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## **Self-presentation, Privacy and EWOM in Social Media**

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## Self-presentation, Privacy and EWOM in Social Media

### Abstract

**Purpose** – Focusing on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in the context of social media communications, the study explores the nature of eWOM and the key drivers of this consumer-generated brand communication.

**Design/Methodology** – The study employs inductive qualitative design, and the data has been collected via 22 semi-structured interviews with individuals who follow brands on Facebook.

**Findings** – Building on interview data, the paper advances a conception of eWOM in the social media context and highlights that eWOM consists of a broad range of brand-related communications, which include such activities as consuming, commenting, posting, and forwarding information. The study also uncovers two major antecedents of eWOM, which are one's concern for self-presentation and privacy.

**Research limitations/implications** – Further research could examine additional drivers of brand-related eWOM in the context of Facebook brand pages, and investigate eWOM in other social media platforms.

**Practical implications** – The findings have two important implications for brand management. Firstly, considering the importance of self-presentation, brands are advised to develop an in-depth understanding of the types of self-image pursued by their target audience. Secondly, given the concerns about privacy on social media, brands may carefully consider and manage the levels of privacy that should apply when communicating with their followers.

**Originality/Value** – The novel insights centre on the individual differences in eWOM activity, and the importance of one's perceptions of self-image and privacy in explaining these differences. It seems that the propensity to engage in eWOM and the form that this communication takes are the reflections of one's self-presentation and privacy preferences.

**Keywords:** EWOM, Brand Communities, Social Media, Self-presentation, Privacy

**Paper type:** Research Paper

### Introduction

The developments in media and technology have changed the ways in which people communicate with one another. Recent years have seen increasing trends towards joining different social networks including Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp and Snapchat (Statista, 2016a). In fact, statistics show that Facebook has over 1 billion daily active users, making it the largest social networking site by the number of users (Statista, 2016b). Given the size of its audience, Facebook is an important marketing communication channel for companies and, reportedly, over 40 million small businesses manage their brand pages on Facebook (Ha, 2015).

Facebook offers multiple benefits for its users. For example, it allows individuals to socialise with their family and friends, as well as interact with people with similar interests whom they may have never met in person (Bryant and Marmo, 2012; Wallace et al., 2012). Members can reach out to their social circle, share relevant news, stories, pictures and videos from their life events (Bryant and Marmo, 2012). Individuals use Facebook to socialise and express themselves, relate their emotions and feelings or relax and even briefly get away from daily responsibilities (Smock et al., 2011; Whiting and Williams, 2013; Curras-Perez et al., 2014).

Aside from enhancing social interaction, Facebook offers its members access to a vast pool of information on different topics, including other members' opinions about products and services, their consumption experiences and brand preferences (Yang et al., 2016). Individuals increasingly use social media to communicate with each other about brands and exchange information and opinions about different products and services (Daugherty and Hoffman, 2014). This communication represents electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). EWOM is a form of external brand communication that is outside of brands' control but can nonetheless have an enormous effect on shaping consumer attitudes towards the brand, affecting brand image and purchase intentions (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012; Abrantes et al., 2013; Ladhari and Michaud, 2015). Individuals have higher propensity to value and trust eWOM because it is created by other consumers and thus denotes more authenticity and credibility than brand-controlled marketing communication (López and Sicilia, 2014). In fact, recent industry research shows that 88% of consumers place equal trust towards eWOM and personal recommendations (Anderson, 2014).

In addition to communicating with others about brands, individuals can reach out to brands on Facebook, which co-exist in this environment with consumers (de Vries et al., 2012; Jahn and Kunz, 2012; Tsai and Men, 2013; Dessart et al., 2015; Azar et al., 2016). Consumers may join brand pages to receive the news or promotional information from their favourite brands, or get answers to their queries through direct interaction with the brand on Facebook (Davis et al., 2014). Research shows that participation in social media-based brand communities and consumer engagement with brands is of value to the brands as well, as the former can have an effect on brand usage intent (Hollebeek et al., 2014), increased brand loyalty (Dessart et al., 2015; France et al., 2016) and loyalty intentions (Dwivedi, 2015), brand value (France et al., 2016) and further dissemination of eWOM (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014). Phua and Ahn (2014) also discuss the influence of an overall number of 'likes' and 'friends' 'likes' of a brand page on consumers' attitudes towards and involvement with the brand, brand trust and their purchase intentions.

Despite the significant progress in understanding online brand communities and their

implications for brands and consumers, significant gap concerns the origin, flow and nature of communications in OBCs. Admittedly, the constant technological changes in online environment hamper the conceptual study of consumer-brand interactions on social media (Baldus et al., 2015). Nonetheless, a significant problem concerns lack of integration and a level of disconnect between two streams of literature: the research on eWOM and scholarship on brand communities. Specifically, brand community literature has traditionally regarded brand community members as individuals who feel attachment towards the brand and have keen interest in the community and its activities (Scarpi, 2010; Laroche et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2012). This literature has argued that brand community members feel connected to one another and exchange brand-related information, share recommendations about how to use the brand, help and support brand community members, express their excitement about brand events and are even willing to contribute to new product development within the boundaries of the community (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Algesheimer et al., 2005; Fuller et al., 2008; Habibi et al., 2014).

