



## Examining the moderating role of sense of membership in online review evaluations



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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores how electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) readers' sense of membership moderates the effects of eWOM antecedent factors on their perceptions of review credibility. To test our hypotheses, we collected 308 samples from two virtual eWOM forums that are famous in China. The results showed that eWOM readers' sense of membership positively moderated argument strength, review sidedness and review rating's effects on review credibility; it also had a negative moderating effect on the relationship between review objectivity and review credibility. Based upon these findings, we discussed the theoretical contributions and practical implications of this study.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the Internet has provided extensive opportunities for consumers to share their past shopping experiences and feelings with others. Researchers have referred to such online communications among consumers as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) [14,21]. Currently, consumers may be exposed to eWOM information virtually everywhere on the Internet, such as online stores, portal websites, blogs, chat rooms, emails, professional eWOM forums, and so on [30]. Moreover, previous research [29,45] suggests that prospective consumers use eWOM information (i.e., consumer-generated online reviews) to make judgments about target stores, products, and services. For example, Gruen et al. [19] find that eWOM information can have a positive impact on consumers' perceptions of product value and their likelihood of recommending the product. In the same vein, Clemons et al.'s [11] findings show that eWOM information played a significant role in the growth of new products in the marketplace, and Zhang et al. [52] further observe that eWOM information had a stronger effect on consumers' attitudes compared to other types of information, such as professional editors' recommendations.

Because many scholars have already recognized the importance of eWOM information, the antecedent factors of eWOM information credibility have become a crucial and interesting research topic in the field of electronic commerce domain. In fact, several studies [e.g., 6–8, 36, 50] investigate this issue, and they identify a series of significant antecedent factors that affect readers' perceptions of information credibility. Based upon the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) [37,39], those eWOM antecedent factors can be classified into two routes (i.e., central and peripheral). Central route factors are associated with the content of information, whereas peripheral route factors rely heavily on the environmental characteristics of information. Although these previous studies make significant contributions to understanding the impact mechanism of eWOM, they neglect information readers' sense of membership (SOM) in websites (e.g., online stores, forums, etc) that display eWOM information. In fact, previous studies [5,25,26,31,43] already recognize that these websites gradually evolved into virtual communities because many of their participants would develop a sense of emotional belongingness to them, which researchers often refer to as SOM [53]. Because Internet users' participation in communities determines their SOM level, the latter can be used to differentiate among community users. For example, users who frequently visit the community—and thus have a high SOM—can be regarded as community old timers, whereas others who either seldom visit the community or who do so for

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the first time and thus possess low SOM could be considered newcomers.

Previous studies [32,42] argue that SOM can significantly affect community members' cognitive styles and behaviors and that people with different levels of SOM are inclined to utilize different criteria to judge other users and matters in the community. Beyond this theoretical assumption, we contend that different eWOM readers may depend on different antecedent factors to different degrees to judge the credibility of review information, and that one piece of review information may mirror different persuasive effects on different people. Because previous research does not systematically explore this issue, little is known about how eWOM antecedent factors affect readers with different levels of SOM. Thus, this research endeavors to fill that gap. We focus on exploring how the effects of eWOM antecedent factors on eWOM readers' perceptions of review credibility are moderated by their SOM in virtual communities. We believe that by exploring the moderating role of the effects of SOM on eWOM antecedent factors, we can discover the internal impact mechanism of the attributes of information. We hope this study will advance this line of research and help researchers deepen their understanding of the distinct effects of these antecedent factors on different information readers.

