

# EMPATHY FOR EMOTIONAL ADVERTISEMENTS ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL IDENTITY

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*This study examines the impact of emotionally driven advertisements on empathy as felt by consumers on social networking sites (tested using Facebook, in the current study), and analyzes the role of social identity as a mediator between empathy and engagement. The study follows an experimental design conducted on college students. The results suggest that emotional appeal has a positive impact on empathy as well as attitude toward ad, which in turn have a positive impact on engagement. The results also suggest that social identity mediates the relationship between empathy and engagement on social networking sites. Findings of this study can be of help to marketers for creating strategies involving emotionally driven advertisements for social networking sites.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Emotions have long been used in advertising. A direct attention to emotions through emotional appeals can make people notice advertising and thus brands. Advertisements are created with the hope to stir emotions so that their message is strengthened and consumers are motivated to purchase the product advertised (Stewart, Morris, & Grover, 2007). Advertising evokes a diverse range of emotions (e.g. humor, sad, happy, love), and response to these emotions plays an important role in creating a relationship between consumers and products (Stewart et al., 2007). Advertisements are meant to strike a chord on some level with the target audience so that they can relate to the situation portrayed in the ad, and empathize with the content of the ad. Empathy in advertising specifies “the extent to which viewers participate vicariously in events, feelings, and behaviors that are shown in a commercial” (Schlinger, 1979, p. 47). Empathy plays an important role in advertising because it triggers consumers’ certain stimuli, and thus maximizes advertising effectiveness (Bagozzi & Moore, 1994). Empathizing with an ad makes consumers imagine being a character in the advertisement and creates an emotional connection between the consumer and the ad. This emotional connection, in turn, creates a positive impression about the product being

advertised and also helps consumers remember the ad for a longer period of time (Friestad & Thorson, 1993).

Based on that, advertisers use different media to increase consumer empathy toward advertising. Currently, one of the widely used media for advertising is social networking sites (SNS) because consumers are increasingly acclaiming SNS as a part of their everyday routine. This is evident from the number of users of SNS. According to Statista (2016a), Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter reported an estimated 1.59 billion, 1 billion, and 320 million active users, respectively, as of April 2016. These huge numbers have also prompted companies to change their advertising strategies with an increasing focus on social networking users. As per recent statistics, spending on advertising on SNS reached \$25.14 billion in 2015, and is forecasted to hit \$41 billion by 2017 (eMarketer, 2016).

However, it is not only the rapid growth of SNS, but also studies showing that active SNS users apprehend high feelings of empathy (Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016), that make SNS appealing to advertisers (Collins, 2014; Knoll, 2016). Previous research has shown that empathy could be facilitated by the use of SNS because it allows consumers to access others in similar situation easily and frequently (Caplan & Turner, 2007). This gives advertisers a platform to use emotional appeals with an expectation to create empathy amongst SNS users. Consumers spending more time on SNS

are also the best at passing around empathy online (Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016). If consumer A passes his feeling of empathy to other SNS users from his friends' list, for example user B and user C, who in turn pass it to more users from their respective friends' list, and so on; more and more consumers will generate empathy toward the advertisement. Research has also found that the expression of empathy can be influenced by similarity and group membership (Müller, Leeuwen, Baaren, Bekkering, & Dijksterhuis, 2013). Social identity, which is an individual's perception of self-concept based on his/her association with a particular social group (Tajfel, 1981, 1982), with friends on SNS can thus be related to empathy.

The fact that SNS is a social setting where consumers are virtually present with their online friends, their social identity with those friends can impact their emotional feelings (Coleman & Williams, 2013). Numerous studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of emotional advertising appeals (Lwin & Phau, 2013; Taute, McQuitty, & Sautter, 2011), however, relatively little is known about the response of consumers to these emotionally driven advertisements on SNS. Social identity can change the way consumers respond to the emotions that they feel while watching emotional advertisements.

Based on previous discussion, the present study experimentally tests the responses to emotional advertising on social media. The effect of sad vs. humorous emotional advertising appeals, as they relate to empathy and customer engagement, is tested. Previous studies have demonstrated the consequences of customer engagement, which includes the concepts of satisfaction, loyalty, commitment, trust, and consumer value (Barger, Peltier, & Schultz, 2016). In this study, consumer engagement in a virtual brand community is seen as a multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral dimensions as a result of specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the community (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013). In context of emotionally driven advertisements on SNS, this study investigates if social identity

mediates the relationship between empathy and consumer engagement.

