

She Said, She Said: Differential Interpersonal Similarities Predict Unique Linguistic Mimicry in
Online Word of Mouth

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This research examines the antecedents, causes, and consequences of *linguistic mimicry*, which assesses how closely individuals match others' word use, in online WOM. We examine mimicry of both linguistic style (how things are said) and content (what is said). To our knowledge, this research provides the first demonstration of unique linguistic mimicry, where consumers engaging in online WOM differentially mimic other posters' word use. Two experiments and one study using field data show that when consumers are personally similar to an individual who has previously posted (e.g., same gender), they mimic this individual's positive emotion and social word use. When consumers are similar in status to an individual who has previously posted (e.g., same forum ranking), they mimic this individual's cognitive and descriptive word use. This differential mimicry is driven by affiliation versus achievement goals, respectively, and affects consumers' engagement in online WOM in terms of posting incidence and volume.

Keywords: online word-of-mouth, linguistic mimicry, interpersonal similarity, LIWC

Word-of-mouth (WOM) occurs when one individual communicates about a consumption experience to another (Godes et al. 2005) and is a fundamental process in marketing (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). Digital media, including online forums such as IGN, review websites such as Epinions.com, and social media platforms such as Twitter, have given consumers the opportunity to connect with others and to share WOM broadly and continually (Stephen 2016). Prior work shows that such sharing has important consequences. WOM influences the attitudes and behaviors of consumers who share it and consumers who hear it (Arndt 1967; Dholakia et al. 2004; Moore 2012), thus affecting firms' sales, profits, and relationships with their customers (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Dellarocas, Zhang, and Awad 2007). Recent work has revealed that the use of particular language in WOM (e.g., explaining words, emotion words) can affect consumers' product evaluations, choices, and review helpfulness ratings (Kronrod and Danziger 2013; Moore 2015; Schellekens, Verlegh, and Smidts 2010; Yin, Bond, and Zhang 2014).

The current paper extends this work by exploring how consumers' online connections with each other affect WOM. We investigate how social variables—specifically, the similarities between consumers—affect the language that consumers use when interacting with others online. Further, we examine the effects of WOM language not only in terms of content, or *what* is said, but also in terms of style, or *how* things are said (Bird, Franklin, and Howard 2002; Pennebaker 2011; Pennebaker et al. 2007). Finally, we explore how such language use affects consumers' digital connections with others, in terms of online engagement and participation. We do so by offering a novel examination of *linguistic mimicry* in online WOM.

Mimicry itself is a connection between people: linguistic mimicry measures how closely individuals match each other's word use in conversation (Ireland and Pennebaker 2010). For example, if a poster in an online forum asks "Is this restaurant reasonably priced?", one could

reply “Yes, it’s cheap!” or “Yes, this restaurant is reasonably priced.” The second reply demonstrates higher linguistic mimicry of the question than the first. Specifically, linguistic mimicry assesses the degree of overlap between two utterances in the percentage of words used in specific language categories (i.e., positive emotion words such as “good”, cognitive words such as “reasonable”). We employ this measure to examine when and why consumers mimic others in online WOM, and to explore how mimicry affects online interactions. We find that consumers who share personal similarities (e.g., gender) with those who have previously posted WOM mimic different linguistic content in their own WOM (e.g., positive emotion words) than consumers who share status similarities (e.g., forum ranking) with these individuals (e.g., cognitive words). We also find that such differential mimicry affects online engagement.

In studying how consumers interact with each other online, this research makes several contributions. First, rather than focusing on one aspect of WOM content (e.g., anxiety words, Yin et al. 2014), we examine the full spectrum of language by investigating linguistic style and content concurrently. Second, by identifying how personal versus status similarities differentially predict mimicry, we provide a novel examination of the antecedents of linguistic mimicry. Third, we offer insight into why these effects occur. We find that personal similarity is associated with a goal to affiliate while status similarity is associated with a goal to achieve, and that these goals predict mimicry of different linguistic content (e.g., positive emotion vs. cognitive words). Finally, this research makes a critical contribution to the behavioral mimicry literature (Chartrand and Lakin 2013), which has not examined differential mimicry of specific behaviors (e.g., foot shaking vs. face touching). We show that mimicry of specific *types* of linguistic content (e.g., positive emotion vs. cognitive words) varies as a function of whether consumers share personal or status similarities with previous posters. To our knowledge, this is the first

demonstration of such differential mimicry effects, linguistically or behaviorally.

Below, we review relevant literature in mimicry and WOM and outline our framework and predictions. We then report the results of two lab studies and one study using field data that empirically investigate linguistic style and content mimicry in online forums.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Behavioral and Linguistic Mimicry

Behavioral mimicry, or “the automatic imitation of ... motor movements” (Chartrand and Lakin 2013), is ubiquitous. It includes mimicry of gestures such as face touching and body postures such as leaning (Bernieri 1988; Chartrand and Bargh 1999; Lakin et al. 2003). The literature has identified situational (e.g., a goal to affiliate; Lakin and Chartrand 2003), individual (e.g., a pro-social orientation; van Baaren et al. 2003), and relational (e.g., group membership; Yabar et al. 2006) variables that increase behavioral mimicry, and has shown that mimicry generally has positive consequences. For example, after mimicking somebody, individuals report higher liking of this person (Chartrand and Bargh 1999; Lakin and Chartrand 2003) and behave in a more pro-social fashion toward them and others (van Baaren et al. 2004).

Prior work has demonstrated that individuals mimic not only others’ motor movements, but their language use as well. Linguistic mimicry reflects how closely individuals match others’ word use in conversation (Ireland and Pennebaker 2010), and is calculated as the relative overlap between two texts or utterances in the percentage of words used in a particular language category (e.g., cognitive words). Mimicry scores range from 0-1, where 0 indicates no overlap of word use in a particular category between two texts (e.g., 16% usage vs. 0% usage), and 1 indicates

complete overlap of word use in a particular category (e.g., 16% usage vs. 16% usage).

Like behavioral mimicry, linguistic mimicry is ubiquitous and serves as a strategic “social glue” (we like those we mimic, and mimic those we like; Lakin et al. 2003) that can have positive or negative consequences across a range of human interactions (Babcock et al. 2014; Lord et al. 2015; Kulesza, Dolinski, Huisman and Majewski 2013; Ludwig et al. 2013; O’Donnell et al. 2015; Rains 2015; Richardson et al. 2014; Yilmaz 2015). For example, higher levels of linguistic mimicry increase romantic interest between individuals who are speed-dating (Ireland et al. 2011), increase preferences for products (Tanner et al. 2008), and increase team performance, trust, and cohesion (Gonzales et. al 2010; Huffaker et al. 2011; Swaab, Maddux and Sinaceur 2011). However, linguistic mimicry can also decrease the likelihood of reaching an agreement in competitive interactions (Ireland and Henderson 2014), and mimicry of negative emotion words decreases trust in dyadic interactions (Scissors, Gill, Geraghty, and Gergle 2010).

Critically, given our research question, linguistic mimicry can occur not only face-to-face, but also via text; individuals mimic others in writing letters and poetry, and even in responding to exam questions (Ireland and Pennebaker 2010). In addition, relative to motor movements, words have specific meanings, which allows us to examine antecedent variables that predict mimicry of both what is said and how it is said. We focus on antecedent variables that are relevant to online WOM. Specifically, we examine how consumers’ similarity to others, either personally (e.g., gender) or in terms of status (e.g., forum ranking), predicts mimicry. Building on the WOM literature, we propose that any mimicry effects will be driven by goals that are activated when consumers encounter others online who share certain similarities with them. We review this work below and discuss the relationships between consumer similarities, goals, and online WOM; we then consider the implications of this framework for linguistic mimicry.

