Effects of users' social identity on intention to purchase a brand: The mediating roles of social media use, eWOM and brand loyalty

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Article Info	Abstract
	Background: Social identity theory suggests that individuals define themselves partly through their membership in social groups, and these identities shape attitudes and behaviors, including consumption choices. Brands increasingly function as social symbols, allowing users to express group belonging, self-concept, and shared values through brand affiliation. Consequently, users' social identities can significantly influence their intention to purchase a brand by strengthening emotional attachment, perceived congruence, and loyalty toward brands that represent their in-group. **Aims:** Consumers like to associate themselves with different brands to represent their social identity. This study suggests a social identity perspective of customer-brand relationship and integrates brand identity with social media usage, electronic WOM (eWOM) and brand loyalty in predicting brand purchase intention in an online environment. **Methodology:** Data were collected through a questionnaire-based survey among a sample of higher education students in a public university in Iran. A sample of 423 respondents was selected through a convenience sampling technique. Data were then analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to provide a prediction-oriented model assessment by LISREL 8.54. Sobel mediation tests were performed to test the mediating effects of social media use, eWOM and brand loyalty on the relationship between social identity and brand purchase intention. **Findings:** The findings indicated that social identity (affective, cognitive, and evaluative) of users/consumers has a significant impact on: (a) social media use, (b) eWOM about brand, and (c) brand loyalty. Social media use and brand loyalty were found to be the determinants of eWOM about brand. Finally, this research found that all three variables of: (a) social media use, (b) eWOM about brand, and (c) brand loyalty are the main determinants of intention to purchase a certain brand. **Conclusion:** This research suggests that social identity perspective can be integrated with other perspectives to model the consumer's psychological path to brand purchase intentions. This study confirms the critical role of social identification of users in the reaction towards a given brand and stresses the mediation effects of social media use, brand loyalty and eWOM on the effects of social identity on the path to brand purchase intention.

1. Introduction

Psychology has evidenced that consumers do not just feel emotional linkages to preferred brands, but they adopt them as part of their identity. According to the theory of social identity, proposed by Tajfel (1978), whereby peoples' sense of who they are is based on their membership of different groups. Tajfel has theorized that the groups in which people belonged to as social classes (such as families, groups of friends, workplaces, etc.) were an important source of pride and self-esteem. He demonstrated that groups give individuals a sense of social identity and a sense of belonging to the social world. Individuals often contribute to their social identities through their networks, and the unique style of communication when sharing information (Badwi et al., 2018; Mohammadian, 2025). From this perspective, social media works as a platform that groups individuals with a similar identity and extracts that similar characteristic and forms a common social self-identity via social media (Hornung et al., 2019). Social networking sites have enabled the individuals to share their opinions, experiences and recommendations in the new virtual world. This environment has provided a new form of communication known as "eWOM" interactions (Jalilvand et al., 2012). Social media use is a social phenomenon and highly dependent on the interactions between users (Bennet, 2015).

Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) suggested that strong consumer-company relationships often result from consumers' identification with those companies, which helps them satisfy one or more important self-definitional needs. In other words, consumers connect with brands in much the same way they connect with their social class, sporting teams and friendship groups, and the brand plays a critical role in making them feel better about themselves by increasing their self-esteem. Previous works has recognized the effect of social identity in driving consumer online behavior (Okazaki, 2015).

For instance, Dholakia et al. (2004) investigated online use intention and reported that the members of virtual community with a stronger sense of social identity are more likely to have a stronger tendency to participate in an online community. Hence, it can be understood that social identity encourages online use behavior (Doosti et al., 2016). Although the recognition of psychological process/path to online consumer intention to purchase a given brand has been a focal issue in marketing research (Jalilvand et al., 2012; Doosti et al., 2016; Hornung et al., 2019) and the extant literature has provided several perspectives on the issue (Jalilvand et al., 2012; Toor et al., 2017), but these studies have proposed different central constructs, including trust (Bilal et al., 2022; Limbu et al., 2012), website attributes (Brunner et al., 2018; Nasrolahi Vosta & Jalilvand, 2022), perceived risk (Featherman et al., 2010), and attitude (Limbu et al., 2012; Doosti et al., 2016; Nasrolahi Vosta & Jalilvand, 2022) to brand purchase intention in online settings.

To date the existing literature pays insufficient attention to the various consequences of social identity to online purchase intention of a brand and has not yet incorporated them into an integrated framework.

However, research has asserted that a social identity perspective might be insightful in describing the relationship between a companies and stakeholders (Wang, 2017). Consumers' social identity can develop meaningful relationships with companies and/or brands (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Therefore, the integration of social identity components with social exchange variables in explaining online purchase intention of a brand is the major purpose of this study.

This research proposes an integrated framework to bridge the existing research gap. In particular, this research contributes to the literature in the four ways. First, the present study helps to improve understanding of the mechanism behind online purchase intention of a brand from the perspective of social identification. Second, this research acknowledges the pivotal role of social identity in the process of brand purchase and implies the mediating effects of brand identification on the effects of eWOM, social media use, and brand loyalty on the path to brand purchase intention in an online setting. Third, most studies on social identity have assessed purchase behavior in physical and offline settings and empirical works on the effect of social identity on online consumer purchase behavior are limited (Wang, 2017). However, this research suggests that social identity can integrate with other variables (e.g., eWOM, social media use and brand loyalty) in an online purchase setting. Furthermore, the theory of social identity suggests that social identity has multiple dimensions including cognitive, affective, and evaluative.

However, these three dimensions have not been separately considered in the previous works. They indicated that social identity plays a key role in driving the purchasing intention of online users. But these works have taken social identity into account as an overall construct. This research attempts to fill this research gap and examines the multiple dimensions of social identity, namely cognitive, affective, and evaluative, on outcome variables.

