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Source Perceptions and the Persuasiveness of Internet Word-Of-Mouth Communication

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Source Perceptions and the Persuasiveness of Internet Word-of-Mouth Communication

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication is a powerful force in shaping consumers' attitudes (Brown and Reingen 1987). With the rise of the Internet, it is increasingly common for individuals to read about the product experiences of consumers who are unknown to them. The purpose of this research is to examine how individuals use the content of consumers' product reviews to make inferences about them—such as whether they are telling the truth—and from this the degree to which they are persuaded by the review.

There is some evidence suggesting that message content can influence source perceptions even beyond explicit information about the source's credentials (Ratneschwar and Chaiken 1991). Yet, the mediating role of source attributions on the persuasiveness of WOM communication is yet unclear (Folkes 1988). According to attribution theory (e.g., Jones and Davis, 1965; Kelley 1973), source perceptions play a critical role in determining whether a message is persuasive. Specifically, individuals try to determine whether the message accurately represents the attitude object or is attributable to irrelevant causes, such as an ulterior motive (Kelley 1967). For instance, consumers likely infer that advertisers want to sell a product. Thus, their glowing product advertisement is likely discounted because of their ulterior motive. One method for advertisers to establish credibility is to include some negative information about their products (cf., Settle and Golden 1974; Swinyard 1981). Because acknowledging the negative aspects of the product could result in a lost sale, such two-sided ads are often attributed to reflecting the source's true feelings. A similar pattern may emerge for consumer-to-consumer communication as well. Negative comments are less socially acceptable than praise (Mizerski 1982). Thus, even when the source is a consumer, two-sided messages may be perceived as more credible than one-sided messages.

Yet, research on message sidedness has yielded somewhat inconsistent findings, suggesting that the relationship between message sidedness, credibility and attitudes toward the brand (A_{BR}) is more complicated (Crowley and Hoyer 1994). I propose that the credibility and persuasiveness of two-sided messages depends on the source's brand attitude (tested in experiment 1) and the recipients' product attitudes (tested in experiment 2).

In terms of the source's brand attitudes, credibility likely depends on whether the content of the review reflects the sources' brand attitudes. If sources are telling the truth, then their attitudes should reflect their reasons for their attitudes. Oftentimes, considering multiple sides of an issue fosters attitude moderation (Linville 1982; Tetlock 1983). Individuals are likely aware of this, and consequently should perceive sources of two-sided reviews to be more credible when their attitudes are moderate rather than extreme (hypothesis 1). According to attribution theory, such attributions should lead to increased message persuasiveness (hypothesis 2).

To test this, 125 undergraduates participated in a study with a 2 (rating: moderate vs. extreme) \times 2 (review: one- vs. two-sided) design. Participants were first asked to imagine that they planned to see a movie and in deciding what to see, they visit a website where they read a rating and review of an animated martial arts film. Rating was manipulated by telling participants of the source's rating on a scale from -3 to $+3$. In the moderate condition, the source's rating was close to the midpoint ($+1$), whereas in the extreme condition, it was the highest possible ($+3$). Participants also received the source's review. The one-sided review contained all positive information. The two-sided review contained one piece

of negative information. After reading this rating and review, participants completed the survey, which included measures of their A_{BR} and their credibility perceptions. In addition, to test alternate theoretical accounts for the persuasiveness of two-sided messages, I included attitudes toward the review, perceived novelty, and a cognitive response measure.

Consistent with hypotheses 1 and 2, there was a significant rating \times review interaction for both credibility and A_{BR} . As predicted, the two-sided review was more credible and led to higher A_{BR} when the sources' rating was moderate (or consistent with the review) than extreme. Likewise, the one-sided review was more credible and persuasive when it was consistent with the source's rating (or extreme) than inconsistent (or moderate), although this difference was nonsignificant. Moreover, perceived credibility mediated the effect of review and rating on A_{BR} .

Whereas the results are consistent with an attribution account, they are inconsistent with inoculation theory, which predicts that two-sided messages reduce counterarguing, and with optimal arousal theory, which predicts that two-sided messages are more novel and lead to greater message liking than one-sided messages (for a review, see Crowley and Hoyer 1994). Specifically, there were no significant differences between conditions in the number of positive versus negative thoughts listed, attitudes toward the review and perceived novelty.