WOM, Goals, and Similarity

Consumers derive utility from sharing WOM (Berger 2014), and do so for many reasons (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Toubia and Stephen 2013). Prior work has shown that online WOM can help consumers satisfy two important goals: affiliation and achievement (Relling, Schnittka, Sattler and Johnen 2016). First, humans have an innate need to affiliate with others (Baumeister and Leary 1995), and engaging with an online community can provide consumers with positive interactions, a sense of belonging, the fostering of relationships, and the feeling of being liked (Hamilton, Schlosser and Chen in press; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Relling et al. 2016; Chen and Kirmani 2015). Second, online communities can allow consumers to feel a sense of achievement by providing the opportunity to share information, gain product knowledge, answer questions, give advice, display expertise, and foster feelings of accomplishment or status (Packard and Wooten 2013; Relling et al. 2016; Chen and Kirmani 2015).

We propose that affiliation and achievement goals can be differentially activated depending on the environmental cues that are present online. A host of research shows that such cues can activate different mindsets, goals, and identities (e.g., Berger and Fitzsimons 2008; Kettle and Häubl 2011; Tanner et al. 2008). We propose that the individual with whom a consumer interacts in a WOM conversation should serve as one such cue (e.g., Chartrand, Dalton, and Fitzsimons 2007; Tanner et al. 2008), and thus, that affiliation and achievement goals will be differentially activated depending on whom consumers encounter online (Ferguson and Bargh 2004; Moore, Ferguson, and Chartrand 2011). Here, we use the term goal broadly, to mean a desired endpoint that motivates behavior (Fishbach and Ferguson 2007).

Specifically, we argue that consumers' similarity with others, in terms of (a) personal demographics and (b) status, will serve as cues to activate certain goals. By personal similarity, we mean that the other individual shares demographic characteristics with the consumer; for example, they may be the same age or gender. By status similarity, we mean that the other poster has the same level of accomplishment or achievement as the consumer; for example, they may have the same forum ranking or number of posts. Personal and status markers are frequently and prominently displayed on online platforms, where personal information such as gender, age, and location, as well as status information such as posting frequency, helpfulness, and tenure as a contributor (e.g., "member since...") are shown alongside consumers' posts or reviews.

We propose that if a consumer engaging in online WOM encounters somebody who is personally similar to them, the recognition of this type of similarity will be associated with an affiliation goal, or the desire to form social connections. This conjecture is based on the notion that we strive to affiliate with others who are similar to us—with those who are part of our in-groups (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Festinger 1950). Prior work shows that factors such as age and gender can indicate similarity with others, and that similarity leads to affiliative behavior (e.g., McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Brown, Grzeskowiak, and Dev 2009; Naylor, Lamberton, and West 2012). For example, actual or inferred similarity between two people (e.g., a shared birthday) can enhance compliance with each other's requests (Burger et al. 2004), make online reviews more persuasive (Naylor, Lamberton, and Norton 2011), and increase the perceived social connection between two individuals (Jiang, Hoegg, Dahl, and Chattopadhyay 2010). Taken together, this literature suggests that when a consumer contributes WOM after an individual who is personally similar to her, the consumer should affiliate with this individual.

On the other hand, we propose that if a consumer engaging in online WOM encounters

somebody who is similar to them in status, the recognition of this type of similarity will be associated with an achievement goal, or the desire to display competency or status. This prediction is based on two lines of work. First, being similar in status to others can activate a motivation to display (or affirm) one's own status (Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011; Charles and Lundy 2013; Kuziemko et al. 2014). Second, in an online context, status information such as tenure, posting frequency, or review helpfulness indicates that an individual has successfully participated in the community, providing needed and useful information (Pendry and Salvatore 2015). Thus, when a consumer contributes WOM after an individual who is the same status as her, the consumer should be motivated to affirm or signal the status they have achieved.

In sum, we argue that interactions with different individuals online can be associated with different goals: engaging in WOM after somebody who is personally similar should activate an affiliation goal, while engaging in WOM after somebody who is similar in status should activate an achievement goal. We further posit that these different goals ought to be associated with mimicking different types of language; we discuss our language predictions below.

WOM, Goals, and Linguistic Mimicry

The present work provides a general examination of the different types of language that individuals might mimic in online WOM, depending on who they are interacting with. To that end, we examine mimicry of linguistic style—how things are said—and linguistic content—what is said. Since our goal is to provide a comprehensive examination of linguistic mimicry, we use the Linguistic Analysis and Word Count program (LIWC; Pennebaker et al. 2007) to operationalize the constructs of interest and guide our analysis. This program covers the breadth

of natural language use in a variety of contexts (e.g., online and offline, written and spoken), has been used in over one hundred published studies on language use (Tausczik and Pennebaker 2010), and is commonly used in assessing linguistic mimicry (e.g., Ireland and Pennebaker 2010). We use LIWC to measure mimicry in six word categories that it assesses: one capturing linguistic style words (i.e., function words) such as articles and pronouns (e.g., the, an, it), and five capturing linguistic content categories: social (e.g., family, you, she, share), positive emotion (e.g., agree, like, happy), negative emotion (e.g., sad, angry), cognitive (e.g., think, because), and descriptive words (e.g., see, up, round, until, blue). See Web Appendix A for additional detail and examples in each language category.

Regarding linguistic style, we predict that consumers will show higher linguistic style mimicry if they are more (vs. less) similar to each other in terms of either personal characteristics or status. This prediction is based on prior work showing that similarity increases behavioral mimicry (Chartrand and Lakin 2013), and on the fact that linguistic style words do not convey specific meanings (unlike linguistic content words). Regarding linguistic content, however, we predict that we will see differences in mimicry depending on who(m) consumers are conversing with, and on whether they share personal or status similarities with this person.

Specifically, we predict that personal similarity and an affiliation goal will be associated with greater mimicry of social words and positive emotion words. The logic for this prediction is straightforward: when affiliating, people talk about other people and relationships, and do so positively rather than negatively (McCroskey and Richmond 1977; Omarzu 2000). Social words can be used to indicate that a consumer is capable of forming positive relationships (e.g., husband, friends) or that she wants to form a relationship with the individual in question (e.g., help, share). Likewise, individuals who are agreeable are viewed positively by others (Fiske et al.

1999, 2002; van der Linden et al. 2010), and those who share positive information do so in part because of interpersonal considerations (De Angelis et al. 2012; Barasch and Berger 2014; Omarzu 2000). Thus, using positive emotion words that indicate agreement (e.g., agree, support) and positive feelings (e.g., happy, hope) can help consumers affiliate with others. In contrast, we do not expect to see any increases in negative emotion word mimicry as a result of personal similarity, as negativity does not aid with affiliating (Greene, Derlega, and Mathews 2006).

