Consumers' Responses to Negative Word-of-Mouth Communication: An Attribution Theory Perspective

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Research on negative word-of-mouth communication (WOMC) in general, and the process by which negative WOMC affects consumers' brand evaluations in particular, has been limited. This study uses attribution theory to explain consumers' responses to negative WOMC. Experimental results suggest that (a) causal attributions mediate the negative WOMC-brand evaluation relation, (b) receivers' attributions depend on the manner in which the negative WOMC is conveyed, and (c) brand name affects attributions. Results also suggest that when receivers attribute the negativity of the WOMC message to the brand, brand evaluations decrease; however, if receivers attribute the negativity to the communicator, brand evaluations increase.

Word-of-mouth communication (WOMC) is an important marketplace phenomenon by which consumers receive information relating to organizations and their offerings. Because WOMC usually occurs through sources that consumers view as being credible (e.g., peer reference groups; Brooks, 1957; Richins, 1983), it is thought to have a more powerful influence on consumers' evaluations than information received through commercial sources (i.e., advertising and even neutral print sources such as Consumer Reports; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). In addition, this influence appears to be asymmetrical because previous research suggests that negative WOMC has a stronger influence on customers' brand evaluations than positive WOMC (Arndt, 1967; Mizerski, 1982; Wright, 1974). Given the strength of negative, as opposed to positive WOMC, the study presented here focuses on the former type of information.

Our research develops and tests, using multiple studies, a set of hypotheses that describes consumers' attributional and evaluative responses to different types of negative-WOMC messages. The hypotheses posit that consumers will generate predictable patterns of attributional responses to negative-WOMC messages that are systematically varied in terms of information content. Furthermore, they predict that attributional responses will mediate the negative WOMC-brand evaluation relation. Finally, and similar to recent studies (cf. Herr et al., 1991), the hypotheses suggest consumer responses to negative WOMC are likely to be influenced by strength of the targeted brand's name.

This study extends research on negative WOMC in two important ways. First, whereas previous studies have typically examined receivers' responses to a summary statement of a focal brand's performance (cf. Bone, 1995; Herr et al., 1991), it is likely that the information contained in negative-WOMC messages is more complex than this. In this study, focal messages are manipulated to include three components of information besides the communicator's summary evaluation (Richins, 1984). Messages include information about the (a) consensus of others' views of the brand (besides the communicator), (b) consistency of the communicator's experiences with the brand over time, and (c) distinctiveness of the communicator's opinions of the focal brand versus other brands in the category. Interestingly, these types of information correspond to the information dimensions examined in Kelley's (1967) seminal work dealing with attribution theory. It is also important to note that although others have used this work to model individual responses to another's actions (e.g., observing someone's inability to dance), this study is the first that empirically extends Kelley's research into a context in which consumers interpret a conversation about a brand.

Second, whereas other studies have posited the existence of a direct relation between negative WOMC and postexposure brand evaluations (e.g., Arndt, 1967; Haywood, 1989; Katz & Lazearfield, 1955; Morin, 1983), our investigation examines the attributional process that explains this association. This approach is consistent with the thinking of several researchers (i.e., Bone, 1995; Herr et al., 1991; Smith & Vogt, 1995) who posited that cognitive mechanisms...
are important, as they can more fully explain the negative WOMC-brand evaluation linkage. Furthermore, this research is consistent with other studies that suggest (but do not test the notion) that receivers’ cognitive processing of negative WOMC involves causal attributional reasoning (cf. Folkes, 1988; Mizerski, Golden, & Kernan, 1979).

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Negative WOMC

Negative WOMC is defined as interpersonal communication concerning a marketing organization or product that denigrates the object of the communication (Richins, 1984; Weinberger, Allen, & Dillon, 1981). Negative WOMC potentially has a more powerful influence on consumer behavior than print sources, such as Consumer Reports, because individuals find it to be more accessible and diagnostic (Herr et al., 1991). In fact, research has suggested that negative WOMC has the power to influence consumers’ attitudes (Engel, Kegemeis, & Blackwell, 1969) and behaviors (e.g., Arndt, 1967; Haywood, 1989; Katz & Lazerfield, 1955).

Attributions as Responses to Negative WOMC

Because the transmission of negative WOMC involves interpersonal and informal processes, attribution theory appears to be particularly helpful in understanding a receiver’s interpretation of a sender’s motives for communicating such information (Hilton, 1995). The central theme underlying attribution theory is that causal analysis is inherent in an individual’s need to understand social events, such as why another person would communicate negative information about a brand (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967). For this study, causal attribution is defined as the cognition a receiver generates to infer the cause of a communicator’s generation of negative information (Calder & Burnkrant, 1977).

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed process consumers use to deal with negative WOMC. Specifically, it proposes two important influences on receivers’ attributional responses to negative-WOMC communication. First, the information conveyed by the sender in a negative-WOMC message is posited to influence receivers’ causal attributions. Second, brand-name strength of the focal brand is also thought to directly affect receivers’ causal attributions. These attributional responses, in turn, are expected to affect receivers’ brand evaluations. Therefore, this study suggests that attributions mediate the presupposed negative-WOMC–brand evaluation relation. Such a model is consistent with theoretical frameworks of interpersonal communication that suggest that attributions mediate an interpersonal message’s effect on a receiver’s evaluation of the focal object (e.g., Hilton, 1995).

There is additional support for the mediational role played by attributions in influencing individuals’ brand evaluations. For example, studies in the advertising literature have suggested that receivers generate causal attributions that in turn affect their evaluations of the advertised brand (e.g., Wiener & Mowen, 1986). In the performance evaluation literature, studies indicate that sales manager attributions of salesperson performance shape their reactions toward a salesperson (e.g., DeCarlo & Leigh, 1996). Thus, the following is proposed for receivers of negative WOMC:

H1: Causal attributions will mediate the effects of negative WOMC on brand evaluations.

Information Type and Causal Attributions

According to research in classical attribution theory (Kelley, 1967, 1973), the categories of causal attributions that people generate in response to information include: stimulus (i.e., brand, in this case), person (i.e., communicator, in this case), circumstance, or a combination of these three. The specific type of attributions generated by individuals, however, depends on the manner in which information is conveyed. According to attribution theory (Kelley, 1967) and other studies dealing with WOMC (e.g., Richins, 1984), a receiver is likely to use three important information dimensions to generate causal attributions: consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency. In a negative-WOMC context, the consensus dimension refers to the degree to which others are likely to agree with the negative views of the communicator. The distinctiveness dimension encapsulates the extent to which the communicator associates the negative information with a particular brand but not other brands. Finally, the consistency di-

1 Although attribution theory suggests that individuals have the potential to generate multiple and interactive attributional responses, this study focuses only on those attributions that are thought to have a significant impact on brand evaluations in the negative-WOMC context (i.e., brand and communicator attributions).
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