We also believe that the results of our research will have valuable implications for practitioners. EWOM communities on the Internet inevitably meet many old and new users on a daily basis. To survive and develop, these communities need not only to retain old timers but also to attract newcomers. One way to achieve these goals is to provide credible information to both types of users. As posited above, eWOM readers with different levels of SOM may utilize different cues to different degrees to evaluate information. However, we find that most eWOM communities utilize only uniform web pages, thus recommending the same review information to all eWOM readers. We contend that this practice is unadvisable because it may result in ineffective eWOM information and consequently, eWOM communities may lose both eWOM readers and the related companies who have adopted eWOM marketing strategies to appeal to those communities. Thus, further exploration of the distinct effects of various eWOM information attributes on different readers (i.e., old and new) is urgently needed to help practitioners design customized review recommendation systems that present the most effective review information to different readers. We believe that increasing the precision of eWOM marketing strategies can further satisfy different readers' information requirements, which could not only help eWOM communities retain old members and attract new ones but also improve the business performance of related companies.

Given the paucity of scientific investigation into this pressing yet intriguing issue, we believe that there is an urgent need to conduct a further exploration of the distinct effects of the attributes of eWOM information on different readers' (i.e., old and new) perceptions of information credibility. Studies in this research domain would serve not only to contribute to the understanding of this important nomological network but also to provide practical marketing strategies to eWOM practitioners. Therefore, the following research question is posed:

*How does eWOM readers' sense of membership moderate the effects of eWOM antecedent factors on their perception of information credibility?*

This study draws on the most influential eWOM antecedent factors from extant eWOM studies [e.g., 6, 9, 47] to build a research model. To advance this line of research, we incorporate SOM into our research model as a moderator to explore its moderating effects on the causal relationship between eWOM

antecedent factors and perceptions of information credibility. The rest of this paper is organized as follows. First, we will introduce the concept of SOM. We then will propose our research hypotheses. Next, we will describe the collection of the data used to test our hypotheses, followed by the results of the data analyses. Finally, we acknowledge the limitations of the study, and we present the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

## 2. Sense of membership

SOM, which is also named sense of belonging, is defined as 'individuals' identification with a group in the sense that people come to view themselves as members of a community' [22,32]. As an integral part of the community, a member's SOM reflects his or her emotional attachment to the community [3,20,53]. A community is a social entity in which people interact with each other because of the presence of a unity of will [48], and it contains a boundary that helps community members to separate "us" from "them". This boundary provides members with a perception of emotional safety that is necessary for them [17]. By frequently participating in the community and interacting with other members, a person will gradually develop a strong SOM with the community, which is the key determinant of the community's cohesion [32].

Although SOM was originally defined in brick-and-mortar communities, various scholars [26,34,49,53] believe that it also applies to online virtual communities. A virtual community is a new form of social entity in which members share information for mutual learning and problem solving via the Internet [28]. Previous studies [32,42] indicate that SOM affects Internet users' cognition and behavior in virtual communities. Thus, people with high SOM may be inclined to utilize different criteria to evaluate other members and information in the virtual community, compared with other low-SOM people. Moving beyond this viewpoint, we postulate that SOM can affect eWOM readers' perceptions of information credibility. However, we do not predict that SOM has a direct effect on information credibility because it is illogical to deduce that eWOM readers with high SOM will believe review information without evaluating its characteristics. It is also irrational to conclude that eWOM readers with low SOM will arbitrarily refuse to accept information without considering its attributes. This is contrary to common sense. However, it is more rational to predict that eWOM readers with different levels of SOM utilize different eWOM antecedent factors to different degrees to evaluate the credibility of information. In this study, we therefore predict that the effects of different eWOM antecedent factors on readers' perceptions of information credibility are moderated by their SOM perception, which is consistent with the findings of previous eWOM research [9,47], which state that information readers' characteristics (e.g., their involvement and expertise levels) can serve as moderators that significantly affect their evaluation criteria for the received eWOM information.

## 3. Research model and hypotheses

With its comprehensive literature review on previous eWOM research [e.g., 7, 8, 36, 47, 50], this study utilizes review argument strength, review sidedness, and review objectivity (the central route factors), together with source credibility, review consistency and review rating (the peripheral route factors) as the antecedent factors of readers' perceptions of review credibility. We predict that SOM serves as a moderator to modify the effects of these antecedent factors on review credibility. The research model is shown in Fig. 1.

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