On the other hand, people who are similar in status to another poster and who are focused on achievement should show greater mimicry of a different set of words, consistent with this particular goal. Specifically, we should see greater cognitive and descriptive word mimicry when consumers share status with a previous poster, as these word categories allow consumers to demonstrate and assert their own status and achievements. Cognitive words (e.g., think, realize) help one to reason or explain, answer questions, provide arguments, and justify opinions (Pennebaker et al. 2007), all of which should be instrumental to achievement in a WOM context (Pendry and Salvatore 2015). Indeed, explaining language in online reviews can increase perceived review helpfulness and product choice (Moore 2015). Likewise, descriptive words (e.g., round, shiny, green) help consumers provide details about products and furnish information about when, where, and how to use them, and should also be associated with achieving and demonstrating status in online WOM (Packard and Wooten 2013; Pendry and Salvatore 2015).

SUMMARY & STUDY OVERVIEW

To summarize, we argue that when consumers are personally similar to others in online WOM, this will be associated with an affiliation goal, but that when consumers are similar in

status to others in online WOM, this will be associated with an achievement goal. We further predict that these differences in similarity and in goals should lead consumers to mimic different types of language (Figure 1). We expect personal similarity to predict increased affiliation-word mimicry (i.e., social and positive emotion word mimicry), but we expect status similarity to predict increased achievement-word mimicry (i.e., cognitive and descriptive word mimicry).

Next, we report three studies that test these hypotheses. Studies 1A and 1B are experiments that adopt a causal chain approach to testing our framework in a controlled setting (Spencer, Zanna, and Fong 2005). Study 1A tests the first link in our model and shows that personal and status similarity are associated with affiliation versus achievement goals, respectively. Study 1B tests the model's second link and shows that affiliation versus achievement goals differentially affect linguistic mimicry. Study 2 uses field data to test the direct effects of similarity on linguistic mimicry in an externally valid, real-world WOM setting. Study 2 also examines downstream consequences of linguistic mimicry, which we discuss later.

STUDY 1A

Study 1A tested the first link in our model using an online forum scenario. We manipulated personal and status similarity and then measured preferences for affiliation- or achievement-oriented forum features. We expected that when individuals encountered someone online who was personally similar to themselves, they would prefer affiliation-oriented features, which represent a means to accomplish an affiliation goal. However, when individuals encountered someone online who was similar in status to themselves, we expected them to prefer achievement-oriented features, which represent a means to accomplish an achievement goal.

Methods

Participants ($N = 90$; 48% female; age was not collected) were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk to complete a 3 (similarity: personal vs. status vs. none) between-subjects experiment.¹ First, participants were asked to imagine they belonged to CoffeeForums.com (a real online forum). They then created a forum profile by indicating their initials, gender, and state of residence, and by answering several questions about coffee (how much they liked coffee, how often they drank coffee, their knowledge and expertise about coffee, plus two coffee trivia questions; see Web Appendix B). Participants were informed that their answers to these questions would be used to generate a user rating and a forum ranking, which would be displayed along with their demographic information (gender, state) in their forum profile.

To create the forum profile, we used gender-specific pictures (a pink female or a blue male icon) that matched participants' selected gender, and we piped the home state participants indicated into their profile. To make the status similarity manipulation as clean as possible, user ratings and forum rankings did not convey any information about hierarchy; instead, we used generic labels and images to convey status. Specifically, participants' user rating was "triple espresso" and their forum ranking was a picture of three cups of coffee. Participants were shown their complete forum profile (see Web Appendix B for an example).

Next, participants imagined they were browsing CoffeeForums.com when they came across a post by a specific individual. This individual's profile was shown to participants (see

¹ For Studies 1A and 1B, which were both conducted on Mechanical Turk, we excluded observations from participants with double IP addresses as well as those who did not complete the study. We also screened out individuals who indicated that they would "never" belong to an online forum such as CoffeeForums.com; exclusion criteria were decided a priori. The reported sample sizes are for the final usable samples.

Web Appendix B for an example), and they were told they would be asked questions about it later. Our similarity manipulation determined the content of this other individual's profile. In the personal similarity condition, participants saw a profile with the same gender and state that they had indicated, but with a different user rating ("dark roast") and forum ranking (three coffee beans). In the status similarity condition, participants saw a profile with the same user rating (triple espresso) and forum ranking as in their profile (three coffee cups), but with a neutral gender (a green person icon) and the state of Delaware. In the no similarity (control) condition, participants saw a profile of an individual with a neutral gender from the state of Delaware², who had a different user rating (dark roast) and forum ranking (three coffee beans) from their own.

After participants viewed another individual's forum profile that was similar to their own in terms of personal information, forum status, or neither, they read a scenario which stated that CoffeeForums.com was interested in members' feedback about some new features they were considering adding to the forum. Participants rated whether CoffeeForums.com should add each of four features (1 = definitely do not add; 7 = definitely add), two of which measured affiliation (e.g., "A smiley face badge that other forum members could give posters after a positive interaction.") and two of which measured achievement (e.g., "An expert badge that other forum members could give posters who provide useful information."). We reasoned that a preference for affiliation- versus achievement-oriented features would reflect participants' respective goals for sharing WOM on the forum. Our dependent variable was a difference score between participants' averaged ratings of the two affiliative features ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.20$) and their averaged ratings of the two achievement features ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.47$), where higher numbers indicate a preference for achievement-oriented features ($M = 0.04$, $SD = 1.25$).

² No participants indicated that they lived in Delaware.

Results

An ANOVA using similarity condition (personal, status, or control) to predict participants' preference for achievement versus affiliation features showed a significant difference between conditions ($F(2, 87) = 3.69, p < .03$). Planned contrasts indicated that participants who saw a forum profile that matched theirs in terms of personal information more strongly endorsed affiliation-oriented features ($M = -0.36, SD = 1.24$) than participants who saw a forum profile that matched theirs in terms of status information ($M = 0.48, SD = 1.40; F(1, 87) = 7.26, p < .008$). The no similarity control condition fell in between ($M = -0.02, SD = 0.96$) and did not differ significantly from either the personal or the status similarity conditions ($ps > .11$).

Discussion

As predicted, individuals who saw the profile of a forum member who was personally similar to themselves (gender, state) more strongly endorsed affiliation-oriented forum features than individuals who saw the profile of a forum member who was similar in status to themselves (user rating, forum ranking). This provides causal evidence for the first link in our model and demonstrates that different types of similarity are associated with different goals. Study 1B tests whether affiliation versus achievement goals lead to differential linguistic mimicry.

STUDY 1B

Study 1B tested the second link in our framework by directly manipulating affiliation and achievement goals. We expected participants with an affiliation goal to reply to a previous individual's WOM with greater mimicry of social and positive emotion words, but expected those with an achievement goal to reply with greater mimicry of cognitive and descriptive words.

Methods

Participants from Mechanical Turk ($N = 159$; $M_{\text{age}} = 36.6$, $SD = 11.71$; 43% female) completed a 2 (goal: affiliation vs. achievement) between-subjects experiment. As in Study 1A, participants were asked to imagine belonging to CoffeeForums.com. Those in the affiliation condition read that their goal in joining the forum was “to have friendly conversations and form relationships with others who share your interests”, while those in the achievement condition read that their goal in joining the forum was “to provide accurate and relevant information that will help others in the forum make decisions and form opinions” (the manipulation was adapted from Hamilton et al. in press).

