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Examining the Moderating Effects of Product Type and Consumer
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The Valence of Online Consumer Reviews and Purchase Decision: Examining the Moderating Effects of Product Type and Consumer Expertise

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the moderating effects of product type and consumer knowledge on the relationship between online consumer reviews and purchase decision. An experiment was conducted to test the hypotheses. The results substantiate the argument that the valence of online consumer reviews impacts the consumers' purchase decision. That is, positive online consumer reviews will have positive effect on the purchase decision while the negative online consumer reviews impact the buying decision negatively. In addition, consumers are more likely to rely on the online consumer reviews to make the purchase decision for the durable products. For the non-durable products, online consumer review is only a supplemental information source for the purchase decision. Finally, the theoretical and practical implications conclude the remark.

Keywords: Online consumer review, product type, consumer knowledge, purchase decision

1. Introduction

With the popularity of Internet and advancement in information technology, huge numbers of consumers now routinely engage in internet-based information searches and purchase transactions. To reduce uncertainty about product quality and risk regarding the seller's credibility, consumers look for information sources such as consumer reviews on the Internet [33]. Compared with traditional marketer-provided information sources such as advertising, sales promotion or direct marketing materials, and salesperson utterances, online consumer reviews represent consumer-generated sources of information. As such, online consumer reviews are generally perceived as more credible and trustworthy information sources [10].

Increasingly, the growing importance of online consumer reviews has been acknowledged by consumers and managers alike. For example, approximately one-third of American travelers read web reviews from other travelers before making travel decisions [4]. The prospect of negative (or for that matter, positive) consumer reviews [39] as well as the reality that marketing firms may be increasingly losing control over this review process [14] holds important position to marketing managers. Given the onslaught of these online consumer reviews – which have facilitated what is commonly known as Electronic-Word of Mouth, or E-WOM [18] [31] – the number of sources available to consumers during their information searches has expanded exponentially. It is likely that some firms will benefit gracefully because they have responded strategically; while others will suffer egregiously because they failed to respond strategically. But realistically, few firms can afford to sit back and permit what happens to happen, absent any strategic and tactical intervention.

However, to date the literature has allocated limited research attention to the online consumer reviews and their impact on consumer information search behavior and business performance [14] [18] [25] [31]. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to bridge the literature gap and expand the practical body of knowledge that addresses the possible impact of online consumer reviews on consumer purchase behavior. The various factors that moderate the impact of online consumer reviews on the purchase decision such as consumer expertise and product type will be investigated and tested. This paper will be organized as follows. First of all, we will present the theoretical foundations and develop the hypotheses. Secondly, an experiment is conducted to collect the data and the results will be reported. Finally, the theoretical and managerial implications suggested by the study will be discussed.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

The phenomenon of online consumer reviews has emerged as a substitute for, and a complement to, traditional WOM communication [7]. To date, studies have investigated the role and impact of consumer motives that prompt the search for online consumer reviews [18], as well as the impact of online consumer reviews on consumer information search behaviors or online product choices [33]. The influence of online consumer reviews on purchase

intention or corporate sales performance has also been examined [7] [25] [31]. The collective outcomes of these studies have yielded various insightful suggestions and implications. Those outcomes have proven inconclusive and at times controversial. Chevalier and Mayzlin [7], for example, found that the valence of a message (i.e., the degree of positive vs. negative reviews), as an important E-WOM metric, exerts a significant impact on consumers' purchase decisions and firms' financial performance. But no such relationship was observed in Liu's work [25]. In part to clarify this uncertainty, this study's first objective is to examine the influence of online message valence on consumers' purchase decisions. In addition, experimental research designs have been described as powerful modes from which E-WOM can be investigated [18]. Consequently, this study is based on an experiment that systematically investigates the impact of positive and negative online consumer reviews on consumer's purchase decision.