The findings of this study could help marketing strategy managers to analyze and to determine the use of appropriate stimulus (sad/humorous) based on the specific level of empathy that managers desire to develop amongst consumers. Using the correct emotional provocation (sad/humorous), marketers can trigger consumers' empathy while watching an emotionally driven advertisement, which can lead to their attitude formation, which in turn can lead them to respond in a certain way to specific advertising stimuli amid specific exposure incident (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Since the formation of a particular attitude toward an ad is followed by highly interactive consumers' response on SNS (Brodie et al., 2013), the marketers can follow and measure this response through "likes," "shares," and/or "comments" made by the consumers on SNS.

Since emotions are viewed as a social phenomenon (Olderbak, Sassenrath, Keller, & Wilhelm, 2014) understanding the impact of emotions (through emotionally driven advertisements) in a social setting can also help marketers increase advertising effectiveness in two ways. First, advertising appeals have a positive impact on customers' empathy as well as customers' attitude toward an ad, which in turn have a positive impact on customer's engagement. Second, when an individual has positive attitude toward an ad and engages in an active behavior on SNS by sharing and socializing his/her personal experiences, then he/she could influence others (i.e. friends, community) about the value-in-exchange and value-in-use of the advertised brand (Schau, Muñoz Jr, & Arnould, 2009), reinforcing the advertising effectiveness.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual model tested with this research is presented in Figure 1. As shown, it is proposed that type of emotion: sad or humorous, in advertising, affects consumers' empathy toward those ads, which influences their engagement for the ad. Next, the model proposes that the relationship between empathy and engagement is mediated by social identity of consumers with their friends group on social

networking sites (SNS). In the following sections, previous literature will be reviewed to obtain a better understanding of the concepts used in the study, and then specific hypotheses regarding the relationships shown in Figure 1 will be presented.

**Social Identity**

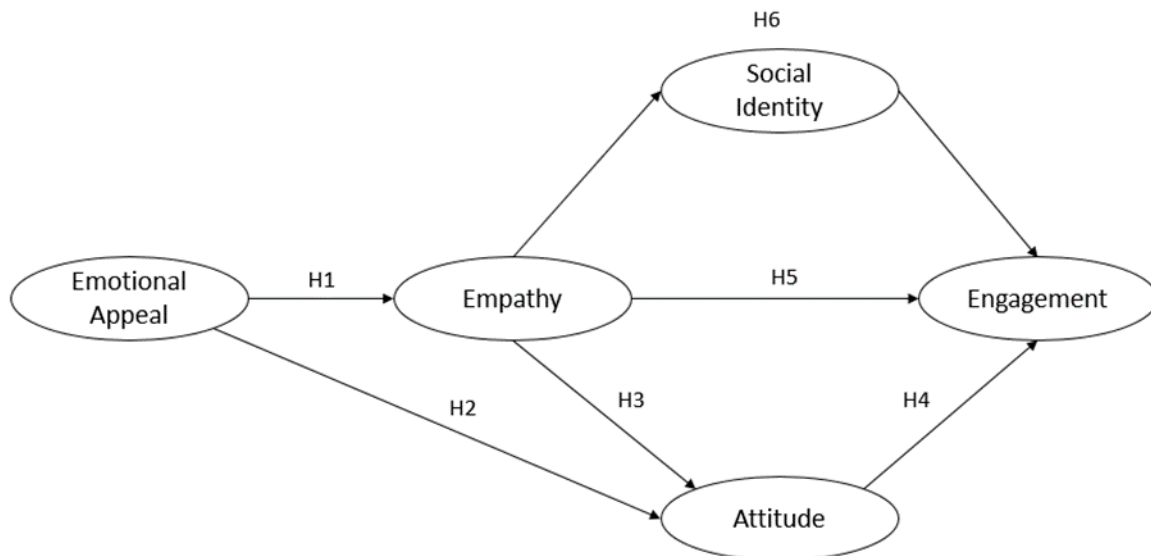
One of the theoretical backbones that underlie the present research is the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). According to Social Identity Theory, people put themselves and others into social groups by various categories, like gender, age, associations (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). An individual's internal structures and processes are guided by these underlying social categories. Individuals "come to perceive themselves more as the interchangeable exemplars of a social category than as unique personalities defined by their individual differences from others" (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987, p. 50). Since individuals think of themselves as identical to their social group, they also think of the other members of their group as identical to each other. This clearly shows how one's image of himself and of his social group corresponds when social identity is psychologically pertinent. Social identity is the part of a person's self-concept that is arrived at due to

his/her perceived association with a particular social group.

Based on that, the relevant social group in the current study is the friends group that consumers have on their SNS. Previous research has shown the influences of friends on users' purchases in the context of social media (Jung, Shim, Jin, & Khang, 2016), and positive perception of certain promotional message, when this message is sent by a friend rather than a company (Wallace, Buil, & de Chernatony, 2014). When a consumer watches an advertisement on SNS, he/she feels as if the ad is being watched in a social environment, due to the fact there are others virtually present on the platform (Chu, 2011). Indeed, the influence of social group is the main effect of counteracting the avoidance of advertising in SNS (Kelly, Kerr, & Drennan, 2010).

