The role of dialecticism and reviewer expertise in consumer responses to mixed reviews

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ABSTRACT

An overwhelming majority of consumers read online reviews prior to making purchase decisions, and such reviews often contain both positive and negative evaluations about a company or a brand. However, there is scant research examining how reviewer expertise and dialecticism (i.e., understanding of contradictory information) simultaneously influence the impact of review valence (i.e., either univalent positive/negative or mixed) on consumers' attitude certainty and decision comfort. The study findings indicate that when reviews are written by non-experts, high dialectical thinkers exhibit similar levels of attitude certainty across univalent and mixed review conditions. Conversely, low dialectical thinkers exhibit higher levels of attitude certainty in the univalent (vs. mixed) review condition. Such an interaction between review valence and dialectical thinking is attenuated when reviews are written by experts. Theoretical and practical implications will be discussed.

1. Introduction

Online reviews are increasingly influential when consumers decide where to stay and where to dine (Wu et al., 2016). Consumers often encounter conflicting reviews about a company or a product (DeMotta et al., 2016; He and Bond, 2015; Xie et al., 2011). In fact, prior research shows that dispersion in review ratings is common across various product categories (He and Bond, 2015). When consumers are exposed to both positive ("the best restaurant in town") and negative evaluations ("terrible food"), they tend to feel ambivalent toward the restaurant (Jonas et al., 1997) and uncertain about their purchase intention (Pang et al., 2016). Such uncertain feelings may lead to psychological discomfort during the decision-making process (van Harreveld et al., 2009).

However, there is scarce research examining how consumers process contradictory information in online reviews, form their attitude towards a company, and make purchase decisions (He and Bond, 2015) (for notable exceptions, see DeMotta et al., 2016; Pang et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2015). Prior research shows that mixed information such as conflicting reviews leads to positive, negative, or inconclusive attitudes (Moe and Trusov, 2011; Moon et al., 2010; Zhu and Zhang, 2010). Therefore, there is an urgent need to understand factors that influence the impact of conflicting reviews on consumers' purchase decision (He and Bond, 2015).

In fact, several studies show that dialectical thinking moderates the impact of conflicting reviews on consumers' attitude towards a

company. Dialectical thinking is defined as tolerance for and understanding of contradictory aspects of a phenomenon (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2015). Attitude certainty is defined as an individual's subjective assessment of the extent to which one's attitude is correct and about the degree to which one has conviction in attitude (Rucker and Petty, 2004). Previous research suggests that high dialectical thinkers tend to have higher levels of attitude certainty when they are exposed to both positive and negative reviews (vs. univalent information) (Pang et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2015).

This research introduces a new boundary condition, reviewer expertise, for the impact of dialectical thinking on consumers' attitude certainty and decision comfort. Prior research posits that expertise acts as a source cue, thus influencing consumers' information processing strategies (Schwarz, 2004; Shah and Oppenheimer, 2007). To that end, the purpose of this research is to empirically test an interaction between reviewer expertise, dialectical thinking, and review valence on attitude certainty. Furthermore, this research demonstrates the mediating role of attitude certainty on decision comfort. A deeper understanding of attitude certainty is important given its strong impact on consumer behavior, including choice processes (e.g., Karmarkar and Tormala, 2010). The study findings suggest that practitioners may need to regularly monitor the pattern of reviews in terms of valence and reviewer profiles in order to effectively manage the presentation format.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Dialecticism and contradictory reviews

Dialecticism is defined as an individual's tendency to understand, tolerate, and accept ambivalent or contradictory information (Peng and Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2015). High dialectical thinkers tend to perceive the world in flux such that paradoxes and contradictions constantly arise (Wang et al., 2015). As such, they believe that an argument can be both true and false at the same time. Dialecticism, reflecting holistic thinking (Choi et al., 2007), is rooted in Confucian philosophy, and is very common in East Asian countries (DeMotta et al., 2016). Prior research suggests that individuals holding more complex, holistic causal theories, such as East Asians, are likely to carefully process information before making attributions for events (Choi et al., 2003). In other words, they tend to engage in systematic information processing. On the contrary, low dialectical thinking, reflecting analytical thinking, is rooted in Aristotelian logical paradigm, and is common in Western countries (DeMotta et al., 2016). According to this paradigm, there is no statement that can be both true and false, and therefore, low dialectical thinkers tend to seek a single truth (Wang et al., 2015). Previous research shows that individuals having relatively simple causal theories, such as Americans, tend to engage in less systematic information processing when searching for cause(s) of an event (Choi et al., 2003).

