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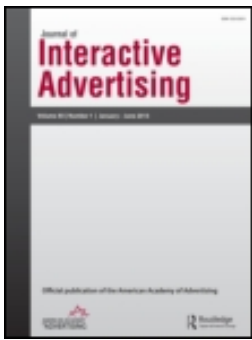
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The Impact of eWOM Message Characteristics on the Perceived Effectiveness of Online Consumer Reviews

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This study seeks to extend the emerging body and scope of research on consumers' attitudinal and behavioral responses to online consumer reviews by examining the role of message content characteristics. From this perspective, this research broadens the understanding and importance of message characteristics to the persuasiveness of online consumer reviews. Specifically, this study investigates how consumers process online consumer reviews within the context of message characteristics, such as message type (attribute centric and benefit centric) and message valence (positive, negative, and neutral), and how this influences consumers' attitudes toward the review and product, perceived credibility of the reviewer, and purchase intention. Data indicate that message valence of online consumer reviews has a persuasive effect on consumers' attitudes toward the review and product, perceived source credibility, and purchase intention. Moreover, message valence interacts with message type, providing a more complex picture of product review effectiveness. Finally, data indicate that benefit-centric reviews result in higher recall than attribute-centric reviews.

Keywords online consumer reviews, source credibility, user-generated content, word of mouth, attitude, persuasion

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Whether it is through posting comments to a business's social media page or a third-party website that aggregates online reviews, the Internet provides the opportunity for consumers to express their opinions on a variety of topics ranging from goods and services to television/film and political views. As a type of user-generated content, online consumer reviews are an emerging element of marketing communication. Recent research has found that 70% of global consumers trust online product and service reviews, an increase of 15% since 2008 (Nielsen 2012). Similarly, approximately 90% of consumers indicated online reviews directly influenced their purchase decisions (Gesenhues 2013). Thus, online reviews have the potential to impact a company's profitability; as such, marketers must understand the extent to which online reviews impact consumer decision making and purchase behavior.

The rise of online consumer reviews has also received considerable attention in academic communities. Research has addressed the importance of online consumer reviews by examining such aspects as awareness (Bailey 2005), motivations (Yoo and Gretzel 2008), the impact on purchase intention (Lee, Park, and Han 2011; Park, Lee, and Han 2007), perceived helpfulness during the purchasing process (Mudambi and Schuff 2010; Schindler and Bickart 2012), and perceived competence of online reviews (Lim and Van Der Heide 2015), to name a few. Although several studies have addressed the influence of online consumer reviews, little research (Cheong and Morrison 2008; Xia and Bechwati 2008) has examined message characteristics when examining outcomes.

The present study extends the emerging body and scope of research on consumers' attitudinal and behavioral responses to online consumer reviews by examining the role of message content characteristics. Simply, this study investigates how consumers process online consumer reviews within the context of attribute- and benefit-centric messages as well as message valence (positive, negative, and neutral) to better understand consumer attitudes toward the review and product, perceived credibility of the reviewer, and purchase intention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Consumer Reviews as Electronic Word of Mouth

According to Nielsen (2012), 92% of consumers worldwide say they trust earned media, such as word of mouth or the recommendation from friends and family, above all other forms of advertising—an increase of 18% since 2007. Word of mouth (WOM), defined as interpersonal communication about products and services between consumers, is one of the most influential sources of marketplace information for consumers (Alreck and Settle 1995; Arndt 1967). Because WOM is typically independent of marketers' influence it is considered to be more trustworthy and credible (Bickart and Schindler 2001; Bone 1995; Lau and Ng 2001). Moreover, WOM is influential in that consumers generally trust peer consumers more than they trust advertisers or marketers (Sen and Lerman 2007).

