



## Research Note

# Understanding the role of interpersonal identification in online review evaluation: An information processing perspective

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## ABSTRACT

While the proliferation of online reviews has increased consumers' access to resources for informing the purchase decision, it has also substantially increased the cognitive effort required for finding personally relevant information through this channel. In the face of this challenge, an increasingly valuable capability of online review platforms relates to delivering the right reviews to the right consumer at the right time. Many platforms have sought to develop this capability by leveraging generic review characteristics like recency and valence, or crowd-level performance metrics like helpfulness score. While useful, these approaches may be overlooking important individual-to-individual (dyadic) social mechanisms that underpin review evaluation and selection. In an effort to inform the development of more robust information management capabilities of online review platforms, we introduce and test a model that highlights the influence of dyadic social information processing in online review evaluation. Results from model testing support most of the hypotheses and reveal important social selection mechanisms consumers employ in this context, which could be leveraged to add additional value through online review platforms.

## 1. Introduction

Online reviews have experienced substantial growth as an information source for consumers. Industry reports indicate that about 90% of online consumers read reviews prior to purchase and about 83% believe that online reviews influence their decision-making (ChannelAdvisor, 2011). As a type of product information created by other consumers based on personal usage experience (Chen & Xie, 2008), online reviews are typically trusted more than traditional media (Cheung & Thadani, 2012) and have been shown to influence important outcomes including information adoption (Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009); product quality perceptions (Flanagin, Metzger, Pure, Markov, & Hartsell, 2014); and purchase intention (Zhang, Zhao, Cheung, & Lee, 2014).

While the proliferation of online reviews has made it easier for consumers to gain access to different resources for informing the purchase decision, it has also substantially increased the cognitive effort required for finding personally relevant information through this channel. For any given product, the typical consumer faces an overwhelming volume of available reviews that often conflict with one another and can be based on diverse usage scenarios (Chen & Xie, 2008). As such, for each online review encountered, the consumer must

decide whether or not to incorporate the information provided into his/her purchase decision—referred to here as the information adoption decision (Zhang & Watts, 2008). The sheer volume of available reviews combined with the cognitive effort required to evaluate each one can create an information overload problem for the consumer. Due in part to these information management challenges, decision outcomes with any single online review can vary substantially from one person to the next, ranging from adoption to giving up and abandoning the purchase decision altogether (Cheung, Xiao, & Liu, 2014; Zhang & Watts, 2008).

Given these issues with this information channel, an increasingly valuable capability of online review platforms relates to delivering the right information to the right consumer at the right time. Many platforms have developed this capability to some extent by providing the ability to filter and sort reviews using criteria such as recency, valence, and/or helpfulness score. While these features are a step in the right direction, their reliance on generic characteristics of the review(er) and/or wisdom of the crowd may be overlooking valuable, interpersonal selection mechanisms consumers rely on in this context, allowing the information overload problem to persist. For example, a fundamental tenet of interpersonal interaction states that individuals inherently desire connections with similar others in terms of interpersonal, sociodemographic, and behavioral characteristics; a

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motivation that ultimately drives trust, information acceptance, and the attitude formation (McPherson, Smith-lovin, & Cook, 2001; Rivera, Soderstrom, & Uzzi, 2010). Translated to online reviews, where consumers seek to shape their beliefs and attitudes based on information provided by relative strangers, an important force underpinning information adoption may involve the creation of social ties to the reviewer.

Past studies on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication provide strong support for the influential roles social mechanisms can play in this context (Cheng & Ho, 2015; Forman, Ghose, & Wiesenfeld, 2008; Luo, Luo, Xu, Warkentin, & Sia, 2015; Ng, 2013; Reichelt, Sievert, & Jacob, 2014). While fruitful, the majority of studies within this stream have investigated social influence through the lens of individual-to-group interaction. Meanwhile, the sociology literature consistently argues that social ties equally exist among individual-to-individual dyads (McPherson et al., 2001; Rivera et al., 2010). Beyond evidence that reviewers' identity-related information enhances the helpfulness of an online review (Forman et al., 2008), we currently have little theoretical understanding of the mechanisms underpinning individual-to-individual (dyadic) social influence through this form of communication. As a result, platform designers are left with limited guidance on what types of information matter for enhancing information management capabilities in this channel. Driven in part by this gap, scholars have called for more research explaining how social processes affect decision making in eWOM, with emphasis on reviewer evaluation and reviewer effects (Cheung et al., 2014; Dou, Walden, Lee, & Lee, 2012).

