

DIFFERENCE OF OPINION OR SOMETHING SINISTER? CONTEXT EFFECTS ON CONSUMER RESPONSES TO EXPOSURE TO ERRONEOUS PRODUCT INFORMATION IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

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ABSTRACT

The implications of exposure to erroneous product information in the blogosphere are profound. In retaliation, consumers can post claim-related counterarguments on the offending blog and negative product-related information on a product review website. Using a scenario-based between-subjects experiment, we observe that retaliatory action depends largely on blame directed toward the blogger and the associated organization as well as feelings of anger aroused by the situation. When a consumer recognizes that product information contained in a blog post is erroneous, blame directed toward the blogger is strongest when the blogger made a utilitarian-based product claim that is aligned with the relevant expertise area as well as when the blogger made a compensation disclosure. On the organization side, blame similarly depends on the compensation disclosure. Although blame is the essential cognitive driver of retaliatory action, this study establishes that the experience of anger partially mediates the effect of blame on retaliatory action. When an affected consumer takes retaliatory action, an orientation toward relationship strengthening and brand building may be the most effective means of responding to the situation.

Keywords: Product claim; error; blogger; expertise; word-of-mouth marketing; consumer dissatisfaction; blame; anger; retaliation.

INTRODUCTION

When they turn to the blogosphere for product information, consumers are exposed to

persuasion attempts embedded in the posts of commercial, noncommercial, and, increasingly, quasi-commercial “bloggers” (Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007; Wei, Fischer, and Main 2008). Owing to the interactive nature of the blogosphere, consumers can also access product information in the comments left by readers in response to the posts. Ostensibly, the information provided by bloggers is based on bona fide product-relevant expertise and experience, but the open editorial environment of the blogosphere raises concern that blog content may not always match external reality (e.g., false word-of-mouth communication; Naylor 2016). Indeed, bloggers do not always verify the accuracy of the claims they embed in their posts (Lenhart and Fox 2006). Depending on how consumers assess the cause of the erroneous product information, it may be judged a breach of domain norms, the blogger deceitful, and the associated organization a willing conspirator (Craig, Loureiro, Wood, and Vendemia 2012; Gelbrich 2010; Gilpin, Palazzolo, and Brody 2010; Papacharissi and Meraz 2012).

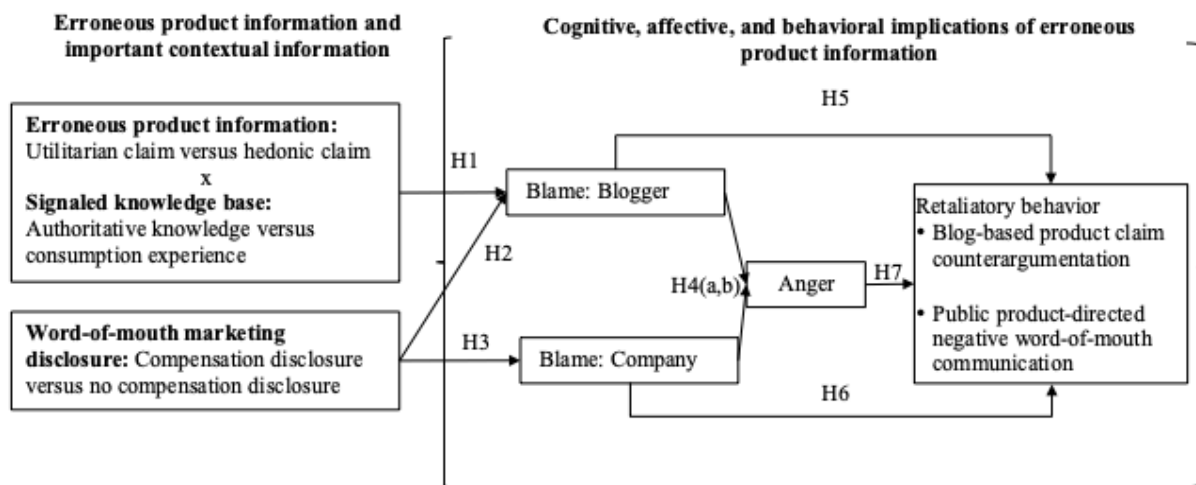
The specific objective of this research is to examine the direct and indirect consequences of communicating erroneous product information through a blog post for affected consumers as well as for the subsequent persuasiveness of the information and the broader market performance of the product. Accordingly, this study aims to complement existing research on dissatisfying marketplace experiences (e.g., deceptive advertising, service failure; Agarwal, Mehrotra, and Barger 2016; Blodgett, Bakir, Saklani, Bachheti, and Bhaskar 2015; Darke and Ritchie 2007; Grégoire, Tripp,

and Legoux 2009; Hunt 1991; Iglesias 2009; Stephens and Gwinner 1998; Umashankar, Srinivasan, and Parker 2016; Wetzer, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2007; Yan and Lotz 2009) by examining how the context surrounding the communication of erroneous product information by a blogger impacts assessments of and responses to it (Figure 1). As the research framework shows, blame, which is expected to fundamentally drive the ensuing outcomes of anger and retaliation, is hypothesized to reflect the content of the erroneous product information assessed against the signaled knowledge base of the blogger as well as the presence versus absence of a word-of-mouth marketing disclosure.

More particularly, this study contributes to our understanding of dissatisfying marketplace experiences by studying when they occur at the hands of a non-marketer entity (Libai, Bolton, Bügel, de Ruyter, Götz, Risselada, and Stephen 2010). Consumer victimization has seen thorough investigation in

prior research, but concertgoers, tourists, hospital patients, and customers across an array of other industries will recognize that fellow consumers can play a vital role in making a consumption experience either satisfying or dissatisfying. As explained below, this study addresses the blame-based consequences of error when it occurs under varying claim-source alignment and word-of-mouth marketing configurations, and is structured as follows. First, hypotheses concerning the outcomes of consumer exposure to erroneous blogger-communicated product information are developed. Second, a detailed description of an experiment-based approach for testing hypotheses is provided. Third, results of hypothesis testing are presented. Finally, remarks with respect to marketing management, research methodology, and future research opportunities are made.