Online consumer reviews are a form of eWOM, or electronic word of mouth, which represent communications posted on the Internet with the intention of influencing consumers' judgments of reviewed products or services. Online consumer reviews, defined as open-ended consumer-authored comments about a product or service that usually contains a numerical rating (usually ranging from 1 to 5 stars), play an increasingly significant role in the consumer purchase process. Prior research indicates 92% of consumers now read online reviews. Of these consumers, 40% form an opinion after reading less than three reviews, an increase of 11% since 2014 (Anderson 2015). More important, however, only 13% of consumers consider using a business that has a one- or two-star rating (Anderson 2015), which demonstrates the growing influence of online reviews on consumer behavior. As such, online reviews are increasingly available for a wide range of products and services such as electronics, games, videos, movies, books, clothes, automobiles, and music. As a leading online retailer, Amazon.com has enabled consumers to post product comments on its website since 1995, and these reviews have been regarded as one of the most popular and successful features of Amazon (Harmon 2004). In recent years, an increasing number of websites offering similar types of consumer reviews have emerged in specialty areas, such as electronics (CNet.com), automotive (Edmunds.com), and tourism (TripAdvisor.com).

Numerous studies investigating consumer review effectiveness suggest that consumer reviews have become a key element in influencing consumer purchase decisions (Cheung, Xiao, and Liu 2012; Dellarocas, Zhang, and Awad 2007; Duan, Gu, and Whinston 2008; Mudambi and Schuff 2010; Park, Lee, and Han 2007). In addition, researchers have examined product sales based on data from websites or online product review platforms (Cheung, Xiao, and Liu 2012; Duan, Gu, and Whinston 2008). For instance, Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) suggest that online book reviews have a significant impact on book sales, while Liu (2006) found that consumer reviews on the Yahoo! Movies website greatly influence box office revenue. Therefore, due to the growing prevalence and

influence of online reviews, it is critical for marketers to understand the extent of their impact on consumer decision making and, ultimately, on purchase behavior.

Message Framing

Researchers investigating the effects of WOM valence on persuasiveness have found that consumers perceive positive messages to be more persuasive than negative ones. For example, East, Hammond, and Lomax (2008) found the impact of positive WOM is generally greater than negative WOM on consumers' purchase probability. However, too much positive information might lead the consumer to question the reviewers' motives, which may hinder the trustworthiness and authenticity of the review (Doh and Hwang 2009; Schindler and Bickart 2012).

Conversely, studies show that negative information is more attention grabbing in general (Ditto and Lopez 1992; Homer and Yoon 1992). Smith and Petty (1996) argue that negatively framed messages are processed more carefully than positively framed messages, and therefore people weight negative information more heavily than positive information during information-processing and decision-making tasks (Doh and Hwang 2009; Kanouse and Hanson 1972; Sen and Lerman 2007). From an information-processing perspective, Kanouse and Hanson (1972) assert that people tend to have negative bias, wherein they put more emphasis on negative information than positive. Therefore, a negative review acts as a more persuasive message than a positive review. More recently, Sen and Lerman (2007) also found that consumers perceive negative reviews as more accurate, informative, and useful than positive.

Besides positive and negative messaging, online consumer reviews can also be framed as two-sided (neutral), which not only provide positive information but also include negative aspects of a product or service. Attribution theory has guided most two-sided studies, which state that neutral messages reduce the receiver's skepticism and enhance the message acceptance (Belch 1981; Crowley and Hoyer 1994). Kamins and Marks (1988) suggest that an increase in information valence reduces the number of counterarguments and the amount of source derogation, which in turn increases the information acceptance and believability.

Although numerous studies have explored the persuasiveness of positive and negative eWOM and the persuasiveness of one-sided versus two-sided messages, there is a dearth of research integrating the three perspectives comparatively. Thus, the current study explores the effect of valence (e.g., positive, negative, and neutral) on consumers' attitudes toward the review and product, as well as perceived credibility and purchase intention.

Cognitive Fit Theory

According to information-processing theory, individuals naturally seek ways to reduce problem-solving efforts (Newell and

Simon 1972). As such, one way to reduce information-processing effort is to facilitate the problem-solving process involved in completing a task, such as purchasing a computer using online reviews. This can be achieved by matching the problem representation to the task, an approach referred to as cognitive fit (Vessey 1991). Within cognitive fit theory (CFT), *task* refers to the problem-solving task the individual has to perform, while *problem representation* refers to the way in which the information pertaining to the task is presented (Chan, Goswami, and Kim 2012). In the current study, the problem-solving task is to purchase a laptop computer, and the problem representation is the information presented in the online reviews.

