An Attribution Explanation of the Effect of Valence Consistency on Review Helpfulness

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Drawing on attribution theory, the current paper explores the role of valence consistency on review helpfulness. Three studies demonstrate that consistent reviews are more likely to be attributed to external factors that are more informative of the actual product quality and, hence, are perceived as more helpful.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Online reviews have become one of the most popular information sources for consumers (e.g., Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Steffes and Burgee 2009). The use of reviews is particularly relevant when being confronted with choice overload. However, consulting online reviews might cause another overload issue: the abundance of available reviews. To help consumers with this information search problem, websites such as Amazon.com present the most helpful online reviews upfront, so consumers can easily identify them during their information search.

Review helpfulness is influenced by numerous factors, including the valence of the review (positive vs. negative). Past research on online reviews has proposed a so-called positivity bias by demonstrating that positive reviews are often perceived as more helpful (Pan and Zhang 2011; Zhang, Craciun, and Shin 2010). However, existing research has ignored the fact that reviews are often consulted together with other reviews. The goal of the current research is to investigate if the helpfulness of a review might be affected by the valence of a focal review and its consistency with the valence of other available reviews.

The effect of review valence consistency can operate in one of two directions. First, a review that is inconsistent with other available reviews might be perceived as more helpful than a review that is consistent with other reviews. For example, when most reviews of a product are positive, a negative review can offer something new and might therefore be perceived as more informative (Skowronska and Carlston 1987). The inconsistency could give this review additional diagnostic power, which is highly related to review helpfulness (Jiang and Benbasat 2007; Mudambi and Schuff 2010).

Alternatively, the current paper argues that a review that is inconsistent with most of the other available reviews will be perceived as less helpful than a review that is consistent with the other reviews. This hypothesis is based on the attribution theory, which offers an understanding of the inferences people make about the validity of the opinions expressed in a review (Folkes 1988). Essentially, people classify the consequences of an action (i.e., the review) into two categories: reviews can be either attributed to reviewer-related motivations (internal attributions) or product-related motivations (external attributions) (Monga and John 2008).

Attributions of causality are often dependent on the extent to which a review is associated with one particular product, the degree to which the product experiences are stable across time and situations, and how likely experts agree with the reviewer (Fiske and Taylor 1991; Kelley 1973). Consequently, we argue that in a case of high consistency between a review’s valence and the valence of other consulted reviews, a review is more likely to be viewed as caused by the product experience (external attributions), while inconsistent reviews will be more likely attributed to personal attitudes and feelings of the reviewer (internal attributions). Since external factors are more reflective of a product’s actual quality, the review will be perceived as more informative and, hence, as more helpful. This will be tested in three studies.

Study 1 examines the effect of review valence consistency on the perceived helpfulness of positive and negative reviews, using data from Amazon. Over 1,300 reviews were extracted for books from different sales ranks. For each review we recorded the review valence (1-5 stars, with 5 being very positive) and the average product score as a proxy for the review valence of other presented reviews as our primary independent variables and the percentage of people finding the review helpful as our dependent variable. In support of the attribution theory hypothesis, our results show that valence consistency is positively related to helpfulness. As such, a positive review for a positively evaluated product will be perceived as more helpful than a negative review would be in this context. This effect disappears when there is a fair share of negative reviews.

A second study investigated if the effect from study 1 can be replicated in an experimental setting and tested the attribution theory as the underlying mechanism of the valence consistency effects. In a 2 (review valence) x 3 (review consistency) design, participants were assigned four restaurant reviews, consisting of one focal review (positive or negative) and three filler reviews, resulting in a high, medium or low consistency condition. After reading the reviews, we measured participants’ evaluation of the focal review and causal attributions of the review, distinguishing between external and internal attributions (Lacznia, DeCarlo, and Ramaswami 2001). Similar to the findings of study 1, both the positive and negative review was evaluated as more helpful when being consistent with the other available reviews. A mediation analysis revealed that consistent reviews are perceived as more helpful because they are attributed to product-related factors, while inconsistent reviews are attributed to personal motivations.

Study 3 investigated a possible moderator. Since experts are often perceived as more objective (Hu, Liu, and Zhang 2008), expert reviews are less likely to be attributed to internal factors when being inconsistent with other reviews. Therefore we expect that an inconsistent expert review might still be perceived as highly helpful, making the valence consistency effect disappear. In a 2 (review consistency) x 2 (reviewer expertise) participants were given reviews about a tablet, with the focal review written by either an anonymous customer or an expert. The results for the regular review replicated the results of the previous study. Explained by the difference in causal attributions, the consistent review is perceived as more helpful. Confirming our expectations, a moderated mediation model revealed that the helpfulness of expert reviews was not affected by valence consistency. This can be explained by the significantly lower internal attributions for the expert review, compared to the regular review.

Although review valence is a well-documented factor for review helpfulness, this research is the first to investigate the role of valence consistency with other available reviews. Drawing on attribution theory, we show that positive reviews are only perceived as more helpful than negative reviews when other reviews are also positive. Because of the high relevance of online reviews, our findings offer interesting managerial insights.

REFERENCES


