Language Use in Word of Mouth

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This research examines speakers’ use of language abstraction in word of mouth and the effects of abstraction on receivers of WOM. First, we examine when and why consumers use more concrete or more abstract descriptions of experiences and demonstrate that (in)consistencies between brand attitudes and experiences lead consumers to systematically vary language abstraction when describing a product experience. Second, we argue that language abstraction can be used strategically and show that a persuasion goal systematically affects the description of a product experience. Third, we find that the language abstraction in a message affects the buying intention of receivers.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Consumers frequently engage in word of mouth (WOM) communication, where one individual shares information about a consumption experience with another. WOM can occur face-to-face, or via spoken or written communication through various technologies (e.g., the Internet) (Godes et al. 2005). WOM has long been recognized as an important process for firms and consumers, and it remains so today, with 60% of consumers consulting friends or family about purchases (Hampton 2006). Past work on WOM has focused on how it impacts the listener (Arndt 1967) and the firm (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006), as well as on who shares WOM and why (Wojnicki and Godes 2008). However, this work has neglected some fundamental aspects of WOM. Most importantly, there has been little attention to the question of what consumers actually say, how they say it, and how these two factors influence not only the listeners, but the speakers themselves. In this session, we hope to tell the other side of the WOM story by introducing recent work that will broaden the field’s perspective on this important topic.

Our papers highlight several new aspects of WOM. We examine the specific content of WOM (Moore, Fitzsimons, and Bettman 2009; Schellekens, Verlegh, and Smidts 2009), how and why this content influences speakers (Moore et al., 2009; Cowley 2009), and how speakers think strategically about WOM (Schellekens et al. 2009; Cowley 2009). These papers ‘zoom in’ on WOM: instead of examining the consequences of WOM for listeners or firms, we focus on the language speakers use, on the determinants of language use, and on how this language influences speakers.

First, Moore et al. (2009) examine how characteristics of experiences influence WOM content as well as how specific WOM content influences speakers’ evaluations of experiences through a process of sense-making. Cowley (2009) also investigates how WOM influences the speaker, focusing on how consumers’ retrospective evaluations of experiences are influenced by conversational norms and by consumers’ awareness of these norms (e.g., whether they are purposely exaggerating). Finally, Schellekens et al. (2009) examine how characteristics of experiences and consumers’ communication goals influence WOM content; they also examine how listeners are persuaded by different WOM content. These papers demonstrate the value of a deeper focus on WOM content and its determinants, and on how this content influences individuals who share WOM. While these papers examine similar novel aspects of WOM, each has a unique contribution: Moore et al. (2009) and Schellekens et al. (2009) both examine WOM content, but focus on different types of content, while Moore et al. (2009) and Cowley (2009) examine two different processes through which speaking can influence the speaker.

In combination, these papers provide an exciting new perspective on WOM and a solid foundation from which to begin additional research in this domain. We hope that this symposium will attract a wide audience, from WOM researchers to those who examine the roles of memory, attitudes, metacognition, and language in consumer psychology. These papers are in advanced stages of completion, and we expect this symposium to stimulate much discussion on the current work and on areas for future research. Thus, we hope to save 15-20 minutes following the presentations for Larry Feick to discuss the presentations and to receive questions from the audience.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Some Things Are Better Left Unsaid: How Word of Mouth Influences the Speaker”
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WOM, where individuals share information about consumption experiences with others, is an everyday occurrence. WOM spreads through various media, both traditional (face-to-face) and non-traditional (online reviews). Past research has focused on how WOM influences those who hear it (Arndt, 1967) and how this influences the firm (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006). However, a fundamental question remains unanswered: how does WOM influence the speaker?

To answer this question, we develop a comprehensive model of how speaking affects the speaker. We argue that it is not simply the act of speaking that influences individuals sharing WOM, but that it is story content or how things are said that strongly influences storytellers. We synthesize past research from psychology and linguistics to develop a model that incorporates: 1) the process by which language influences speakers; 2) antecedent variables that influence what speakers say; and 3) the consequences of speaking, including changes in speakers’ evaluations of experiences, as well as changes in speakers’ intentions to repeat, recommend, and tell others about experiences.

We focus on one important type of story content and how that influences speakers. Past work suggests that individuals can understand and recover from traumatic experiences by building narratives around them and figuring out why they occurred (Pennebaker 1997). Thus, we focus on whether storytellers explain why events occurred or explain why they feel the way they do about experiences, and examine how this explaining language influences speakers. We suggest that antecedent variables such as experience valence (positive or negative) will influence how much explaining language individuals use in their stories. The use of explaining language is then hypothesized to change evaluations through a process of sense-making, where individuals come to understand experiences and consequently find them less compelling (Gilbert, Wilson, and Centerbar 2003). In short, sense-making makes positive experiences less positive and negative experiences less negative. We contribute to this literature by focusing on how specific types of language influence sense-making. In four studies, we demonstrate that explaining language does facilitate sense-making and can thereby cause paradoxical effects of WOM. Specifically, explaining positive experiences decreases the speakers’ evaluations of and their willingness to repeat and recommend experiences. Conversely, explaining negative experiences increases the speakers’ evaluations of and their willingness to repeat and recommend experiences. Finally, making sense of an experience makes consumers less likely to spread future WOM by telling others about the experience.