Cognitive fit theory indicates that individuals' information processing is more efficient and effective when using the appropriate cognitive processes from given information (Vessey 1991). Simply, cognitive fit occurs when the problem representation and the task both emphasize the same type of information. When the information matches, cognitive effort is minimized (Hong, Thong, and Tam 2004). However, when a mismatch occurs and the information is not consistent, cognitive fit will not occur, because similar processes cannot be used to both act on the problem representation and solve the problem (Vessey and Galletta 1991). Because individuals create mental representations based on the information presented, there are two possible routes when information is not consistent. One option requires the individual to create a mental representation based on the task. This involves transforming the task information into a mental representation suitable for task solution. The alternative option requires the individual to create a mental representation based on the problem representation. Here, individuals will need to transform the information to develop a solution to the problem. However, due to the lack of cognitive fit, performance will be worse under either option.

Research (Agarwal, Sinha, and Tanniru 1996; Dunn and Grabski 2001; Smelcer and Carmel 1997) suggest cognitive fit may provide a useful theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between the review type and the effect on consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions. Individuals tend to seek information that fits their needs to minimize their cognitive effort. Thus, if the information in the online consumer reviews matches the consumers' shopping task, such as purchasing a laptop computer, consumers are able to process the information more efficiently and have a better recall of product information (Hong, Thong, and Tam 2004).

Information presented in online consumer reviews can be divided into two types: attribute-centric reviews and benefit-centric reviews. Attribute-centric reviews focus on describing technical specifications of products, such as screen resolution or size, which are supported by objective data and description (Park and Lee 2008). By contrast, benefit-centric reviews are composed of subjective evaluations and interpretations based on feelings and perceptions toward products. To evaluate the product, reviewers subjectively interpret benefits of each attribute in their own way (Park and Lee 2008).

When consumers process online product reviews presented in a way that fits the users cognitively, they are able to more efficiently process the review; such reviews have a positive impact on their purchase intentions (Park and Kim 2009). Based on prior research, attribute-centric reviews provide factual information that leads consumers to process using their own knowledge. This leads to consumers using more cognitive effort as they process the attribute information in a way that they can interpret. Thus, the consumers must create their own mental representations of what the attribute information means in terms of evaluating a product as a potential purchase. Conversely, benefit-centric reviews present more direct and intuitive messages that directly indicate advantages and disadvantages of the product compared to attribute-centric reviews, enabling review readers to process the review in a faster and easier way (i.e., cognitive fit). In that way, benefit-centric reviews are more likely to minimize cognitive effort compared to attribute-centric reviews, which will better fit the consumers' needs and enhance their decision making. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: A benefit-centric review will have a more positive effect on (a) attitude toward the review, (b) attitude toward the product, (c) perceived credibility, and (d) purchase intention compared to an attribute-centric review.

H2: A benefit-centric review will result in higher recall than an attribute-centric review.

METHODS

Sample

Participants consisted of 251 students (69% female, 31% male) from a large Southwest university in the United States. All participants were part of a participant pool operated through the university. Participants received course credit for their participation. In all, 97% of participants ranged in age from 18 to 26, while 3% indicated being age 27 or older. In terms of ethnicity, 70% of participants indicated Caucasian, followed by 15% Asian, and 13% Hispanic or Latino.

Design

The research questions and hypotheses were tested using a 3 (valence of reviews) \times 2 (types of reviews) experimental design. The two independent variables were valence of the review (positive only versus negative only versus neutral) and type of review (attribute centric versus benefit centric). The experiment and survey were conducted online.

The experimental product (stimuli) in the study was an online review for a 13.3-inch Apple MacBook Pro with Retina Display. A laptop was chosen as the experiment product because electronic products are frequently purchased through shopping websites and consumers tend to rely on comments

and reviews from previous users due to the fact that electronic products are generally complicated (Park and Lee 2008). To control for product relevance, perceived product message importance was estimated and controlled in all analyses (see Measures section that follow for details).

