

Implications of erroneous product reviews by product-enthusiast communicators

James D. Doyle, Ph.D. (**contact author**)
School of Business
The University of North Carolina at Pembroke
P.O. Box 1510
Pembroke, North Carolina
28372
Tel.: (910) 521-6871
Fax: (910) 521-6750
Email: james.doyle@uncp.edu

Louise A. Heslop, Ph.D.
Sprott School of Business
Carleton University
1125 Colonel By Drive
Ottawa, Ontario
K1S 5B6
Canada
Tel.: (613) 520-2600, ext. 2378
Fax: (613) 520-2532
Email: louise_heslop@carleton.ca

Implications of Erroneous Product Reviews by Product-Enthusiast Communicators

James D. Doyle, The University of North Carolina at Pembroke
Louise A. Heslop, Carleton University

It is revealed through a between-subjects experiment that “blogger error” produces blameworthiness cognitions as well as specific affective states that together facilitate intentions in offended blog readers to engage in revenge-seeking behaviors directed at the offending blogger. Blogger error represents a negative occurrence to offended blog readers who, depending on the blame they assign and feelings of anger and dissatisfaction they experience, may seek to inflict harm on the offending blogger in the forms of negative word-of-mouth communication and online public complaining behaviors. Word-of-mouth marketing, a growing managerial practice that involves material relationships between consumers and organizations which must be disclosed to audience members, can be harmful to bloggers who, whether intentionally or not, publish erroneous content on their blogs.

Introduction

Motivated consumers seek accurate product information to inform their decisions, develop a knowledge base for potential future application, and perhaps even gain membership in communities of product enthusiasts and experts. In the Web 2.0 era, an increasingly diverse community of information sources attempts to satisfy this information-based market need by disseminating hedonic and utilitarian product claims through a widening array of channels. Blogs and the commercial, quasi commercial, and non-commercial information sources (i.e., “bloggers”) who write them are key players in the online product information environment. Blogs are frequently updated online collections of the ideas and experiences of bloggers presented in reverse chronological sequence through text, imagery, and audio/video objects.

Structural and blogger-specific characteristics of the blogosphere make inaccurate blog content (i.e., “blogger error”) a realistic prospect. From a structural perspective, a computer, internet access, and a claim to disseminate are all that are needed in order for an individual to write a blog. From a blogger perspective, knowledge bias and reporting bias mean that, either due to perceived inadvertence or perceived deceptive intent, content disseminated by a blogger may fail to accord with external reality. Trust is therefore an essential characteristic of productive blogger-blog reader relationships. Trust is particularly relevant to blogger-blog reader relationships in which the claims of the blogger are experiential in nature. In a product context, it has long been recognized that consumers are wary of claims that either can only be assessed through or after product consumption or that cannot ever be assessed. As with what are termed “experience goods” such as movies, claim recipients can practically only determine the accuracy of an experiential claim by acting on it and judging if it accords with external reality.

If acting on a claim is a manifestation of trust, then it can be expected that blogger error (e.g., a movie review that overstates how entertaining or historically accurate the movie is) may deteriorate trust in the relationship between an offending blogger and its readers. However, studies of the consequences of service failure offer evidence suggesting that the consequences of blogger error may extend beyond decreased trust intentions (e.g., Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009; Wetzer, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2007). Direct and indirect revenge-seeking behaviors are steps that offended individuals can take to inflict harm upon or otherwise perpetrate a transgression against a perceived initial transgressor (Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009; Weiner 2000; Wetzer, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2007). Direct and indirect revenge-seeking behaviors are subtly distinguished on the basis of whether or not they involve personal interaction between the revenge seeker and the individual or organization from which revenge is sought (Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010). In the blogosphere, negative word-of-mouth communication is a viable indirect revenge-seeking behavior (Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010). Online public complaining has been investigated as a type of negative word-of-mouth communication that differs from convention in that it has a mass-public orientation and is capable of reaching a large audience (Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010).

Literature Review And Hypotheses

Blameworthiness and blogger error

Blameworthiness for a negative occurrence can be defined as the extent to which an offended party perceives the offending party as being accountable for the events that lead to the negative occurrence (Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp, 2010). When a negative event occurs, offended parties commence an attributional search in order to develop a plausible causal explanation for the event (Weiner, 2000). In this context, blog readers are expected to consider the intangible or latent qualities of the blogger (e.g., character and motives) in order to assess the extent to which the blogger is deserving of blame for the error. It is expected that the content of the erroneous message, as well as the background of the communicator, will be considered during this attributional search.

