



# An examination of negative e-WOM adoption: Brand commitment as a moderator



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 26 May 2013

Received in revised form 6 October 2013

Accepted 28 November 2013

Available online 7 December 2013

### Keywords:

Attribution theory

Brand commitment

Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM)

Source credibility

## ABSTRACT

This study combines the Yale Model and Attribution Theory to examine the interaction among message, source, receiver characteristics, and receiver perceptions of information credibility. Receivers were examined as to whether negative messages would influence their perception and actual adoption. This was an experimental study that adopted Starbucks as the research context. 502 valid questionnaires were collected. The data analysis results indicated that both consensus and vividness led to information receivers forming external attributions and perceiving information as credible; receiver brand commitment had a moderating effect on both relationships. Additionally, external attributions about writers had a positive and direct relationship with source credibility but not with information credibility. Source credibility had a positive influence on receiver information credibility but not on negative e-WOM adoption. Based on the results and findings, this study suggested that companies should construct their own communication platform to collect negative consumer comments. In terms of brand commitment, they must establish brand commitment through marketing activities and corporate social responsibility policies in order to mitigate the effect of negative e-WOM messages.

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## 1. Introduction

The popularity of online communication and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) has become important in e-commerce, both of which produce information for potential customers that lead to a sense of trust [15]. E-WOM communications possess unprecedented scalability and speed of diffusion [11]. Especially compared to positive e-WOM, negative e-WOM will have a strong impact on purchase decisions. Chang et al. pointed out that online complaint messages against a company may be easily and rapidly distributed to a high volume of potential consumers [9], which in turn causes damage to the company's reputation.

In the online communication environment, consumers can view e-WOM information from many platforms, such as blogs, search engines, virtual communities, and consumer review systems, among others. Gu et al. pointed out that online consumer reviews (i.e., e-WOM) are important resources by which consumers seek product or service quality information [19]. However, why consumers are willing to believe and accept e-WOM messages shared by strangers is an interesting issue to both researchers and practitioners, especially negative e-WOM. Consumers generally suspect the credibility of both positive and negative e-WOM information because of a lack of personal knowledge about the motivations of unseen strangers [10]. However, Yoo et al. pointed out that, online shoppers are much more sensitive to negative e-WOM [53] because negative

information is more diagnostic and informative than positive information and thus is weighted more heavily in judgments than is positive information [4].

To judge the degree to which consumers are affected by negative e-WOM messages, this study uses information credibility and negative e-WOM adoption as the two outcome variables. If consumers believe and adopt what is said in the message, the possible effects will be changes in their attitudes, beliefs, and actions. Thus, a message learning approach, also called the Yale model, is adopted for the purpose of examining whether consumers are affected by negative e-WOM messages.

The Yale model proposed that in the entire communication process, people will be influenced by three components: message, source, and receiver. In online communication platforms, information receivers are directly affected by the received message; factors such as consensus and vividness will influence receivers' perceptions, whereas characteristics related to the message source are always limited because message writers can enjoy a certain level of anonymity. To resolve this issue, this study further adopts attribution theory and regards causal attributions as a concept of source characteristics. This means that information receivers will form attitudes toward the message writer (perceived as source credibility) on the basis of causal inferences they have made, and their attitude will then have an influence on the effectiveness of the message. In addition, Ahluwalia et al. proposed that prior consumer characteristics, such as brand commitment, will affect their processing and also the impact of negative publicity [1]. Thus, to investigate the interactions among message, source, and receiver, this study regards brand commitment as a receiver characteristic that also plays an important role in the communication process.

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Within the context of online communication or negative e-WOM, there are several research gaps that previous studies have not addressed. First, the Yale model can be viewed as a basic model in the communication field; however, it has typically been adopted in the offline environment, and there have been few studies extending the Yale model to the online communication context. Second, Cheung et al. used dual-process theory to examine topics concerning information credibility and adoption and adopted the Yale model concept to decide the informational determinants [12]. However, they did not take the information attribution process of receivers into account after reading a message. Hilton mentioned that attribution theory appears to be particularly helpful in regard to understanding a receiver's interpretation of a writer's motives for sharing a message [20]. On the contrary, Lee and Song adopted attribution theory to examine the effects of online complaints on receiver perceptions and company evaluations, but they did not consider factors such as information credibility and adoption [31]. Lastly, Funk and Pritchard pointed out that strong commitment holds an inherent structural bias that favors the parsimonious processing of information, especially when diagnosing negative information [14]. In the e-WOM context, message receivers should inherently have brand preferences; however, a receiver who is highly committed to a brand may resist undesirable information about that particular brand. In line with this concept, previous studies have demonstrated that commitment can moderate the effectiveness of negative information [32] but have only demonstrated a macro moderating effect, thus not providing studies with more detailed examination.

