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## **The Effect of Audience Expertise and Information Valence and Wom Transmission**

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We focus on how audience expertise shapes WOM valence, showing that individuals are more likely to share negative WOM with expert audiences but positive WOM with less expert audiences. We find that the interaction between audience expertise and WOM valence is explained by consumer's desire to appear competent.

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# The Effect of Audience Expertise and Information Valence and WOM Transmission

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Scholars have investigated different factors shaping WOM conversations (see Berger 2014 for a review). One important element that can affect the type of information shared is the audience one talks to. For instance, when talking to close others, individuals may craft what they share in a different way than when talking to distant others. The issue of how audience shapes WOM communications has not received adequate attention so far.

Based on the idea that listeners can vary in their level of expertise on the topic at hand, we study the role of audience expertise in shaping WOM. Specifically, we investigate how talking to more or less expert others affects WOM valence. We rely on past work showing that both positive (e.g., Berger and Milkman 2012; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004) and negative WOM (Amabile 1983; Schlosser 2005) can help consumers project a positive image, and propose audience expertise as a factor explaining when consumers are more likely to share positive rather than negative information and when the opposite occurs.

## Theory

Consumers prefer sharing positive WOM to signal their expertise to others (Packard and Wooten 2013) or to show they are smart shoppers (De Angelis et al. 2012) or bearers of good news (Berger and Milkman 2012). However, they prefer sharing negative WOM to show competence and knowledgeability (Amabile 1983; Schlosser 2005). Thus, past research shows that consumers might self-enhance by sharing either positive or negative WOM. What is unknown is what makes them more likely to share positive WOM in some cases and negative WOM in others. We propose audience expertise as an element that can shed light on this issue.

While reality shows that consumers often craft their WOM messages to the audience they talk to, WOM literature has not given adequate attention to the issue of how audience shapes WOM, with the exception of a work by Chen and Berger (2013) showing that individuals talk about controversial topics with distant others rather than close others, and a work by Barasch and Berger (2014) showing that large audiences trigger sharing of self-presentational content while small audiences triggers sharing of content deemed useful for recipients.

We contribute to this literature by studying the effect of audience expertise on WOM. WOM research has focused on the expertise of the communicator, demonstrating that consumers often share WOM to signal their real (Wojinicki and Godes 2011) or ideal (Packard and Wooten 2013) expertise to others. We predict that consumers are more likely to engage in WOM after a negative than a positive experience when talking to expert others, whereas they are more likely to engage in WOM after a positive than a negative experience when talking to less expert others. We hypothesize this effect is explained by sharers' desire to appear competent.

## Methods and findings

Experiment 1 tested our hypothesis by randomly assigning 203 respondents to a 2 (WOM valence: positive vs. negative) x 3 (audience expertise: expert, non expert, control) between subjects design. Participants read a scenario about a car purchase situation, manipulated to be either positive or negative. To manipulate audience ex-

perience, we had respondents imagine talking to either another person known to be expert on cars or to a person who doesn't know much about cars, or to a person they know (control). Dependent variable was a 7-point measure of WOM likelihood.

Two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of audience expertise ( $F(1, 197) = 10.79, p < .001$ ) and a significant WOM valence x audience expertise interaction effect ( $F(1, 197) = 6.85, p < .001$ ): when talking to expert, WOM likelihood was higher after a negative than a positive experience ( $M_{neg} = 5.97, SD = 1.03$  vs.  $M_{pos} = 5.14, SD = 1.11, t(197) = 2.25, p < .03$ ), while no difference was observed when talking to non-expert ( $M_{neg} = 4.42, SD = 1.99$  vs.  $M_{pos} = 4.40, SD = 1.70, t(197) = .05, ns$ ). However, when audience expertise was unknown, WOM likelihood was higher after a positive than a negative experience ( $M_{pos} = 5.81, SD = 1.22$  vs.  $M_{neg} = 4.76, SD = 1.63, t(197) = 2.97, p < .001$ ).

Experiment 2 tested the mediating role of desire to appear competent. 177 respondents were randomly assigned to a 2 (WOM valence: positive vs. negative) x 3 (audience expertise: expert, non-expert, control) between subjects design. Compared to previous experiment, we changed the product (novels) and measured how respondents would feel if they happen to share their experience with the people described in the scenario using two 7-point measures (1 = totally disagree; 7 = totally agree): "I would be very much willing to appear knowledgeable," and "I would be very much willing to show I have high standards in my evaluations" ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

Two-way ANOVA revealed a significant valence x expertise interaction ( $F(1, 171) = 7.44, p < .001$ ). When talking to experts, WOM likelihood was higher after a negative than a positive experience ( $M_{neg} = 5.07, SD = 1.48$  vs.  $M_{pos} = 4.15, SD = 1.49, t(176) = 2.08, p < .04$ ), while no difference was observed for non expert ( $M_{neg} = 3.89, SD = 2.11$  vs.  $M_{pos} = 4.36, SD = 1.88, t(197) = 1.10, ns$ ). When audience expertise was unknown, however, WOM likelihood was higher after a positive than a negative experience ( $M_{pos} = 5.32, SD = 1.22$  vs.  $M_{neg} = 3.86, SD = 1.67, t(171) = 3.37, p < .001$ ).

Next, we ran a mediated moderation model, whereby we regressed WOM likelihood on audience expertise, WOM valence, their interaction, and the "desire to appear competent" (our mediator). The effect of the mediator on WOM likelihood was positive and significant ( $b = .45, t(171) = 4.87, p = .001$ ). More importantly, we found a negative and significant indirect effect of expertise x valence ( $b = -.34, 95\% \text{ confidence interval} = .87 \text{ and } -.06$ ). This finding demonstrates that the desire to appear competent accounts for the differential impact of audience expertise and WOM valence on WOM likelihood.

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