Participants then imagined they were browsing the “*Coffee Shops, Espresso Bars & Cafés*” thread on CoffeeForums.com, where people write about their coffee shop experiences, what they like about coffee shops, what makes a good coffee shop, etc.”, and that they had decided to post in this thread. They were asked to read the last post in the thread, which their post would follow. Participants then read a post about an individual's visit to a local coffee shop. We constructed this post so that it used all four critical language content categories: positive emotion words, social words, cognitive words, and descriptive words.³

³ We did not test our hypotheses about linguistic style mimicry (i.e., function words) in this study. It is difficult to alter the percentage of linguistic style words in a text without substantially changing (or losing) its meaning, as function words comprise over 50% of normal language use (Pennebaker, Mehl and Neiderhoffer 2003).

After reading, participants were asked to choose one of two pre-constructed reply posts that they would use to continue to discussion thread. These two reply posts varied in the degree of linguistic mimicry they shared with the original post; the affiliation reply post had higher linguistic mimicry of social and positive emotion words and lower linguistic mimicry of cognitive and descriptive words, and vice versa for the achievement reply post. Necessarily, this meant that the posts varied in the theme of their content, such that the affiliation post discussed social aspects of a coffee shop and the achievement post discussed learning about coffee preferences. In constructing the reply posts, we calibrated carefully relative to the initial post. Specifically, the affiliation reply had approximately the same percentage of social and positive emotion words as the original post, but about half the percentage of cognitive words;⁴ the achievement reply had approximately the same percentage of cognitive and descriptive words as the original post, but about half the percentage of social and positive emotion words. Additional details on the original and reply posts are provided in Web Appendix C.

To ensure that differences in the perceived valence of the reply posts did not explain our results, especially given our manipulation of positive emotion words across replies, following their selection of a reply post, participants evaluated both posts on 7-point scales for how negative or positive the reply was overall (-3 = very negative; 3 = very positive).

Results

We first examined participants' perceptions of the valence of the two reply posts. While perceived valence was not affected by our goal manipulation ($ps > .10$), the two reply posts

⁴ It was not possible to decrease the percentage of descriptive words by half in the affiliation post; please see note in Web Appendix C.

differed in perceived valence ($M_{\text{affiliation}} = 6.03$, $SD = 1.01$; $M_{\text{achievement}} = 6.33$, $SD = 0.85$; $t(158) = 4.13$, $p < .0001$). Thus, we used perceived valence as a covariate to ensure that differences in valence of the reply posts did not, by itself, explain our results.

A logistic regression with goal (affiliation vs. achievement) as an independent variable and the valence scores for each post as covariates was used to predict whether participants chose the affiliation or the achievement reply post. The perceived valence scores were both significant covariates ($ps < .0005$). However, the effect of the goal manipulation was also significant ($\chi = 3.94$, $p < .05$);⁵ participants in the affiliation goal condition were less likely to choose the achievement reply post (52%) than those in the achievement goal condition (67%).

Discussion

This study demonstrates the second link in our framework: participants with achievement versus affiliation goals chose reply posts that mimicked different types of language. Specifically, those with an achievement goal favored the reply post with higher mimicry of cognitive and descriptive words and lower mimicry of social and positive emotion words, whereas those with an affiliation goal favored the reply post with higher mimicry of social and positive emotion words and lower mimicry of cognitive and descriptive words.

Together, Studies 1A and 1B provide causal evidence for the “a” and “b” paths in our conceptual framework (Figure 1), which are the necessary and sufficient conditions needed to establish mediation (Spencer et al. 2005; Zhao, Lynch and Chen 2010). However, we still sought to demonstrate the direct effect of similarity on linguistic mimicry. Further, we note that these

⁵ Without the perceived valence covariates, the effect remained marginally significant ($\chi = 3.26$, $p < .07$).

studies rely on experimenter-constructed posts and on specific manipulations of personal and status characteristics, leaving open the possibility that our results are due to idiosyncrasies in our stimuli or manipulations. We also wanted to test our predictions with participants generating their own WOM. Thus, our next study tests the direct effect of personal versus status similarity on linguistic mimicry using real world data, which contains multiple, highly varied posts and a heterogeneous sample.⁶ Study 2 also explores the consequences of linguistic mimicry in an online context; we discuss these predictions next.

STUDY 2

Study 2 aims to replicate our findings regarding personal and status similarity as antecedents of linguistic style and content mimicry. Going beyond Studies 1A and 1B, we also explore the consequences of mimicry as a function of similarity. Specifically, we sought to examine the effects of mimicry on online consumer engagement. We use two behavioral measures of forum engagement to assess these consequences: 1) a consumer's total posts in a forum thread, and 2) whether or not a consumer replied to the thread in which they made their first post. Our predictions regarding the consequences of linguistic style and content mimicry build on existing work in this area.

First, prior research suggests that mimicry of linguistic style (function words) could have positive or negative consequences for forum engagement. For example, while linguistic style mimicry increases romantic interest in a speed-dating (affiliation-oriented) context (Ireland et al. 2011), it is also more likely to lead to an impasse in negotiations in a competitive (achievement-

⁶ In addition to Study 2, we also conducted an experiment, Study 1C, that tested the direct effect of personal versus status similarity on linguistic mimicry; please see details in Web Appendix D.

oriented) context (Ireland and Henderson 2014). Based on this, we might expect increased forum engagement from function word mimicry as a result of personal similarity, but decreased forum engagement from function word mimicry as a result of status similarity.

Second, research on the consequences of linguistic content mimicry also reveals mixed findings. For example, mimicry of negative emotion words decreases trust in dyadic interactions (Scissors et al. 2008). Together with the linguistic style results above, these findings suggest that in an affiliation-oriented context (i.e., when personal similarity is high), mimicry of linguistic content may have positive consequences, while in an achievement-oriented context (i.e., when status similarity is high), mimicry of linguistic content may have negative consequences (Ireland et al. 2011; Ireland and Henderson 2014; Scissors et al. 2008). Combining this literature with our experimental findings, we predict that personal similarity should increase social and positive emotion word mimicry, and this should increase forum engagement, whereas status similarity should increase cognitive and descriptive word mimicry, and this should decrease forum engagement. We test these predictions by assessing linguistic style and content mimicry as mediators of the relationship between personal and status similarity and forum engagement.

Methods

We began by downloading an entire sub-section of the Rotten Tomatoes movie forums: the DVD forum (<http://forum.rottentomatoes.com/forum/65802>). In this section of the forum, individuals discuss such things as upcoming DVD releases, favorite movies, and related goods such as televisions, DVD players, and speakers. Data was collected in the fall of 2011; all threads and posts in the DVD sub-section at the time were downloaded. The complete dataset had 35,802 posts in 3,892 threads, with 3,426 unique users.

Each post was tagged with a number of characteristics common to many online forums: post date, thread, post number within thread, posting time, and post content (further subdivided into actual content, signature content, and quoted content; see below). In addition, the following information about the writer of each post was captured: user name, location, rating (a unique Rotten Tomatoes label like “stem”, “vine”, etc.), join date, total number of posts, number of months belonging to the forum, and any additional, optional information provided in the user’s profile of up to 13 movie-related categories (e.g., favorite movie, celebrity, etc.). We had a research assistant create a binary measure of provided/not provided (1/0) for each of these 13 categories. The research assistant also coded the gender of each poster manually, when gender could be inferred from their user name. Rotten Tomatoes displayed all of this personal (e.g., user location) and status (e.g., join date) information next to each individual’s post in the forum.⁷

After downloading, post content was spell-checked and cleaned of irrelevant or repeated content that would affect mimicry calculations. Specifically, poster’s signatures were removed (these appeared in every post, but their content was fixed), and if the poster quoted a prior post in their reply, the quoted text was removed. Finally, some posts were double posts and some had no replies (thus, mimicry could not be assessed); these posts were not included in our analysis, resulting in a final data set containing 28,321 total posts in 3,063 threads.

