Do Others Influence What We Say? The Impact of Interpersonal Closeness on Word-of-Mouth Valence

SHORT ABSTRACT

How does interpersonal closeness affect the sharing of valenced word-of-mouth among consumers? We suggest and demonstrate across three experiments that the closer two consumers feel, the greater the likelihood that they will share negative word-of-mouth relative to positive word-of-mouth, and vice versa. We attribute this effect to low versus high interpersonal closeness activating high versus low levels of construal. Specifically, based on prior research, we theorize that low interpersonal closeness activates high-level construals, thus prompting senders to transmit positive rather than negative information, whereas high interpersonal closeness activates low-level construals, thus prompting senders to transmit negative rather than positive information.

LONG ABSTRACT

A central question to word-of-mouth (WOM) research has been to understand the diffusion of positive versus negative WOM among consumers (Brown & Reingen 1987; Herr, Kardes, & Kim 1991). While some scholars have shown negative WOM can trump positive WOM (e.g., Kamins, Folkes, & Pernes 1997), others have found positive WOM to prevail (e.g., East, Hammond, &Wright 2007). Yet, little is known about *when* consumers tend to share positive versus negative information in their conversations.

This research proposes that interpersonal closeness influences consumers' tendency to share positive versus negative information. By interpersonal closeness, we refer to the perceived psychological proximity between two individuals (Gunia, Sivanathan, & Galinsky 2009; Miller, Downs, & Prentice 1998). Such perceived proximity can stem from physical or social similarity (Latanè et al. 1995), emotional closeness (i.e., tie strength; Gunia et al. 2009) or even social roles (Rucker, Galinsky, & Dubois, in press). To illustrate, the more two people have strong ties, occupy similar roles in society or share particular physical or physiological traits, the higher their interpersonal closeness.

Specifically, we hypothesize that low interpersonal closeness prompts individuals to share positive rather than negative information, whereas high interpersonal closeness prompts individuals to share negative rather than positive information. Our hypothesis is based on the idea that high interpersonal closeness activates low-level construals while low interpersonal closeness activates high-level construals (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak 2007). In turn, different levels of construal are associated with consumers sharing positive or negative information. Specifically, as shown by Eyal et al. 2004, *pros* (i.e., positive information) are associated with high-level construals whereas *cons* (i.e., negative information) are associated with low-level construals. Therefore, we hypothesize that low interpersonal closeness activates high-level construals, thus prompting senders to transmit positive rather than negative information, whereas

high interpersonal closeness activates low-level construals, thus prompting senders to transmit negative rather than positive information. We test this hypothesis across three experiments.

Experiment 1 tested the hypothesis that individuals tend to transmit more negative information to close others, but more positive information to distant others. Participants were presented with a review of a camera containing five positive and five negative attributes. They were then asked to indicate the name of a close or distant other and the nature of the relationship with this person. Then, participants were asked to write a message about the camera addressed to the person they just indicated. Results revealed that participants included more negative attributes in their message when addressing a close recipient than when addressing a distant recipient ($p = .03$).Thus, participants tended to transmit more negative information to close others, but more positive information to distant others.

Experiment 2 tested whether negative opinions tend to be transmitted more across strong ties (i.e., chains of individuals close to one another) than across weak ties (i.e., chains of individuals distant from one another), while positive opinions tend to be transmitted more across weak rather than strong ties. Participants were placed into a "WOM chain" in which each individual acted first as a recipient and then as a sender of a message. To start the chain, participants occupying the first position were given a typed copy of a review of a hotel, which was either positive or negative, and were told the review came from either a close or distant person. Participants were then asked to transmit the message to a close or distant other. Participants in the second position received the message written by a participant in position one, and then transmitted it to participant in position three, and so on. Individuals assigned to the weak (strong) tie condition were asked to imagine the review came from a distant (close) other, and prompted to send their review as if they were to write a message to a distant (close) other. We counted participants' positive and negative thoughts in each message. Results showed that participants tended to transmit negative information more within strong ties, reflected by a similar number of negative thoughts across the first, second and third position ($p > .60$), rather than within weak ties, reflected by a significantly decreasing number of negative thoughts across the three positions ($p < .01$). In contrast, they tended to transmit positive information more within weak ties, reflected by a similar number of positive thoughts across the three positions ($p > .50$), rather than within strong ties, reflected by a significantly decreasing number of positive thoughts across the three positions ($p < .01$). Overall, positive information was shared more across weak rather than strong ties, whereas negative information was shared more across strong rather than weak ties.

Experiment 3 tested the hypothesis that negative (positive) information tend to be transmitted more among similar (dissimilar) individuals rather than among dissimilar (similar) individuals. The procedure was the same as Experiment 2, although we manipulated perceived similarity between sender and recipient by telling participants, who were undergraduate students, the review came either from Paul, 21, another student (high-similarity) or from Roger, 61, retired (low-similarity). Results showed that participants tended to transmit negative information more among similar others, reflected by a similar number of negative thoughts across the first, second and third position ($p > .50$), rather than among dissimilar others, reflected by a decreasing number of negative thoughts across the three positions ($p < .01$), while they tended to transmit

positive information more among dissimilar others ($p > .50$) than among similar others ($p < .01$). Overall, positive (negative) information was shared more among dissimilar (similar) individuals.

This research provides new insights on WOM by investigating how a central structural feature of interpersonal communication – psychological closeness between sender and recipient – can influence whether positive or negative WOM is more likely to be shared. We show that consumers tend to share positive information with distant others, but negative information with close others, and demonstrate the consequences for how positive versus negative information is differentially communicated among weakly and strongly tied networks.

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