However, the friends group on SNS can be diverse and can have different sub-categories (in-groups) as far as identifying with them is concerned. But even with these in-groups, people tend to integrate their multiple identities in a complex, differentiated and inclusive identity structure, typically referred to as social identity complexity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). When multiple in-groups are sensed to be overlapping by an individual, he/she manages

**FIGURE 1:  
Conceptual Model**



to simplify the identity structure and forms single in-group identification for the different sub-categories. Hence, social identity in this study considers a unified identification with all the sub groups present in one's social network.

### Consumer's Empathy

Due to social identity, consumers' group membership in SNS can influence the feeling of empathy (Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016). The underlying mechanism behind the feeling of empathy draws from Appraisal Theory (Scherer, 1997), which argues that emotions are based on evaluative interpretations of the situation (appraisals). Based on that, empathy is generated when an individual appraises a specific situation in the same fashion that the other person appraises the same situation (Wondra & Ellsworth, 2015). This means that an individual can understand and feel another individual's position from the viewpoint of that individual, and can also interpret his/her cognitive and emotional reactions to that situation.

According to Appraisal Theory, empathy could be influenced by the psychological states of the observer, and could buffer or magnify the outcome of empathetic feeling on the appraisal process (Olderbak et al., 2014). It could include stable differences between observer and target in judgments and beliefs based on social conditions (social class, race, education level, culture), personal setting (salience emotions and affects), group of reference, and short-term dissimilarity in judgments and beliefs based on the current context. Research has empirically demonstrated that the environment and environmental activities can impact one's empathy (Wondra & Ellsworth, 2015).

Hence, empathy lets individuals appraise a situation as if they were really present at that place and got affected by the situation. It concerns the recognition and understanding of someone else's feelings (Taute et al., 2011). These feelings could be positive, negative, or neutral, depending on the situation of a person. Accordingly, empathy can be defined as an act of a person to identify, understand and imaginatively share another person's emotions, thoughts or feelings. In the present study,

empathy is presumed to be generated by using emotional appeal in SNS ad.

## HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

### Emotions, Empathy, and Consumer's Attitude

Previous research has linked emotions with advertising response, and this response is generally shown to be affected through empathy. In addition, Bagozzi and Moore (1994) tested the relationship between emotions and prosocial behavior with empathy as a mediator. They showed empathy was greater in the strong versus the weak emotional advertisement. Research has also shown that audience can respond in a wide variety of ways to negative and positive emotions used in advertising appeals (Zhang, Sun, Liu, & Knight, 2014). Small and Verrochi (2009) showed that individuals show more sympathy and are inclined more to donate when the charity advertisements show victims having sad expressions, as compared to the advertisements showing victims with happy or neutral expressions. As the literature suggests, it seems plausible that sad emotions lead people to empathize more with the situations directing their responses in favor of the cause. On the other hand, though positive emotions (e.g. humor) also lead people to generate response, yet they are less contagious as compared to negative emotions (e.g. sad). Based on these arguments, we formally hypothesize the following:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Consumers exhibit more empathy toward advertisements that use a sad emotional appeal than ones that use a humorous emotional appeal.

In addition, emotional appeals are used in the advertising to impart certain attitudes in the consumers so they will act in a certain way. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) suggested that positive emotional appeal is likely to enhance the persuasive impact of an advertising message, which have a positive influence on attitude toward the ad. The underlying mechanism in the attitude process draws from Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1977). According to TRA, an individual's actual behavior is a consequence of his/her behavioral intentions, which are formed

by his/her attitude and the relevant subjective norms concerning the behavior. Based on the discussion above, the present study defines attitude toward ad as a propensity to respond in a certain way to specific advertising stimuli amid specific exposure incident (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Based on these arguments, we formally state:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Consumers exhibit a positive attitude toward advertisements that use a sad emotional appeal than ones that use a humorous emotional appeal.