FIGURE 1
Research Framework



THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Blame

A variety of theoretical perspectives shed light on the cognitive processes at play when a dissatisfying marketplace experience occurs (e.g., attributional cognition, Weiner 2000; persuasion knowledge, Friestad and Wright 1994; theory-of-mind, Craig, et al. 2012; expectation disconfirmation, Dahl and Peltier 2015; Oliver 1981). Collectively, these perspectives and supporting evidence from recent research (e.g., use of fMRI; Craig, et al. 2012) indicate that context may impact blame-related decision making by affected consumers (e.g., causal locus, causal controllability; Bonifield and Cole 2007; Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010; Heider 1958; Weiner 2000; Xie and Keh 2016; Xie, Madrigal, and Boush 2015). Here, the trust-related qualities of the blogger viewed against the content focus of the erroneous product information may be relevant to blame-related decision making. Accordingly, we examine if the level of blame assigned to the blogger and the organization whose product the erroneous information concerned is influenced by, firstly, the match or lack thereof between the focus of the information (hedonic or utilitarian characteristics) and the ability base claimed by the blogger (authoritative knowledge or consumption experience), and secondly, whether or not the blogger discloses receiving compensation for the blog claim.

Claim-Source Alignment and Blame.

A substantial body of research shows that effective persuasion requires alignment between the various elements of a persuasion attempt (e.g., Fleck, Korchia, and Le Roy 2012; Friedman and Friedman 1979; Mishra, Roy, and Bailey 2015). In the blogosphere, a blogger will be most persuasive making a claim that aligns with the knowledge base upon which the blogger is positioned (termed here “claim-

source alignment”) versus a claim that does not align with that knowledge base (“misalignment”). A blogger associated with a high level of authoritative knowledge making an original claim which to be accurate would require that knowledge base (i.e., alignment) would typically achieve greater persuasive impact than a blogger lacking that level of authoritative knowledge (i.e., misalignment). Particularly for claims that cannot be independently verified absent consumption (e.g., an experience claim), alignment functions as an important credibility cue and potential mechanism for achieving a particular persuasion objective.

To achieve an association with a particular knowledge base, a blogger can embed trustworthiness-related ability signals in the “About Me” area of the blog (Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Doyle, Heslop, Ramirez, and Cray 2012a; Doyle, Heslop, Ramirez, Cray, and Armenakyan 2012b; Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995). Signal content differs according to the intended authoritative knowledge or consumption experience position of the blogger; whereas a blogger pursuing an ability reputation based on authoritative knowledge may emphasize category-relevant education and employment experience, a consumption experience blogger can stress heavy product usage, category involvement, and user community membership.

While signals of authoritative knowledge and consumption experience may ordinarily facilitate persuasion (Doyle, et al. 2012b), this blog content may actually may be held against the blogger once error is discovered. When it is determined that the blogger-communicated product information is erroneous, the above-mentioned credibility cues may translate into an assessment that the blogger “should have known better” (high level of blame). Specifically, a blogger who emphasizes category-relevant expertise who errors within that category (i.e.,

alignment) may be the recipient of a particularly severe blame assignment. By comparison, a perception of misalignment may trigger a relatively mild blame assignment, reflecting an attribution of inadvertence. Erroneous information concerning the education-, information-, and fact-based merit of a movie, for example, may trigger a different level of other-directed blame on the basis on whether the blogger is positioned as an authority-based expert or a consumer with extensive consumption experience.

This alignment effect may be most prominent for claims concerning the utilitarian merit of a product for two reasons. First, since alignment implies that the content focus of the product information matches the signaled knowledge base of the blogger, an erroneous utilitarian claim may be attributable to intent because the authoritative knowledge blogger is in possession of the “truth” with respect to the relevant subject matter. By contrast, evaluations of hedonic product properties can be influenced by mood and other antecedent states, implying that disagreement across hedonically oriented claims may not necessarily reflect a selfish orientation on the part of any evaluator. Second, utilitarian product properties are amenable to objective evaluation to a greater extent than hedonic product properties. For example, dates of key historical events represented in a movie may be a topic of less intense debate than, for example, excitement in a movie-watching experience. Accordingly, an inaccurate hedonic claim may be perceived to derive from an honest difference of opinion as opposed to blameworthy deceit, thus making the signaled ability base of the blogger for that type of content focus less relevant as a decision-making factor. By contrast, accuracy in a utilitarian claim may specifically depend on possession of traits associated with authoritative knowledge; while anyone can make such a claim, a communicator high in authoritative knowledge is in a relatively privileged position with respect to having knowledge necessary for

achieving accuracy. A communicator who signals authoritative knowledge, then, may receive a severe blame assignment by knowing the truth with respect to the utilitarian matter but taking steps to misrepresent it. It is consequently predicted that:

H1: The blame assigned to the blogger for making an inaccurate product claim focusing on the utilitarian merit of the product is greater in an alignment versus a misalignment situation. In contrast, the blame assigned to the blogger for making an inaccurate product claim focusing on the hedonic merit of the product does not vary according to the alignment versus misalignment situation.

