text{threat}} = 5.124, M_{\text{no-threat}} = 5.088; F(1, 192) = .062, p = .804$) on eWOM usefulness was insignificant. Yet, a significant interaction of perceived impermeability and its threat ($F(1, 192) = 4.958, p = .027$) was found. Contrast analyses showed that participants high and low in impermeability perceived similar level of usefulness ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.039, M_{\text{low}} = 5.137; t(192) = -.489, p = .625$) when there was no threat, not supporting H2a. However, when participants were exposed to threat, higher impermeability led to higher perception of eWOM usefulness ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.397, M_{\text{low}} = 4.851; t(192) = -2.617, p = .010$) supporting H4a.

The analysis on eWOM adoption intention showed insignificant main effect of perceived impermeability ($M_{\text{high}} = 2.990, M_{\text{low}} = 2.684; F(1, 192) = 2.022, p = .157$) and social identity threat ($M_{\text{threat}} = 2.940, M_{\text{no-threat}} = 2.742; F(1, 192) = .750, p = .388$). The interaction revealed significant ($F(1, 192) = 4.090, p = .045$) consistent to the results for eWOM usefulness. Contrast analyses showed that there was no significant difference between participants high and low in impermeability ($M_{\text{high}} = 2.673, M_{\text{low}} = 2.811; t(192) = -.434, p = .665$) rejecting H2b. However, when threat was posed, higher impermeability of social identity led to higher willingness to adopt eWOM ($M_{\text{high}} = 3.333, M_{\text{low}} = 2.546; t(192) = -2.387, p = .018$) supporting H4b.
In addition, a moderated mediation analysis tested the mediating role of source identification to explain the effect of perceived impermeability on eWOM usefulness and eWOM adoption (see Figure 4). The bootstrapping technique for conditional indirect effects (Preacher and Hayes 2008) estimated a significant indirect effect among participants in threat condition: perceived impermeability increased eWOM usefulness (95% CI = [.031, .336]) and eWOM behavioural intention (95% CI = [.058, .582]) through increased perception of source identification. Yet, there was no corresponding indirect effect in no-threat condition on both dependent variables: perceived impermeability had no effect on eWOM usefulness (95% CI = [-.330, .012]) and eWOM adoption intention (95% CI = [-.575, .031]) through the mediator.

Results from this study revealed that consumers evaluate the posting of a Facebook friend who shares an impermeable social identity as more favourable even and only when the identity was threatened. Moreover, the underlying mechanism was found that perceived impermeability of social identity increased the respondents’ perception that they belonged to the same group as the source which resulted in amplified associative responses toward the source’s eWOM when social identity threat was posed. For those with temporal thus less impermeable social identity, receiving social identity threat did
not boost the desire to identify with the group because they could avoid the criticism easily.

**General discussion**

The current research examines how individuals’ responses to eWOM on Facebook differ depending on whether or not the individuals’ social identity is highly shared with that of the source (study 1) and whether social identity is perceived as impermeable (study 2). In study 1, participants assessed eWOM more positively when they shared a high school identity with the source. However, this effect was minimized when the identity was
undervalued. In study 2, participants in the impermeable condition rated eWOM usefulness and adoption intention higher even though the identity was criticized. In addition, source identification emerged as the underlying mechanism accounting for this causal relationship.

This research contributes to the literature on eWOM and social identity in several ways. First, to the best of our knowledge, the current research is the first to apply social identity theory to eWOM in the context of Facebook. Even though a few studies have explored social relationship factors that contribute to eWOM in SNSs context (e.g. Chu and Kim 2011), no studies have examined the role of social identity and threats to it. Second, in contrast to prior research that has examined eWOM in SNS contexts through surveys, this research used an experimental paradigm to elucidate causal relationships among variables. Third, this research utilized real (i.e. high school) and fictitious social identity (i.e. supermarket membership) conditions to generalize findings. Finally, the present study introduces a realistic and context-specific variable, labelled behavioural intention about eWOM adoption, which was measured by asking respondents’ intention to ‘Like’ a posting, leave a ‘Comment’ on it, and ‘Share’ it. This newly constructed variable captures typical reactions of Facebook users in reality so that future research can effectively adopt this construct to explore SNS behaviours.

Although this study provides initial findings on eWOM, a few limitations should be noted. First, although the present research covers major aspects of social identity theory (e.g. identity sharing, identity threat, and impermeability of identity), other aspects of social identity need to be considered in explaining eWOM-related judgment and behaviour. For instance, the length of time after acquiring social identities, differences between an innate identity and an acquired identity, and the level of effort invested to obtain identities are fruitful alternatives for future research. Second, not only can the existence of identity threat moderate the effect of social identity, but the type of threat can do so as well. Han, Duhachek, and Rucker (2015) argue that individuals respond differently depending on which aspect of identity is threatened. Third, the level of identity sharing and impermeability may have an additional effect on active behaviours, such as generating one’s own eWOM messages. Finally, although we had initially expected that the perceived impermeability of social identity would positively affect eWOM evaluation, it was restricted to situations in which social identity was threatened. A potential explanation for this is because the fictitious supermarket membership utilized in the scenario may not have been considered as realistic or perceived as important social identity to the participants. If the group membership reflected more realistic factors in life and was regarded as more critical (e.g. member of workplace or village), then perceived impermeability of the social identity may work as a significant factor on eWOM evaluation even under no-threat condition. In other words, the positive effects of perceived impermeability on eWOM evaluation might be restrictively activated depending on the significance of social identity or related situations. Thus, we contend that when and why perceived impermeability performs as a crucial factor on eWOM evaluation may also be an important area to explore in the future research.

Findings from this research yield various managerial insights for eWOM management and membership program management. First, marketers should consider social identity characteristics of target populations when exploiting network hubs or opinion leaders to spread eWOM messages. Specifically, transmitters who share wholesome social identities
with target customers may exert stronger influence on receivers. However, when a social threat to shared identity is unavoidable, marketers need to effectively strategize in order to make receivers react associatively to the source. Second, companies’ membership programs can serve as a new form of social identity in capitalistic economies. As a result, companies must strengthen the group network among consumers and leverage the network as a mouthpiece to diffuse favourable messages not only to group members, but across the entire market as well. Furthermore, since the current research confirms the positive impact of identity’s impermeability, companies should encourage customers to maintain membership for an extended period of time or effectively lock them in the program.

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References


**Appendix. Facebook posting stimulus used in studies 1 and 2**

![Facebook posting stimulus](image-url)