2. Literature review
2.1. Social identity theory
According to the social identity theory, people define themselves based on the social and personal aspects. Social identity defines an individual's characteristics and features including their abilities and individualities. For example, the social aspect of personality (social identity formation) depends on how individuals think about themselves as a group member (Wang et al., 2022). Social identity is defined as "a part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their membership knowledge in a social group (groups) alongside the value and emotional significance of the membership" (Fong et al., 2021).

Such a general definition must adhere to three factors in order to give an individual the ability to develop his or her identity with a group. They are cognitive, evaluative and affective factors. The cognitive dimension refers to the extent to which an individual is aware of his or her membership and also encompasses the process of self-grouping, i.e., which group an individual chooses to place in. It leads to the individual's membership in multiple groups and the formation of several social identities.

Previous studies showed that when the nature of an individual's membership in a group is opposite to his/her group choice inclining to be a member, it affects his/her behavior as a member of that group (Langner et al., 2013). The evaluative component involves group judgments in the social context and their impact on the formation of group members' self-esteem. Hence, it is an indicator of self-confidence and self-esteem of a group (Belanche et al., 2017).

The cognitive component includes traits, beliefs, goals and other properties common among people belonging to a particular grouping. The affective component refers to the affective-emotional connection between the individual and the group. It represents the emotional investment in relation to one's awareness about belonging to the group and evaluations of the group (Reis & Puente-Palacios, 2019). All three dimensions cannot be replaced nor transformed and they may also be expressed in the form of different behaviors (Addis & Grünhagen, 2014). However, there is little empirical research about the behaviors such as an online brand purchase intention (Wang, 2017).

2.2. Hypotheses

Understanding the media use from the perspective of SIT entails considering individual psychological and communicative activity. For example, the presence of minority group members in media ownership, production, and green-lighting roles improves the vitality of those groups (Erigha, 2018). For customers, the specific features/group dimensions associated with different groups in the media are of import.

In particular, the need for quality depictions of one's ingroup appears to be so important that audiences may actively reject and select media content in an attempt to manage social identity needs and protect the perceptions of group vitality (Mckinley et al., 2014). Social media as new, complex, or amplified communication tool have provided massively increased ability to find content supportive of social identities-inexpensive production and distribution costs relative to traditional media make such content easier for social groups to create (Harwood, 2020). Previous researches mainly have focused on interpersonal level (e.g. relationship maintenance) and uncovering individual level (e.g. information seeking) gratifications of media use while neglecting to address the possibility that individuals may use the media to reaffirm their social identities (Chan, 2014).

Social identity in a social networking service would affect how individuals use it. Individuals are goal-directed and active users of the media who choose media content based on the gratifications they may acquire. For example, social media use is related to the gratifications of information seeking, getting guidance and being entertained. Park et al. (2009) conducted a research on Facebook groups and found that members gratified their needs for socialization, status enhancement entertainment, and information. Trepte (2006) argued that users choose the media in accordance with given group memberships and connects social settings and individual motivations in media consumption. Accordingly, working on an individual's social identity and enhancing self-esteem can be a motive for media selection and usage. More recent research conducted by Wang (2017) has considered cognitive, affective, and evaluative components of social identity as the determinants of media usage. The results indicated that affective dimension has an effect on use behavior, while the cognitive and evaluative dimensions have not a significant influence on use behavior. However, there are only a few researches on the linkage of social identity and social media use (Wang, 2017; Chan, 2014). According to the above discussion, the following hypothesis has been developed:

H1. Social identity affects social media use.

EWOM refers to 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 (Jalilvand et al., 2012). Considering social identity as a factor producing eWOM is important because the identification of individuals with their social environment plays a critical role in the production of face-to-face WOM (Sanz-Blas et al., 2019). Social media provides users with an ideal context to express their need for belonging (Borges-Tiago et al., 2019). It helps users to construct social identity and allows them to satisfy the needs for self-definition and relationship with other members of given groups (Hajli, 2018).

Few researches have investigated the way in which individuals identify with different social groups and sharing their opinions and experiences through eWOM (Bilgihan et al., 2014; Demiray & Burnaz, 2019). No study has investigated the effect of the social identity components (affective, cognitive and evaluative) on eWOM generation via social media. Further, prior works have focused mainly on traditional WOM. However, Langner et al. (2013) investigated the relationship among capital, self-enhancement, and social presence, the three factors that constitute social identity, in the traditional WOM settings.

Similarly, a study of González-Soriano et al. (2020) confirmed the influence of social identity on the generation of eWOM, showing that

social capital is an important variable in this process. In the case of virtual communities, Arenas-Gaitan et al. (2013) showed that WOM has two main functions related to social identity. First, WOM is a means of representing concerns about others and helping the members of virtual community to make better choices. Second, customers can use WOM as a way to manage other users' impressions of them.

Okazaki (2015) revealed that, among other factors, social identity is an important antecedent affecting social intention (group-level driver) and desire (individual-level driver) to engage in eWOM. In the context of online communities, social identity with its three components, namely, affective, cognitive and evaluative, can stimulate the generation of eWOM about a certain phenomenon. Based on the above discussion, we have developed the following hypotheses:

H2. Social identity affects eWOM about a given brand.

Brand loyalty is ascertained by the degree, which shows repeated consumer buying patterns and how consistently consumers purchase the same brand. It is the worth of any brand. Brand loyalty is the consumer's tendency to purchase the same product of a particular brand again and again rather than choosing another brand (Rungsrisawat & Sirinapatpokin, 2019). Brand loyalty research has adopting various approaches to model the determinants of brand loyalty. The social identity perspective of consumer-brand relationship proposes that consumers engage in pro-brand behavior as they identify with the focal brand (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

However, mainstream research into brand loyalty neglects the role of social identity of consumers (i.e. affective, cognitive and evaluative identity). They mainly consider brand identity as the antecedent of brand loyalty and suggest that brand identification arises largely due to the brand identity (Rather & Hollebeek, 2019). For example, in their study on four- and five-star hotels in the emerging markets context, Rather and Hollebeek (2019) found that customer brand identification, trust, commitment and satisfaction exert a positive impact on loyalty. Rather (2018) employed a sample of 345 customers in hospitality contexts in India and revealed that there is a significant relationship between social identity construct (customer brand identification) and hotel brand loyalty, an offline context. Social identity theory implies that self-esteem impacts the intention to compare oneself with others (Vogel et al., 2014), which, in turn, would positively affect loyalty toward a loved brand (Kuo & Hou, 2017; Le, 2021). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H3. Social identity affects brand loyalty.