Prior research distinguishes between utility and hedonism in and deriving from product or service consumption. Utilitarian consumption, or consumption that produces utilitarian value, is outcome based, task related, functional, and instrumental in nature. By contrast, hedonic consumption, or consumption that produces hedonic value, is experience based, non-task related, entertaining, and emotional in nature. Product enthusiasts are typical communicators of product reviews in the blogosphere. Product enthusiasts are characterized by high product-related passion, zeal,

enduring involvement, loyalty, and consumption experience, even if they lack formal subject-matter education, experience, and accomplishments.

Given that movies have both enjoyment-providing hedonic and utilitarian characteristics, two possible states exist in the relationship between a product enthusiast blogger and the movie reviews he or she disseminates. A state of claim-source accordance exists when this particular blogger disseminates claims about hedonic product dimensions (e.g., fun, excitement), whereas a state of claim-source discordance exists when this particular blogger makes claims about utilitarian product dimensions (e.g., historical accuracy). Thus, accordance (discordance) occurs when the content of a product review is matched with the background of the blogger; product enthusiasts are presumed to know more about hedonic than utilitarian product dimensions. Under a state of claim-source accordance (discordance), it is expected that blog readers would hold the blogger more (less) blameworthy for the error, as the blogger would (not) have been expected by blog readers to possess the ability to make accurate remarks about the product. Under a state of claim-source discordance, it is expected that blog readers would hold the blogger less accountable for the error, since the potential for honest inadvertence would be relatively high.

H1: The perceived blameworthiness of the product-enthusiast blogger for an erroneous review of the hedonic merit of the product is greater than for a review of the utilitarian merit of the product.

Blogger blameworthiness is also expected to vary according to whether or not the blogger discloses participation in a word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) campaign to blog readers. Even though it is recognized that the stimulation of favorable word-of-mouth communication is a key marketing responsibility, emerging practices involve unprecedented “amplification” (i.e., intervention by marketers in word-of-mouth exchanges between consumers; Kozinets et al. 2010). Although the Word of Mouth Marketing Association asserts that WOMM is not about “*creating* word of mouth” (emphasis added), but rather “building active, mutually beneficial consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-marketer communications” (2007), Kozinets et al. (2010) argue that WOMM involves intentional application of marketing tactics in order to influence word-of-mouth communication among consumers. In the United States, bloggers who receive compensation from companies for reviewing their products or providing product endorsements are required to disclose that material connection to their readers (Federal Trade Commission 2009).

Attribution theory offers a conceptual rationale for expecting disclosed involvement in a WOMM campaign to positively relate to the extent to which offended blog readers blame a blogger for an error it commits, since WOMM would seem to imply the possession of reporting bias. In contrast, the blogger who makes no WOMM disclosure may be perceived to possess a desire to help consumers and to have the freedom to make honest remarks about the product, even if the remarks are negative. By extension, the blogger who does not make a disclosure of its participation in a WOMM campaign may receive a relatively low level of blame for blogger error, with offended blog readers conceivably attributing the error to simple inadvertence or an acceptable difference of otherwise sincere opinions.

H2: The perceived blameworthiness of the WOMM blogger for the blogger error is greater than that of the non-WOMM blogger.

Anger, dissatisfaction, and blogger error

Negative occurrences are noted for producing emotions of anger and dissatisfaction (e.g., Wetzer, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2007). Anger is defined as an emotional state characterized by aggressive other-directed feelings, thoughts, and action tendencies (Bougie, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2003). Anger and dissatisfaction have been found to correlate positively with each other, but dissatisfaction is characterized as a general negative affective state that does not depend on the manner by which a negative event occurred but simply on the perception that an unexpected negative event occurred that was caused by somebody else or by an uncontrollable circumstance (Bougie, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2003; Wetzer, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2007).

H3: The perceived blameworthiness of the blogger relates positively to the (a) anger and (b) dissatisfaction experienced by blog readers as a result of blogger error.

Anger and dissatisfaction are also expected to relate negatively to the perceived accuracy of the product review. Irrespective of the cause of the error, low perceived product review accuracy implies risk of loss to blog readers because the experiential nature of the claim means that the error cannot really be known by the blog reader until he or she has invested resources in evaluating the accuracy of the claim.