Concurrently, eWOM scholarship has focused on a solicited communication between individuals with strong and weak ties, friends or individuals outside one's social circle respectively. EWOM can take different forms, including online reviews, private messages, or blog posts (Shin et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2015), where at least one of the parties is interested and is actively looking for brand-related information. However, this research does not account for eWOM that is unsolicited and can be encountered on Facebook by individuals who may not be even interested in the brand in question, but become a party to the brand-related communication exchange by virtue of being 'connected' to a brand community member. Consequently, eWOM research insufficiently addresses diffusion of information that is associated with very weak or non-existing social ties in this context. Finally, brand community members can engage in eWOM both inside and outside of the communities, but little is known about whether their eWOM behaviour is related or not related to their engagement with the brand community.

Current paper integrates two streams of literature on online consumer brand-related interactions, namely research on electronic word-of-mouth and online brand communities. Specifically, it explores consumer communications in the context of Facebook brand pages through the lens of eWOM and OBC research. The particular objective here is to explore the interconnectedness of Facebook brand pages and individuals' personal profiles, to examine how it affects the nature of their eWOM activity, and identify the drivers of eWOM in this context.

The remainder of the document is structured as follows. First, the paper discusses the current state of social media eWOM research within and beyond online brand communities to delineate the focus of the study. Next, the study methodology is presented, followed by the overview and analysis of the findings. Finally, the paper concludes by addressing key theoretical and practical implications, limitations and suggestions for future research.

## **Social media and eWOM**

The development of online and social media environment has witnessed the growth of consumer-to-consumer and consumer-brand interactions (Popp et al., 2015; VanMeter et al., 2015). Individuals increasingly turn to online environments to look for information about products and services, to find comparisons of different brands and their main features, to learn about other consumers' experiences with the brands; or to find confirmation of pre-defined product judgements (Pentina et al., 2015). Individuals can further discuss and exchange brand-related information on social media, asking their friends and close contacts for restaurant suggestions, get ideas regarding holiday destinations, or recommendations about which technology brand to choose. Thus, social media allows for a significant amount of information to be generated outside of companies' control and influence. Consumers can relate their perceptions of the brand to one another and shape each other's attitudes towards the brand (Ladhari and Michaud, 2015) and its reputation in the eyes of potential customers (Amblee and Bui, 2011).

This type of online consumer interactions can be conceptualised as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and is usually defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). The extant research discusses that eWOM can encompass both textual and visual structural elements (Hoffman and Daugherty, 2013). It can appear on different platforms and take various forms, including but not limited to online customer reviews (Anderson and Magruder, 2012; Pentina et al., 2015; Clare et al., 2016), blog posts (Morimoto and Trimble, 2012; Hsu et al., 2013), reviews of companies on social networking sites (Ladhari and Michaud, 2015) or consumer comments about products on e-commerce websites (Amblee and Bui, 2011; Muralidharan et al., 2014). As a form of communication, eWOM includes generation of brand-related information, passive consumption of information, and further dissemination or passing along the received information (Yeh and Choi, 2011).

Both academic and industry research offer evidence of the power and influence of online consumer-generated brand-related communications (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). Consumers perceive eWOM as a more credible (Doh and Hwang, 2009) and helpful source of information about brands, as it provides knowledge that is rarely available from company-generated sources (Reichelt et al., 2014). Evidence from the marketing practice also suggests that 61% of consumers read online reviews before making a purchase decision (Charlton, 2015), and online consumer reviews tend to be more trusted than communication originating from the company (Nielsen, 2012). Previous studies have established that eWOM can influence consumers' attitudes towards products (Lee et al., 2008), loyalty (Gruen et al., 2006), their purchase intentions (Chih et al., 2013; Baker et al., 2016) and trust towards the company (Ladhari and Michaud, 2015). Additionally, eWOM can have a significant effect on businesses' sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006) and revenues (Kim et al., 2013).

Brand community and eWOM research highlight similar motivations for engagement in online communications. Individuals engage in eWOM for a variety of reasons, and the key motivations can be grouped into three categories, including social, functional and emotional drivers (Lovett et al., 2013). These share similarities with findings from online community

research, which for example discusses that individuals participate in virtual brand communities to obtain social, functional and entertainment values (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008). Individuals consume and contribute to eWOM to help others with product enquiries (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Bronner and de Hoog, 2011), to obtain buying-related information (Hennig-Thurau and Walsch, 2003) and seek advice (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), to express positive (Lovett et al., 2013) and negative feelings (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), as well as for self-enhancement (Alexandrov et al., 2013; Lovett et al., 2013), self-expression (Saenger et al., 2013) and social interaction-related reasons (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Bronner and de Hoog, 2011; Alexandrov et al., 2013; Wolny and Mueller, 2013).