Research has revealed that identification results in more positive

product evaluations, as well as increased purchase intention for identity-linked products in the traditional contexts (White & Dahl, 2007; Li et al., 2013; Yazdanpanah & Forouzani, 2015; Wang, 2017; Suha & Sharif, 2018). For example, Wang (2017) conducted a survey on the users of social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, and found that the affective, cognitive and evaluative dimension of social identity positively influences social media members' purchase behavior. Mcgowan et al. (2016) concluded that affective social identity mediates the relationship between cognitive social identity and emotional value, where affect is the main determinant in the formation of purchase intention. Interestingly, in their empirical study of 467 Instagram users, Farivar and Wang (2022) indicated that followers' social identity, their interest fit and the influencer's opinion leadership positively impact followers' purchase intention towards influencers' recommendation, but social identity had a more salient effect than the others. Zhang and Li (2022) also revealed that social identity can positively influence purchase behavior in cultural and creative product virtual communities.

In a tourism setting, Huang et al. (2008) examined the theoretical meaning of social identity and cross-cutting categorization whereby parental and friends' in-group identity may affect the national identity of allocentrism and consumer ethnocentrism (CET) and the role that CET plays in the mediating relationship between allocentrism and intention to purchase foreign versus domestic products. Suha and Sharif (2018) also found that social identity can significantly influence purchase intention and behavior through theory of planned behavior determinants, namely attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control. However, the majority of previous works have focused on offline business environments. Hence, it is expected that those high in social identity (i.e. affective, cognitive and evaluative) have a higher purchase intention for a brand in a cyberspace. Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis has been suggested:

H4. Social identity affects the intention to purchase a given brand.

Social media sites referred to the web-based services that allow users to create and develop their friend networks by building personal profiles. The media provides authentic information from across the world at any time and enables consumers to do interactions and comparisons (effective two ways communication) (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012a). The number of users who use social media as a part of their daily life is significantly high; they share their preferences, experiences, and opinions regarding the services or products of brands on these platforms (Alboqami et al., 2015). Hence, social media is one of the most powerful and appropriate platforms for interpersonal communications and eWOM (Doosti et al., 2016; Jalilvand & Heidari,

2017). Recent studies accumulate evidence on the effects of social media use on online behaviors such as eWOM and purchase intention (Muda & Hamzah, 2021; Lim et al., 2023). Purgat (2018) also found that social media is used for eWOM. The higher social media use by the consumers, the more proliferation of eWOM will happen. A rapid growth in customer activities on social media has forced firms to be on these platforms as these platforms affect purchase intention (Jalilvand et al., 2012; Toor et al., 2017). In a recent study, Prasad et al. (2017) showed that social media usage has a significant direct influence on purchase decision involvement. In their study of Romanian and Bosnian students, Cuong (2021) found a significant influence of social media content, social media consumer connect, eWOM on purchase intention. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

H5. Social media use affects eWOM about a given brand.
H6. Social media use affects the intention to purchase a given brand.

EWOM has two main functions: first, it is related to social identity, in which eWOM may be used to guide other users and create communication between people; Second, eWOM can be used as a tool to help others make better choices (Jalilvand et al., 2012; Jalilvand & Heidari, 2017). The online conversations in social media naturally have a significant influence on consumers` purchase intentions. Recently, Prasad et al. (2017) indicated that eWOM has a significant direct influence on purchase decision involvement. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H7. EWOM about a given brand affects the intention to purchase the brand.

In the social media context, loyal customers often like to be the brand ambassadors for other customers. In this regard, the members of brand communities tend to disseminate positive information about brands (Zaglia, 2013). Therefore, customers showing high levels of loyalty towards a given brand are prone to involve positive eWOM behavior. Recently, Rialti et al. (2017) conducted a survey among social-media based brand communities of an American sportswear brand and indicated that loyal consumers are frequently prone to initiate a positive eWOM concerning a brand. Eelen et al., (2017) also asserted that loyal consumers' willingness to engage in eWOM increases when they are motivated to signal their identity through a brand or to help a brand. However, loyal consumers need strong motivation tied to the brand to engage in eWOM. Furthermore, empirical research has suggested that brand equity is a determinant of purchase intention (Rungsrisawat & Sirinapatpokin, 2019; Goyal & Verma, 2022). Rungsrisawat and Sirinapatpokin (2019), for example, conducted a survey in different

market places of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malaysia and found that brand loyalty has a positive impact on consumer purchase intent. In the context of mobile phone brands, Goyal and Verma (2022) also showed that brand loyalty and brand equity serially mediate the relationship between brand engagement and purchase intention. Building on this, we propose our last set of hypotheses:

H8. Brand loyalty affects eWOM about a given brand.
H9. Brand loyalty affects the intention to purchase a given brand.
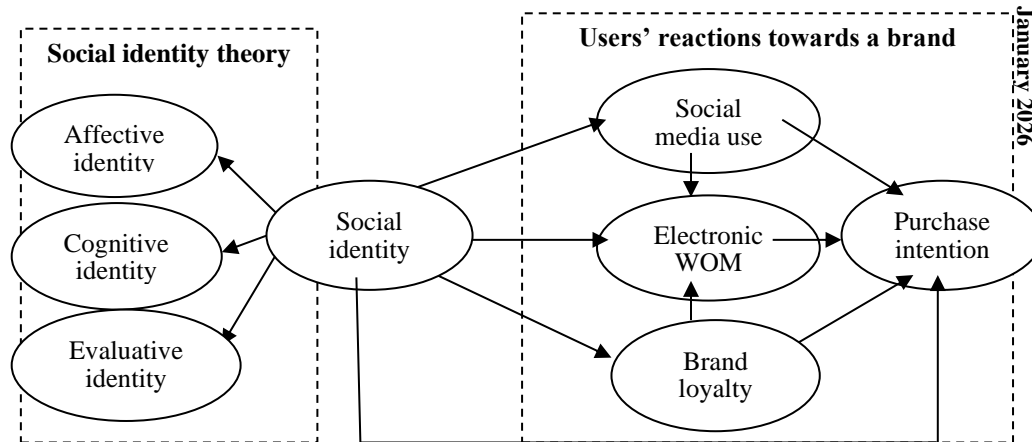
Figure 1. Conceptual Model (Adopted from Kuo & Hou, 2017; Le, 2021; Farivar & Wang, 2022; Suha & Sharif, 2018; Jalilvand & Heidari, 2017; Muda & Hamzah, 2021; Prasad et al., 2017)

