

## **Social Activities, Interpersonal Trait Judgments and Trust within Social Networking Sites**

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*Social networking Web sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter have become a primary medium in which consumers communicate and obtain information. The increasing impact of SNSs poses a new challenge to marketers: the cost-effective identification of advocates who are perceived as trustworthy and can exert disproportionate influence on others. SNSs allow the sharing of various personal information and social activities from which observers are able to infer the personality characteristics and trustworthiness. In this research, we investigate the impact of social activities — both usage intensity and the level of group orientation — on observers' trust intention towards contents generated by the target through interpersonal trait judgment within a SNS. How social interaction influences trust within SNSs has not been well investigated in extant research. Extending Warranting theory under Social Information Processing (SIP) literature, we propose that these mechanisms can manifest themselves in interpersonal personality trait judgment, and ultimately influence the trust intention. We look into two interpersonal traits that are most relevant in the current context: a communal trait - sociability and an agentic trait - expressiveness. Particularly, we hypothesize that usage intensity increases both perceived sociability and expressiveness, while group-orientation level only increases perceived sociability. Moreover, only communal traits like sociability enhance trust intention while agentic traits like expressiveness do not improve trust. To test the foregoing hypotheses, we conducted a survey with 185 university students and the data was analysed using structural equation modeling (SEM) method. The results largely supported the hypotheses. In sum, our study can provide insights into this emerging literature. The findings also have several managerial implications. First, the findings can help both individual and organizational users make more informed decisions when using SNSs. Second, the research can provide pragmatic guidelines for marketers to identify promising advocates and optimize their marketing efforts on SNSs.*

**JEL Codes:** M31 and M15

### **1. Introduction**

Since their introduction, social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily social activities. According to a recent eMarketer report, "Worldwide Social Network Users: 2014 Forecast and Comparative Estimates," nearly one in four people worldwide use social networks in 2013. The number of social network users around the world will rise from 1.73 billion in 2013 to 1.97 billion in 2014, a 13.4% increase. By 2017, the global social network audience will total 2.55 billion (eMarketer 2013). SNSs have become a primary medium in which consumers communicate and network (Boyd and Ellison 2007, Valkenburg and Peter 2009) and an important venue for word-of-mouth Marketing (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels 2009).

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The increasing impact of SNSs poses a new challenge to marketers — the cost-effective identification of opinion leaders whose user-generated contents (UGC) are perceived as trustworthy and can exert disproportionate influence on others as brand advocates. SNSs allow the sharing of various personal information and social activities, from which observers are able to infer a target user's personality characteristics and the trustworthiness of UGC by the target. This is important because the information gathered from UGCs can play an essential role in shaping consumers' attitude towards the focal product under discussion.

SNSs are increasingly attracting the attention of both academic researchers and practitioners. Prior research on impression formation on SNSs has studied the accuracy of personality impressions based on Facebook profiles (Gosling, Gaddis and Vazire 2007) and the extraversion of the target's friends and number of friends influence the perceived popularity, communal orientation, and social attractiveness of the target (Utz 2010). However, these studies did not comprehensively examine how consumers use the various aspect of a SNS profile as cues to infer the personalities of the target and ultimately on trust intention towards UGCs. Trust is a critical factor for sharing information and building up relatively new relationships (Coppola 2004, Piccoli and Ives 2003). Also, studies by Gambi (2009) and Maheswaran (2007) show that trust is a serious concern among SNSs users. As there is a clear lack of face-to-face contact, it is harder to gather information and develop relationships. Thus, investigating how interaction on SNSs influence trust towards UGCs will be significantly important. However, how social interaction influence trust towards UGCs within SNSs has not been well investigated in extant research.

In this research, we aim to fill the gap in the existing literature by investigating the impact of social interaction — both usage intensity and level of group orientation — on trusting intention of contents generated by the target within a SNS through interpersonal trait judgment. Although previous literature in this area of research have investigated the link between the amount of contact hours between any pair of users of SNSs and how it develops trust (Gambi 2009), not much have been discussed about how the individual's social behavior on SNSs such as usage intensity and group orientation lead to trust formation. That is to say, we investigate the SNS social behaviors displayed by an individual and how it impacts the trust formation of others who do not necessarily directly interact with the user of interest.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we briefly review research that investigates the impact of SNSs, interpersonal trait Judgments and impression formation online. This review highlights gaps in the existing study, suggesting the need to consider the underlying judgment process for formulating trust intention. Subsequently, we develop hypotheses about how consumers make trait judgments in SNSs based on the target's social activities and how these judgments affect trust intentions. This is followed by this research's methodology, results and discussion. Lastly, the managerial implications and future research are presented.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Social Networking Web Sites (SNSs)**

SNSs are defined as internet-based services that allow users to (a) construct a public or semi-public profile within a system, (b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (c) view and interact with their list of connections and others within the system (Boyd and Ellison 2007). SNSs allow users to make self-presentations by creating

online profiles, containing text, photos and/or videos, about themselves and their connections and sharing with others.