Nguyen [27] is the only author who has proposed a conceptual framework examining the possible effects of moderating variables such as product type and consumer expertise on consumers' belief in and usage of online consumer reviews. Nonetheless, the questions regarding whether and how product type and consumer knowledge moderate the impact of online consumer reviews on consumers' purchase decisions remain unanswered [31]. Consequently, the second objective of this paper was to address this shortfall by examining the potential moderating effects associated with the level of consumer expertise (i.e., knowledgeable vs. novice shoppers) and product type (i.e., high involvement vs. low involvement products) on the "online consumer reviews → purchase decision" relationship.

Information search represents the stage of the decision making process wherein consumers actively seek and subsequently integrate information from internal and external sources [37]. Internal information search involves memory. External search entails examining all other relevant information not already embedded in memory [12]. Individuals such as friends and family members are important external information sources [2]. WOM originates from such individual sources. A consensus has emerged that satisfaction with a product or service can cause positive behavioral intentions such as positive WOM [11] [28] [24]. Satisfaction itself refers to, at some level, a personal judgment of the pleasurable fulfillment that results from consumption of a product/service [30]. Favorable WOM should be directly associated with such pleasant experiences. In turn, such WOM might ultimately contribute to favorable purchase intention and eventual loyalty [41].

On the other hand, negative WOM has been characterized as being reflective of a consumer's dissatisfaction with a product or firm [34]. Unfavorable WOM provides negative information about a product, service or firm. It imposes greater influence on subsequent consumer behavior than more positive information [40] [22] [35]. Although consumers sometimes fail to make careful or accurate attributions regarding why or how a product or service came up short, they still feel confident about such inferences [15] [19] [35]. The degree of confidence in their negative inference could lead to more strongly expressed negative WOM, which may turn new customers or prospects away from the product/service or firm in question [38]. Dissatisfaction with a brand, or an entire product category, may contribute to switching behavior. Such a response would clearly impact consumers' repurchase intentions [23]. WOM, as a mode or source of communication, has traditionally enjoyed high source credibility by both marketers and consumers because it is generally offered absent any prompting, compulsion or personal interest.

Given the popularity of Internet and proliferation of e-commerce, a new source of WOM, called online consumer reviews, is becoming increasingly dominant. Online consumer reviews provide a large amount and variety of information. They also greatly reduce the costs in time and effort that traditionally were associated with consumer information search efforts [33]. The valence (e.g., positive vs. negative characteristics) of online consumer reviews is likely an important E-WOM metric. Chevalier and Mayzlin [7] concluded that while positive online review contributed to increased book sales, incrementally more positive reviews were less powerful in increasing sales than incrementally more negative reviews were in lessening book sales. While the credibility of online consumer reviews should be further explored, one can assume that most consumers still trust their authenticity. The 2007 Edelman Trust Barometer survey showed that substantially more than half of the participants chose their peers as their most-trusted source compared to only one fifth in 2003 [50]. As a result, we speculate that negative online consumer reviews, as negative word-of-mouth, could delay the purchase decision. Therefore, we propose that:

H1: The positive impact of favorable online consumer reviews [on consumer purchase intentions] should prove less consequential/ impactful than the negative impact of unfavorable online consumer reviews [on consumer purchase intentions].

Knowledge may exercise a critical factor when consumers evaluate a product/service and make purchase decision [3]. Alba and Hutchinson [1] argue that consumer knowledge is composed of product familiarity and expertise. Familiarity is thought to capture the product-related experiences accumulated by the consumer. Consumer expertise, in turn, is thought to capture the ability to perform product-related tasks successfully. Because expert consumers possess prior information about product characteristics, they are better prepared to differentiate relevant from irrelevant information, and they may tend to rely more on their product/service knowledge and less on others' opinion [20]. It appears possible that such experts act rationally than novices. As a result, consumer experts may be more capable of discriminating "good" (i.e., valid) from "bad" (i.e. less than valid) recommendations based on their prior knowledge and/or experience with the product/service. By comparison, novices, who know far less about a product, appear more likely to seek non-product information and consider other's opinions particularly those opinions that are expressed negatively [16] [26] [32].