3. Methodology
3.1. Data collection procedure
Population includes graduate students in a public university in Iran. The study was conducted over a period of 3 weeks, and data were collected from participants through different social media pages and channels of the University in the various platforms such as Instagram, Telegram, Eitaa, Soroush, and WhatsApp. Thus, we shared the link of questionnaire to the survey on them. The answers were collected using the platform Porsa. Irandoc, which is a research tool. Using such a platform allows researchers to save money and time to gather data (Bethlehem & Biffignandi, 2012). The language of the survey was Persian, as we targeted Persian students. An online link to the survey was shared with 500 individuals, yielding 423 responses (77 did not complete the survey), resulting in an 84.6% response rate.

Since this study uses a single source of data that may yield high correlations among the variables, a test for common method bias (CMB) to recognize the potential effects of common method variance (CMV) was necessary (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The literature has introduced a number of techniques for the assessment of CMB, such as

Harman's single-factor test, partial correlation procedures, multiple method factors test, etc., none of them have indicated to be superior (ibid). The CFA approach for Harman's one-factor test was employed to test for the CMV. This test allows for the assessment of potential CMB by examining whether a single latent factor could pose an alternative explanation to the analysis (ibid). After the 27 items were loaded onto a common factor and performed CFA, the one-factor latent model generated a chi-square of 632.89 (for the measurement model, $\chi^2 = 294$). The fit of the one-factor model was significantly worse than that of the measurement model, showing that CMV is not a serious problem.

3.2. Measures
To ensure the adequate validity and of reliability the measurement scales, instruments used to operationalize the research constructs were adapted from previous works. Further, a pretest of the survey was administered to 20 random individuals extracted from a social media channel of the University. After correcting spelling errors and five sentences for clearer understanding, the final questionnaire was launched. Respondents were asked to represent their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, with statements on the following main constructs: social identity, social media use, brand loyalty, eWOM and purchase intention. Social identity was measured with ten items from Wang (2017). Items were averaged to form a social identity evaluation scale. Social identity was set as a second-order construct. Cognitive (3 items), affective (3 items), and evaluative (4 items) social identities were used as first-order constructs. The scale of social media use was adapted from Prasad et al. (2017) who developed the scale with nine items. The scale was reduced to 6 illustrative items and these items measured social media use. EWOM about the brand was measured with 4 items from the works of Jalilvand et al. (2012). Brand loyalty four-item scale developed by He et al. (2012) was employed to measure the loyalty of consumers toward a given brand. A three-item measure was adapted from Jalilvand and Samiei (2012b) to measure consumers' intention to purchase the brand.

3.3. Validity and Reliability
As shown in Table 1, the reliability of the instrument items was approved using Cronbach's α to evaluate the internal consistency of the constructs in the structural model. The level of internal consistency for each construct was acceptable, with the alpha ranging from 0.714 to 0.855, which exceeded the minimum hurdle of 0.60 (Hair et al., 2006). Additionally, three types of validity were evaluated to validate the measurement model: content validity, discriminant validity, and convergent validity. In order to establish content validity, consistency between the extant literature and the measurement items was ensured.

This was performed by interviewing experts and pilot testing the instrument. Discriminant and convergent validities are assessed for construct validity. Thus, convergent validity was evaluated by examining composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) from the measures (ibid). The reliability and convergent validity of the constructs are satisfied by retaining variables with α's that exceed the recommended value of 0.70, which exceed the value of 0.70 for the CR (Hair et al., 2011) and which exceed 0.50 for the AVE (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). CR values of the seven constructs were between 0.784 and 0.901 and all were above the suggested minimum of 0.7. The AVE values for the constructs were between 0.502 and 0.696 and these values provide evidence of convergent validity (ibid).

These AVE values can also be used to assess discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) which is evident in the results of this research as AVE values for all constructs are higher than the largest squared pairwise correlation between each construct. Further, to test the discriminant validity among the constructs, correlations among the constructs were estimated to determine whether they were significantly different from 1; the confidence intervals of the correlations, calculated as correlations $\pm 1.96 \times$ standard error of estimate, did not include 1, so these results assured the discriminant validity of the measurement model (Table 2). Lastly, the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) was controlled. According to Hair et al. (2017), the HTMT value must be well below 0.85 (which is considered the most conservative value). In our study, the analysis shows that discriminant validity was established for all HTMT values. Bootstrapping was also conducted and controlled the upper confidence interval limit to check for HTMT inference criteria. As all values were well below 1 (ibid), it is concluded that discriminant validity is established. In sum, the measurement results are satisfactory and suggest that it is appropriate to proceed with the test of the structural model.

4. Findings
4.1. Sample profile
A total of 423 questionnaires were returned and used for statistical analysis. Of a total sample 423 respondents, 45.86% (194) were male and 54.14% (229) were female. A large majority of respondents' age were between ranges of under 25 (47.75%), 26-30 (32.86%) and above 30 (19.39%), respectively. The majority of the respondents had below 1000 dollars (46.80%) and 1000-2000 dollars (20.57%) monthly income. Descriptive statistics are displayed in Table 3.