Experiment 2 was designed to examine whether the effectiveness of two-sided messages might also depend upon the recipients' receptivity to such messages. Two-sided messages introduce uncertainty (Sorrentino et al. 1988), which likely appeals less to those who generally like such products. Specifically, for those who generally like such products, the brand will likely provide a favorable experience (i.e., a gain). When dealing with gains, individuals prefer certainty (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) and consensus in opinions (West and Broniarczyk 1998). Thus, they should prefer one- to two-sided messages. If someone dislikes such films, then seeing such a film will likely be an unfavorable experience, or a loss. When facing losses, people prefer uncertainty (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) and disagreement (West and Broniarczyk 1998). Thus, they should prefer two- to one-sided messages.

When the message is inconsistent with individuals' preferences—such as when a two-sided review is read by someone who typically likes such products—they will likely respond by discrediting the source. Indeed, individuals judge a source whose position differs from their own to be biased and unfair (Sherif and Sherif 1967). Thus, I predict that the two-sided message will be perceived as less (more) credible than the one-sided message by those who typically like (dislike) such products (hypothesis 3). In addition, because credibility is related to more favorable source attitudes (Crowley and Hoyer 1994), the source of the two-sided message should be liked less (more) than the source of the one-sided message for those who typically like (dislike) such products (hypothesis 4). As a result, the two-sided message should be less (more) persuasive than the one-sided message for those who typically like (dislike) such products (hypothesis 5). Furthermore, those who typically like (dislike) such products will publicly rate the two-sided message as less (more) helpful than the one-sided message (hypothesis 6).

To test these hypotheses, 60 undergraduates received either a one- or two-sided review. The materials and procedures were the same as experiment 1, except that I held the rating constant as extreme (i.e., the product got 5 out of 5 stars). After receiving the review, participants completed a survey, in which they reported

their attitudes toward the brand, source, and product category. The latter measure was used to categorize participants as liking versus disliking such products. There were no gender differences in liking such films. Participants were also asked to rate the helpfulness of the review, which they were told would be posted on a website.

Consistent with hypotheses 3-6, there was a significant review x product liking interaction for credibility, liking, A_{BR} and helpfulness. Those who generally like such films found the source of the two-sided review to be less credible and less likeable than the source of the one-sided review. For those who generally dislike such films, although the cell means were in the predicted direction, the reviews had little effect on their perceptions of source credibility and liking. Furthermore, those who typically like such products held higher A_{BR} and rated the one-sided review as more helpful than the two-sided review. Again, among those who typically dislike such products, the two-sided review was slightly (although not significantly) more persuasive and rated as somewhat more helpful than the one-sided review. Moreover, consistent with attribution theory, attitudes toward the source mediated the relationship between product attitudes and review on A_{BR} and helpfulness ratings.

To summarize, the results suggest that two-sided messages do not always lead to credibility gains and greater persuasiveness than one-sided messages. In fact, under certain conditions, two-sided messages were perceived as less credible and were less persuasive than one-sided messages. Specifically, experiment 1 demonstrated that when the source's brand attitude is extreme, a two-sided message was less credible than a one-sided message. In addition, experiment 2 demonstrated that when the recipient typically likes such products, a two-sided message was less credible and less persuasive than a one-sided message. The results of both experiments were consistent with attribution theory.

One limitation of both studies is that the negative information appeared near the end of the message. Some argue that information appearing at the end of a message is interpreted as reflecting the source's true attitudes (Igou and Bless 2003). This may explain why a two-sided message was seen as less credible when it came from a source with an extreme attitude. Perhaps the source would be perceived as more credible if the negative information appeared earlier in the message.

Others have also shown that the persuasiveness of two-sided messages depends on whether the positive and negative attributes are negatively correlated or uncorrelated (Pechmann 1992). Examples of negatively correlated attributes include price and quality or taste and calories. Perhaps a two-sided message from a source with an extreme attitude would be perceived as credible if the negative information was correlated with the positive information. These are important directions to pursue.

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