H4: The perceived accuracy of the product review relates negatively to the (a) anger and (b) dissatisfaction experienced by blog readers as a result of blogger error.

Negative word-of-mouth communication, online public complaining, and blogger error

Blogger blameworthiness is expected to relate positively to the extent to which offended blog readers develop behavioral intentions to engage in negative word-of-mouth communication and online public complaining as a result of blogger error. In this study, negative word-of-mouth communication is conceptualized as negatively valenced communication in a non-public setting (i.e., disseminated to personally known recipients), whereas online public complaining is conceptualized as negatively valenced communication in a mass-public setting (Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010). Compared to uncontrollable external attributions, Weiner (2000, p. 385) states that “external attributions that are controllable are much more damaging. They do not lead merely to exit and going away from, but rather they give rise to active actions, or going against.” For this reason, it is expected that higher levels of blame will be associated with higher intent to harm the online reputation of the blogger.

H5: The perceived blameworthiness of the blogger relates positively to the intentions of blog readers to engage in (a) negative word-of-mouth communication and (b) online public complaining as a result of blogger error.

In addition, the perceived accuracy of the product review is expected to relate negatively to negative word-of-mouth communication and online public complaining intentions. Such intentions are (not) expected when blog readers attribute the message with low (high) accuracy, since the size of the error (i.e., degree of inaccuracy) is likely to function as a key driver of the extent to which blog readers have something to exact revenge for.

H6: The perceived accuracy of the product review relates negatively to the intentions of blog readers to engage in (a) negative word-of-mouth communication and (b) online public complaining as a result of blogger error.

Finally, anger and dissatisfaction are also expected to relate positively to negative word-of-mouth communication and online public complaining intentions. Prior research shows that affective outcomes of service failure are predictive of retaliatory behaviours in response to negative occurrences.

H7: (A) Anger and (b) dissatisfaction relate positively to the intentions of blog readers to engage in (i) negative word-of-mouth communication and (ii) online public complaining.

Methodology

A 2 x 2 (WOMM disclosure versus no WOMM disclosure; hedonic versus utilitarian product review) between-subjects experiment involving 159 research participants facilitated hypothesis testing. Constructs were measured using seven-point scales on which high values indicate high blameworthiness assignments, feelings of disappointment, anger, and dissatisfaction, as well as negative word-of-mouth communication and online public complaining intentions. Movies were selected as the product category for this research as a pretest ($n = 184$) indicated consumers would be disappointed if a movie review they read overstated the merits of the movie ($M = 4.02$; $S.D. = 1.57$).

Research participants were exposed to a gender- and age-neutral “About Me” statement by a product enthusiast blogger and a favourable movie review. Research participants exposed to the WOMM treatment received the following disclosure statement: “Disclosure: I am compensated with movie tickets, merchandise, and other promotional material by the makers of this movie for writing and posting reviews of its movies on my blog.” A movie scenario focusing on a romantic relationship between an American soldier and an Afghan aid worker in an orphanage in Afghanistan was developed for use in this study. The scenario was pretested and assessed (all Cronbach alphas $> .90$) as being realistically exciting, sensual, educational, and appealing (all means > 4.29). Hedonic and utilitarian movie reviews were developed to be similar to those on blogs and related media. Pretests of the strength, quality, understandability, positive valence, hedonic appeal, and realism (all Cronbach alphas $> .78$) of the movie two reviews resulted in moderate-to-high scores (all means > 3.5 , $ps < .05$) that did not significantly differ from each other (all $ps > .1$). Since the “About Me” statement described a blogger with high consumption experience, the hedonic (utilitarian) movie review condition served to provide a state of claim-source accord (discordance) for the purpose of testing H1.

Blameworthiness, anger, dissatisfaction, movie review accuracy, negative word-of-mouth communication intentions, and online public complaining intentions were measured after research participants were advised of the erroneous nature of the movie review. The blameworthiness of the blogger was assessed with four items (Cronbach $\alpha = .97$) adapted from related research (e.g., Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp, 2010). Blameworthiness assignments were moderate under both the hedonic movie review ($M = 3.14$, $S.D. = 1.76$) and the utilitarian movie review ($M = 3.15$, $S.D. = 1.63$) conditions, with no significant difference observed between them ($F(1,157) = .004$, $p > .1$). Error-induced anger and dissatisfaction were respectively assessed as the extent to which research participants were angry, mad, and outraged (3 items; Cronbach $\alpha = .93$) as well as disappointed, dissatisfied, discontented, and displeased (4 items; Cronbach $\alpha = .93$). Negative word-of-mouth communication (3 items; Cronbach $\alpha = .91$) and online public complaining (Cronbach $\alpha = .96$) intentions measures were drawn

from research on the retaliatory responses of consumers to perceived service failures and trust violations (e.g., Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp, 2010). Behavioral responses to blogger error were moderate ($M_{Neg. WOM} = 2.96$, $S.D. = 1.78$; $M_{Online complaining} = 2.08$, $S.D. = 1.85$).