In response, the current study investigates online review evaluation through a distinctly psychosocial lens, emphasizing the role of dyadic social information processing. Extending the knowledge base on the role of identity-related information in online review effectiveness, this study seeks to uncover *how* identity and identity-related information influence review evaluation. To this end, we introduce a research model grounded in two theories, identity theory (Burke, 1969, 1991; Stryker & Burke, 2000) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984). Identity theory helps describe the role identity-related information plays in social tie creation among dyads where uncertainty and division exist. Meanwhile, ELM clarifies how and when different types of information processing drive decision-making. Combining these theories with past research on identification, we introduce three distinct types of interpersonal identification to the IS literature—value-driven, consumption-driven, and website-driven—and investigate their impacts on information adoption with online reviews. After presenting the research model guiding this study, we report the results of model testing via a survey involving 262 unique respondents. We then discuss the implications of the results for researchers and practitioners interested in evolving the information management capabilities delivered through online review platforms. Overall, this study is motivated by the following research question:

**RQ.** How do identity and identity-related information drive the information adoption decision with online reviews?

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. Online reviews as dyadic social encounters

When information is communicated between individuals, online or otherwise, a social system is organized and an information process occurs, making all interpersonal encounters information-generating social systems (Arenas-Gaitan, Javier Rondan-Cataluña, & Esteban Ramírez-Correa, 2013; Fuchs, 2002, 2003). Consistent with this notion, past research posits that eWOM and online reviews, in particular, can serve social and identity-related functions (Forman et al., 2008; Reichelt et al., 2014). In this vein, online reviews represent a specific type of dyadic social encounter with a distinguishing characteristic that

also marks an important constraint. Unlike face-to-face encounters, where communication is bi-directional and participants can draw on various visual and contextual cues; online reviews involve one-way persuasive communication from relatively unknown reviewers. As such, this context involves salient social uncertainty challenges to overcome prior to accepting the message.

In traditional dyadic social encounters, individuals address this uncertainty by relying on social mechanisms that evaluate similarities and compatibilities among actors' identity-related attributes (Rivera et al., 2010). While conventional thinking might assume the relative scarcity of explicit social information in text-based computer-mediated-communication (CMC) like online reviews would undermine reliance on these types of mechanisms, communication theories argue otherwise. For example, social information processing (SIP) theory (Walther, 2008) posits that, despite the lack of nonverbal cues inherent in CMC, "individuals can find other ways to render the same connotation through word content, style, frequency and length of messages, and other CMC-based behavior" (p. 397). Complementing SIP theory, the social identity model of deindividuation (SIDE) argues that the relative anonymity associated with CMC provides a context in which perceived connectedness is accentuated when someone identifies to some degree with the limited social information available (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Spears & Lea, 1992).

Together, these theories and past research paint a more complex picture of online reviews than has traditionally been offered. For one, online reviews represent information-laden dyadic social systems involving the consumer and the reviewer, with one-way persuasive communication occurring from a relatively unfamiliar source. Furthermore, social information embedded in an online review may not always be explicit in nature, as implicit forms of communicating identity-related information equally exist. Finally, although online reviews represent an instance of CMC, social selection mechanisms can play an important role in uncertainty reduction and ultimately, review evaluation in this context. Drawing on this perspective, we examine information adoption in the online review context through a distinctly psychosocial lens.

### 2.2. Identity theory and interpersonal identification

Rooted in structural symbolic interactionism, identity theory explains social organization as the interaction of unique, interrelated individuals performing unique but integrated activities; each seeing things from his/her own perspective (Stets & Burke, 2000). Explaining how dyadic social influence manifests, the theory argues that individuals are primarily motivated to maintain identity consistency and reduce uncertainty by seeking out interaction partners likely to reinforce their own self-views, a process referred to as *selective interaction* (Burke & Stets, 1999; Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004). Selective interaction is driven by the internal desire for *self-verification*, whereby "perceived self-relevant meanings match those of [his/her] identity standard" (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 288). As a mechanism of self-affirmation, self-verification is rooted in individuals' fundamental needs for peers to see them as they see themselves (Swann, 1987).

In dyadic social settings, selective interaction is driven largely by the establishment of interpersonal identification, which captures *the degree to which an individual perceives identity similarity with an interaction partner in terms of held attitudes, beliefs, and values* (Rivera et al., 2010; Swann et al., 2004). As a measure of certainty that the self-view will be reinforced by another, interpersonal identification is not assumed *a priori*; instead, it must be established. When it cannot be established, either by way of information insufficiency or information signals suggesting otherwise, individuals will work to minimize the influence of the social counterpart and seek out more compatible others (Stets & Burke, 2000; Swann, 1987).

Scholars have further argued that interpersonal identification should not be conceptualized as a single overarching construct. Instead,

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