Nowadays, with the rise of the World Wide Web, far more consumers are beginning to search for information online, from sources such as blogs, chat rooms or consumer rating sites. Nysveen and Pedersen [29] found that consumers' product knowledge positively influences their purchase intention when shopping online. While knowledgeable consumers may examine consumer reviews to look for new information about a product or service, they may not depend on this information to make a decision because they are more likely to rely on prior knowledge of the product/service to make judgments [5] [20]. Conversely, novice shoppers have no prior knowledge and experiences. Therefore, they may rely more on online consumer reviews - regardless of their valence - when making purchasing decisions. On this basis, it is proposed that:

H2: Expert shoppers should be less likely than novice shoppers to use online consumer reviews to making or seeking support for their purchase decisions.

Product type exercises substantial influence on various consumer purchasing behaviors, including their level of involvement with the product itself. Consumers' involvement with any product or its purchase is primarily based on a combination of two factors. The first is the importance of the product to consumers. The second relates to the level of risk that consumers assign to a product [17]. The intensity of information search generally increases concomitant with increases in the levels of risk and/or importance assigned to the product by consumers [29]. Generally, consumers concurrently perceive nondurable products as less important and risky. Consequently, consumers tend to engage in less goal-oriented – or lower involvement- search behaviors when evaluating or otherwise considering nondurable goods [29].

Durable goods are more routinely classified as "high involvement" products. This difference in large part derives from the fact such products generally feature greater between-brand differences, complexity and perceived risk. Consumers tend to seek more information and examine more attributes and alternatives when evaluating durable as opposed to non-durable products [36]. Thus consumers of high involvement products may tend to search for more product information online. They may also be more likely to read more online consumer reviews in order to search out and evaluate other buyers' opinions and suggestions. By comparison, consumers of low involvement products may be less likely to engage in extensive information search. The primary reason appears to be that such products are deemed less important and less risky by consumers. On this basis, it is hypothesized that:

H3: Consumers involved in high involvement consumption decisions should be more likely than those involved in low involvement consumption decisions to seek out online consumer reviews when making or seeking support for their purchase decisions.

3. Method and Findings

Data for this study were collected using a self-administered instrument distributed at a flagship public University. To avoid subject speculation bias about the purpose of the study, respondents were divided randomly into two independent groups. Respondents in one group were given instrument "A" where they responded on descriptions that featured negative online consumer reviews. Respondents in the second group were given a different questionnaire (i.e., "B") where they evaluated their search and purchase behaviors based on descriptions that featured positive online consumer reviews. Two product categories - flat screen TVs and backpacks - were featured as focal products in this experiment. Each category was selected because products from each are purchase with relative frequency by the target respondents. In addition, the selected products clearly diverge in terms of the degree of their durability. Descriptions for each product were developed after an online research of consumer reviews of flat screen TVs and backpacks. Twelve doctoral and eight MBA students were asked to write down their buying

criteria for flat screen TVs and backpacks. Each hypothetical product was assigned a non-descriptive brand name (e.g., brand X or Z) to avoid preexisting perceptions or biases regarding an actual brand's quality or attributes/characteristics.

Respondents were asked to respond to a set of seven questions capturing their perceptions of the quality of product, as described in the questionnaire. This step was conducted to ensure that respondents did, in fact, perceive the descriptions of the online consumer reviews accurately in terms of quality evaluation (i.e., manipulation check). The seven items for the manipulation check include "Brand X or Z is *technically advanced, innovative, reliable, durable, prestigious, exclusive, and its overall quality is good*". Responses were assessed through 5-point Likert scales anchored between "1" (indicating strong disagreement), and "5" (indicating strong agreement). Participants were next asked whether they would buy brand X or Z based on descriptions provided in the online consumer reviews. Consumer expertise for flat-screen TVs and backpacks were measured separately by using scales from Alba and Hutchinson [1] [21]. Demographic information such as gender, age, social class was also measured.