Previous research on responses to emotional advertising appeals shows that empathy relates positively to attitudes toward an ad (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Consumers' attitudes toward advertising on SNS have also been studied, and it has been found that consumers respond favorably toward the SNS ads that provide entertainment or informational value (Taylor, Lewin, & Strutton, 2011). In another study on the roles of consumers' sympathy and empathy in attitude formation, Escalas and Stern (2003) showed that empathy leads consumers to have a positive attitude toward advertising dramas. Empathy, being a feature of entertainment experience enables consumers "to live in the character" (Langfeld, 1967, p. 137), and it has been shown that the more intense the empathetic feeling is, the more positive attitude is formed toward the advertisement (Chebat, Vercollier, & G elinas-Chebat, 2003). Along the same lines of reasoning, we think that since empathy is created by the use of emotional appeals in the current study which makes the feeling more intense, it should lead to a positive attitude formation toward the ad. Hence, the following is hypothesized:

**H<sub>3</sub>:** Empathy for SNS ads is positively related to attitude toward these ads.

### **Attitude toward Ad and Customer Engagement toward the Ad**

An important benefit of advertising over internet is that companies can interact with their consumers and can also judge their behavioral responses. Internet can provide a variety of information about consumers' activity ranging from observing and attending, to clicking on ads and buying the products (Rodgers, Ouyang, & Thorson, 2017). Lavidge and Steiner (1961)

applied the hierarchy-of-effects model to advertising and showed that attitude toward ad is positively related to behavioral intentions. This relationship, shown in their seven-step model, is agreed upon by advertising researchers. The hierarchy-of-effects model assumes a fully mediated relationship between attitude toward ad and behavioral intentions (Smith, Chen, & Yang, 2008). According to TRA, those behavioral intentions are the measure of the willingness of an individual to try. In other words, the more an individual intends to enroll in a behavior, the more chances are that he/she will actually execute it. In the present study, TRA is used in the model for consumers' online behavior for SNS ads.

In addition, TRA has received much attention in SNS studies in the past (Kwon & Wen, 2010), because revealing personal reaction to an SNS ad by "liking," "sharing," or/and "commenting" can be considered as a volitional behavior which in turn can result in a particular outcome (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015). Specifically, for this study, this response can in turn lead to engagement in the product or brand being advertised. Brand engagement is defined as "a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object in focal brand relationships" (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011, p. 259). This psychological state creates "an individual difference representing consumers' propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves" (Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009, p. 92). Brodie et al. (2013, p. 108) defined customer engagement in a virtual brand community as "a multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral dimensions, as a result of specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the brand community". This study used this definition because the core process of engagement is highly interactive, experiential, and based on a number of sub-processes, including "learning," "sharing," "advocating," "socializing," and "co-developing" (Brodie et al., 2013), which is a common behavior in SNS. By sharing personal experiences and influencing others and advocating focal brands, consumers may influence value-in-exchange and value-in-use (Schau et al., 2009). Based on that, the

behavioral intentions (consumer engagement) can be judged through response provided by the consumers on SNS through “likes,” “shares,” and/or “comments.” Combining the internet users’ behavioral responses toward advertising and the relationship between attitude toward advertising and behavioral intentions, the following hypothesis is developed:

- H<sub>4</sub>:** Attitude toward SNS ads is positively related to customer engagement in ad.

### The Mediating Role of Social Identity

Consumers’ responses to SNS advertising have been studied in the past, but it really picked up pace from the seminal article by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), in which they highlighted the importance of advertising on social media. (Zeng, Huang, & Dou, 2009) found that the intentions of an SNS user to accept advertising on his/her social network are influenced by both social identity and group norms. In-group attitudes as well as empathy have been showed to be influenced by group membership (Dovidio et al., 2010). Different emotional reactions to in-group and out-group members are motivated by the need to secure a positive social identity. Derks, Bos, and Von Grumbkow (2007) found that while having daily conversations, people adjust their emotions according to different social environments. This was found to be true for computer and face-to-face media, implying that social contexts remain relevant for computer-mediated communications as well as face-to-face media.

Social identity is powerful enough to make individuals behave according to the norms of the group that they identify themselves to. These norms can also shift people’s empathy. Ickes, Gesn, and Graham (2000) conducted a meta-analysis to challenge the old belief that women feel more empathic as compared to men. They showed that women may not actually empathize more than men, but they might do so because they are expected to be more empathetic by the society, according to the traditional gender roles. Women seem to be following social identity while experiencing empathy. In a different study, Thomas and Maio (2008) conducted an empathy test on two groups of men. One of the groups was told that

women found men acquainted with their feminine side to be more attractive, and the other group was not given any such information. Performance of the men who were provided such information improved on a later empathy test, pointing out that people behave according to the demand of the situation, and thus also changes their identities accordingly.

Due to the fact that individuals behave in different situations according to the identities that they manifest in those situations, they also exhibit emotions consistent with their identities (Coleman & Williams, 2013). Since empathy is an important part of emotional development (McDonald & Messinger, 2011), it is predicted that social identity will have a similar impact on feeling of empathy generated from an emotional ad appeal. Hence, the following is hypothesized:

- H<sub>5</sub>:** Empathy toward SNS ads is positively related to customer engagement in ad.
- H<sub>6</sub>:** Social identity (with SNS friends group) positively mediates the relationship between emotional advertising appeals and empathy.

