

## The contrasting effects of negative word of mouth in the post-consumption stage

Haksin Chan <sup>a,\*</sup>, Selina Cui <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Marketing, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong

<sup>b</sup> Arkadin (HK) Ltd., 2402, Citicorp Centre, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong

Received 12 January 2010; revised 16 November 2010; accepted 23 November 2010

Available online 30 December 2010

### Abstract

We explore the effects of negative word of mouth (NWOM) from worse-off or similar others in the post-consumption stage. In four experiments, we show that the ramifications of NWOM are more complex than portrayed in the literature. Specifically, we demonstrate that attribute-based NWOM has a negative (i.e., aggravating) effect on dissatisfied consumers, whereas experience-based NWOM has a positive (i.e., alleviating) effect. Thought-listing data reveal distinct processes underlying the contrasting effects. On one hand, these results are consistent with the predictions of attitude polarization and downward comparison research. On the other hand, they are explainable in terms of the disconfirmation model.

© 2010 Society for Consumer Psychology. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Word of mouth; Post-consumption; Dissatisfaction; Attitude polarization; Social comparison; Self-enhancement

Consumers are increasingly sharing product information and consumption experiences with each other. With the proliferation of online communities and social media, consumers may conveniently share their experiences or opinions and, at the same time, be easily exposed to word-of-mouth (WOM) influence (Wheat, 2010). This exposure, whether intentional or incidental, has enormous implications for all stages of decision making (Schindler & Bickart, 2005). In particular, the growing opportunities for WOM influence have the potential to transform the post-consumption processes.

Consider the following excerpts from two Internet consumer forums.

Consumer A “The hotel was obviously old but it could’ve been cleaner. The room had a musty smell; the furniture was broken & should not have been in the room since it obviously needed to be replaced. The carpet was stained & sticky; it also needed to be replaced

or could’ve been cleaned...There was a microwave, refrigerator & TV which were all plugged into one extension cord which...we’re sure the Fire Marshal would not appreciate seeing.”<sup>1</sup>

Consumer B “I [used] a Clinique sample from one of those free gift things...I used a very small amount and it actually made my skin feel great...and [last night] I used it again. On this application, almost instantaneously I noticed red blotches forming on my skin which soon turned to rash like bumps...When I woke up this morning my face is bright red over my whole cheeks and most of my forehead feels like I have been badly sunburnt.”<sup>2</sup>

How would such postings influence other disgruntled guests of the hotel and consumers allergic to Clinique products? Would these consumers be more displeased because they are more convinced that the hotel/Clinique products are bad (per

\* Corresponding author. Fax: +852 2603 5473.

E-mail addresses: [hchan@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:hchan@cuhk.edu.hk) (H. Chan), [s.cui@arkadin.com](mailto:s.cui@arkadin.com) (S. Cui).

<sup>1</sup> <http://travel.yahoo.com/p-hotel-376105> (accessed July 15, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> <http://forums.vogue.com.au/showthread.php?p=4280911> (accessed July 15, 2010).

attitude polarization research), or would they feel better knowing that they are not the only victims of a service/product failure (per downward comparison research)?

The WOM literature is silent on these intriguing questions. Prior research on WOM influence has focused on the pre-purchase stage, documenting strong WOM effects on product involvement (Giese, Spangenberg, & Crowley, 1996), brand attitude (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991; Lacznia, DeCarlo, & Ramaswami, 2001), purchase intention (Gilly, Graham, Wolfenbarger, & Yale, 1998), and purchase behavior (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Liu, 2006). Nonetheless, the impacts of WOM on other consumers in the post-consumption stage remain largely unexplored.

Interestingly, two bodies of social psychological literature—one on attitude polarization and one on downward comparison—point to opposite effects of negative WOM (NWOM) on other dissatisfied consumers. Given the distinct processes that underlie attitude polarization and downward comparison, we propose and demonstrate that NWOM (from worse-off or similar others) may aggravate or alleviate dissatisfaction, contingent on message content—which may trigger one process versus another. As we will discuss, both the aggravating effect (per attitude polarization research) and the alleviating effect (per downward comparison research) are conceptually linked to the disconfirmation model of consumer (dis)satisfaction.

