Persuasive Influence of Online Word of Mouth and Professional Reviews

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ABSTRACT
Effects of online word of mouth (WOM) and professional reviews on consumer product evaluations were tested in four experiments, in which subjects are exposed to information posted on a simulated movie website. We find that infrequent consumers of a category are more influenced by WOM than are frequent consumers. This effect is not moderated by whether the online comments are experience-based or purely speculative. In the presence of both WOM and professional reviews, frequent consumers of a category are more influenced by professional reviews but less influenced by WOM than are infrequent consumers.

Key Words: Persuasion, Word of Mouth, Critical Reviews, Movies

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Motivation and Objectives
Consumers receive a variety of product information in the form of online comments posted by users on web portals (e.g., Bizrate, Froogle, Yahoo! Shopping) or websites specializing in specific product categories (e.g., Travelocity, Expedia, Hotels.com, Edmunds, Yahoo! Movies). The objective of this research is to investigate the influences of online information on product evaluations, and how the message recipients’ frequency of product category consumption moderates the persuasiveness of online information.

In addition, this research considers the influences of professional (or expert) reviews that are often contemporaneously available alongside WOM on a website. For instance, Edmunds.com provides WOM from “real people,” and expert reviews in the format of “Editors Reviews and Ratings”. Travel websites frequently provide reviews by both consumers and travel industry professionals (e.g., Mobil Travel Guide’s Incognito Hotel Inspectors, AAA hotel ratings). Given that professional tastes do not necessarily represent the mass population, and that professional reviews may differ by those of ordinary consumers, we wish to assess if infrequent consumers relate to and therefore are more influenced by online WOM than professional reviews, while frequent consumers of a category are more responsive to professional reviews than to WOM.

Study 1: Online WOM and Category Consumption Frequency
Post messages are expected to persuade the message recipients in the same direction of their valence (positive versus negative), with negative messages likely to have a stronger effect than positive ones. Moreover, we postulate that infrequent consumers are more influenced by online WOM than are frequent consumers. We utilize online WOM about movies as the context for the studies. To enhance realism of the study, we construct an experimental website that mimics an actual movie website, Yahoo! Movies, and use a to-be-released movie, Sahara, as a stimulus. One hundred and one students were randomly assigned to one of the 2 (WOM: positive vs. negative) x 2 (message recipient’s consumption frequency: infrequent vs. frequent moviegoer) between-subjects conditions.

The analysis shows that the negative WOM has a stronger effect on movie evaluations than positive comments do (X = -1.09 vs. 0.65, p < 0.01). Infrequent moviegoers are more influenced by online WOM than are frequent moviegoers ( = -0.39 vs. -0.06, p < 0.07). The difference between the effects on frequent versus infrequent moviegoers is significant when the WOM are mostly negative. Frequent moviegoers are less influenced by negative WOM than the infrequent moviegoers ( = -0.79 vs. -1.40, p < 0.02). This difference is non-significant when the WOM are positive (p > 0.85).

Study 2: Replication of Study 1 with Experience-based vs. Speculative WOM
In this study, we replicate Study 1 using a different movie and different subjects. In addition, we examine if the interaction between consumption frequency and WOM found in Study 1 is moderated by message-related characteristics i.e., whether a particular comment is based on the message provider’s personal experience with the product, or is simply speculative. The study context and procedures are similar to those of Study 1. We selected National Treasure as the stimulus and presented WOM on the simulated Yahoo! Movies website. The experiment uses a 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) x 2 (prior experience of the message provider: experience based vs. speculative) x 2 (message recipient’s consumption frequency: infrequent vs. frequent) between-subjects design. One hundred and fifty seven students were randomly assigned to experimental conditions.

Both the main and interactive effects of valence and frequency found in Study 1 are perfectly replicated. Additionally, experience-based messages are found to be more influential than speculative messages when they are mostly negative ( = -1.23 vs. -0.83, p < 0.07). This difference is non-significant when the messages are mostly positive ( = 0.48 vs. 0.37, p > 0.63). Infrequent moviegoers are more influenced by WOM than are frequent moviegoers. Interestingly, this difference is significant when the WOM are speculative ( = -0.50 vs. 0.05, p < 0.02), but not so when they are experience-based (p < 0.16).

Study 3: WOM with and without the Presence of Professional Reviews
The purpose of this study is to assess: (1) whether the effects of online WOM are moderated by professional reviews that express an opposing view, and (2) whether the influences of online WOM and professional reviews vary by the frequent versus infrequent consumption of the category. The procedure of Study 3 is similar to that of Study 1 and Study 2. We used a 2 (professional review: absent and present) x 2 (online WOM: positive and negative) x 2 (consumption frequency: infrequent vs. frequent moviegoers) between-subjects design. The professional review conditions were induced by presenting summary ratings of 14 popular movie critics.

One hundred and twenty eight undergraduate students were randomly assigned to the conditions. When WOM were positive, the exposure to negative professional ratings yielded a less positive attitude change compared with the case of no reviews, (no review, positive WOM) = 0.65, (negative review, positive WOM) = 0.20, p < 0.10. However, if WOM were negative, prior exposure to
(positive) professional reviews yielded a less negative attitude change compared with the no-review case. With regard to the effects of frequency, the existence of professional reviews did not significantly affect infrequent moviegoers, $p > 0.37$ and $p > 0.43$. However, for frequent moviegoers, the existence of professional reviews has a significant effect.

**SUMMARY**

Compared with infrequent moviegoers, frequent moviegoers are less influenced by online WOM but more influenced by professional reviews. These differences are particularly significant when the information that matters more i.e., either WOM or professional reviews is negative. We also find that when online WOM express negative opinions, consumers pay attention to whether the opinions are based on prior experience with the product or are purely speculative.

**REFERENCE**


