The Impact of Product Review Writing on Attitude Formation

Stephen Xihao He, Georgia Tech, USA
Samuel Bond, Georgia Tech, USA

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**Abstract**

Putting emotional experiences into words has been shown to evoke various health and psychological consequences. Extending these ideas, our research examines the impact of writing on the evaluation of consumption objects. We argue and demonstrate that under certain conditions, consumers’ ratings of a product are systematically biased when they are first given the chance to write a product review. In an experiment using short films, the bias was obtained for two different review manipulations which focused on distinct properties of the viewing experience. Importantly, most participants did not believe that their evaluations were affected by the review-writing process, and the effect was not moderated by lay theories about its existence.

**Introduction**

Consumers frequently rely on the opinions of others to make their purchase decisions. Although many recent studies have explored the influence of reviews on audiences’ attitude toward a product, little existing research has considered how the process of writing a review might influence the attitude of the reviewer. Our work addresses two primary questions. First, does writing a review systematically impact the evaluation of a target product (and if so, in what direction)? Second, to what degree are consumers aware that this influence may occur?

Writing helps people to think and reason about their experiences. The highly structured nature of language and syntax often leads to a ‘search for meaning’ and enhanced understanding of an experience or attitude object (Singer, 2004). Numerous studies have demonstrated positive health and social outcomes of writing about intense emotional episodes (Bootzin, 1997; Frattaroli, 2006; Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006). On the other hand, verbalizing an episode may impair memory for details (Lane & Schooler, 2004), and deliberating about one’s attitudes may alter those attitudes (Millar & Tesser, 1986) or impair decision quality (Wilson & Schooler, 1991).

Our framework relies on a set of attitude models involving the construal of targets and standards (Feldman & Lynch, 1988; Schwarz, 1999). These models assume that contextual influences make certain information temporarily accessible (Higgins, 1996), and that the influence of accessible information on judgment occurs through the formation of different mental representations. Typically, the inclusion (exclusion) of information in one’s representation of a target results in assimilation (contrast) effects on their evaluations of the target.

Applying these ideas to the consumer review process, we suggest that the act of writing about a consumption experience makes certain details of the experience more salient and accessible. Importantly, we predict based on theories of memory and cognition that content of reviews is going to be biased by the overall valence of the experience. Consequently, because information retrieved and analyzed during the writing task will be deemed diagnostic, it will be included in one’s mental representation of the experience, triggering assimilation effects. An implication of this proposal is that consumer “ratings” may depend on whether or not they are preceded by a review (e.g., ratings of a generally favorable product will be higher following a review.)

**Hypothesis 1**: Writing a product review prior to assigning a rating will systematically alter evaluations of the product.

Review instructions vary dramatically across different consumer forums (e.g., Amazon.com vs. epinions.com). Therefore, we consider two different types of review, self-focused and target-focused (described below). Self-relevant information is likely to be salient even without writing; however, target-focused reviews should make accessible facets of the experience that would otherwise go unnoticed, enhancing the influence of the writing task.

**Hypothesis 2**: The effect of review writing on evaluations will be stronger for reviews that are target-focused rather than self-focused.

Abundant research suggests that individuals are poor at introspecting into their mental processes (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Hence, if the review task does alter evaluations, it is unlikely that consumers will be aware of the existence (or direction) of the effect.

**Hypothesis 3**: Individuals will not be aware of the effect of reviews on their evaluations.

**Design**

The study was conducted in a university lab with 121 student participants. The target stimulus was a short movie clip (George Lucas in Love) that parodies the popular Star Wars franchise. After viewing the movie clip on a computer, participants were given different instructions according to condition. Participants in the target-focused review group answered a series of questions focusing on attributes of the clip; e.g., “Please comment on the PLOT of the movie clip”; participants in the self-focused review group answered a series of questions focusing on their own feelings and responses; e.g., “Please comment on HOW YOU FELT as you were watching the movie clip.” Participants in the control group wrote for five minutes about events of the previous day. Next, all participants rated the movie on four 7-point attitude scales and one ten-star “movie evaluation” scale. They were then asked whether they believed that their ratings were