## **Brand communities and eWOM**

Social media facilitates consumer-brand interactions by offering a platform for brand community development. Habibi et al. (2014, p. 125) discuss that “at the intersection of brands and social media are groups of communities of brand admirers”, referred to as “social media-based brand communities”. Brands use social media to engage with their existing fans, to maintain relationships with current customers, and to spread interest and awareness among potential brand enthusiasts (Palazon et al., 2015), ultimately positively influencing their brand evaluations (Beukeboom et al., 2015). Similarly, brand enthusiasts can initiate pages and groups related to the brand and attract others interested in the brand to join (Zaglia, 2012). Facebook brand pages encompass brands from various industry sectors, ranging from just having a few hundred fans to thousands of followers (Habibi et al., 2014).

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001, p. 412) defined a brand community as “a specialised, non-geographically-bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand”. The authors stressed the three key community markers attributed to brand communities: consciousness of a kind, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Nonetheless, years of academic research on the topic have uncovered some significant idiosyncratic characteristics of brand communities. Specifically, brand communities differ in the ways they are managed (e.g. enthusiast-run vs. company-managed brand communities) (Woisetschläger et al., 2008; Hsieh, 2015); types of brands represented (e.g. Arora, 2009; Leban and Voyer, 2015); community size (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Scarpi, 2010); social relations among the members (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002; Sicilia and Palazon, 2008); or members’ reasons for participation (Relling et al., 2016). There are also substantial differences in the levels of brand community members’ engagement with the community (Tsai and Men, 2013). The intensity of participation varies (Kang et al., 2015), and as many as 90% of brand community members can be lurkers, or passive observers and consumers of content, whereas 9% of individuals occasionally contribute and only 1% include posters or most active members (Madupu and Cooley, 2010).

A strand of brand community research proposes that Facebook brand pages can be viewed as a particular type of online brand communities (OBCs) embedded in social networks (Zaglia, 2012; Habibi et al., 2014; Palazon et al., 2015; Habibi et al., 2016). Just like conventional brand communities, Facebook brand pages are formed around a single specific brand and often include individuals who are very interested in the brand in question (Jahn and Kunz,

2012). Existing research also evidences the existence of three community markers in the investigated Facebook-based OBCs (Zaglia, 2012; Habibi et al., 2014). Admittedly, Zaglia (2012) notes that whereas Facebook groups exhibit strong characteristics of communities, brand pages indicate a somewhat weaker type of community. Accepting, that these kinds of communities differ from the conventional view of the brand community, current research follows the latest trend in the OBC research (e.g. Dessart et al., 2015; 2016; Relling et al., 2016) and explores Facebook brand pages through the lens of brand community literature.

A significant amount of communication is potentially exchanged within OBCs, where members share their opinions and ideas about the brand and react to its news, engaging in eWOM within the boundaries of the community in terms of the information sharing, learning and endorsing (Dessart et al., 2015; 2016). There is evidence that brand community members participate in the community via engaging in both positive and negative eWOM (Relling et al., 2016); as well as influence one another in the community (Palazon et al., 2015), for example where the group may affect individual members' attitudes towards brand extensions (Chang et al., 2013).

Based on the definition by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), current study defines eWOM in the context of social media-based brand communities as communication initiated by the brand community members about a brand, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet. This includes posting and reading the brand-related communication within the brand community and forwarding the communication outside of the community.

Despite a large volume of online consumer interactions that takes place in social networks both outside and inside the brand communities, the research on eWOM in social networks still seems limited. The search for relevant articles that concurrently addresses eWOM and social networks on EBSCO Business Source Premier Search revealed only a small number of entries. The search for relevant papers included the following keywords: 'eWOM', 'WOM', 'online WOM', 'SNS', 'Facebook', 'Twitter' published between 2010-2017. The timeframe enabled to identify the most current papers that reflected the constantly evolving nature of the environment. The search generated 20 peer-reviewed papers on eWOM in SNS in general and six articles on eWOM in brand communities embedded in the social network sites (Table 1).

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In general, very few studies have looked into eWOM in the context of online brand communities. Contrasted with a large volume of literature that has discussed the nature of eWOM communication about brands (Abrantes et al., 2013; Saenger et al., 2013), including more recently social media eWOM (Chu and Kim, 2011; Wolny and Mueller, 2013; Daugherty and Hoffman, 2014; Hatzithomas et al, 2016), limited studies have focused on brand community eWOM. Existing research to date has primarily focused on eWOM between the brand community members within the community (Yeh and Choi, 2011; Chang et al., 2013; Relling et al., 2015), thus not accounting for the information that goes into and outside of the communities and potentially influences other people who are not members of the community, but are connected to a brand community member. Similarly, online eWOM has been usually approached as solicited exchange of information between friends, or other



consumers' reviews of their consumption experiences, and research has tended not to explore how social media users may be affected by eWOM coming in from OBCs.

As brand communities become embedded in the social networks, the activities that take place inside the brand communities potentially get interlinked with consumers' personal profiles, and the nature of online consumer-to-consumer and consumer-brand interactions becomes more complex. Within the social media environment, consumers' social and brand-related communication is especially interconnected, and users' casual online interactions with friends on a social network can ultimately trigger their brand-related eWOM intentions (Okazaki et al., 2014). Building on the brand community and eWOM research, this study aims to explore the nature and drivers of eWOM in the context of Facebook brand pages.

