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Pre-print version of the following publication: | Versione pre-print della seguente pubblicazione:

Original Citation/Citazione:
Pelaez Martinez, Andrea; Block, Lauren; Hada, Mahima; Kayande, Ujwal. (2026). The Mimicry of Negative Valence in Online WOM: A Cognitive Approach. In Bridging at the Frontiers: Marketing for a World in Transition (pp. 701- 704). American Marketing Association. Isbn: 978-0-87757-028-8. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://46387974.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/46387974/Academic Conferences/2026_AMA_Winter_Proceedings.pdf.

Availability/Disponibilità:
This version is available at: 11385/262338 since: 2026-05-19T20:31:12Z - Questa versione è disponibile alla pagina: 11385/262338 dal: 2026-05-19T20:31:12Z

Publisher/Casa editrice:
American Marketing Association

Published version/Pubblicato:

License/Licenza:
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Availability/Termini d'uso:

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08 November 2026

THE MIMICRY OF NEGATIVE VALENCE IN ONLINE WOM: A COGNITIVE APPROACH

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Keywords: WOM, Mimicry, Negative Valence, Nonconscious processing

Description: This paper shows that when writing online reviews, consumers systematically mimic the negative tone of nearby posts—largely through nonconscious processes—leading even satisfied customers to express more negative opinions when exposed to proximate negative evaluations.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question

Online reviews influence consumer decision-making, shaping expectations, choices, and brand reputations (Babić Rosario et al., 2016; Moore & Lafreniere, 2020). Although positive reviews are more prevalent (De Angelis et al., 2012), negative reviews exert a disproportionate impact on sales and

market outcomes (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Varga & Albuquerque, 2023). A common assumption is that negativity in reviews primarily reflects poor consumption experiences. However, research on online word of mouth (WOM) suggests that review content is systematically biased by contextual factors and prior contributions (Godes & Silva, 2012; Moe & Schweidel, 2012; Schlosser, 2005, 2009).

Prior work offers mixed predictions about mimicry in review writing. Schlosser (2005) argues that consumers strategically adjust their tone downward when exposed to negative reviews to signal competence, whereas Moore and McFerran (2017) contend that mimicry is affiliative and therefore mainly positive. This paper addresses two core questions. First, do consumers systematically mimic the negative valence of proximate reviews, such that exposure to nearby negativity leads them to express more negative opinions regardless of their actual experiences? Second, what psychological mechanisms underlie this effect? Specifically, is negative-valence mimicry primarily a conscious, strategic process, or does it operate largely outside awareness through nonconscious cognition?

Methods and Data

The research employs a multimethod design combining one large-scale field study with two controlled experiments across distinct consumption contexts. Across all studies, negative valence is operationalized counting negative words with the LIWC 2022 “tone_neg” dictionary.

Study 1 analyzes archival TripAdvisor data from 2004–2008, when reviews were displayed in strict reverse chronological order (Wang & Chaudhry, 2018). This feature allows precise identification of the three proximate reviews visible to each focal reviewer. The analysis models the relationship between the focal review’s negative valence and the average negative valence of the three immediately

preceding reviews, controlling for reviewer tendencies, content characteristics, hotel attributes, and time effects. Negative binomial regressions test whether proximate negativity predicts subsequent negativity.

Study 2 provides causal evidence in a laboratory setting. Undergraduate participants read three reviews about university study areas that were manipulated to be either low or high in negative valence while holding length, emotionality, and extremity constant. Participants then wrote their own reviews.

Study 3 applies a process dissociation paradigm (Fitzsimons & Williams, 2000; Kramer & Block, 2008) using a 2 × 2 × 2 between-subjects design that manipulates exposure context, motivational alignment, and attentional resources, enabling estimation of conscious and nonconscious components of mimicry.

Summary of Findings

Across field and laboratory settings, the results consistently demonstrate that consumers mimic the negative valence of proximate reviews. In the TripAdvisor field data, the average negativity of the three preceding reviews significantly predicts the negativity of the focal review, even after controlling for reviewer history, content features, hotel characteristics, and time effects. This pattern indicates that negativity propagates within review streams beyond what would be expected from independent consumer experiences.

The experimental studies replicate and strengthen this conclusion. In Study 2, participants exposed to highly negative reviews wrote approximately 68% more negative words than those exposed to less negative reviews, despite reporting comparable experiences with the target setting.

Study 3 both confirms negative-valence mimicry and reveals its psychological basis. Participants who read a negative review produced significantly more negative language than those who read a neutral control passage. Process dissociation estimates that the nonconscious component accounts for roughly 80% of the total mimicry effect, whereas the conscious component contributes only about 12%. In relative terms, nonconscious mimicry is approximately six times larger than conscious mimicry.

Together, these findings demonstrate that consumers systematically absorb and reproduce negativity in their linguistic environment, largely without deliberate intent or awareness.

Statement of Key Contributions (208 words)

This paper advances theory on online WOM and linguistic mimicry in two central ways. First, it extends prior work on review mimicry (Schlosser, 2005; Moore & McFerran, 2017) by demonstrating robust negative-valence mimicry from a cognitive rather than purely social or affiliative perspective. Whereas earlier accounts emphasized strategic self-presentation or social bonding, the present findings show that consumers mimic negativity even when such behavior offers no clear interpersonal benefit. This reframes negative review dynamics as a cognitive phenomenon rooted in automatic language processing.

Second, the paper offers a novel methodological and theoretical contribution by decomposing mimicry into conscious and nonconscious components. While prior research suggests that mimicry may occur at either level (Ki & Kim, 2019), this work is the first to quantify their relative contributions in online reviews. Using a process dissociation framework, the study demonstrates that nonconscious processes dominate linguistic mimicry, exceeding conscious influence by a factor of six. Reviewers are therefore

not primarily choosing to be more negative; rather, they are subtly shaped by the linguistic environment in which they write.

Platforms and managers should therefore consider interventions—such as awareness cues or design features promoting authentic and diverse expression—to prevent self-reinforcing cascades of unwarranted negativity.

Note. References are available upon request.