Word-of-Mouth Marketing Disclosure and Blame

Blogger. Although organizations have always been interested in generating favorable word-of-mouth communication (Dichter 1966), emerging practices such as word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) involve unprecedented levels of intervention by marketers in product-related communication among consumers (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, and Wilner 2010). WOMM is a growing marketing tactic that involves the dissemination of product-related messages through selected consumers to members of a target audience (Kozinets, et al. 2010). From a company perspective, WOMM is appealing because it can be inexpensive, quickly implemented, and less likely than marketer-communicated messaging to activate persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994; Kozinets, et al. 2010; Word of Mouth Marketing Association 2017).

Whereas practitioners intend WOMM to focus on “... building active, mutually beneficial consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-marketer communications” (Word of Mouth Marketing Association 2007), the *quid pro quo* compensation that consumer communicators receive in WOMM campaigns

blurs the line between marketer and non-marketer information sources. Accordingly, WOMM participants may be legally required to disclose to readers the compensation they receive for posting product information. In the United States, for example, the Federal Trade Commission (2009) requires bloggers who endorse (i.e., review a product and receive a cash or in-kind payment from the seller) a good or service to disclose that “material connection” to their readers. From a persuasion perspective, there is an obvious risk associated with this type of disclosure; as a protection against “covert” marketer-consumer tactics, the majority of consumers believe that unified guidelines for marketing practices on social media are necessary (American Marketing Association 2011; Carl 2008; Milne, Bahl, and Rohm 2008; Wei, et al. 2008). Indeed, prior research would suggest that a WOMM disclosure could lessen the persuasive effectiveness of product information communicated by a blogger by arousing concern that the blogger is biased and has their interests in mind rather than those of their readers (e.g., external causal attribution, reporting bias, and compromised integrity; Eagly, Wood, and Chaiken 1978; Folkes 1988; Hunt, Smith, and Kernan 1985; Kelley 1973).

When error is discovered, a blogger who has made a WOMM disclosure may receive more blame for the error than a blogger who has not made a WOMM disclosure. Rather than inadvertence or a simple difference of opinion, a WOMM disclosure may trigger a relatively severe blame assignment stemming from an assessment that external causation, bias, or compromised integrity, all of which are under the willful control of the blogger, contributed to the error. In contrast, when the blogger makes no WOMM disclosure, readers are more likely to believe the blogger is reporting their unbiased but potentially inaccurate opinion. As a result, less blame would be assigned to such a blogger for the error. It is consequently predicted that:

H2: The blame assigned to the blogger for making an inaccurate product claim is greater when the blogger makes a WOMM disclosure than when the blogger does not make a WOMM disclosure.

Company. The blogger is not the only possible blame target. A company with a positive financial interest in the market performance of a particular product is a logical potential target, and prior research shows that the communication of erroneous product information in a typical commercial setting (e.g., deceptive advertising) can trigger strong cognitive responses from affected consumers impacting not only the advertiser but also advertisers in a more general sense (Darke and Ritchie 2007). Even though the end result may be the same between them (e.g., a misinformed purchase decision), erroneous product information communicated by a blogger is clearly different from that communicated by a commercial source. The blogosphere enforces informal editorial standards, implying that a consumer can provide information to readers that, while still beneficial to the company from a market performance perspective, occurs outside the editorial oversight of the company.

To the extent that an affected blog reader believes that a blogger was uninfluenced by the relevant company in communicating erroneous product information, it would be anticipated that the reader would direct a relatively small amount of blame to the company. Given the open nature of the blogosphere, absence of a WOMM disclosure may be sufficient for engendering this belief. However, a WOMM disclosure may focus affected readers on the relationship between the blogger and company as opposed to the freedom available to communicators in the blogosphere, thus prompting a relatively severe blame assignment directed toward the company. A WOMM disclosure, then, may be seen to signal that the company was a complicit partner in the

dissemination of the erroneous content, and possibly even that the company was fully or partly responsible (e.g., as a co-author) for developing the erroneous content in the first place. It is consequently predicted that:

H3: The blame assigned to the company when a blogger makes an inaccurate product claim is greater when the blogger makes a WOMM disclosure than when the blogger does not make a WOMM disclosure.

Anger

Consumers can experience an array of negatively valenced emotions during and in the aftermath of a marketplace experience that is incompatible with goals (Stephens and Gwinner 1998). Prior research has focused on disappointment, moral outrage, and even guilt as experienced by affected consumers (e.g., Estelami 2000; Kalamas, Laroche, and Makdessian 2008; Weiner 2000), but anger appears to be particularly relevant to exposure to erroneous product information and its context-based implications for blame, as hypothesized above (i.e., Hs 1-3). Anger is a complex emotion, involving high-intensity feelings, thoughts, and action tendencies (Bougie, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2003; Kalamas, et al. 2008). Unlike the inward focus of guilt (i.e., sense of personal responsibility; Barclay, Skarlicki, and Pugh 2005), anger is associated with a perception that a negative occurrence was under the control of a specific other (Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer 1999; Bougie, et al. 2003; Bonifield and Cole 2007; Chebat, et al. 2005; Gelbrich 2010; Iglesias 2009; Ruth, Brunel, and Otnes 2002; Weiner 2000). Accordingly, anger is typically felt in situations in which affected consumers direct blame away from themselves and toward a particular target (Chebat, Davidow, and Codjovi 2005; Gelbrich 2010; Lazarus 1991; Stephens and Gwinner 1998; Wetzler, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2007).

Further exacerbating this affect-based effect is the interpretability of blame as an indication that a blogosphere norm has been violated. Indeed, behaviors that are in conflict with in-domain norms are associated with negatively valenced emotions (Bitner, Booms, and Tetrault, 1990), and blameworthy conduct by a blogger and a company may both be considered contrary to the expectations of blog readers and, potentially, the fundamental purpose of blog-based consumer interactions. Bloggers are valued as information sources by consumers for their freedom to provide product information that aligns with their consumption experiences as opposed to merely serving as an additional sales channel (Doyle, et al. 2012a). Beyond the other-directedness of the blogger and company blame assignments, blame is expected to facilitate anger by stemming from conduct that affected consumers could have been seeking to avoid by turning to the blogosphere in the first place. It is consequently predicted that:

H4: The levels of blame assigned to the (a) blogger and the (b) company are positively related to the anger experienced by affected consumers because the blogger made an inaccurate product claim.

