



A Meta-analytic Investigation of the Role of Valence in Online Reviews

Nathalia Purnawirawan^a & Martin Eisend^{b,*} & Patrick De Pelsmacker^{a,c} & Nathalie Dens^{a,d}

^a University of Antwerp, Faculty of Applied Economics, Prinsstraat 13, 2000 Antwerpen, Belgium

^b European University Viadrina, Faculty of Business Administration and Economics, Große Scharnstr. 59, 15230 Frankfurt, Germany

^c Ghent University, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Tweekerkenstraat 2, 9000 Gent, Belgium

^d Antwerp Management School, Sint-Jacobsmarkt 9-11, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium

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Abstract

Based on a meta-analysis, this study aims to clarify the influence of online review valence (i.e., whether reviews in a review set are predominantly positive or negative) on various dependent variables, in particular on perceived usefulness of the reviews and on attitudes toward the product. The findings suggest that review valence affects perceived usefulness in a different way than it affects attitudes. We find an optimum impact level for perceived usefulness and a ceiling effect for attitudes. Primarily negative review sets that include few positive reviews show the strongest effect on perceived usefulness, while positive review sets that include few or no negative reviews are most successful in influencing attitudes. Additionally, review valence has a stronger influence on perceived usefulness when the reviews refer to experience (rather than search) products, and it has a stronger influence on attitudes for unfamiliar (rather than familiar) brands. Finally, the strongest influence of review valence refers to recommendation intentions. These findings provide several implications for researchers and practitioners.

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Introduction

Online reviews about products work as a form of free “sales assistance” (Chen and Xie 2008) because consumers use these reviews to learn about products and to reduce uncertainty and transaction costs (Lee, Park, and Han 2008). Consumers usually come across both positive and negative reviews related to a product. The influence of review valence has received considerable attention both from scholars and practitioners (e.g., Lee and Youn 2009). However, findings regarding the role of review valence on consumers’ evaluations are not straightforward. For instance, Purnawirawan, Dens, and De Pelsmacker (2012) found that, when presented in a certain order, a review set with four positive and four negative reviews is capable of generating an attitude as positive as with a set with

six positive and two negative reviews. While Forman, Ghose, and Wiesenfeld (2008) found that review sets with extremely high or low product ratings were associated with higher levels of helpfulness than reviews with moderate ratings, Mudambi and Schuff (2010) found quite the opposite: moderate ratings are more helpful than extreme low or high ratings.

To explain these mixed findings, we perform a meta-analysis on the influence of valence of online reviews on consumers’ evaluations and show how the degree of positivity (i.e., the extent to which review sets contain positive reviews) clarifies the mixed results in previous studies. Applying a meta-analysis has several advantages: the meta-analysis averages out sampling error deviations from correct values due to large samples and repeated tests and corrects mean values for distortions due to measurement error and other artifacts. More importantly, a meta-analysis provides a unique opportunity to include a wide range of review valence variations (i.e., different degrees of positivity) that cannot be provided and tested by a single experimental study. These variations allow us to investigate the relationship between valence and its consequences in

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Nathalia.Purnawirawan@gmail.com (N. Purnawirawan), Eisend@europa-uni.de (M. Eisend), patrick.depelsmacker@uantwerpen.be (P. De Pelsmacker), nathalie.dens@uantwerpen.be (N. Dens).

more detail. By this, the present study complements two recent meta-analyses that have investigated the effect of valence on sales (Floyd et al. 2014; You, Vadakkepatt, and Joshi 2015): these meta-analyses have looked at sales effects, while our meta-analysis investigates psychological outcomes, in particular, attitudes and usefulness. These variables capture the different functions of review valence in the decision process of consumers: online reviews serve as informants in the information seeking process and as recommenders in the evaluation process. While the perceived usefulness of online reviews plays a major role for online reviews as informants, attitude relates to the role of online reviews as recommenders.