Based on real product reviews from online shopping websites (Amazon.com) and professional third-party electronic review websites (CNET.com, Macworld.com, Digitaltrends.com, Appleinsider.com), six reviews were developed (see appendix for examples). Reviews were presented as part of Amazon.com to create a realistic feeling when participants read the review (see appendix 2). To avoid other factors influencing the evaluation of the review, the length of each review was controlled to 126 characters, all reviews were anonymous, and all reviews addressed four features of the product; in other words, while the content varied among conditions, the amount of information and source did not.

Independent Variables

Two key independent variables have been identified in the current study: valence of information in the review (positive only \times negative only \times mixed) and types of review (benefit centric versus attribute-centric). In terms of the valence of review, positive reviews address four features of the MacBook Pro: screen resolution, lightweight, battery life, and high-speed processing performance. Negative reviews outlined four additional aspects: problematic black level performance on screen display, a connectivity issue, keyboard and trackpad unresponsiveness, and a RAM memory upgrade issue. The neutral reviews contain two positive and two negative features mentioned in the positive and negative reviews.

The types of review can be divided into two aspects: benefit centric and attribute centric. According to Park and Kim (2009), attribute-centric reviews focus on describing technical attributes of products, such as numbers supported by objective data and description, while benefit-centric reviews tend to show subjective evaluations and interpretations based on personal feelings and perceptions toward products (see appendix for examples).

Procedure

All subjects ($N = 251$) were randomly assigned to one of six conditions. All participants were sent a link via e-mail that would take them to their assigned condition. After reading through the online product review, subjects were asked to indicate their attitude toward the review, attitude toward the product, attitude toward reviewer, and purchase intention.

Measures

The questionnaire consisted of six major sections that assessed (1) attitude toward review, (2) attitude toward

product, (3) perceived credibility, (4) purchase intention, (5) message recall, and (6) message importance.

Attitude toward review. Attitude refers to one's cognitive and affective orientations with respect to some stimulus object or behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Thus, attitude toward the review is defined as the reviewer's overall evaluation of the information in the review. Based on Bailey and Pearson (1983), attitude was measured using six items on a 7-point scale ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.10$, $\alpha = .85$). Items include *Not at all informative/Very informative*, *Not at all helpful/Very helpful*, *Not at all useful/Very useful*, *Not at all trustful/Very trustful*, *Not at all valuable/Very valuable*, and *Does not make me very confident in purchasing this product at all/Makes me very confident in purchasing this product*.

Attitude toward product. Attitude toward the product refers to the reviewer's overall evaluation of the product. To assess the attitude toward the product five semantic differential items (*Dislike/Like*, *Unfavorable/Favorable*, *Negative/Positive*, *Bad/Good*, *Not at all usable/Very usable*) on a 7-point scale were adapted from Holbrook and Batra (1987) ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.40$, $\alpha = .96$).

Perceived credibility. Perceived credibility refers to the perceived credibility of the reviewer. Based on Ohanian's (1990) research, the present study measured source credibility via 7-point semantic differential scales using a series of seven adjectives (*Unreliable/Reliable*, *Untrustworthy/Trustworthy*, *Undependable/Dependable*, *Not Expert/Expert*, *Unknowledgeable/Knowledgeable*, *Inexperienced/Experienced*, *Biased/Unbiased*) by asking subjects "How do you describe the reviewer?" ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.06$, $\alpha = .89$).

Purchase intention. Purchase intention is a personal action tendency relating to the brand (Bagozzi and Burnkrant 1979; Ostrom 1969). Intentions are distinct from attitude because attitudes are summary evaluations, whereas intentions represent "the person's motivation in the sense of his or her conscious plan to exert effort to carry out a behavior" (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). Therefore, purchase intention is defined as the person's willingness to purchase a product in the future (Bickart and Schindler 2001; Doh and Hwang 2009; Kumar and Benbasat 2006; Lee and Youn 2009). In the current study, a single item on a 7-point scale ranging from *Very unlikely* = 1 to *Very likely* = 7 was adapted from the study of Bearden, Lichtenstein, and Teel (1984) to measure subjects' purchase intentions ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.46$). Participants responded to the single question: "Given the information shown on the review, how likely would you be to purchase this product?"