In all, 582 respondents were asked to participate in the survey. Only 383 questionnaires were collected, however. Of these, 381 are usable (190 from group 1 and 191 from group 2). The response rate is 65.5% and usable rate is 65.8%. There were 219 male and 155 female respondents. More than 78% (300) of the participants were in the age between 18 and 25. Most of the subjects are juniors (33.3%) and seniors (42.5%), and from middle class (48.6%) and upper middle class (35.2%). In addition, 83% of respondents were from the U.S..

Independent samples t-tests were used to test for manipulation check (see Table 1). The results confirmed that the scenarios actually captured characteristics (i.e., positive or negative) that were intended to be associated with online consumer reviews. Respondents reading positive online consumer reviews assigned significantly higher ratings to high- and low-involvement products than did respondents who were exposed to negative online consumer reviews. In an extension of prior work [1], Kleiser and Mantel [21] developed and validated four dimensions presumed to capture consumer expertise. These dimensions were, respectively, cognitive effort/automaticity, analysis, elaboration and memory. This study adopted the 15 items of consumer expertise as proxy to measure respondents' comparative status as either "experts" or "novices." These items were checked for internal consistency (see Table 2), and convergent and discriminant validity (see Tables 3 and 4). All the Alpha scores exceeded .68, suggesting sufficiently high construct reliability was present. Inter-factor correlations were less than the respective Alpha scores and greater than the covariance estimates. This result infers the presence of high convergent and discriminant validity among the constructs.

To test hypothesis one, we used regression analysis to evaluate how the purchase intention in positive scenario (that is, positive online consumer reviews) will differ from that in negative scenario (that is, negative online consumer reviews). From the table 5, we can see that the product evaluations in both scenarios have significant impact on the purchase intention ($\beta_{\text{positive}} = 0.685$, and $\beta_{\text{negative}} = 0.948$; $p = 0.000$). In addition, the beta weight for product evaluation in positive scenario ($\beta_{\text{positive}} = 0.685$) is much lower than that for product evaluation in negative scenario ($\beta_{\text{negative}} = 0.948$). The results substantiate the hypothesis 1 that the positive impact of favorable reviews would prove less consequential/ impactful than the negative impact of unfavorable reviews.

Hypothesis 2 was tested using univariate data analysis (see Table 6). The result indicates significant impact of product evaluation on the consumers' purchase intention ($p = 0.000$). For the four dimensions of consumer expertise, only elaboration is significant at 0.1 level ($p = 0.083$), while the other three dimensions (cognitive effort, analysis and memory) is not statistically significant ($P_{\text{cog}} = 0.439$, $P_{\text{ana}} = 0.731$, and $P_{\text{mem}} = 0.951$). The marginal significance of elaboration dimension implies that the consumers are likely to employ their existing knowledge to evaluate the

Table 1. Manipulation check: independent samples t-test of product evaluation for each product

ProductEvaluation	Flat-screen TV				Back Pack			
	Negative	Positive	t	Sig.	Negative	Positive	t	Sig.
Tech Advanced	2.44	3.88	15.15	0.00	1.82	3.34	17.44	0.00
Innovative	2.25	3.62	14.38	0.00	1.89	3.49	17.76	0.00
Reliable	3.04	3.60	6.03	0.00	2.60	3.74	12.70	0.00
Durable	3.05	3.32	2.93	0.00	2.64	3.85	13.51	0.00
Prestige	2.09	3.75	17.37	0.00	1.85	3.40	17.52	0.00
Exclusive	1.99	3.43	14.21	0.00	1.74	3.25	17.23	0.00
Overall Quality	2.96	3.96	10.71	0.00	2.36	3.97	19.18	0.00

Table 2. Internal consistency test: consumer expertise

Dimensions	Flat- screen TV			Backpack		
	Alpha	Mean	SD	Alpha	Mean	SD
CE-Cognitive	0.79	2.51	0.70	0.81	2.45	0.80
CE-Analysis	0.69	3.39	0.79	0.68	2.30	0.79
CE-Elaboration	0.81	2.88	0.97	0.78	2.50	0.87
CE-Memory	0.82	2.69	0.90	0.81	2.45	0.85