The findings of the study contribute to the literature as follows. First, we provide an integrative review of the empirical literature on the effects of online review valence on perceived review usefulness, attitude, purchase intention, recommendation intention, and credibility. By calculating mean effect sizes, we show whether and how online review valence affects evaluations and we resolve inconsistency in findings across primary research studies. The meta-analytic result indicates a pattern of weak and strong effects of online review valence that can guide future research and practice. Second, by means of moderator analyses, we provide answers about the causes of the mixed findings. We identify positivity degree as a key moderator that explains mixed findings of previous studies. In particular, we show that review valence affects perceived usefulness differently than it affects attitudes. This finding gives a new explanation on the effectiveness of online review valence that provides critical insights for scholars, managers, and website owners.

The remainder of the text is organized as follows. First, we present a literature review and develop hypotheses. Second, we describe the meta-analytic procedures, including the literature

retrieval process, database development, coding, and computation of effect sizes. Next, we integrate the effect size estimates and conduct a moderator analysis to test our hypotheses. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of managerial and future research implications.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

We start with discussing how review valence influences several dependent variables: attitude, perceived usefulness, purchase intention, recommendation intention, and credibility. After that, we develop hypotheses related to the moderator variables. Fig. 1 provides an overview of our research model.

Independent and Dependent Variables

The independent variable in this meta-analysis is *online review valence*, which refers to whether reviews in a review set are predominantly positive or negative. In this study, we focus on experimental studies and consider two types of *review sets*: a single review set and a set of several reviews. This means that the effect of valence can stem from a comparison between one positive versus one negative review (e.g., Sen and Lerman 2007) or sets of mixed positive and negative reviews (e.g., Doh and Hwang 2009). Thus, for this study, we take into account all published studies that contrasted the effect of one positive versus one negative review, or the effect of a set of positive versus a set of negative reviews on the dependent variables in our research model. The main dependent variables that have been investigated in prior experimental research are attitude, perceived usefulness, purchase intention, recommendation intention, and credibility. Table 1 provides the definition and operationalization of these variables. It further details the

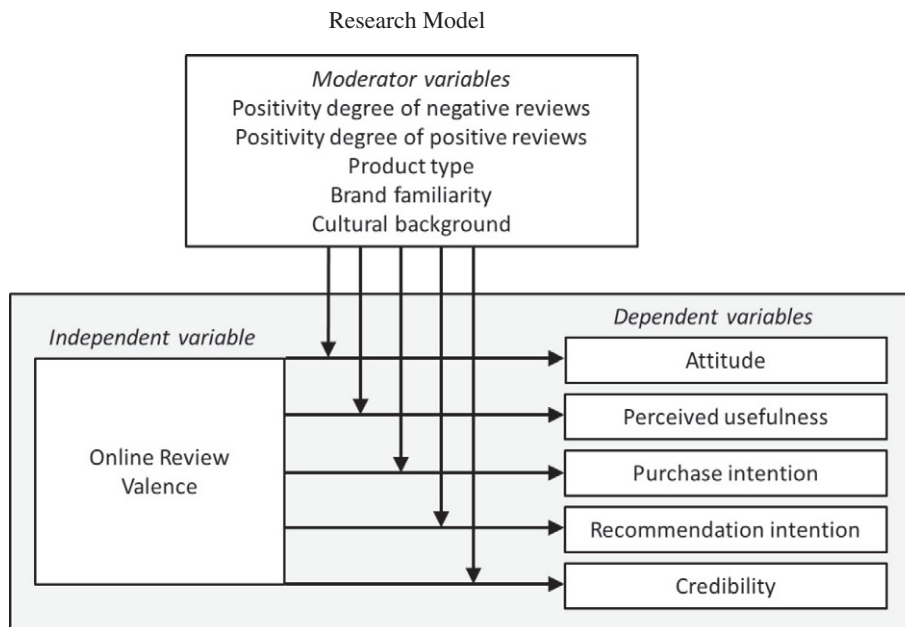


Fig. 1. Research model.

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