Table 1. Validity and reliability of the instrument

Construct		Items	Factor loadings	t-value	Mean	CR	AVE	Cronbach's α
Affective identity	AI1	I have strong feelings of belongingness toward the brand.	0.823	6.87	3.82			
	AI2	When someone praises the brand, it feels like a personal compliment.	0.754	9.87	3.78	0.784	0.578	0.745
	AI3	I would experience an emotional loss if I had to stop buying the brand.	0.704	10.25	3.66			
Cognitive identity	CI1	I feel high degree of overlap between my personal identity and the identity of this brand.	0.786	8.24	4.06			
	CI2	I think that my own sense of who I am (i.e. my personal identity) overlap with my sense of what this brand represents (i.e. the brand identity).	0.827	9.85	4.06	0.831	0.502	0.755
	CI3	My self-image overlaps with the identity of this brand as I perceive it.	0.830	10.11	3.48			
Evaluative identity	EI1	I believe others respect me for my association with the brand.	0.758	6.74	3.60			
	EI2	I consider myself a valuable partner of the brand.	0.791	6.38	3.71	0.803	0.556	0.790
	EI3	I am a valuable consumer of the brand.	0.784	6.43	3.85			
	EI4	I am an important consumer of the brand.	0.876	6.35				
Brand loyalty	BL1	I would actively search for the brand in order to buy it.	0.775	7.24	3.77			
	BL2	Even if another brand has same features as X, I would prefer to buy X.	0.703	8.26	3.80	0.799	0.544	0.727
	BL3	If I cannot distinguish of another brand and X, I still think that buy X is advisable.	0.729	6.97	3.46			
	BL4	I would prefer to buy X If there is another brand as good as X, I prefer to buy X.	0.743	5.58	3.35			

Construct		Items	Factor loadings	t-value	Mean	CR	AVE	Cronbach's α
Social media use	SMU 1	My relationship with the brand is enhanced by the social media.	0.758	9.59	3.09	0.815	0.525	0.726
	SMU 2	I use social media to monitor other runners in the community.	0.775	6.36	3.97			
	SMU 3	I use social media to follow sales and promotions.	0.798	8.74	3.89			
	SMU 4	I use social media to improve my relationship with different brands.	0.768	6.99	2.89			
	SMU 5	I use social media to monitor events and trends.	0.792	7.58	3.02			
	SMU 6	I use social media to communicate with firms.	0.814	9.47	3.12			
eWOM	eWOM1	I speak positive things online about the brand.	0.744	8.68	4.38	0.814	0.537	0.714
	eWOM2	When I buy a brand, others' online brand reviews make me confident in purchasing the brand.	0.760	10.46	3.22			
	eWOM3	I recommend others online to purchase a particular brand.	0.830	10.29	2.55			
	eWOM4	I often read others' online product reviews to know what brand make good impression on them.	0.910	8.96	3.43			
Purchase intention	PI1	I would buy the brand rather than any other brands available.	0.860	10.75	3.37	0.901	0.696	0.855
	PI2	I intend to purchase the brand within next year.	0.768	8.33	3.86			
	PI3	The probability that I would buy the brand within the next 12 months is high.	0.707	9.14	3.78			

Notes: AVE-Average Variance Extracted, CR-Composite Reliability

Table 2. Discriminant validity

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. AI	*0.578*						
2. CI	0.245	*0.502*					
3. EI	0.282	0.328	*0.556*				
4. EWOM	0.246	0.286	0.272	*0.537*			
5. SMU	0.331	0.199	0.238	0.269	*0.525*		
6. BL	0.189	0.175	0.198	0.352	0.425	*0.544*	
7. PI	0.354	0.106	0.224	0.387	0.332	0.289	*0.696*

Notes: AI=affective identity; CI=cognitive identity; EI=evaluative identity; EWOM=electronic word of mouth; SMU=social media usage; BL= brand loyalty; PI=purchase intention; Diagonal: AVE; Subdiagonals: correlation

Table 3. Characteristics of respondents

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Age (years)		
Under 25	202	47.75
26-30	139	32.86
Above 30	82	19.39
Gender		
Male	194	45.86
Female	229	54.14
Family income		
Below $1000	198	46.80
$1000-$2000	87	20.57
$2001-$3000	61	14.42
$3001-$4000	54	12.77
Above $4000	23	5.44

4.2. Structural model
The proposed model was tested by structural equation modeling (SEM), which included a test of the overall model fit and individual tests of the significance of the hypothesized relationships among the research variables. These tests indicated the relationships among social identity (affective, cognitive, and evaluative), eWOM, social media use, brand loyalty and intention to purchase a given brand. The parameters estimations and the overall fit index of the measurement model are based on the maximum likelihood (ML) method. The main conditions assumed for the use of ML estimation are met or closely approximated in the study. Additionally, the sample was sufficiently large (n= 423 cases), over the recommended size of 200 cases (Jalilvand et al., 2017), the scale of observed variables was continuous, and no violations of multivariate normality were found in the survey responses (Dewasiri et al., 2018). Figure 2 illustrate the explanatory power of structural model, the standardized path regression coefficients that show the direct impacts of the predictor upon the forecasted latent constructs, and related t-values of the research model paths. The goodness-of fit statistics indicated that the structural model fit the data reasonably well. The 5-item model generated a chi-square of 324.35 (d.f=186, P= 0.004). As the chi-square for this measurement model was significant