## METHODOLOGY

### Experimental Design and Procedure

A 2 (emotions: humor vs. sad) × 2 (social identity: high vs. low) between-subjects lab experimental design was adopted to conduct the study. Emotions were manipulated by showing humorous vs. sad ‘Text and Drive’ PSA advertisements to the participants. Social identity was manipulated by asking the respondents to imagine that they come across the advertisement while surfing internet (non-Facebook) vs. asking the respondents to imagine that they are watching the advertisement on Facebook which was shared/liked by some of their friends. To enhance the feeling of internet (non-Facebook) vs. Facebook, a picture of Google search website was used as the background for internet advertisement, and a picture of Facebook wall was used for Facebook advertisement. The focus of the study was Facebook because it is generally considered the most popular SNS today. In the United States itself, Facebook

accounts for 43.2% of all social media site visits (Statista, 2016b).

A total of 210 senior undergraduate students (112 males and 98 females) participated in the study, from a sampling frame of 337 students enrolled in three different courses at a mid-western public university. These students were invited in exchange for course extra credit. Students were considered an appropriate population for this study because as of February 2016, 26.6 million U.S. Facebook users were found to be between 18 and 24 years old, and 33.2 million users were between 25 and 34 years (Statista, 2016b); and most students correspond to these age brackets. In our sample, 90.5% respondents were in between 18 to 23 years of age, while 7.6% belonged to the 24 to 29 years old age bracket, and 1.9% were in the 30 to 35 years old range.

The experiment was conducted online (through Qualtrics), and the participants were provided with the link to participate, where they were required to watch the assigned advertisement, followed by a series of questions which measured their response to those advertisements, and some general questions. Participants were sent emails with formal invitations to participate in the study. After a few days, reminder emails were sent to these participants. In total, 337 students were invited to participate in the study, out of which 250 participated. Out of these 250, 35 cases were seen to have taken unreasonably more or less time to complete the survey. Further investigation of these 35 cases revealed that these cases had more than 50% of missing data, and hence were deleted (Hair et al. 2010). Out of the remaining 215, five participants claimed of not using Facebook and hence were removed, resulting in a total of 210 usable responses. So the final response rate obtained was 62.3%.

### Pretest and Manipulation Check

Perdue and Summers (1986) suggest conducting manipulation checks during pretest phase, if the participants and procedures of the pretest are similar to those of the main study, as they were in this case. Hence, participants' responses to six "Text and Drive" Public Service Advertisements (PSA) were evaluated.

Humor was used in the first three PSAs: "Todd's texting troubles," "Afterlife," and "It's not safe," to impact the attitudes of the participants toward texting and driving. On the other hand, disastrous outcomes were used for the remaining three PSAs: "by TranterGrey Media," "Highway Patrol," and "Goosebumps," to yield sad emotions in the participants toward texting and driving.

These PSAs were tested to determine whether the manipulations (humor or sad) were realistic. A convenience sample of 45 students in marketing class reviewed and evaluated the PSAs in return for extra credit. Seven-point Likert scales (anchored strongly disagree/strongly agree), with two items: "the advertisement was sad" and "the advertisement was funny" were used to collect their responses for sad and humorous advertisements, respectively. The responses for sad advertisements were reverse coded so as to anchor them as strongly agree to strongly disagree. The respondents rated PSA "It's not safe" as the most humorous (mean = 5.13) and PSA "by TranterGrey Media" as the most sad (mean = 2.22). The difference between these two means was statistically significant,  $t(44) = 8.231$ ,  $p < .001$ , supporting the manipulation. Hence, these PSAs were further used in the study as representative of two types of emotions: humorous and sad.

### Measures

Empathy was measured using the scale items developed by Escalas and Stern (2003): "While watching the ad, I experienced feeling as if the events were really happening to me;" "While watching the ad, I felt as though I were one of the characters;" "While watching the ad, I felt as though the events in the ad were happening to me;" "While watching the commercial, I experienced many of the same feelings that the characters portrayed;" and "While watching the commercial, I felt as if the characters' feelings were my own." A five items scale was modified for the present study to measure social identity (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992): "In general, belonging to social groups is an important part of my self-image;" "The social groups I belong to on Facebook are an important reflection of who I am;" "I think it is accurate if I am described as a typical member of the group that

I belong to on Facebook;” “I often acknowledge the fact that I am a member of the group on Facebook;” and “I would feel good if I were described as a typical member of the group on Facebook.” Seven-point Likert scale with endpoints as “very strongly disagree” and “very strongly agree” was used for both the measures.