Retaliation

Consumers affected by a dissatisfying marketplace experience have a variety of retaliatory options available to them (Aron 2016; Gelbrich 2010; Grégoire and Fisher 2008; Grégoire, et al. 2009; Hunt 1991; Wetzler, et al. 2007; Yan and Lotz 2009). When a blogger posts erroneous product information, affected consumers can pursue retaliation against the blogger by posting claim-related counterarguments on the blog to hamper the persuasiveness of the erroneous product information and against the company by disparaging the product on a product review website to harm the company by affecting the

market performance of the product. Through their punitive nature, these retaliatory behaviors serve as potential means for re-establishing justice and fairness between affected consumers and, in this study, the blogger and the company (Aron 2016; Grégoire and Fisher 2008; Grégoire, et al. 2010). Seen in a slightly different light, these retaliatory behaviors may also be viable problem-focused means of simply coping with the dissatisfying marketplace experience (Stephens and Gwinner 1998).

As Weiner (2000, p. 385) notes, blame assignments "...do not lead merely to exit and going away from, but rather they give rise to active actions, or going against." Accordingly, blame is expected to relate to the intentions of affected consumers to publicly retaliate in response to their exposure to erroneous product information. Indeed, prior research indicates that a sense of unfairness in exchange is more strongly linked to public complaining than to private complaining, with a key difference between them being that public complaining will have a far greater reach (to fellow consumers) than private complaining (Balaji, Jha, and Royne 2015). It is specifically predicted that blame directed toward the blogger and toward the company will each positively relate to the retaliatory behaviors corresponding to that respective target (i.e., claim-related counterargumentation to harm the persuasive power of the product information; product-related negative word-of-mouth communication to harm the market performance of the product).

H5: The blame assigned to the blogger for making an inaccurate product claim positively relates to the intentions of affected consumers to post claim-related counterarguments on the blog.

H6: The blame assigned to the company because the blogger made an inaccurate product claim positively relates to the intentions of affected consumers to post

negative product-related information on a product review website.

Research has established that high-intensity emotions stemming from a dissatisfying marketplace experience rarely lead to conciliatory behaviors by affected consumers (i.e., relationship-repairing; Bonifield and Cole 2007; Bougie, et al. 2003). Instead, affected consumers may find that retaliatory behaviors offer a therapeutic benefit which may be offsetting to the anger experienced during and in the aftermath of such an experience that is ultimately traceable back to the blameworthy actions of others (Bougie, et al. 2003; Bonifield and Cole 2007; Gelbrich 2010; McColl-Kennedy, Patterson, Smith, and Brady 2009; Zourrig, Chebat, and Toffoli 2009). Beyond the benefits of re-establishing a sense of equilibrium with the relevant target (e.g., reduced stress; Andrade 2005; Chebat, et al. 2005; Chebat, Davidow, and Codjovi 2005; Lazarus 1991; Stephens and Gwinner 1998; Vidal 2014), retaliation may bring about certain "mood-lifting consequences" (Andrade 2005, p.355) relative to the negatively valenced emotions experienced by affected consumers.

Accordingly, it is anticipated that the anger experienced by affected consumers will positively relate to their intentions to communicate claim-related counterargumentation to harm the persuasive power of the product information as well as product-related negative word-of-mouth communication to harm the market performance of the product. With a higher level of emotion implying a heightened state of action-oriented readiness (Bagozzi, et al. 1999), anger may facilitate retaliation against the perceived wrongdoers (namely, the blogger and the company) which, at least indirectly, could protect fellow consumers from falling victim to the same dissatisfying marketplace experience. It is consequently predicted that:

H7: The anger experienced by affected consumers because the blogger made an inaccurate product claim positively relates to their intentions to post (a) claim-related counterarguments on the blog and (b) negative product-related information on a product review website.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Experiment Information

Product category

Hypothesis testing was facilitated by a scenario-based experimental design that was developed and revised through several rounds of pretesting to align with relevant research (e.g., marketing stimuli, dissatisfying marketplace experiences, social media; Du, Fan, and Feng 2014; Harris, Mohr, and Bernhardt 2006; Park, Shin, and Ju 2015). For all pretests, participants were drawn from the same consumer population as that which was represented in the main study. Movies were ultimately selected as the product category for this study for their appropriateness to the study design and the population under study. Specifically, movies were chosen because they have strong experiential properties, are frequently reviewed in blog posts, and can be assessed against hedonic and utilitarian criteria (e.g., accurate representation of a historical event; Gazley, Clark, and Sinha 2011; Oliver and Bartsch 2010). Additionally, separate pretests showed that the majority of relevant consumers consult blogs to obtain movie-related information ($n = 38$; nearly 85%) and that they would experience “disappointment” if they read a movie review in which the merits of the movie were overstated ($n = 184$; range: 0-6; $M = 4.02$; $S.D. = 1.57$).

Plotline

For developing a plotline to be described in the blog post, a separate pretest involving 42 consumers found a moderate or better level of “fondness” for movies in the action, dramatic, war, and romantic genres ($M_s = 4.98, 3.78, 3.63,$ and $3.63,$ respectively). Accordingly, the plotline focused on a romantic relationship

between an American soldier and an aid worker in Afghanistan. A further pretest involving 52 consumers assessed the plotline as realistically exciting, sensual, educational, and appealing (all $M_s > 4.29$) using measures in relevant research (e.g., Oliver and Bartsch 2010; Potts and Belden 2009; all Cronbach $\alpha > .90$).