(P <0.05), this statistic is sensitive to large sample sizes (e.g. Hair et al., 2006). To reduce the sensitivity of the chi-square statistic, the chi-square value is divided by the degrees of freedom. The re-estimated chi-square value was 1.744 and this new value is within an acceptable cut-off value range, from 1.0 to 3.0. The goodness fit index (GFI= 0.96, with 1 indicating maximum fit), Relative Fit Index (RFI= 0.94, with 1 indicating maximum fit), Comparative Fit Index (CFI= 0.91, 1= maximum fit), Root Mean Square Residual (RMR=0.036, with values <0.08), the comparative fit index (NFI= 0.92, with 1 indicating maximum fit), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI= 0.97, 1= maximum fit) and the incremental fit index (IFI= 0.95) met the proposed criterion of 0.90 or higher. Finally, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA= 0.059, with values <0.08 indicating good fit), one of the indices best suited to our structural model with a large sample, indicated that the model is a reasonable fit.
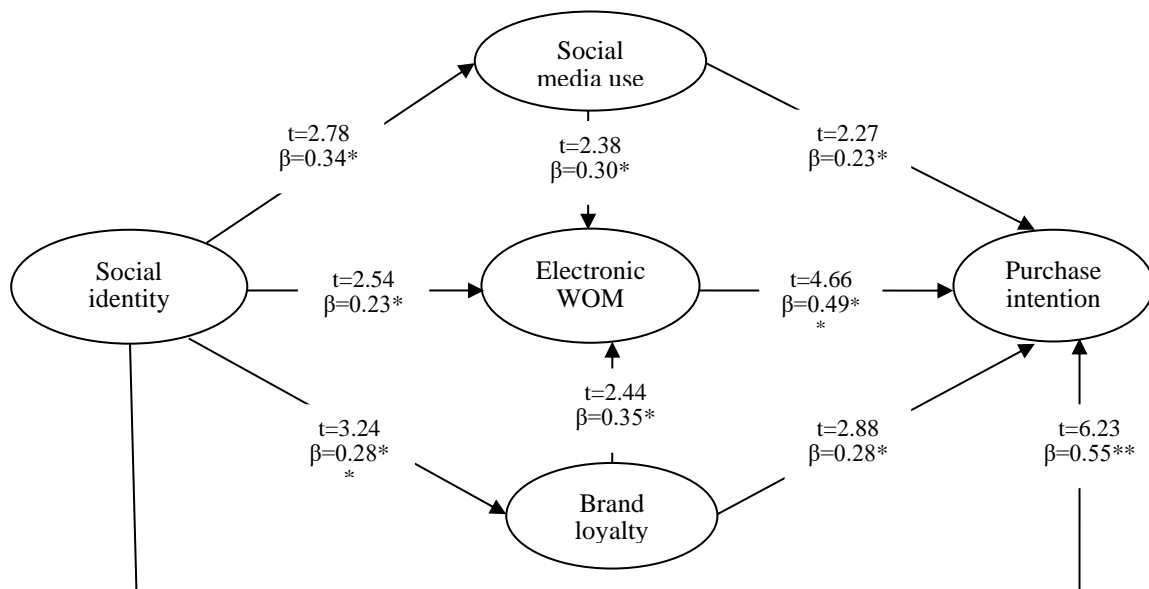
*Notes: Results shown are significant standardized path coefficients. *P<0.01, **P<0.001

Figure 2. Standardized coefficients and *t*-values for hypothesized paths

4.3. Hypothesis testing

Structural equation modeling is one of the methods of covariance analysis. According to Hair et al. (2006), if the t-statistics resided in the range of -1.96 and 1.96, the hypothesis is rejected and if the same statistics is outside the range, the hypothesis is supported. Table 4 shows the results of the individual tests of the significance of the hypothesized relationships among the variables. Among the nine relationships tested, all of them were found to be significant at the alpha

levels of 0.01 and 0.001. Social identity had a significantly positive influence on social media use, with $\beta= 0.340$, $t= 2.780$, and $P<0.01$, indicating that social identity was an important predictor of social media use. Social identity also had a strong positive influence on eWOM about the brand ($\beta= 0.238$, $t= 2.543$, $P<0.01$). Further, social identity influenced brand loyalty, with $\beta= 0.281$, $t= 3.240$, and $P<0.01$, indicating that social identity was an antecedent of brand loyalty. Social identity was also found to be associated with intention to purchase the brand ($\beta= 0.554$, $t= 6.236$, $P<0.001$). In addition, findings revealed that social media use has a positive and significant impact on eWOM about the brand ($\beta= 0.301$, $t= 2.388$, $P<0.01$). It was indicated that social media use is positively related to intention to purchase the brand ($\beta=0.239$, $t=2.272$, $P<0.001$). Similarly, there was found a significant relationship between eWOM about the brand and purchase intention ($\beta=0.498$, $t=4.668$, $P<0.001$). Furthermore, brand loyalty affected significantly eWOM about the brand ($\beta=0.356$, $t=2.447$, $P<0.01$). Finally, data indicated that brand loyalty ($\beta=0.238$, $t=2.886$, $P<0.01$) are significantly associated with consumers' intention to purchase a given brand.

Table 4. Testing the hypothesized relationships in the research model (n= 423)

Hypothesized relationship	Standardized estimate (β)	t-statistic	Result
H1: Social identity →Social media use	0.340*	2.780	Accepted
H2: Social identity →EWOM	0.238*	2.543	Accepted
H3: Social identity →Brand loyalty	0.281**	3.240	Accepted
H4: Social identity → Purchase intention	0.554**	6.236	Accepted
H5: Social media use →EWOM	0.301*	2.388	Accepted
H6: Social media use → Purchase intention	0.239*	2.272	Accepted
H7: EWOM → Purchase intention	0.498**	4.668	Accepted
H8: Brand loyalty →EWOM	0.356*	2.447	Accepted
H9: Brand loyalty →Purchase intention	0.283*	2.886	Accepted

Notes: * $P<0.01$, ** $P<0.001$

4.4. Indirect effects

In addition to the direct effects, Sobel test was employed to identify and quantify the indirect effects (Hayes, 2009). Table 5 illustrates the result of mediating effects of eWOM, social media use and brand loyalty. As Table 5 shows that social identity has significant indirect effects on purchase intention via social media use ($\beta=0.39$, $t= 2.631$, $P= 0.006 <0.001$); via eWOM ($\beta=0.31$, $t= 2.742$, $P= 0.005 <0.001$); and via brand loyalty ($\beta=0.26$, $t= 2.054$, and $P= 0.013 <0.05$). Table 5 clearly shows that social identity does not only have a significant direct effect on purchase intention ($\beta=0.554$), but also a significant indirect effect via its effect on eWOM, social media use and brand loyalty.