Nine-point semantic differential scale items: anchored by the descriptive pairs unfavorable/favorable, negative/positive, bad/good, and no liking/liked a lot (Coulter, 1998) were used to measure attitude toward ad. Engagement in ad was measured by asking “How likely are you to like/share/comment on the advertisement on your Facebook?” Seven-point semantic differential scales with items: anchored by unlikely/likely, definitely not/definitely, and probably not/probably (Taute et al., 2011) were used to collect their responses. Demographic questions were also included at the end of the survey.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### Measure Validation

As suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), validity of the measures was tested using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Although the chi square statistic was significant ( $\chi^2 = 169.62$ , d.f. = 108,  $p = .00$ ), other fit indices were also considered. The comparative fit index (CFI = .98), goodness-of-fit index (GFI = .92), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI = .97), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA = .05), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR = .04) indicated a satisfactory overall fit.

CFA results are shown in Table 1. These results add support for the convergent validity for all the measures. For the underlying constructs, all estimated loadings of indicators come out to be positive and significant. As reported, composite reliability of all the constructs is more than the .7 benchmark (Nunnally, 1978), with

**TABLE 1:**  
**Measurement**

Construct	Items	Factor loadings	Composite reliability
Empathy	While watching the ad, I experienced feeling as if the events were really happening to me	0.78	0.95
	While watching the ad, I felt as though I were one of the characters.	0.83	
	While watching the ad, I felt as though the events in the ad were happening to me.	0.84	
	While watching the commercial, I experienced many of the same feelings that the characters portrayed	0.89	
	While watching the commercial, I felt as if the characters' feelings were my own.	0.76	
Attitude towards Ad	Unfavorable/Favorable	0.88	0.85
	Negative/Positive	0.68	
	Bad/Good	0.81	
	No liking/Liked a lot	0.93	
Social Identity	In general, belonging to social groups is an important part of my self-image.	0.69	0.94
	The social groups I belong to on Facebook are an important reflection of who I am.	0.83	
	I think it is accurate if I am described as a typical member of the group that I belong to on Facebook.	0.93	
	I often acknowledge the fact that I am a member of the group on Facebook.	0.80	
Engagement	I would feel good if I were described as a typical member of the group on Facebook.	0.82	0.96
	Unlikely/Likely	0.91	
	Definitely not/Definitely	0.96	
	Probably not/Probably	0.96	



minimum value being .85. As Table 2 shows, the average variance extracted (AVE) across the constructs is more than the .5 threshold (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The data also supported discriminant validity of the measures. The estimated AVE of each measure were compared with the squared inter-construct correlation (Fornell and Larcker 1981). In all cases, the AVEs were found to exceed the squared inter-construct correlations, confirming the discriminant validity of the constructs. The descriptive statistics and correlations for the constructs are provided in table 2.

### Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses were tested using AMOS 22.0 (see Table 3). Results of the model demonstrate acceptable fit (CFI=.98, IFI=.98, TLI=.97, RMSEA=.05,  $\chi^2/df$  ratio=1.53,  $\chi^2 = 189.77$ ,  $df=124$ ,  $p=.00$ ). Emotional appeals negatively influence empathy ( $t=-2.73$ ,  $R^2=-.20$   $p<.01$ ). In other words, emotional appeals have a positive impact on empathy, but as emotional appeal changes from sad to humorous (sad appeals were coded as 1 and humorous as 2),

consumers have less empathy, thus supporting  $H_1$ .  $H_2$  is also supported with emotional appeal positively related to attitude ( $t=3.86$ ,  $R^2=.26$   $p<.001$ ). Consistent with prior research (Taute et al., 2011), empathy significantly influences attitude toward ad ( $t=5.44$ ,  $R^2=.43$   $p<.001$ ), and attitude toward ad significantly influences engagement in the ad ( $t=4.10$ ,  $R^2=.30$   $p<.001$ ), supporting  $H_3$  and  $H_4$  respectively. It was hypothesized that empathy should be a significant predictor of engagement ( $H_5$ ), which is confirmed as indicated by the significant positive relationship between these two measures ( $t=2.70$ ,  $R^2=.21$   $p<.01$ ).

To find further support for  $H_1$ , one-way ANOVA was conducted on emotional appeals. Results showed that the participants who were exposed to sad appeal exhibited higher empathy than participants who were exposed to humorous appeal ( $F(1, 208) = 7.237$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $M_{Sad} = 4.387$  vs  $M_{Humor} = 3.857$ ;  $\sigma_{Sad} = 1.492$  vs  $\sigma_{Humor} = 1.357$ ), with an effect size of .183.