### **2.2 Interpersonal Trait Judgments and Impression Formation Online**

Interpersonal personality judgment is the process through which people perceive each other's personalities through receiving certain information about others, or meeting others in person (Funder 1995). It is a central process in interpersonal interactions (Berger and Calabrese 1975). Determining how people judge personality is important because personality judgments often influence individuals' behaviors (Snyder and Swann 1978, Snyder and Klein 2005), which raises two important questions in the current research context. First, how does interpersonal personality judgment happen? Second, how do the personality trait judgments affect the subsequent trusting intention in the user-generated contents?

In the social psychology literature, judging the personality traits of others is an ubiquitous and consequential activity of daily life (Funder 1995). Personality traits are patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior that are relatively consistent over time and across situations. Previous research concerning personality judgment focused on the accuracy of judgments, and the influence of personality judgments on various aspects of social interactions (Funder 1995). A variety of variables contribute to the accuracy or inaccuracy of personality judgment in systematic ways. These variables include characteristics of the focal individual whose personality is being judged —the target, as well as characteristics of the individual who is judging personality — the judge (Funder 2010). Yet, most of these studies have not yet examined the trait judgment process and the consequences of trait judgments under the SNS context.

Personality judgment in the online context has been studied under the impression formation framework in the information systems field. For example, Gosling et al. (2007) studied the accuracy of personality impressions based on Facebook profiles and found that the impressions showed some accuracy. Utz (2010) examines how self-generated information and friends-generated information affect the perceived popularity, communal orientation, and social attractiveness of the target. However, these studies did not comprehensively examine how the different aspects of social activities within a SNS can affect trait judgment and trust intention to user-generated contents.

### **2.3 SNS Social Interaction and Interpersonal Traits**

The virtual space of the Internet has given people extraordinary freedom for carrying out different social activities. Some SNS users choose to disclose some information to signal their identities. Others may use the platforms to share wall photos, videos and comments/testimonials on others' posts, apart from displaying the basic information. We posit that such social activities displayed by a particular user can influence others' impression of the target user. Particularly, we argue that not only the level of interaction, but the nature of the activities would also have an impact. In the current research, we look into two aspects of SNS social interaction, namely the usage intensity and the group orientation.

For SNS usage intensity, we adopt a similar definition by Hargittai and Hsieh (2010), that takes into consideration both frequency and diversity of SNS uses. We mainly look into four types of different usages and extent of usage, including the number of friends, the frequency of profile updates, the photos and videos in the profile (both posted and tagged) and the various types of information displayed by the target user. On the other hand, we

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define group-orientation as the extent to which an individual enjoys and seeks working with others, involving others in decisions and seeking others' feedback. Applied to the current research context, group-orientation is the level of group involvement in the SNS social interactions, such as group versus individual shots in pictures and videos and whether the posts mainly originates from the target user or from third parties.

According to social information processing theory (SIP) (Walther 1992), people make use of whatever information is available within a computer-mediated environment with which to form impressions, such as language style and content, chronemics, and photographic or biographic information (Tong et al. 2008). Under this stream of literature, Walther et al. (2008) utilized the Brunswikian Lens Model (Brunswik 1956) in their research and found that behavior generated by the profile owner's friends was used by observers in impression formation processes. According to the Brunswik lens model (Brunswik 1956, Gigerenzer and Kurz 2001), the behavior of individuals and the artifacts produced by them reflect their personality. The cues are used as a lens by observers who try to make inferences about the personality of an individual. However, observers do not use all available cues, but focus on or utilizing certain cues. The information can be differentiated according to its warranting value (Walther and Parks 2002). The more immune information is to manipulation, the higher the warranting value of the information. Perceivers' judgments about a target rely more heavily on information which the targets themselves cannot manipulate than on self-descriptions (Walther et al. 2009).