Message recall. Based on the methodological approach used by Bolls, Muehling, and Kak (2003), message recall was achieved by means of an open-ended question that asked participants to list as many of the attributes in the product review as they could recall. Responses were coded based on the number of attributes correctly recalled, ranging from 0 (no attributes recalled correctly) to 4 (all four attributes recalled correctly). The coded responses were then recoded into a

5-point scale (1 = no attributes recalled, 5 = all attributes recalled).

Message importance. Message importance, included as a control variable, was measured using a single item on a 7-point scale based on Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) information elaboration model ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.28$). Participants responded to a single question: "When I read the review, I felt the information in it might be important to me."

RESULTS

After controlling for perceived message importance ($F(1, 250) = 4.082$, $p < .05$), data indicate that valence significantly influenced attitude toward the review, $F(2, 250) = 3.017$, $p < .05$. Looking at least significant difference (LSD) post hoc comparisons, the neutral review (positive and negative) ($M = 5.03$, $SE = .11$) and the positive review ($M = 5.11$, $SE = .11$) were not significantly different from each other. However, both significantly differed from the negative review ($M = 4.66$, $SE = .10$). In addition, data indicate that valence significantly influenced attitude toward the product, $F(2, 250) = 48.795$, $p < .01$. Again, LSD post hoc comparisons indicated the positive review resulted in significantly greater perceived attitude toward the product ($M = 5.50$, $SE = .14$) than the neutral (positive and negative) ($M = 4.47$, $SE = .13$) and negative review ($M = 3.68$, $SE = .12$).

After controlling for perceived message importance ($F(1, 250) = 29.99$, $p < .01$), a significant effect was detected for perceived source credibility by message valence, $F(2, 250) = 3.21$, $p < .05$. LSD post hoc analysis demonstrated that while the positive review ($M = 4.44$, $SE = .12$) did not differ from the neutral review ($M = 4.60$, $SE = .11$) or the negative review ($M = 4.21$, $SE = .09$), the neutral review did significantly differ from the negative review. Finally, data also indicate a significant main effect for purchase intent for message valence, $F(2, 250) = 23.05$, $p < .01$. LSD comparisons indicate the positive review resulted in significantly greater purchase intention

($M = 4.93$, $SE = .16$), followed by the neutral review (positive and negative) ($M = 4.03$, $SE = .15$) and negative review ($M = 3.54$, $SE = .13$).

Turning to the hypotheses, data indicate no significant main effect for attitude toward the review, hypothesis 1(a) ($F(1, 250) = .01$, $p > .05$); or product, hypothesis 1(b) ($F(1, 250) = .911$, $p > .05$). However, as displayed in Figure 1, a significant message by valence interaction was detected for attitude toward the product ($F(2, 250) = 11.31$, $p < .01$). Here, when looking at benefit-centric messages, the positive message ($M = 5.85$) produced significantly higher attitude toward the product scores, followed by the neutral message ($M = 4.03$) and negative message ($M = 3.58$). In contrast, the attribute-centric message produced nonsignificant differences between the positive ($M = 5.17$) and neutral messages ($M = 4.92$), but both were significantly different from the negative attribute-centric message ($M = 3.57$).

Supporting hypothesis 1(c), data indicate a significant main effect for perceived source credibility by message type ($F(1, 315) = 3.73$, $p < .05$). Here, attribute-centric messages ($M = 4.53$, $SE = .09$) were found to produce greater source credibility than benefit-centric ($M = 4.20$, $SE = .09$) messages.

Turning to hypothesis 1(d), while data failed to support the main effect predicted for purchase intention by message type ($F(1, 250) = .361$, $p > .05$), a significant interaction effect (see Figure 2) for message type by valence was detected ($F(2, 250) = 3.952$, $p < .05$). Here, when looking at benefit-oriented messages, the positive message ($M = 5.21$) produced significantly higher source credibility perceptions followed by the neutral message ($M = 3.71$) and negative message ($M = 3.42$). In contrast, the attribute-centric message produced nonsignificant differences between the positive ($M = 4.65$) and neutral messages ($M = 4.35$), but both were significantly different from the negative attribute-centric message ($M = 3.64$).