## **Methodology**

Due to the lack of research connecting brand community literature and eWOM research and taking into account the emerging and evolving nature and functionality of online environment, this study adopts an exploratory approach. To understand the experiences of members of Facebook brand pages and focusing on the nature of their communication about brands, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility in gathering the data, where the researcher can alternate between the questions depending on the flow of the discussion, can add follow-up questions and ask for additional clarification (Mitchell and Jolley, 2009).

Facebook was chosen as a research context for several reasons. The decision was driven by the overwhelming popularity of the social network, and the current trend in the brand community research, where a strand of the literature regards Facebook brand pages as special types of OBCs (e.g. Zaglia, 2012; Habibi et al., 2014; 2016). Finally, the review of existing literature has shown limited research on eWOM in social media-based OBCs, therefore not much is yet known about the nature and drivers of eWOM in this context.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed over a period of 4 weeks and this involved several revisions before the data collection took place. During the process of data collection, some of the questions were rephrased with the latest social media jargon to suit the participants. In the beginning of the interviews respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, main interview themes and that the interview should take up to 1 hour. During the interviews respondents were asked to relate their experiences with the brand pages and how they communicated with others about the brands. The interview guide encompassed several themes, including individuals' communication on Facebook within and outside the brand pages, the connection of brand pages to their personal profiles and to their broader social network of friends. The participants were asked to discuss their brand-related eWOM activity on Facebook, and to provide stories and examples related to their experiences with either official or enthusiast-run Facebook brand pages or groups. The questions were largely driven by the exploratory nature of the study, where the researchers were interested in understanding the individuals' behaviour within this context. Frequently, the respondents were members of more than one brand page and were encouraged to discuss the communities

where they felt they were most active.

The study employed purposive and snowball sampling methods to recruit participants. Specifically, in line with the purposive sampling method, the criterion for participating in the study was belonging to one or more brand pages on Facebook. Snowball sampling was used and interviewees were asked to suggest other potential participants, who would satisfy the participation criteria. Snowball sampling is appropriate here because it provides the flexibility of data collection and allows the issue to be investigated in depth, as the participants recruited fit the participation criteria and are able to provide insights into the research problem.

Overall 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted over Skype and face-to-face, depending on the direct proximity of each participating informant. The data collection lasted until the data saturation had been reached, where no new information was being uncovered in the interviews (Adler and Adler, 2012). Participants were advised that their anonymity would be preserved. Participants represented different age groups, nationalities and occupations (Table 2). The majority of the interviewees were young adults aged between 24 and 35 years old (millennials). Individuals within this age group are most engaged and active on social media (Strutton et al., 2011), with the majority of Facebook users aged between 18 to 29 and possessing college education (Patterson, 2015). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The average duration of the interview was 38 minutes and represented 175 pages of single space transcripts with font size 12.

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Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis was chosen because of its flexibility: unlike other methods of qualitative analysis, it is not tied to a particular epistemological approach and theoretical framework and allows searching for patterns and themes within the data, going back and forth to the literature and data to make sure that the analysis is robust and thorough (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The researchers applied their judgement about what is going to be considered a theme. Members of company-managed and enthusiast-run brand pages represented units of analysis.

## **Findings**

### *Nature of brand-related eWOM on Facebook*

In contrast to conventional definitions of eWOM, the consumer-generated brand communication on social media represents a broad array of communication activity. Considering the specific context of communication, informants engaged in various forms of brand-related eWOM exchanges, including posting new content, commenting on the posts, replying to comments, sharing content from other social networks, and consuming information. The findings suggest that members of Facebook brand pages are consumers, generators and transmitters of brand-related eWOM.

Previous research suggests that behavioural engagement in social media-based brand

communities encompasses information sharing, learning and endorsing (Dessart et al., 2015; 2016). A lot of interviewees discuss consuming content on the brand pages, including reading other members' comments about the brand to get ideas about how to use the brand, or how to combine different clothing styles (in the case of a fashion-related brand). The finding corroborates research that shows that the majority of brand community members are lurkers rather than posters (Madupu and Cooley, 2010).

Posting behaviour often includes replying to other members' comments, for instance when expressing an agreement or a disagreement with the discussed issue. Individuals often try to help others in the community by providing advice and sharing information about specific characteristics of the brand:

*'...Somebody asked about the shoe size, so I think that one person asked if the size is normal size, or if it's a little bit smaller and then I commented 'yes, the shoes are smaller'...because I wanted to be helpful' (F6).*

Besides communicating with other brand followers, informants report posting their queries directed at the brand publicly on the brand page. This posting behaviour is viewed as eWOM because it is created by an individual and becomes visible to other members of the page and the poster's social network.