Table 3. Discriminant validity analysis for flat- screen TV

	Purchase Decision	Product Evaluation-TV	CE- Cognitive	CE- Analysis	CE- Elaboration	CE- Memory
PurchaseDecision		0.69	0.04	-0.03	-0.02	0.03
ProductEvaluation-TV	0.71**	(0.91)	0.08	0.06	0.07	0.11
CE-Cognitive	0.05	0.12*	(0.79)	0.31	0.44	0.46
CE-Analysis	-0.03	0.08	0.52**	(0.69)	0.58	0.48
CE-Elaboration	-0.01	0.08	0.63**	0.74**	(0.81)	0.70
CE-Memory	0.03	0.14	0.71**	0.66**	0.81**	(0.82)

Table 4. Discriminant validity analysis for backpack

	Purchase Decision	Product Evaluation- BP	CE- Cognitive	CE- Analysis	CE- Elaboration	CE- Memory
PurchaseDecision		0.93	0.04	0.14	0.08	0.08
ProductEvaluation- BP	0.78**	(0.94)	0.05	0.14	0.12	0.09
CECognitive	0.04	0.07	(0.81)	0.36	0.45	0.48
CEAnalysis	0.14**	0.18**	0.57**	(0.68)	0.51	0.45
CEElaboration	0.08	0.14**	0.66**	0.75**	(0.78)	0.54
CEMemory	0.08	0.10*	0.72**	0.66**	0.74**	(0.81)

Table 5. Regression analysis for two scenarios: purchase intention is dependent variable

Indep. Variable	PurchaseIntention-Positive			PurchaseIntention-Negative		
	B	t	Sig.	B	t	Sig.
Intercept	1.023	3.604	0.000	-0.066	-0.361	0.719
Product Evaluation	0.685	8.929	0.000	0.948	12.506	0.000
R	0.562			0.686		
Rsqr	0.315			0.471		
AdjRsqr	0.312			0.468		

Table 6. Univariate data analysis with purchase intention as dependent variable

Indep. Variable Parameter	Purchase Intention		
	B	t	Sig.
Intercept	0.279	1.561	0.119
Product Evaluation	0.955	25.404	0.000
CE-Cognition	0.063	0.775	0.439
CE-Analysis	-0.029	-0.344	0.731
CE-Elaboration	-0.144	-1.739	0.083
CE-Memory	0.005	0.061	0.951
R	0.810		
Rsqr	0.656		
AdjRsqr	0.651		

online consumer reviews and make their purchase decisions. Consumer knowledge plays a significant role in the relationship of online consumer reviews and purchase intention. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is partially supported. Further, we look at the moderating effect of product type. We ran regression analysis for flat- screen TV and backpack separately and found that for both products the product evaluation has significant impact on purchase intention (see table 7, $\beta_{TV} = 0.839$, and $\beta_{backpack} = 0.822$; $p = 0.000$). In addition, the beta weight for product evaluation of flat-screen TV ($\beta_{TV} = 0.839$) is higher than that for product evaluation of backpack ($\beta_{backpack} = 0.822$). The results reveal that consumers involved in high involvement consumption decisions are more likely to seek out online consumer reviews when making or seeking support for their purchase decisions than those involved in low involvement consumption decisions. Therefore, the results provided support for H3.

Table 7. Regression analysis for flat- screen TV and backpack: dependent variable is purchase intention

Indep. Variable Parameter	PurchaseIntention-TV			PurchaseIntention-Backpack		
	B	t	Sig.	B	t	Sig.
Intercept	0.217	1.634	0.103	0.483	4.474	0.000
Product Evaluation	0.839	20.488	0.000	0.822	22.986	0.000
R	0.738			0.775		
Rsqr	0.545			0.601		
AdjRsqr	0.543			0.600		