“About Me” statements, WOMM Disclosure, and Blog Posts

Signals of authoritative knowledge and consumption experience were developed and embedded in “About Me” statements ostensibly contained in the blog which featured the product information. Blog excerpts of equal length emphasized either expertise-based authoritative knowledge (education and academic achievements, work experience, and recognition for subject-matter achievements) or experience-based consumption knowledge (frequent movie-viewing behaviors, regular consumption of movie-related media, and extensive participation in movie-related discussions). Beyond their alignment with the conceptualizations of authoritative knowledge and consumption experience, a pretest involving 66 consumers showed that the “About Me” statements did not differ in their believability or argumentation properties (e.g., strength; $p > .1$). Conforming to industry guidelines (Word-of-Mouth Marketing Association 2007), the following compensation disclosure statement was developed: “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.”

The blogger-communicated hedonic and utilitarian merits of the movie were embedded in blog posts of identical structure and length. In the blog post stressing the hedonic merit of the movie, the blogger described the experience as “exciting, energetic, and action packed,” whereas the blog post positioning the movie in terms of its utilitarian qualities described the experience as “educational, informative, and factual.” Assessed on multiple measures during

pretesting, the blog posts containing the information which would later be revealed as erroneous did not differ in terms of their realism, strength, quality, understandability, or emotional valence (all Cronbach α values $> .78$; all p values $> .1$). The posts received moderate or better ratings on the scales (all M values > 3.5 , all p values $< .05$), indicating they effectively served as examples of the product information which consumers can access in the blogosphere.

Procedure and Scenario

Participants ($N = 320$; 53% male) were randomly and evenly assigned to one of eight between-subjects blogger/blog post conditions (authoritative knowledge versus consumption experience; hedonic merit versus utilitarian merit; WOMM disclosure versus no WOMM disclosure). All participants were recruited from undergraduate classrooms at a large Canadian university. Participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to identify consumer responses to product information communicated via a blog post; for achieving this purpose, participants were told that a movie that was scheduled to be shown at a time that fit their schedule had been reviewed on a blog. Subsequently, participants were exposed to one of the eight experimental conditions and then advised that it became apparent to them that the movie was not what the blogger said it would be. For example, participants received the hedonic treatment (i.e., “Exciting, Energetic, and Action Packed”) were told that, after watching the movie, they assessed it to be “not exciting,” “boring,” and “full of terrible acting and pathetic special effects.” Parallel information was directed to participants who received the utilitarian product information. Across the blog post conditions (hedonic versus utilitarian), the product information was assessed very low in terms of its *truthfulness*, *accuracy*, and *trueness* (Cronbach $\alpha = .95$; $M = 1.35$, $S.D. = 1.45$), indicating that the scenario was effective for operationalizing consumer exposure to erroneous product information via a

blog post. Finally, no significant difference between the blog post conditions was identified in terms of their alignment with the actual movie-watching experience. For example, there was no significant difference in perceived accuracy between the WOMM and non-WOMM conditions ($|M_{Difference}| = .11$, $p > .1$).

Measures

Studies of negative marketplace phenomena (e.g., Bonifield and Cole 2007; Bougie, et al. 2003; Grégoire, et al. 2010; Kalamas, et al. 2008; Wang and Huff 2007) were consulted to inform construct measurement decisions, as outlined below. First, blame was assessed as the extents to which participants perceived the blogger to have *knowingly misrepresented the truth*, *attempted to deceive readers*, *attempted to mislead readers*, and *hid the truth* (Cronbach $\alpha = .97$) and the movie company to have *been in total control over as well as totally responsible*, *at fault*, and *blameworthy* for the actions of the blogger (Cronbach $\alpha = .97$). Except where hypothesized, no blame-based differences were identified between the hedonic merit versus utilitarian merit or authoritative knowledge versus consumption experience conditions ($p > .1$).

Second, anger was assessed as the extent to which participants reported feeling *angry*, *mad*, and *outraged* (Cronbach $\alpha_{Anger} = .93$) as a result of being exposed to the scenario information. Since no experiment-based direct effect was hypothesized, three-way ANOVA was performed as a confound check to determine if anger varied across treatment conditions. Results of the ANOVA provided no evidence of an anger effect for any treatment condition ($F_{Blogger\ type}(2,311) = 1.04$, $p > .1$, $\eta^2 = .01$; $F_{WOMM\ type}(2,311) = 1.60$, $p > .1$, $\eta^2 = .01$; $F_{Movie\ review\ type}(2,311) = 1.10$, $p > .1$, $\eta^2 = .01$) or interaction involving a combination of conditions.

Finally, retaliation was assessed as the extents to which participants reported intentions to *leave negative feedback*, *post a critical comment*, and *criticize* the movie review on the

blog (Cronbach $\alpha = .95$) as well as to *criticize* the movie or post a *negative review* or a *critical comment* about the movie on a product review website (Cronbach $\alpha = .95$). Since no direct or interaction effect of the treatment conditions was hypothesized, a three-way MANOVA was performed as a check against potential confounds. Results of the MANOVA provided no evidence of a direct or interaction effect of the treatment conditions ($F_{\text{Blogger type}(2,311)} = 1.74, p > .1, \eta^2 = .01$; $F_{\text{WOMM type}(2,311)} = 2.77, p > .05, \eta^2 = .02$; $F_{\text{Movie review type}(2,311)} = 2.92, p > .05, \eta^2 = .02$).