Table 5. The mediating roles of eWOM, social media use and brand loyalty

Independent variable	Mediating variable	Dependent variable	Path coefficients	t-statistics	p-value
Social identity	Social media use	Purchase intention	0.39	2.631	0.006
Social identity	eWOM	Purchase intention	0.31	2.742	0.005
Social identity	Brand loyalty	Purchase intention	0.26	2.054	0.013

5. Discussion and Conclusions
5.1. Theoretical implications
The main purpose of this study was to analyze the influence of social identity on intention to purchase a given brand through the roles of eWOM, brand loyalty and social media use as mediating variables. Few researches have examined the direct and indirect effect of social identity with its three components on purchase intention (Wang, 2017). Linking a brand to a social identity would likely result in more positive value perceptions and stronger purchase intentions from strongly identified consumers. However, studies to date have neglected to examine the underlying psychological process, which this research addresses. A contribution of this research is that all components of social identity, namely affective, cognitive, and evaluative, have been simultaneously studied in an integrated model in association with other behavioral variables. This study is an attempt to use social media usage, brand loyalty, and eWOM communications in order to explain the fact that each individual, with his or her distinct identity characteristics, have different reactions to a brand in online platforms. In fact, our results highlighted the importance of considering social identity as a discriminant factor in digital marketing strategies on social media platforms.

The results indicated that the improvement of social identity raises social media use. These results are in line with previous works such as Trepte (2006), Park et al. (2009), and Wang (2017) who indicated that the users' social identity affects the use of social media. It means that if the consumers feel more interest and dependence to a particular social media, they would be likely to use it with more frequency. Social media enables identity expression, exploration, and experimentation; something natural for the human experience. On social media, consumers express their identities through text, visual material, likes, shares, and links to other sites. Consumers can express their identity on the social media since there are no place or time restrictions. They can post a picture or video, share a link, or join some group, and it would immediately become known to other consumers. Declaring an individual's views, likes, or dislikes, is a part of identity expression. By doing so, consumers inform others of their preferences and social groups with which they associate themselves. The process of exploring identity using social media is related to the possibility of viewing an unlimited amount of content. This activity, however, is not limited by consumers' search for their identification. Social platforms are also

exploited by consumers and companies to seek individuals with common opinions and attitudes. The possibility of experimenting with identity is another important role of social platforms (Gündüz, 2017). A consumer may not know about what side of the argument he or she is or what resolution to a conflict he or she would prefer. In such cases, consumers try themselves in different roles until they make sure which one they prefer. It is possible to join a variety of virtual communities and see which of them suits the person best. Experimentation, along with expression and exploration, helps individuals to establish their identities.

According to the findings of this study, consumers' social identity will lead to eWOM about a given brand. This result was consistent with prior researches conducted by Okazaki (2015), Arenas-Gaitan et al. (2013), Langner et al. (2020) and González-Soriano et al. (2020). They revealed that social identity is an important antecedent to engage in eWOM behavior. If a given social media platform is aligned with consumers' social identity, they would participate in behaviors such as eWOM. If the consumers perceive themselves as a key member of an online platform, they would likely to disseminate eWOM for a particular brand. Social identity influences the awareness and knowledge of an individual and develops a sense of community (Shen et al., 2008). Social identity expression on social media provides relevant information to virtual communities regarding the quality, price, and characteristics of brands. Therefore, social identity is considered a factor that promotes the participation of consumers within a social context, electronic or otherwise, through the generation of comments on their consumption experiences, which provides relevant information that can influence consumers' decisions to purchase or reject a brand (González-Soriano et al., 2020). Social identity is a collective factor rather than an individual factors such as the desire for recognition or the sense of closeness with other consumers, seems to be an important motivator in the generation of eWOM.

We found that social identity is a key antecedent of purchase intention. This finding supports the results of works conducted by Mcgowan et al. (2016), Wang (2017), Suha and Sharif (2018), and Farivar and Wang (2022). They have indicated that social identity can significantly affect purchase intention. To our knowledge, this is the first study that investigated the direct and indirect effects of social identity on purchase intention simultaneously. This research suggested that social identity of consumers can be integrated with other mediators to model the consumer psychological path to purchase intention. Hence, a consumer-brand relationship was hypothesized for the path to brand purchase intention. Consumers often use brands to construct and enact their social identity, for instance by wearing branded clothes, discussing the brand and its products online, or attending events sponsored by the brand (e.g., Fiedler & Sarstedt, 2014). Therefore, consumers

strategically use brands as identity cues, which allow them to communicate a consistent self-view. Social identity engages consumers in behaviors that make them feel closer to their social group, such as the purchase of identity-linked brands to help enact their social identity.

In addition, we revealed that social media use and eWOM are two predictors of purchase intention. These results are in line with theoretical predictions and previous findings for online environment (Doosti et al., 2016; Jalilvand & Heidari, 2017; Toor et al., 2017; Purgat, 2018; Cuong, 2021). The desire to provide relevant information regarding brand within virtual communities promotes the generation of comments on the social platforms. These are well-established insights in the literature of marketing. Among the many studies focused on these impacts, Jalilvand et al. (2012) examined the influence of user opinions regarding their experience with new products or services, finding that the content generated by consumers can play a significant role in the shopping decisions of other consumers than the content generated by companies. Interestingly, Tamir and Mitchell (2012) demonstrated that the sense of collaboration would be felt when sharing information (i.e., whether information is considered useful and relevant) increases interaction between consumers. The literature also revealed that, even if consumers' comments are not all positive, they are considered reliable by other consumers which in turn, increase eWOM generation, which is found to be strongly associated with future purchase intentions. Therefore, managing intrinsic motivations of consumers for sharing opinions, ratings, and comments could be more important than just encouraging positive comments in the context of social media platforms.

