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The Impact of Online Word-of-mouth and Negative Media Exposure on Consumer Habitual Skepticism: The Mediating Effect of Attribution

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Abstract: How did habitual skepticism come into being? In this research, the causes of consumer habitual skepticism are explored from the perspective of attribution. We put forward two important antecedent variables, negative online word-of-mouth and negative media exposure. The study results show that the higher the negative word-of-mouth perception is, the higher the stability and controllability of consumer attribution will be, and the higher the degree of consumer habitual skepticism will be. The higher the intensity of negative media exposure is, the higher the stability and controllability of consumer attribution will be, and the higher the degree of consumer habitual skepticism will be. We test this framework through two experiments. Study 1 investigates the influence of negative word-of-mouth spread and media exposure on consumer habitual skepticism. Study 2 investigates the effect of two independent variables on consumer habitual skepticism from an overall point of view and explore the mediation effect of attribution.

Keywords: online word-of-mouth, media exposure, consumer habitual skepticism, attribution theory

1. INTRODUCTION

For the past few years, with the unceasing exposure of products' harm crisis incidents and company scandals, consumers' confidence in products and industries has decreased^[1]. Consumers have showed great skepticism about company advertising^[2], and environmental statements^[3], corporate crisis public relations^[4], enterprise social responsibility^[5], media reports^[6] and other aspects, even to the point of questioning without thinking. This kind of doubt which is formed by continuous stimulation and reinforcement of external information for a certain period of time is called consumer habitual skepticism. There are studies showing that skepticism can further influence consumers' emotions and attitudes. To be more specific, skepticism about advertising propositions will make consumers reject the attractiveness of advertising, which will further let them generate a lower brand attitude and willingness to buy related products^[7]; Consumers' skepticism of the company will lead to a decline in enterprise reputation^[8] and a decreased willingness to buy its products^[9]. Once the consumer skepticism becomes a habit, it will be very hard for companies to gain consumers' trust. Obviously, as an important consumer emotion, understanding consumer habitual skepticism is vital for companies, but the research about it is evidently not enough. How did habitual skepticism come into being? And what kind of factors affected it? So, in order to fill these gaps, this study is aimed at understanding the generation mechanism of consumer habitual skepticism through developing relevant conceptual frameworks and conducting empirical tests. We put forward that media exposure and word-of-mouth spread are important antecedents of consumer skepticism. This is because consumer habitual skepticism is formed by the constant influence of external environmental information, and online word-of-mouth and media exposure are important sources for consumers to get external information. Furthermore, because consumers use the knowledge of persuasion to help them understand and handle some incidents through attributional reasoning^[8]. The research literature which consumers doubt also shows that causal attribution can cause consumers to doubt the company, so we take attribution as the intermediary mechanism in this study.

We achieved the goals above through two studies. Study 1 investigates the influence of negative word-of-mouth spread and media exposure on consumer habitual skepticism. Study 2 investigates the effect of

two independent variables on consumer habitual skepticism from an overall point of view and explore the mediation effect of attribution. The remaining parts of this paper will begin with a review of related research which forms the theoretical basis and assumption generation, then talk about research methods and the results of three studies. In the end, this paper will discuss the survey results and their management influence, limitations and future research approaches.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Negative online word-of-mouth

Word-of-mouth (WOM) generally refers to non-commercial interpersonal communication, which includes discussions about products and sharing contents related to product; It can be direct recommendations or just mentions ^[10]. It includes not only face-to-face discussion and sharing, but also online mentions and comments. From the aspect of marketing effectiveness, the study by Bughin, Doogan, and Vetvik ^[11] found that word-of-mouth is the key factor in 20% to 50% of all purchasing decisions. Because of the intangibility and service experience, customers are more likely to rely on interpersonal communication in the form of word-of-mouth in service contexts ^[12]. Word-of-mouth communication have an influence on the short-term and long-term judgments of consumers on product evaluations. This influence is even greater when consumers are in face of an uncertain experience and when word-of-mouth communication content is presented by experts ^[13]. Word-of-mouth can positively influence decision-making, and meanwhile can also negatively affect decision-making ^[14]. Many studies suggest that negative word-of-mouth is more powerful than positive one.