RESULTS

H1 predicted that, for the blogger who made an inaccurate claim concerning the utilitarian merit of the product, affected consumers would levy more blame in an alignment situation than in a misalignment situation. In view of a blame-based outcome, a blogger who emphasizes utilitarian merit in a product review may need to be particularly cautious if that blogger is positioned to readers in terms of authoritative knowledge; if not, then the blogger may receive a relatively mild blame assignment owing to a perception of inadvertence or overall goodwill. No parallel effect was hypothesized for an inaccurate claim concerning the hedonic merit of the product, since enjoyment can derive from multiple subjectively assessed aspects of a consumption experience. H2 predicted that the blogger who made the WOMM disclosure would receive a higher blame assignment than the blogger who did not make the WOMM disclosure, largely because of suspicion around the compensation that bloggers receive under a WOMM arrangement. To rule out the possibility of unanticipated interaction effects, a three-way ANOVA (authoritative knowledge versus consumption experience; hedonic merit versus utilitarian merit; WOMM disclosure versus no WOMM disclosure) was conducted and no such effect was found (all p values $> .1$). Additionally, no main effect of product claim focus was observed (hedonic merit versus

utilitarian merit: $|M_{\text{Difference}}| = .22, p > .1$). As expected, a significant main effect of WOMM disclosure versus no WOMM disclosure was observed ($p < .01$). A main effect showing authoritative knowledge to attract a more severe blame assignment that consumption experience was also seen, but the effect was weak in relation to the WOMM main effect ($|M_{\text{Difference}}| = .34, p < .05$).

Supporting H1, when the erroneous product information focused on the utilitarian merit of the product the blame assignment under the alignment situation (namely, authoritative knowledge) was greater than under the misalignment situation (namely, consumption experience; $|M_{\text{Difference}}| = .55, p < .05$). Further supporting H1, when the erroneous product information focused on the hedonic merit of the product there was no significant difference between the blame assigned to the blogger who signaled authoritative knowledge and the blogger who signaled consumption experience ($|M_{\text{Difference}}| = .14, p > .1$). As predicted in H2, the blogger who made the WOMM disclosure to readers attracted more blame than the blogger who did not make that disclosure ($|M_{\text{Difference}}| = .54, p < .01$). A similar effect was observed with regard to blame directed toward the company ($|M_{\text{Difference}}| = .77, p < .01$), supporting H3. ANOVA to assess the presence of further effects found evidence of a two-way interaction between WOMM type and product claim focus ($F(1,312) = 5.24, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$). Consistent with the blame risk for bloggers who provide utilitarian-focused product information established in H1, this interaction showed for these bloggers that blame directed at the company when they make a WOMM disclosure versus when they do not make a WOMM disclosure is greater than for the blogger who provides hedonic-focused product information ($M_{\text{Utilitarian} - \text{WOMM disclosure}} = 2.52, SD = 1.54$; $M_{\text{Utilitarian} - \text{No WOMM disclosure}} = 1.35, SD = 1.50$ versus $M_{\text{Hedonic} - \text{WOMM disclosure}} = 1.90, SD = 1.52$; $M_{\text{Hedonic} - \text{No WOMM disclosure}} = 1.53, SD = 1.56$).

A regression-based bootstrapping technique (see Hayes 2012) was employed for holistically testing the direct and indirect effects implied in Hs 4-7. First, H4 predicted that the blame assigned to the (a) blogger and the (b) company would positively relate to the anger felt by affected consumers. Second, Hs 5 and 6 respectively predicted that the blame assigned to the blogger (company) would positively relate to the intentions of affected consumers to post claim-related counterarguments on the blog (negative product-related information on a product review website). Finally, H7 predicted that the anger experienced by affected consumers during and in the aftermath of their exposure to the erroneous product information would positively relate to the same set of blogger-directed and company-directed behavioral intentions. Together, Hs 4-7 represent the hypothesized cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes of consumer exposure to erroneous product information communicated by a blogger.

Prior to the holistic test (Hayes 2012), bivariate correlations was assessed to determine first-level support for Hs 4-7. First, the blame-anger bivariate correlations indicated that anger relates to the extent to which an affected consumer attributes a dissatisfying marketplace experience to, in this case, the blogger (H4a: $r = .32, p < .001$) and the company (H4b: $r = .47, p < .001$). Second, the blame-behavioral intention bivariate correlations were significant as follows: H5: $r = .34, p < .001$; H6: $r = .41, p < .001$. Finally, the anger-behavioral intention bivariate correlation was significant as follows: H7: (a) $r = .41, p < .001$; (b) $r = .47, p < .001$.

With first-level hypothesis support obtained, the regression-based bootstrapping technique (Hayes 2012) was executed to continue testing Hs 4-7 and to identify significant direct and indirect relationships among the constructs. Consistent with the blame-anger bivariate correlations reported above, blame assignments directed toward the blogger and the company were shown to

positively relate to anger experienced by affected consumers (H4a: $t_{Blogger} = 3.92, p < .001$; H4b: $t_{Company} = 8.17, p < .001$; $R^2 = .25, F = 54.44, p < .001$). Also consistent with the relevant bivariate correlation, blame directed toward the blogger is positively associated with intentions of affected consumers to post claim-related counterarguments on the blog (H5: $t = 4.39, p < .001$). Similarly, blame directed toward the company is positively associated with intentions of affected consumers to post negative product-related information on a product review website (H6: $t = 4.54, p < .001$). Finally, anger felt by consumers during and in the aftermath of their exposure to erroneous product information was found to positively relate to intentions of affected consumers to post claim-related counterarguments on the blog (H7a: $t = 6.48, p < .001$; $R^2 = .22, F = 43.92, p < .001$) as well as to post negative product-related information on a product review website (H7b: $t = 6.48, p < .001$; $R^2 = .26, F = 57.81, p < .001$). The bootstrapping technique further allowed for the assessment of direct, indirect, and total effects of blame on the behavioral intentions (Figure 2). For both behavioral intentions, blame directed toward the corresponding target exerts a complex effect comprised of both cognitive and affective elements.