Measures

After cleaning the data, we calculated two independent variables (personal and status similarity), several control variables, and our six dependent mimicry variables.

⁷ The information displayed by Rotten Tomatoes has changed since data was collected; location information is no longer displayed, and only some of the forum status information is displayed.

Independent Variables. For any given two adjacent posts, we calculated personal similarity and status similarity measures to serve as our key independent variables.

Personal similarity. We assessed the degree of matching between adjacent posters' demographic information as a measure of personal similarity. We coded both location (specific match; e.g., Belgium as 1 if same, 0 if different/missing) and gender as matching or not (1 if same, 0 if not/missing).⁸ The result was a personal similarity score that ranged from 0-2 ($M = 0.038$, $SD = 0.19$), with higher scores reflecting more similarity between two adjacent posters.⁹

Forum status similarity. We assessed similarity in forum status between adjacent posters. To calculate status similarity, we created a composite measure that incorporated: number of months belonging to the forum (1 if same, 0 if not)¹⁰, number of posts (1 if same, 0 if not), user rating (1 if same, 0 if not)¹¹, and join date (1 if same, 0 if not). The binary measures were then summed, resulting in a status similarity score that ranged from 0-4 ($M = 0.166$, $SD = 0.465$), with higher scores reflecting greater status similarity between two adjacent posters.

We tested the correlation between these two independent variables to ensure they were capturing distinct measures. Personal and status similarity had a very small but statistically significant relationship ($r = 0.04$, $p < .0001$).

Control variables. We also calculated several control variables to address issues of

⁸ We note that our results are not sensitive to whether missing personal information is coded as “same”, “different”, or “missing”; this suggests that the recognition of actual similarity drives our results.

⁹ We also tested gender and location matching separately, to see which might drive any effects of personal similarity. Gender matching showed significant effects nearly identical to those reported below, while location matching did not show any significant effects, suggesting that gender similarity is the primary driver of personal similarity (please contact the authors for more details on these results). We thank a reviewer for this suggestion.

¹⁰ The forum status variables do not have missing data, as they are system generated. Correlations between these four status indicators were no higher than $r = 0.17$, suggesting that they can be combined into one measure of status.

¹¹ Rotten Tomatoes does not provide information on how user ratings are determined, so the meaning of these labels (e.g., vine, stem) is not clear. This is not an issue for our purposes, as we are primarily interested in whether adjacent posters share the *same* rating. See also the section on Status Differences Versus Status Similarity regarding this issue.

causality, given our use of field data. However, we note that our dependent (mimicry) measures are assessed later in time than our independent factors, ruling out reverse causality. Further, any explanation whereby mimicry effects are driven by individual differences in gender or forum status does not explain the interaction we predict, which is based on *matching* of these variables across forum participants. In addition, our independent variables (e.g., gender, join date) are largely static and thus cannot be predicted by mimicry scores. Still, we calculated a number of control variables to reduce the likelihood that third variables are responsible for our effects.

First, where possible, gender was manually coded by a research assistant based on user names (N = 6795; 92% male). Second, the linguistic content of each post was assessed by LIWC; that is, the relative percentages of function, social, positive emotion, negative emotion, cognitive, and descriptive words in each post were measured. Third, we calculated each poster's level of disclosure, since divulging personal information online may be associated with WOM or mimicry. This measure was comprised of: providing extra information in one's profile (favorite movie, etc.; 1 if provided, 0 if not), disclosing gender (1 if yes, 0 if no), and disclosing geographic location (1 if yes, 0 if no). These measures were summed, resulting in a disclosure score that ranged from 0-3 ($M = 0.285$, $SD = 0.539$), with higher scores reflecting greater disclosure from a particular poster. See Table 1 for independent and control variable means.

Dependent Variables.

Mimicry. We used LIWC, which reports the percentage of words in various categories in a given piece of text, to measure the content of each post in the forum. From these content measures, we calculated six linguistic mimicry scores as our primary dependent variables. Mimicry scores were calculated for linguistic style (function words) and for our five linguistic content categories (social, positive emotion, negative emotion, cognitive, and descriptive words;

see Table 2 for means). Following past work (Ireland et al. 2011), we used the following formula to assess the extent of linguistic mimicry between two adjacent forum posts:

$$\frac{1 - (|\% \text{ words}_{\text{poster1}} - \% \text{ words}_{\text{poster2}}|)}{(\% \text{ words}_{\text{poster1}} + \% \text{ words}_{\text{poster2}} + .0001)}$$

Results

Linguistic Mimicry. Given the distribution of the mimicry scores, which range only between 0 and 1 and contain many 0s and 1s, we used a Tobit model for our analysis (Amemiya 1984). To predict levels of mimicry in each language category, we ran a model with user, thread, and linguistic content (e.g., percentage of social words in a post) as covariates, and personal and status similarity as independent variables. Nearly identical results are found using either OLS or a fractional logit model. We included user as a covariate to address individual differences in language use (Pennebaker 2011; Pennebaker and King 1999; Pennebaker, Mehl, and Niederhoffer 2003), thread to address any variation arising from content differences across topics, and linguistic content to address variation in word type across posts.

Linguistic Style Mimicry. We first tested linguistic style mimicry (function word mimicry) as a result of personal and forum status similarity. As predicted, higher levels of personal ($\beta = 0.043$, $t(28320) = 5.48$, $p < .001$) and status ($\beta = 0.019$, $t(28320) = 5.58$, $p < .001$) similarity predicted greater function word mimicry. Function word content was a significant covariate ($\beta = 0.002$, $t(28320) = 20.96$, $p < .001$).

Linguistic Content Mimicry. We next tested linguistic content mimicry as a result of personal and status similarity for both affiliation words (social and positive emotion words) and achievement words (cognitive and descriptive words).

The two affiliation word categories, social and positive emotion words, showed results consistent with our predictions. While higher levels of personal similarity predicted greater social word mimicry ($\beta = 0.068$, $t(28320) = 4.75$, $p < .0001$), forum status similarity did not predict social word mimicry ($p > .25$). Social word content was a significant covariate ($\beta = 0.002$, $t(28320) = 5.81$, $p < .001$). Similarly, higher levels of personal similarity predicted greater positive emotion word mimicry ($\beta = 0.002$, $t(28320) = 5.81$, $p < .001$), but forum status similarity did not predict positive emotion word mimicry ($p > .94$). Positive emotion word content was a significant covariate ($\beta = -0.003$, $t(28320) = -10.13$, $p < .001$).¹²

The two achievement word categories, cognitive and descriptive words, also showed results consistent with our predictions. While higher levels of status similarity predicted greater cognitive word mimicry ($\beta = 0.007$, $t(28320) = 2.29$, $p < .02$), higher levels of personal similarity predicted lower cognitive word mimicry ($\beta = -0.020$, $t(28320) = -2.63$, $p < .009$). Cognitive word content was a significant covariate ($\beta = -0.003$, $t(28320) = -22.96$, $p < .001$). Similarly, while higher levels of status similarity predicted greater descriptive word mimicry ($\beta = 0.010$, $t(28320) = 2.40$, $p < .02$), higher levels of personal similarity predicted lower descriptive word mimicry ($\beta = -0.061$, $t(28320) = -6.02$, $p < .0001$). Descriptive word content was a significant covariate ($\beta = -0.0004$, $t(28320) = -2.51$, $p < .01$).

