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Clinton Amos
Weber State University

Skyler King
Weber State University

Anthony Allred
Weber State University

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An Investigation into How the Modes of Persuasion and Valence affect Perceptions of Online Reviews

Clinton Amos, Weber State University, Ogden, UT

Skyler King, Weber State University, Ogden, UT

Anthony Allred, Weber State University, Ogden, UT

ABSTRACT

Consumers ubiquitously rely on assessments provided by strangers when seeking knowledge or making consumption decisions. Whether buying a car or a toaster, or choosing a restaurant, most consumers would feel lost if they attempted to make these decisions without first seeking verification via an online review. Despite the importance of online reviews in consumers' daily lives, research on the effectiveness of online reviews is still in elementary stages and questions remain regarding how online review content style affects consumer judgments. Correspondingly, little is known about how message construction (e.g., rhetorical strategies) affects consumer judgments. Using an experimental design, this paper provides a valuable contribution to online review literature by examining the effects of Aristotle's three modes of persuasion (referred to as "modes" in the manuscript: ethos, pathos, and logos), in conjunction with valence (positive vs. negative), on review usefulness and trustworthiness.

To conduct the experiment, a full-factorial between-subjects design was used, resulting in 14 discrete conditions based on modes and valence combinations. In addition, general attitude towards online reviews was included as a control variable. Extensive pretesting and a pilot study were employed to refine stimuli and study design. The study was administered via Qualtrics and TurkPrime to collect data from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) participants with recommended precautions for improving sample quality (e.g., restrict to one IP address). The MTurk data collection resulted in 893 usable questionnaires after accounting for the attention and manipulation checks and sample sizes per cell ranged from 59 to 67 participants. MANCOVA was used to assess manipulation effects on review uselessness and trustworthiness. Multivariate significance was demonstrated for modes, the attitudinal control variable, and valence while univariate results further indicate that both modes and valence significantly affected usefulness and trustworthiness perceptions. Examination of pairwise comparisons suggest a superior positive effect for the logos appeal on both usefulness and trustworthiness. When taking into account valence, results revealed that the superior positive effect of the logos appeal seems to be isolated to negative reviews.

This study's findings highlight the value consumers place on logos appeals over other appeals for negative reviews in an online review context. Organizations should be relieved that participants found pathos appeals in negative reviews to be less trustworthy and usefulness. A supplementary analysis suggests that people perceive pathos-laden negative reviews to be left by a "bad" customer. Organizations and online review platforms should consider using message framing strategies to increase the likelihood of logos appeals to enhance the value that reviews have for consumers.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Clinton Amos (PhD, University of North Texas) is an Associate Professor of Marketing at Weber State University. He has authored numerous publications in outlets such as the Journal of Advertising, Journal of Consumer Affairs, and European Journal of Marketing, among others.

Skyler King (PhD, Washington State University) is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Weber State University. King's research focuses on non-profit marketing, consumer financial decision making and consumer time orientation and has appeared in the Journal of Non-Profit and Public Sector Marketing and Social and Personality Psychology Compass, among others.

Anthony Allred (PhD, Oklahoma State University) is a Professor of Marketing at Weber State University. His cross-disciplinary research focuses on consumer behavior, service quality and nonprofit marketing. He has authored numerous publications in periodicals such as the Journal of Consumer Marketing, Journal of Product and Brand Management, Journal of International Consumer Marketing, Journal of Nonprofit and Public Sector Marketing and many others.