To address these research gaps and answer the research question, in this study, a framework is developed by extending the Yale model and combining it with attribution theory in which external attributions are taken as the source characteristic, and subsequently, the impact of negative e-WOM messages is investigated. In addition, this study also explores the moderating role receiver brand commitment plays in regard to information processing. The research objectives are as follows:

- (1) The main purpose of this study is to examine the influences of message characteristics (consensus and vividness) on receivers making external attributions about the writer as well as perceiving information credibility.
- (2) The influences of external attributions about the writer on a receiver's perceptions of information credibility and source credibility.
- (3) The direct effect among two credibility perceptions (source credibility & information credibility) and receiver's intention to adopt a negative e-WOM message.
- (4) The moderating effect of brand commitment on the effectiveness of a negative e-WOM message.

## 2. Theoretical background

Over the years, many theories have explained how people are influenced after receiving related information, including the Yale model, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and the Heuristic Systematic Model (HSM). ELM and HSM have been used to investigate different levels/depths of information processing, such as in Tam and Ho [48] and Koh and Sundar [28]. Accordingly, both ELM and HSM posit two routes (the central vs. peripheral route and the systematic vs. heuristic route) for judging the persuasiveness of messages. That is, when the elaboration likelihood level increases, the effects of central factors on information readers' perception, attitudes or beliefs will also be enhanced, whereas the effects of peripheral factors become less important, and vice versa [33]. They emphasized how message receivers are persuaded (e.g., through central or peripheral cues) and the ability of receivers to understand the presented message. However, the Yale model covers components, such as message (information), source (writer), channel (place), and audience (receiver or reader) that affect people's attention, comprehension, and acceptance of a message, which is a more

comprehensive method by which to explain the messages being transmitted. It not only emphasizes how the messages are being exposed, but also how messages are retained by receivers and the consequences of consumer reaction [44].

In the e-WOM context, consumers can read most messages online. However, how consumers are persuaded by online messages that are shared by someone they do not know and why they accept and retain messages for subsequent reactions is the main issue being discussed in the current study. Thus, relative to ELM and HSM, the Yale model is more suitable for this purpose. This study regards the writer as someone who writes and shares opinions in an online communication environment, and it regards the receivers as the people who hear, read, and receive the online message.

### 2.1. The Yale model

The Yale model, also called the Yale Persuasive Communication model (YPC model) was developed by Hovland et al. [22]. It identifies several processes of persuasive communication (e.g., exposure, attention, comprehension, acceptance, retention, and action). In online communication environments, the components preceding the persuasive communication process include the source (message originator), the message (information content), the medium used (or channel), and the receiver (person who receives the information). Possible effects of the interaction among these components and processes are the receiver's changes in beliefs, attitudes, and behavior [44]. There are several message factors that may influence the effectiveness of the communication process, such as the order of arguments, the explicitness of requests, and the use of emotional appeals [44].

The source is where the information comes from. The credibility of a source is a critical element with regard to affecting attitudes. According to Hovland et al., factors such as expertise, trustworthiness, and status determine source credibility [22]. The Yale model argues that receiver characteristics will also affect communication effectiveness (e.g., an individual's ability to persuade, as well as the individual's intelligence and personality) [44]. Considering that the focus of this study is the effect of negative WOM messages in the online communication environment, message channels are not taken into account. Thus, in the case of either online discussion forums or blogs, only one channel will be adopted to examine the persuasiveness of negative e-WOM messages.

The three major components of persuasive communication process are elaborated as follows:

- (1) Message characteristic-consensus and vividness

*Message characteristics*, which are an important component in the Yale model, comprise a numbers of factors, such as message framing, the length of a message, presentation style, and other factors that are related to the message content. Referring to Lee and Song, the current study adopted consensus and vividness as two message characteristics to examine attribution and company evaluation under the negative e-WOM context [31].

*Consensus* is the extent that people act in a same way in a situation or toward a particular stimulus [38,47]. In the negative WOM context, consensus refers to the degree to which others are likely to agree with the negative views of the communicator [29]. Because online communication platforms enable users to reply to the messages they read as well as the replies made by other receivers, receivers can easily compare message content on the Internet. This study follows the definition of Laczniak et al. [29] and assesses message content by the replies of different receivers. When the replies support the writer's opinions, the consensus level is high, and vice versa.

*Vividness* is the information capacity to attract and hold attention in order to excite imagination [31]. As defined by Steuer, vividness relates to the breadth and depth of a message [43]. Message breadth is the number of sensory dimensions, cues, and senses

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