Extending the existing research, we argued that the warranting principle becomes more important when different traits are being judged. In interpersonal trait judgments, morality and competence, often also called communion and agency, are the two central dimensions in impression formation (Abele et al. 2008, Fiske, Cuddy and Glick 2007). Communal traits are mainly other-profitable, whereas competence or agentic traits are self-profitable (Abele and Wojciszke 2007, Peeters 1992, Wojciszke 2005). We proposed that judgment on communal traits requires information of higher warranting value due to the other-profitable focus. That is, high warrant information only used for communal traits while low warrants could apply to both.

We focus one communal trait – expressiveness, and one agentic trait – sociability, based on their contextual relevance. Sociability is defined as being friendly, outgoing, cheerful and sociable, while expressiveness describes the openness to sharing of experience. Usage intensity is of relatively low warrant as it can be easily manipulated by the user, while group orientation is of relatively high warrant as it is difficult to be manipulated. Extending the SIP literature, we propose that the warranting mechanisms can manifest themselves in interpersonal personality trait judgment. Particularly, we hypothesize that usage intensity increases both perceived sociability and perceived expressiveness, while group orientation only increases perceived sociability.

**H1:** Usage intensity increases perceived sociability.

**H2:** Usage intensity increases perceived expressiveness.

**H3:** Group-orientation increases perceived sociability.

Trust has been defined in a multitude of different ways (Hosmer 1995), such as a trust belief (Lindskold 1978), a social structure (Shapiro 1987) and a behavioral intention (Currall and Judge 1995) . We adopted the behavioral intention definition of trust in the current research and define trust intentions as willing to depend, or intends to depend, on the other party with a feeling of relative security, in spite of lack of control over that party, and even though negative consequences are possible (Mcknight and Chervany 2001).

Benevolence belief has been found to be one antecedent of the intention (Knoll and Gill 2011). Sociability, as a communal trait, is mainly other-profitable, which highly correlates with benevolence. Thus, perceived sociability should also enhance trust intention.

**H4:** Perceived sociability increases trust intention.

On the other hand, the trust intention of the same target could be diluted by the self-profitable agentic traits such as expressiveness. A highly expressive profile owner may fuel the inference that the he/ she spends most time superficially interacting with others and the information provided by these people might be of lower quality.

**H5:** Perceived expressiveness decreases trust intention.

### 3. The Methodology and Model

To test the foregoing hypotheses, we conducted a personal-administered survey with 185 students from a major university in Singapore. The average age of the respondents is 21.2 years old. A pre-test shows that the respondents are frequent SNS users, who log on to a SNS site at least once a day. Furthermore, 45.9% of the respondents are male and 54.1% are female, which corresponds to previous findings on SNS user profile that 56% of SNS users are female (Hampton et al. 2011).

Participants were first given 10 minutes to log in and surf using their own Facebook accounts as they normally do. Then they were told to “keep in mind the profile which you last saw (excluding your own), and answer the following questions based on the SNS experience”.

Items measuring the social interaction, personality judgments and trust intention of the target user are included in the survey. These measures extend Utz (2010) study where only extraversion was manipulated through number of friends and profile pictures, and focusing on popularity, communal orientation and social attractiveness judgments as outcome variables. Also, by further classifying SNS social interactions into group orientation and usage intensity, we are able to test whether such classification of SNS social interactions can exert different impacts on a user’s implied expressiveness and sociability, and ultimately trust formation.

Usage intensity is measured by the total number of friends, profile updates frequency, number of videos and pictures on 5-point interval scales, and the amount of information displayed. The amount of information displayed is measured by the number of different types of information, such as gender, relationship status, family information, education information etc. The more types of information are shared, the higher the amount of information displayed. Group-orientation is measured by whether the photos/videos are group shots or individual shots and whether contents are mainly originated from the target or others. Both items are measured by 5-point semantic differential scales, using “all group shots” versus “all individual shots”, and “originates from others” versus “originates from the profile owners” as anchors, respectively. Sociability is measured by 4 items describing how friendly, cheerful, sociable and outgoing the target is. Expressiveness is measured by 3 items describing how willing and open the target is to share opinions, thoughts and different aspects of life and how expressive the target is, adapted from Kring, Smith and Neale (1994). Lastly, trust intention is measured by a single item, “I trust his/her posts online”.