Finally, regarding hypothesis 2, data indicate a statistically significant difference for benefit- and attribute-centric messages ($F(1, 250) = 6.84$, $p < .05$). Here, benefit-centric

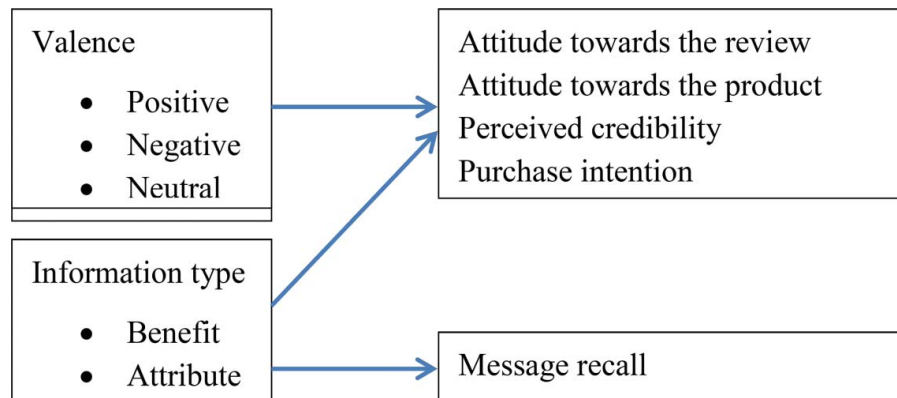


FIG. 1. Conceptual diagram of proposed relationships among variables. (Color figure available online.)

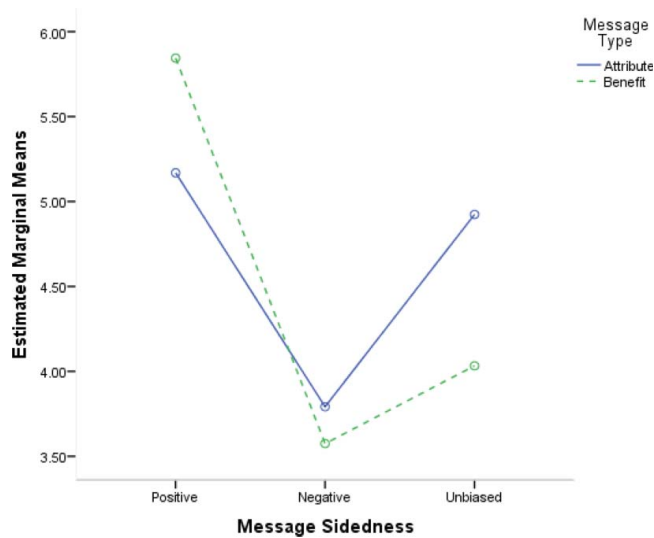


FIG. 2. Message-type by Message Valence for attitude toward the product. (Color figure available online.)

messages ($M = 2.74$, $SE = .11$) produce significantly higher recall than attribute-centric messages ($M = 2.32$, $SE = .12$). Thus, hypothesis 2 is supported.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study provide a better understanding of the influence of message characteristics associated with a persuasive online consumer review. Data indicated that message valence has a persuasive effect on consumers' attitudes toward the review and product, perceived source credibility, and purchase intention. That is, the positive review has the greatest impact on consumers' attitudes toward the review, followed by the neutral (negative/positive) review and negative-only

review. This aligns with previous studies indicating that consumers perceive positive messages to be more persuasive than negative ones. Similarly, the positive-only review had the greatest persuasive effect on consumers' attitudes toward product and purchase intention, followed by the neutral and negative-only reviews. This finding is supported by East, Hammond, and Lomax (2008), who suggest the impact of positive WOM is generally greater than negative WOM on consumers' purchase probability. In addition, participants perceive higher reviewer credibility when they read the neutral and positive-only reviews compared to the negative-only review. Overall, both the positive-only and neutral reviews have a greater effect on consumers' attitudes and purchase behavior than negative-only reviews, which contradicts research suggesting that a negative WOM message has a stronger impact on brand evaluation.