To establish the role of social identity as a mediator, four conditions were tested separately

**TABLE 2:**  
**Descriptive Statistics: Construct Means, Standard Deviations, AVEs, and Correlations (N= 210)**

	Construct	Mean	SD	X1	X2	X3	X4
X1	Empathy	4.12	1.45	0.67	0.14	0.06	0.12
X2	Attitude towards Ad	6.64	1.78	0.38	0.69	0.01	0.16
X3	Social Identity	3.72	1.49	0.25	0.11	0.67	0.07
X4	Engagement	4.48	2.47	0.34	0.40	0.26	0.90

Note: Average variance estimates are on the diagonal

: Correlations are below the diagonal

: Squared correlations are above the diagonal

**TABLE 3:**  
**Hypotheses testing:  $H_1 - H_5$**

Hypotheses	SEM	
	Estimates	t-value
Base Model		
Emotional Appeal → Empathy ( $H_1$ )	-0.20**	-2.73
Emotional Appeal → Attitude toward Ad ( $H_2$ )	0.26***	3.86
Empathy → Attitude toward Ad ( $H_3$ )	0.43***	5.44
Attitude toward Ad → Engagement ( $H_4$ )	0.30***	4.10
Empathy → Engagement ( $H_5$ )	0.21**	2.70

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

without taking the whole model into account (table 4): (1) Influence of empathy (predictor variable) on the mediator social identity; (2) influence of social identity on engagement (dependent variable) ; (3) influence of the predictor variable, empathy on the dependent variable, engagement; and (4) the impact of empathy on engagement (which should either be no longer significant or should be reduced in strength), after controlling for the mediator variable, social identity (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

As it can be seen in table 4, the first three conditions were met by the model. That is, empathy positively affects social identity ( $t=3.30$ ,  $R^2=.26$   $p<.001$ ), and social identity positively affects engagement ( $t=2.26$ ,  $R^2=.16$   $p<.05$ ). Furthermore, empathy has a positive impact on engagement ( $t=4.71$ ,  $R^2=.36$   $p<.001$ ). For the fourth condition, impact of empathy on engagement reduced ( $t=4.71$ ,  $R^2=.36$  versus  $t=4.10$ ,  $R^2=.31$ ) after controlling for social identity, which demonstrates partial mediation by social identity (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010).

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Although prior research has studied the impact of different emotions on consumers (Zhang et al., 2014), it remains unclear how consumers perceive and react to emotional appeals in a social setting (Ngai et al., 2015), and how firms can use this information to improve their advertising strategies (Knoll, 2016). This study addresses this gap by examining the impact of sad and humorous advertising appeals on

consumers using four different scenarios in an experimental study grounded in the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) and Appraisal Theory (Scherer, 1997).

Based on that, the goal of this study was to determine the effect emotional advertising appeals (sad vs. humorous), as they relate to empathy and customer engagement. In line with previous research, it was found that negative emotions (leads by sad emotional appeals) lead to more empathy as compared to happy emotions (leads by humorous emotional appeals) (Bagozzi & Moore, 1994; Small & Verrochi, 2009). The findings support the theoretical assumptions posed by prosocial behavior theoretician that consumers can respond, in a wide variety of ways, to negative and positive emotions used in advertising appeals (Zhang et al., 2014). These findings also indicate that emotional appeal has a direct and indirect effect (through empathy) on consumers' attitude toward ads. Those findings support the arguments from the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1977), that suggest that an individual's behavioral intentions are formed by his/her attitude. Defining attitude as the propensity to respond in a certain way to specific stimuli, our results demonstrated that empathy significantly influences attitude toward ad, which is consistent with findings of Taute et al. (2011) and Lwin and Phau (2013).

In addition, the findings of the present study show that social identity partially mediates the relationship between empathy and engagement. As expected, the findings indicate that

**TABLE 4:**  
**Hypotheses testing for Mediation: H<sub>6</sub>**

Hypotheses	SEM	
	Estimates	t-value
Main effect		
Empathy → Engagement	0.36***	4.71
Social Identity Mediation (H <sub>6</sub> )		
Empathy → Social Identity	0.26***	3.30
Social Identity → Engagement	0.16*	2.26
Empathy → Engagement	0.31***	4.10

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

consumers' social identities with their friends' group becomes salient after feeling empathetic toward an emotional ad and before engaging (i.e. liking/sharing/commenting) with that ad on social networking site. These findings support theoretical assertions from Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) which suggest that individuals think of themselves as one and the same to their social group, and they see members of their group as indistinguishable to each other. Social identity is powerful enough to make individuals behave according to the norms of the group that they identify themselves to. These results also complement a previous research that has shown how consumer's purchases are influenced by friends in the context of social media (Jung et al., 2016; Schau et al., 2009), which includes a high valuation of promotional message, when the message is sent by a friend rather than a brand (Wallace et al., 2014).