Covariates and Robustness. The models above demonstrate that our results hold when controlling for relevant linguistic content (e.g., cognitive word use). We also confirmed that these results were robust to three additional covariates (see Web Appendix E for a correlation matrix between personal and status similarity and each covariate). First, we tested each model controlling for gender, as language use and mimicry can vary by gender (Lehane 2015; Newman

¹² For negative emotion word mimicry, neither personal nor status similarity was a significant predictor ($ps > .19$).

et al. 2008; Pennebaker et al. 2003); while these models had a smaller sample ($N = 5864$), as not all posters disclosed their gender, the results were similar to those reported above. Second, we tested each model including posters' overall disclosure level as a covariate. Disclosure was not a significant covariate in any model, and including it did not alter the results reported above. Third, we included post number ($M = 170.3$, $SD = 489.7$) as a covariate to account for differences in topics or popularity within thread.¹³ Post number was not a significant covariate in any model, and the results above replicated with this variable included.

Finally, we tested whether our results held when using each individual's first post in the forum (i.e., the "cleanest" test). We ran the models above using only such data ($N = 9271$) to address issues of causality, self-selection, and prior behavior/learning (e.g., previous posting frequency; Schweidel and Moe 2014). These results were slightly weaker as a result of the smaller sample size, but were consistent with the results reported above.

Personal and Status Similarity Interactions. A priori, we did not make predictions about any potential interactions between personal and forum status similarity because we expected each type of similarity to have an independent effect on mimicry of different word categories. However, the results above reveal that personal similarity negatively affects cognitive and descriptive word mimicry. For this reason, and to gain further insight into how different types of similarity influence mimicry, we re-ran the above models including the interaction between personal and forum status similarity. While the main effects reported for personal and forum status similarity hold when this interaction is included in the model, the interaction was significant for each of the word categories examined, except for social words.

Analysis of these interactions suggested that when participants were not similar to the

¹³ Note that thread, which was included as a covariate in our main model, addresses issues of popularity across threads.

prior poster either personally or in terms of forum status, both variables predicted decreased mimicry. However, when participants were similar to the prior poster personally and in terms of status, only personal similarity predicted increased mimicry. Further, when there was no personal similarity match, the effects of forum status similarity on linguistic mimicry reported above were significant; when there was a personal similarity match, the effects of forum status similarity were non-significant. In short, personal similarity appears to be a stronger predictor of linguistic mimicry than forum status similarity. See Web Appendix F for details.

Status Differences Versus Status Similarity. Our primary interest is in the effects of personal and forum status matching on linguistic mimicry—that is, on the effects of similarity on mimicry. However, we can calculate *differences* in status for three out of four of our forum status measures, allowing us to assess whether the prior poster is higher or lower in status than the current poster. Thus, we standardized and combined the differences between adjacent posters' join date, number of posts, and months belonging to the forum. For this forum status difference variable, positive numbers mean that the focal poster was of higher status than the previous poster; negative numbers mean that the focal poster was of lower status than the previous poster.

We re-ran the models above including this forum status difference variable, with personal and forum status similarity as independent variables and user, thread, and linguistic content as covariates.¹⁴ In all cases, the main effects of personal and forum status similarity on linguistic mimicry reported above were replicated. Differences in forum status predicted linguistic mimicry only for cognitive words: individuals showed greater mimicry of cognitive words ($\beta = -0.0144$, $t(28310) = -4.65$, $p < .0001$) when the previous poster was of lower status than themselves. This analysis suggests that forum status matching is a stronger predictor of linguistic mimicry than

¹⁴ The status difference variable was not significantly correlated with personal or status similarity ($ps > .24$).

differences in forum status.

Consequences of Mimicking. We next examined the consequences of linguistic mimicry. Given our data, we were able to compute two behavioral measures of forum engagement: 1) the total number of posts a user made in a particular thread, and 2) whether the user replied to the thread in which their first forum post appeared (0/1). As with the first-post robustness check above, this latter variable partially addresses causality concerns; it allows us to cleanly test how forum engagement is affected by linguistic mimicry after a user's very first encounter with the forum. For both variables, our effective sample was 22,225 observations.

We assessed how these two dependent variables were impacted by how much a user mimicked the poster prior to them. We only tested models based on our predictions. To do so parsimoniously, we tested the following mediation models: 1) whether linguistic style (function word) mimicry mediated the relationship between personal similarity and forum engagement; 2) whether linguistic style (function word) mimicry mediated the relationship between forum status similarity and forum engagement; 3) whether linguistic content mimicry of affiliative words (social or positive emotion words) mediated the relationship between personal similarity and forum engagement; and 4) whether linguistic content mimicry of achievement words (cognitive or descriptive words) mediated the relationship between forum status similarity and forum engagement. In these four mediation models, we used either personal similarity or forum status similarity as an independent variable (the other similarity variable was used as a covariate) and our two forum engagement behaviors as dependent variables (Hayes 2013; model 4). Across models, the relevant measure of linguistic content was included as a covariate (e.g., cognitive word use) and the relevant mimicry score was used as a mediator (e.g., cognitive mimicry).

Function Word Mediation. We first examined whether linguistic style mimicry (function word mimicry) mediated the relationships between personal and forum status similarity and forum engagement; we tested separate models for personal similarity as an independent variable and for forum status similarity as an independent variable.

Across models, neither function word mimicry nor forum status similarity predicted total posts by thread ($ps > .40$), though personal similarity did ($\beta = -0.259$, $t(22224) = -1.86$, $p < .06$). However, the indirect effects of personal similarity and forum status similarity on total posts by thread via function word mimicry were not significant ($CI_{\text{status}}: -0.0005 - 0.0014$, $p > .05$; $CI_{\text{personal}}: -0.062 - 0.0009$, $p > .05$). Similarly, neither function word mimicry nor forum status similarity predicted first-post replies ($ps > .44$), though personal similarity did ($\beta = -0.194$, $Z = -2.46$, $p < .01$). Again, however, the indirect effects of personal and forum status similarity on first-post replies via function word mimicry were not significant ($CI_{\text{status}}: -0.006 - 0.003$, $p > .05$; $CI_{\text{personal}}: -0.001 - 0.0023$, $p > .05$).

These analysis suggest that linguistic style (function word) mimicry, whether driven by personal similarity or forum status similarity, did not affect forum engagement.

Social and Positive Emotion Word Mediation. We next examined whether affiliation-word mimicry mediated the personal similarity–forum engagement relationship; we tested separate models for each dependent variable, with personal similarity as an independent variable and either social or positive emotion word mimicry as a mediator.

Testing social word mimicry as a mediator of forum engagement revealed that it significantly and negatively predicted total posts by thread ($\beta = -0.149$, $t(22224) = -2.32$, $p < .02$), as did personal similarity ($\beta = -0.266$, $t(22224) = -1.91$, $p < .06$). The indirect effect of personal similarity on total posts by thread via social word mimicry was significant ($CI: -0.027 -$

-0.0027, $p < .05$). In contrast, social word mimicry did not predict first-post replies ($p > .39$), though personal similarity negatively predicted first-post replies ($\beta = -0.203$, $Z = -2.57$, $p < .01$); the indirect effect was not significant (CI: -0.0097 – 0.0027, $p > .05$).