## 4. The Findings

The data was analysed using structural equation modeling (SEM) method. A two-step approach was adopted in which first a valid and reliable measurement was established, and subsequently the structural model was tested using Mplus 6.12 (Muthén and Muthén 2011). To examine the measurement model, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the data collected was conducted. In particular, model fit was assessed in terms of four indices: comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). A model is considered to be satisfactory if RMSEA is lower than 0.07 (Steiger 2007), CFI is greater than 0.95, TLI is greater than 0.90, and SRMR is lower than 0.08 (Bearden, Netemeyer and Mobley 1993, Hu and Bentler 1999). The result of CFA indicated that the measurement model fit the data well ( $\chi^2 (58) = 104.648$ , CFI = 0.950, the TLI = 0.932, RMSEA = 0.066, and SRMR = 0.062).

**Table 1: Estimated Factor Correlation Matrix from the Revised Measurement Model**

	SD	CR	AVE	Correlation Matrix			
				SOCIAL	EXPRESS	USEINT	GRPORI
1. SOCIAL	0.551	0.749	0.599	0.774			
2. EXPRESS	0.730	0.759	0.632	0.260	0.795		
3. USEINT	0.607	0.577	0.363	0.267	0.304	0.602	
4. GRPORI	0.272	0.177	0.197	-0.001	-0.095	-0.073	0.444

*Notes:* SOCIAL = sociability; EXPRESS = expressiveness; USEINT = usage intensity; GRPORI = group orientation; SD = standard deviations; CR=composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. Value on the diagonal is the square root of AVE.

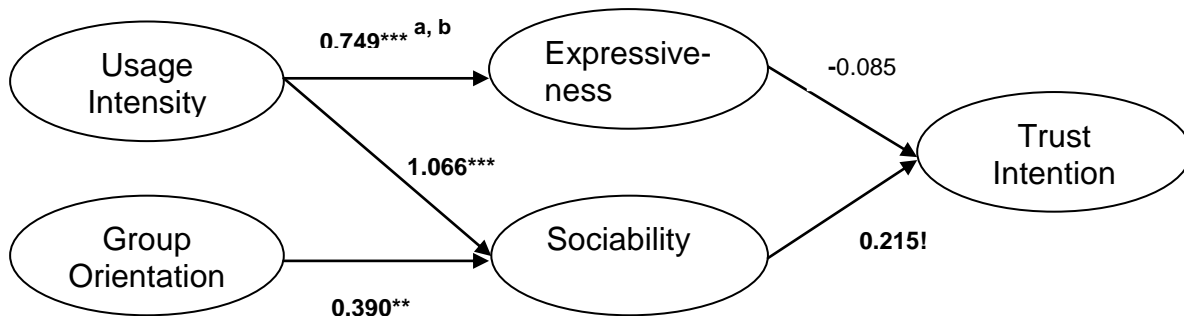
Table 1 describes the standard deviations, composite reliabilities (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE), and correlations of the factors based on the measurement model. In addition to the model fit, we examined the reliability, the convergent validity, and the discriminant validity of the scale. Reliability was examined based on CR and AVE. A scale is said to be reliable if  $CR > 0.70$  and  $AVE > 0.50$  (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). As shown in Table 1, the CRs range from 0.177 to 0.759, and the AVEs range from 0.632 to 0.197, which are mostly above recommended cut-off values except for group orientation. On the other hand, convergent validity is established if all item loadings are equal to or above the recommended cutoff level of 0.50 (Hair et al. 1998). We found that except for the lowest loading of 0.347 in an item for group orientation, all of the other loading estimates met the criterion, suggesting the convergent validity of the scale. Discriminant validity is the extent to which an item does not relate to the measures of other constructs. Discriminant validity is achieved if the square root of the AVE is larger than correlation coefficients (Fornell and Larcker 1981, Chin 1998). We found that all of the correlation estimates met the criterion. Therefore, it can be argued that at least a reasonable extent of discriminant validity was established in this study. Overall, the evidence of good model fit, reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity indicates that the measurement model was appropriate for testing the structural model at a subsequent stage.

### 4.1 Structural Model and Research Hypotheses

We tested the causal model using the structural equation modelling (SEM) technique. Figure 1 reports the results of SEM analysis. Fit indices indicate that the model is a

realistic representation of the data ( $\chi^2(71) = 121.727$ , CFI = 0.946, the TLI = 0.931, RMSEA = 0.062, and SRMR = 0.059).