The analysis reveals interesting insights about the different nature of the online behaviour of the members of company-managed and enthusiast-run brand pages on Facebook. It seems that official brand pages are used to communicate with or provide feedback to the brand. By contrast, enthusiast-run groups can attract more consumer-to-consumer interaction, where the participants exchange their opinions about the brand or follow its news.

*'...Very often...I can see a comment that someone made, and that's a way that I often become a member of a page...When a good friend of mine is giving attention to a brand – it kind of gives credibility to the page' (F8).*

Interviewees also discuss intentional spread of information about the brand to their social network, including posting links onto their friends' timelines, their personal timelines, or in private messages to their friends. Furthermore, in this instance lurkers' behaviour may be valuable to the brand, as even though they might not engage in the brand-related conversations with other brand page members, they can share the information from the page outside. As one respondent comments:

*'Sometime I quote them in a post on my newsfeed, sometimes I'll send it directly to a specific friend, so it goes onto their wall, or sometimes in a private message – depending on what I write to go with it' (F8).*

Members invite others to join the brand pages, thus promoting the brand to their network of friends. This is also often done when the individual has a close relationship with the person managing the brand page, and in this way, they are helping the person managing the brand. For example:

*'I may share something on purpose just because I know that a friend of mine is kind of*

*involved with a brand, so in this case, I definitely try to promote this brand – you know, make it exposed to more people’ (F7).*

This activity can be related to the brand community members’ sense of moral responsibility and, as noted by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), the activity represents the perceived obligations of the brand community members to one another and the community as a whole. Previous research has identified that a sense of moral responsibility can manifest when helping others in the community through responding to their problems, providing advice and advising new members about using the brand and even recruiting new members to the community (Casalo et al., 2008; Dholakia and Vianello, 2011; Kuo and Feng, 2013).

Not all communication originates within the community. Besides exchanging comments and getting involved in discussions with others within the page, members can also gather information about the brand outside of the page, and then share it with other brand followers. This includes sharing the news that they have heard about the brand outside of the brand page, discussing rumours, or for example posting links from other sources onto the official brand pages and unofficial fan-initiated groups. For example:

*‘...Especially before the line-up was announced – you always get into any festival I guess where there are rumours going about...so a lot of people would write comments with what they’ve heard or what they suspect, or maybe inside information through people somebody knows – one of the acts...’ (F8).*

*‘...There’s always rumours about new players coming into the club, a classic is someone’s seen someone’s car in the football club, and it’s a private number platter and they start circulating rumours that it’s a big superstar or something...So yeah maybe they’ve linked an article from the BBC’ (M4).*

### *Drivers of brand-related eWOM on Facebook*

The nature and degree of brand-related eWOM activity in the Social Media context appeared to be influenced by two main drivers: 1) one’s need for self-presentation and communicating one’s self-image to the social network, and 2) one’s perceptions and preferences regarding openness and privacy offered by the specific social media context.

### *Self-representation and brand-related eWOM activity*

Many of the informants perceive their personal Facebook profile as an extension of one’s self; it represents one’s identity online (Belk, 2013). A major part of consumer behaviour can be traced online – including pages individuals ‘like’, stories they ‘follow’, brands they engage with – it is all reflected on the newsfeed and is quickly disseminated to one’s social network. This poses a question, whether this nature of social media somehow shapes the way individuals interact online and more specifically – interact with brands or with each other about brands on social media.

As reflected by one of the interviewees, Facebook has become a part of people's everyday lives:

*'I was quite familiar with his [designer] work and I really admired him and I just wanted him to be a part of my sort of everyday life, since I'm always on Facebook and I wanna see his work appearing here and there, so I checked him out on Facebook, and I found him, and I liked his page' (F10).*

There is an overall understanding, that one's own identity on Facebook is an extension of one's real personality and it has an ability to convey a certain message to one's network of friends. Thus, respondents discuss taking advantage of this by choosing what message to convey. Participation in brand pages on Facebook is also a signal of one's personality, identity and it can start from day one on Facebook. Here informants discuss being 'selective' and 'strategic' with the kind of message that they are conveying to the rest of their social network by following the page:

*'...Especially now that you see that people can see what you like...I suppose you have to be a little bit more selective with what you do like...If you connect with a brand in this way – or you're making it... part of you, because it's gonna be this brand or the message that this brand is transmitting – it's gonna be part of the impression that these other people have of you. So it's kind of like a personal statement' (M3).*

Lee et al. (2012) characterise this driver of eWOM communication as self-construal, which reflects how individuals view themselves in relation to others. Here authors discuss two types of self-construal – independent, where individuals would express themselves the way they see fit regardless of the social environment; and interdependent self-construal – which may shape the way individuals interact with others, as they regard themselves as a part of a larger social group. Indications of these drivers were found in the data:

*'Mostly I try to use my Facebook as strategically as possible, because I know that potential employers also look at it when you apply, so I'm trying to repost and I try to make smart comments on articles that are in relation to my work and to my specialization' (F10).*

*'...It has to be something that I feel identified with because I think when you share something about a brand – you are also making a statement. And...if you are doing it in your personal page – I think you have to be even more careful...because it's a bigger statement' (M3).*