Social identity was related to brand loyalty positively. This is in consistent to what has been hypothesized by existing literature in the offline setting (He et al., 2012). To date, empirical research on social identity-brand loyalty nexus is insufficient. The present research addresses this gap by examining the effects of social identity on brand loyalty in an online environment. Consumers have personal and social identities that collectively, contribute to their sense of self. Given brands' capacity to facilitate social identity expression and development, consumers can self-express their identity through brand relationships. Social identity can influence consumer perceptions, cognitions and assessments as well as motivate the development of consumer brand attachment, thereby heightening loyalty (Yang et al., 2017). Thus, consumers' social identification can explain a range of consumer-based outcomes, containing loyalty (He et al., 2012).

In addition, brand loyalty affected eWOM about a given brand and the intention to purchase the brand. More recently, the literature accords attention to integrating the role of brand loyalty (Goyal & Verma, 2022; Rungsrisawat & Sirinapatpokin, 2019; Rialti et al., 2017; Eelen et al. 2017) to different constructs such as eWOM and purchase intention.

Brand loyalty can positively influence the dissemination of conductive comments about the brand. Loyal consumers tend to show brand-friendly behaviors, which explains their participation in the virtual brand communities and enhances the likelihood of engagement in positive eWOM (Eelen et al., 2017). As a result, the loyal consumers who repurchase a brand are more likely to share their positive consumption experience with others.

Finally, eWOM about a given brand had affected the intention to purchase the brand. In the same way, this result is supported by those obtained by Jalilvand et al. (2012), Jalilvand and Heidari (2017), and Prasad et al. (2017). The online platforms themselves that facilitate eWOM, such as discussion boards and other online communication tools are also increasingly being recognized for how they affect the adoption and use of products and services of a brand.

5.2. Pratical implications

According to the findings, several suggestions can be provided for digital marketers. First, social media marketers can create positive feelings in users and intensify their sense of emotional belonging and dependence about their brands on the media through providing users with unique facilities and characteristics. It can make easy and widespread access to the media. Big data analysis helps marketers to gain more awareness of the audience's interests, which in turn creates more facilities and access to a social media.

Second, social media users expand identification with these platforms and the virtual groups fostered in such environment. This social identification drives both use and purchase behavior. Managers should acknowledge this insight and consider focusing on consumer's identification toward the website to encourage both use and purchase behavior. In fact, consumers' identification with a brand should be important for marketers, as identification positively affects consumers' judgments and behaviors.

Third, marketers must try to instill a desirable mental image in consumers to create a greater sense of alignment between their personal identity and what is perceived by other users on social media platforms. In this regard, uncertainty-reduction is a motive underlying why customers depersonalize in favor of the group prototype. Social identity motivates consumers to behave in a way aligned with prototypical perceptions and behaviors in order to reduce subjective uncertainty. Brands linked to the social identity are likely consistent with the group prototype and thus afford such opportunity for uncertainty reduction.

Forth, long-term investment in the operation of brand pages while ignoring the value of virtual communities may no longer to be a good strategy. The role of social identity in virtual communities must be taken into account by marketers, and it is possible to do this by making only slight strategic changes. Marketers can actively foster customer

relationships in communities by posting content and interacting with customers, allowing the marketers to indirectly enhance transactions and decline transactional costs. This research also recommends that firms should create strategies that encourage the generation of comments that other consumers could consider relevant and informative. It does not necessarily mean that the comments should only be positive, but that some form of feedback can be established that highlights or makes most visible the comments considered most useful by consumers. This strategy has already been used in online marketplaces such as Digikala and on user-rating and recommendation platforms for fashion goods. Digital marketers can produce dynamic, appealing and useful advertisement content for their page on social media. They must also take into account the users' needs such as entertainment, awareness and information in an attempt to generate effective content and making the users engagement in the process of content production.

Finally, marketers can also create a sense of importance in the virtual community members through the employment of consumers as opinion leaders and stimulating them to play the role of influencer. Brand managers may also invite the brand loyal members to provide reviews of their product usage experiences. By playing the role of influencer to other customers, expert members recognize the spiritual values of being loyal customers of the brand. In addition, the members can disseminate their positive comments across online communities or at brand community events, which influences others. In terms of online communities, loyal consumers can utilize hashtags as an effective way of providing their usage experiences or brand knowledge in online pages. In sum, marketers need for brand strategists to tailor social media branding strategies according to the social identity of the targeted consumers.

5.3. Limitations and Future works

This study identified limitations that provide immediate avenues for further research. First, the survey was conducted in an online way among students of a public university. Researchers can perform comparative studies on social media users in other universities to increase the generalizability of the findings and to compare of the views and behaviors of various users in social media platforms. Second, due to the use of non-probabilistic sampling method, it is not possible to project these results to the whole population. In fact, the sample is not representative of all students in Iran. However, given that the purpose of the study is not to explain the population of Iranian students, but rather to examine hypotheses, this research takes an initial first step in that direction, subject to further research.

Future scholars may broaden the theoretical scope by integrating complementary perspectives such as self-congruence theory or social

comparison theory to explain how multiple social identities interact in shaping consumer–brand relationships in online environments. Longitudinal or experimental designs could also be employed to examine the causal and temporal dynamics between social media usage, brand identity, and behavioral outcomes such as loyalty and purchase intention. Moreover, comparative studies across different social media platforms may reveal how varying affordances and community structures influence eWOM patterns and identity-based engagement. Cross-cultural research would further enhance understanding of how cultural orientations, such as collectivism or individualism, moderate the identity–loyalty relationship, while investigations across diverse product categories or industries could determine the boundary conditions of the proposed model. As digital technologies evolve, future studies might also explore how AI-driven personalization, influencer marketing, or virtual brand communities reshape identity signaling and brand relationship formation. Finally, examining mediating and moderating mechanisms such as perceived authenticity, sense of virtual community, or psychological needs for belonging could deepen theoretical insight into the social identity processes that underlie online brand loyalty and purchase intention.

Conflict of interest
The author declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations
The author has completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability
The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the author on reasonable request.

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