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# Reading to make a decision or to reduce cognitive dissonance? The effect of selecting and reading online reviews from a post-decision context



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## ABSTRACT

This research challenges the presumption that reading online reviews solely affect reader attitudes toward a prospective decision. Instead, readers may strategically select and read reviews *after a decision*. This research advances and tests hypotheses proposing that: (1) post-decision readers select decision-supportive reviews earlier and more frequently; and (2) the reviews they read affect the subsequent cognitive dissonance they experienced. Two studies employed an original post-decision experiment and demonstrated that readers expressed biased review selection. Interestingly, the reviews they read affected and increased their cognitive dissonance. The findings contributed to understanding the complex dynamic of online reviews in a post-decision context.

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Online reviews (e.g., customer reviews on [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)) continue to be an important and popular source of information (Dellarocas, 2003; Dellarocas, Zhang, & Awad, 2007). These reviews originate from other users; as a result, products retailers undoubtedly utilize their influences to facilitate purchase behavior (Purnawirawan, Eisend, Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2015). Readers often perceive online reviews as more credible and more trustworthy than traditional advertising (e.g., Huang, Chou, & Lan, 2007). Based on this advantage, prior research related to online reviews has largely attended to the effect of reading reviews on reader attitudes (e.g., Doh & Hwang, 2009; Kim & Hollingshead, 2015; Lee, Rodgers, & Kim, 2009). These attitudes serve as conceptual antecedents toward some decisional and behavioral outcomes of interest (e.g., purchasing a laptop computer; choosing to use e-cigarettes).

The decision- or outcome-oriented perspective is especially evident in recent review articles and summaries (e.g., Kim & Hollingshead, 2015; Walther & Jang, 2012). These authors outlined various sources of persuasive influence on participatory, or Web 2.0, websites and their associated effects on reader attitudes. Under this participatory view, the extent to which the review valence, or the extent to which reviews are positive or negative, serve as a generalized source of influence that directionally and aggregately correspond to influence reader attitudes (e.g.,

Purnawirawan et al., 2015; Walther, Liang, Ganster, Wohn, & Emington, 2012).

Importantly, even after making a decision (e.g., product purchase), readers can still select and read online reviews. This post-decision selection and reading behavior theoretically serves a different motivation than the motivation for making an accurate decision (Festinger, 1957; Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2010). More important, this motivation activates specific selection biases and associated effects. The current research advances and tests such a post-decision dynamic to examine and explore the alternative effect of online reviews on readers.

The current research focuses this post-decision dynamic at a theoretical and practical level by reporting on a series of systematic research. This research starts by providing empirical evidence establishing that readers do frequently utilize and read reviews after a decision. Next, this research examines how post-decision readers select reviews and the associated effect in a controlled laboratory design. Finally, this research provides a replication of the findings in an online environment. The following sections provide rationale and justify the relevance for investigating online reviews from a post-decision context.

## 1. Online reviews: The importance of a post-decision perspective

On participatory websites, readers often first confront the task

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of selecting which reviews to read from the plethora of reviews available online. Popular retail websites, such as [Amazon.com](#), have amassed a large number of product reviews. [Otterbacher \(2009\)](#) reported an average of 340 reviews posted for products randomly sampled on [Amazon.com](#). [Ghose and Ipeiritos \(2007\)](#) also reported a high number of reviews per product ( $M = 138$ ), 1339 reviews being at the high end for a single product. It is not surprising that a PEW Internet Survey found that 30% of internet users reported feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information they found while shopping or researching online ([Horrigan, 2008](#)). Given the abundance of available reviews, readers' motivation likely guide how their selection and subsequent reading behaviors.

Reader motivation differs based on whether a decision has taken place (i.e., pre-versus post-decision). Before a decision (e.g., product purchase), readers may seek information to make an accurate decision ([Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2010](#)). After a decision, readers may seek information to justify the decision they made ([Cummings & Venkatesan, 1976](#); [Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2010](#)). This motivational difference leads to a discrepancy in how readers both select and regard the information they receive ([Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2010](#); [Hart et al., 2009](#)).

Examining reviews from this post-decision perspective offers vital and unique contributions to understanding how participatory websites affect readers. Participatory websites ([Walther & Jang, 2012](#)) are distinct communication environments where multiple sources of influences and cues (e.g., star ratings, helpfulness ratings, number of comments, likes) exist simultaneously. These cues may facilitate the selection process by serving as sorting cues that best address the readers' motivation. For example, readers may select reviews they perceive as higher in quality prior to a decision; after making the decision, they may select reviews that support their decision to reduce dissonance. Specifically, a decision activates a motivational mechanism to support the original decision. This activation suggests that there are characteristics of selected reviews that systematically attract attention and selection. This post-decision motivation also affects outcomes other than attitude (e.g., increasing or reducing cognitive dissonance). In a post-decision context, decision accuracy is not the primary motivation for information-seeking. Addressing this argument may yield corresponding data that provide boundary conditions for the existing research on the effect of online reviews. In addition, it empirically demonstrates how reviews serve a differential purpose after a decision.