The study also identified an interaction between review valence and review type for message persuasion. Here, data suggest the positive online consumer review with benefit-centric information has the greatest positive effect on consumers' product attitudes and purchase intentions. In addition, benefit-centric reviews resulted in greater recall than attribute-centric reviews. Thus, consumers process reviews more efficiently and have a better recall of product information when messages are benefit centric and focus on reviewers' personal feelings and perceptions toward the product rather than objective reviews that focus on the technical aspects of the product. According to Park and Kim (2009), purchase intention is positively impacted when consumers are able to efficiently process information. Therefore, marketers should encourage consumers to post subjective reviews about how they feel toward products and their experiences. This will, in turn, increase purchase intention by those using the review during their decision-making process.

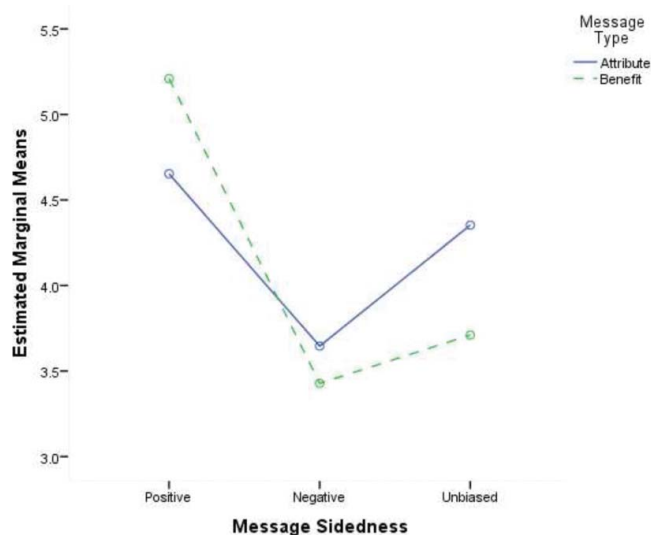


FIG. 3. Message-type by Message Valence for source credibility. (Color figure available online.)

Theoretical and Managerial Implications

The findings suggest that message valence and, to some degree, information type influences how consumers perceive online consumer reviews. Although the findings of this study are partially inconsistent with its predictions, this study has potential implications for both academic researchers and practitioners. Given that consumers have access to a wide range of online reviews—whether posted on a company's social media account or on a third-party website (e.g., Amazon, CNET)—the finding that benefit-centric reviews produce greater perceived credibility, as well as greater recall, can add to what is known about consumers' processing of online reviews. In addition to supporting the prediction that benefit-centric reviews are easier to recall because they are easier to process and interpret, benefit-centric reviews might also influence perceived credibility. As consumers continue to turn to the Internet in search of information about products and services, it is critical that online reviews be perceived as credible, especially

in light of recent controversy in which Amazon.com filed a lawsuit against four websites that allegedly sold fake product reviews placed on Amazon.com (Rubin 2015). It is likely that consumers perceive benefit-centric reviews, which are based on feelings and perceptions of the product or service, as more credible because they seem to be based on personal experiences rather than the reiteration of technical facts that can be gleaned from the general product description. As such, marketers should encourage consumers to post online reviews that highlight personal experience, as well as the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the product or service. Moreover, marketers should not be fearful of negative reviews. Prior research shows that even negative reviews can be beneficial in that they can mitigate risk (Goldsmith and Horowitz 2006) by helping consumers understand the worst possible scenario (Mims 2011). Similarly, results in this study indicate that negative online reviews had little impact on purchase intention when compared to the neutral online reviews.

This study emphasizes the importance of properly managing consumer reviews on online shopping sites. Although marketers cannot selectively filter online consumer reviews to manipulate content, they can control the display of those reviews in some situations. Providing summary information of online consumer reviews is an effective way to feature the proportion of positive, negative, and neutral reviews. For example, Amazon.com provides average rating information and total number of reviews for consumers to get a firsthand evaluation of the product. Furthermore, online shopping website managers can categorize online consumer reviews based on the review's valence. For instance, Amazon.com categorizes consumer reviews by two aspects, "most helpful favorable review" and "most helpful critical review," which presents a spotlight of reviews. Given the importance of positive and neutral reviews on attitude and behavior, we suggest an interactive webpage management system for marketers and managers. When a product has a high proportion of positive online consumer reviews, the system will automatically emphasize this information (Lee, Park, and Han 2008).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with most research, the present study has limitations that should be noted. First, purchase intention and message importance were measured with a single item. Because the construct indicated adequate validity, this limitation did not have a serious impact on the results, but more items measuring purchase intention and message importance are encouraged for future research to enhance reliability. Second, the study did not take consumers' prior knowledge of the product into consideration. The product used in the study, an Apple MacBook Pro, was most likely familiar to some participants, and such familiarity might affect their evaluations of the online consumer reviews. Finally, the results of the study might have been different if other product categories had been used. Because there are