Compared with traditional word-of-mouth, online word-of-mouth information is wider in range, faster in speed and more in quantity. Hennig thurau et al. ^[15] defined online word-of-mouth as all positive or negative comments about a product or company made by a potential, actual or former customer passing on to a mass group or organization through an online medium. Online word-of-mouth can be spread through a series of communication tools based on network media, such as online product discussion area, online forum, newsgroup, blog, instant messaging, etc. ^[16]. Due to the communication cost is low, consumers can share their points of views and attitudes anytime and anywhere. What's more, the internet word-of-mouth is anonymous, which makes the sender of the message more unscrupulous when teasing and complaining. Negative information is more diagnosable, and information consistency theory also proves that information different from the original information will be handled more seriously ^[17], as a result, individuals will rely more on negative information when making a decision. Therefore, negative online word-of-mouth often has more influence than positive word-of-mouth. The consumer habitual skepticism we study in this paper is mainly derived from negative word-of-mouth.

2.2 Negative media exposure

Media, the medium of information spreading, is an important way for the public to get information. "Exposure" is always considered as a specific mechanism of media, and some studies directly equate it with negative reporting. Generally speaking, the media prefer to publish reports with negative information, because it is easier to get the attention of the audience by negative reports than by positive information ^[18].

Negative exposure refers to that media distributes information about potential threats to products, services and individuals for free ^[19]. According to a survey conducted by DDB Needham worldwide, negative reports and how enterprises deal with them have also become the most important factors affecting consumers' purchase decisions. More importantly, social psychology research indicates that people rely more on negative information when they form an overall evaluation of a goal ^[18]. This effect not only works when forming an overall impression of a person, but also works when evaluating products. Because negative information is more diagnostic and useful, consumers prefer to form their own value judgment by negative exposure ^[20]. Besides, the

study found that negative media exposure is more biased. This bias comes from the journalists and editors' personal preferences^{[21][22]}; on the other hand, it comes from the choices made by journalists to maximize their own interests due to the audience preferences^[23]. Because of consumers concern about food safety, some media deliberately exaggerates the facts to attract the attention of consumers in order to meet consumer preferences.

With the booming of the Internet, online media have become an important information source for consumers. Many scholars have begun to pay attention to the credibility of network media^[24]. Li Xiaojing and Zhang Guoliang^[25] compared the credibility of traditional media, web1.0 websites and social media through an online random sampling survey, and found that among the three types of media, traditional media is still considered the most reliable. Social media is used more and more commonly and frequently, the credibility of which, however, is the lowest among the three.

2.3 Consumer habitual skepticism

Skepticism is a common psychological state of humans, in which the perceiver has malicious guessing about the motives of others and believes that others may have hidden motives. As a result, Fein^[26] defined consumer skepticism as a dynamic state, and it is a state of psychological doubt caused in specific situations. It is a potential response of consumers to advertisement, promotion and public relations^[27].

Habits are always understood as "learned behavior sequences which will become automatic reactions to specific situations and can play a role in achieving certain goals or final states"^[28]. Verplanken and Aarts^[29] defined habit as learning oriented automatic response, that is to say, habit is not innate, but an individual's learned response to a certain stimulus that can be cultivated later^[28].

