Selective Consumer Wom Communication and Its Consequences

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Consumers often selectively communicate their consumption experiences with others in order to achieve interpersonal goals or meet situational demands; as a consequence of this selective process, their post-communication judgments of the experiences might be realigned with the contents of the communicated messages. A two-step, memory-based experiment demonstrated that subjects primed with a best friend audience communicated more negative product information than those primed with a stranger and they were also more likely to negatively interpret ambiguous information. Post-communication product attitude was reassessed twenty-four hours later and subjects in the best friend group showed significantly decreased product evaluations.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers’ interpersonal, word-of-mouth (WOM) communications have long been recognized as an effective channel to disseminate market information (Frenzen and Nakamoto 1993) and, perhaps more importantly, to influence consumers’ product judgments and choices (Herr, Kardes and Kim 1991). Accordingly, much of the research attention has been focused on the recipient of the WOM message (i.e., the audience). However, for an interpersonal social interaction like WOM, surprisingly very little is known about the effect of WOM on the communicator of the message (i.e., the speaker). Specifically, two issues are largely overlooked: First, the speaker’s retelling of past experience to an audience is not a verbatim recall of what has happened (Marsh 2007); instead, the speaker’s message construction is a selective process, a process that is under the influence of many individual and situational forces. Second, this selective communication process itself might drive important cognitive changes in the minds of the speaker. In other words, communicating consumption experience with others might affect the speaker’s subsequent judgments of the experience itself.

For the WOM speaker, communications of consumption information with others can serve many different interpersonal or situational goals, such as self-presentation, impression management, or entertainment, and more importantly, accuracy is often not the main objective; thus, the communicated message should not be a simple relay of the stored knowledge. In fact, message modifications, such as interpretation, evaluation, exaggeration, omission, or even falsification (e.g., Argo, White, and Dahl 2006; Sengupta et al. 2002) are ubiquitous in consumers’ daily conversations. “This means, in effect, that one has to lie. We must leave out the details that don’t fit, and invent some that make things work better (Schank and Abelson 1995, p. 34).”

Borrowing a term from social psychology (e.g., Higgins 1992), I use audience-tuning to refer to the WOM speaker’s adaptive message construction behavior, in which the speaker tailors his/her message to suit the audience’s characteristics or meet situational demands. I posit that the speaker’s audience-tuning behavior not only affects the quantity and quality of the WOM messages transmitted to the audience but also has a significant cognitive impact on the speaker’s subsequent memory and judgments of the communication topic. As Schank and Abelson (1995, p. 58) put it, “We lose the original and keep the copy”. That is to say, as a consequence of the communication, the speaker’s recollections or evaluations of the consumption knowledge might be realigned with the contents of the communicated messages.

Many researchers have reasoned that memory differences after communications could be attributed to the fact that communicators selectively rehearsed certain aspects of the past events during communications and the rehearsals enhanced the subsequent retrievals of those details. In addition to the rehearsal mechanism, McGregor and Holmes (1999) proposed a heuristic explanation that people develop a heuristic version or interpretation of the past events to effective retelling of past story and this interpretation heuristics directly biased later judgments and remembering of those events. Regardless, either due to enhanced rehearsal or heuristic interpretation, selectively modifying past experiences to serve communication purposes is bound to have a cognitive impact on the speaker.

In an effort to provide empirical evidence of WOM speakers’ message modification behavior and its consequent cognitive changes, this research developed a memory-based, two-step experiment approach. Subjects first learned some evaluatively complex (positive, negative and ambiguous) product information and formed initial judgments. After a brief delay, they were supraliminal primed with different social relations: best friend vs. stranger (i.e., communal vs. exchange relation; see Clark and Mills 1979, 1993). Immediately afterwards, in an ostensibly unrelated task, they were asked to freely communicate the product information to a relation-ambiguous audience. Subjects’ responses revealed the following patterns: Those primed with a best-friend audience communicated more negative product information than those primed with a stranger; they were also more likely to negatively interpret ambiguous information.

Twenty-four hours later, product attitude was reassessed via an online questionnaire. Results showed a significant attitude change. More importantly, subjects in the best friend condition presented significantly decreased evaluations of the product, which could be attributed to the fact that these participants recounted significantly more negative product information during the communication stage and this selective rehearsal affected their subsequent judgments. Interestingly, audience-tuning behavior did not seem to have an evaluative impact on subjects in the stranger group: Although they rehearsed more positive product information than those in the best friend condition, they seemed to have a mechanism in place to filter out or not register the audience effect during either the message production process or the later reevaluation of the product. This unexpected finding pointed to a promising direction for future research. For example, if it is reasonable to expect that the speaker needs to monitor the retelling-induced cognitive change, then what factors would contribute to the enhancing or discounting of this ability? What are the roles of the audience in this monitoring process?

The intended contribution of this research is twofold. First, by priming a common relationship variable to demonstrate the WOM speaker’s selective message construction and the resultant cognitive changes (and non-change), this paper attempts to raise researchers’ attention to the social co-construction nature of consumer WOM behaviors. It is necessary for researchers to adopt a broader, interpersonal, co-constructive view of the WOM behaviors and to identify the antecedents and consequences of this complex process (see Pasupathi 2001 for a review). Second, as a meaningful addition to the WOM research methodology, this research introduces a new memory-based experimental approach that could be used to systematically investigate the process of WOM communications and its consequences.

REFERENCES