Support was observed in this study for each hypothesized relationship (Table 1). The general emphasis of this study has been to examine the effect of context on consumer responses to exposure to erroneous product information communicated by a blogger and to determine the path by which target-specific blame and the emotional experience of anger lead to relevant forms of retaliation. Bloggers who are positioned on the basis of consumption experience tend to receive mild blame assignments as compared to bloggers positioned in terms of authoritative knowledge. The blame to which authoritative knowledge bloggers are assigned tends to be particularly severe when the blogger writes on topics that align with that knowledge base. Bloggers who make an

admission of compensation similarly receive more severe blame assignments than those who do not. Positive blame assignments tend to relate to anger when consumers are exposed to erroneous product information in the blogosphere. As a motivational force, anger has been observed here to drive intentions to post claim-related counterarguments on the blog and post negative product-related information on a

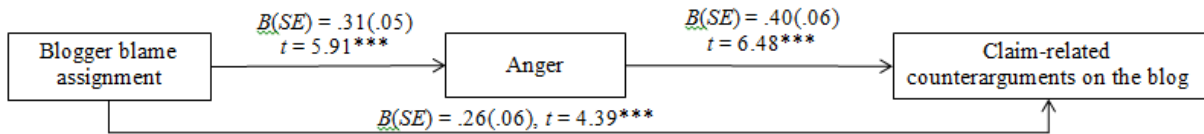
product review website. Anger is central in the path to these forms of retaliation, both as a direct antecedent as well as a player in the indirect relationship between blame and the behavioral intentions.

Table 1
Summary of Hypothesis Tests

Hypothesized relationship	Result of hypothesis tests
H1: Claim-source alignment versus misalignment for erroneous utilitarian claim; no parallel effect for erroneous hedonic claim	Supported for utilitarian claim ($ M_{Difference} = .55, p < .05$); No significance difference for hedonic claim ($ M_{Difference} = .14, p > .1$)
H2: Blame assignment for the blogger who makes a WOMM disclosure versus does not make a WOMM disclosure	Supported ($ M_{Difference} = .54, p < .01$)
H3: Blame assignment for the company when the blogger makes a WOMM disclosure versus does not make a WOMM disclosure	Supported ($ M_{Difference} = .77, p < .01$)
H4: Anger outcome of blame assigned to the (a) blogger and the (b) company	Supported for blogger ($t_{Blogger} = 3.92, p < .001$) and company ($t_{Company} = 8.17, p < .001$)
H5: Effect of blame assigned to the blogger on intention to post claim-related counterarguments on the blog	Supported ($t = 4.39, p < .001$)
H6: Effect of blame assigned to the company on intention to post negative product-related information on a product review website	Supported ($t = 4.54, p < .001$)
H7: Effect of anger on intentions to post (a) claim-related counterarguments on the blog and (b) negative product-related information on a product review website.	Supported for claim-related counterarguments on the blog ($t = 6.48, p < .001$) as well as negative product-related information on a product review website ($t = 6.48, p < .001$)

Figure 2
Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects

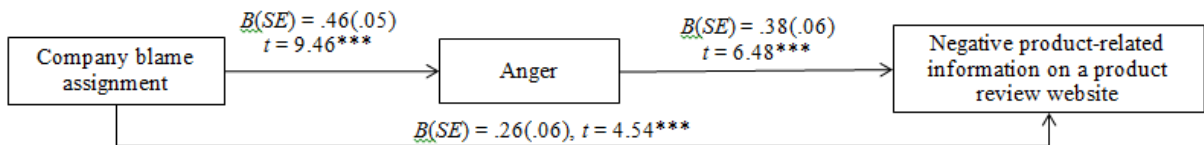
Claim-related counterarguments on the blog



Direct, indirect, and total effect of blame assignment on intentions of affected consumers to post claim-related counterarguments on the blog

Direct: .26 (.15, .38); Indirect: .31 x .40 = .12 (.07, .21); Total: .38

Negative product-related information on a product review website



Direct, indirect, and total effect of blame assignment on intentions of affected consumers to post negative product-related information on a product review website

Direct: .26 (.15, .37); Indirect: .46 x .38 = .18 (.10, .25); Total: .42

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

Note: Parentheses indicate the bootstrapped bias-corrected 95% confidence interval. When a confidence interval excludes zero, regardless of direction, the effect is considered significant and stable.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING MANAGEMENT

Consumers commonly turn to emerging media to access product information, allowing organizations new opportunities for reaching target markets. In the blogosphere, however, the open editorial environment makes consumer exposure to erroneous product information a real possibility. As the results of this study show, the marketing-related risk of communicating erroneous product information is clear: for the blogger and the company, blame-driven retaliation could have a marked negative effect on performance (e.g., message persuasiveness and consumer following; market performance).

Blame, as this study shows, is sensitive to the context within which the exposure occurs. Specifically, erroneous utilitarian product information written by a blogger who claims to possess expertise that aligns with the information is particularly likely to trigger a severe blame assignment, as does error that is paired with a compensation disclosure. Even when they make claims outside their specific area of expertise, bloggers who present themselves in an authoritative fashion are held to a high accuracy standard. Bloggers associated with authoritative knowledge trigger the strongest blame assignment when they make erroneous claims concerning topics that align with their knowledge base, however, indicating that this error configuration (i.e., high blogger

expertise and high difficulty to personally assess) represents a particularly serious blogosphere breach. Instead, erroneous product information communicated by a blogger positioned on the basis of consumption experience is relatively likely to benefit from a causal attribution of innocent inadvertence, uncontrollable external circumstance, or a simple difference of opinion.