Further, we put forward the definition of consumer habitual skepticism: it is a kind of psychological state, which looks at people and things around in negative and pessimistic psychological state. When in face of the hidden and unknown motivation, people will come in to this state, expecting that the other party lacks ability, which is dishonest, malicious, irresponsible, and will violate consumer's interests, even hurts consumers. Habitual skepticism is a kind of thinking activity of thinking, exploring and researching from the opposite side due to individual's uncertain perception of organization or other's behavior motivation, product features and other specific things. This kind of thinking has the characteristics of negativity, exploratory and automaticity. To be more specific, firstly, habitual skepticism is a kind of negative guessing automatically generated by the individual's uncertainty of other people's behavior motivation. Secondly, habitual skepticism is an automatic response when people are uncertain about the motives of others' behaviors, which tends to negatively deduce the intention of other people's behavior. Finally, habitual skepticism is an individual's cognitive inertia for reducing risk, which makes the perceiver unconsciously doubt about the motivation of other people's behavior, thus conducting a series of negative speculation which they think reasonable.

2.4 Attribution theory

Attribution is the process of inferring and judging the cause of their or others' behavior based on related information and clues^[30]. People will infer the explanations of their own or other people's behaviors based on the reasons behind them, and these explanations determine the following behaviors^[31]. Attribution can have an effect on consumers' purchasing or choosing behaviors. Many studies have manipulated consumers' beliefs to lead consumers to attribute choices to liking the product or to being constrained by the situation, or to purchasing the product to please others^[32]. The study on attribution in the field of consumer behavior mostly occurs in the framework of product quality defects or service failures to explore the judgments and behavior intentions of consumers on the attribution of negative incidents. Generally speaking, the attribution of accidents can affect consumers' satisfaction and emotion, and it has an impact on the behavior of consumers, the success or failure of products, and the spokespersons, communicators of product in the context of consumption and service^[33].

Studies about the social psychology normally think that the antecedent variables of attribution are related to motivation, information, and belief^[31]. On the one hand, consumers may have motivations to make some causal inferences from hedonic or self-esteem needs; on the other hand, relevant information about an action, such as the frequency of occurrence, and what other actions occur simultaneously, forms the basis of consumer attribution. Finally, the previous beliefs may lead consumers to make some causal inferences. In addition, most studies combine the antecedent variables of attribution with the outcome variables for testing^[31], and found that attribution outcome variables include multiple behaviors, intentions, and emotion^[34]. It can be roughly classified as a result related to the locus^[35], a result related to controllability, and a result related to stability^[34].

Consequences linked to locus. Consumers' attribution to locus of the occurrence will influence their degree of satisfaction. Oliver and Desarbo^[36] manipulated source attribution through experiments and found that when investors attribute the success of their stock investments to external causes (such as institutional reports and reminders), they will have higher degree of satisfaction than those who attribute it to internal causes (investors' own research and decisions). A similar effect is seen in the negative event situation, where consumers will be more dissatisfied if they attributed the problem to the seller^[37].

Consequences linked to controllability. Controllability refers to the extent to which the consumer believes the event can be controlled. For example, passengers may consider the slow speed of check-in baggage to be a controllable factor for airlines, while flight delays are considered to be a problem with less controllability by airlines^[38]. Controllability also has an effect on consumers' anger about product failure^[35], and they may express more anger at product failure caused by controllable factors of companies.

Consequences linked to stability. Stability perception influences consumers' expectations of whether similar events will happen again^[34]. If consumers think a kind of product or service failure is stable, then they will adjust their expectations for that product or service. Stability often works together with the source of the occurrence to form the attribution of consumers to relevant events or problems, which will further affect the consumers' subsequent behavior.

2.5 Negative online word-of-mouth, negative media exposure, and consumer habitual skepticism

Compared with positive word-of-mouth, negative word-of-mouth is easier to obtain and diagnose, as a result, its impact on consumer attitudes and behavior^[39] is even greater. However, it is worth noting that due to the popularity of the Internet, the influence of negative online word-of-mouth, the negative or passive word-of-mouth information spread through the Internet, is becoming more and more significant, whose perniciousness far more exceeds the word-of-mouth in the past interpersonal communication. And its spread and diffusion through the key nodes of all kinds of social network platforms will affect a wider range of consumers to form a skeptical attitude towards organizations or products involved in negative events, forming habitual skepticism from month to month.

