



## Full length article

## How online consumer reviews are influenced by the language and valence of prior reviews: A construal level perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Online reviews are a commonly used source of product information to guide consumers in their purchase decisions. This source of information helps them to make better-informed decisions. Communicators on online review platforms have multiple goals, but only one of them is to provide accurate information. Before posting comments, they could read previous reviews which will in turn influence their written comments. The impact of previous reviews on readers has been demonstrated. However, its influence on writers has hardly been studied. We examined how language abstraction in reviews is influenced by language abstraction in prior reviews, and whether this biased language use may have a subsequent effect on the persuasiveness of reviews. Building on literature about linguistic style matching and construal level theory, the present paper reports two experiments (N = 101 and N = 189) showing that people use more concrete language when prior reviews also use concrete language (i.e. words that refer to tangible, qualities or characteristics), and that this concreteness leads to more favorable attitudes towards the reviewer and the product. These findings suggest that language abstraction is contagious, review platforms could capitalize on this by seeding concrete reviews.

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## 1. Introduction

The Internet has changed the way consumers search for information, and more importantly the way they buy products and order services. Consumers increasingly look for online reviews to provide them with valuable information about products and services. Online reviews are often regarded as an extension of traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) into the online domain, and are often referred to as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM).

eWOM currently is one of the most often considered ways to gain knowledge about products and services (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Hong & Park, 2012; Kim & Hollingshead, 2015). According to Nielsen, online consumer reviews are the third most trusted format; two-thirds trust consumer opinions posted online (Nielsen, 2015). Online consumer reviews are generated by consumers and written for prospective consumers. In these eWOM reviews,

consumers only have to interact with their computers to post their opinions about products or services. Their opinions are widely and easily accessible to other consumers, but are only disseminated if and when prospective consumers search for them (Sen & Lerman, 2007). These product or service descriptions appear on review platforms such as *Amazon.com* or *Tripadvisor*. A review example could be: "The dinner in this restaurant was good, the food was delicious." These online comments are often seen as helpful and credible, which both can be driven by several types of factors (Chua & Banerjee, 2016; Huang, Chen, Yen & Tran, 2015; Shan, 2016). Contrary to verbal face-to-face word-of-mouth, online consumer reviews contain some textual and graphical elements that influence consumers (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014). Because of the lack of facial expressions and vocal fluctuations in computer-mediated communications environments, reviewers have to learn from online interaction which is available (Hong & Park, 2012).

This suggests that the contents of one's review may be easily influenced by the context in which it is provided. In line with this notion, earlier research has found that the contents of reviews are influenced by those of prior reviews that have been posted on the platform (e.g., Moe & Schweidel, 2012; Purnawirawan, Dens, & De

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Pelsmacker, 2012). The strong influence of online reviews on purchase decisions is to a larger extent caused by the perception that reviews provide independent information from a large number of people who purchased the product. Contrary to this perception, posting online reviews might be seen as context-dependent communication (Hamilton, Schlosser, & Chen, 2017; Liang, 2016), that is partly influenced by what (and how) previous reviewers wrote.

On a more generalized level of theorizing, these findings are in line with the idea that humans are prone to imitating each other in social interaction (Chen, Chartrand, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 1998). This imitative behavior streamlines social interaction and aids in learning to replicate actions and improves language comprehension (Adank, Hagoort, & Bekkering, 2010). Imitative behavior has been found to occur in many ways, including language use. Recent research has shown that synchronization in conversational style, more specifically *linguistic style matching* (LSM) increases shared perceptions among interlocutors (Pennebaker, 2011). Due to this linguistic style matching, the words that one person uses go along with the words used by the other person uses. In the present research, we conceive online reviews as partly conversational utterances, which are prone to linguistic style matching, so that reviewers display imitative behavior in their review writing, both in terms of valence and linguistic style.