Finally, the contributions of this research advance current research in the area of advertising on social networking sites by offering a significant finding. The present research demonstrates that emotional appeal (with greater incidence of sad appeal) has a positive impact on empathy as well as attitude toward ad, which in turn have a positive impact on engagement. Also, the result that social identity mediates the relationship between empathy and engagement on social networking sites demonstrates that individuals tend to adjust their emotional responses according to different social environments with a strong emphasis on the norms of the group they feel belong to.

These findings are congruent with the postulates of Appraisal Theory (Scherer, 1997) which suggest that empathy, as emotional response, could be influenced by the psychological states of an observer (in this case generated by using emotional appeal in SNS ad). Also, the findings are consistent with the claims of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) that suggest that any emotion, perception, and attitude could be buffered or magnified depending upon the influence of the social group of reference.

## Managerial Implications

The findings of this study are managerially useful. The finding that sad emotional appeal has a greater effect on empathy than humorous appeal on SNS, which leads to attitude formation and finally engagement, indicates that sad advertising executions are more effective to create engagement toward emotional ads, than humorous advertising executions. To expand the possibility that consumers will engage in an ad, advertisers should create ads that effectively generate empathy amongst consumers, and should find ways to boast their social identities, which will make them express their feelings on SNS. Based on this recommendation, the main focus for marketing managers should be to encourage interactivity amongst consumers by creating online brand communities, posting advertisement, and leading interactive activities on those communities, such as contests, positioning hashtags, among others. Using this strategy, marketing managers could generate more participation among consumers about the promotional message, which then can enhance social identity of the advertisement audience, which in turn can enhance their engagement in those ads. As a chain reaction, more and more consumers can be inclined to buy a product/service, followed by sharing it on SNS, because it will serve as a reinforcement to their individual identity. The consumer inclination to buy a product/service, because of their feeling of empathy with the SNS ad, combined with their fortified social identity, suggests that an advertising strategy that is well-conceived and designed in a way that increases likes, comments and shares on SNS will eventually be successful.

## Limitations and Future Research

The current study has several limitations. First, the experimental manipulations that were conducted might not have evoked much involvement from participants, as would have been in a real setting, and thus their responses to the manipulations may be substantially weaker than their actual experience. Second, a manipulation check for social identity was not conducted, which if done, could have given a better perspective on the scenario. Third, though a random assignment was done while

conducting the experiment, yet interviewing and debriefing the participants afterwards could have revealed any suspicions or unexpected thoughts that they might have developed about the purpose of the study. Fourth, the current study focusses only on one SNS (Facebook). Future research can be conducted on other sites like Instagram or twitter, which might yield different results, based on the style or format of their application. Fifth, though a demographic distinction of SNS consumers has been made in the current study, yet it would have helped to get a psychographic distinction of the consumers as well. Finally, we used the same items to measure social identity, as well as engagement, for all the participants (i.e. the ones watching the ad on Facebook and the ones watching on internet). Since the items for both these constructs included references to Facebook, they might have influenced the response of the participants who watched the ad on Facebook. Further research can be conducted to take care of this issue by modifying the items according to the context in order to avoid any possible bias in participants' responses.

Based on the results of the study, it is found that people process emotional information differently for different type of appeals used (sad vs. humor), while watching emotional advertisements, and to some degree, use such information to form attitudes toward the ad, or/and empathize with the ad, and accordingly engage in the ad. Social identity plays an important role as consumers' engagement with ads on SNS can occur depending on their shared identities with the group members. Further study and replication would be required, however, and should enhance our understanding of how and under what conditions do these emotions enhance or repress the effect on advertising responses on SNS. This should advance advertising managers' recognition and appreciation of expansive value of emotional appeals and thus enhance advertising effectiveness.

Though use of student sample should not pose much threat to generalizability, since the participated students' age group is the most vulnerable to the type of PSA used (text and drive), and also to the type of social setting

used (Facebook), yet future research could be conducted on the general population considering that students might not actually represent the consumer population (Greenberg, 1987). Further research can also be conducted by testing the same hypotheses using qualitative research, as qualitative research can reveal some important motives behind engaging or disengaging on social networking sites. Interviews can be conducted with participants, and their internal feelings toward this whole idea of emotional advertisements on social networking can be understood in depth.

Future research can also be conducted using data from different countries as culture might play a role here in two different ways (Hofstede, 1991). First, consumers from different countries might be more empathetic toward different emotional appeals depending on their cultures. Second, social identity might change the role depending upon independent versus interdependent consumers (Hofstede, 1991).

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