Negative word-of-mouth communication involves interpersonal processes and informal processes. It's easier to explain the receiver's understanding of the sender's motivation for delivering such kind of information using attribution theory^[40]. Because the cause-and-effect analysis is the individual's internal need to understand social events, the information receiver will infer why other people share negative information about the brand^[41]. As a result, attribution becomes the cognition generated by that the information receiver infers the reason why the transmitter propagandizes the negative information. The research^[40] verified that attribution involves the evaluation of interpersonal information on the focus object of the receiver. Laczniak, Decarlo and Ramaswami^[42] also verified that attribution is the intermediary of the influence of negative word-of-mouth on brand evaluation. So, from this study's point of view, the receiver's attribution is also the intermediary of the influence of negative online word-of-mouth on consumers' habitual skepticism.

According to the classical attribution theory study, causal attributions that people make about information

include stimulation (it refers to negative events in this case), people (it refers to communicators in this case), environment, or a combination of the three. However, the specific types of attribution generated by individuals depend on that by which way the information is delivered. In the context of negative word-of-mouth communication, receiver may make the attribution based on the extent to which others agree with the spreader's negative view, that is, common understanding. The more negative online word-of-mouth information about an event, the more controllable the problem is expected to be, so this kind of common understanding will have an effect on the controllability of attribution. What's more, the stability of attribution will be influenced by the stable negative experience of communicators in different times and situations. As communicators relate negative information with specific brands (rather than other brands), consumers will increase their criticism of enterprises, which means they will attribute the causes of negative events to enterprises rather than other environmental causes.

As a result, we infer:

H₁: Negative online word-of-mouth perception influences consumer habitual skepticism through consumer attribution.

H_{1a}: The higher the negative online word-of-mouth perception is, the higher the stability of consumer attribution will be, and the higher the degree of consumer habitual skepticism will be.

H_{1b}: The higher the negative online word-of-mouth perception is, the higher the controllability of the consumer attribution will be, and the higher the degree of consumer habitual skepticism will be.

If media exposure is focused too much on bad news, it will affect people's cognitive framework and form "habitual skepticism"^[43]. This is mainly because the media, as a communication tool with high reliability, has always been an important method for individuals to get public information. When the media frequently exposes negative information, the public will feel a higher degree of insecurity and uncertainty. They may even think that in the social environment and life, there are risks everywhere and they always need to be vigilant. Furthermore, the public's processing of negative information is different from that of positive information. Studies have proved that negative information is more diagnosable. Therefore, the public may be more sensitive to negative information. They are more willing to process it at the cognitive level, with deep memory. As a result, the frequent media exposure of the negative information will inevitably arouse consumers' habitual skepticism.

Taking product's harm crisis as an example, media exposure will inevitably expand the negative effects of the crisis. Due to media exposure, the range and degree of negative events perceived by the public will exceed the actual situation. And the use of multimedia (including voice, picture, photo and even 3D animation, image, etc.) will also improve consumers' perception of the negative information's facticity, that is, improve the stability of that negative events are caused by companies^[44]. From the previous literature review, it can be found that when the media exposes negative events, sometimes it will cause some deviation in the report in order to gain the attention of the public. This deviation objectively leads to the controllable attribution of consumers to the relevant company or brand.

As a result, we infer:

H₂: The intensity of negative media exposure influences consumer habitual skepticism through consumer attribution.

H_{2a}: The higher the intensity of negative media exposure is, the higher the stability of consumer attribution will be, and the higher the degree of consumer habitual skepticism will be.

H_{2b}: The higher the intensity of negative media exposure is, the higher the controllability of consumer attribution will be, and the higher the degree of consumer habitual skepticism will be.

3. METHODS AND CONCLUSIONS

All assumptions will be studied through two experiments. We hope that our findings will provide new points of views to the literature on online word-of-mouth, media exposure, and consumer habitual skepticism.

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