## 2. Participatory websites and aggregated user-representations

The motivational effect may also alter how readers regard different sources of persuasive influence on participatory websites. There are multiple sources, and each source specifically references the type of cues and signals left by users ([Walther & Jang, 2012](#)). One such cue, star ratings, conveys information regard the contents of a particular review and allows readers to select reviews without fully reading the textual content. Prior to making a decision, the cue conveys specific valence characteristic regarding the review. For example, star ratings conveys the extent to which a review is positive or negative toward a product. However, the product decision alters the manner to which this cue may be interpreted as decision-supportive (i.e., congenial) or decision-unsupportive (i.e., uncongenial) ([Hart et al., 2009](#)). This suggests that one cue provides different signals on the basis of whether a decision has been made ([Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2010](#); [Hart et al., 2009](#)). The current research focuses on this review valence (i.e., star ratings), one of the most prominent cues present on platforms such as [Amazon.com](#).

This type of cue categorically fits [Walther and Jang's \(2012\)](#)

description of aggregated user-representations (AUR). Their framework describes different sources of persuasive influence and how they juxtapose in influencing on reader. AUR, in the case of star ratings, is deliberate in that users intentionally leave the rating to help readers in making the decision. However, the post-decision perspective takes a different theoretical contention that AURs can support alternative functions for dissonance reduction as opposed to directly influencing reader attitude toward a decision. This contrast is elaborated in that post-decision motivation alters the potential meaning conveyed by AUR, explained below.

Pre-decisionally, the information conveyed by star ratings is clear. Positive reviews (e.g., 5 out of 5 stars or 4 out of 5 stars) recommend the product to other readers. This type of review often contains corresponding written information in the text that is favorable toward the product. Alternatively, negative reviews (e.g., 1 out of 5 stars or 2 out of 5 stars) dissuade other consumers from a decision by providing an overall unfavorable rating and corresponding written information that discourages the purchase.

As opposed to valence, post-decisional star ratings can convey the *congeniality* of a review. Congeniality depends on the results of a prior decision ([Hart et al., 2009](#)). Congenial reviews, regardless of valence, confirm a decision. Uncongenial reviews disconfirm the decision. For example, if a reader purchased an Apple computer, congenial reviews include positive reviews of the Apple computer. In addition, congenial reviews include negative reviews of alternative products that the reader did not purchase (e.g., Sony computers). Uncongenial reviews include negative reviews for the Apple computer and positive reviews for alternative products (e.g., Sony computers). The need to alleviate the dissonance may lead readers to find congenial reviews and avoid uncongenial reviews ([Chatterjee, 2001](#); [Cummings & Venkatesan, 1976](#); [Soutar & Sweeney, 2003](#)). The current research applies and extends cognitive dissonance theory ([Festinger, 1957](#)) to examine the post-decision dynamic on participatory websites.

## 3. Cognitive dissonance theory

Cognitive dissonance theory ([Festinger, 1957](#)) specifies the presence of cognitive elements. One or more elements that are inconsistent with one another lead to cognitive dissonance. [Festinger \(1957\)](#) notes that “[a decision between two alternatives, each with positive and negative aspects] is probably the most usual type of decision situation ... dissonance will result when action is taken” (p. 36). Specifically, the importance of the decision, the attractiveness of the unchosen alternative, and the degree of cognitive overlap affect the magnitude of dissonance.

“The importance of the decision will affect the magnitude of dissonance that exists after the decision has been made” ([Festinger, 1957](#), p. 37). For example, deciding between products a person may actually purchase or own is more important than a hypothetical decision. An important decision invokes more cognitive elements. For instance, learning about a product that one may potentially purchase corresponds with important cognitive elements regarding future consequences of receiving the product (e.g., reliability, quality) and the prospect of using it.

The attractiveness of the unchosen alternative also affects cognitive dissonance. Selecting one attractive alternative (e.g., a product) means rejecting the other attractive alternative (e.g., another product) with its own associated desirable features. Put plainly, *choosing between two similarly attractive alternatives* results in “giving up” something, and thus produces cognitive dissonance. For example, if a reader views a Samsung and a Sony phone as nearly equal in how much he/she would like to own the phone, this person will experience a high degree of dissonance from the decision. However, when two alternatives are not similar in

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