larger numbers of product categories in today's online shopping sites, further research may need to take more product categories (e.g., clothes, books, cosmetics) into consideration to generalize our findings.

Future research should seek to extend the findings of this study by incorporating source type. There are three primary sources that dominate today's online consumer reviews landscape: regular Internet users who produce online consumer reviews with real disclosure and anonymity, professional gatekeeper companies who prepare material for "third-party" editorial websites, and marketers who generate reviews for promotional purpose (Dou et al. 2012). This study focused on reviews posted by anonymous reviewers to prevent a perceived bias inherent in company reviews or sponsored reviews. Future research should look to understand the influence of source on message type and valence.

CONCLUSION

The current study investigates how message and source characteristics of online consumer reviews impact attitudes and purchase behaviors. The findings of this study not only increase the understanding of online consumer reviews but also provide implications to other eWOM contexts such as online discussion forums, social networking sites, and online travel review sites. This study provides a potentially important step in gaining a better and deeper understanding of how eWOM works as a powerful and influential tool.

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APPENDIX

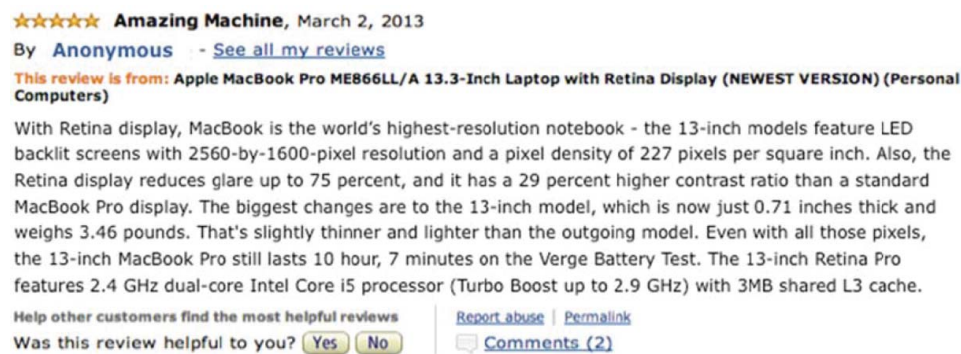


FIG. A1. Online consumer reviews in survey: Positive attribute-centric review by anonymous.

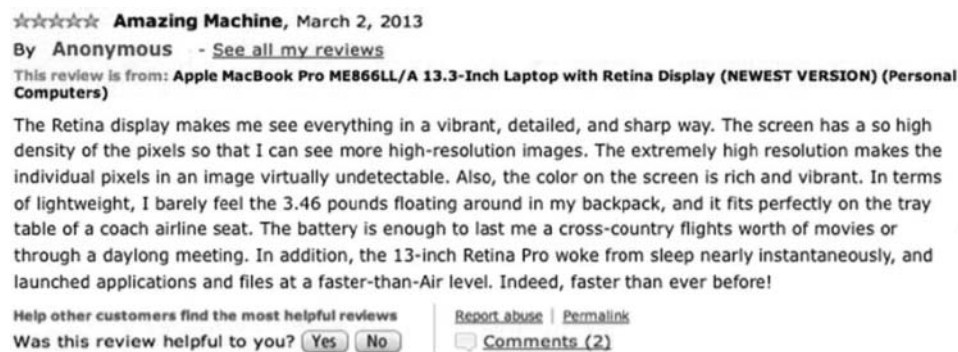


FIG. A2. Online consumer reviews in survey: Positive benefit-centric review by anonymous.