This study also shows that there is a critical context-based blame difference between erroneous product information accompanied by a WOMM disclosure versus that absent a WOMM disclosure. Consistent with previous research (Xie, et al. 2015), even modest compensation is sufficient for attracting a significant blame assignment; indeed, in this study, the compensation would not have represented much out of any marketing budget. Compensated bloggers and the companies partnered with them must recognize that, when product information is revealed to be erroneous, consumers appear relatively unwilling to accept innocent inadvertence, uncontrollable external circumstance, or a legitimate opinion difference as a plausible cause of the error. Instead, a possible conclusion would be that the compensated blogger was acting as a *de facto* marketing voice. Accordingly, organizations looking at a blogger for potential WOMM partnership should evaluate the blogger not only for overall blogosphere visibility but also for a record of publishing accurate product information. In this regard, companies can turn to bloggers who have been recognized for excellence (e.g., Wine Bloggers Conference winners) or who signal an appropriate mix of independently verified trustworthiness signals in the “About Me” area of their blogs (Doyle, et al. 2012b; Mayer, et al. 1995). Of course, it is also important that bloggers conform to pertinent regulations; compensated bloggers in the United States, for example, are required to disclose that compensation to their readers (Federal Trade Commission 2009).

Steps for lessening the likelihood that a consumer will interpret product information as erroneous and blameworthy may be particularly valuable in light of the findings of this study. Bloggers do not always verify the accuracy of the claims they embed in their posts (Lenhart and Fox 2006), which creates a situation ripe for error. Particularly for authoritative knowledge bloggers who make claims that would be within their area of expertise, good practice would involve checking facts, consulting multiple sources, and soliciting claim-related feedback from peers. From a content perspective, a balanced approach may be beneficial for lessening the likelihood a consumer will attribute perceived inaccuracy to a deceptive intent. Two-sided messages (i.e., positive information and negative information, to varying extents; Crowley and Hoyer 1994) may dissuade an affected consumer from making a severe blame assignment. In a WOMM situation, companies should be monitoring claims for accuracy, insisting that the blogger post a disclaimer, ensuring an integrated and consistent approach to promotion, and enforcing brand standards to ensure that they are represented well by the bloggers they are working with. From a risk management perspective, ensuring that uncontrolled messages are just a piece of the overall communications presence adopted by an organization may be an effective strategy. By communicating product information through advertising and other marketer-dominated channels, organizations can ensure that product-related discourse among consumers involves claims which have been approved for distribution to an external audience.

When error occurs and an affected consumer takes retaliatory action, both blogger and organization should respond in a spirit of relationship strengthening and brand building. Apology is useful for responding to service failure (Rose and Blodgett 2016; Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999), and can be beneficial when error in the blogosphere occurs, but critical

feedback can also be a valuable opportunity for learning and building customer engagement. For example, feedback can be used for identifying the product traits that users look to for assessing product quality; in movies, a company could investigate the relative importance of dialogue, costumes, and special effects for forming the ideal customer experience. Beyond learning, organizations can take the feedback as an opportunity for engaging customers in product-related discourse. Particularly for high involvement customers, organizations can seek to build brand loyalty by offering an additional relationship dimension (interactions with the organization).

Of course, not every negative marketplace experience necessarily leads to retaliation. Indeed, other behavioral options are available to affected consumers for resolving the discomfort associated with a negative marketplace experience; importantly, these options have different implications for learning and relationship strengthening. Withdrawal allows an affected consumer to escape continued victimization and is easily done in the blogosphere, but it denies the relationship partner opportunities to enhance customer-relevant knowledge and pursue relationship restoration through a recovery attempt. The same complication may be true of social support seeking, which may involve an affected consumer venting frustration to others. Complaint making lacks the vindictive nature of retaliation, making it a preferable behavioral response to a negative marketplace experience. Though it can be unsettling to receive a complaint, action should nonetheless be taken to encourage dialog with affected consumers to help them resolve discomfort but also to enhancing learning, strengthen the relationship, and minimize the probability of retaliation and withdrawal. Dialog may even serve a preventative purpose; rather than waiting for error to occur, bloggers and the organizations partnered with them could conceptualize every brand exposure as an opportunity to engage

consumers in conversation and not just as one for a one-way persuasion attempt.

Opportunities for Future Research

Future research can be focused on enhancing the external validity, generalizability, and managerial applicability of the results reported in this study by considering new product categories, incorporating alternative types of claims, and explicitly incorporating recovery attempts. As occurred in this study, product category decisions are best made in direct consideration of actual consumer behavior; a pretest showed that the relevant consumer profile seeks movie-related information on blogs, suggesting a strong level of design-based ecological or external validity. Future research could experimentally differentiate experience from search and credence claims as well as quality overstatement from quality understatement and continue to parallel service-based research by exploring relevant approaches to service failure recovery (Andreassen 2001; Bitner, et al. 1990; Estelami 2000; de Matos, Henrique, and Rossi 2007; Oliver 1977). The effectiveness of any recovery attempt could be studied in terms of forgiveness for the error by blog readers and could look at how blog reader perceptions of justice and fairness of any recovery attempt impact their readiness to forgive. Indeed, a justice-based approach (e.g., Grégoire and Fisher 2008; Harris, Thomas, and Williams 2013) could be valuable for extending the present research. Forgiveness implies emotional reengagement on the part of the offended party as well as abandonment of the right to punish the offender (Heslop, Lu, and Cray 2009) and, as such, is an important step in order for people to willingly expose themselves to risk by again placing trust in the offender (Xie and Peng 2009). A final opportunity for further research would be the potential buffering effect of relationship quality on consumer responses to exposure to erroneous product information.

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