Testing positive emotion word mimicry as a mediator of forum engagement showed that it was not a significant predictor of total posts by thread ($p > .27$), though personal similarity was a negative predictor ($\beta = -0.290$, $t(22224) = -2.08$, $p < .04$); the indirect effect was not significant (CI: -0.0019 – 0.0114, $p > .05$). Similarly, positive emotion word mimicry did not predict first-post replies ($p > .22$), though personal similarity negatively predicted first-post replies ($\beta = -0.210$, $Z = -2.67$, $p < .008$); the indirect effect was not significant (CI: -0.0008 – 0.0062, $p > .05$).

Together, these results suggest that social word mimicry as a function of personal similarity partially decreased forum engagement by influencing total posts but not first-post replies; positive emotion word mimicry did not affect forum engagement.

Cognitive and Descriptive Word Mediation. Finally, we examined whether achievement-word mimicry mediated the forum status similarity–forum engagement relationship; we tested separate models for each dependent variable, with forum status similarity as an independent variable and either cognitive or descriptive word mimicry as a mediator.

Testing cognitive word mimicry as a mediator of forum engagement revealed that it negatively predicted total posts by thread ($\beta = -0.223$, $t(22224) = -1.89$, $p < .06$); forum status similarity did not ($p > .68$). The indirect effect of forum status similarity on total posts by thread via cognitive word mimicry was significant (CI: -0.0046 – -0.0001, $p < .05$). Similarly, cognitive word mimicry negatively predicted first-post replies ($\beta = -0.176$, $Z = -2.73$, $p < .006$), but forum status similarity did not ($p > .53$). The indirect effect of forum status similarity on first-post replies via cognitive word mimicry was significant (CI: -0.0027 – -0.0001, $p < .05$).

Testing descriptive word mimicry as a mediator of forum engagement showed that neither it nor forum status similarity were significant predictors of total posts by thread ($p > .36$), and the indirect effect was not significant (CI: -0.0007 – 0.0032, $p > .05$). Similarly, neither descriptive word mimicry nor forum status similarity were significant predictors of first-post replies ($p > .46$), and the indirect effect was not significant (CI: -0.0004 – 0.0019, $p > .05$).

These results suggest that cognitive word mimicry as a function of forum status similarity *decreased* forum engagement by decreasing total posts by thread and by decreasing the likelihood that consumers would reply to the thread containing their first post. In contrast, descriptive word mimicry did not affect forum engagement.

Consequences of Being Mimicked. For completeness and for consistency with prior work, we also examined whether forum engagement was affected by being mimicked (rather than by mimicking). That is, we tested how consumers' total posts by thread and first-post replies were affected by the degree to which their word use was mimicked by the poster subsequent to them.

These results mirrored our findings regarding consumers' mimicry of the prior poster: when a subsequent poster showed greater mimicry of a consumer's cognitive word use, forum engagement decreased for both dependent variables. Similar to above, the other word categories did not show any effects (see Web Appendix G for detailed analysis).

Discussion

As hypothesized, this study shows that personal similarity and forum status similarity predicted different, specific types of linguistic mimicry. Consistent with prior literature, the more

similar individuals were to the previous poster—either personally or in terms of forum status—the more they mimicked this individual’s linguistic style, or function word use. More critically, the more personally similar a poster was to the poster immediately preceding them, the less they mimicked this individual’s cognitive and descriptive word use, but the more they mimicked social and positive emotion word use. The more similar a poster was to the poster immediately preceding them in terms of forum status, however, the more they mimicked this individual’s cognitive and descriptive word use. These results were robust to several covariates, and complement our experimental results. Critically, this study also documented how differential mimicry predicts individual posters’ subsequent behavior. We found that mimicry of cognitive word use decreased forum engagement in terms of total posts and first-post replies.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research reports three studies that investigate the antecedents, causes, and consequences of linguistic mimicry. In two experiments, we show that: a) personal and forum status similarity are associated with affiliation and achievement goals, respectively; and b) affiliation and achievement goals prompt differential linguistic mimicry. Further, we demonstrate using data from an online forum that personal and forum status similarity predict different types of linguistic mimicry, and show that both mimicking and mimicry have consequences for consumers’ online behavior. Specifically, we find that personal similarity leads individuals to mimic a prior poster’s social and positive emotion word use, while forum status similarity leads individuals to mimic a prior poster’s cognitive and descriptive word use. We also find that when consumers mimic a prior poster’s cognitive word use or when a subsequent poster mimics their

cognitive word use, forum engagement decreases.

In short, this research provides a comprehensive examination of linguistic mimicry in online communication. In doing so, it contributes to the growing literature on WOM content (e.g., Moore 2015) and to work on linguistic and behavioral mimicry (e.g., Chartrand and Lakin 2013). These findings demonstrate that individuals do not mimic indiscriminately in online interactions; rather, consumers mimic different word categories depending on whom they are responding to. To our knowledge, this is the first demonstration of variation in *what* gets mimicked when holding conversation partners constant; for example, when consumers are personally similar to an adjacent poster, they mimic social but not cognitive words. Framed a different way, this is the first demonstration of variation in *who* gets mimicked when holding mimicry behavior constant; for example, social words are mimicked when consumers respond to those who are personally similar, but not when they respond to those who are similar in status.

This research provides several practical insights. First, given the mimicry effects we observe, managers may want to consider how reviews or other consumer-created online WOM is sorted. For example, if more helpful reviews are displayed first on a site, and are therefore the most likely to be seen by consumers posting later reviews, the language in these reviews is most likely to be mimicked; this should increase the overall helpfulness of the reviews being posted. Second, managers already work to foster feelings of status, affiliation, and similarity amongst their consumers. We confirm the importance of affiliation and achievement motivations in online communities (Relling et al. 2016), and provide a nuanced consideration of how personal and status similarity can affect engagement, given these goals. Our findings suggest that managers might want to be strategic about which type of information is displayed online. For example, platforms that want to foster affiliation might display or highlight personal information. In

particular, to maximize opportunities for similarity, managers could emphasize personal characteristics that are likely to be shared by many consumers (gender, broad age categories, broad locations such as “USA”). Conversely, platforms that want to foster high quality interaction and information-sharing should display or highlight status information—though our findings suggest that this may decrease engagement. Of course, platforms focused on offering help or advice may rather have fewer, high quality responses than many low quality ones.