4. Discussion and Implication

These results suggest that the valence (i.e. positive versus negative) of online consumer reviews exercise a significant impact on consumer purchase decisions. That is, the positive online consumer reviews will have a positive effect on the consumers’ purchase decisions and the negative consumer reviews will have a negative impact on the customers’ buying decisions. This finding partially clarifies the previous controversial studies, which show either positive impact or no impact of the message (i.e. positive vs. negative reviews) on the purchase decision and financial performance [7] [25]. In addition, this study extends previous studies and finds that the impact of negative online consumer reviews on purchase intention is stronger than that of positive online consumer reviews. In addition, we found that the consumer knowledge about a product or service impact their likelihood to use online consumer reviews to make purchase decisions. While other dimensions of consumer expertise such as cognition, analysis and memory were not found to have significant impact on the relationship between online consumer reviews and purchase intention in this study, we expect more studies to exam and clarify this issue.

The support for hypothesis 3 shows that high-involvement (that is, durable product) consumers are more likely to rely on online consumer reviews to make purchase decision than consumers of low- involvement products. This indicates that consumers are more inclined to use online consumer reviews to make purchase decisions for the durable products. Because durable products tend to entail larger-ticket purchases; they also tend to engender the perception, at least, of greater risks for potential buyers. By any measure, durable products are more likely than nondurables to be deemed important by consumers. Consequently, consumers apparently are much more willing to conduct greater information research and, in the process, physically examine the features and quality of the product. In turn, such consumers may be more likely to seek the online consumer reviews to make the buying decisions. On

the other hand, because non-durable products tend to be less expensive and to pose less risk to shoppers, it would appear that consumers are actually less willing to look for additional information source such as the online consumer reviews to make their buying decisions. An alternative explanation may lie in the less draconian consequences of loss resulted from purchasing low involvement products. The result implies that online consumer reviews could be a highly complementary information source for consumers of low involvement products. However, it is necessary to replicate this study in other settings or using different product categories in order to extend our findings in this study.

The results of this study yield several important theoretical and managerial implications. First of all, the findings indicate that, in the relationship between online consumer reviews and consumer purchase decisions, product type matters. The more durable a product, the more likely consumers are to look for online consumer reviews to make their purchase decisions. In addition, this study generates insightful managerial suggestions. Since online consumer reviews are growing in importance as an information source in the consumer purchasing decisions, especially for the durable products, marketers of durable (high involvement) products should pay more attention to the online communication channels to monitor the flow of the online consumer reviews. They should make strategic plans to stimulate and encourage more positive comments about their products and services through available online message channels. At the same time, managers may also need to take actions to minimize the negative information about their products and the company. For example, they may introduce new or improved products that better solve the consumers' problems or provide better customer services to change consumers' perception of the poor service quality. Since online reviews are, or, at least, ought to be an increasing concern for marketing management, the close monitoring of the online information channels could provide valuable insights on how to manage their product or service more effectively and efficiently. For instance, online consumer reviews can provide marketing firms important insights about key product features and quality aspects, e.g., the ones consumers presumably value the most or least, and on the consumers' usage experiences and preferences, which could be considered and incorporated into the marketing plan.

Our study should yield three contributions. First, to our knowledge, this study is the first to empirically investigate the moderating influence of product type and consumer knowledge on the relationship between online consumer reviews and purchase decision. Second, we extend the existing consumer behavior literature by discovering the influential moderating effect of product type on the impact of online consumer reviews and purchase decision. Therefore, we enrich the current knowledge of online consumer information search and purchase decision behavior. Third, we enrich the WOM literature by investigating empirically how the new form of E-WOM—online consumer reviews—impact the consumer decision making and pre-purchase behavior.

The major limitation of this study is that it was based on a student sample. This may constraint the generalizability of this study, although, it should be noted, student and student-aged populations themselves are each key target segments for e-marketers. It may be worthwhile to replicate the study by using non-student samples within different age groups and diverse knowledge backgrounds. Future research is needed to conduct the study in other cultural settings, such as in China, Canada, Japan, India and Mexico, to investigate whether and how differences between Western and Eastern cultures or between developed countries and developing countries may impact consumers' online information search behavior and the purchase decision.

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