In study 1, we showed individuals two positive or negative photographs and asked them to write a story about one of the photos. First, we found that writing had an overall dampening effect on participants’ photo evaluations compared to not writing. We also found that participants used more explaining language when telling stories about negative compared to positive photos. Most impor-
tantly, we found that participants who used more explaining language in their stories evaluated the positive photos less positively and the negative photos less negatively than participants who used less explaining language. These results were mediated by sense-making, where explaining language increased sense-making, and sense-making decreased evaluations of positive but increased evaluations of negative experiences. We also ruled out two alternative explanations for our findings: participants’ evaluations were not altered because explaining language influenced metacognitive perceptions of difficulty in writing, nor were evaluations altered because explaining language encouraged individuals to include evaluation inconsistent information in their stories.

In study 2, we coded actual Amazon.com book reviews to ensure that our findings were not restricted to lab participants writing to an unspecified audience. We found that individuals rating books extremely, at one or five stars, used less explaining language than individuals rating books less extremely, at three stars; we observed these effects using both an across reviewer data set and a within-reviewer data set. As in study 1, then, explaining language was associated with less extreme evaluations of positive and negative experiences.

Studies 3 and 4 manipulated language use to provide experimental support for the idea that explaining language alters evaluations. In study 3, we gave individuals a Scrambled Sentence Task with explain, relive, or control prime words. We found that individuals in the explain prime conditions used more explaining language in their stories and had less extreme evaluations of positive and negative experiences than individuals in the relive prime conditions, who used less explaining language in their stories. The impact of prime on evaluations was mediated by sense-making, such that explaining language helped individuals make sense of their experiences, leading to decreased evaluations of positive but increased evaluations of negative experiences.

In study 4, we provided individuals with a constructed story for which they filled in the blanks. We had an explain, a relive, and a control condition, where the only difference between the relive and explain conditions was an explaining clause at the end of some sentences (e.g. “Dinner was _____.” vs. “Dinner was _____ because ______”). Thus, this study controls for various potential differences between explaining and reliving language (e.g. evaluation inconsistent information, emotionality, detail) and varies only whether individuals provided explanations or not. This study replicated our previous findings: individuals in the explain condition had less extreme positive and negative evaluations than individuals in the relive or control conditions.

In sum, we proposed and tested a model for understanding a critical but understudied issue in WOM. While past research has indicated that WOM influences listeners (Arndt, 1967), in addition to understanding this outward ripple, it is vitally important to understand how WOM influences the speaker. We go beyond previous work to highlight WOM content and demonstrate how that content influences critical downstream consequences for the speaker. We show that some things are, indeed, better left unsaid: sharing positive stories can be bad for the speaker, while sharing negative stories can be good for the speaker, depending on their story-telling language. Explaining language dampens evaluations of positive experiences and improves evaluations of negative experiences, and these evaluative changes are linked to changes in intentions to repeat and recommend experiences.

In two studies, we demonstrate that recounting an experience in a conversational format does polarize REs when storytellers are unaware that they may have included exaggerated affective reactions in their conversation. Study 1 also reveals that changes in REs are accompanied by changes in intentions to repeat the experience. In study 2, we find that changes to the pre-conversation peak moment of pain or pleasure do not cause shifts in REs, but that REs are influenced by a new moment which emerges as the most affectively intense as a result of the conversation.

In study 1, 94 students participated in a 2 x 2 x 2 between subject design with conversational goal (be entertaining vs. be informative), event valence (positive vs. negative), and goal instruction type (implicit vs. explicit) as independent factors. Participants thought of two recent experiences of the same valence that had occurred in two different restaurants. After providing a RE of the events, participants were provided with implicit or explicit instructions to be either entertaining or informative during an upcoming conversation. Participants then had a conversation about the least positive or negative of their two restaurant experiences, depending on condition. One day later, participants were asked to report their RE and to choose a restaurant to revisit.

In the explicit instruction conditions, REs were amplified after people recounted their experience with an informative goal, but not with an entertaining goal. The implicit instruction conditions revealed amplification of the RE in both goal conditions. The results are consistent with the assertion that it is awareness of the potentially distorting effect of the entertainment goal which eliminates the polarization of the RE. The results also provide evidence that behavioral changes accompany shifts in REs. Specifically, in the positive conditions, participants selected the restaurant they had told a story about to revisit, as opposed to the restaurant they had preferred prior to their conversation. In the negative conditions, participants selected to revisit the non-discussed restaurant, as opposed to the pre-conversation preferred (or least negative) restaurant. The only exceptions were participants in the explicit/entertaining conditions: these participants chose to revisit restaurants consistent with their pre-conversation REs and were not influenced by storytelling.