Results

Across all conditions, a moderate level of blameworthiness was assigned to the blogger ($M = 3.15$, $S.D. = 1.69$), suggesting the relevance of the blameworthiness cognition as a response to blogger error. H1 predicted that the blameworthiness of the blogger would be higher for its erroneous review of the hedonic merit of the movie than for the utilitarian merit of the movie. H2 predicted that the blogger who made the WOMM disclosure would receive higher blameworthiness ratings than the blogger who did not make the WOMM disclosure. A two-way ANOVA was used to test hypotheses 1 and 2. No evidence was observed of an interaction effect between movie review type and WOMM treatment on the perceived blameworthiness of the blogger ($F(1,155) = .06$, $p > .1$). The ANOVA failed to reveal support for H1, since there was no significant difference between the blameworthiness of the blogger who reviewed the hedonic merit of the movie ($M_{Hedonic} = 3.14$, $S.D. = 1.76$) and that of the blogger who reviewed the utilitarian merit of the movie ($M_{Utilitarian} = 3.15$, $S.D. = 1.63$; $F(1,155) = .01$, $p > .1$).

In contrast, H2 was supported by the analysis. The blogger who made the WOMM disclosure to readers garnered more blame ($M_{WOMM} = 3.54$, $S.D. = 1.69$) than the blogger who did not make the WOMM disclosure ($M_{No WOMM} = 2.74$, $S.D. = 1.61$; $F(1,155) = 9.15$, $p < .01$). This blameworthiness finding implies serious consequences for this particular marketing practice when error occurs. At the same time, however, additional analyses failed to show the WOMM blogger receiving more negative affective responses to blogger error than the non-WOMM blogger ($M_{Difference - Anger} = .41$, $p > .05$; $M_{Difference - Dissatisfaction} = .31$, $p > .1$). Perhaps even more important is that the additional analysis did not show the WOMM blogger receiving higher negative word-of-mouth communication intentions or online public complaining intentions than the blogger who did not make the WOMM disclosure ($M_{Difference - Neg. Comm.} = .26$, $p > .1$; $M_{Difference - Online public complaining} = .39$, $p > .05$).

Bivariate correlations were inspected and multiple regression analysis was used to test hypotheses 3 and 4; regression results are shown in Table 1. Anger and dissatisfaction were examined as two affective outcomes of blogger error and the hypothesized relationships between blogger blameworthiness and these affective outcomes (H3a and H3b) were supported by the analysis. Blogger blameworthiness was observed to possess positive relationships with feelings of anger ($r = .40$, $p < .001$) and dissatisfaction ($r = .33$, $p < .001$) caused by blogger error.

Table 1. Multiple regression analysis results

| IVs | Anger | | Dissat. | | Negative WOM | | Online public complaining | |
|-------|------------|-----|------------|-----|--------------|---------|---------------------------|-----|
| | β | t | β | t | β | t | β | t |
| Blame | .425.87*** | | .334.36*** | | .24 | 3.27*** | .293.89*** | |

| | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|------------|---------|----------|----------|---------|-----|--------|
| Accuracy | .253.48*** | .06 | .75 | -.22 | -3.05** | .07 | 1.01 |
| Anger | - | - | - | .18 | 1.83* | .28 | 2.81** |
| Dissatisfaction | - | - | - | .23 | 2.50** | .08 | .86 |
| Adjusted R^2 | .21 | | .10 | .29 | | .27 | |
| F value | 21.59*** | 9.55*** | 16.94*** | 15.61*** | | | |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

The perceived accuracy of the movie review was not observed to possess the hypothesized relationship with anger (H4a) and dissatisfaction (H4b). Perceived movie review accuracy was not significantly related to the feeling of dissatisfaction caused by blogger error ($r = .03$, $p > .1$) and, curiously, was positively related to the feeling of anger caused by blogger error ($r = .21$, $p < .01$). It is apparent that the negative affective outcomes of blogger error derive more from the perceived reasons for the error than from the size of the error.

