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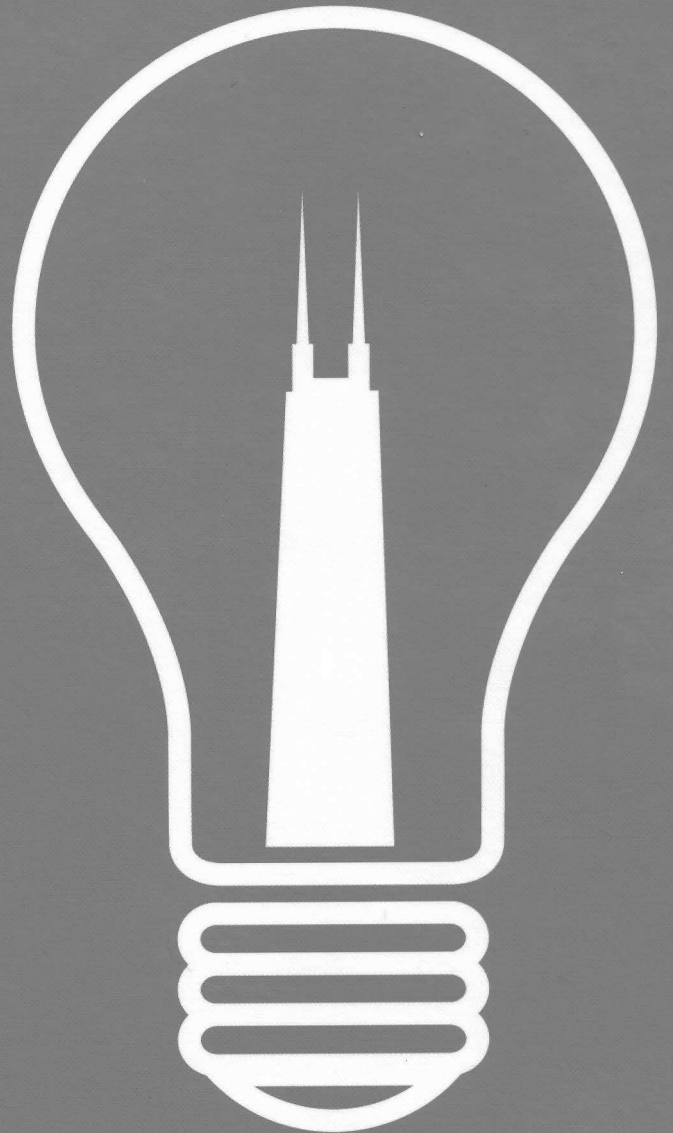# MAKING A DIFFERENCE

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Do Others Influence What We Say? the Impact of Interpersonal Closeness on Word-Of-Mouth Valence

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Three experiments show that the closer consumers feel to a message recipient, the greater the likelihood that they will share negative relative to positive word-of-mouth. We attribute this effect to high vs. low interpersonal closeness activating low vs. high construal level and subsequently affecting information sharing.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A great deal of research in word-of-mouth (WOM) has aimed to understand whether consumers are more likely to share positive or negative information (Brown & Reingen 1987; Herr, Kardes, & Kim 1991). While some scholars have shown negative can trump positive WOM (e.g., Kamins, Folkes, & Pernes 1997), others have found positive WOM to prevail (e.g., East, Hammond, &Wright 2007). Yet, little is known about *when* consumers are more likely to share positive versus negative WOM.

This research explores the role of interpersonal closeness as one factor that can influence consumers' tendency to share positive versus negative information. By interpersonal closeness, we refer to the perceived psychological proximity between two individuals (Gunia, Sivanathan, & Galinsky 2009; Miller, Downs, & Prentice 1998). Such perceived proximity can stem from social similarity (Latanè et al. 1995), emotional closeness (i.e., tie strength; Gunia et al. 2009), or even spatial and temporal proximity (Liberman, Trope & Stephan 2007). For instance, the more two people have strong ties, occupy similar roles in society or share particular physical or physiological traits, the higher their interpersonal closeness.