Prior research has examined the downstream consequences of dialectical thinking. For example, high dialectical thinkers (i.e., Chinese college students) tend to support both sides of an argument, whereas low dialectical thinkers consider both sides of the argument to be incompatible (Peng and Nisbett, 1999). Spencer-Rodgers et al. (2004) suggest that East Asians tend to express more contradictory aspects about themselves than their Western counterparts. In the context of online reviews, DeMotta et al. (2016) show that high dialectical thinkers in a Western context process mixed information more fluently than low dialectical thinkers, and therefore, they exhibit higher levels of confidence in their judgments. Similarly, in the context of online reviews, Pang et al. (2016) show that individuals primed with high dialecticism tend to expect the other side of information when they are exposed to univalent information, so they perceive univalent information as incomplete, thus leading to higher levels of attitudinal ambivalence and felt discomfort. Indeed, prior research suggests that some consumers (e.g., high dialectics) believe that they have complete information when they have both positive and negative reviews (Rucker et al., 2014; Shoham et al., 2017). Moreover, Wang et al. (2015) demonstrate a similar effect of dialecticism in the new product evaluation context by priming dialecticism among Chinese university students.

Conversely, low dialectical thinkers do not process contradictory information fluently (DeMotta et al., 2016), thus leading to higher levels of attitudinal ambivalence and discomfort (Pang et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2015). In line with such findings, this research predicts that low (vs. high) dialectical thinkers tend to be less tolerant of mixed information, and therefore, they feel more certain about their attitude towards a restaurant when they receive only one-sided information (either positive or negative reviews) than when they receive mixed reviews. On the other hand, high dialectical thinkers are more attuned to mixed information, thus leading to similar levels of attitude certainty across univalent and mixed review conditions.

2.2. The moderating role of reviewer expertise

This research introduces reviewer expertise as a boundary condition for the interaction between review valence and dialecticism on attitude certainty. Prior research suggests that consumers rely on information from others (Flynn et al., 1996) and tend to increase confidence in their judgments based on available cues of source credibility (Priester and Petty, 2003). For example, consumers tend to think that the quality of

information in online reviews is not certain, thus searching for cues such as identity-descriptive information about reviewers (Forman et al., 2008). Previous research shows that information from experts (vs. non-experts) is perceived as more persuasive (Petty et al., 1981) and more reliable (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009). Thus, consumers tend to use reviewer expertise as an easily processed source cue (Schwarz, 2004; Shah and Oppenheimer, 2007). Therefore, they tend to engage in heuristic processing (Chaiken and Maheswaran, 1994) instead of systematic processing such as dialectical thinking (Choi et al., 2003). In sum, this research posits that when reviews are written by experts, consumers are less likely to engage in dialectical thinking, and therefore, only review valence should drive attitude certainty. That is, consumers exhibit higher levels of attitude certainty when they are exposed to univalent expert reviews (either positive or negative) rather than mixed expert reviews. Conversely, when reviews are written by non-experts, individuals are more likely to engage in systematic processing (Choi et al., 2003).

Taken together, we put forth the following predictions:

H1. There is a significant three-way interaction between review valence, dialectical thinking, and reviewer expertise on attitude certainty.

H1a. There is a significant two-way interaction between review valence and dialectical thinking on attitude certainty when reviews are written by non-experts. Specifically, we expect that people high in dialectical thinking will exhibit similar levels of attitude certainty when exposed to univalent and mixed reviews, while their counterparts low in dialectical thinking will show higher levels of attitude certainty in the univalent (vs. mixed) review condition.

H1b. With expert reviews consumers will exhibit higher levels of attitude certainty in the univalent (vs. mixed) review condition.

2.3. The mediating role of attitude certainty on decision comfort

Prior research defines felt discomfort as a negative feeling of being uneasy, uncomfortable, and tense (Williams and Aaker, 2002). Similarly, decision comfort is defined as "the degree of psychological and physiological ease, contentment, and well-being an individual feels in relation to a certain decision" (Parker et al., 2016, p. 114). Previous research shows that attitude ambivalence is positively related to felt discomfort (Pang et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2015). Similarly, an individual's psychological discomfort will increase when the person is unsure of the correctness of the choice made (van Harreveld et al., 2009). For example, when consumers are exposed to mixed reviews, they exhibit ambivalent attitudes and experience feelings of difficulty in making purchase decisions. Consequently, they feel less comfortable about their decision (Wang et al., 2015). This research suggests that the impact of review valence on decision comfort is mediated by attitude certainty such that, when individuals have conviction in their attitude, the level of decision comfort is likely to increase. Formally, we put forth the following hypothesis:

H2. Attitude certainty mediates the impact of review valence on decision comfort.

Our conceptual model is shown in Fig. 1.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study design and sample

This study employed a 3 (review valence: univalent positive vs. univalent negative vs. mixed) × 2 (reviewer expertise: low vs. high) × 2 (dialecticism: low vs. high) between-subjects experimental design. Participants were 229 U.S. consumers and recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is a crowd-sourced online participant pool (Peer et al., 2014), and studies show that data from MTurk ensure demographic diversity (Buhrmester et al., 2011).