Although study 1 shows that telling someone about an experience may result in more extreme REs, the findings do not provide insight into how the shift occurs. At least three mechanisms could facilitate the adjustment: 1) Telling the story could increase the intensity of the pre-conversation peak moment. If this is the case,
then information regarding the cause of the peak intensity remains intact; 2) A new, more intense, peak could be introduced during the conversation. If this is the case, then the relationship between peak intensities and moments within the experience is altered by the conversation. The moments which are inconsistent with the pre-conversation peak could be assimilated in the direction of the peak; 3) The speaker simplifies the story and makes the explanation for the events more definite by altering affectively inconsistent moments to be consistent with the affective reaction to the peak moment.

In a second study examining these mechanisms, 80 students participated in a 2 x 2 between subject design with two levels of conversational goal (be entertaining, be informative) and two levels of event valence (positive, negative). Participants thought of a positive or negative restaurant experience and provided a RE of the event. Then, they listed the moments or snapshots of the experience and rated the importance of each moment and the degree to which the moment was enjoyable. Participants were then given an explicit goal (informative vs. entertaining) to accomplish while telling a story about their experience to a conversation partner. One day later, participants were asked to report their remembered RE and to rate the importance and enjoyment of each of the moments listed before the conversation and added during the conversation. Study 2 results indicated that shifts in RE occurred because a new experience peak emerged after the conversation. The new peak was either a new moment included during the conversation which had not been identified before the conversation or was a pre-conversational non-peak moment which intensified in terms of its utility. It is interesting to note that the pre-conversation peak did not become more intense, nor was there a general increase in the degree of pain or pleasure associated with all of the moments.

In sum, we provide evidence that REs are amplified after recounting an experience in conversation, unless the storyteller is being purposely entertaining. What difference between pre- and post-conversation REs leads to this amplification? Study 2 revealed that the post-conversation RE was constructed using a new peak. The new peak was either a pre-conversational moment which became more intense, or was a new peak, included in the conversation, but not reported before the conversation. This is an important finding because previous research has implicitly assumed that there is a peak moment from the experience which continues to be a critical determinant of REs; these studies demonstrate that storytelling can change this peak moment.

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Consumers like to share their experiences with products and services with each other. But what do consumers say during WOM conversations? For example, when your bright new “brand X” shirt has lost its color after you have washed it once or twice, you could say to your friend, “My brand X shirt has faded,” or you could say, “My brand X shirt was of poor quality.” In the former case, you provide a very concrete description of what actually happened. In the latter, you use more abstract wording which generalizes your experience with the shirt fading to the overall quality of the shirt. These differences in language use can also have an effect on the receiver of the WOM message. In spite of the substantial amount of prior research on WOM, there has been little attention to the question of how consumers talk about products and brands, and whether and how this influences the extent to which they persuade other consumers.

Previous research has found that abstract versus concrete descriptions of experiences influence the processing of and the inferred meaning drawn from such descriptions. To understand and study these implications, particularly in the area of person perception, Semin and Fiedler (1988) developed the Linguistic Category Model. According to the model, event descriptions that use more abstract terms (implicitly) convey that an actor’s displayed behavior is more typical of the actor and is more likely to be repeated. Thus, the description is viewed as more informative of the actor and is less focused on the specific circumstances under which the behavior was performed. More concrete descriptions, on the other hand, are objective descriptions of the specific observable behavior, and are therefore verifiable and lead to less dispute (Semin and Fiedler 1988; Wigboldus et al. 2000).

The present paper first demonstrates that consumers systematically use more concrete or abstract language in descriptions of product experiences. The studies presented here are the first to examine language abstraction outside the interpersonal domain and to evaluate language use in descriptions of products. In line with earlier research (Wigboldus et al. 2000), we argue and show that consumers’ a priori expectations about a brand or product determine whether they describe their experiences in abstract or concrete terms. More specifically, product experiences that are congruent with a consumer’s product attitude are communicated more abstractly than incongruent experiences. We also show that consumers can use language abstraction strategically in word of mouth.

Although people generally are unaware of the level of abstraction that they use to describe an event, some studies suggest that language abstraction can be used in a strategic manner (Douglas and Sutton 2003). We extend these findings by showing that consumers vary language abstraction based on a communication goal, such as the goal to persuade someone of the quality of a product. More specifically, if consumers want to persuade someone of a product, they will use a more abstract message for a favorable experience and a more concrete message for an unfavorable event.

The strategic use of language abstraction suggests that consumers consciously or unconsciously assume that there are differences in the persuasiveness of language abstraction (see Hamilton 2003 for a similar argument). To our surprise, there has been no research examining whether abstract descriptions of favorable experiences (and concrete description of unfavorable experiences) are indeed more persuasive and lead to more favorable evaluations of the actor (or, in this case, the product). In the last study of our paper, we show that the language abstraction of a message affects the purchase intentions of the receiver. Positive messages about a product are shown to be more persuasive when they are presented in more abstract language. However, the opposite effect is found for negative messages: an increase in language abstraction for a negative product referral leads to a decrease in receivers’ intentions to purchase the product.

Our research extends previous work on language abstraction while providing important insights into the nature of WOM communication, which may be of use for marketers who are seeking to manage and optimize WOM marketing (Ryu and Feick 2007).

REFERENCES