A small number of studies have examined language use in online reviews. Schellekens, Verlegh, and Smidts (2010) were among the first to analyze written comments. They found that product experiences that were congruent with consumers' brand attitudes were communicated in a more abstract wording. In order to obtain a more systematic understanding of the impact of prior reviews on the use of language abstraction in subsequent reviews the *construal level theory* (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2010) could be used. Specifically, *construal level theory* suggests that we form abstract mental construals of distal objects or experiences and concrete construals of close objects or experiences. Thus, although we cannot experience what is not present, we can make predictions and speculate. Predictions and speculations are all mental constructions, distinct from direct experience and they will transcend the actual moment. They represent psychological distance which is a subjective experience that something is close or far away from the self, here, and now (Freitas, Salovey & Liberman, 2001; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Lots of research on this theory has been done (Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010), however, the theory has not been widely applied in the online consumer review context.

To the best of our knowledge, the present research is the first to examine how the use of language abstraction of reviewers is influenced by the use of language abstraction in prior reviews, and how the resulting language use subsequently impacts the attitudes and intentions of readers. Previous research on word-of-mouth has mainly focused on the reader, but little attention has been paid to the question of how consumers describe products and whether and how this influences the extent to which prior reviews influence subsequent reviewers. This article aims to fill those gaps. We conducted two experimental studies which were approved by the first author's designated Ethics Committee. Study 1 investigates the effect of the level of abstraction in a backpack review on attitudes towards the reviewer, the product and the subsequent reviewers' writing behavior. Study 2 examines the suggested effects of a search product (i.e., a *smartphone*) with valence as an extra factor to assure the effects of Study 1 are not only limited to positive reviews. In addition, the design of both studies differed. In Study 1 participants had to evaluate a backpack of an unfamiliar brand whereas in Study 2 they had to evaluate their own smartphone.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Construal level theory

To better understand how the language used in online reviews is influenced by a prior review, we discuss the properties of online review content from the perspective of *construal level theory* (Trope & Liberman, 2010). CLT predicts that when psychological distance decreases (a subjective feeling that something is close to the self), one will think in a more concrete way (Fujita et al., 2006; Trope & Liberman, 2003). Conversely, when psychological distance increases, one will think and write more abstractly. Prior research already found evidence for the impact of psychological distance on construal and consumer evaluations (Huang, Burtch, Hong, & Polman, 2016; Zhao & Xie, 2011). These studies made use of two dimensions of psychological distance and found that the effect of spatial distance (i.e., authoring a review about a geographically distant restaurant, rather than a proximate one) increased the effect of temporal distance (i.e., authoring a review after a lengthy delay, rather than immediately) on consumer evaluations, and the other way around.

The impact of psychological distance on language abstraction has been widely demonstrated (Trope & Liberman, 2010), with different embodiments of distance creating the same respective levels of construal. For example, people were found to use more concrete language when describing their own actions than another one's actions (Semin & Fiedler, 1989), or when instructed to address someone politely (i.e., "distant") rather than in colloquial language (Stephan, Liberman, & Trope, 2010). Concrete language refers to things that are available to the senses, and can be observed and measured while abstract language refers to ideas or concepts. Similarly, concrete consumer reviews are those containing more detailed information about a product than abstract consumer reviews do. Consider for example the following reviews: "The laptop I bought, combines powerful performance and a great keyboard with new eye-tracking technology for a genuinely innovative experience." (concrete) as opposed to "The laptop has great quality, lots of cool features and is easy-to-use!" (abstract). The greater level of detail is associated with a low level of cognitive construal, at which people think more concretely and is, as earlier declared, associated with psychological proximity. When people are thinking at low levels of construal, they are focusing on details that are less essential to the overall essence of the object. In this case we talk about the peripheral, secondary features. Contrary, a high level construal is when people are thinking abstractly (Trope & Liberman, 2003). To conclude, online consumer reviews that are written in a concrete language style provide detailed information about a product as opposed to abstract written reviews. Previous research already found that level of detail in a prior review affected the credibility of search products (Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013). Research from fields such as social psychology and interpersonal communication has shown that the level of mental construal affects the attitudes and behavior of the reader towards the sender (e.g., Schellekens et al., 2010; 2012). They showed that language abstraction in word of mouth influences receivers' inferences about the product attitudes of the sender (Schellekens et al., 2010). According to the CLT, it was found that when a person has to make decisions for the near future, reviews from proximal social others have a larger impact on one's product attitudes than reviews from distant social others (Zhao & Xie, 2011). Based on these prior findings it can be argued that online review elements could be understood from *construal level theory*. The question, however, arises whether language abstraction in online consumer reviews is influenced by prior posts.

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