This relates to both what goes in and what doesn't:

*'I don't think it [brand] is relevant to the profile and to what I like to project on Facebook as a personality' (F10).*

Taking the roles of a receiver of this communication, interviewees discuss that not all content is solicited, or wanted – as being posted on one's profile it can potentially be visible to many people. More specifically:

*'...A friend of mine had shared on my wall the Facebook link of a clothing brand, and she was writing me something like '...you have to check out this brand because they have amazing you know clothing for really good prices, so take a look at it'. I don't really like that. I think that they make my wall dirty' (F7).*

Even though interviewees were happy to describe their activity on the pages and the ways in which they interacted with others about brands, when asked directly to characterise their roles in the pages, a lot of interviewees described themselves as 'passive observers'. They further stated that they would only share something when they felt it would be very relevant and interesting for their friends. In this regard, they characterise themselves as more of consumers of brand-related content, who go onto the pages or follow the brand's updates on the newsfeed. This conflict seems to be linked to the ways individuals want to see themselves, or possibly, how they want others to see them. Thus, during the discussions with members of brand pages it became evident that their activity, or the nature or form of their communication, is shaped by their awareness of openness of the context. The openness of the brand pages shapes the way their personal profiles are seen and what they are associated with, or what kind of image they project. This seems to serve as a trigger to filter the amount of communication, where interviewees discuss limiting the amount of information they share; what form it is presented in, such as whether it is in a private message, or whether it is shared onto their 'friends' timelines.

The way individuals wish to present themselves to the rest of their social networks can shape the nature of their communication about brands, as well as the intensity of communication. Thus, projecting one's self-image can serve as a driver and a gatekeeper of brand-related eWOM, where some information is 'strategically' shared publicly, while other things are shared privately or simply consumed and not retransmitted.

#### *Openness, privacy and brand-related eWOM activity*

Another prominent theme that emerged from the interviews was the issue of revealing too much and potentially over-sharing or giving out too much information for others to see. This theme seems to be related to one's perception of or attitude to privacy and how it shapes individuals' online communication about brands. Privacy is further related to the openness of the embedded communities and their connection to the members' social network. Here interviewees also discuss their own perceptions of privacy on Facebook, but also how the openness and visibility of different content may be accepted differently by their friends. For example, one respondent stated:

*'...You don't' have anonymity that you might have with another methods of kind of communicating with that company' (F14).*

Because of the perceived lack of anonymity, and due to the openness of the Facebook brand pages, individuals report being 'more careful' and cautious when engaging with brands on Facebook. Just like their need for self-presentation can serve as a driver to follow the brand page, potential privacy concerns may be used as an internal psychological barrier:

*'...Because it links to your profile, you know they [brands] track your clicks of things and stuff like that, so it's yeah more of a privacy concern than anything. If there were a way that I could block or I could limit or choose what information that the company could see - I'd really like that and I'd probably like a lot more pages – if I have that option, because it's just...you know they get access to all of your information that's publicly available, it's you know, it makes me think twice and be more careful with which pages I like' (F14).*

*'...I like staying informed on Facebook, but since Facebook privacy is something very debatable – I don't like exposing myself that much. I'm just – I'm very picky on where I can comment and what sort of comment' (F10).*

Informants further discuss that while appreciating and emphasising their friends' potential privacy preferences, they try to adapt the way they share relevant brand-related information with friends. In this instance an interviewee discusses opting for a private message on Facebook instead of sharing a post on the 'friend's' timeline:

*'...Because well I don't know if they want it to be public or not, so might as well go with private. And if they wanna make it public – they can do it by themselves' (F9).*

Informants are sometimes conscious of their environment on Facebook and specifically emphasise that there are other individuals present on their social network. These individuals might not follow the same brand pages and therefore, might not have or even be willing to have the access to brand-related news. Understanding what is happening interviewees further discuss how they adapt their online behaviour when it's related to brand pages. This is driven by their awareness of this openness of the specific context, which forces them to also format their communication in a way that it will reach their target audience, but also will not impact the people who are potentially not interested in the brand. For example one interviewee notes:

*'...I will not annoy my friends – my other friends, and I will be sure that the person that was interested...in what they [the brand] shared - will see it. Otherwise maybe people that are not really interested in that will see it and the person that you wanted to be the receiver will not be informed' (F7).*

ence of potentially unwanted information that is exchanged on social media within the brand community members' social network.

## **Discussion**

The paper has explored the nature of brand-related eWOM in the context of Facebook brand pages. Building on the research on eWOM and the literature on brand communities, and using qualitative data from interviews with consumers, this research elaborates on the conceptualisation of eWOM in this specific context and sheds light into two important drivers of eWOM activity. EWOM in the context of Facebook brand pages involves a variety of communication activities, including commenting, posting, sharing and consuming brand-related content. Two important drivers of brand-related eWOM in the social media emerge,

which are one's need for self-presentation, or communicating one's self-image, and one's concern for privacy.