A general framework of message content is lacking in the WOM literature, although recent studies have recognized the complexity (Lacznia et al., 2001) and adaptability (Schellekens, Verlegh, & Smids, 2010; Sengupta, Dahl, & Gorn, 2002) of WOM content. As conceptualized in this article, attribute-based WOM highlights the product—what it is and how it performs, whereas experience-based WOM highlights the consumer—what happens as a result of purchase and consumption. This distinction draws on Gutman's (1982) conceptualization that products possess attributes but consumers experience the consequences of product attributes. As anecdotal examples, consumer A's posting is attribute-based and consumer B's posting is experience-based.

In short, our research investigates the effects of attribute-based and experience-based NWOM (from worse-off or similar others). The results of four experiments reveal an aggravating effect on dissatisfaction when the message is attribute-based and an alleviating effect when the message is experience-based. The evidence also suggests that the contrasting effects are driven, respectively, by a product-evaluative and a social-comparative process. Moreover, these effects seem to reach beyond dissatisfaction and contribute to corresponding changes in repurchase intent. Note, however, that message context and experience comparability create boundary conditions for these NWOM effects. Before presenting the empirical work, we lay out the theoretical foundations for the opposite effects of NWOM on consumer dissatisfaction.

### Attitude polarization

Attitude polarization refers to a social psychological phenomenon in which an attitude becomes more extreme after

exposure to, deliberation on, and/or communication about attitude-congruent information (Abelson, 1995; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). For example, a voter who opposes a public policy typically becomes more opposed to it after reading an article against the policy; a consumer who has a favorable opinion of a product typically becomes more favorable after hearing positive comments about it.

The attitude polarization effect is most evident when group discussion is involved. Not only does group discussion facilitate the exchange of persuasive arguments among individuals, but it also motivates individuals to adjust their positions in order to meet or exceed the perceived norm (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). These two types of influence—informational and normative—often occur in combination to produce the polarization effect (Isenberg, 1986).

A number of other conditions also contribute to attitude polarization. Evaluating new information, even that which is mixed or inconclusive, can cause an attitude to become more extreme (Lord, Ross, & Pepper, 1979), and mere exposure to the attitude positions of like-minded others is sufficient for normative forces to exert their polarizing influence (Myers, 1978). In fact, attitude polarization can be induced by sheer intrapersonal processes such as thinking about an attitude object (Tesser, 1978) and repeated expression of an attitude (Downing, Judd, & Brauer, 1992). In a broader framework, these intrapersonal processes may be conceptualized “as involving imagined or anticipated interaction with like-minded individuals, thus implicating the same mediating mechanisms as in group polarization” (Abelson, 1995, p. 29). Regardless of the varied theoretical perspectives, attitude polarization is a robust phenomenon that manifests itself under a variety of conditions, interpersonal or otherwise.

### *Attitude polarization among consumers*

Previous research has confirmed consumer susceptibility to informational and normative influences (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989; Lascu, Bearden, & Rose, 1995). In particular, the polarization effect as a result of group interactions has been shown to be pertinent to different aspects of consumer behavior. In their study of sorority women in the naturalistic environment, Ward and Reingen (1990) found interesting patterns of polarization for consumer beliefs and choices. They further observed that group characteristics may promote or inhibit polarization. On the basis of experimental data, Rao and Steckel (1991) verified that a decision model that incorporates the polarization effect outperforms models that do not. Recently, Bohlmann, Rosa, Bolton, and Qualls (2006) demonstrated that satisfaction judgments of both individual consumers and organizational buyers are susceptible to the polarizing influence of group interactions—a phenomenon they labeled as “escalation.”

### *The aggravating effect of NWOM*

A large amount of WOM occurs in the context of group discussions with family and friends (Ward & Reingen, 1990), colleagues (Bohlmann et al., 2006), and strangers (Schlosser,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/882280>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/882280>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)