Negative word-of-mouth communication and online public complaining were assessed as two behavioral outcomes of blogger error in this study. No evidence of an interaction effect between WOMM type and movie review type was observed for either negative word-of-mouth communication intentions ($F(1,155) = .24$, $p > .1$) or online public complaining intentions ($F(1,155) = .002$, $p > .1$). Relationships between blogger blameworthiness, movie review accuracy, two affective outcomes of blogger error, and these two behavioral intentions were inspected. Results are shown in Table 1. As predicted, blogger blameworthiness is a positive antecedent of both negative word-of-mouth communication and online public complaining intentions. H5 was therefore supported by the analysis.

The analysis revealed movie review accuracy to possess a complex relationship with negative word-of-mouth communication and online complaining intentions. As expected, the perceived accuracy of the movie review was found to possess a negative relationship with intentions to engage in negative word-of-mouth communication. H6a was therefore supported by the analysis. In contrast, movie review accuracy was not observed to possess a significant relationship with online complaining intentions. H6b was therefore not supported by the analysis.

H7 predicted that (a) anger and (b) dissatisfaction would positively relate to the intentions of blog readers to engage in (i) negative word-of-mouth communication as well as (ii) online public complaining. Consistent with H7a(i) and H7a(ii), anger was observed to relate positively to both behavioral intentions. H7b(i) was also supported, but H7b(ii) was not.

Discussion

Blogger error and its implications for blog readers and bloggers have not been examined in prior research. The blameworthiness implications of WOMM are among the important contributions of this study. Indeed, the anger and dissatisfaction produced by blogger error appear more related to how the error occurred than to the size of the error. Bloggers and the organizations that enlist them in a WOMM capacity must recognize that, in the context of blogger error, offended readers appear relatively unwilling to accept inadvertence, uncontrollable factors (e.g., a technical glitch), or a legitimate opinion difference as plausible causes of the error in the WOMM condition as compared to the non-WOMM condition. As this research indicates, blameworthiness is an essential cognition for its relationships with both the affective

and behavioral responses to blogger error. Anger, dissatisfaction, negative word-of-mouth communication intentions, and online public complaining intentions were all observed to relate to the extent to which offended blog readers found the blogger worthy of blame for the error.

Based on these results, bloggers may be tempted to take precautions against receiving blame in the event of blogger error. However, WOMM bloggers should not conceal the material connections that join them to their corporate sponsors. In general, precautions should be taken so as to minimize the probability of blogger error in the first place.

References

- Bougie, Roger, Rik Pieters, and Marcel Zeelenberg (2003), "Angry Customers Don't Come Back, They Get Back: The Experience and Behavioral Implications of Anger and Dissatisfaction in Services," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 31(4), 377-393.
- Federal Trade Commission. (2009), "FTC Publishes Final Guides Governing Endorsements, Testimonials," (accessed March 5, 2011), [available at <http://www.ftc.gov/opa/2009/10/endortest.shtm>].
- Grégoire, Yany, Daniel Laufer, and Thomas Tripp (2010), "A Comprehensive Model of Customer Direct and Indirect Revenge: Understanding the Effects of Perceived Greed and Customer Power," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 38, 738-758.
- Grégoire, Yany, Thomas Tripp, and Renaud Legoux (2009), "When Customer Love Turns Into Lasting Hate: The Effects of Relationship Strength and Time on Customer Revenge and Avoidance," *Journal of Marketing*, 73(Nov.), 18-32.
- Kozinets, Robert, Kristine de Valck, Andrea Wojnicki, and Sarah Wilner (2010), "Networked Narratives: Understanding Word-Of-Mouth Marketing in Online Communities," *Journal of Marketing*, 74(March), 71-89.
- Weiner, Bernard (2000), "Attributional thoughts About Consumer Behavior," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27(3), 382-387.
- Wetzer, Inge, Marcel Zeelenberg, and Rik Pieters (2007), "'Never Eat in That Restaurant, I Did!': Exploring Why People Engage in Negative Word-Of-Mouth Communication," *Psychology & Marketing*, 24(8), 661-680.
- Word of Mouth Marketing Association (2007), "WOM 101," (accessed March 5, 2011), [available at <http://womma.org/wom101/wom101.pdf>]