The findings provide several theoretical implications. Members of Facebook brand pages are consumers, creators and transmitters of brand-related eWOM, highlighting the potential richness of eWOM as a communication process. Admittedly, the majority of interviewees often identify themselves as silent observers rather than active contributors to eWOM communication, which is consistent with the findings of previous research (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). The study also advances the notion that the nature of eWOM within social media is both broader and more complex than previously suggested, where communication does not simply refer to the customer-to-customer exchange – the conventional view of eWOM (Gruen et al., 2006; Liang et al., 2013), but it can also include the act of communicating with a brand (Chatterjee, 2011). Due to the nature of Facebook brand pages, contacting a company publicly on the page becomes visible to the other brand followers, and to the contributor's personal network of friends. Thus, they become participants in this communication, whether voluntary or not.

The second contribution of this research refers to the roles of self-image in eWOM. Brand page members' eWOM activities about brands are often tightly linked to the technological context they are in. Specifically, due to the embeddedness of the pages in the SNS, the communities are often perceived not as separate entities and third parties, but as integral parts of the members' personal profiles on the SNS. The communities seem to be closely connected to the members' social network and are often used to project one's self-image or to make a statement about themselves to their 'friends'. The study further suggests that there is a link between consumers' self-identity and their willingness to actively participate in the social media-based brand communities. Previous studies have discussed that often consumers engage in eWOM for self-enhancement reasons (Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2004), or to strengthen their reputation as experts among other consumers (Cheung and Lee, 2012). This study further adds to the findings of Wallace et al. (2014) by addressing the self-expression motivation that shapes eWOM activity in relation to the OBC context.

The third implication concerns individuals' perception of privacy in the context of Facebook brand pages. Revealing one's real identity on Social Media affects the nature of one's eWOM participation. Members of Facebook brand pages are often concerned about the openness of the social media environment, where information can be potentially shared with a large number of individuals. Openness and attitude to privacy seem to effect the willingness of individuals to actively engage in eWOM both with other members of the page, and with their broader network of 'friends'. Previous research has indicated that consumers perceive commenting to be more public and visible than 'liking' (Kabadayi and Price, 2014).

Finally, supporting previous research (Hammedi et al., 2015), the findings show that members of social media-based brand communities have multiple brand community memberships. It seems as if the individuals' need to express themselves, their opinions, or to socialise may be stronger than their admiration for the brand itself.

The paper provides several managerial implications. Importance of self-presentation concerns for individuals, who follow brand pages on Facebook and engage in brand-related eWOM



needs to be carefully considered by community managers. Specifically, it may be valuable for the brand managers to get an in-depth understanding of the types of image that their followers may wish to project on social media. This will help the brands to have a more relevant and targeted content for their audiences.

The second practical implication is related to individuals' privacy concerns highlighted in the findings. Members of Facebook brand pages show awareness of the open nature of embedded brand communities and the interconnection between the pages and their personal profiles on the social network; where the openness and visibility may have a limiting effect on one's eWOM engagement in this context. Brands may consider introducing different levels of privacy settings to respond to potential privacy concerns of their target audiences and to encourage eWOM communication within the communities.

### **Limitations and future research**

This study has several limitations. First, the paper adopts qualitative research approach, which aims to explore an under-researched area of consumer interactions limited to Facebook brand pages. The study setting and exploratory data do not allow for generalizability of the findings to all brand communities and all social media. The study design focuses on community participants and explores multiple pages to which they belong. Future research could focus the investigation on one brand category, or, compare the findings from different types of brand communities (e.g. within an alternative social media setting) to provide further insights into the implications of category or community setting on eWOM.

Furthermore, the participant recruitment has several limitations associated with participant demographics. Specifically, the majority of respondents were female, which may not be an accurate representation of the average brand community membership. Additionally, participants came from different cultural backgrounds, which may have interesting implications for the privacy concerns and eWOM, as well as self-representation and eWOM, which could be addressed in future studies. Another interesting avenue for the future research would be to explore additional drivers of eWOM communication in the social media context.

Additionally, due to the openness and embeddedness of Facebook brand pages the boundaries between members and non-members seem to be less salient. Connecting branding and social media research is especially relevant as consumers use both for self-expression and projecting a certain image about oneself to others. Previous research has shown that brands are often chosen for specific attributes that can be communicated through purchase and consumption (Chernev et al., 2011; Saenger et al., 2013), while social networks can be used for self-expression and projecting one's self-image (Van Dijck, 2013). Future studies could further address the question of how brand attributes and community settings affect eWOM. Finally, future research should also closely look into the role of lurkers, as even though they do not actively contribute to the discussions on the brand pages – the findings suggest that they may be happy to share the content from the pages both privately and publicly.