We propose that high interpersonal closeness prompts individuals to share more negative information compared to high interpersonal closeness. Our hypothesis builds on the idea that high interpersonal closeness activates low-level construals while low interpersonal closeness activates high-level construals (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak 2007). Key to our theorizing, high-level construals increase the focus on positive information, whereas low-level construals increase the focus on negative information (Eyal et al. 2004; Trope and Liberman 2000; White et al. 2011). For instance, Eyal et al. 2004, showed that people tend to focus more on the *cons* (i.e., negative information), relative to the *pros* (i.e., positive information) of a certain an action, when the action is close in the future than when it is distant in the future. Thus, we hypothesize that low interpersonal closeness activates high-level construals, prompting senders to focus more on positive relative to negative information, whereas high interpersonal closeness activates low-level construals, prompting senders to focus more on positive relative to negative information. We tested this hypothesis across three experiments.

Experiment 1 tested our basic hypothesis that senders of a WOM message tend to share more negative information, relative to positive information, the closer they feel to the message recipient. Participants read a review of a camera containing four positive and four negative attributes. They were then asked to indicate the name of a close or distant other and the nature of the relationship with this person. Then, participants were asked to compose a message about the camera addressed to the person they indicated. Participants included more negative attributes in their message when addressing a close recipient than when addressing a distant recipient (*p* < .01).

Experiment 2 aimed at providing robustness, while also addressing a potential alternative explanation for our effect. In particular, individuals might be more motivated to protect close rather than distant others. Thus, they might communicate more negative relative to positive information to close others in order to warn and protect them from unforeseen negative consequences. To rule out this explanation, we asked all participants to send a WOM message to a friend and varied how far they felt from the message recipient to manipulate closeness. Participants read the same review as in Experiment 1 and sent a WOM message to a friend located in the same city (close condition), a different city (moderate condition) or a different country (distant condition). We computed a valence index, (number of positive thoughts minus negative thoughts divided by total number of thoughts), which revealed that participants wrote increasingly more negative messages as the intended recipient was geographically closer (p < .01).

Experiment 3 tested a consequence of this effect: namely, WOM messages become less positive across successive transmissions within chains of closely tied individuals. In contrast, messages become less negative across successive transmissions within chains of loosely tied individuals. Participants were placed into a "WOM chain" in which each individual acted first as a recipient and then as a sender of a message. To start the chain, participants occupying the first position in the chain were given a description of a hotel that included three positive and three negative features and were told to write a message to a friend with the goal of transmitting the information as accurately as possible. This yielded an initial set of WOM messages about a hotel. Participants in the second position received the message written by a participant in position one, and then transmitted it to participant in position three, and so on. Key to the experiment, participants in position 2 and 3 were assigned to one of two conditions. Specifically, individuals assigned to the weak (strong) tie condition were asked to imagine the review came from a distant (close) other, and prompted to send their review as if they were to write a message to a distant (close) other. We counted participants' positive and negative thoughts in each message. Across strong ties, the number of negative thoughts was constant (F <1) while the number of positive thoughts significantly decreased (p< .01). In contrast, across weak ties, the number of positive thoughts was constant (F <1) while the number of negative thoughts significantly decreased (p <.001) . These results are consistent with our proposition that positive information might be more prone to be lost in transmission among chains of strongly tied individuals, relative to negative information. In contrast, negative information might be more prone to be lost in transmission among chains of weakly tied individuals.

This research provides new insights on WOM diffusion by investigating how a central structural feature of WOM communication – interpersonal closeness between sender and recipient –influence the sharing of positive vs. negative information. We show that consumers tend to share more positive information with distant compared to close others. Furthermore we demonstrate important consequences of how positive versus negative information is differentially communicated in weakly versus strongly tied networks.

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