**Figure 1: Standardized Coefficient Estimates of the Empirical Model**



Notes: <sup>a</sup> Bold coefficients indicate support for hypothesis.  
<sup>b</sup> ! $p < .1$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed).

We found that most of the hypotheses proposed in the causal model were supported. Specifically, as hypothesized, usage intensity had a positive effect on perceived sociability ( $\beta = 1.066$ ,  $p = 0.000$ , two-tailed, Hypothesis 1 supported) and a positive effect on perceived expressiveness ( $\beta = 0.749$ ,  $p = 0.000$ , Hypothesis 2 supported). In addition, group orientation had a positive impact on perceived sociability ( $\beta = 0.390$ ,  $p = 0.009$ , Hypothesis 3 supported). This supports our classification of SNS social interactions into usage intensity and group orientation.

We also found that trust intention was influenced positively by perceived sociability ( $\beta = 0.215$ ,  $p = 0.058$ , Hypothesis 4 marginally supported). However, trust intention was not found to be influenced by perceived expressiveness although the effect was found to be in line with the proposed direction ( $\beta = -0.085$ ,  $p = 0.459$ , Hypothesis 5 not supported). This could be due to the limitation in the sample size, which undermines the statistical power leading to an insignificant result.

Finally, we checked if the effect of usage intensity and group orientation on trust intention was fully mediated by perceived expressiveness and sociability. As a way of testing the mediation effect, the direct paths from usage intensity and group orientation to trust intention were added and allowed to be free. The proposed model – Model 1 was compared with a competing model – Model 2. Model 1 tested the traits that fully mediated the effects of SNS activities on trust intention. Model 2 was an extended model, which includes all the relationship in Model 1 and additional direct effects of SNS activities (Usage Intensity and Content Group Orientation) on trust intention. No significant difference was found between the extended model (Model 2) and the proposed model (Model 1). The result indicated that in spite of the added path, the decrease in chi-square value was insignificant ( $\Delta \chi^2(2) = 0.163$ ,  $p > .05$ , no significance). Indeed, the usage intensity and group orientation to trust intention paths were found to be insignificant, thus supporting the full mediation hypotheses.

## 5. Summary and Conclusions

The research extended prior research by examining how one’s SNS social activities are used to draw inferences about the personality of the target, which in turn, affects the trust intention towards the UGC by the target. Prior research has already shown extraversion of

the friends affects the judgment of target (Utz 2010). The present study extended these findings to the sociability and the expressiveness of the target. Moreover, the empirical study tested the mediating role of the trait judgments. The results showed that a target's usage intensity and level of group orientation jointly influence personality judgments. Depending on the nature of the trait judgment to be made, cue utilization varied. Specifically, it was found that level of group-orientation of the target's social activities is perceived as important when the target's sociability is judged. On the other hand, the usage intensity can positively influence both perceived sociability and expressiveness. Furthermore, the result also indicated that only communal traits such as sociability enhance trust intention while agentic traits like expressiveness did not improve trust.

In sum, the findings have several managerial implications. First, to enhance trust, individual and organizational users should focus on their level of group orientation instead of usage intensity only. Efforts to involve customers into their promotional campaigns could help increase group orientation levels, which can further enhance trust. For example, actively inviting and responding to customer feedback/comments could increase companies' level of group orientation on SNSs. Second, to optimize their marketing efforts on SNSs, marketers should identify promising users that display more group orientation rather than heavy users only as brand advocates. As heavy users are more commonly found, to further optimize the trust in the marketing efforts on SNSs, marketing managers should identify brand advocates that seem to adopt a higher level of group orientation; such as posting more group pictures as well as users who try to involve as many of their SNS friends in their wall posts, sharing third-party postings, instead of those whose profiles display solely individual posts.

A limitation of the current study is the small sample size and non-probability sampling method, which could affect the statistical power of our study and limit the generalizability of the findings. For example, the positive effect of perceived sociability on trust intention is only marginally significant and the negative effect of perceived expressiveness on trust is not significant. The non-significant results are probably due to the sample size constrain. In addition, the data was collected through a person-administered survey using real life user profiles, through which we cannot rule out all the other alternative explanations to develop causal relationships. Future studies can better establish causal relationships by manipulating the levels of SNS interactive activities of user profiles in a laboratory setting.

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