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Table 1. Research on eWOM in SNS within and outside OBC

Source	Focus of the study	Method	Outside OBC	Within OBC	Platform
Chatterjee (2011)	Drivers of customer-to-customer brand recommending and referral behaviour on SNS	Quasi-experiment	✓		SNS
Chu and Kim (2011)	eWOM antecedents on SNS	Survey	✓		SNS
Hur et al. (2011)	Impact of OBC trust and affect on OBC commitment	Survey		✓	N/A
Yeh and Choi (2011)	eWOM antecedents in OBC	Survey		✓	Online community
Liang and Scammon (2011)	Features of eWOM on health SNS	Netnography	✓		Health SNS
Strutton et al. (2011)	Generation differences in eWOM behaviour	Focus groups, Survey	✓		SNS
Lee et al. (2012)	Effect of self-construal on eWOM intentions in OBC	Experiment		✓	Facebook
Williams et al. (2012)	Use of social media among the Generation C	Content analysis	✓		Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and other
Chang et al. (2013)	Role of brand community eWOM in members' evaluation of brand decisions	Experiment		✓	Bulletin board system, Facebook
Goodrich and De Mooij (2013)	Differences of effects of online and offline sources on purchase decisions across cultures	Survey	✓		Social Media
Hoffman and Daugherty (2013)	Attention to visual and textual elements of eWOM	Experiment	✓		Pinterest
Kietzmann and Canhoto (2013)	Impact of different consumption experiences on motivations to share eWOM	Survey	✓		Facebook, Twitter
Okazaki et al. (2013)	Influence of gossiping propensity on eWOM intentions	Experimental survey	✓		SNS
Wolny and Mueller (2013)	Motives for eWOM about fashion brands in SNS	Survey	✓		Facebook, Twitter
Cataluna et al. (2014)	Influence of eWOM in SNS and on the Internet on purchase behaviour	Survey	✓		Facebook, Twitter, Tuenti
Daugherty and Hoffman (2014)	Antecedents of attention to negative, positive and neutral eWOM	Experiment	✓		Pinterest

<b>Source</b>	<b>Focus of the study</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Outside OBC</b>	<b>Within OBC</b>	<b>Platform</b>
Fang (2014)	Adoption of eWOM by SNS users	Survey	✓		Facebook
Okazaki et al. (2014)	Online gossip propensity on SNS (antecedents and outcomes)	Experimental survey	✓		SNS
Reichelt et al. (2014)	Effect of eWOM credibility on eWOM reading	Survey		✓	Discussion forums
Hennig-Thurau et al. (2015)	Effect of eWOM messages on Twitter on the adoption of new movies	Survey	✓		Twitter
Kreis and Gottschalk (2015)	Motivations for eWOM depending on the media choice	Survey	✓		Facebook
Ladhari and Michaud (2015)	Influence of eWOM on trust and attitude towards a hotel, booking intentions and website perceptions	Experiment	✓		Facebook
Yen and Tang (2015)	Motivations for eWOM posting depending on the media choice	Survey	✓		Facebook
Hatzithomas et al. (2016)	Engagement in eWOM on SNS	Text analysis	✓		Twitter
Relling et al. (2016)	Effects of positive and negative eWOM in social media based brand communities depending on the community type	Quantitative content analysis, Experiment		✓	Facebook
Oh et al. (2016)	Impact of paywall on eWOM effectiveness on social media	Natural experiment	✓		Twitter

Table 2. Interviewees' demographics

Name	Interview duration, min	Nationality	Language	Employment	Age Group	Brand category
F1	44	US	EN	Working full-time	36-50	Fashion / Clothing, Technology,
M1	27	US	EN	Working part-time	25-35	TV / Entertainment, Automobile, Food / Beverages, Electronics
F2	24	France	EN	Student	19-24	Political organization
F3	39	Ukraine	RU	Student	25-35	Fashion / Clothing, Fashion / Accessories
M2	20	France	EN	Student	19-24	News / Publishing, Hospitality / Tourism, Food / Beverages
F4	23	Lithuania	EN	Student	25-35	Fashion / Accessories, Festival, Hospitality / Tourism
F5	55	India	EN	Student	19-24	Education, Fashion / Clothing, NGO, Technology
F6	41	Poland	EN	Student	19-24	Fashion / Clothing, Fashion / Accessories, Home Decor
F7	101	Greece	EN	Working part-time	25-35	Festival, Fashion / Clothing, Fashion / Accessories
M3	49	Colombia	EN	Working full-time	25-35	News / Publishing
F8	21	UK	EN	Working full-time	25-35	Festival
F9	24	France	EN	Student	25-35	Fashion / Clothing
F10	23	Greece	EN	Student	25-35	Fashion / Clothing
F11	33	Ukraine	RU / EN	Self-employed	25-35	Fashion / Clothing, Retail & Consumer Merchandise
M4	49	UK	EN	Working full-time	19-24	Sports
F12	39	Malaysia	EN	Student	19-24	Fashion / Clothing, Games / Entertainment
F13	26	Greece	EN	Self-employed	25-35	Food / Beverages
F14	41	Australia	EN	Working full-time	19-24	Public Services, Fashion / Clothing
F15	62	Ukraine	RU	Working full-time	25-35	Health / Beauty, Gifts
F16	29	France	EN	Student	19-24	Music / Entertainment, Fashion / Accessories
F17	34	Australia	EN	Working full-time	19-24	Social, Hospitality / Tourism
F18	23	Nigeria	EN	Self-employed	25-35	Celebrity Brand