Given the novelty of our investigation, these recommendations come with the caveat that additional work is required, particularly regarding the consequences of linguistic mimicry. Better understanding how consumers are affected by generating WOM is of theoretical and practical importance, as the prevalence and usefulness of the information available online is determined by consumers’ willingness to engage and post content. First, future work could further explore the effects of linguistic mimicry on online engagement, with reference to the current paper and to prior work. Specifically, unlike in prior work (Ireland et al. 2011), linguistic style mimicry did not affect forum engagement in our data, perhaps because the effects of linguistic content mimicry—in particular, the negative consequences of cognitive word mimicry—were simply stronger; the effects of style versus content mimicry could be formally contrasted in future work. Further, our data do not show an increase in forum engagement from social and positive emotion word mimicry, but do show a decrease in forum engagement from cognitive word mimicry. We speculate that these results may be because the Rotten Tomatoes forum is more achievement- than affiliation-oriented; future research could test this conjecture. Second, the consequences of linguistic mimicry for consumers’ social and digital connections could be examined more broadly. For example, consumers’ engagement with a given community could be tracked longitudinally as a function of mimicking (or being mimicked), or their engagement across

communities or online channels (Schweidel and Moe 2014) could be assessed, perhaps with attention to whether the channel is predominantly affiliation or achievement-oriented. Such research might shed light on when and why there are negative or positive consequences of linguistic mimicry in online WOM. Third, it may be worth investigating the consequences of linguistic mimicry at the individual level. Since linguistic mimicry can change the content of what gets posted, it likely also has the potential to affect the attitudes and behaviors of consumers who read and write online WOM (Moore 2012; Moore 2015).

Future research could also examine other aspects of personal or status similarity. For example, although we focus on the role of similarity in determining *how* individuals reply to a post (i.e., in terms of mimicry), these variables likely also affect *whether* individuals reply to a post. In addition, while we find no clear effects of status differences (high vs. low) on mimicry, this was not the focus of the present research. More salient manipulations could be used to test the effects of status differences in this context, especially since people often misjudge their standing relative to others when information is even slightly ambiguous (Norton 2013). Finally, our operationalization of personal similarity suggests that it is the recognition of actual similarity that drives our effects, rather than the recognition of dissimilarity or inferred similarity based on ambiguous information (i.e., a user whose name does not indicate gender). Interestingly, other work has shown that when no information is available online, consumers assume that others have similar preferences to themselves (Naylor et al. 2011). Future work could examine consumers' assumptions about similarity given different types of information and could test how such assumptions affect online behavior.

Further, moderators of these effects could be assessed. Since individuals use different language when sharing WOM about utilitarian versus hedonic products (Kronrod and Danziger

2013; Moore 2012), product type may affect linguistic mimicry. Further, WOM about products related to identity or status might affect mimicry. If discussing relevant products strengthens (weakens) affiliation or achievement goals, the reported effects might be exacerbated (attenuated). Another potential moderator is the valence of WOM. While we did not assess valence, a more nuanced examination might reveal interesting effects, such as mimicry of negative emotion words. Perhaps individuals with an affiliation goal would mimic even negative emotion words if these were relevant to the topic, or if they indicated agreement with others.

Finally, while we show that the highly varied meaning of words can lead to differential linguistic mimicry, the same could be done for behavioral mimicry. For example, there are many cross-cultural variations in gesture meaning (Graham and Argyle 1975; Rehm, Bee, and André 2008; Mauney et al. 2010), and variation in basic body posture (e.g., leaning toward or away) and speaking distance (e.g., close or far) might also carry meaning within and across cultures (Remland, Jones, and Brinkman 1995). Thus, it might be possible to examine how affiliation and achievement goals affect mimicry of different behaviors. For example, if leaning toward an individual is more indicative of affiliation than leaning away, we would expect to observe 1) more forward than backward leaning when an affiliation goal is active compared to when it is not, and 2) more forward leaning when an affiliation versus an achievement goal is active. Similarly, if tongue protrusion or forehead touching is indicative of achievement (e.g., thinking hard, trying to do a good job), we would expect to observe more such behavior when an achievement goal is active (vs. not), and when an achievement versus an affiliation goal is active.

Ultimately, we hope that this investigation of when and why individuals mimic specific types of language inspires future research in linguistic and behavioral mimicry, with the recognition that who the audience is shapes both what is said, as well as how it is said.

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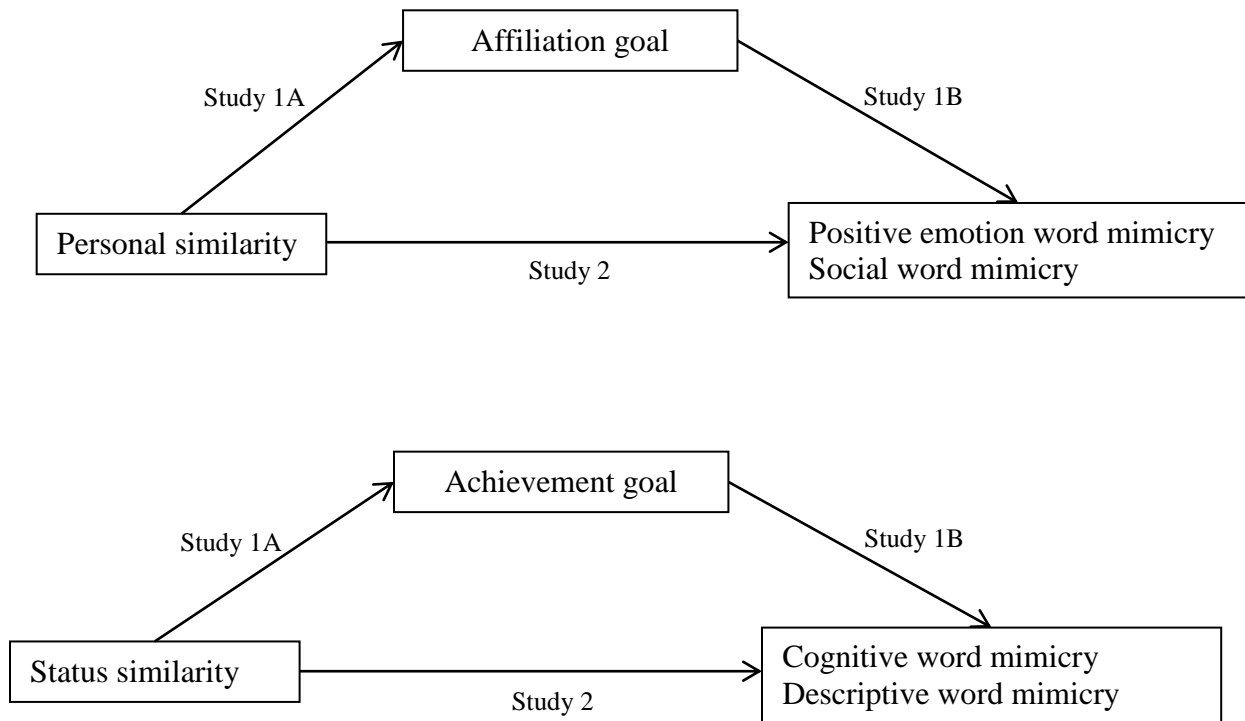
Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Table 1: Means for Independent and Control Variables, Study 2

Variable	Mean	SD
<i>Independent Variables</i>		
Personal similarity	0.04	0.19
Status similarity	0.17	0.47
<i>Control Variables: Linguistic Content</i>		
Function word use	42.45	16.66
Social word use	5.58	6.61
Positive emotion word use	5.21	9.00
Negative emotion word use	2.12	4.89
Cognitive word use	13.35	10.26
Descriptive word use	14.30	10.52
<i>Control Variables: Disclosure</i>		
	0.29	0.54

Table 2: Mimicry Score Means for Language Categories, Study 2

Variable	Mean	SD
Function mimicry	0.50	0.23
Social mimicry	0.48	0.41
Positive emotion mimicry	0.44	0.41
Negative emotion mimicry	0.53	0.46
Descriptive mimicry	0.57	0.30
Cognitive mimicry	0.56	0.23